



# The Qur'ān as a Discourse of Signs

## Citation

Graham, William A. 2014. "The Qur'ān as a Discourse of Signs." In *No Tapping around Philology: A Festschrift in Honor of Wheeler McIntosh Thackston Jr.'s 70th Birthday*, edited by Alireza Korangy and Daniel J. Scheffield, 263-275. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.

## Published Version

[http://www.harrassowitz-verlag.de/title\\_221.ahtml](http://www.harrassowitz-verlag.de/title_221.ahtml)

## Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:34299222>

## Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Open Access Policy Articles, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#OAP>

## Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.  
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

## The Qur'ān as a Discourse of Signs

William A. Graham, Harvard University

The importance of the many passages of the Qur'ān that refer to the signs of God available to human beings as instruction, guidance, and warning has long been noted in Muslim and non-Muslim scholarship. Such recognition of a major element of the text has not, however, done full justice to the centrality of sign language and imagery in the Qur'ān. In what follows, I want to honor my longtime Harvard colleague and friend, the exceptional Persian and Arabic specialist, Wheeler M. Thackston, with a modest proposal that the Qur'ān is best read explicitly and even primarily as a discourse of signs. If this be accepted, many of the unusual and unique aspects of the Qur'ān's text, style, and content can be seen as logically consistent with the text's reiterated call to heed the manifold signs of God's sovereignty that are evident in creation, in history, and in revelation.

The concluding verse, or *āyah* (lit. "sign"), of *Sūrat Yusuf* reads:

Truly, in their [God's messengers'] stories there is a lesson [*ibrah*] for those possessed of understanding; it is no invented tale, but a confirmation of that which came before it, a clear exposition of everything, a guidance, and a mercy for a people who have faith. (12:111)

This brief passage is arguably a concise résumé of the Qur'ān's most fundamental purpose and method, as well as of the broader notion of scriptural revelation it reflects. The key word in this regard is the noun *ibrah* (pl. *ibar*), "lesson," which carries the sense of

something by which one is warned, exhorted, or taught, especially something from which one takes instruction—an admonition or example.<sup>1</sup> An *'ibrah* is anything "whereby one passes from ignorance to knowledge"<sup>2</sup>—above all a lesson that reveals or explains something and enables one to “cross over” to a new understanding.<sup>3</sup>

The *'ibar*, or “lessons,” to which the Qur’ān refers are of two kinds, both of which convey evidence of God’s sovereignty. First, He has given clear *'ibar* in the natural world around us for all who would take notice: “God it is Who causes day and night to alternate; in that truly there is an *'ibrah* for those with eyes to see!” (24:44); or “Truly you have in cattle an *'ibrah*: We give you to drink from what is in their bellies, and you have many benefits [from them], and of them you eat” (23:21; similarly, 16:66).

---

<sup>1</sup> *Lisān al-‘arab*, 6:205; Lane, *Lexicon*, 1938a.

<sup>2</sup> Lane, *Lexicon*, 1938a.

<sup>3</sup> *‘Abara*, the verbal form I of the root, means “to cross over, to traverse (e.g., a river or valley), or to travel (a road, as in S. 4.43).” By extension, it can mean “to die (“to cross over [to the other side]”), as well as “to ponder or study”—i.e., “to traverse” a text in order to understand it. This is vivid in an Arabic saying that plays on two different vowelings of the form I imperfect: “O God, make us to be of those who take warning [*ya ‘baru*] from this world and do not [merely] pass through it [*ya ‘buru*]”; *Allahumma ja ‘alnā min man ya ‘baru ad-dunyā wa-lā ya ‘buruhā* (*Lisān al-‘arab*, 6:205; cf. Lane, *Lexicon*, 1937b, with further references to Arabic lexica). Forms I, II, and VIII are used in the Qur’ān (e.g., 12:43) and later to mean “to interpret,” especially with respect to dreams—perhaps based on the core idea of connecting two different things. Correspondingly, forms I or VIII can mean “to take warning, admonition, or example”—to learn a lesson—from something, as in S. 59:2, which cites the example of what happened to groups who rejected God’s message and Muhammad’s call (to Jewish tribes of Medina, according to Muslim commentators). On *'ibrah* and its meaning generally, see the extensive and superb discussion of Muhsin Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldūn*, 65-72.

Second, God has provided in the human experiences of previous messengers and peoples (including also Muhammad and his nascent community) clear historical *'ibar* that serve as warnings and models for all who would heed them. Sūrah 12:111, cited above, refers to the accounts of God's messengers as an *'ibrah*, a lesson that offers guidance as well as evidence of God's justice and mercy. In this same vein, 79:26 declares: "Truly, in that [story of Pharaoh and Moses] there is indeed an *'ibrah* for whosoever fears [God]." Similarly, 59:2 exhorts those with eyes to see to take a lesson (*fa'tabirū yā-ūlī l-absār*) from an earlier encounter of Muhammad with his opponents from among "the people of scripture."<sup>4</sup> Finally, 3:13 recalls, according to some commentators,<sup>5</sup> God's assistance to Muhammad and the faithful at the Battle of Badr as an explicit sign that carries a lesson: "You have had a sign [*āyah*] in the two hosts that battled one another. . . . Surely in that is an *'ibrah* for those who have eyes to see." Here God explicitly gives a sign containing a lesson for instruction of the faithful.<sup>6</sup>

These several *'ibar* passages are only the most explicit Qur'anic references to the ways in which God uses signs or tokens in nature and history (and cites them in His revelations) to instruct humankind. Far more numerous are the varied terms or stylistic conventions used to designate or point to the signs, tokens, and proofs that serve as *'ibar*,

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 28:27-28; Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf*, 3:498; *al-Jalālayn*, 729; cf. also note 3 above, last sentence but one.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr* 3:13 [*altafsir.com*]; Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* 3:193; al-Qummī, *Tafsīr* [*altafsir.com*]; *Tafsīr Bayḍāwī* 1:151; Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf* 1:341; *al-Jalālayn*, 66.

<sup>6</sup> Significantly, Franz Rosenthal argues that "without doubt the most profound impact of the Qur'anic view of history has been its stress on history as an example or lesson (*'ibra*)," and he cites 12:111 as the clearest statement of this. "History and the Qur'ān," *EQ* 2:441a.

as signal lessons for humankind—terms and conventions that pervade the text of the Qur’ān. By far the most important and frequent of these terms (380 occurrences<sup>7</sup>) is that just seen in S. 3:13, namely *āyah* (or its plural, *āyāt*), “sign,” which, as this verse specifies, typically carries a lesson, or *‘ibrah*, simply by virtue of being a sign of something else. Indeed, in his commentary on 3:13, Tabarī glosses *āyah* as *‘ibrah wa-tafakkur*, “a lesson and [cause for] reflection.”<sup>8</sup>

*Āyah* in pre-Islamic Arabic meant originally “sign,” “mark,” or “token,” and has exact parallels in the Hebrew *ōth* as well as the Aramaic and Syriac *āthā*.<sup>9</sup> It occurs in this sense a few times in the Qur’ān also, as in 2:248, where the ark is called the mark or token, *āyah*, of Saul’s kingship, and 17:12, where the sun and moon are called the two tokens (*āyatān*) of day and night.<sup>10</sup> Otherwise, the word is used all but exclusively to refer not to mere identifying marks, but rather to recurring phenomena, events and divine actions that are instructive “tokens” or even “proofs” of God’s engagement in the world—signs that carry an *‘ibrah*. Like the few instances of *‘ibrah*, the many occurrences of *āyah/āyāt* in the Qur’ān virtually always refer to God’s wondrous signs in either nature or history. In addition, *āyah* can also designate in some instances an individual pericope or verse of the

---

<sup>7</sup> This and other Qur’anic word counts are based on M. F. ‘Abd al-Bāqī’s *al-Mu‘jam al-mufahras* unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>8</sup> Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* 3:193. See also the discussion of *āyah* by Husayn al-Dāmaghānī (d. 1085), in which he also notes *‘ibrah* as one meaning of *āyah* in the Qur’ān: *Iṣlāḥ*, 60-61.

<sup>9</sup> Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 72-73; following von Kremer, Jeffery notes that *āyah* has no Arabic root and is clearly a loan word from Syriac or Aramaic; cf. *idem*, “*Āya*”, *EF*, 1:773b.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the sources cited above in n. 9.

Qur'anic revelations themselves, as we can see if we review briefly the several uses of *āyah* in the Qur'ān.<sup>11</sup>

### ***God's signs in nature***

The Qur'ān makes clear that every human being has inescapable evidence of God's sovereignty and merciful bounteousness in the manifold signs openly available in the physical phenomena of nature. These include not only mountains, oceans, rain, sun, stars, vegetation, and the like, but even man-made products from nature's raw materials, such as boats, clothing, tents, and houses. Implicit here is the notion that the world and all that is in it are manifest tokens of God and His active involvement in His creation.

There are a series of striking passages in the Qur'ān that call attention to the manifold, unmistakable *āyāt* of God in the world around us.<sup>12</sup> A representative example of these "natural wonders" pericopes is found in 2:164:

Truly, in the creation of the heavens and the earth, in the alternation of day and night, in the ships which course through the sea with that which benefits humankind, in the water that God sends down from the sky wherewith He restores the earth after it has died, in the animals of all kinds He has spread through it, in the variation of the winds, and in the clouds

---

<sup>11</sup> On "signs" in the Qur'ān generally, see Watt, ed., *Bell's Introduction*, 121-27, 148-49; Rahman, *Major Themes*, 65-79; al-Dāmaghānī, *Iṣlāḥ*, 60-61; Timm, "Divine Majesty," 47-57. The most penetrating analysis of *āyah* in the Qur'ān is arguably that of Madigan, *Self-Image*, 96-103, while Benyamin Abrahamov, "Signs" (*EQ* 5:2-11), offers a good, comprehensive summary treatment of signs in the text.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., S. 3:189-91; 7:54-58; 10:5-6; 13:1-4; 16:10-16, 65-81; 26:7-8; 30:16-27; 34:9; 45:3-13; 50:6-11. On God's signs in the natural world, with many additional examples from the Qur'ān, see Graham, "Winds to Herald God's Mercy."

made to serve between heaven and earth—[in all these] are *āyāt* for a people who have sense.

Such “*āyât*” passages prominently provide recurring references to natural phenomena as tangible evidence of both God’s creative and sustaining power and His inexhaustible bounty and mercy to humankind. These phenomena are “signs” or “wonders” (in the extended sense of *āyāt*) testifying that God is “Lord of the heavens and the earth and what is between them, the All-Merciful” (78:37). S. 51:20 puts it simply: “In the earth are signs for those of certain faith.” Nature is a book in which God’s *āyāt* can be read. These are available to those who are able to use their God-given intellectual powers to reflect on the world around them and its implications. All humans have in principle such capacity, which allows them to recognize that God is the unique Creator and Sustainer of the cosmos Who out of His infinite mercy provides beneficently for His creatures and Who on the Last Day will sit in judgment over His creatures.

On the other hand, those who are ungrateful enough to deny God willfully do so not simply by evil deeds, but also by perversely rejecting the clear signs of His power and mercy: “And if We sent a wind, and they saw it [the green land] turn yellow, they would afterwards still persist in ungrateful denial [*la-ẓallû min ba’dihi yakfurûna*]” (30:51; cf. 30:58). *Kufr* is ungrateful denial or rejection of the manifold tokens (*āyāt*) of God’s sovereignty and His freely bestowed blessings and mercies. This perversity in the ingrate, the *kāfir* who rejects God, drives him or her to perdition despite all the signs in nature that should drive instead toward gratitude and obedience. The *kāfir*'s sin is at base the refusal to heed the patent divine *āyāt*.

### *God's signs in human history*

The second kind of *āyah/āyāt*, events in human affairs rather than natural phenomena, involves as it were God's activity in time rather than space. Here the Qur'an reminds us that God has never left humankind without guidance from messengers and revelations, even though many peoples have rejected them. Here belong the manifold references both to God's many messengers before and including Muhammad, and also to the peoples to whom He sent His prophets and apostles with revelation and guidance. From the Qur'an's perspective, its many historical references to previous messengers and peoples offer clear signs of God's presence in human affairs through reminders of His repeated efforts in the past (and, by logical extension, into the present as well) to guide human beings aright, no matter how often they reject those efforts. Of these there are multiple examples, for which four can stand as representatives:

In Joseph and his brothers are *āyāt* for the inquiring. (12:7; cf. 12:2)

So We rescued him [Noah] and his companions in the ship, and We made this an *āyah* for created beings. (29:15; cf. 25:37, 26:121, 54:15)

We made the son of Mary and his mother an *āyah* (23:50; cf. 19:21, 21:91)

And from that [destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah] We have left a clear *āyah* for a people who have sense. (29:35; cf. 15:75, 15:77, 51:37)

Apart from the stories of God's rescue of particular persons and peoples (as in the case of Noah or Joseph), a frequent theme in such references is the rejection by earlier peoples of God's messengers and His signs. In S. 26 alone there are references to God's dealings with seven different messengers and those opposed to each of them: Moses and Pharaoh (26:15-67); Abraham and his father's people (26:69-102); Noah and those who



would not listen to him (26:5-20); Lot and the sinful townspeople (26:160-74); and the Arabian messengers Hūd (26:123-38), Šālīḥ (26:141-58), and Shu‘ayb (26:176-90) and their respective recalcitrant peoples. Each of these stories of the obduracy of a previous nation is capped with the single terse line, “Truly, in that [story] is an *āyah*, although most of them did not believe [in it]” (*Inna fī dhālika la-āyatan wa-mā kāna aktharuhum mu‘minīn*). The burden of each of these passages is that the hearers of the Qur‘ān should be able to look back at the history of God’s dealings with previous peoples and use their powers of reason to see the clear signs that should impel them to be of the faithful and not of those who deny God, reject his messengers and signs, and do evil. S. 20:128 makes this point clearly: “Is there not guidance for them in how many generations we caused to perish before them, among whose [former] habitations they walk? Truly in that are *āyāt* for those who thoughtfully reflect” (cf. 32:26).

Also in this category are the special signs or miracles (*āyāt*) that God has effected for specific purposes, as when He answered Zechariah’s request for a special *āyah* to attest to the truth of His promise of the miraculous birth of a son John to him, an aged man, and his barren wife Elizabeth (3:41; 19:10); or when He brought the plagues upon Pharaoh and Egypt as *āyāt* given on behalf of His messenger Moses and the Israelites (e.g., 7:103-36; 43:46-56). In yet other passages, the Qur‘ān reminds Muhammad and his contemporaries that God’s *āyāt* are also evident in their own affairs. The reference (3:13) to the Muslims’ victory over their Meccan enemies in the battle of Badr cited earlier is the prime example of this, reinforced as it is by reference to this event as both *āyah* and *‘ibrah*. However, all such accounts of specific *āyāt* given by God to bolster the missions of His messengers, including Muhammad, are vastly outnumbered by references to the signs/lessons to be

gleaned from the experiences of earlier messengers and those whom they tried to warn and bring to faith in God.

Consistently, the *āyah* passages referring to recent and distant past events repeat the clear message of the urgency of paying attention to God’s efforts to guide his creatures and humankind’s frequent failure to accept that guidance. The Qur’ān presents its preaching as one directed at getting its hearers to heed the *āyāt* offered in human experience and consequently to turn to God in obedience. Even the major Qur’anic theme of the Last Judgment is often accompanied by references to the fact that God has always provided the signs that people need for their own salvation. S. 45:31 says that God will say on that day to the unbelievers, “As for those who rejected [Me], My *āyāt* were recited to you and you were scornful and became doers of evil” (cf. 20:126). Similarly, He says in 57:19 of the fate of these unbelievers, “as for those who have rejected [Us] and called Our *āyāt* lies, they are the companions of the Fire” (cf. 27:83-85; 7:51). Such eschatological passages echo a recurring refrain of warning in more than fifty other passages that condemn those who deny God’s *āyāt* and call them lies.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Many of the imagined/threatened Judgment Day events that should be evoked by God’s signs are introduced by one of two kinds of “truncated temporal sentence” in the Qur’ān (see Paret, *Der Koran*, 3-4; cf. note 27 below), namely one that stands only as a temporal clause, “*yauma . . .*” which translates something like “[Consider that] on a day [when . . .]” the event/action in question will occur, since a prior main clause needs to be assumed: e.g. in 17:52: “On a day when He summons you . . .”; cf. other examples at 3:30, 106; 5:109; 6:22, 128; 9:35; 10:28, 45; 16:84, 89, 111; 17:71; 18:47, 52. This becomes a kind of shorthand signal in the Qur’ān of a lesson about the consequences of evil at the Last Judgment.

### *The verses of the Qur'ān as verbal āyāt*

The use of *āyah/āyāt* to designate the wonders of God in nature and the lessons of history does not exhaust the meanings of the term in the Qur'ān. In a third usage, *āyāt* came ultimately to be the term used by Muslims for the discrete “verses” of the collected Qur'ān itself, in the sense of these verses themselves being God’s revealed verbal “signs” (or even “wonders, miracles”—a sense consonant with the later theological doctrine of the miraculous inimitability [*i'jāz*] of the Qur'ān) of which the Qur'ān speaks so frequently. There has, however, been some disagreement as to whether *āyah* as used in the Qur'ān itself clearly carries its later, specific meaning of an individual unit or pericope into which the text was divided very early on (as attested in early surviving codical fragments<sup>14</sup>), or whether all instances of *āyah* and *āyāt* in the Qur'anic text only refer to God’s signs in the two more general senses (signs in nature, signs in history) discussed above.<sup>15</sup> Scholars have not been in full agreement on this. Some have tended to see a number of instances of *āyah/āyāt* in the Qur'ān as specific references to its textual units/verses, while other scholars have been more cautious about reading some, or any, instances of *āyah* in the Qur'ān as referring unambiguously

---

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Sadeghi and Goudarzi, “*Ṣan‘ā' 1*”, pp. 7, 40, 58, 60, 122-4, and *passim*.

<sup>15</sup> The commentators do not seem to address the question, but rather assume that *āyah* refers in some instances not simply to any “sign” referred to in God’s Word but to a specific textual unit or “verse” of that Word. See, for example, Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* 1:475-76; *Tafsīr Bayḍāwī*, 1:80; Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf*, 1:176; *al-Jalālayn*, 22-23 (on S. 2:106, regarding abrogation of an *āyah*); cf. the discussions of S. 41:3 (*kitāb fuṣṣilat āyātuhu qur‘ānan ‘arabiyyan . . .*) in Ṭabarī, 24:90-91, Zamakhsharī 3:184, and *al-Jalālayn*, 629. Citing S. 3:7 as an example, the eleventh-century scholar al-Dāmaghānī in his *Iṣlāḥ* (60) makes clear that a verse of the Qur'ān is one of the meanings of *āyah* in the text itself.

to an actual verse of the text—such reading being potentially an anachronistic back-projection of the later common use of *āyah* for “verse.” For example, George Sale, Rudi Paret, Muhammad M. Pickthall, Kenneth Cragg, Muhammad Asad, and Tarif Khalidi all render *āyah* as “verse,” not “sign,” whenever this is a possible sense in the text. However, in their Qur’ān translations, Richard Bell, A. J. Arberry, Régis Blachère, and Alan Jones typically leave both possibilities open by using “sign” or simply the transliterated Arabic “*āya*” (Blachère) whenever either reading could be plausible.<sup>16</sup>

Here Arthur Jeffery’s view seems persuasive. He argues that even if “sign/s” is likely the usual and best translation of *āyah/āyāt* generally in the Qur’ān, there is still evidence of at least a tendency toward the specific meaning (“verse”) in the text itself (largely, in his view, in occurrences in the chronologically later portions of the text).<sup>17</sup> It is not hard in many individual passages to give preference to the specific sense “verse” or “pericope” (although the general sense of “signs” cannot ever be wholly ruled out). Some examples are: 2:106, “Whatever *āyāt* we annul or cause to be forgotten, we bring better or similar ones [to replace them]”; 3:7, “He it is who has sent down to you the Scripture in which are explicit *āyāt* that are the essence of the Scripture [*umm al-kitāb*], and others that are ambiguous”; 6:105, “Thus do We lay out in manifold ways our *āyāt*” [*wa-kadhālika*

---

<sup>16</sup> Bell even gives on occasion a footnote indicating that “verse” would be an alternative translation for “sign,” e.g. in S. 41:2. *Qur’ān Translated*, 2:477, n. 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Foreign Vocabulary*, 72. Jeffery first says, “it is doubtful whether it ever means anything more than *sign* in the Qur’ān,” but he then admits that “as Muhammad comes to refer to his preaching as a *sign*, the word tends to the later meaning” and cites here S. 3:5 (which is an error, since this verse does not mention *āyah*).

*nuṣarrif al-āyāt*]; 6:97, “We have made Our *āyāt* precise/clear for a people of good sense”; and 41:2-3, “a scripture, the *āyāt* of which have been clearly set forth as an Arabic reciting” (*kitāb fuṣṣilat āyātuḥu qur’ānan ‘arabīyan*).<sup>18</sup> Also relevant here are the numerous references to “the *āyāt* of the Scripture [*al-Kitāb*],” especially those at the beginning of Sūrahs 10, 12, 13, 15, 26, and 31 that proclaim, “These are *āyāt al-kitāb* [or: *āyāt al-kitāb al-mubīn*],” and S. 27:1, which begins, “These are the *āyāt* of the *Qur’ān* and a *kitāb mubīn*,” which might best be translated, “These are the verses of the Recitation, a clear Scripture” (reading the phrase as hendiadys for emphasis). Another argument for the specific sense being already present in the Qur’anic text would be the close linkage of *talá*, “recite,” in more than thirty instances with *āyah/āyāt*, which suggests that *āyāt* are the natural units of scriptural reciting and so logically “verses” of the text.

There is also a relevant juxtaposition of *āyāt* and the phrase *al-kitāb wal-ḥikmah* in a formulaic, late-Medinan description of Muhammad’s mission that is repeated in four places (2:129, 2:150-51, 3:164, and 62:2), as Daniel Madigan has pointed out.<sup>19</sup> Madigan plausibly suggests that these four passages are best to be seen as a late, possibly creedal

---

<sup>18</sup> Other salient examples are: 2:252 (cf. 3:108): “These *āyāt* of God We recite to you in truth. Truly, you are one of those sent as messengers”; 28:86-87: “You had no hope that the Scripture would be revealed to you [*yulqā ilayka*] except as a mercy from your Lord. . . . And let them not divert you from the *āyāt* of God after they have been sent down to you”; and 3:101: “How can you reject [faith] when God’s *āyāt* are recited [*tutlá*] to you and His messenger is among you?” There is the same ambiguity in the use of *āyāt* with reference to other scriptures, as in 3:113: “Among the People of Scripture [*ahl al-kitāb*] is an upright nation who recite God’s *āyāt* in the night, prostrating themselves” (cf. 6:124, 126; 5:75).

<sup>19</sup> *Qur’ān’s Self-Image*, 91-92.

formula employed “to distinguish the Muslim community from other groups and to establish it in its own right.”<sup>20</sup> S. 3:164 is typical of all four occurrences:

God has indeed been gracious to the faithful in sending among them a messenger who is one of their own to recite to them His signs [verses?] [yatlū ‘*alayhim āyātihi*], to purify them, and to make known to them the authoritative scripture [*al-kitāb wal-ḥikmah*]<sup>21</sup>

Here we see again how difficult it is to determine whether *āyāt* in such passages refers to God’s signs in nature or history, or to the actual verses of the Qur’anic recitation.

Whichever reading one prefers, this repeated creed-like formula underscores how utterly primary in the mission of God’s messenger(s) the recitation of His *āyāt* is held to be.

While the ubiquity and prominence of *āyah/āyāt* in the Qur’ān as well as its linkage with *‘ibrah* might alone argue for seeing the text as primarily oriented to iteration of God’s signs, this is not the sole argument for the centrality of this theme to the Qur’anic message. Less frequent but still significant are the occurrences of several other words that serve a similar function or are linked to that of *āyah/āyāt*. The most important of these (sixty-six occurrences) is the root *B-Y-N* in either the nominal form *bayyinah* (pl. *bayyināt*), “evidence, confirmation, clear indication”, or the adjectival forms meaning “clear, manifest”: *bayyin*, (especially in the phrase *āyyāt bayyināt*, “clear signs”) or *mubīn* (usually modifying *kitāb*, *qur’ān*, or *nadhīr*, “warner”—i.e., a prophet, especially

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>21</sup> Literally, “the book/scripture and wise judgment,” which Madigan prefers with good reason to read as a hendiadys (*takrīr al-kalām*), yielding a translation something like “the authoritative (or ‘wise’) scripture” (ibid., 93-96).

Muḥammad).<sup>22</sup> Also important to the general Qur’anic theme of the ubiquity of evident tokens of God and His sovereignty (and similar in usage to *āyah*) are terms such as *burhān* “proof, confirmation,” and *mathal*, “example, similitude, parable, allegory.” All but one of the eight occurrences of the former of these two words refer to proofs of divine sovereignty that the faithful have from God, or that the unbelievers *do not* have from their (false) gods.<sup>23</sup> The term *mathal* (pl. *amthāl*) occurs eighty-eight times and is therefore prominent in the text. The *amthāl* of the Qur’ān are predominantly either the stories of previous peoples, examples from God’s creation, or explicit parables making a moral point through an exemplary story (e.g., the two owners of gardens in 18:32-44) not unlike the parables in the Christian New Testament.<sup>24</sup>

In general, *āyah*, *‘ibrah*, *bayyinah*, *burhān*, and *mathal* all serve in the Qur’ān to hold up things in nature or human affairs that offer convincing evidence, examples, or proofs of God’s sovereignty and attendant claim on human recognition and response.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> *Bayyināt* occurs seventeen times as a noun meaning “clear messages/evidence,” and fifteen times as an adjective in the phrase *ayyāt bayyināt* (or *mubayyināt*), “clear signs.” *Mubīn* occurs some twenty-seven times; *Al-kitāb al-mustabayyin*, “the book that makes things clear,” also occurs once. These usages are all consonant with the idea that God’s revelations (including the Qur’ān) and God’s messengers (including Muhammad), have proclaimed clearly and unmistakably the signs/lessons of His truths.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., 4:174, 23:117, 2:111, 21:24, 27:64, 28:32, 28:75.

<sup>24</sup> On *mathal*, see A. H. Mathias Zahniser, “Parable,” *EQ* 4:9-11; Frants Buhl, “Vergleichungen,” 1-11; and Rudolf Sellheim, “Mathal,” *EF*<sup>2</sup> 6:811-15, esp. 821a and the bibliography. This term’s relation to the aforementioned words for “sign,” “lesson,” “proof,” etc., deserves full and separate treatment in another place.

<sup>25</sup> A few other words carry also the meaning, “sign(s),” or something close to this, but all are used only in specific and different senses or contexts from those of *āyah* or the similar/related

All told, the roughly five hundred references to God’s signs, tokens, or proofs in the world suggest that the Qur’ān is a text intended in the first instance to be a call (or a succession of calls) to heed God’s signs and the lessons and proofs of His sovereignty they contain—signs, lessons, and proofs that, it argues consistently, are evident all around us in nature, in the history of previous prophets and peoples, and in God’s revealed words.

On this basis we can argue that in content and form the Muslim scripture is *semiological* in the most basic sense of the word and can be well characterized as fundamentally *a discourse of signs*. The two basic kinds of *āyāt*, the natural and the historical—and it could be argued also the third kind, the textual, function as *‘ibar*, signal lessons or tokens, as (clear) evidence (*bayyināt*), or even as proofs (*barāhīn*) of God and examples or similitudes (*amthāl*) of what He asks of His servants. In this way, in addition to referring to the clear signs and proofs of God in nature and history, the Qur’ān’s verses are functionally what they sometimes may be also in the text itself, or at least what they rapidly came to be in early Muslim usage: the verbal revelations that are themselves signs of God (*āyāt Allāh*) calling attention to His other signs and lessons in nature and history.

---

terms just discussed. Noteworthy here are *sha‘ā’ir*, “signs, marks” and *uswah*, “example, model.” The former occurs four times, to designate particular divine marks, namely elements of the observances prescribed for the Hajj. Neither precisely natural phenomena, historical signs, nor revelations, the *sha‘ā’ir* are ritual reminders of God and His claims on human worship: 2:158 (the hills of al-Ṣafā and al-Marwah), 5:2, and 22:32 (Hajj rites in general), and 22:36 (sacrificial animals at Minā). A second term closely related to God’s general signs and proofs given for human edification is *uswah*, “example, model,” which in all three of its occurrences designates the “good example” (*uswah Hasanah*) offered by God’s messengers: 33:21 (Muhammad); 65:4, and 65:6 (Abraham and his followers). Finally, the word *sīmā*, “mark,” occurs six times, but never with respect to God’s signs, only with reference to the marks by which righteous or sinful persons can be visually identified, especially at the Last Judgment.



God's *āyāt* are key both to the Qur'ān's presentation of itself as scripture and to its primary message. We are better able to appreciate the peculiar nature of the Qur'anic discourse, as well as its own theory of revelation and scripture, by recognizing more deliberately the centrality of its "sign" language and correlative imagery to both its message and its literary form.

It has been so obvious and taken for granted that the "sign" passages loom large in the Qur'anic text that neither traditional Muslim nor modern academic students of the Qur'ān have sufficiently stressed how determinative for the Qur'ān its "discourse of signs" actually is. The logic of signs—literally, the *semiology*—of the Qur'ān is fundamental to what the text presents itself to be as revealed Word. It constantly reminds its hearers that God communicates His own sovereignty and power as well as His beneficence and mercy through signs and lessons in nature, in history, and in repeated revelations and prophetic missions. Arguably no other scripture presents itself so explicitly and self-consciously as does the Qur'ān as *both* indicator (through its referential role in calling on nature and history as testimony to God's sovereignty) and instantiation (through its own textual testimony to that sovereignty) of tangible signs that mediate the divine to the human. The Qur'ān is self-consciously explicit about its own function as the latest, corrective revelation in a long series of scriptural dispensations. This self-consciousness is most fully expressed in its self-presentation as a discourse *both of and about* God's signs, His *āyāt*, which offer signal lessons, *'ibar*, concerning who He is and what He requires.

The basis for understanding the Qur'ān as a discourse of signs is to be found in both its style and its content. First, the didactic, hortatory style of the Qur'ān is fundamental, in that the text presents itself, or any one of its *āyāt*, frequently and explicitly

as a reminder—a *dhikr*, *tadhkirah*, or *dhikrā*—of what people of good sense ought to see and respond to in the world around them, what they ought to consider from past history and take warning and promise from for their own lives.<sup>26</sup> This *reminding* is what signs do. It is because of the Qur'ān's reiterated purpose of reminding humans of their obligation to recognize God's sovereignty and to do good in His creation that it is necessarily so largely paraenetic (even taking into account its more legalistic passages), so explicitly focused on getting its listeners to heed its messages. This overall paraenetic character is nowhere more evident than in its presentation of itself literally as a recital (*qur'ān*, *tilāwah*) of God's manifold *āyāt* in the natural cosmos and the histories of past peoples.

Second, its narrative style is episodic. The Hebrew and Greek scriptures of Jews and Christians also comprise many different types of narrative, but these are typically more homogeneous textual units in which a given narrative, legal, epistolary, hortatory, apocalyptic, or other type of material dominates. With the notable exceptions of the Joseph story in S. 12 and some of the short Meccan sūrahs, the Qur'ān largely eschews homogeneous chapters devoted only or even primarily to one theme, story, expository style, or even type of discourse, whether narratives, visions, exhortations, legal-moral regulations, psalmodic texts, or whatever. Instead, it moves back and forth over various subjects and shifts voices within its discrete segments.

In terms of style as well as content, a few (largely short) sūrahs are unitary, but the majority are not. Many could exchange some passages with others, and many share whole phrases and sentences; typically they reiterate material and thereby underscore a series of recurrent themes calling to faith and expressing what God expects of those who have faith.

---

<sup>26</sup> There are 274 occurrences of the root *DH-K-R* as noun or verb used in this sense; see Angelika Brodersen, "Remembrance," *EQ* 419b-424.

The text shifts frequently from references to historical examples to admonitions about the coming Judgment or prescriptions for pious living, from exhortations to good or warnings about evil to regulation of social and personal practices or to psalmodic praise of God. It is not surprising that non-Muslim readers often find the text disjointed in its rapid shifts in topic, example, audience, and grammatical person or voice. There are, however, at least three crucial reasons for what might be called this "episodic" shape of the text as a whole.

First, the Qur'ān is, in its own view and that of traditional Muslim scholarship, a collection of revelations (or "signs") sent down piecemeal, often as *ad hoc* and even *ad hominem* messages to Muhammad, over an extended period of years. Muslims have always recognized that many sūrahs are composites of material revealed at different times and directed to different contexts. If the traditional view of the piece-meal revelation of the Qur'ān is even approximately the reality it purports to be, this would explain the episodic and protean character of the text, which frequently involves multiple shifts in voice, style, and content within the same sūrah.

Second, this episodic, protean character of Qur'anic discourse is much more intelligible if we recognize also the fundamentally "referential" style of the text, in which allusions to stories, people, or values clearly assumed already to be known to its listeners are brought forward in varying sequences and detail. As mentioned above, the Qur'ān is substantially and stylistically what it calls itself at various points: a "reminder", a "[call to] remembrance", or even an "admonition", which exhorts its hearers to "recollect" stories, events, and ideas with which they are assumed to be already conversant to some

degree (e.g., 5:7, 7:69,74).<sup>27</sup> Also frequent, largely in the typically late, narrative sūrahs, are the recurring temporal clauses introduced by the word “*idh*,” best rendered in the general sense of “[recall] when . . .”<sup>28</sup> These call attention not to full narratives concerning Adam, Noah, Abraham, Hūd, Sālih, Moses, Jesus, etc., but rather to episodes from their lives, each of which even without explicit designation as such is clearly to be taken as an *āyah* (carrying, in turn, an ‘*ibrah*)—for example, the multiple instances in S. 2 involving Moses and Abraham.<sup>29</sup> Each referenced episode stands for the larger, fuller story of God’s dealings with one of his messengers and his people, which the hearers should be able to fill in for themselves from the single reference or reminder. These passages function as linguistic flags or “signs” that alert listeners to their responsibility to draw on the (evidently well-known) stories of past peoples for their own guidance.

---

<sup>27</sup> See note 25 above.

<sup>28</sup> There are approximately one hundred instances of these temporal *idh* clauses that need a main clause supplied. For a discussion of these “truncated (*or*: abbreviated) temporal sentences” (“verkürzte Zeitsätze”), in the Qur’an, see Paret, “Zur Übersetzung,” introduction to *Der Koran*, 3-4, drawing upon Nöldeke, *Neue Beiträge*, 17, which see. Cf. note 13 above.

<sup>29</sup> Moses examples: 2:49, 50, 51, 53, 54, 55, 58, 60, 61, 63, 67, 72; Abraham examples: 2:124, 125, 126, 127, 131. Other examples of the “truncated temporal clause” with *idh* include: 2:30, 34, 83, 84, 93, 166, 260; 3:35, 42, 45, 55, 81, 121, 122, 124, 153, 187; 5:20; 18:50, 60; 6:74; 7:161, 163, 164, 167, 171, 172; 8:7, 9, 11, 12, 30, 42, 43, 44, 48, 49; 10:71; 12:4, 8; 14:6, 35; 15:28; 17:60, 61; 18:10, 50, 60; 19:3; 20:10, 116; 21:76, 78, 89; 24:15; 26:10, 70, 106, 124, 142, 161, 177; 27:7, 54; 28:76; 33:7, 10, 12, 13; 36:13, 14; 37:124, 134; 51:25, 38, 41, 43; 61:5, 6.

Third, we need to underscore the obvious: the whole text is explicitly first and foremost an oral “recitation” (*qur'ān*), consisting of a multitude of discrete recitations. Witness the nearly three-hundred passages scattered throughout the text that are introduced by the one-word command, “Say!” (*qul!*), addressed evidently to the Prophet and by extension to every listener. The Qur'ān is a composite text that was not only revealed in varying-length segments at different times in Muhammad’s prophetic career, but also memorized and collected in some measure during and beyond that career. Whatever redaction may have occurred, the fundamentally oral and composite nature of the transmitted material dictates in large part the episodic character of the text with its repeated calls upon its audience to recite and to pay attention to its manifold signs.

In conclusion, we can essay a few observations regarding the rhetoric or discourse of signs in the Qur'ān. It would seem, both from traditional Muslim chronologizing of the revelations and from the arguments of modern scholars about the development of the Qur’anic vocabulary over the course of the ongoing revelations to Muhammad, that there was an increasing emphasis upon God’s *āyāt* as His evident signs/wonders in nature and in the history of His dealings with humankind, progressing finally to ever greater identification of such signs/wonders with the actual units of verbal revelation He sent down. God’s verbal messages here become functionally identical to His physical actions: revelation, or its scriptural fixation, becomes both a recounting of and referring to divine signs, *āyāt*, and also itself a set of verbal signs, or *āyāt*. Here, consciously or unconsciously, the ambiguities of the word *āyāt* are subsumed in a discourse wherein scriptural word and divine sign or wonder are all but inseparable.

It is thus not hard to see how naturally the text of the Qurān supported the move in early Muslim theological discussions from the sign discourse of the Qur'anic text to speaking about the Qur'ān as a *mu'jizah*, a “miracle”—literally, something that renders imitation impossible. The doctrine of “miraculous inimitability” (*i'jāz*) that developed was not only a scholastic, apologetic exercise to defend the uniqueness of Muslim scripture, but arguably a logical extension of what could be read out of the Qur'ān itself, where a remarkably full-blown doctrine of scripture as a compilation of God's *āyāt* (in both simple and technical senses) is presented. That doctrine in many ways is the corollary of the Qur'ān's conception of itself as a discourse of signs. In recognizing this self-understanding of the text, we see the purpose of its constant emphasis upon the clarity, explanatory power, and unambiguity of its message: namely, to stress that even while providing such clear signs in His handiwork and activity in the world, God has also spoken His message in clear human language, so that no doubt can arise about Him or His message.

What the semiology, or discourse of signs, of the Qur'ān shows the attentive reader is the unfolding of a remarkably consistent understanding of God's revelatory activity in the created world. It is an understanding that dovetails logically and functionally with the piecemeal revelations, the episodic and referential style, and the fundamentally oral, memorized and recited character of the Qur'anic revelations. It is also the key link between the Qur'ān's generic understanding of divine revelation and scripture and its presentation of its own role as God's culminating and corrective scriptural revelation.

When S. 6:109 commands Muhammad, “Say, *āyāt* belong to God” (*innamā l-āyātu 'inda llāh*), the fullest implication is that all wonders of nature and history and all verbal revelations come solely from the One Creator/Sustainer. The God who speaks in

the Qur'ān is one who throughout history has never left His human creatures without clear signs and tokens, whether in the natural world, in human history, or, most explicitly, in His revealed words. The Qur'ān's notion of Scripture is clear: it is the set of divine *āyāt* that repeat and call attention to God's other wondrous signs, the verbal units of revelation that contain His *'ibar*, His signal lessons or instructive tokens. Collectively, these recited units are, for the faithful, arguably a kind of miracle or, in the words of S. 12:111 with which we began, "a confirmation of that which came before it, a clear exposition of everything, a guidance, and a mercy for a people who have faith."

### Works Cited

'Abd al-Bāqī, Muḥammad Fu'ād, comp. *al-Mu'jam al-mufahras li-alfāz al-qur'ān al-karīm*. Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1407/1987.

Bayḍāwī, 'Abd Allāh b. 'Umar al-. *Tafsīr al-bayḍāwī al-musammá anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-ta'wīl*. 2 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1420/1999.

Bell, Richard, trans. *The Qur'ān Translated, with a Critical Rearrangement of the Sūrahs*. 2 vols. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937-39.

Buhl, Frants. "Über Vergleichen und Gleichnisse im Qur'ān." *AO* 59 (1924): 1-11.

Dāmaghānī, Husayn b. Muḥammad, al-. *Iṣlāḥ al-wujūh wal-nazā'ir fil-qur'ān al-karīm*. Edited by 'Abd al-'Azīz Sayyid al-Ahl. Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm lil-Malāyīn, 1970.

*The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. New Edition. 11 vols. and supplement. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986-2004. (Cited in notes as *EI*<sup>2</sup>)

- The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ân*. Edited by J. D. McAuliffe et al. 5 vols. and index.  
Leiden: Brill, 2000-06. (Cited in notes as *EQ*)
- Graham, William A. “‘The Winds to Herald His Mercy’ and Other ‘Signs for Those of Certain Faith’: Nature as Token of God’s Sovereignty and Grace in the Qur’ân.” In *Faithful Imagining: Essays in Honor of Richard R. Niebuhr*, edited by Sang Hyun Lee, Wayne Proudfoot, and Albert Blackwell, 19-38. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995.
- Jeffery, Arthur. *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’ân*. Gaekwad’s Oriental Series, vol. 79. Baroda, India: Oriental Institute, 1938.
- [*Jalālayn*] al-Qur’ân al-karīm wa-bi-hāmishihi tafsīr al-imāmayn al-jalīlayn. . . . Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1983.
- Lane, E. W. *An Arabic-English Lexicon*. 8 parts and supplement. London: Williams and Norgate, 1863-93.
- [*Lisān al-‘arab*] Muḥammad b. al-Mukarram Ibn Manzūr. *Lisān al-‘arab*. 20 vols. [Būlāq reprint with corrections and indexes]. Cairo: al-Dār al-Miṣrīyah lil-Ta’līf wal-Tarjamah, 1966.
- Madigan, Daniel A. *The Qur’ân’s Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam’s Scripture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Mahdi, Muhsin. *Ibn Khaldūn’s Philosophy of History*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1957.
- Muqātil ibn Sulaymān. *Tafsīr*. [www.altafsir.com](http://www.altafsir.com), s.v.



- Nagy, Gregory. "Sêma and Nôêsis." In *Greek Mythology and Poetics*, 202-22. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990.
- Nöldeke, Theodor. *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft*. Strasbourg, 1910.
- Qummī, ‘Alī ibn Ibrāhīm al-. *Tafsīr*. www.altafsir.com, s.v.
- Rahman, Fazlur. *Major Themes of the Qur’ān*. Minneapolis and Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980.
- Paret, Rudi, trans. *Der Koran*. Stuttgart, 1962.
- Sadeghi, Behnam, and Mohsen Goudarzi. "Şan‘ā’1 and the Origins of the Qur’ān," *Der Islam* 87 (2012): 1–129.
- [Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*] Ṭabarī, Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-. *Jāmi‘ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl āy al-qur’ān*. 30 vols. in 12. Cairo: Mustafá al-Bāb al-Halabī, 1954-68.
- Timm, Roger E. "Divine Majesty, Human Vicegerency, and the Fate of the Earth in Early Islam." *Hamdard Islamicus* 13 (1990): 47-57.
- Watt, W. Montgomery, ed. *Bell's Introduction to the Qur’ān*. Edinburgh, 1970.
- Zamakhsharī, Maḥmūd b. ‘Umar, *al-Kashshāf ‘an ḥaqā’iq ghawāmid al-tanzīl wal-‘uyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūd al-ta’wīl*. 4 vols. Beirut, 1366/1947.