

Divine Wrath and Divine Mercy in Islam

Their reflection in the Qur'ān and Quranic Images of Water¹

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In this essay in exploration of wrath and mercy in Islam, we will restrict ourselves largely to the quranic data in an attempt to let Islam speak for itself and minimize authorial intervention, distortion, manipulation and interpretation. Much of what follows, therefore, is actual quotation from the Qur'ān inasmuch as the Qur'ān is that which permeates the Islamic world view and regulates the actions and thinking of the followers of Muḥammad to an exceptionally high degree – probably unparalleled in the other world religions. Authorial presence may be detected in the emphasis placed here on the relationship between these two divine attributes and the way in which the Qur'ān uses water imagery to communicate their reality and function, their drama.

Allāh is by far the most characteristic designation of the utterly transcendent (Q. 112) yet infinitely close and intimate (Q. 50:16) creator and master of the cosmos. Its etymology, like the etymology of the English word “God” is somewhat foggy and/or elliptical. Being composed of two elements, the standard Semitic definite article and the Arabic word for “god” the usual rendering is “*The* one and only god deserving of allegiance and obedience”. This understanding reflects the *Sitz im Leben* of the original revelation in its polytheistic context, a context in which the supreme god Allāh was not unknown, but for that was not the sole focus of attention or spiritual and religious concentration. The task of the Prophet was to demonstrate and argue in this milieu that Allāh was in fact “the only god worthy of the name”, or more simply God. In this essay, God and Allah will be used interchangeably when referring to the master of creation and “Lord of all worlds” by Whose grace, providence and solicitude for hu-

¹ Transliteration generally follows that of the Library of Congress. Qur'ān appears thus transliterated and capitalized. The adjective appears as “quranic” – lower case “q” except in the title of this paper or where it might be differently transliterated in the title of other works or in quotations from other works or when it begins a sentence. This is consistent with the way Bible and biblical are spelled in contemporary scholarship.

manity the Qur'ān was revealed. (See Q. 2:121–2; 6:153, 157; 7:63; 11:118–9; 17:86–7; 18:65; 36:5–6)

Both God and the Qur'ān are designated and alluded to by many different epithets and substantives throughout the sacred text. Whether this is a related development out of the polytheistic milieu: “only one God, but numerous names”, cannot be ascertained. We do know that Arabic loves words and their concomitant distinctions, nuances and differences. And, we owe to this general love of words – what sometimes appears to the uninitiated as mere pleonasm – the distinctive and culturally significant literary aesthetic that produces the wonderful variety and richness of descriptions of God and the Book, frequently employing synonyms and near synonyms. It should be added immediately that the great learned tradition, which may in some ways be seen as issuing from a study of the Qur'ān, did not, in spirit or theory, recognize the existence of pure synonyms. Each quranic word must have its own meaning, its own *raison d'être*. Thus a sub-theme to the general theme of God's nature and description arose, namely the organization and categorization of those special words that are seen as divine names and attributes.² The somewhat popular doctrine of the so-called Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*) is a feature of this sub-theme. It developed from the contemplation of such quranic verses as: “To God belong the most beautiful names so call upon Him with them.” (Q. 7:180) or: “Say: Beseech Allāh or beseech al-Rāḥmān! Unto whichever you cry (it is the name). His are the most beautiful names.” (Q. 17:110)

The word *muslim* has as its primary meaning or intention “one who is wholly committed to God”. This commitment may take several forms, but the basic and elementary intention is generally understood to be commitment and obedience – “submission”, if you will – to the divine law as revealed in the Qur'ān and as indicated in the blessed example of the Prophet Muḥammad. This example is preserved in that other highly venerated compendium of Islamic religious teaching known as Ḥadīth, frequently referred to as Tradition. Because of space constraints, we will restrict our discussion and observations mainly to the Qur'ān, its form and contents. However, it must not therefore be lost sight of that alongside the wealth of material on the topic of wrath and mercy to be found in the Qur'ān there is

² The interested reader is directed to the excellent specialized articles in the three editions of Encyclopaedia of Islam, Leiden, hereafter EI followed by a numerical superscript indicating edition. On this topic they would be GILLIOT, C., Attributes of God, in: Krämer, G. / Matringe, D. / Nawas, J. / Rowson, E. (eds.), EI³, Leiden 2008. Available only online at <http://www.brillonline.nl/>; accessed 24 June 2008, GARDET, L., al-Asmā' al-Ḥusnā' [The Most Beautiful Names], in: Bearman, P. / Bianquis, Th. / Bosworth, C.E. / van Donzel, E. / Heinrichs, W.P. (eds.), EI², Leiden 2008, vol. 1, p. 714. See also ID, Allāh, in: EI², vol. 1, pp. 406–417.

an additional storehouse of information, teaching and lore contained in the great repository of Islamic belief, the Ḥadīth. Any exhaustive study of this question will of course take into consideration both sources of Islamic belief.

In one of the more lucidly argued modern studies of the Qur'ān, Fazlur Rahman notes that of the several major themes of the Book, the description and nature of God must come first in both importance and thematic sequence, because it is only in the shadow of the quranic “theory of God” that the rest of the Book can properly be understood.³ *Who is the God of the Qur'ān?* is therefore the first question we must try to answer in our exploration of divine wrath and mercy. There is no topic better suited for an introduction to the “mind of the Qur'ān” – which for Muslims is also in some way or another, a window into the “mind of God” – than a close examination of the theme of divine mercy ceaselessly proclaimed and invoked throughout its 6,000-plus verses (Ar. *āyāt*; lit. “miraculous signs”). By comparison, the theme of anger may be seen as a foil against which the mercy of God (Ar. *Allāh*) is made manifest. Such a window into the “mind of God” is thought to provide access to and understanding about a divine plan for humanity whether this humanity be expressed in, through and as society or in, through and as the individual.

The central importance of divine mercy in the Qur'ān and in Islam in general may be illustrated by a brief reference to the thought of the 13th century spiritual and literary virtuoso, Muḥyī ad-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240). His synthesis and elaboration of the basic elements of Islamic religious thought – known as the Unity of Being (Ar. *waḥdat al-wujūd*) – would influence, whether positively or negatively, all islamicate religious discourse after him. Here mercy is not only a defining attribute of the otherwise utterly unknowable God, it is also the answer to the question “Why is there something rather than nothing?” If for Avicenna (Ibn Sina, d. 1037) this same question would be answered with reference to the central and somewhat abstract notion of Being (Ar. *wujūd*) and if for Suhrawardī (*al-Maqtūl*, viz “the Executed one” d. 1191) the same question is answered with the much less abstract but still comparatively cold, remote and impersonal notion of Light, Ibn ‘Arabī insists that the foundational ontic category is none other than divine mercy. Rather than say God created the universe, or God existentially created the universe, or God “fulgurated” the universe, it is most apposite and useful to think in terms of God’s having “mercified” the universe.⁴ The universe or cosmos is therefore simultane-

³ RAHMAN, F., *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, Minneapolis (Minnesota) 1980.

⁴ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, Beirut ²1980. Cf. also the title of the recent study by HIRTENSTEIN, S., *The Unlimited Mercifier. The life and thought of Ibn Arabī*, Ashland (Oregon) 1999.

ously a manifestation of divine mercy and composed of the substance of this mercy. Things have not been merely “created” they have been “mercified” into existence. The major source for Ibn ‘Arabi’s distinctive and quite imaginative thought was, as is now firmly established, the Qur’ān itself, which he obviously internalized to such a high degree that his consciousness and conscience were suffused with and structured on its various patterns of meaning, literary and otherwise.⁵

Divine wrath, while certainly of profound importance in the worldview of Muslims and Islam, is by comparison best thought of as an absence of clemency or mercy, or even more helpfully, as the foil against which the drama of divine mercy is carried out. But even here, there are several beloved instances of mercy masquerading as wrath or anger. The prime example comes in the Sūra of the Cave in the quranic depiction of the sojourn of Moses with his unnamed servant and the mysterious stranger they are destined to encounter. Moses is strongly attracted to the spiritual knowledge that seems to emanate from the Stranger and so Moses asks to accompany him on his journey. The Stranger warns Moses that he is likely to be shocked and scandalized by the actions of the Stranger who will appear to perform cruel and heartless acts. Moses insists that he will obey and acquiesce if only allowed to accompany him. The Stranger agrees with one proviso: Moses is not permitted to question any of his doings. Then in quick succession there occur a series of what appear to Moses unjust, irrational, destructive and violent acts against innocent or otherwise blameless people: 1) the Stranger sinks a ship without cause, putting its passengers in harm’s way; 2) the Stranger kills a young man for no apparent reason; 3) in a town where the small party (the Stranger, Moses and Moses’ servant) have been treated inhospitably, the Stranger, for no apparent reason or compensation decides to repair one of the town walls that was on the verge of collapse. As the Stranger had warned, Moses was unable to bear the incongruity and mystery of these actions, two of which were clearly violent and destructive and could have been interpreted as a gesture of unprovoked divine anger, since the Stranger was clearly a representative of God. Exasperated by Moses’ lack of patience and his breaking his vow not to question the Stranger about his actions, the Stranger then explains his actions, only after issuing the resounding and heartbreaking “Now is the parting between me and thee” (Q. 18:78 Ar. *hādhā firāq baynī wa baynika*). As Abdel Haleem translates the verse: “He said, ‘This is where you and I part company. I will tell you the meaning of the things you could not bear with patiently.’”

⁵ CHODKIEWICZS, M., *Un océan sans rivage*. Ibn Arabī, *Le livre et la loi*, Paris 1992. Translated into English by David Streight as: *An ocean without shore*. Ibn Arabī, *the Book, and the Law*, Albany (NY) 1993.

The Stranger, whom tradition, not the Qur'ān, identifies as Khaḍīr or Khidr (Pers. Kezr) then explains that he sank the ship because there was a tyrannical king who was confiscating all of the seaworthy vessels in the land for his own purposes and if he saw this particular ship which was owned by poor men who had no other means of gaining a livelihood, they would be utterly bereft. So the Stranger scuttled it knowing that once the danger had passed the owners could raise the ship and repair it. In the second case of apparent cruelty meted out by this mysterious servant of God, the Stranger explains that had this youth lived his parents, who were faithful believers, would be tested and pained by his rebelliousness. Thus he killed this son that he might be substituted for a more virtuous son in the future and the parents come to no grief, a son who would be “better in purity and closer in affection” (Q. 18:81) than the one the Stranger had killed. Although the final act of the Stranger is apparently the opposite of wrath, anger and destruction, the solution to the puzzle of why the Stranger would perform an act of such charity for a city that had been so inhospitable is explained to the impatient Moses. The Stranger tells him that because he knew there was a buried treasure under this unstable wall and that this treasure was the legal inheritance of two of the cities orphans, he repaired the wall so that the rightful owners of the treasure could actually retrieve the legacy their deceased father had buried under it. This story illustrates the famous ḥadīth “God’s mercy exceeds – (or in some versions – “precedes, outstrips”) His wrath”.⁶ In the case of the mysterious stranger, it is important to remember, especially in the present context, that he is introduced in the following verse: “So they met one of Our servants on whom We had bestowed mercy (*rahma*) from Ourselves and whom we had taught knowledge from Our own presence.” (Q. 18:65)

Thus the Qur'ān conceals the central lesson of this remarkable story in the single word “mercy” (*rahma*) indicating from the outset that whatever the mysterious Stranger says or does would be a manifestation of divine mercy.⁷ In what follows, we will explore first the topic of wrath or anger as it appears in the Qur'ān in a series of the most characteristic words. Then we will look at the subject of mercy. By way of comparison, we will explore the clear relationship that obtains in the “divine poetics” of the Qur'ān between these two “theological” categories and their counterparts in the images of water in the Qur'ān. This will permit us to see something very essential about the quranic theophany, namely the way in which the

⁶ This well-known and oft-repeated idea occurs in two forms as a Ḥadīth Qudsī: “Truly, My mercy prevails over My wrath.” “My mercy outstrips My wrath.”

⁷ See the comparison of this quranic tale with the Alexandrian romance in BROWN, N., *The Apocalypse of Islam*, in: *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*, Berkeley / Los Angeles / Oxford 1993 [reprinted], pp. 199–233.

“paradox of monotheism” is resolved through the compelling language and poetics of the Qur’ān. Thus the remote and abstract notions of mercy and wrath are given something like what Eliot called, in discussing another literary work, an “objective correlative”.⁸ The reader/listener of the text finally will have no doubt about either the quality of divine mercy, identified with pure, sweet, life-giving water or the quality of divine wrath, identified with vile, poisonous, or destructive and life-threatening waters used to illustrate the reality of divine anger and punishment. Let us first turn to the lexicon of divine wrath found in the Qur’ān.

Divine Wrath

It is best to deal with this topic first inasmuch as while it is clearly an important quranic theme, by comparison with mercy it occupies less prominence in the Book and may be seen, frankly, as an ancillary or component of mercy, rather than its diametric and equal opposite. The Qur’ān, as has been observed repeatedly, is adamantly non-dualistic. Despite the numerous and incessant invocations of various dualities and opposites throughout the Qur’ān, it is never doubted that God is one, undivided, simple and the sole master of the universe.⁹ For example, while the devil certainly has a role to play it is as the enemy of man, not God.¹⁰ The divine nature, will, and decree are all of the same seamless reality (Ar. *al-ḥaqq*) and the various words and adjectives are given to us by God in accordance with our capacities to understand and articulate our own experience.¹¹ God’s anger is referred to several times throughout the Qur’ān.¹² In the very first sura, The Opening (or Overture: *al-Fātiḥa*), God’s mercy and anger are brought together in this most frequently invoked of all prayers.¹³

- 1 In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy!
- 2 Praise belongs to God, Lord of the Worlds,
- 3 the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy,

⁸ See below, p. 260.

⁹ LAWSON, T., Duality and Opposition in the Qur’ān. The Apocalyptic Substrate, in: *Journal of Quranic Studies*, in press.

¹⁰ WENSINCK, A.J. / GARDET, L., Iblīs, in: *EI*², vol. 3, pp. 668–671.

¹¹ See GARDET, Allāh.

¹² Other quranic figures also express anger. These include the believers themselves, enemies of the Prophet Muḥammad, other prophets such as Moses and Jonah. In this chapter we are restricting the discussion to God, even though prophets may be understood as instruments of the divine. See BASHIR, S., Anger, in: McAuliffe, J. D. (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, Leiden 2006, vol. 1, 92–93.

¹³ Ayoub, M., The prayer of Islam (on *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa*), in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 47(1979), pp. 635–647.

- 4 Master of the Day of Judgement.
- 5 It is You we worship; it is You we ask for help.
- 6 Guide us to the straight path:
- 7 the path of those You have blessed, those who incur no anger and who have not gone astray.¹⁴

As in many questions quranic, the *Fātiḥa* provides a reliable guide to the form and contents of the message. Note here that in addition to the repetition of divine mercy in four separate places, the word Lord is also invoked in the Arabic *rabb*. The meaning of this word refers to caring, nourishing, education and guidance. The idea of wrath or anger occurs almost as a grace note to set off and emphasize the overwhelming mercy of God. It is important to recognize also that even in this fleeting instance the anger cannot be predicated of God grammatically.¹⁵

Quranic Arabic words that may be translated as wrath or anger are derivative of the following trilateral roots: GH-Ḍ-B; L-‘-N; S-KH-Ṭ; N-Q-M; R-J-S; S-Ā-F. With regard to the most frequent and characteristic word used by the Qur’ān to refer to God’s wrath, GH-Ḍ-B, this 3rd person singular verb is predicated of Allāh five separate times in the Qur’ān with the meaning of “God was angry at him/them.” One interesting instance of this verb, in the 3rd person plural, applies to humans, indicating that among those who are on the right path are those who, when moved to anger, readily forgive (Q. 42:37). To the degree that the pattern of divine attributes in the Qur’ān are ultimately as much, if not more, about human potential and the development of “god-like qualities” as they are about the nature of the unknowable God, this verse suggests that one of the god-like qualities human beings would be well to emulate is precisely forgiveness (Ar. *ghufrān*) an attribute applied to God dozens of times throughout the Qur’ān. To return to anger and wrath, the nominal form (Ar. *ghaḍb*) is also associated with the divine only thirteen times throughout the Qur’ān. This same word, or its derivative, is also used to describe the anger or wrath of Moses (Q. 7:154, 20:81–82) and Jonah (Q. 21:87). A companion word to *ghaḍiba* is construed on the Arabic root L-‘-N and occurs several times as a near synonym. Taken by itself it is frequently translated as the verb “to curse/reject/damn” or the noun “curse” or the object “accursed”. This root occurs 41 separate times throughout the Qur’ān. We will indicate its presence in the following quotations when it is found.¹⁶

¹⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of the Qur’ān are from ABDEL HALEEM, M. A. S., *The Qur’ān. A New Translation*, Oxford 2004. References to specific sura and aya appear as follows: Q. 1:1–7; when citing elucidations, comments or interpretations of the translator, the volume is cited as follows: *The Qur’ān* followed by the page number(s).

¹⁵ *The Qur’ān*, p. 3.

¹⁶ Indeed *ghaḍab* itself may be translated as “curse” as in Q. 24:9. See below.

Another quranic word that may be translated as anger or wrath is *sakhiṭa*. This word, which also can be translated as “condemnation” or its derivations, occurs four separate times in the Qur’ān, three of these refer to God. A related concept is found in the term “vengeance” (Ar. *naqma*). This important quranic idea occurs, as referring to the vengeance of God, in the formulaic phrase: “We exacted retribution from them” (Q. 7:136, 15:79, 30:47, 43:25, 43:55, cf. also Q. 5:95). The related form occurs in the several passages that describe God as “capable of retribution” (Ar. *dhū intiqām* x4: Q. 3:4, 5:95, 14:47, 39:37). The recipients of God’s retribution, wrath and vengeance (Ar. *muntaqimūn*) are singled out in three separate verses (Q. 32:22, 43:41, 44:16). It seems important here to point out that this word is also used to describe the wrath of the unbelievers as well (cf., e.g., Q. 9:74). As is common to the style of the Qur’ān, God is shown to be more able, even in vengeance and wrath, than the humans who reject His signs.¹⁷

One key example of God’s anger from the Qur’ān is in the case of the unjust taking of human life:

If anyone kills a believer deliberately, the punishment for him is Hell, and there he will remain: God is angry (*ghaḍība*) with him, and rejects him (*la’ana*), and has prepared a tremendous torment for him. (Q. 4:93)

Another example of the expression of God’s anger is in the context of those who worship other gods:

Say, ‘Shall I tell you who deserves a worse punishment from God than [the one you wish upon] us? Those God distanced from Himself, was angry with (*la’ana*), and condemned (*ghaḍība*) as apes and pigs, and those who worship idols: they are worse in rank and have strayed further from the right path. (Q. 5:60)

Bearing false witness also elicits divine anger:

As for those who accuse their own wives of adultery, but have no other witnesses, let each one four times call God to witness that he is telling the truth, [7] and, the fifth time, call God to reject (*la’ana*) him if he is lying; [8] punishment shall be averted from his wife if she in turn four times calls God to witness that her husband is lying [9] and, the fifth time, calls God to reject (*ghaḍība*) her if he is telling the truth. (Q. 24:6–9)

People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*, Q. *passim*), those who have received revelation in the past and who now follow their scripture, are frequently praised by the Qur’ān. But, they may also fall afoul of the divine and incur God’s wrath:

I And, unless [the People of the Book] hold fast to a lifeline from God and from mankind, they are overshadowed by vulnerability wherever they are found. They have

¹⁷ Other words that may be translated in specific contexts, as divine anger or wrath are : *ba’s* (x2: Q. 4:84, 40:29); *rijs* (x Q. 6:125, 7:71, 10:100), *āsafa* (x1: Q. 43:55)

drawn God's wrath upon themselves. They are overshadowed by weakness, too, because they have persistently disbelieved in God's revelation and killed prophets without any right, all because of their disobedience and boundless transgression. (Q. 3:112)

II Remember when you said, 'Moses, we cannot bear to eat only one kind of food, so pray to your Lord to bring out for us some of the earth's produce, its herbs and cucumbers, its garlic, lentils, and onions.' He said, 'Would you exchange better for worse? Go to Egypt and there you will find what you have asked for.' They were struck with humiliation and wretchedness, and they incurred the wrath (*ghaḍab*) of God because they persistently rejected His messages and killed prophets contrary to all that is right. All this was because they disobeyed and were lawbreakers. (Q. 2:61)

III Those who took to worshipping the calf will be afflicted by their Lord's wrath, and by disgrace in this life.' This is the way We repay those who invent such falsehoods, [153] but your Lord is most forgiving and most merciful towards those who do wrong, then repent afterwards and truly believe. (Q. 7:152–153)

Again, the idolaters, polytheists, deniers and hypocrites are singled out for God's wrath:

I And to torment the hypocritical and idolatrous men and women who harbour evil thoughts about God – it is they who will be encircled by evil! – who carry the burden of God's anger, whom God has rejected (*wa ghaḍaba Allāhu 'alayhim wa la'anahum*) and for whom He has prepared Hell, an evil destination! (Q. 48:6)

II He said, 'You are already set to receive your Lord's loathing (*rijs*) and anger (*ghaḍab*). Are you arguing with me about mere names you and your forefathers invented, names for which God has given no sanction? Just wait; I too am waiting.' [72] We saved him, and those who were with him, through Our mercy; We destroyed those who denied Our revelations and would not believe. (Q. 7:71–72)

III Have you not seen [Prophet] those who give their loyalty to people with whom God is angry (*ghaḍība*)? They are neither with you nor with them, and knowingly swear to lies. [15] God has prepared a severe torment for them: what they do is truly evil. [16] They have used their oaths to cover up [their false deeds], and barred others from the path of God. A humiliating torment awaits them – [17] neither their wealth nor their children will be of any use to them against God – they will be the inhabitants of Hell, where they will remain. (Q. 58:14–17)

IV Low indeed is the price for which they have sold their souls by denying the God-sent truth, out of envy that God should send His bounty to any of His servants He pleases. The disbelievers have ended up with wrath upon wrath (*ghaḍab 'alā ghaḍab*), and a humiliating torment awaits them. [91] When it is said to them, 'Believe in God's revelations,' they reply, 'We believe in what was revealed to us,' but they do not believe in what came afterwards, though it is the truth confirming what they already have. Say [Muhammad], 'Why did you kill God's prophets in the past if you were true believers? [92] Moses brought you clear signs, but then, while he was away, you chose to worship the calf – you did wrong.' (Q.2:90–92)

V Can the man who pursues God's good pleasure be like the man who has brought God's wrath (*sakht*) upon himself and whose home will be Hell – a foul destination? (Q.3:162)

VI 'Eat from the good things We have provided for you, but do not overstep the bounds, or My wrath (*ghaḍabī*) will descend on you. Anyone on whom My wrath (*ghaḍabī*) descends has truly fallen. (Q. 20:81)

VII How will they feel when the angels take them in death and beat their faces and their backs [28] because they practised things that incurred God's wrath (*mā askhaṭa Allāh*), and disdained to please Him? He makes their deeds go to waste. (Q. 47:27–28)

VIII You who believe, do not take as allies those with whom God is angry (*ghaḍiba*): they despair of the life to come as the disbelievers despair of those buried in their graves. (Q. 60:13)

IX As for those who argue about God after He has been acknowledged, their argument has no weight with their Lord: anger (*ghaḍab*) will fall upon them and agonizing torment awaits them. (Q. 42:16)

X With the exception of those who are forced to say they do not believe, although their hearts remain firm in faith, those who reject God after believing in Him and open their hearts to disbelief will have the wrath (*ghaḍab*) of God upon them and a grievous punishment awaiting them. (Q. 16:106)

XI Believers, when you meet the disbelievers in battle, never turn your backs on them: [16] if anyone does so on such a day – unless manœuvring to fight or to join a fighting group – he incurs the wrath of God (*bā'a bi-ghaḍab min Allāh*), and Hell will be his home, a wretched destination! (Q. 8:15–16)

Divine Mercy

If the word Allāh is the most characteristic of the numerous names and attributes mentioned in the Qur'ān it is only so by a thin margin. In the ranking of the numerous divine names it is generally accepted that they are 1) Allāh 2) *al-Raḥmān* and 3) *al-Raḥīm*. These two other names, names which bear directly on the present theme, are in fact equally important in Islamic piety and “God theory”: as the Qur'ān itself has it, whatever can be said of Allāh can be said of al-Raḥmān (Q. 17:110 quoted above). These Arabic nouns of description and agency (*al-Raḥmān*, the Merciful and *al-Raḥīm*, the Compassionate) are derived from the same Arabic root: R-Ḥ-M.¹⁸ The central meaning of this root is indicated by its *maṣḍar* or “infini-

¹⁸ Their are numerous other roots from which are derived verbs and nouns in the Qur'ān to refer to such specific divine names and attributes as tenderness, kindness (L-Ṭ-F; R-'-F), generosity (Ḥ-W--SH; K-R-M; W-H-B), lovingness (Ḥ-B-B; W-D-D), gentle-

tive, verbal noun”, *rahma*: kindness, beneficence or an act of kindness and favor.¹⁹ This word occurs 114 times in the Qur’ān and in all but three instances, relates such kindness and beneficence to God alone. It is important to point out that the earliest lexicographers saw the deep connection, on the etymological level, between this word and the Arabic word for “womb”, *rahim* (pl. *arḥām*). Thus it is not without some interest that we note a similar connection between two of the most important and most frequently invoked names of God, *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm* with the qualities of motherhood, nurturance, and unconditional love. Perhaps we have here a species of agape, if it is possible to conceptualize this form of love without the sacrificial dimension.

On a strictly statistical level, the word Allah occurs most often (x 2811). Its persistent and repeated association and identification with the qualities of mercy and compassion is, however, quite remarkable. The otherwise remote, abstract and infinitely aloof Allāh is thus given “form” by its identification with the more familiar and worldly notions of mercy and compassion. And, to repeat, this is the most frequent and intense “gloss” of Allāh throughout the Qur’ān. The ideas of mercy, love and compassion carried by each of the words *al-Raḥmān* (x170) *al-Raḥīm* (x227) both in the *basmala* or invocation that heads 113 of the 114 *sūras* of the Qur’ān are ceaselessly used to “flesh out” this otherwise utterly transcendent Being. There are of course other attributes ascribed to and associated with God.²⁰ But there is no question that the quality of mercy is the most important not only with regard to the mere fact of frequency of occurrence but more importantly by taking into consideration what has been called the “élan” of the Qur’ān.²¹ However abstract, remote or “mathematical” the concept of Allāh might otherwise seem to us²², its identification with these two words ameliorates and modulates such existential distance. After all,

ness (Ḥ-N-N; L-Ṭ-F; R’-F), graciousness (N-‘-M, friendship, clemency (Ḥ-L-M; ‘-F-W); forgiveness (GH-F-R; ‘-F-W); faithful (’-M-N), helper (N-Ṣ-R), guardian (H-F-Z; W-K-L; W-L-Y), educator, teacher, “parent” (R-B-B); solicitous, one who turns to the needy and unrepentant (T-W-B). These are merely a few of the dozens of word forms that are used throughout the Qur’ān to refer to God’s loving kindness and merciful “nature”. See the truly remarkable reference work prepared especially for the English reader by KASSIS, H., *A Concordance of the Qur’ān*, Foreword by Fazlur Rahman, Berkeley / Los Angeles / London 1983. The standard Arabic concordance remains, of course, AL-BĀQĪ, M. F. A., *al-Mu’jam al-mufahras li-alfāz al-Qur’ān al-Karīm*, Cairo 1986 [recent reprint].

¹⁹ GIMARET, D., *Rahma*, in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. VIII, p. 391.

²⁰ GILLIOT, C., *Attributes of God*.

²¹ RAHMAN, F., *op. cit.*

²² For example, note the frequently suggested etymology that the word Allāh actually represents the ligature of two northern proto-Semitic words, both of which may be derived from the definite article yielding a possible translation for *allāh*: “The the”. GARDET, Allāh, in: *EI*².

this same Allāh as the Qur'ān tells us is somehow a creator and infinitely close: “We created man – We know what his soul whispers to him: We are closer to him than his jugular vein” (Q. 50:16)

The essential point to be made here is that attempting to speak about particular verses or “signs” of the Qur'ān that privilege the idea of mercy is also a little bit like trying to look at the forest and the trees at the same time. We have seen how every sura (but one) is introduced with an invocation of divine mercy and how the particular idea of *rahma* is spread throughout the Qur'ān in an astonishing number of contexts. In addition, for the pious believer/reader listener, every single letter of the revelation is a symbol, harbinger and bearer of this same mercy. It may even be said that the space against which the words of the Qur'ān itself are written or heard are also reminders of the central theme of the Qur'ān, God's mercy, through the wondrous reversal of figure and ground that occurs in reading, meditation and audition. Thus, to some extent, to simply list verses that mention mercy is somewhat redundant and unnecessary, unlike the case with divine wrath. Rather, let us proceed to the next section of our study, a short introduction to the way in which the Qur'ān's distinctive expressive style, its “poetics” may be seen to function with regard to wrath and mercy.

Wrath, Mercy and Water

In the brief amount of space available here, it is best to try to make the key point as succinctly as possible. We return to the idea introduced briefly above, “the objective correlative”. This term, coined originally in the 1840's, was used by the literary critic and poet, T.S. Eliot, to refer to one of the ways in which literature operates. Specifically, he wishes to discuss the way in which emotion is expressed and represented in literature:

[T]he only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula for that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in a sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.²³

Here we would like to apply this literary insight to the manner in which an otherwise abstract or theoretical divine “emotion” such as wrath or mercy is made “sensible” and concrete to the audience of the Qur'ān. A reasonable objection to this method might be offered on the grounds that since it is a matter of doctrine, based on the statements in the Qur'ān itself, it cannot be considered poetry. However, quranic studies of the last 50 years or

²³ ELIOT, Selected Essays, pp. 144–5.

so have loosened to a considerable degree such strictures and impediments to the understanding and appreciation of what is likely the most read and quoted book on the planet. Not least of these is the magnificent research of Navid Kermani, *Gott ist schön* (referred to below). And there are others. Most pertinent to the present context is the recent masterful study by Zwettler in which the poetry question is most satisfactorily analyzed and elucidated. It is now clear that the Qur'ān was condemning, in the first place the poets and soothsayers who were responsible for the compositions. This condemnation was pointed directly at the source of their inspiration, which was never Allāh, but rather the mysterious entities known as jinn or even other inhabitants of the invisible realm. Thus their "revelations" were tainted. The prophet Muḥammad was not a poet, but this does not mean that the revelation that came through him was not poetic.²⁴

A careful reading of the Qur'ān will disclose that while divine revelation as such is largely restricted to prophets and messengers (*anbiyā'* and *rusūl*), all of creation is portrayed as the grand instrument of the divine will. Indeed, in one famous passage, God tells us that the natural world is guided by the same kind of divine inspiration (*wahy*) through which His messengers receive revelation.

And your Lord inspired the bee, saying, 'Build yourselves houses in the mountains and trees and what people construct. Then feed on all kinds of fruit and follow the ways made easy for you by your Lord.' From their bellies comes a drink of different colours in which there is healing for people. There truly is a sign in this for those who think. (Q. 16:68–69)

Thus the natural world is an expression of the mercy, guidance and generosity of God. A primary symbol of the natural world in the Qur'ān is the all-important element of water. It is mentioned several times in key contexts where it is made clear that just as water is essential for biological life, divine water, revelation as mercy, is necessary for spiritual life. The two are symbols of each other. There are several distinct words used dozens of times throughout the Qur'ān to describe water and its various functions and forms as an instrument of the divine. A few of these characteristic passages are offered here, but they must be seen as only a sampling from the vast sea of quranic water references and imagery – a topic clearly worthy of a separate study.²⁵ Among the many quranic words which designate

²⁴ ZWETTLER, M., A Mantic Manifesto. The Sūra of 'The Poets' and the Qur'ānic Foundations of Prophetic Authority, in: Kugel, J.L. (ed.), *Poetry and Prophecy. The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*, Ithaca (N.Y.) 1990, pp. 75–119 (notes pp. 205–231).

²⁵ See the recent brief but important discussion in HALEEM, M. A., *Understanding the Qur'an. Themes and Style*, London / New York 1999: Chapter 3: Water in the Qur'an, pp. 29–41, see also ID, Water in the Qur'an, in: *Islamic Quarterly* 1989, vol. 33, no 1, pp. 34–50. A more sustained consideration of the water symbolism of the Qur'ān is in the

water or its various forms and related activities or objects we may list the following: water/rain, *mā'* (x63); rain, *ghayth* (x3), *wadq* (x2); to ask for rain, *istaghātha* (x1), to rain, *maṭara/amṭara* (x15); spring, running water, *ma'īn* (x4) torrential rain, *midrār* (x3); hail, *barad*(x1); cloudburst, *ṣayyib* (x1) and rainclouds, *ghamam* (x4), *muzn* (x1), *saḥāb* (x9), *a'ṣara* (x1), *'arīd* (x2).²⁶ There are also the several designations for bodies of water: sea, river, river bed : *baḥr* (x41), *yamm* (x8), *nahar/anhār* (x54), *wādī/awdiya* (x10), rivulet: *sarīy* (x1); spring, fountain: *'ayn/uyūn* (x21 see also *ma'īn* above), *yanbū'/yanābi'* (x2), watering place, *wird* (x); pool, *lujja/lujjī* (x2). In addition, there are also several mentions of various objects associated with or identified in the context of water of some kind or another: pearls, *bayḍ* (x1) *lu'lu'* (x6); cup/goblet, *kā's* (x6); fish, *ḥūt* (x5); ship, *fulk*(x23), *jarā*(x1), *saḥīna* (x4). In addition to verbs, such as “to rain”, mentioned above, there are also many usages of several other action words (or words directly derived from them) which have to do only with water in some form or another: to give to drink. *saqā'*(x25); to come to or bear water, *warada*, *wārid* (x4); to drink, *shariba* (x39), to sail on the water, to flow *jarā'*(64); to cascade, *thajjāj* (x1); to weep, *bakā* (x6) tears, *dama'a* (x2); *abyaḍḍat 'aynāhu min al-ḥuẓn* (x1). Specific types or qualities of water are also mentioned: sweet to drink, *furāt* (x3); salty to drink, *milḥ* (x2); vile (actually “pus”) to drink, *ṣadīd* (x1) boiling to drink, *ḥamīm* (x14); pleasant mixture, *mizāj* (x3) of, respectively, perfume, *kāfūr*, ginger, *zanjabīl*, and spiritually exhilarating musk, *tasnīm*. To close this brief and incomplete catalogue of quranic water imagery we must mention the rivers and springs of paradise, such as those named (*salsabīl*, *kawthar*) or those not named but which flow perpetually with wine (*khamr*, *raḥīq*), with milk (*laban*), with honey (*'asal*) or sweet water (*furāt*).²⁷ In this connection,

recent report by BOUGHUERRA, M. L., Water. Symbolism and culture, in: Les Rapports de l'Institut Veolia Environment, No. 5, available on the world wide web at: <http://www.institut.veolia.org/en/cahiers/water-symbolism/>. References here are to the downloaded pdf of the issue, especially pp. 31–45: Water in the Qur'ān: Symbolism and foundations of a water culture. See also the important philosophical exegesis on water in the Qur'ān by Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī (d. ca. 1635) cited in CORBIN, H., *En Islam iranien*, vol. I, pp. 315–316. The recent excellent study of quranic esthetics, by KERMANI, N., *Gott ist schön. Das ästhetische Erleben des Koran*, München 2000, surprisingly pays scant attention to this topic. See BACHELARD, G., *L'Eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, Paris 1942, translated into English by Edith R. Farrell as: *Water and Dreams. An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, Dallas (Tx.) 1983.

²⁶ N.b. the related phenomenon of shade (*ẓalīl*, *ẓill/ẓilāl*) and cloud shadow (*ẓullah*) many times (24 to be exact) used throughout the Qur'ān as a metaphor for God's mercy. Unfortunately, there is no space here to consider those other essential “waters” mentioned in the Qur'ān: blood, tears, wine, honey, milk and so on.

²⁷ A thorough discussion of what might be called “quranic hydrology” (if the epithet were not so unappealing) would, of course, include other words and concepts, such as

even the frequent quranic references to fruit would find a place in a thorough discussion inasmuch as fruit, among other things, is a natural and efficient means for preserving and transporting water. Quranic words that would come under this category include those having to do also with fruit/fructify, (*thamara/athmara*, x24; *fākiha*, x14; *janā*, x2 ; *nabata*, x28). Such references also frequently occur in a moral, spiritual and even eschatological context.

There is clearly no need here to emphasize the logicality and efficacy of this general poetic conceit, this “objective correlative”, given the geographic realities of the *Sitz im Leben* of the rise of Islam and the revelation of the Qur’ān. Water in the Qur’ān is clearly the most precious thing in the material world and frequently the search for it was the chief occupation of the Arabs. It is thus no accident that the Qur’ān uses water to teach about the spiritual and sometimes intangible things of God. The word *sharī’a* means, after all, “path to the water spring”. What follows is simply a series of a few of the most dramatic examples of the quranic use of water as emblems of divine wrath and mercy. We will begin with those verses in which water in some form or another is representative of divine wrath and anger. The first quotation is a succinct and powerful reminder to all humanity that it is God who is in control of the natural realm as well as the spiritual realm. The image here is the ability of God (contrasted with the inability of humanity) to supply water, the source of all life (see below). “Say, ‘Just think: if all your water were to sink deep into the earth who could give you flowing water in its place?’” (Q. 67:30)

Water as Symbol of Wrath and Divine Chastisement

The Flood and other natural calamities:

I And so We let loose on them the flood, locusts, lice, frogs, blood – all clear signs. They were arrogant, wicked people. (Q. 7: 133)

II When Our command came, and water gushed up, We said, ‘Place on board this Ark a pair of each species, and your own family – except those against whom the sentence has already been passed – and those who have believed,’ though only a few believed with him. [41] He said, ‘Board the Ark. In the name of God it shall sail and anchor. My God is most forgiving and merciful.’ [42] It sailed with them on waves like mountains, and Noah called out to his son, who stayed behind, ‘Come aboard with us, my son, do not stay with the disbelievers.’ [43] But he replied, ‘I will seek refuge on a moun-

yabisa (x4) that indicate the absence, withholding or drying up and withering of nature because of a lack of water, the divine name *al-Şamad* – usually translated as “the Eternal Refuge” – said by lexicographers to denote in its original meaning a great solid boulder which may be used to protect inhabitants of a *cul-de-sac* river bed in times of flood.

tain to save me from the water.’ Noah said, ‘Today there is no refuge from God’s command, except for those on whom He has mercy.’ The waves cut them off from each other and he was among the drowned. [44] Then it was said, ‘Earth, swallow up your water, and sky, hold back,’ and the water subsided, the command was fulfilled. The Ark settled on Mount Judi, and it was said, ‘Gone are those evildoing people!’ (Q. 11:40–44)

III Noah said, ‘My Lord, help me! They call me a liar,’ [27] and so We revealed to him: ‘Build the Ark under Our watchful eye and according to Our revelation. When Our command comes and water gushes up out of the earth, take pairs of every species on board, and your family, except for those on whom the sentence has already been passed – do not plead with me for the evildoers: they will be drowned – [28] and when you and your companions are settled on the Ark, say, “Praise be to God, who delivered us from the wicked people,” (Q. 23:26–28)

Use of Water as Instrument or Symbol of Divine Disfavor:

I We took the Children of Israel across the sea. Pharaoh and his troops pursued them in arrogance and aggression. But as he was drowning he cried, ‘I believe there is no God except the one the Children of Israel believe in. I submit to Him.’ (Q. 10:90)

II There are, in the land, neighbouring plots, gardens of vineyards, cornfields, palm trees in clusters or otherwise, all watered with the same water, yet We make some of them taste better than others: there truly are signs in this for people who reason. (Q. 13:4)

III The only true prayer is to Him: those they pray to besides Him give them no answer any more than water reaches the mouth of someone who simply stretches out his hands for it – it cannot do so: the prayers of the disbelievers are all in vain. [15] All that are in heaven and earth submit to God alone, willingly or unwillingly, as do their shadows in the mornings and in the evenings. (Q. 13:14–15)

IV If only, when you entered your garden, you had said, “This is God’s will. There is no power not [given] by God.” Although you see I have less wealth and offspring than you, [40] my Lord may well give me something better than your garden, and send thunderbolts on your garden from the sky, so that it becomes a heap of barren dust; [41] or its water may sink so deep into the ground that you will never be able to reach it again.’ [42] And so it was: his fruit was completely destroyed, and there he was, wringing his hands over what he had invested in it, as it drooped on its trellises, and saying, ‘I wish I had not set up any partner to my Lord.’ [43] He had no forces to help him other than God – he could not even help himself. [44] In that situation, the only protection is that of God, the True God: He gives the best rewards and the best outcome. [45] Tell them, too, what the life of this world is like: We send water down from the skies and the earth’s vegetation absorbs it, but soon the plants turn to dry stubble scattered about by the wind: God has power over everything. (Q. 18:39–45)

V But the deeds of those who disbelieve are like a mirage in a desert: the thirsty person thinks there will be water but, when he gets there, he finds only God, who pays him his account in full – God is swift in reckoning. [40] Or like shadows in a deep sea covered by wave upon wave, with clouds above – layer upon layer of darkness – if he holds out his hand, he is scarcely able to see it. The one to whom God gives no light has no light at all. [41] [Prophet], do you not see that all those who are in the heavens and

earth praise God, as do the birds with wings outstretched? Each knows its [own way] of prayer and glorification: God has full knowledge of what they do. [42] Control of the heavens and earth belongs to God: and to God is the final return. [43] Do you not see that God drives the clouds, then gathers them together and piles them up until you see rain pour from their midst? He sends hail down from [such] mountains in the sky, pouring it on whoever He wishes and diverting it from whoever He wishes – the flash of its lightning almost snatches sight away. (Q. 24:39–43)

Eschatology:

I Say, ‘Now the truth has come from your Lord: let those who wish to believe in it do so, and let those who wish to reject it do so.’ We have prepared a Fire for the wrongdoers that will envelop them from all sides. If they call for relief, they will be relieved with water like molten metal, scalding their faces. What a terrible drink! What a painful resting place! (Q. 18:29)

II Hell awaits each one; he will be given foul water [oozing pus] to drink, [17] which he will try to gulp but scarcely be able to swallow; death will encroach on him from every side, but he will not die; more intense suffering will lie ahead of him. (Q. 14:16–17)

III Here is a picture of the Garden promised to the pious: rivers of water forever pure, rivers of milk forever fresh, rivers of wine, a delight for those who drink, rivers of honey clarified and pure, [all] flow in it; there they will find fruit of every kind; and they will find forgiveness from their Lord. How can this be compared to the fate of those stuck in the Fire, given boiling water to drink that tears their bowels? (Q. 47:15)

IV In the Name of God the Merciful the Compassionate
Have you heard tell about the Overwhelming Event? [2] On that Day, there will be downcast faces, [3] toiling and weary, [4] as they enter the blazing Fire [5] and are forced to drink from a boiling spring, [6] with no food for them except bitter dry thorns [7] that neither nourish nor satisfy hunger. [8] On that Day there will also be faces radiant with bliss, [9] well pleased with their labour, [10] in a lofty garden, [11] where they will hear no idle talk, [12] with a flowing spring, [13] raised couches, [14] goblets placed before them, [15] cushions set in rows, [16] and carpets spread. [17] Do the disbelievers not see how rain clouds are formed, [18] how the heavens are lifted, [19] how the mountains are raised high, [20] how the earth is spread out? [21] So [Prophet] warn them: your only task is to give warning, [22] you are not there to control them. [23] As for those who turn away and disbelieve, God will inflict the greatest torment upon them. It is to Us they will return, [24] and then it is for Us to call them to account. (Sura 88, The Overwhelming Event (*al-Wāqi‘a*), 24 verses)

Water as Symbol of Mercy

A few of the many Quranic verses in which water may be identified with divine mercy are now presented. To begin with, let us look at the verses that speak of water in connection with creation, cosmogony and ontology.

It is precisely such verses that have helped inspire the medieval theory of the ontic ground as mercy, referred to above.

I It is He who created the heavens and the earth in six Days. – His Throne extends over the water too – so as to test which of you does best. Yet [Prophet], if you say to them, ‘You will be resurrected after death,’ the disbelievers are sure to answer, ‘This is clearly nothing but sorcery.’ (Q. 11:7)

II Are the disbelievers not aware that the heavens and the earth used to be joined together and that We ripped them apart, that We made every living thing from water? Will they not believe? (Q. 21:30)

III And God created each animal out of water: some of them crawl on their bellies, some walk on two legs, and some on four. God creates whatever He will; God has power over everything. (Q. 24:45)

IV It is He who released the two bodies of flowing water, one sweet and fresh and the other salty and bitter, and put an insurmountable barrier between them. [54] It is He who creates human beings from water, then makes them kin by blood and marriage: your Lord is all powerful! (Q. 25:53–54)

In the following series of verses, the symbolic rôle of water as mercy is highlighted:

I People, worship your Lord, who created you and those before you, so that you may be mindful [of Him] [22] who spread out the earth for you and built the sky; who sent water down from it and with that water produced things for your sustenance. Do not, knowing this, set up rivals to God. (Q. 2:22–23)

II [Prophet], give those who believe and do good the news that they will have Gardens graced with flowing streams. Whenever they are given sustenance from the fruits of these Gardens, they will say, ‘We have been given this before,’ because they were provided with something like it. They will have pure spouses and there they will stay. (Q. 2:25)

III Remember when Moses prayed for water for his people and We said to him, ‘Strike the rock with your staff.’ Twelve springs gushed out, and each group knew its drinking place. ‘Eat and drink the sustenance God has provided and do not cause corruption in the land.’ (Q. 2:60)

IV Even after that, your hearts became as hard as rocks, or even harder, for there are rocks from which streams spring out, and some from which water comes when they split open, and others which fall down in awe of God: He is not unaware of what you do. (Q. 2:74)

V In the creation of the heavens and earth; in the alternation of night and day; in the ships that sail the seas with goods for people; in the water which God sends down from the sky to give life to the earth when it has been barren, scattering all kinds of creatures over it; in the changing of the winds and clouds that run their appointed courses between the sky and earth: there are signs in all these for those who use their minds. (Q. 2:164)

VI [Prophet], say, ‘Would you like me to tell you of things that are better than all of these? Their Lord will give those who are mindful of God Gardens graced with flowing streams, where they will stay with pure spouses and God’s good pleasure – God is fully aware of His servants – (Q. 3:15)

VII It is He who sends the winds, bearing good news of His coming grace, and when they have gathered up the heavy clouds, We drive them to a dead land where We cause rain to fall, bringing out all kinds of crops, just as We shall bring out the dead. Will you not reflect? [58] Vegetation comes out of good land in abundance, by the will of its Lord, but out of bad land only scantily: We explain Our Revelations in various ways to those who give thanks. (Q. 7:57–58)

VIII We divided them into twelve tribes [as distinct] communities, and, when his people asked him for water, inspired Moses to strike the rock with his staff [so that] twelve springs gushed out. Each tribe knew its own drinking place; We gave them the shade of clouds and sent down to them manna and quails [saying], ‘Eat the good things We have provided for you.’ They did not wrong Us; it was themselves they wronged. (Q. 7:160)

IX Remember when He gave you sleep as a reassurance from Him, and sent down water from the sky to cleanse you, to remove Satan’s pollution from you, to make your hearts strong and your feet firm. (Q. 8:11)

With this cursory introductory exploration and listing of key quranic verses, we see that divine wrath and mercy are major quranic themes and that some of the Qur’ān’s distinctive character may be understood by observing how these otherwise somewhat abstract, theoretical or even theological ideas are rendered powerfully intelligible to the reader / listener / believer. Indeed, this exploration and discussion may be considered an example of what the great classical Muslim philosopher, al-Fārābī (d. 950 C.E.) meant when discussing the nature of prophethood and its relation to intellect, imagination and philosophy. This man is known to Muslim intelligentsia as “the second teacher” (after Aristotle, who was the first). His task was, in some sense, to coordinate the insights and axioms of Greek philosophy with the form and contents of the Islamic religion. Naturally, he was led to compare the role of the philosopher king with the prophet legislator and concluded that the ability to render philosophical (metaphysical and theological) truths and values into cognizable images that the untrained could understand, was amongst the greatest abilities and distinguishing characteristics of a prophet.²⁸

In closing, we may express the hope that while the subject of divine mercy certainly serves as a suitable topic with which to introduce that vast religious, social and cultural complex known as Islam we now also have

²⁸ MAHDI, M., Fārābī, Abū Naṣr. Philosopher-King and Prophet-Legislator, in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. ix, p. 228.

some notion of how this same Islam, with its deep and rich scriptural affiliations and decidedly spiritual vocation, may serve as a place from where to view the question of divine mercy in a distinctive and instructive light. With regard to the suggestion that the drama of mercy and wrath is reflected in the quranic use of water imagery, much more could be said. We have not, for example, touched upon the important rôle of actual physical water; ablutions, general hygiene, funeral procedure, irrigation laws and so on also reflect the central place which water as mercy holds in the Book. Nor have we touched upon the uniquely islamicate notion of the cosmogonic, noetic and ontic category of later Islam, known as the World of Images (*'ālam al-mithāl*) the door to which is said to be located on, among other places, the reflective surfaces of water.²⁹ The ablutions for the prayer codified in the *sharī'a*, (Ar. 'path to the watering pool') reminds the believer of the symbolic and non-symbolic syzygy represented by quranic water.³⁰ Ablutions at prayer and washing the dead and all of the other many religious instructions and rites involving water attest to this fact: that in Islam, water as an essential, life-giving element is symbolic of a spiritual reality otherwise veiled from the senses.

²⁹ In the premodern period, the World of Images became an axiom of philosophical speculation. Its history begins with Avicenna and Suhrawardi and reaches an apogee in the work of the Safavid philosophers. Henry Corbin and Fazlur Rahman have written pioneering works on this topic, they are referred to in LAWSON, T., Ahmad Ahsa'i and the World of Images, in: Hermann, D. / Mervin, S. (eds.), *Shi'ite Streams and Dynamics in Modern Times*, Tehran / Paris (6,500 words, in press) and ID, *Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy in Twelver Shi'ism. Ahmad Ahsa'i's Critique of Kashani's *Risala fi al-'ilm**, in: Gleave, R. (ed.), *Religion and Society in Qajar Iran*, London 2005, pp. 127–154 .

³⁰ BOUGHUERRA, pp. 37–41.