

# The Epic Voice of the Qur'an: Some Preliminary Considerations

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Whatever else an epic does for a culture or a community, it provides a dictionary for the language of self-identity, of 'mythography' and the broader cultural code. The epics we are familiar with: *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, 'Gilgamesh', *The Aeneid*, *The Shah-nameh*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *Ulysses*, and *Finnegans Wake* are all distinguished by an explicit and self-consciously contiguous (if sometimes difficult-to-follow) narrative theme. Much the way the combined Old and New Testaments have come to be seen as the great code of Christian/Western culture, the Qur'an has for long been seen as such for Islamic/Islamicate culture, even if this understanding has not been made explicit.<sup>1</sup> In the Qur'an, narrative coherence is frequently stimulated to life in the mind of the audience/reader, as a function of what has been aptly called its 'referential nature'.<sup>2</sup> In this instance, the Qur'an may be compared to a musical improvisation upon a familiar melody, which is sometimes present, sometimes alluded to or echoed and sometimes present by being completely absent – aniconic.

The much remarked atomistic, discontinuous, fragmentary approach to the Qur'an exemplified in the standard *tafsīr* corpus, notwithstanding, it is clear that Islam and Muslims nonetheless acquired and developed a coherent notion of who they were/are, and that the title of Hodgson's famous trilogy *The Venture of Islam* does indeed say something important and accurate about the history of Islam and the culture it produced; it could just as easily have been called *The Epic of Islam*. Indeed, it is possibly from the vista supported by the unassailability of this epic confidence, triumph and attendant 'euphoria' that the atomisation of the Qur'an in *tafsīr* was seen as utterly harmless – 'nonthreatening', and perhaps simply expressed a pure vertical scientific desire to come to terms with and explore the epic ethos at what might be thought a narratological molecular level.

As scripture the Qur'an fulfils many roles and functions, as text it is possible to think of it as a distinctive cornucopian text, containing within it many different genres, all somehow united and made to cohere through two perhaps opposing literary 'energies': (1) that of apocalypse and (2) that of epic.<sup>3</sup> The idea of opposition is related to a general sense that apocalypse occurs in the context of social and cultural disturbance and change, while epics are symbolic of stability and bespeak or valorise a status quo. Some thoughts on the discrete workings of the former were published a

few years ago in this journal.<sup>4</sup> This is a similar attempt to delineate what might be thought the basic epic substrate of the Qur'an. Obviously, the Qur'an is quite dissimilar to those epic poems mentioned above from the point of view of form, performance setting, narrative flow, notions of morality and cultural identity. However, as I hope to illustrate, there is more than enough resonance between the form and contents of the Qur'an and the epic genre (whether Homeric or other), as this has come to be understood and problematised in contemporary scholarship, to warrant such an exploratory investigation.<sup>5</sup> Among other very intriguing, and in this context somewhat paradoxical, developments in this recent scholarship is the recognition of the influence of older Near Eastern epics on the formation of Homer's two great books.<sup>6</sup> In what follows, some of this recent scholarship will be highlighted in order to help demonstrate that there are important, perhaps even decisive, similarities between the Qur'an and what we now understand by the word 'epic', from the point of view of function and form. A brief quotation from one of the most recent reference works on the ancient epic will make what might otherwise be thought a rather far-fetched comparative exercise more immediately promising:<sup>7</sup>

In potential size, epic is hugely ambitious, undertaking to articulate the most essential aspects of a culture, from its origin stories to its ideals of social behavior, social structure, relationship to the natural world and to the supernatural. The scope of epic is matched by its attitude: as Aristotle noted, it dwells on the serious. (Even its meter, says Aristotle, is 'most stately and weightiest' ... *Poetics* 1459b34–5.) Epic, the ultimate metonymic art form from the perspective of its *pars pro toto* performance, is on the level of ideology a metonymy for culture itself.

Before proceeding, and in order to clear up any possible misunderstanding of my purpose, I would like to state in no uncertain terms that I do not wish to demonstrate in this article that the Qur'an is 'mere' literature. One way of conceptualising this exploration is to consider the Qur'an in its dignity as divine revelation. Sacred scripture is – in line with its own theory of revelation – revealed in the language of the people to whom it is directed (Q. 14:4). That is to say, the Qur'an contains much that corresponds to what might be considered the 'epic expectations' of its audience, its *qawm*. This audience, the 'Nile to Oxus' or Mesopotamian 'sectarian milieu' – it is perhaps unnecessary to emphasise – was one for whom the epic in various forms had helped to supply, define and refine values, history and identity since time immemorial. We are concerned with drawing attention to what may be designated the 'epic voice' of the Qur'an. The model for such an exploration is taken from Frye's monumental study of the Bible in which he wishes to emphasise that while the Bible is literature, it is more than literature.<sup>8</sup> Frye self-consciously avoided theology in these works to concentrate on literary features, to demonstrate how these

had been instrumental in articulating a religious or spiritual vision and at the same time lending unity to the Bible.<sup>9</sup> In the case of the Qur'an, what might otherwise be mistaken for 'mere literature' should be considered the medium through which the divine message is relayed. Like Frye and the Bible, we are not interested here in the Qur'an's theological content. Rather, we are interested in the medium by which that theological content was communicated. This medium is, for lack of a better word, literature. Specifically we are concerned with the epic aspect of or dimension of literature. Put another way, I would like to test the idea that the Qur'an may be partly seen and read as a skeletal or even refracted epic. Clearly, viewed from this perspective the main thrust of the narrative is the unfolding of history, beginning in the pre-creational timeless, mythic setting of the Day of the Covenant and stretching to the 'end of the world' with the Day of Judgement. In the course of this unfolding, various divinely appointed heroes experience numerous tests, challenges and persecutions – peripeteias – in order to protect and promote the master or epic notion of the oneness of God – epic in terms of scale because it applies to the universal humanity present at the Day of the Covenant (*the Day of alast* Q. 7:172), and this humanity is defined not as Arab or Muslim, but simply as *bani Ādam* – humanity. This epic journey, and various subsidiary ones, unfolds in the course of the Qur'anic 'performance'. This unfolding is not always smooth or 'entertaining'. Rather, it is frequently broken, implicit and sometimes apparently abandoned altogether. Yet, it is the core narrative of the Qur'an.

The main point in what follows is that the Qur'an may be read – especially in the context of its own time and place – as a 'modern' reworking and critique of epic as it had been transmitted to an audience of the Nile to Oxus region since pre-antiquity through the poems of Homer, Gilgamesh or the Alexandrian Romance, among others. The Qur'an critiques such epics because they are, in the first place, not centred on the oneness of God, and God's plan for humanity. Earlier epics are, by comparison, ethnocentric, limited in vision. With the Qur'an we have a combined literary and religious theophany that may be thought to have begun with the Hebrew Bible. The Qur'an does not have a 'chosen people' as such, but rather affirms that all people, all humanity is 'chosen'. It is the universality of the Qur'anic epic that allows us to compare it and observe it in conversation with other epic traditions. This does not mean it is not sacred scripture. Indeed, the very assertion of the oneness of God as a guarantor of the oneness of humanity keeps its religious and scriptural/revelational character always foremost. This is nowhere more dramatic than in the precreational scenario mentioned above, *the Day of alast*. Here, according to the Qur'an, the history of humanity and consciousness were born at the same time. It is an epic birth.

Simply put, if the Qur'an is read in the chronological order of revelation, the subject matter and form of the verses strongly suggests a version or rendition of apocalypse,

especially with the affirmation of revelation from an unseen realm through the agency of a supernatural being, the nearness of the Hour, natural dislocations and catastrophes of a miraculous nature entwined with the theme of judgement, and the breathtaking absence of any hint of narrative movement, apart from the simultaneous meta-movement and -stillness of apocalypse. However, when read in the order of the *muṣḥaf* the situation is quite otherwise. After a few brief introductory verses of invocation, prayer and petition, we are fully involved in the historical beginnings of humankind on earth with the story of Adam, followed by the story of Moses and so on. *Sūrat al-Baqara*, it has recently been argued, is really a tightly structured book of education, telling the community who they are and where they came from<sup>10</sup> – precisely one of the purposes and preoccupations of the epic genre.

An examination of the epic dimension of the Qur'an will help not only the 'Western reader' but also any reader of the text, who, if the daunting mountain of textual commentary composed in every century since the codification of the Qur'an is any indication, also had difficulty from time to time in understanding perfectly the text. Such an exploration may also help solve the perennial question recently voiced anew in Carl Ernst's fine book *How to Read the Qur'an*: why does the so-called 'Uthmānic codex assume the form it has today, beginning with the longest suras and ending with the shortest, an arrangement which almost perfectly reverses the chronological order of revelation. Here, it is simply and fairly stated: '[No] one really knows how or why the fixed arrangement of suras took shape in this way'.<sup>11</sup>

In elucidating the epic elements of the Qur'an, its epic substrate, we may achieve some insight into this problem. The insight may be stated rather mnemonically as follows: If read in the order of revelation, the Qur'an sounds like an apocalypse; if read in the order of the *muṣḥaf*, the Qur'an sounds like an epic. I am not saying that if read in 'muṣḥafī order' the Qur'an somehow becomes another book, that it is now not holy scripture and it has become 'secular literature'; I am only stating that when read in 'muṣḥafī order' its narratological landscape is different than if read in 'tanzīlī order'. The narratological landscape does, of course, influence theology. The historical record of Adam and Eve, the Children of Israel and Moses and Pharaoh with which the *muṣḥaf* begins is, however, not accidental or neutral vis-à-vis Islamic theology and *Heilsgeschichte*. Recent work on the Biblical canon has, for example, demonstrated that the Biblical order, when compared with other versions of the psalter and the Psalms, raises a number of questions largely to do with a messianic or Christological structure of the canon.<sup>12</sup> If we then compare and contrast the various roles common to each genre we are left with a working – and therefore provisional – conclusion that those who performed the widely-attested (i.e. *mutawātir*) duty of casting the Qur'anic text in its final form wished to convey and emphasise the narrative, not to say *Heilsgeschichte* aspects of the Qur'anic 'corpus' over and above the more abstract, poetic, imagistic and a-historical mood of the apocalyptic

‘regions’ of the Qur’an. And because of the vastness of the scope of this *Heilsgeschichte* and the struggles of its heroes, the narrative is heard and read with the tonalities of the epic. Ultimately, the arrangement of the Qur’an stands as an authorial gesture of the first importance. The *muṣḥaf* emphasises the epic voice and dimension of the Qur’an. As sacred epic, then, the Qur’an is concerned not with a particular ethnic group (unlike previous epics), rather it is concerned with forging a new group for which it is providing a universal narrative. The new group is humanity. This is not a mere literary achievement; it is a shift in religious consciousness.

Contrary to the apparent meaning of many of the earliest more explicitly apocalyptic suras and verses, the world did not end, time did not end, the mountains had not been turned into tufts of wool: the Hour had not come. Rather, the followers of Muḥammad had become triumphant in the ‘sectarian milieu’ and life had gone on. A new religious community had acquired more or less permanent features. The epic voice of the Qur’an explains these features, gives them content and rationale in the context of an otherwise chaotic welter of religious identities. This is the power and function of the epic. The inherent epic voice of the Qur’an is sometimes more fully expressed and sometimes less. And though this is not the only voice heard or read in the Qur’an, it may be one of the more significant. Where the epic feature appears vestigial and undeveloped, it is always the case that it has been taken up in extra-Qur’anic literature to be fleshed out and made more fully epic, say, in the *Sīra* of Ibn Hishām.<sup>13</sup> Of course, both the apocalyptic and epical personalities of the Qur’an also intertwine, creating something of a literary fugue. In some cases, the Qur’anic apocalypse is rendered more epic than other apocalypses, and in some instances the Qur’anic epic is rendered more apocalyptic than other epics. This is a unique and characteristic feature of the Qur’an and its recognition will help scholars and readers come to terms with its otherwise *sui generis* character.

The epic form and mode has come to us from before antiquity – it is a distinct cultural bestowal, crystallising, for example, with Gilgamesh in the Ancient Near East and Homer in the Ancient ‘West’, to name only two of the most influential for Western literature. That it has contributed to the formation and composition of the Bible is well accepted. Indeed, ancient Hebrew epics may have simultaneously contributed to and been influenced by the evolution and development of the form.<sup>14</sup> The history and development of the Persian epic tradition has long been a topic of great interest.<sup>15</sup> Indian culture also esteems an ancient epic tradition.<sup>16</sup> Then, there is of course the Arabic oral ‘folk’ epic itself, much studied from a number of angles.<sup>17</sup> It is therefore quite understandable that elements and vestiges of the epic are traceable in the Qur’an, some more prominent than others. This has not been brought out into the open sufficiently, the question possibly getting ‘confused’ or conflated with some understanding of ‘religion’ as distinct from or even opposed to ‘literature’

as such. But, if the epic is a metonymy of culture and that culture is also deeply imprinted with what we are fond of calling religion, then it seems sensible to try to account for some of that religiosity through its metonym.<sup>18</sup>

Pursuing the Qur'anic epic voice is in the service of saying something quintessentially true about both the Qur'an itself and Islamic culture in general, something that seems to have eluded scholarship especially on the Qur'an. If we can rely on electronic searches, there are, for example, only 18 occurrences of the word 'epic' in the 6 volumes of the magisterial *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*. And these fleeting instances pertain not to the Qur'an itself, but frequently to various literatures that are perceived to be in conversation with the Qur'an – indigenous, cultural epics with which the Qur'an entered into conversation as a result of the expansion of the *Dār al-Islām*.<sup>19</sup> The recent penetrating analysis of the vernacular Qur'an in the Balkans represents the kind of brilliant and illuminating work on the relationship between orality, textuality, folk epic and 'Qur'anic epic' that can be done.<sup>20</sup> The earlier study of the role of epic in conversion in Central Asia is equally suggestive.<sup>21</sup> More explicit concern with epic in an Islamic setting, especially Central Asia, has reasonably enough centred on poetry and performance and frequently the relationship between orality and narrative. The great Persian national epic of Firdawsi has generated its own library of excellent scholarship.<sup>22</sup> However, in all of this scholarship there is virtually no mention of the Qur'an.


In the most recent scholarship on epic, there is sometimes a reference to the 'standard handbook definition' of the genre. This, of course, implies that current scholarship on the epic has gradually moved away from the traditional definition. And, in fact, this is the case. Such divergence or, if you like, progress in epic scholarship, is guided by the insight that epic had for too long been the emblem of successful, triumphant societies and civilisations. The erroneous assumption was that it is these cultures that produce and own epics, while the ones that were defeated do not. Such a fallacy has been exploded in, for example, the brilliant Introduction to *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World* which clearly dissolves this and several other 'clouds of glory' clinging to the notion of epic.<sup>23</sup> In what follows, I would like to make a first step by reading the Qur'an, studying it, with reference to precisely the standard or traditional definition, especially since the culture for which the Qur'an was and is an emblem and metonym was also triumphant. This is by way of opening up the question. I hope to be able to return in another study to the very interesting, and in some ways even more promising, recent theoretical material on the epic produced in the last 25 years or so and what such scholarship might also have to tell us about the Qur'an as a cultural phenomenon.

It is the article by Revard and Newman in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*<sup>24</sup> that is frequently referred to as the standard definition of the genre.<sup>25</sup> The opening paragraph of that article succinctly encapsulates the breadth,

depth and scope of the genre as it had generally come to be understood by the time of writing this classic description:<sup>26</sup>

An epic is a long narrative poem that treats a single heroic figure or a group of such figures and concerns an historical event, such as a war or conquest, or [a] heroic quest or some other significant mythic or legendary achievement that is central to the traditions and belief of its culture. Epic usually develops in the oral culture of a society at a period when the nation is taking stock of its historical, cultural, and religious heritage. Epic often focuses on a hero, sometimes semi-divine, who performs difficult and virtuous deeds; it frequently involves the interaction between human beings and gods. The events of the poem, however, affect the lives of ordinary human beings and often change the course of the nation. Typically long and elaborate in its narrative design, episodic in sequence, and elevated in language, the epic usually begins 'in the midst of things' (*in medias res*) and employs a range of poetic techniques, often opening with a formal invocation to a muse or some other divine figure, and frequently employing elaborate formulaic figures, extended similes (usually termed epic or Homeric similes), and other stylized descriptive devices such as catalogues of warriors, detailed descriptions of arms and armor and descriptions of sacrifices and other rituals. Recurrent narrative features include formal combat between warriors, prefaced by an exchange of boasts; accounts of epic games or tournaments; and fabulous adventures, sometimes with supernatural overtones and often involving display of superior strength or cunning. Epic incorporates within it not only the methods of narrative poetry but also of lyric and dramatic poetry. It includes and expands upon panegyric and lament. With its extended speeches and its well-crafted scenic structure, it is often dramatic and is perhaps with the choral ode the true ancestor of ancient drama.

The epic is thus understood as containing or displaying a number of predictable features or conventions. In tabulated form, they may be listed as follows:

- 1)  epic is frequently the first or oldest literary work (whether oral or textual) in the culture, and is usually very long.
- 2) Opens *in medias res*
- 3) The setting is vast, covering many nations, the world, or cosmos
- 4) Begins with an invocation to a muse
- 5) Starts with a statement of theme: *praepositio*
- 6) Makes use of epithet

- 7) Makes use of epic similes and figures
- 8) Contains long lists: *enumeratio*
- 9) Features long and formal speeches
- 10) Shows divine intervention in human affairs
- 11) Features 'star' heroes who embody the values of the civilisation
- 12) Performed before an audience

The above list will serve as a point form guide for the preliminary and necessarily brief discussion that follows. Though it is not mentioned in Revard and Newman, one might add a thirteenth factor, namely that the epic frequently generates numerous commentaries and/or types of performance. As such, it may also be considered an 'open' work, as per Eco's widely influential discussion.<sup>27</sup> Doubtless, one of the reasons for a disinclination to see the Qur'an in its epic dimension is because of the notoriously daunting narrative discontinuity of the text. Recently, however, there have appeared numerous studies elucidating the mechanics, rhetoric and poetics of Qur'anic coherence, especially with regard to ring composition/chiasmus.<sup>28</sup> The role of ring composition and chiasmus in oral composition was first brought to scholarly attention in studies of the *Odyssey*. So, we come full circle: to the degree that the mysterious narrative structure of the Qur'an has been unappreciated, so has its epic dimension. We can now appreciate more acutely why, though the narrative flow and continuity 'on the page' of the Qur'an may be problematic at the 'molecular' level, the overall coherence and identity – its 'centre of narrative gravity' – is never really in question. It was argued in an earlier study on apocalypse that it was precisely the recurring figure of duality that helps to establish the Qur'an's continuity in the face of such apparent discontinuity.<sup>29</sup> Here, we add that another guarantor of this same continuity is the epic 'energy' of the Qur'an: the relentless and compelling apocalyptic and epic energy suffusing the text, exemplify a concern with the journey, spiritual heroism, the affirmation of a distinct code of moral values, the assertion of community identity and other traditional epic problems and topics. The Qur'an's epic role and function is also unmistakable in its status as the first book in Arabic and, furthermore, a long composition that rhymes from beginning to end – something the uninitiated may be forgiven for mistaking as poetry.<sup>30</sup> This fulfils the requirement that the epic be in elevated, not to say 'artificial' or artistic language. As such, it offers a cognate to other seminal, culturally foundational texts such as the poems of Homer, 'Gilgamesh', and *The Aeneid* to name only three. One should not fail to mention here the culturally foundational role of this elevated, 'exalted' Qur'anic Arabic excerpted, as it were, from the Qur'anic text/context. The *Fātiḥa* as the opening (perhaps better, 'overture') for the *muṣḥaf* does double duty as the (first) invocation to 'the muse' and as demonstrating the distinctively Qur'anic instance of



an epic beginning *in medias res* and in stating the introductory theme. We will look at each of these three Qur'anic versions of standard epic conventions in turn.

It might first be useful to acquaint ourselves briefly with the meaning of the term muse. Today the word stands for an agent of inspiration and is frequently used figuratively in a variety of contexts, often having nothing to do with classical Greek mythology in which the muses were nine goddesses, daughters of Zeus, who were the sources of knowledge of all the arts and sciences, and whose aid was traditionally petitioned before beginning a given work, in this case epic poetry, whose muse was Calliope.<sup>31</sup> The typical petitioning of a muse in the traditional epic is thus more directly concerned with the poet asking for inspiration. Now, it is obvious that the Qur'an's *the Merciful and the Compassionate* (*al-rahmān al-rahīm*) or *Lord of the worlds* (*rabb al-'ālamīn*), is much more than a mere 'muse' and that the anthropomorphism and polytheism of the Greek tradition could not be more repellent to Islamic religiosity, piety and spirit. However, the two traditions do agree on one extremely important factor: the role of inspiration. In both cases the 'literary phenomenon' is identical, but the actual source of the inspiration is also decisive, as was shown decisively by Zwettler.<sup>32</sup>

Here in the Qur'an we have the distinctive and familiar invocation, the *basmala*. If this is not an explicit request, such may be thought implied: *In the name of God* is thus a comparatively indeterminate prayer that can mean 'with the help of God', 'on the authority of God', or 'By God', as in an oath. The mood is continued with the opening words of the next verse: *Praise be to God*. The prayer and petition seems obvious. Since God is the author of the Qur'an, why would there be any more explicit request for 'poetic' help? Such a point is made most explicit at Q. 17:16 when the Prophet is instructed to *not move your tongue*. The *basmala*'s ubiquity throughout the Qur'an tends to argue for its role as an invocation, naturally not to a 'muse' but to the one and only 'God of Islam'. Its doubling with the *ḥamdala* at the opening of the *muṣḥaf* emphasises the specifically monotheistic epic character of the Qur'an. The Qur'an is using the epic convention of the invocation, but it doubles as an invocation to God. As such, it is a rewriting or recasting – a critique – of the traditional epic. In musical terms, it may be thought a transposition into the 'key of monotheism'. Part of this critique is, again, to universalise the epic and simultaneously personalise it. This will become clearer below when the subject of the epic hero and the Qur'an is addressed.

With the *Fātiḥa* as the beginning, the *muṣḥaf* also begins *in medias res*. The persistent and variously-evoked imagery of the road or the path in the Qur'an is first introduced here with the mention of the *ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm* (*the right path*). The exact wording is: *iḥdinā al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm* (*Guide us to (or on) the straight path*). Regardless of which preposition one chooses, the idea of a path suggests being in the middle of the action, the process or progress – from a beginning to an end. Such a

structure also depends upon the frequent use of flashbacks so common in the epic form, such as the kind we find immediately following the *Fātiḥa* in Q. 2:30ff and *passim* throughout the Qur'an. The path, no matter how it is construed, is between two terminals: the Day of the Covenant mentioned later, and the Day of Doom or Judgement, mentioned here. So, the Qur'an begins with *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* in an invocation of the straight path that, it is assumed, we are already on (*in medias res*) after invoking God, the Most Merciful and alluding to the end of the epic journey, the Day of Doom, Judgement Day. It is not, however, until we get to Q. 7:172 that we discover – or are reminded – in detail of the egg from which this long, dramatic formative history emerged.<sup>33</sup> The Day of the Covenant is, for the Qur'an, the beginning of time, being and history (and everything else) in the same way that Genesis is the beginning for the Hebrew Bible. It is also the beginning of consciousness.<sup>34</sup> Having been born on the Day of the Covenant, every time consciousness is deployed presents – in a sense – a remembrance (*dhikr*) and imitation, reenactment, or performance (*ḥikāya*) of that primordial event. Thus the Qur'an, the *muṣḥaf*, begins in the middle of things. Ultimately, of course, the Qur'an is not fully at ease with these traditional categories: beginning, middle and end. It unfurls its particular character in serene disdain for such relative banalities. The *totum simul* identified by Brown<sup>35</sup> is also perhaps a useful way of thinking of Qur'anic textual flow/narrative. But, narrative in the standard understanding of the term is also extremely important for the Qur'an's epic function. Whether we take as our historical beginning the story of Adam and Eve, first encountered in the Qur'an at Q. 2:30, or the Day of *alast*, the opening of the book assumes we are on the path from that event headed for the last event. All of us, the prophet-hero, humanity, and the individual, are precisely and firmly ~~(perhaps even imprisoned)~~ *in medias res*. So, after an invocation of the Qur'anic muse, God (an invocation that is repeated so often that it has become one of the epic formulae of the book), and after beholding ourselves on a path (whether the straight one or the wrong one), we discover we are in the midst of the action. It is normally the hero who is thus situated, but the Qur'an in some sense wants to implicate everyone in the heroic quest. It is important to repeat that the road, by whatever Arabic word it may be designated, is one of the more frequent themes or metaphors in the Qur'an and that as such it also assumes the role and function of the epic simile, mentioned above as number 7 in the list of epic conventions.<sup>36</sup>

But it is not only the Qur'anic vocabulary that points to the epic élan of Islam and the venture of Islam. Corbin many years ago described in some detail the way in which the heroic epic evolved, under the impress of Islamic culture and civilisation, into something he called the mystical epic.<sup>37</sup> Though he did not explicitly deal with the Qur'an's epic dimension in this elegant study, it may be assumed that he was not unaware of the Qur'anic 'germs' of epic heroism that also fed the evolution of the Islamic mystical epic. One of the stages in between might be thought of as the

~~common or garden~~ religious epic. The path of righteousness is indicated not only in the famous *ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm* but also in countless key extra-Qur'anic words and titles, such as *sabīl*, *nahj*, *muwaṭṭa*, *sīra*, *madhhab* and so on. And while it would take a few centuries for such travel to be reconfigured and revalorised as 'progress' in the contemporary sense, it nonetheless captures the sense of 'Pilgrim's Progress'. Without the preoccupation with the metaphor of movement from one place to another, journeying and travelling – whether such preoccupation be Qur'anic or extra-Qur'anic – a great deal of what is distinctive about Islam and Islamic culture would be lost or simply absent. Thus, the statement of theme is clear: praise and petition to be on the right path and to be pleasing to God. The rest of the Book demonstrates in detail how this is to be achieved and how the opposite is to be avoided. The *Fātiḥa*, in presenting the theme of the Qur'an, has long been said by the exegetical tradition to encapsulate the entire book through a celebrated, oft-quoted *ḥadīth* ascribed to °Alī that may be paraphrased thus: everything that is in the previous scriptures is in the Qur'an, everything that is in the Qur'an is in the *Fātiḥa*.<sup>38</sup>

Traditional genre-definitions of the epic mention the importance and function of lists. A prime example of such a list can be found in the catalogue of ships that sailed from Greece to Troy (Book 2.484–759 of the *Iliad*), and the famous 'Catalogue of Women' by Hesiod. Catalogues bespeak cultural wealth and plenitude and may also provide something of a 'reality effect' in addition to universalising the message and in some cases, such as Biblical genealogies, pay homage to various members of the audience. In the Qur'an, we find catalogues of both material and spiritual 'items'. This is not surprising since the concerns of the Qur'an may be thought equal parts 'spiritual' and 'material' (without, however, being dualist). One of the most populous lists in the Qur'an is spread from the beginning to the end (and may also thus be considered another marker of continuity). The divine attributes and names number well over several dozen, beginning with the most frequent, *al-rahmān* and *al-rahīm*.<sup>39</sup> The next major list would be the 55 various names for the Qur'an the Qur'an itself uses, mentioned by al-Suyūṭī in the *Itqān*.<sup>40</sup> The list of suras may also qualify as well as numerated lists of verses, both of which together actually constitute the Qur'an. A long list of the 25 prophets and messengers mentioned in the Qur'an is certainly relevant. In addition there are much shorter lists of the false gods of the *jāhili* period: al-Lāt, al-°Uzzā, and Manāt (Q. 53:19–20); Wadd, Suwā°, Yaghūth, Ya°ūq, and Nasr – the gods of the people of Noah (Q. 71:23); *al-ṭāghūt* – 'false gods' (Q. 16:36 and Q. 39:17).

There are, in addition, the more restricted lists of the various religions and their holy books: *Yahūd*, *Naṣāra*, *Ṣābi°ūn*, *Majūs*, *al-Tawrāt*, *al-Zabūr*, and *al-Injīl*. But the fewness of actual names of religions and scriptures here can be misleading. After all, the Qur'an affirms that a revelation has been given to every human community

through a prophet or messenger (Q. 35:24); and that the Qur'an does not mention all of them (Q. 40:78); that such revelation has been in the language of the particular community (Q. 14:4). The 'alphabet of prophets' that emerges from the Qur'an goes quite beyond the function of the normal epic list to provide a key to the unlocking of the various mysteries entailed in the chaos of religions greeting observers and denizens of the 'sectarian milieu'. Furthermore, this cultural alphabet is identified as being distinct from mere 'poets', a group with which it might otherwise become confused.<sup>41</sup> Thus a theoretical list of communities takes shape in the Qur'an. Such a theoretical list is the basis for the vast literature of so-called heresiographical works and tales of the prophets, more properly considered works of comparative religion in the cosmopolitan context in which they were composed. Such a list of nations, languages and races is again evoked in Q. 49:13:<sup>42</sup>

*People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman,  
and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognise one  
another. In God's eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most  
mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware.*

A list of types of human response to the divine message also emerges, for example, *im, mu'min, ahl al-kitāb, kāfir, mushrik, fāsiq, munāfiq, shahīd, and radd*. There is a list of levels of Paradise and levels of Hell, more or less symmetrical, and a list of various nations such as al-Rūm. There are potential 'lists' of communities that have passed away as suggested by the frequent locution, or some variation of, *tilka ummatun qad khalat* (Q. 2:134), and *wa kam min qaryatin ahlaknāhā* (Q. 7:4), and so on.<sup>43</sup> Such references may be considered placeholders for later elaboration by the tradition, just as the 25 Qur'anic prophets open a catalogue section for the eventual 124,000 prophets and messengers acknowledged by the Islamic tradition. Angels, though unnamed, provide the basis for a list. The pillars of religion (*passim*) and the pillars of faith (Q. 2:177) represent two more lists.

Other kinds of books and literary – whether oral or textual – 'sources' suggest another list: *asāṭir al-awwalīn, shi'r/shā'ir, kitāb/kutub, ṣuḥuf*, and all of the *matériel* of literacy mentioned in the Qur'an from the mysterious and transcendent *lawḥ al-mahfūz* to the *signs of God (āyāt)* that are to be read by all believers. Guenther's suggestion that even various verbal formulae, such as *'allama al-insān*,<sup>44</sup> indicate a culture of literacy is quite to the point: there is a list of literary sources, again whether actual or theoretical, oral or textual, embodied in the Qur'an. The mysterious letters also form another list, as do the verses/signs and suras themselves.

A major 'list' for consideration is the one indicated in the frequent Qur'anic concern with *all [created] things (kullu shay', passim)*, which function also as *signs of God* (for example, at Q. 41:53). Such a list is obviously not fully elaborated or itemised, but there are several moving and eloquent passages which list features of the

creation and its subservience to God, such as Q. 4:190. Thus the entire ‘contents’ of the cosmos and the soul – in addition to the signs/verses of the Qur’an itself – are brought within the purview and literary sovereignty of the epic vision of the Qur’an. Just as the various genealogical chains in the Bible may be seen to constitute a variation on the epic list, so we might consider the laws in the Qur’an a similar variation on the conventional epic list. Modern and classical scholars tend to agree that there are 500 verses of legal import in the Qur’an, this constitutes a rather long list in itself.<sup>45</sup>

Among the multitude of exhortations and prescriptions found in the Qur’an, there are a good number of legal and quasi-legal stipulations. Thus legislation was introduced in select matters of ritual, almstax, property, and treatment of orphans, inheritance, usury, consumption of alcohol, marriage, separation, divorce, sexual intercourse, adultery, theft and homicide.

Thus while the nomothetic function of the Qur’anic legal pronouncements need not be questioned, by looking at the same material as literature, specifically epic, we are given a new understanding of the text. Q. 5 is a fine example, listing many commands and prohibitions, from the status of the individual, to concerns of the community, to rules for inter-religious relations. Such laws have been seen as naturally separable (and therefore ‘listable’ apart) from the more universal principles contained in the Qur’an and particularly in Sura 5.<sup>46</sup>

Sūra 5, revealed at Medina, marshals a list of commands, admonitions and explicit prohibitions concerning a great variety of issues, from eating swine meat to theft. References to the Jews and Christians and their respective scriptures recur throughout. In Q 5:43 God asks, with a sense of astonishment, why the Jews resort to Muḥammad in his capacity as a judge ‘when they have the Torah which contains the judgment (q.v.) of God’. The Qur’ān continues: ‘We have revealed the Torah in which there is guidance and light, by which the prophets who surrendered [to God] judged the Jews, and the rabbis and priests judged by such of God’s scriptures as they were bidden to observe’ (Q 5:44). In Q 5:46, the Qur’ān addresses the Christians, saying in effect that God sent Jesus (q.v.) to confirm the prophethood of Moses (q.v.), and the Gospel to reassert the ‘guidance and advice’ revealed in the Torah. ‘So let the people of the Gospel judge by that which God had revealed therein, for whosoever judged not by that which God revealed: such are sinners’ (Q 5:47).

Lists are thus an important feature of the Qur’an. As such, their presence represents an epic convention in distinctive Qur’anic form.<sup>47</sup>

Related to lists in the case of the Qur'an, the epic convention of the epithet looms rather significantly. The traditional notion of the epic epithet is, for example, the famous Homeric 'rosy fingers of dawn', or references to Agamemnon and Menelaus as 'the two eagles', or the evocative 'wine-dark sea'. These epithets are conventions and mannerisms – verging on what the ungenerous might call cliché – frequently repeated stock phrases in Homer's poems, and serve to move the action along with a minimum of verbiage. They are also touchstones of familiarity, adding to the continuity of the poems. They have helped define the epic genre. In the Qur'an there are numerous locutions that serve the same purpose.<sup>48</sup> To begin with, we might consider the divine attributes again. Doing double duty as an example of an epic catalogue or list, they also function as epic epithets. In the Qur'an their identity is almost never questioned and they add variety and information about the otherwise utterly unknowable God. In this way these epithets orient the reader/listener and provide familiarity. Apart from the divine names and attributes, such familiar Qur'anic formulae as *the life of the world* (*ḥayāt al-dunyā*), and verbal formulae such as *for those who have minds to know* (*ulū'l-albāb*), also function as epithetical 'shortcuts' and embellishment. Also to be mentioned are the various names of the Qur'an itself: *al-dhikr*, *al-tanzīl*, *al-kitāb*, in addition to all of those other figurative self-references that populate the text.<sup>49</sup> There is certainly no space here to examine everything that might be considered epithets in the Qur'an, but, in addition to the two mentioned here, we could briefly mention also the epithet *all created things*, and the 'trope' and its expression mentioned in the previous section: the community that has passed away, and the frequent Qur'anic warning to *not trade* for a paltry price the signs of God, the next world or belief.

Closely related to the epic convention of the epithet is the epic or Homeric simile.<sup>50</sup> An epic simile is one through which the entire scope or concern of a given epic may be stimulated to life. Sometimes referred to as an extended simile, it is seen in such phrases as 'Apollo came like the night'. We see in the Qur'an various characteristic tropes or similes, such as *to purchase this world with the next with a paltry price* or the repeated use of *So which of your Lord's bounties will you deny* in Q. 55. A more abstract but nonetheless instructive Qur'anic simile occurs with the glorious 'Light Verse' (Q. 24:35), whose other, darker, half (Q. 24:36) is frequently forgotten in the dazzling light and beauty of its language. Another similar example is the 'Throne Verse' (Q. 2:255) that resonates with all those other Qur'anic uses that employ throne imagery.<sup>51</sup> These key Qur'anic moments would seem to function very much like the epic similes in Homer and other poems. The *Fātiḥa* itself may be seen to fulfill a fourth function as an epic simile, particularly with reference to the extended imagery of the straight path and those who have been lead to it. The parables of the two gardens and their owners also falls under this category. Other possible epic similes or metaphors are: humanity, revelation, and unity. These are extended comparisons in some way key to the extended argument of the 'poem'. Throughout

the Qur'an numerous 'simile moments' occur which are important both for the general, if refracted, epic narrative, (important, that is, for keeping the 'action' moving), and for supplying essential information pertinent to how and why the narrative moves. Here it is interesting to emphasise again that the divine attributes, mentioned above, may also function as epic similes in which God, ever remote – as per the epic simile in *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* (Q. 112) – is nonetheless connected to the world and the epic action of the prophets and humanity through such divine 'emotions' as wrath and mercy.<sup>52</sup>

But there is also a sense in which the entire Qur'an, in its recounting of the history of humanity as call and response to the divine message, is one long grand or operatic epic simile. And here we approach the sense in which revelation (the Qur'an) is its own hero (see below). Typological figuration, so key to the Qur'an's method, dictates that Muḥammad is Moses and Jesus in the poetic or spiritual sense and it dictates that his community is also their community: what happened to the earlier group will happen to them.<sup>53</sup> Can the Qur'an really be the hero of its own epic? Can it be considered a meta-epic? A skiamorphic epic? An 'incomplete' epic? Or, is it a text through which an epic quest and struggle is refracted in original, compelling and challenging ways (~~see below 'Reader as Hero'~~)? To the degree that these questions are reasonable, it is also reasonable to pursue and attempt to delineate the distinctive features of the Qur'an's epic voice.

When read in terms of its epic voice, the Qur'an *is* a long speech, the speech of God through the angel to Muḥammad. In addition, other brief speeches populate the text. It is perhaps even less necessary to dwell at great length on this particular epic convention. As revelation, the Qur'an is, *ipso facto*, concerned with and emblematic or illustrative of divine intervention in human affairs. It is God, after all, who is speaking, and it is God who is addressing and challenging humanity precisely on the grounds of His having intervened in the past: communities who obeyed Him prospered, those who did not were destroyed. It is God who will ultimately judge all humanity on the Day of Judgement. But here we are introduced to a meta-dimension of the problem in observing that not only does the Qur'an speak about divine intervention, it *is* divine intervention. Thus do the contours of the Qur'anic epic become more and more discernible. Though the story adumbrated in the Qur'anic epic could not be told in a single sitting or even a single day, the story is so important that the shorthand version – the *muṣḥaf* (i.e. the Qur'an) – available on the best possible authority, may be told and or recited (performed) in the course of a single day. As indicated above, the time frame is from before creation to the Day of Judgement, the spatial canvas is equally vast. Thus, the Qur'anic chronotope is epic indeed.<sup>54</sup> Within this time-space continuum numerous if not near-infinite features are noticed, valorised, sacralised, and condemned.

All of the cosmos, creation, humanity, time, and history are the subject of the Qur'an. Simply put, the scale of action could not be more vast. Although there is no need to 'prove' this, a few features of this vast scale are offered here: the action of the Qur'an starts, as was mentioned above, on the Day of the Covenant. Actually, the 'action' or at least the scene has to begin even before the Day of *alast*, because even here we are introduced to already fully-formed (if not yet created!) characters, such as Adam, to say nothing of the pre-existent God Himself. This pre-existent beginning is characteristic of the Qur'an, setting it apart from other creation myths. Certainly many creation myths begin in some kind of chaos before creation. However, the Qur'an distinctively posits something else as the substrate upon which creation proceeds, suggesting that chaos is really a human 'creation' and has nothing to do with God or His plan.<sup>55</sup> The end is the aforementioned Judgement Day towards which all creation is wending. The vastness of the temporal scale is matched by an equally vast spatial canvas, a spectrum of place and space reaching from the atom and the sperm, and the space(s) they occupy, to the vastnesses of the seven heavens and beyond. This spatial continuum is further divided into planets, nations, villages, seas, lakes, rivers, stars and so on. Into this vastness enter, of course, *all [created] things* animal, vegetable, mineral, human, angel, and jinn. With the entry of humans also comes an attendant moral spectrum, or spatiality, through which the drama of choice and faith are acted out in a wide variety of human relationships from the familial to the tribal, the national, the mercantile, the military, the prophetic, and so on. As has been remarked many times, the paucity of detail in many of these instances is also a characteristic feature of the Qur'an's expressive style, but not one that has diminished its appeal or epic call (cf. *kerygma/dawa*). Here, it may be thought to have worked an opposite magic, by relying upon the reader or listener to fill in the blanks, the epic becomes perhaps personalised to a degree not quite encountered in other scriptures and epics. The lack of historical detail is here just as productive as a wealth of historical detail might be. The *tafsīr* tradition is, of course, a permanent record of just how well the audience is able to fill in the blanks, or to put flesh on the epical skeleton of the Qur'an.<sup>56</sup>

### **The Hero of the Qur'an**

If we are to be thorough in our exploration of the Qur'an as a special kind of epic, we had better start looking for a hero before too much more time passes, not least because the hero appears to be the most single important element of a given epic. The word 'hero' of course comes from a Greek word meaning 'protector' and we may discuss at our leisure precisely what the hero thus protects in the case of the Greek epics, but it is likely to emerge that it is identity and ethos, which are among the most prized treasures. In the case of the Qur'an and Islam, our epic protects the truth of divine oneness, which of course paradoxically protects the audience, reader, and believer. In this final section of our brief exploration of the epic substrate of the



Qur'an, we return to the place we started, with the standard definition of the genre. Here we are concerned only with this fragment of the definition:<sup>57</sup>

[Epic] treats a single heroic figure or a group of such figures and concerns an historical event, such as a war or conquest, or [a] heroic quest or some other significant mythic or legendary achievement that is central to the traditions and belief of its culture.

The hero is an essential element of the epic. Even though Aristotle himself argued that this aspect can be ~~overdone~~, the hero has emerged as the central point in which not only the exploits of a single individual are retold for edification and entertainment (not necessarily separated) but that the hero as single agonistic player embodies the virtues and ethics esteemed by the audience of a given epic. But the above definition also points to something beyond the usual notion of the hero as single actor in a story, namely that the heroic role may be assumed by numerous individuals. In the Qur'an, Muḥammad emerges as an epic hero in the context of all the other heroes who have been sent by God to reform humanity, namely the 25 prophets and messengers explicitly mentioned and the vast number (eventually fixed at 124,000) accounted for in theory by the developing tradition. Muḥammad's role is in fact defined and elucidated by identifying his office with those earlier named prophets, most of whose roles and lives are defined in much greater detail than his.<sup>58</sup> The epic struggle here is largely the one that seeks to replace savagery with civilisation.<sup>59</sup> In the course of this quest, this Herculean labour, the hero has been typified as going through a series of more or less standard stages in the service of the epic struggle. It was perhaps Carlyle who first detected the epic nature of Islam's self-image in his famous, though today little read, analysis of Muḥammad as hero of the prophetic type.<sup>60</sup> Joseph Campbell in his widely influential *Hero with a Thousand Faces* also refers sparingly to Muḥammad and Islam in the course of delineating his own, somewhat idiosyncratic and controversial, heroic code or profile. Campbell, originally a Joyce scholar, borrowed a neologism from *Finnegans Wake* as a technical term for the heroic process he saw functioning in human societies ancient and new, eastern and western: monomyth. To take Campbell's theory much further than he himself did in the case of Muḥammad, we will offer a brief sketch of the way in which the Prophet's life story as alluded to in the Qur'an and more fully detailed in the *sīra* (a word, by the way, that can easily be, and often is, translated as 'epic') may be thought to conform to that scheme.<sup>61</sup> To speak of the life of Muḥammad as an epic is not the same as speaking of the Qur'an as an epic. Given, however, the inseparableness of the two sources and the incessant cross-fertilisation between them reflecting identity, ethos and praxis, it is certainly not irrelevant to focus briefly on the figure of the Prophet, after which we will address certain other manifestations of the heroic, more directly and arguably 'Qur'anic'.<sup>62</sup>

Muḥammad's birth, boyhood, and adolescence up to his marriage to Khadija is of course not told in the Qur'an, but it is told in all its remarkable detail in the *sīra*.<sup>63</sup> The *sīra* is umbilically wedded to the Qur'an as that which makes the adamantly referential and allusive nature of the text understandable to its audience. His birth is signalled by a light emanating from his father 'Abd Allāh's forehead. His father, a descendant of Meccan 'royalty', the son of 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, dies before the birth of his son. (It should be remembered that much of the first part of Ibn Hishām's edition of the Ibn Ishāq biography is in the manner of establishing precisely this 'royal' lineage.) The predestined birth had also been foreshadowed by the vow of 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib to sacrifice his son, the Prophet Muḥammad's father – a plan that was abandoned for the ransom of a number of camels. And his mother dies while he is still very young. Thus we have the familiar theme of the disadvantaged and yet highborn beginning of the hero. Muḥammad's receipt of revelation and the concomitant (re-)establishment of monotheism in the place of existing polytheism, a restoration of true religion, is certainly in line with the Campbellian theory. A challenge emerges in Muḥammad's status as *ummī*, meaning either 'illiterate' or 'unlearned' in religious texts; the rampant polytheism, materialism and brutality of his society; and his relatively lowly social status as a result of his orphanhood. It is in the early period of his orphaned life that the signs of prophecy are recognised by the Syrian monk Baḥīrā, adumbrating the helper motif that emerges more fully after the first experience of revelation on Mt Ḥirā<sup>3</sup> in the ~~mythic~~ cave.<sup>64</sup> Quite apart from the long list of sacred relics that Muḥammad is said by tradition to have become heir to, the Qur'an first casts the angel of revelation in the role of helper and the experience of revelation and the contents of revelation as the supernatural protection the (now) prophet will need to accomplish his task. Shortly after, of course, other helpers emerge: Khadija, Warāqa, Abū Bakr, and eventually all of the Companions and by extension the *umma* itself. Muḥammad's *mi'raj* qualifies perfectly as an instance of 'crossing-over', and though the details are not in the Qur'an, the Qur'an is almost universally read to refer to it (Q. 81:19–25, Q. 53:1–21). But, prior to the *mi'raj*, the actual experience in the cave on Mt Ḥirā<sup>3</sup> may be thought a textbook example of this mythic crossing over into an enchanted realm. The description of Muḥammad's experience is decisive: first an encounter with a supernatural, nearly monstrous, being followed by a profound fear and refusal of the communication or charge.<sup>65</sup> Here, the helpers become instrumental in reassuring the Prophet who fears that he has somehow become a despised poet. The name Muṣṭafā indicates the divine choice of Muḥammad, and his pre-prophetic life is generally regarded as the proving ground for this choice, during which he exemplified all of the noble and heroic qualities that he would continue to manifest throughout his life. Chief among these tests are his confronting the entire weight of Arab '*sunna*' with the changeless *sunna* of God.<sup>66</sup> The battle would play out over his lifetime. Of course, the Hijra perfectly qualifies as exile, flight from persecution.<sup>67</sup> In the biography of the Prophet, the

typical return to the ‘real’ world after the crossing-over is conflated with the establishment of the Medinan *umma* after the return from the *mi‘rāj*. Later, the Prophet’s victorious return to his beloved Mecca will add another layer of drama to this standard heroic motif. With his triumph and conquest and the support and allegiance he attracted from the various tribes, he is ~~of~~ now the very personification of ‘protector’ (cf. hero) and able to dispense the bounty (spoils) of his success in meeting the heroic challenge and test, upon all whom he esteems as members of his nation, the *umma*. The relevance of each of these stages to the heroic life of Muhammad may be more fully elaborated and illustrated with regard to the Qur’an and the *sīra*. For the time being, we simply wish to register the compelling nature of this schema for a study of the epic substrate of the Qur’an.

There are other ways in which the hero has come to be understood and which may also help illumine the epic dimensions of the Qur’an, though not necessarily in traditional terms. Other candidates for heroic status in the case of the Qur’an are: God, the community, humanity as such, and the reader/listener. After all, the divine attributes may also be seen as human attributes of an otherwise transcendent God whose heroic quest is to lead humanity to some kind of enlightenment, whether by hook or by crook.<sup>68</sup> That the audience of the Qur’an is challenged to the same heroic standard as the Prophet and prophets is axiomatic of monotheistic kerygma and is an example of the call to what has appositely been called ‘moral athleticism’.<sup>69</sup>

So while warfare, battle, spying, scheming, and deceit may not hold the same prominent place in the Qur’an as they do in other more conventional epics, they certainly have a prominent role, part of which is to function as a metonym for the journey of the soul from the Day of *alast* to the *yawm al-dīn*, which is *the* heroic journey from ignorance to enlightenment. Here enlightenment seems to function in tandem with the more traditional epic quest for immortality, as in Gilgamesh.<sup>70</sup> The Qur’anic *jihād* of such multifarious renown, and to which every believer is summoned, is really a call to this same heroism, whether it be on the battlefield of military combat or the battlefield of spiritual conquest, the epic (cf. *baṭal*) dimension is unmistakable. Subsidiary heroic features, such as the bestowal of boon in the form of wealth or comfort, are also traceable in the Islamicate veneration of hospitality, an invocation of the ultimate hospitality of Paradise, which, in the last analysis, is causally linked with the heroic triumph of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>71</sup> The ultimate boon is of course true civilisation in place of the pre-existing savagery (*jahl*).

While obviously not an epic in the traditional sense, there is enough ‘epic energy’ prominently in operation in the Qur’an to do the work required: the nation of Islam is born, its credentials presented, the identity of the new community encoded, the purpose of life made clear, and the chaos of religions transformed into the understandable product of the history of the relation between God and humanity. While the foundational literary epics are seen, from the point of view of traditional –

especially Abrahamic – monotheism, to spring from a ‘pagan’ (i.e. a presumably uncongenial and or dubious) tradition, it should be remembered that even in Homer there is veneration of *the God*, Theos. If the sacred olive tree of Greek religion resonates typologically with the olive tree that is now *neither of the east nor of the west* (Q. 24:35) we are not arguing for cultural and/or ‘conscious’ borrowing. We only wish to point out structural and ‘grammatical’ homologues representing distinct and freestanding separate cultural complexes. However, the splendid role of the olive in the Qur’an may be thought a simultaneous climax of both epic and apocalyptic energies in the mode of ‘glory’ (Greek *kleos*) – a motif quite characteristic, whether in dramatic or theological garb, of both the epic and the apocalyptic tradition. The hero achieves, or perhaps better, participates in, glory, but this glory, in the case of Muḥammad (and in counterpoint with the pre-Islamic cognate of *fakhr*), is in some ways a reflection of the everlasting and sublime glory of the one and only God/Allāh.<sup>72</sup>

The epic repertoire calls for the hero-leader to overcome the rebellion of his people,<sup>73</sup> a theme that may be considered one of the major preoccupations of the Qur’an. In the case of the Qur’an, the hero preserves and protects the correct means of worship (namely *tawḥīd*) against which such rebellion is cast as operating. And the movement from Mecca to Medina may be seen as an example of the kind of protection Aeneas accomplished when he rescued his gods and brought them to a place where he might be free to worship them. In one sense, Muḥammad’s success in establishing an *umma* in Medina may be thought the climax of a minor or subsidiary epic in which the primordial covenant is re-enacted and the moment thus preserved in perpetuity. But in the Qur’an the large ‘framing’ epic seems to present us with another hero, namely humanity itself. *Al-Nās*, *al-insān*, *banū Ādam*, *al-khalq*, and *al-bashar* are all words that acquire something of a heroic tonality in the unfolding of the Qur’anic message and which acquire a distinct role in the Qur’an. Part of this heroism must surely be involved in the epic task of ‘understanding’ through reading/audition of the Qur’an’s account of everything. It is, after all, with humanity as hero fallen on difficult times that the Qur’an begins, the specific humanity of Mecca whose prayer is reflected in the *Fātiḥa*. While the prophets and messengers are charged with their heroic tasks to promote the message of divine unity, their audiences are also charged with, in the nature of things, a perhaps equally heroic duty. Here the antagonists are civilisation and savagery, and it is in Islam and the Qur’an that civilisation acquires special status as a religious value. *Jahl* is its opposite, so that the *ḥizb al-shayṭān* (Q. 58:19) are those who reject knowledge and succumb to the expedient of savagery. The image of the Prophet Muḥammad as hero is in reality deathless. This has most recently been demonstrated in works of anthropology, but is enshrined in the Islamic tradition itself.<sup>74</sup>

The serpentine and broken, allusive or refracted manner in which the whole story unfolds – perhaps similar in some ways to the vagaries of the *qaṣīda* – is never told *seriatim* from beginning to end, except in Q. 12, *Sūrat Yūsuf*, which begins at the end of the first third of the *mushaf*. Indeed, in light of what we now know of the importance of chiasmus and ring structure for the composition of the Qur’an, it may not be wrong to consider the twelfth sura as the chiasmic ‘centre’ of the Qur’an. Parts of the narrative stream are most frequently glimpsed from time to time in the context of other tellings and it is left to the audience to stitch the various segments together and/or to supply missing information. Such a technique of storytelling is tried and true, guaranteeing audience interest through audience participation/authorship. From this point of view, it could be argued that it is not so much the fact that the Qur’an is an epic, but that the otherwise disparate elements explicitly told or alluded to ~~it~~ have been ‘epicised’ by the audience.<sup>75</sup> *Sūrat al-Baqara* sets the tone and general structure of the Qur’anic epic through the basic story of revelation and instruction in which God’s prophets are heroes set against odds and their communities are similarly tried. Success is assured both in this world and in the next. What follows from *Sūrat al-Baqara* may be thought a number of tellings of the same epically-charged *da‘wa* or kerygma: revelation, acceptance/rejection, success and prosperity/failure, and destruction. And, all of this is still firmly on the straight path of epic literary expectations that culminates on the Day of Judgement. More symmetry.

The heroics of the prophets are, of course, of special interest because they emulate and reflect most closely the heroics of the standard epic hero. Miraculous or auspicious birth; lowborn; removal from home or exile and return; encounter with supernatural spirits, angels, guides; given a message or task; rejected in the prosecution of the task; brought low only to rise again triumphant.

That the Qur’an inherits an epic voice and theme is no surprise. What the Qur’an does with this inheritance is interesting in the extreme, as if it improvises on a set form to provide a new iteration, a ‘modern’ and commensurately challenging rendition of the familiar genre. With the Qur’an one senses a now stronger, now weaker presence of the epic genre. As mentioned above, if one begins reading from the beginning of the *mushaf* the epic form is suggested. If one begins with the earliest revelations, reading chronologically, one feels oneself in the presence of apocalypse. But because of the effect of the peculiar scriptural feature, dubbed by Brown *totum simul*, it matters not where we begin to read, once we understand the epic scope. This can come only from immersion in the text:<sup>76</sup>

Once a verbal structure is read, and reread often enough to be possessed, it ‘freezes’. It turns into a unity in which all parts exist at once, which we can then examine like a picture, without regard to the specific movement of the narrative. We may compare it to the study

of a music score, where we can turn to any part without regard to sequential performance.

While it is problematic to use the technical term ‘canon’ with regard to the Qur’an, it is nonetheless true that the arrangement of the final text of the Qur’an stimulates the same kinds of questions that may be found discussed in recent scholarship on the Biblical canon.<sup>77</sup> Canon is as much about the relationship between form and content as it is about what has been deemed worthy to preserve. Arrangement of canon is just as much an authorial gesture as the composition of verses or suras. Depending upon the order in which the various parts of a discourse are read, the meaning may be utterly changed. Though it has been hinted at in the past, we still do not have a fully fledged study of how, for example, the arrangement of the exegetical *ḥadīth* in, say, al-Ṭabarī, represents an original authorial gesture despite the protestations to the contrary of al-Ṭabarī himself.<sup>78</sup> The study of the way in which the Psalms are arranged in the canon likewise has produced a large library of scholarship in which the intention of the arrangement of the canon is energetically debated.<sup>79</sup> It is not necessary to list here an exhaustive catalogue of how form becomes content in the case of the arrangement of books, we only need imagine rearranging the Bible, putting the Book of Revelation first and the Book of Genesis last to gain some insight into the centrality of arrangement to the purpose of this or that text/discourse. With the Qur’an, it is as if the ‘conservative’ epic form domesticates and tames the sometimes opposing and even antagonistic or socially disruptive literary energies of apocalypse. Such energies have recently been the subject of suggestive analysis in a comparison of Homer and the Bible.<sup>80</sup>

To the degree that the Qur’an may be performed, heard, and read as an epic, its continued ‘popularity’-*cum*-sanctity may be more clearly understood. Far from disappearing, it seems that the epic – in all its forms including the Qur’anic – continues to exercise a strong hold on the human imagination. No wonder, then, that the Qur’an remains the most read book in the world.

This brings us finally to the very important aspect of performance,<sup>81</sup> especially as it may pertain to a study of the Qur’an. While the bibliography on this is meagre, it is nonetheless an open secret that the Qur’an in fact is coterminous with, and unthinkable without, performance. The original revelations were performed, first by the Prophet Muḥammad himself, then readers and reciters who have, in imitation of the Prophet’s *sunna*, performed the Qur’an from the very beginning. Believers also perform the Qur’an, at least to God and themselves, in the course of their private devotions. Public performances of the Qur’an have always existed and always entailed competition. Thus, as for the view that epic lives mainly as an oral performance, the Qur’an can easily be implicated in the genre. In the discussions of epic between orality and textuality,<sup>82</sup> the Qur’an also is seen to have an important if unexplored interest. But if we stay with the idea that an epic is most epic when it is

performed (and not merely read as a written text) we can easily accommodate the Qur'an once more, whose stories and heroes, whose sense of history and justice, are a permanent and important element of the *imaginaire* of millions of people, regardless of their relationship with the actual printed book. It is wired into the culture, the culture is thus something of a performance of the Qur'an: epic is a metonym for culture.

### Conclusion

Whether we wish to use the word epic or not, the 'clear light of history' shines on the unprecedented spread of Islam from the backwater of the Hijaz to the Hindu Kush mountains in the East and the western coasts of Africa and southern Europe in less than a hundred years. A key element in this was the spread of the Qur'an over such a vastly variegated cultural, geographic, and linguistic territory, a territory that would come to be known as the abode of Islam, the place where Islam abides and sets the moral and ethical tone, supplies the language of social intercourse, provides a universal narrative of beginnings in the form of Qur'anic cosmogony for the various populations, supplies and adjusts the names and identities of otherworldly spiritual beings, teaches a universal narrative of endings in the form of Qur'anic eschatology, teaches also a universal natural history and claims for this teaching the highest possible authority. The result is that a 'citizen' of the *dār al-Islām* can journey from one end of the Islamic world to the other and, while much of what is encountered will be strange and new, a very impressive amount of the cultural *imaginaire* will be familiar and even 'feel like home'. This is, according to any measure, an incredible achievement, and one that likely could not have been predicted a hundred years earlier. One of the ways this was achieved, it seems possible to speculate, was the way in which the Qur'an acknowledges and validates the histories of all of these various ethnicities and linguistic groups, by virtue of such verses as Q. 10:47, *li-kulli ummatin rasūl*, which teaches that there is no human community that has not had the benefit of divine teaching from a messenger of God, even if it has lost the record of this. Furthermore, each nation has been taught the divine message in its native language so that the message be as clear as possible, as in Q. 14:4, *wa-mā arsalna min rasūlin illā bi-lisān qawmihi li-yubayyina lahum*. Thus each nation's history, according to the Qur'an, is *ipso facto* dignified by a pre-existing relationship with the one God. It may be that those pre-existing epics with which the Qur'an frequently meshed and which the Qur'an frequently validated, may have easily been understood as a remaining record of a long-ago and otherwise perhaps half-forgotten divine revelation. The epic voice of the Qur'an emerges as a great universaliser validating the quest and struggle of all of humanity (~~cf. the traditional 124,000 prophets~~) in whatever place they may be found. The nature of this epic voice is, of course, uncompromisingly monotheistic and God-centred. The heroes of the Qur'an are the virtuoso servants of God whose main task is to eradicate

the opposite of monotheism and to teach the godly virtues of ethical monotheism. We are aware of how the early histories of the Muslim community came to see a simultaneous acknowledgement of, and break with, the so-called *jāhili* past. The record of this transformation is to be found in the new vocabulary of the Qur'an, especially when compared with the oral literature of the pre-Islamic period. It is designated in the sources as a move from savagery to civilisation. The same general pattern may be discerned in all those places where Islam established itself. Part of this transformation has to do with reorienting the universally-encountered epic struggle in its various forms and within the various cultures of the *dar al-Islām* at the centre so that it becomes a truly universal – in Islamic terms – epic struggle with God at the centre and the various pre-Islamic cultural heroes, either through typological figuration or other so-called 'literary devices', brought into the fold of the Islamic *Weltanschauung*, or left to languish on the margins of *tawḥīd*-configured religion in a somewhat liminal state between 'good and evil'.

The epic voice or mode of the Qur'an is that which is privileged and made obvious in the *muṣḥaf* to such a degree that it may help explain the final arrangement of the Qur'an. Would such an epic élan be as easily discerned if the revelation were read only in the chronological order of revelation? Rather the mood of the 'performance' would be entirely different, conditioned by a much more direct concern with the nearness of the Hour and all of the accompanying powerful apocalyptic forecasts, symbols and imagery, promises and threats. Even so, this apocalyptic 'music' is never absent from the experience of the Qur'an. It is a distinctive and characteristically incessant leitmotif and may be thought to provide the 'soundtrack' for the master epic we have been discussing here. The mix – or fugue – is very heady indeed. To recognise the Qur'an's apocalyptic and epic voices and their contrapuntal relationship is to observe something quite essential about the way in which the Qur'an commands and grips an audience, the way it teaches and the way in which its readership, its audience, develops its attachment to the Book. Through its own verbal artistry it somehow brings together in one place epos, mythos, and logos (each of which depends upon words and language) to nourish the individual soul and the community through validating the historical identity of each reader/believer and pointing the way to a fulfillment of the destiny implied in this historical identity as disclosed to all humanity on that 'long ago' yet ever-present Day of *alast*.

The hero is a protector, and a suggestive translation for this word is the Arabic '*walī*', a word still frequently, if inadequately, translated as 'saint' in much of the relevant literature. However, it is nonetheless instructive that for the article 'Heroes and Hero Gods' in Hastings' monumental and venerable encyclopedia, the reader interested in the Islamic instance is referred to another article, namely 'Saints (Muslim)'.<sup>83</sup> The distinctive and ubiquitous Islamic 'institution' of *walāya* may indeed offer some clues about the nature of the Qur'anic epic and heroism. Quite



apart from its very rich and malleable semantic charge, through which it denotes a powerful cluster of mutually enhancing, generative meanings (friendship, protection, guardianship, loyalty, and even love) it also bespeaks a mutual activity (or verbality) by which both the subject and object are somehow united in participation in this friendship, guardianship, loyalty, and love. While the word is frequently used to refer to highly accomplished spiritual heroes, whether in Shi'ism or Sūfism, it is important to note that it is actually God Himself who is designated (nearly 50 times) the *walī*, par excellence, in the Qur'an (e.g. Q. 2:107, 120, and 257; Q. 3:68; Q. 6:51 and 70; and Q. 9:74 and 116, to list only a few). By virtue of their relationship to God, prophets and messengers and their communities are also understood as bearers of *walāya* (see for example the explicit designation Q. 5:55). Our Qur'anic heroes are thus indicated. Heroism is no longer, according to the Qur'an, the prerogative or fate of one remarkable person from the past. It becomes the desideratum of the entire community who see the Prophet and Messenger as a perfect example (*uswatun ḥasanatun*, Q. 33:21 and Q. 60:4).

With the Qur'an at the centre of Islamic religious experience, the epic value of all believers is affirmed. All of creation reiterates the absolute value of life and its meaningfulness (as for example in Q. 43:51). Through participation via the act of reading or recitation, the individual rehearses and re-performs the story in uncountable ways and through uncountable circumstances. Here we return to Corbin's important observations about the act of reading and imitation (*ḥikāya*) through which the reader or reciter actually becomes identified with the spiritual heroes of the tradition, and through which the epic quest and struggle for an Esfandyar for example, becomes the epic quest and spiritual challenge of the reader, the *ḥikāyeh*.<sup>84</sup> There is no reason to assume that the process would be any different in the case of the heroes of the Qur'an whose lives and stories are constantly recited by the believer/reader. Perhaps this bespeaks a natural development within the rich spiritual heritage of Islam, its valorising in equal parts both the role of society and the role of the individual, its emphasis on the meaningfulness of life. The vast cultural and religious achievement and transformation that is associated with the name 'Islam' certainly suggests the category and adjective 'epic'. Is it therefore any wonder that it is possible to trace the source of this epic élan to the Qur'an itself?

#### NOTES

1 As in the case of Northrop Frye's three studies of the Bible, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*; *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature*; and *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion*. On the appositeness of Frye's approach to Qur'anic studies, see Waldman, 'Review: Islamic Studies', ref. to p. 546-7; Arkoun, art. 'Contemporary Critical Practices and the Qur'ān'; Lawson, 'Seeing Double', p. 69.

2 Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, p. 1.

3 On the notion of an open ended, encyclopaedic, cornucopian text, see the study of Erasmus, Rabelais and others in Cave, *The Cornucopian Text*, esp. pp. 332–4. The comparison with the ‘secular’ writings of French humanists is not impertinent. Rather, it is directed by Frye’s observation that ‘In the mythical mode, the encyclopaedic form is the sacred scripture ... In the mythical mode [the] central or typical episodic product is the oracle. The oracle develops a number of subsidiary forms ... Out of these, whether strung loosely together as they are in the Koran or carefully edited and arranged as they are in the Bible, the scripture or sacred book takes place (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 56).

4 Lawson, ‘Duality, Opposition and Typology in the Qur’an. See also the more recent Lawson, ‘Le Coran et l’Imaginaire apocalyptique’; Lawson, art. ‘Apocalypse’; and Lawson, ‘The Voice of Apocalypse’.

5 See, for example, the excellent collection of articles entitled *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, edited by John Miles Foley. A similar collection of articles focused on the question of the continuing hold of the epic on the contemporary imagination is *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World: The Poetics of Community*, edited by Margaret Beissinger, Jane Tylus, and Susanne Wofford. It should be added that in neither of these two recent collections – which may be considered something of a *status quaestionis* for epic studies – is the Qur’an the topic of discussion and analysis. I am applying the results of this and other epic scholarship to the Qur’an by means of the venerable (if controversial) intellectual tool known as *qiyās* (‘analogy’). It is hoped that the correspondences thus arrived at will stimulate further discussion and research. I would like to thank Johannes Haubold (Durham University) and Oliver Taplin (Oxford University) for answering my email enquiries (summer 2011) regarding current scholarship on the epic genre. I am also grateful to the participants at two conferences for their feedback, criticisms and suggestions. These were the SOAS Qur’an Conference of 2009 (London) and the American Oriental Society Meeting 2011 (Boston). Such gratitude is also meant to absolve all and sundry of any responsibility for the final form of this article.

6 Haubold, ‘Greek Epic’.

7 Martin, ‘Epic as Genre’, p. 18.

8 See above, note 1, for the titles of the three most important books by Frye on the Bible and literature.

9 Frye himself was quite candid about his approach and perspective: ‘For my purposes the only possible form of the Bible that I can deal with is the Christian Bible, with its polemically named “Old” and “New” Testaments. I know that Jewish and Islamic conceptions of the Bible are very different ...’ (*The Great Code*, p. xiii). Further, he does not wish to discuss theological or dogmatic issues, but rather wants to relate the Bible ‘to imaginative rather than doctrinal or historical criteria’ (*The Great Code*, p. xxii). He is thus interested in the ‘literary unity’ of the Bible (*The Great Code*, p. xiii) as we are interested in the literary unity of the Qur’an.

10 Reda, ‘Textual Integrity and Coherence in the Qur’an’.

11 Ernst, *How to Read the Qur’an*, p. 38.

12 The pertinent literature is vast and controversy remains: Sanders, *Canon and Community*; Mays, ‘The Question of Context in Psalm Interpretation’. For an overview of the general topic, see McDonald and Sanders (eds.), *The Canon Debate*; also the modern classic, Moore Cross, *From Epic to Canon*. My thanks to my colleague Robert Holmstedt for calling my attention to the possible relevance of the ‘canon issue’ for Qur’anic studies.

13 See the pioneering article on the epic dimension of the *Sīra* by Stefan Sperl, ‘Epic and Exile’. The Arabic word *sīra* has become a near equivalent for the Greek derived term ‘epic’. But it is not the only one: *ḥamāsa* (‘valour’, ‘bravery’, ‘heroism’) is also found – thus the use of *ḥamās* (‘zeal’) as the acronym for *ḥarakat al-muqāwama al-Islāmiyya*, ‘the Islamic

Resistance Movement'. Others use *shī'r malḥamī* ('heroic poem', 'poem about fierce battle'); cf. also the related *baṭal* ('hero') from *baṭūla* (to be brave, to be a hero). Mattā b. Yūnus (d. 328/940) could not think of an Arabic equivalent for the Greek **ποιοῦν** and merely used the (non-existent) Arabic *āfi*. See Pellat, art. 'Ḥamāsa: i. Arabic Literature'; see also the very interesting comments regarding the relationship between the Qur'an and epic motifs in classical Islamic historiography in Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, pp. 4–5.

14 Niditch, 'Epic and History in the Hebrew Bible'; Niditch, 'The Challenge of Israelite Epic'; and Moore Cross, *From Epic to Canon*. See also the foundational study by Cyrus Herzl Gordon, 'Homer and Bible: The Origin and Character of East Mediterranean Literature'.

15 Davidson, 'Persian/Iranian Epic'.

16 On the epic hero in the Mahabharata, see the comments and references in Gregory Nagy, 'The Epic Hero', esp. pp. 85–6.

17 See the several studies by Dwight Reynolds. The most recent is 'Epic and History in the Arabic Tradition'. See also the brilliant pioneering discussion in Hamori, *On the Art of Medieval Arabic Literature*, esp. ch. 1. My thanks to Maurice Pomerantz for this reference. See also the extended and substantial studies of pre-Islamic Arab heroism in Bravmann, *The Spiritual Background of Early Islam*, pp. 39–122, and pp. 254–87.

18 Such would appear to be part of the task in Northrop Frye's three last books, all of which were on the Bible: *The Great Code, Words with Power* and *The Double Vision*. But this task was already set in his very first book, *Fearful Symmetry*, as Denham has suggested in *Northrop Frye*, p. ix.

19 The articles in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* in which the word epic occurs are: 'Ararat' (x1: in title of work in the bibliography); 'Epigraphy' (x1: re *Shahnameh*); 'Literature and the Qur'an' (x1: 'ancient Hindu e. '); 'Material Culture and the Qur'an' (x1: re 'e. struggle' against 19<sup>th</sup> cent. colonialism); 'Satanic Verses' (x1: 'epic prophetic biography'); 'South Asian Literatures and the Qur'an' (x6: various indigenous literatures are epic inspired by the Qur'anic Joseph story); 'Turkish Literature and the Qur'an' (x6: re pre-Islamic Turkish e., romantic e. as gloss for '*hikaye*', and the remarkable mix of Qur'anic piety with worldly culture); and 'Yemen' (x1: the epic cycle of Abū Karib). The word 'epic' has not merited an entry in the more recent comprehensive source book *The Qur'ān in Context*, ed. Neuwirth, Sinai, and Marx.

20 Badalanova Geller, *Qur'ān in Vernacular*. My thanks to the author for this deeply learned, illuminating study.

21 DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde*.

22 There is of course a large bibliography, especially on the *Shah-nameh*. But reference to the Qur'an as a possible kernel for the more elaborate poetry is very meager indeed.

23 Not least of which is the incisive critique of Bakhtin's celebrated and enormously influential study of the epic and the novel, 'Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel', chapter 1 in his *The Dialogic Imagination*. Thanks to my colleague Niel Ten Kortenaar for a fascinating 'Bakhtin conversation' over lunch a few years ago (see below, Conclusion).

24 Revard and Newman, art. 'Epic. I. History (Revard) and II. Theory (Newman)'.

25 For example, as in Martin, 'Epic as Genre', p. 19.

26 Revard and Newman, art. 'Epic. I. History (Revard) and II. Theory (Newman)'. Excerpt lightly adjusted for readability by removing encyclopedic cross-references.

27 Eco, *The Open Work*; see p. 11 for a reference to a relationship between epic performance technique and 'openness'.

28 Cuypers, *The Banquet*. This is an English translation, of the original work of Cuypers, *Le Festin*, summarised in Ernst, *How to Read the Qur'an* (see above, note 11).

29 Lawson, 'Duality, Opposition and Typology', p. 31, and *passim*.

30 On the uneasy and colorful career of Qur'anic rhyme in the Islamic intellectual tradition see the various articles by Devin Stewart, starting with the most recent 'Divine Epithets and the *Dibacchius*' and 'Poetic License in the Qur'an'. See especially his groundbreaking 'Saj' in the Qur'an', reprinted in Turner (ed.), *The Koran*, vol. 3, pp. 74–111, and in Rippin (ed.), *The Quran*, pp. 213–51. See now also his 'The Mysterious Letters and Other Formal Features'.

31 The other arts and their corresponding muses were: history (Clio), love poetry (Erato), song and elegy (Euterpe), tragedy (Melpomene), hymns/praise (Polyhymnia), dance (Terpsichore), comedy (Thalia), or astronomy (Urania).

32 Zwettler, 'Mantic Manifesto'.

33 The term *ab ovo* ('from the egg') was coined by Horace in his ideal description of the epic, which – according to him – 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 (*Ars Poetica or Epistle to the Pisos*, A.S. Kline translation, pp. 119–52).

34 Lawson, 'Typological Figuration and the Meaning of "Spiritual"', esp. p. 234.

35 Brown, 'The Apocalypse of Islam', p. 167 (see here also a reference to the similarity between the Qur'an and Eco's 'open work').

36 On the epic simile, see below. Some of the words for road or path, journey, and travel in the Qur'an are: *imām*, *manākib*, *minhāj* (cf. *nahj*), *sabīl*, 'aqaba, sawā', *sharī'a*, *shir'a*, *rashada*, *shirāt*, *sunna*, *ṭarīq*, *ṭarīqa*, *yabas*; JOURNEY(n): *rihla*, *safar*; JOURNEY (v): *ḍaraba*, *sarā*, *sāha*, *sāta*, *sāra*, *za'ana*; TRAVERSE: 'abara, *qaṭa'a*; STEEP ROAD: 'aqaba. It is not accidental that many of these words have become veritable emblems of Islamic identity, e.g.: *sunna*, *sharī'a*, *imām*.

37 Corbin, 'De l'Épopée héroïque à l'Épopée mystique', reprinted in *Face de Dieu, face de l'homme – Herméneutique et soufisme*, at pp. 175–243.

38 Lawson, *Gnostic Apocalypse and Islam*, p. 102. The *ḥadīth* continues: and everything in the *Fātiḥa* is in the *basmala*. 'Everything in the *basmala* is in the first letter 'b' and everything in the 'b' is in the point under it. And I am that point'.

39 They are traditionally numbered as 99, plus  frequently unknown or still hidden Greatest Name (Böwering, art. 'God and His Attributes').

40 Al-Suyūfī, *al-Itqān*, vol. 1, pp. 50ff.

41 Lawson, 'Typological Figuration and the Meaning of "Spiritual"', pp. 233–4; Zwettler, 'Mantic Manifesto', pp. 106–9.

42 Translation from Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, p. 518.

43 For a fuller discussion of this textual feature, see Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, pp. 2–4.

44 Guenther, art. 'Literacy' in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*.

45 Hallaq, art. 'Law' in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*.

46 Cuypers, *The Banquet*, pp. 30–2. See also the remarks on Sura 5 in Hallaq, art. 'Law'.

47 See also the related stimulating discussion in Bray, 'Lists and Memory'.

48 For a pioneering (if not always satisfactory) discussion of the Qur'an in connection with the Parry-Lord thesis and related questions, see Dundes, *Fables of the Ancients*. Here Dundes points out that while much important work on the oral composition of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry has been done (mentioning James Monroe and Michael Zwettler), by comparison little on the actual poetics of the Qur'an exists. Since then, however, the sources on this topic have

multiplied. In addition to another ‘pioneering’ article, Gluck, ‘Is there Poetry in the Qur’an?’, the work of Cuypers (see above note 28) and the works of Devin Stewart, (see above note 30), much of the writing of Mustansir Mir, Angelika Neuwirth, and her colleagues at the Corpus Quranicum project, in addition to numerous excellent discussions of the poetic power of the Qur’an, such as Soraya Hajjaji-Jarrar’s ‘The Enchantment of Reading’ have helped fill a serious and deep lacuna in Qur’anic studies. (Incidentally, Boullata’s groundbreaking book appears to have not been known to Dundes.) The present article is another, similar attempt.

49 Mir, art. ‘Names of the Qur’an’.

50 Revard and Newman, art., ‘Epic. I. History (Revard) and II. Theory (Newman)’.

51 Cf. Gordon, ‘Homer and Bible’, pp. 62–3, 68, 77, and 92–3.

52 Lawson, ‘Divine Wrath and Mercy in Islam’.

53 Lawson, ‘Typological Figuration and the Meaning of “Spiritual”’, pp. 221–6.

54 Chronotope is the technical term developed by Bakhtin to refer to the time/space continuum of a given work.

55 Lawson, ‘Coherent Chaos and Chaotic Cosmos’.

56 ‘Epics ... produce a vision of aesthetic and cultural order which shapes historic time at the expense of representations of the multiple contexts and competing intentions that bear on historical moments’ (Wacker, ‘Epic and the Modern Long Poem’, p. 126).

57 Revard and Newman, art., ‘Epic. I. History (Revard) and II. Theory (Newman)’.

58 Zwettler, ‘Mantic Manifesto’, pp. 108–9.

59 Lawson, ‘Coherent Chaos and Chaotic Cosmos’, pp. 15–6.

60 Carlyle, *Heroes and Hero-Worship* (‘Lecture II: The Hero as Prophet. Mahomet Islam. Friday 8th May, 1840’), pp. 60–110.

61 The scheme may be briefly summarised as entailing for the hero an unusual, difficult, miraculous or otherwise remarkable birth into a sacred or noble lineage; summons to a challenge; a helper, otherworldly or not, and protective, sometimes magical or supernatural objects; crossing-over: the hero leaves the natural world and begins his journey or quest; the hero is tested to prove his worth; the hero usually leaves his home to find safety from the opponents; the hero frequently returns home after the epic journey, victorious and powerful and especially with the ability and wealth to bestow on his helpers and community (Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, pp. 28–37).

62 A highly suggestive first exploration of the *Sīra* as epic is Sperl, ‘Epic and Exile’.

63 Ibn Ishāq, *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*, vol. 1, pp. 112–34.

64 Caves are classic and widely attested scenes for the inception of a heroic vocation. See, e.g. Heyden, art. ‘Caves’.

65 Ibn Ishāq, *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*, vol. 1, pp. 167–73.

66 As when the Quraysh charged Muḥammad with *bid‘a*/innovation: breaking the unity of the community, challenging the existing ‘religion’ (*dīn*) and ethos (*aḥlām*) (Ibn Ishāq, *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*, vol. 1, pp. 192–5).

67 See also Gordon, ‘Homer and Bible’, pp. 69–70, for parallels with the Hebrew Bible.

68 Cf. the epithet ‘Odysseus the Cunning’ with the assertion in the Qur’an that ‘God is the best of schemers’ (Q. 3:54 & Q. 7:30, cf. also *makr passim* in, e.g. Q. 7:99, Q. 8:30, Q. 10:21, Q. 13:42).

69 Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*.

70 Gordon, ‘Homer and Bible’, p. 93; is immortality refused in Greek epic and the Bible?

71 Cf. Gordon, 'Homer and Bible', pp. 70–1. It is instructive to note those epic elements listed by Gordon in this article, such as 'Wise Woman Beauty' (p. 77), which seem not to have a role in the Qur'an. Likewise, the frequent embarrassment of the gods by humans seems not to have a cognate in the Qur'an (p. 94). On the other hand, animals speak (p. 95) in the Qur'an as they frequently do in hero myths (Cf. Q. 27:16, Q.18, Q. 22–6, and Q. 82).

72 Lawson, 'Glory as Apocalyptic Motif in the Qur'an'; also Gordon, 'Homer and Bible', p. 101.

73 Gordon, 'Homer and Bible', p. 102. Note that shifts in person (a frequent Qur'anic phenomenon) in the epic have been noted as characteristic (Gordon, 'Homer and Bible', p. 103).

74 'The image of the Prophet as the universal political hero takes its place alongside his presence as the spiritual centre of the universe. More progressively, there is some evidence that the nature of the traditional patterns persists in modern reformulations' (Tayob, art. 'Muhammad').

75 Bowra, *Heroic Poetry*, pp. 351–3: 'In 1934 Milman Parry encountered a bard in Southern Serbia, a Moslem called Avdo Mededovi aged about sixty, who would sing for two hours in the morning and for another two hours in the afternoon, resting for five or ten minutes every half-hour. To sing a long song took him two weeks with a week's rest in between to recover his voice. The result was an epic poem ...' ↴

76 Frye, *The Great Code*, pp. 62–3.

77 McDonald and Sanders, *The Canon Debate*.

78 Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an*, p. 70.

79 See the analytical overview in Waltke, 'A Canonical Process Approach', pp. 3–18.

80 Kawashima, 'Verbal Medium and Narrative Art'.

81 '[Epic] is, very importantly, a genre that is performed before an audience. While individual performers of epic (each with varying levels of creativity) are appreciated, anonymity and collective involvement surround authorship per se ... literary epic, unlike oral traditional epic, is usually seen as the creation of a single author, immersed in literacy and everything that literacy brings with it. Literary epic is created with artistic perfection in mind, not expediency of performance ...' (Margaret, Tylus, and Wofford (eds), *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World*, pp. 7–8).

82 '[W]ritten epic often twists uncomfortably on the dilemma of whether the poet should emphasize submersion in a collective voice or an individual poetic voice and authority' (Margaret, Tylus, and Wofford (eds), *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World*, p. 9). And: 'It is perhaps only historical accident, but again and again one encounters poets in the tradition of literary epic who likewise write from the margins and whose poems thereby hinge on the thematics of exile and estrangement: Dante writing his *Commedia* in exile from Florence; Milton writing *Paradise Lost* during the Restoration, the composer of the *Chanson de Roland* – perhaps – in figurative exile at the English court. In such ways, the social and economic vulnerabilities to which oral poets continue to be subject have left their mark, however mediated, on the legacy of written epic as well' (Margaret, Tylus, and Wofford (eds), *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World*, p. 9).

83 Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 6, p. 633.

84 Corbin, 'De l'Épopée héroïque', p. 234. There is, of course, another sense in which the reader achieves the status of hero, and this is by virtue of having 'understood' the perhaps difficult text through which they have journeyed.