CHAPTER 3

Muhammad as Educator, Islam as Enlightenment, and the Quran as Sacred Epic

Todd Lawson

Civilization—or, to use a more current formulation, civil society—has sacramental value in Islam, to borrow a thoroughly non-Islamic technical term. The Quran, the biography of the Prophet Muhammad, the ethos of Muslim society and culture, and the general pietistic orientation of Muslims all agree that an erring and suffering humanity—the sons of Adam—has been created by God to live in harmony and prosperity. Further, this is seen to be most readily achievable through following the guidance of the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad. Guidance or education is therefore pivotal to the central defining Islamicate epic journey from ignorance (*jahl*) to enlightenment (*islām*). The centrality of this journey for Islam is distinctive because it involves the above-mentioned children of Adam, humanity. There are no chosen people. According to the Quran, humanity in the aggregate has been guided by God, through prophets and revelations, from the beginning of time. Moses, who is mentioned in its pages more than any other figure, is the ostensible hero of the Quran, and his journey from Egypt to Canaan symbolizes the more abstract journey from bondage to freedom, from ignorance to enlightenment. Through the ineluctable rhetorical power of typological figuration, however, it emerges that Muhammad is the real hero of the book, and it is his journey that it recounts and prescribes as exemplary.[1] He emerges, especially when the Quran and the *Sīra* are read together, as the epic hero par excellence of the Islamic tradition, and his message is esteemed particularly germane for the amelioration of the chaos of religions so characteristic of the Nile-to-Oxus region of late antiquity.[2] In what follows we will attempt to outline in very broad strokes the main features of such epic heroism, a heroism that centers precisely on education.

Islam holds the Prophet Muhammad in esteem in multiple ways. We will focus here on the role of Muhammad as educator, universally admired and celebrated as such by Muslims around the world through the Quran and its exegesis, through the *ḥadith* (or literature of Prophetic traditions) and its exegesis and

1 Zwettler, Mantic.
2 Lawson, *Quran*.

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application to praxis, the so-called *sunna* of the Prophet, and through ancillary institutions—legal, social, pietistic, and conceptual—such as schools, consultations, mosques, meetings, markets, parliaments, *madrasa*s, *zāwiya*s, *ribāṭ*s, *khānaqāh*s, and family life. At the center of all these is the Prophet Muhammad. Muhammad is also found at the center of more purely intellectual disciplines and fields of inquiry, beginning, again, with the Quran and its exegesis, the *ḥadīth*, law, poetry, history, natural science, and philosophy.[3] Muhammad is loved and admired for his character, his innate moral beauty, his behavior with friend and enemy alike, his special relationship with God (*walāya*), his role as messenger and prophet, and his heroism in challenging and suffering the forces of darkness seen to have been abroad in his time and place. Finally, his heroism is most celebrated because of the way it transformed his society from one of barbarous and savage violence and conflict (*jahl*) to one in which the virtues of civilization (frequently overlapping with the names and attributes of God in the Quran) set the tone of individual and communal life. It is astounding that Muhammad's great achievements as an educator are not more widely known and celebrated beyond the Islamic world. Persistent ignorance here represents a failure both moral and intellectual.[4]

It may be countered that, in fact, the society produced by Muslims following the teachings of their Prophet was not always a pure vertical development away from the imperfect social reality into which Muhammad was born. However true this may be, Islam does not lay such a failure at the feet of its founder, Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh; rather, it sees this as the all too human failure of his community to live up to the exacting and uncompromising standards he inculcated, first through the Quran, and then through his own example, the *sunna*. Thus, it remains that Muhammad is esteemed foremost as an educator. Such is indeed emphasized by the first Sura to have been revealed, "Recite: And thy Lord is Most Generous, who taught the use of the pen, taught man what he knew not" (Q 96:3–6). An ancillary persuasive example of such esteem and veneration of education is not difficult to find. During the first hijra, a group of Muslims led by Jaʿfar b. Abī Ṭālib, the brother of ʿAlī, fled persecution from the Hejaz to the realm of the negus of Abyssinia, seeking refuge from persecution and possible annihilation. The negus offered them refuge, and all proceeded well until emissaries of the hostile Quraysh pursued the refugees all the way to Ḥabash and attempted to persuade the negus to withdraw his protection, accusing the Muslims of having committed a variety of enormities and crimes

3 Brown, *Hadith*; Khalidi, *Images*; Hosseini-Nassab, Prophet.
4 An exception is Gulick, *Muhammad*.

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against their community, their tradition, their kinsmen, and their religion. The negus summoned Jaʿfar to his court to question him about these accusations. Jaʿfar's response was eloquent and persuasive. The negus sent the Qurayshis away empty-handed and frustrated. More important in the present context is the image of the Prophet that emerges from Jaʿfar's speech, and the way in which the purpose of Islam itself is delineated in his words:

> When [the Muslims] came into the royal presence they found that the king had summoned his bishops with their sacred books [opened] around him. He asked them what the religion (*al-dīn*) was for which they had forsaken their people (*qad fāraqtum fīhi qawmakum*), without entering into his religion or any other. Jaʿfar b. Abī Ṭālib answered, "O King, we were an uncivilized people (*kunnā qawman ahla jāhiliyyati*), worshipping idols, eating corpses, committing abominations, violating natural ties, treating guests badly, and our strong devoured our weak. Thus we were until God sent us an apostle."[5]

At the center of this discourse is the idea of transformation through recognition and education—recognition of the spiritual and intellectual impoverishment represented by the status quo, and recognition of the apostle who will guide them away from that state. Note the comparatively scant theological content in this speech. Even before this late second/eighth-ninth century edition of Ibn Isḥāq's epic account of the rise of Islam out of the moral chaos of *jāhilī* Arabia,[6] the theme was already a salient part of the *daʿwa*, or kerygma, of Islam.[7] Beginning with the Quran, the heroism of numerous prophets against the blindness, opposition, persecution, and ignorance of their communities is a prominent leitmotif. There is no space here to elaborate in detail. And, in any case, this reading of the Quran is uncontroversial. It may be argued, or caviled, that we do not know exactly how old the Quran is—though positive evidence is mounting—and, therefore, we do not know with laser precision the year from which we can date this self-identity of Islam and Muslims as cultivators and purveyors of true civilization, civilization in which communal harmony, prosperity, and justice represent the social gospel of the Quran. A community made up of various allegiances and confessions was the theme of this kind of divinely guided education in the document widely known as the Constitution of Medina, a "*kitāb*" whose authorship is ascribed to none other

5 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* i, 249–250 / Guillaume, *Life* 151–152 (slightly revised).
6 On the *Sīra* as epic, see Sperl, Epic.
7 Sinai, Eschatological kerygma.

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than the Prophet himself.[8] Such themes are part of the divine message of the Quran, no matter how it is arranged, even if the final order of the *Muṣḥaf* represents an authorial gesture of the first magnitude by stressing the epic qualities of the message of Islam.[9] So, it follows that civilization as such is elevated to the rank of religious value, what might be called in another tradition "sacrament."[10] This is, in and of itself, a striking feature to the student of comparative religion. The theological divine unity taught by Islam via *tawḥīd* is meant to be reflected in the unity (*waḥda*) of the community that goes by its name. It is also of some interest that, according to the abovementioned Constitution of Medina and, it may be argued, the Quran itself, such a community is not composed solely of Muslims but reflects late antique cosmopolitanism.[11]

It is just such an élan, this preoccupation with true civilization, that so obviously captured the imagination, and one might say heart, of the historian Marshall G.S. Hodgson (d. 1968), whose magisterial three-volume study of Islam was given the title *The venture of Islam: History and conscience in a world civilization*. It is a work that, despite its age, remains perhaps the very best introduction to the historical problem of the rise of Islam and its breathtaking expansion, growth, and development on a global scale as a new way of being human. The great success of this venture is ascribed to numerous factors, including to the historical, political, social, economic, and spiritual exhaustion of neighboring societies, to the relentless strength, unity, and military and administrative brilliance of the Muslim invaders or those they commissioned, and, finally, to the truth and compelling sui generis power of the Quran's critique of and prescription for social and spiritual health. It may be further suggested that much of the Quran's literary power stems from the master narrative embodied in the Quran's story of humanity, its relation to God, to death, to suffering, to family, to history, to the cosmos, and to the present moment—*al-sāʿa* ("the Hour" or "the Time"), which is of such characteristic and instrumental frequency in the Quran.

But the Quran is not a work of literature, one may reasonably protest. Indeed, from the earliest times, the Quran, the Prophet, and those who recognized the salience and truth of the abovementioned critique, Muslims included, strenuously asserted that the Quran was not the creation of a mere mortal the way literature, especially poetry, is. Rather, it is the Word of God. But even in the

8 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* ii, 85–87 / Guillaume, *Life* 231–232; Lecker, "*Constitution*."

9 Lawson, *Quran* vxi–xvii.

10 Very briefly, a sacrament is that action or practice through which the presence or will of God is put into play. Jennings, Sacrament.

11 Cameron, Late antique apocalyptic; Donner, *Muhammad*.

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*āya*s and Suras of the Quran these same readers would recognize familiar "literary structures of religious meaning."[12] So, while the vocation of the Quran was not purely literary, it did trail clouds of literary glory. To adapt the useful words of Northrop Frye's discussion of the Bible, the Quran is both literature and more than literature.[13] A similar subjunctivity regarding its literary character is detected in numerous studies of the Quran. Characteristic here is Mir's observation that some passages of the Quran attain an "almost epic" quality.[14] As it asserts in a pivotal and incalculably important description of how it (i.e., revelation as such) functions, the Quran offers the following: "We sent not a messenger except [to teach] in the language (*lisān*) of his [own] people, in order to make things clear to them" (Q 14:4).[15]

Here, one allows that language comprises much more than vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, however basic these elements are. One of the features of the language of the Quran, it has recently been suggested, is precisely the epic form that it assumes, or, more accurately, was given by those who were responsible for its final arrangement.[16] This form, known in Arabic as the *Muṣḥaf* ("book[ed]," "codex," "compilation," "arrangement") differs, according to Islamic tradition, from the earlier unarranged state of the revelations, whose only principle of order had been that of chronology.[17] As is well known and uncontroversial, at some stage that material was forged into the arrangement we have today, and this arrangement largely reversed the chronological order of the revelation—the *Tanzīl* ("sent down," "revealed")—so that in the *Muṣḥaf* the earliest revealed *āya*s and Suras are consigned to the end of the book, while the latest revelations are placed at the beginning. Such an arrangement also sculpts from what might thus be thought the "raw material"—the *Tanzīl*—an epic structure for the Quran's message of transformation through revelation, a transformation preached to both the individual and the community. Such a structure imparts universality and urgency to this message, in addition to offering a kind of hallowed recital of humankind's travails and successes in its timeless relation with God. All this may also be thought to amount to a highly effective pedagogy.[18] Finally, understanding the Quran's epic form explains the age-old riddle of why the Quran was arranged the way it is.

12 Such is the brilliant title of the groundbreaking book from Boullata, *Literary structures*.
13 Frye, *Great code* xvi.
14 Mir, Language 94.
15 Quran translations are from Abdallah Yusuf Ali, *Holy Qur'an*, sometimes slightly adapted. Adaptations are italicized.
16 Lawson, *Quran* 1–26.
17 Neuwirth, Structure.
18 Reda, *Baqara*.

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1 The Epic Form

The literary structure of religious meaning of concern here is the epic form. The epic is among humankind's oldest literary preoccupations, beginning in Mesopotamia with the story of Gilgamesh. The books of Homer, Hesiod, and Virgil are further examples—and there are many more. The epic has continued to be written, composed, and sung down to the present, and it remains an influential literary form throughout the world, across a dizzying variety of cultures and languages.[19] The earliest epics are oral poetic compositions. The rhyme aids in the memorization and stabilization of the text.[20] The epic spirit or energy has enlivened and sacralized much of biblical narrative, European literatures, Asian literatures, African literatures, Caribbean literatures, and beyond. Epics are also frequently parochial or tribal. The Quran distinguishes itself by its uncompromising address to humanity. Those who hear it or read it are challenged to expand their vision of what it means to be human. The epic is a human thing.

The epic spirit is, in part, generated by its form. Although each epic is individual and distinct, each is also seen to depend upon form, which is the result of a combination of several elements. Here, we will list (in nine sections) twelve of the most frequent and characteristic of the epic genre. In some instances, the relevance of a given epic element for the Quran and Islam will be readily apparent.[21] In other instances, it will require some further explanation.

1. Frequently the first or oldest literary work (whether oral or textual) of a given culture, and usually very long

Not much is needed to be said here. Indeed, one of the striking features of the history of Islam and, for that matter, Arabic literature, is that the Quran is acknowledged as the first book in Arabic. This is, of course, different from claiming it to be the first literary work. For this we must look elsewhere. It should be remembered that the Quran is also rhymed from beginning to end.

19 Some recent important scholarship on the epic is Foley, *Companion*; Beissinger, Tylus, and Wofford, *Epic traditions*; Konstan and Raaflaub, *Epic*.

20 Reynolds, Epic and history 393: "Given the structures of fixing utterances into both meter and rhyme, the ancient Arabs correctly understood that poetry was more easily memorized and underwent far less change in transmission than prose."

21 These elements are detailed in the standard article on the topic by Revard and Newman, Epic I & Epic II. For further details regarding the way in which the following epic features occur in the Quran, the reader may consult Lawson, *Quran* 1–75, 169–174.

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2. Typically opens in the midst of the action (in medias res)

The term *ab ovo* ("from the egg") was coined by the first century BCE Roman poet Horace in his ideal description of the epic, which usage dictates should not begin at the very beginning, in this case, the egg from which Helen of Troy was born. Rather, a good epic should put us in the middle of the action from the very start, and flatter the audience in assuming that the story is known.[22] This is thought also to provide a more compelling literary structure, allowing for flashbacks, and a more creative manipulation of time and history, for the purposes of emphasizing aspects of the narrative and of enhancing the esthetic experience of the audience and holding its attention. This feature is seen to have a cognate in the Quran's structure, which places the true beginning of humanity, and its relation to God, not at the beginning of the *Muṣḥaf* but deep within the Quran—that is, at Q 7:172:

> When thy Lord drew forth from the Children of Adam—from their loins—their descendants, and made them testify concerning themselves, [saying]: "Am I not your Lord [who cherishes you and sustains you] (*a-lastu bi-rabbikum*)?"—They said, "Yea! (*balā*), we do testify!" [This], lest ye should say on the Day of Judgment: "Of this we were never mindful."

The so-called verse of the Day of the Covenant, or the Day of Alast (from the Arabic *a-lastu*, "Am I not?," of the above verse), which occurs at a time and place "before" creation in a purely spiritual realm, is the moment from which proceeds actual creation, including the creation of Adam and Eve. They are, of course, the main characters, along with Iblis, the angels and God, in the opening narrative of the *Muṣḥaf* (Q 2:30–39). From the point of view of epic structure, it is no accident that the primordial covenant described in Q 7:172—the details of which will not be disclosed until much later in the text—is alluded to here at the very beginning of the *Muṣḥaf*, at the close of the Adam and Eve narrative at Q 2:39.

3. Has a vast setting, covering many nations, the world or worlds, the cosmos, and all time

There is also no need to demonstrate in great detail this feature of the Quran. The unimaginably vast temporal frame has already been pointed out when locating the actual beginning at the Day of Alast, before the creation of the

22 Horace, *Ars Poetica* 119–152.

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cosmos, time, space, and humanity. Paradoxically for the Quranic chronotope, this is the beginning point for both consciousness and history. The temporal frame ends, in one sense, on the Day of Judgment. The geographic scale is also vast, taking into its scope all places inhabited by humanity, various categories of humans and other creatures, and other worlds such as hell, heaven, the realm of the jinn, the natural realm, and so on.

4. Begins with an invocation to a divine being or muse

5. Starts with a statement of theme (praepositio)

These two elements come together with the *basmala* and Fātiḥa, which open the *Muṣḥaf*. Ancient epics typically begin with a prayer or petition to a divine being or muse to ask for inspiration and guidance in relating the narrative. Even though the *basmala* (the phrase or prayer "In the Name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate") occurs frequently throughout the Quran, it remains that it is the very first verse of the Quran. The Fātiḥa is widely held by the Islamic tradition to somehow contain not only the entire Quran but in fact all of the revelations that came before it. The well-known *ḥadīth* of the *basmala*, frequently related as the words of ʿAlī, provides a good example:

> The Quran contains all of previous revelations, the Fātiḥa contains all of the Quran, the Basmala contains all of the Fātiḥa, the letter Bāʾ of the basmala contains all of the Basmala, the point under the Bāʾ contains all that is in the Basmala.[23]

So, with regard to these two epic features we have an instructive example of how the Quran conforms to the wider epic tradition and its expectations but does so in its own, distinctively Quranic fashion. Chief among the themes of the Quran introduced in the Fātiḥa is that of the path, a classic epic concern; the ancient epics involved long and eventful culture-defining journeys of heroes whose quests also entailed the most cherished values and symbols of the culture involved. A chief feature of the journey is hardship and suffering (but, it is not the only one). We will return to this below in the discussion of Muhammad as the hero of the Quranic epic.

6. Makes pervasive use of epithet

23 Widely cited in this or variant forms. The point under the *bāʾ* is a feature of Arabic orthography: ب.

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7. Makes pervasive use of epic similes

8. Contains long lists (enumeratio)

In another example of the distinctive way in which the epic is embodied by the Quran, these three features, counted separately in Revard and Newman, may be considered to function largely as one element, especially given that the Quran is permeated with the names and attributes of God. These, and other locutions, such as *al-ḥayat al-dunyāʾ* ("the life of the world"), and *ūlū al-albāb* ("those possessed of minds/understanding"), are just as distinctive of the Quran as formulaic references to "the wine-dark sea" or "the rosy fingers of dawn" are of the poems of Homer. The element of lists overlaps with the Quranic use of epithet in that the divine attributes may also be seen as a Quranic example of *enumeratio*, as can the enumeration of various religions, books, communities, elements of the natural world, and supernatural beings. Thus, the Quran fulfils one of the roles of the epic in that it may be thought to provide a dictionary for culture. An epic simile in the Quranic instance would be grounded in the exquisite "Light Verse" at Q 24:35:

> God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The Parable of His Light is as if there were a Niche and within it a Lamp: the Lamp enclosed in Glass: the glass as it were a brilliant star: Lit from a blessed Tree, an Olive, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil is well-nigh luminous, though fire scarce touched it: Light upon Light! God doth guide whom He will to His Light: God doth set forth Parables for men: and God doth know all things.

Other such epic similes and/or metaphors are not only not difficult to adduce but, on the contrary, represent what is most distinctive about the Quran—the Throne Verse (Q 2:255), the Fātiḥa, the Verse of the Covenant, and so on. These familiar and strikingly beautiful, if not exquisitely poetic, passages of the Quran somehow are always there in reading any passage of the text.

9. Features long and formal speeches

The Quranic "improvisation" upon this epic convention may be thought to be embodied in the fact that the Quran is itself one long speech, the speech of God. There are, of course, ancillary speeches by various persons within the Quran. But, the real demonstration of verbal artistry that such epic speeches seem to have as their raison d'être is found in the entire Quran, not in this or that comparatively short speech of some (non-existent) Quranic Agamemnon, Menelaus, or Odysseus.

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10. Shows divine intervention in human affairs

This is the epic convention that requires the least explanation. The self-avowed purpose of the Quran is to provide evidence for the way in which God actively engages with humans at both the individual and communal levels, and to assert that it is happening now.

11. Is recited before an audience

This also requires no argument.

12. Features "star" heroes who embody the values of civilization

With the epic hero, our discussion comes into sharper focus. Epics are universally seen as defined by heroism. An epic without a hero is unthinkable. The heroism displayed and detailed in an epic becomes the blueprint for the moral standards of a given society. While the life of the Prophet Muhammad is not the subject of the Quran in the way that Odysseus's life is the subject of the Odyssey, his struggle and achievement, his epic journey, does, surreptitiously or imperceptibly, assume pride of place through typological figuration. This is, again, one of the key literary features of the Quran.[24] Muhammad is mentioned by name only four times in the Quran. Moses, however, is mentioned over a hundred. Other prophets, such as Joseph and Adam, are also mentioned many more times. Their travails and suffering, what in the context of the epic is called peripeteia, and their survival and success describe an epically charged life, one that has implications and importance far beyond the individual hero. Typological figuration occurs when the audience or reader sees the life of the storyteller, in this case Muhammad, in the stories being told about the previous prophets. In such fashion his status of prophet is sealed for his community. The reader, as part of this community, also identifies with earlier communities—both those who accepted their prophet and also those who rejected their messengers. The reader also sees him- or herself in the stories being told. In such manner, the Quran emerges as a kind of roman à clef in which the story of Muhammad's divinely appointed task to restore the proper worship of God is the central epic adventure, and the enemies and supporters of earlier prophets in their similar task come to life again in members of the community being addressed by the Quran. His heroism, in line with the heroism of previous prophets, is most perfectly defined within the terms of the educator. His primary duty—in the event, quite Stygian—was to restore true monotheism to an ignorant, thankless, and wildly polytheistic humanity.

24 Lawson, *Quran* 57–62.

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Heroism, however, is not the sole preserve of the prophets. Through reading and delving into the stories of the Quran and its epic vision, the reader/believer also becomes implicated in the heroism of the Quran. Again, typological figuration is at work. It is a very short step from the audience identifying Muhammad with the prophets of the Quran, to identifying themselves with the audience of the earlier prophets.[25] Inasmuch as the Quran implicates all humanity—those present on the Day of Alast—the Quran then may be thought of as the epic of humanity, whose journey from ignorance to enlightenment is a shared desideratum requiring a shared heroism. Part of the pedagogy is implicated in this typological figuration, but not all of it.

In his renowned series of six lectures on heroes and the heroic in history, delivered in May 1840, Thomas Carlyle (d. 1881) courageously dedicated the second lecture to Muhammad.[26] But, this aspect of the Prophet's biography has been slow to attract more attention.[27] Recently, some further progress in the study of Muhammad as hero has indicated a fertile area for future studies.[28] To briefly repeat some of that discussion, it will be relevant to observe that the broad outlines of the Prophet's birth, life, enlightenment, and call, his journey away from home and his return, his suffering and persecution, and his triumph over the same, all represent fairly standard elements of the career of an epic hero.[29]

2 Islam as Enlightenment

Just as the idea of civil society is elevated by Islam to the status of sacrament, so is knowledge. The Quran is replete with various words for truth, knowing, teaching, learning, realizing, intelligence, observation, being aware, recognition, and revelation. It may be that this theme, together with that of the path mentioned above, constitutes the core values of the Quran and Islam. The pervasiveness of the ideas of cognition and perception and illumination in the Quran may be thought to be both summarized and symbolized in the key Quranic verse:

25 See the analogous process explicated in Corbin, Épopée.
26 Carlyle, *On heroes* 60–109.
27 Nash, Amin Rihani.
28 Sperl, Epic.
29 Lawson, *Quran* 14–22.

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> Soon will We show them our Signs (*āyātanā*) in the [furthest] regions [of the earth] (*al-āfāq*), and in their own souls (*anfusihim*), until it becomes manifest to them (*yatabayyana lahum*) that this is the Truth (*al-ḥaqq*). Is it not enough that thy Lord doth witness all things?
>
> Q 41:53

Just as the epic voice and arrangement of the Quran have been largely ignored by scholarship, so also (until recently) has the apocalyptic dimension of the Quran. In the present context, this is particularly germane, because the core meaning of the originally Greek word apocalypse is "revelation" (cf. above *Tanzīl*). Revelation, a near synonym of enlightenment, is basically knowledge that comes suddenly, perhaps even unexpectedly. It is knowledge, and it therefore presumes a pedagogy and a pedagogue. The knowledge conveyed by Muhammad through the Quran and his *sunna*, whether as information, wisdom, or praxis, is what transformed his followers from savages to civilized humans, as indicated above in the quotation from Jaʿfar.

The word "enlightenment" is chosen here because of the distinctive way in which the abovementioned typological figuration produces knowledge.[30] The identification of the Prophet Muhammad comes about not through an argument from causality or through syllogistic reasoning but through the supralogical dynamism of faith, hope, and the poetics of imagination at work in the process of typological figuration. Long recognized as a powerful generator of art and meaning in the Bible[31] and European literature, typological figuration in the Quran has only recently begun to be explored.[32] The knowledge generated through this figure is that much more permanent and indelible because it is free from the constraints of time and mere rationalism. Indeed, in the midst of the typological "recital," time seems to cease to exist, and the past, the present, and the future merge at the point of recognition or what Aristotle called, in a different context, anagnorisis.[33] Quranic anagnorisis brings with it the sense of absolute and invulnerable truth precisely because it transcends time. Again, Northrop Frye is helpful:

> When we wake up from sleep, one world is simply abolished and replaced by another. This suggests a clue to the origin of typology: it is essen-

30 Ibid., 76–94.

31 Goppelt, *Typos*; Frye, *Great code*; Auerbach, *Scenes* 11–78, ch. "Figura."

32 Zwettler, Mantic; Lawson, Duality; Lawson, Typological figuration; and now Lawson, *Quran* 57–93.

33 Kennedy, *Recognition*; note here, 128–129, the construal of Islam as enlightenment.

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> tially a revolutionary form of thought and rhetoric. We have revolutionary thought whenever the feeling "life is a dream" becomes geared to an impulse to waken from it.[34]

Such recognition or awakening, an Arabic word for which is *ʿirfān*, is implicated in the act of *islām*, frequently translated as "submission," because an acceptance or recognition of truth, and commitment to the truth, are key to it.

The epic story told in the Quran is what established a new vision of humanity, and made a new world. Those who understood the world in terms of Quranic history, in which it is taught that prophets had been sent by God to every community that had ever lived (Q 10:47), who spoke to that community in their own language (Q 14:4), who recognized Muhammad as the most recent and even the last of such divine emissaries, now understood what might otherwise be seen as the chaos of religions prevailing in the Nile-to-Oxus region as a divinely ordained cosmopolitan setting in which the chief task would be to mutually recognize and understand such "religious" and cultural differences (Q 49:13) in the process of expanding the *dār al-Islām* (the Abode of Enlightenment) at the expense of the *dār al-Ḥarb* (the Abode of Chaos). After all, had "he" wanted, God could have quite easily made humanity into one homogenized community (Q 5:48).

After the remarkable spread and consolidation of Islam, the world became one to a degree previously unattained or imagined. From Andalusia to the Hindu Kush, a "citizen" of this world would be met with familiar moral, mythic, and historical presuppositions and could feel somehow "at home." The hero is not only the Prophet Muhammad but also the inhabitants of this new world, who, to one extent or another, maintained and cultivated the healing ethos of this new epic for humanity, a humanity that had, after all, once been together in perfect harmony in the presence of their Lord on that remarkable occasion before time and place existed (Q 7:172), and who were all traveling a shared path to judgment. A skeptic may see such illogical or irrational conditions as pointing to the impossibility or unworkability of such a vision. A more optimistic response would take into account the perfect unassailability of such a vision, anchored as it is in the placeless and the timeless. At the very least, one might see it as an inspiring verbal icon of hope for a fractured humanity, who, having once been at peace, must of a necessity be capable of it once again. This requires remembrance, and of course the Quran never tires of summoning to remembrance, *dhikr*.

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34 Frye, *Great code* 80–81.

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3 Conclusion

By drawing attention to the epic structure of the Quran, and to its themes of heroism and enlightenment, it is certainly not suggested that a conscious effort was being made to artificially construct a new "epic" scripture. Rather, taking guidance from Q 14:4, which insists that divine revelations are given in the language of their intended audience, we simply wish to point out that part of this language entailed what today we might refer to as the literary expectations of the reader. The form and content—the energy of the epic—had, at the time of Islam, circulated nowhere more pervasively and vigorously than in the Nile-to-Oxus region. Heroes and their travails and triumphs were a large part of that *Gedankenwelt*.[35] It is of some interest to observe that the Arabic epic poems appear between the tenth and twelfth centuries CE,[36] three to five centuries after the revelation of the Quran.

In promulgating the sacred epic of the Quran, the Prophet recounted narratives that functioned rhetorical through typological figuration to bring about a new awareness of who his audience was, and their role in history. The words of Walter Benjamin, discussing another storyteller, are apt:

> [T]he storyteller joins the ranks of the teachers and sages. He has counsel—not for a few situations, as the proverb does, but for many, like the sage. For it is granted to him to reach back to a whole lifetime (a life, incidentally, that comprises not only his own experience but no little of the experience of others; what the storyteller knows from hearsay is added to his own). His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his entire life. The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story. This is the basis of the incomparable aura about the storyteller … The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself.[37]

Of course, the Prophet Muhammad did more than tell stories; his role as educator is not exhausted by reference to storytelling. But, the stories he did tell—we all came from the same place and are traveling the same path; God is one; all prophets are equal; humanity is one; and "religion" is one—were essential to Islamic identity. The epic vision of history and humankind taught through his

35 Wheeler, Moses 260–261.
36 Reynolds, Epic 392.
37 Benjamin, Storyteller 108–109.

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story changed—and continues to change—the world, because ultimately this new epic expands the vision beyond this or that ethnic or linguistic group to speak unapologetically to humanity as a single reality.

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