Qur'anic Stories: God, Revelation and the Audience

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This monograph is an impressive addition to the growing number of studies on the Qur'an as a literary text. The declared focus is not on theology but on theography. To quote Jack Miles, who introduced the term theography: "While theology typically uses the difficult tools of philosophy, theography gravitates toward the more user-friendly and descriptive tools of literary appreciation and, to a point, even towards the tool of biography. Rather than attempt to state the significance of the divine character in philosophical terms, theography aspires more modestly to *meet* him in the same simple way that characters can be met on the pages of a work of literary art" [*God in the Qur'an* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018), 17].

Alhassen has a different objective in her use of theography. While Miles explores the comparative aspects of Biblical and Qur'anic stories in applying the tools of theography, Alhassen is intent on examining the Qur'an as narrative performance in its own terms. Her approach centers on God as narrator in three roles, or as she says, three layers: God as narrator to a general audience, God as narrator to the Prophet Muhammad, and then God as a character interacting with other characters. In terms

familiar to students of Qur'anic commentary (*tafsīr*), Alhassen is deploying a mode of analysis known as *tafsīr al-qur'ān bil-qur'ān* (commentary of the Qur'an with, and through, the Qur'an). She is mindful of precursors, going back to the earliest (al-Tustari) and extending to modern practitioners (Sayyid Qutb), but she is focused above all on how certain stories are constructed and what is the message, above all literary and performative, in their structure.

The content of these stories is selective. It hones in on three characters: Mary, the mother of Jesus; Joseph; and Moses. The effort in each instance is to provide stylistic features from Qur'anic surahs that refer to other surahs, incentivizing further reading but also humility about the degree of human comprehension permitted by the Narrator. In the simplest language, Elhassen hopes to illustrate how God manages—or manipulates—revelation to both reveal and conceal, disclose and hide, His intent. Each chapter exposes the ambiguity and ambivalence of divine intent. Chapter One is titled "Knowledge, Control and Consonance in *Surat Al `Imran* 3:33-62." It includes unexplained leaps across time, that is, disjunctures and aporia. Though they may be disorienting, they are bracketed with a consonance between the readers and the characters, and even the readers and God, impelling readers to search elsewhere in the Qur'an for answers to their puzzlement. Similarly, in Chapter Two, "God, Families and Secrets in the Story of *Surat Maryam* 19:1-58", we find that story's structure once again reinforces God's privileged and omniscient position, so much so that God as narrator also becomes part of the story He Himself reveals. Chapter Three is in some ways the most explicit demonstration of God's deliberate dalliance with the reader/listener. It is focused on "Evidence, Judgment and Remorse in *Surat Yusuf*". While many commentators have struggled to understand certain features of the text, Elhassen explains that the divine intent supersedes and cancels all human concerns in *Surat Yūsuf*. "God centres Himself in that story: all that matters is God's forgiveness, truth and judgment; human notions of evidence, guilt and remorse are insignificant" (10). Chapter Four turns to Moses, and takes another twist in the narratological strategy of theography. "Merging Words and Making Connections in *Surat Taha*", like its sequel, Chapter Five, "*Surat al-Qasas* and its Audience," foregrounds God "as an omniscient and reliable narrator

who sometimes withholds information from readers or makes them work hard by using subtle language" (10). At every point the intratextual evidence buttresses God's intent as the engaged yet reticent narrator, one who "provides new and sometimes exclusive details, while also presenting new mysteries", "mysteries meant to keep the audience in their place" (11).

Perhaps the strongest, and certainly most novel, element in her analysis is to refocus on the intent of the opening, disconnected letters, *ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa`āt* or *fawātiḥ al-ṣuwar*, that mark 29 surahs or roughly one-quarter of the entire Qur'anic corpus. While dismissed or glossed by some commentators, Muslim and non-Muslim, Alhassen sees them as part of the divine strategy to "withhold information from readers in order to make certain theological points" (77). This is evident in several stories that she analyzes but especially in *Surat Yūsuf*. Like other surahs which begin with these disconnected letters, they occur at the beginning in order to stress the authoritative message that follows, so that the first three verses of *Surat Yūsuf* read (in Abdel Haleem's 2010 translation, which she prefers throughout):

> 12:1 *Alif Lam Ra* These are the verses of the Scripture that makes things clear –
> 2 We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an so that you (people) may understand.
> 3 We tell you [Prophet] the best of stories in revealing this Qur'an to you. Before this you were one of those who knew nothing about them.

And she then explores the logic of gradual disclosure, beginning with "letters that make up words (12:1), then narrow to the Arabic Qur'an (12:2) and, finally, focus even further on the stories in the Qur'an, or this specific story (12:3)" (78).

It is not clear that the *muqaṭṭa`āt* have the same explanatory power in other surahs, those that unfold Qur'anic stories about Mary and Moses in Chapters 3, 5, and 6. About their function in Q 19:1 we are simply told that Shawkat Toorawa, in his pioneering study of this surah, had demonstrated that the five disconnected letters here are unlike other disconnected letters in the Qur'an because they offset the rhyme pattern of the rest of the surah (46-47), but the theological point remains obscure.

In Chapters 5 & 6, with reference to Moses narratives in *Surat Ṭāhā* (Q 20) and *Surat al-Qaṣaṣ* (Q 28), there is no discussion of the *muqaṭṭa`āt*, though other points of interest are explored with fascinating, often compelling insight. What one misses is any reference to another explanation of these opening letters, the one offered by Muhammad Asad, to wit, that in some cases, including *Surat Ṭāhā*, the letters can be a meaningful colloquial expression in pre-Islamic Arabian dialects, in this case, *tā hā* signifying "O man" (Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* 225, n.1).

But the shortfall on this matter is small in comparison to the advance in rethinking the literary quality and authorial intent of the Qu'ran as divine wit. The theological claims in Alhassen's exercise are subtly restated: God is Omnipotent but not Capricious. He conceals in order to engage and encourage the reader. Though there persists the central conflict between believer and disbeliever, insider and outsider, to the Qur'anic message and Muhammad's mission, Alhassen demonstrates time and again how literary analysis, and literary analysis alone, can yield the deeper levels of meaning and the incentive for belief/obedience at the heart of the Qur'anic corpus. While there are numerous precursors in this endeavor—with several mentioned beside Sayyid Qutb—Alhassen wants to underscore how literary analysis, far from eliminating or reducing, instead buttresses a theological agenda. As she concludes, "the narratological, semantic and rhetorical approach has provided new insights into Qur'anic stories, showing ways in which they advance the overall metaphysical and ethical messages of the Qur'an" (159). For all readers of this extraordinary performative text, whatever their background, motive, or outlook, the stories come alive with a fresh, invigorating and engaging analysis, at once exploratory and comprehensive. Though this study does not displace or eliminate the need for Qur'anic commentary (*tafsīr*), it expands the range of interpretative possibilities and so enhances the allure of the central text.

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