

The Structure and Interpretation of *Sūrat al-Mu'minūn*¹

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In terms of their structure, the 48 *sūras* that Nöldeke ascribed to the first Meccan period form a relatively homogeneous group.² This holds true regardless of whether or not they are actually the 'early Meccan' revelations he supposed. Most of them comprise one or more discrete sections, each of which is devoted to one of six subjects: polemic; eschatology; signs of Allāh's power and beneficence; narratives about previous envoys; the revealed status of the message; or private communication with the Envoy.³ This is not the case with the 42 *sūras* of Nöldeke's second and third Meccan periods. Their structure is often more elusive, because although the same six principal themes are present it is difficult to disentangle them. However, 13 of these *sūras* – 8 second Meccan and 5 third Meccan – appear to be tripartite, each having a long narrative section sandwiched between opening and concluding sections that evince different themes.⁴ In her pioneering study of the composition of the Meccan *sūras*, Neuwirth argued that on closer analysis most of the other 'middle Meccan' and 'late Meccan' *sūras* also prove to be tripartite.⁵ I have argued elsewhere that this is an oversimplification.⁶ In the present paper, I propose to take the debate a step further by examining the structure of *Sūra* 23, a 'middle Meccan' *sūra* commonly known as *Sūrat al-Mu'minūn*.

The more obviously tripartite *sūras* have what Neuwirth calls a *Ringkomposition*, with the third part echoing the motifs of the first. She states that this seems not to be the case with *Sūra* 23. Nevertheless, she detects a connection between the initial list of virtues, vv.1–11, and what she describes as a 'hymnic' passage, vv.78–80. She observes that both of these groups of *āyās* consist principally of predicates introduced by *alladhīna* and *alladhī* respectively, but that whereas the one extols the believers the other extols the Creator.⁷ On the basis of this, she suggests that vv.78–80 mark the beginning of the third part. The structure that she proposes for the *sūra* as a whole is as follows:⁸

1. Introduction

1–11 list of virtues

II A. *āyāt*

12–16 creation of mankind as evidence of power to resurrect

17–22 further *āyas*: firmament, water, vegetation, tree of Ṭūr Saynā', cattle, ship (*fulk*)

II B. Legends of the Prophets

23–30 Nūḥ and his deliverance in *fulk*

31–41 unnamed envoy

42–44 envoys appearing from time to time at regular intervals

45–49 Mūsā and Hārūn

50 Ibn Maryam

51–53 address to envoys: disunity among the communities

II C. Exhortation, Polemic

54–56 exhortation to the Prophet, polemical question regarding eagerness for good things

57–61 virtue list: possessors of the virtues in question are the ones who are really eager for good things

62–63 recording of deeds in *kitāb*

64–67 fade-in of the judgement; punishment

68–71 flash-back in polemical questions, fading into present-day reproach

72–77 task of the Prophet, exhortation, announcement of the punishment of the unbelievers

III Hymnic Passages, Threat of Judgement, Profession of Divine Unity

78–80 attribution of praise to Allāh, embodying *āyāt*

81–83 unbelievers cite forefathers as grounds for rejecting the resurrection

84–89 questions concerning the possessor of power and sovereignty, answer: Allāh

90–92 unity of God

93–98 recommended prayer, exhortation, recommended formula

99–104 the unbelievers' hour of death, repentance, *yawm*, scales

105–8 rejection of repentance

109–11 flash-back: ridiculing of the believers by the deniers who are now facing the judgement

- 112–15 questions about the duration of time between death and resurrection, *khalq bi'l-ḥaqq*
- 116–18 praise of Allāh as sole deity, threat against worshippers of several deities, recommended prayer

There are a number of weaknesses in Neuwirth's analysis:

1. There is an imbalance in the relative length of what she identifies as Parts I and III; whereas the former comprises only 11 *āyas*, the latter comprises 42.⁹
2. It is arguable that v.54, the beginning of Neuwirth's Part II C, actually marks a more significant turning point than v.78, which she regards as the opening *āya* of Part III. It is in v.54 that the implied speaker [Allāh] first addresses the privileged addressee [Muḥammad] in the second person singular, with the words: 'So leave them in their overwhelming confusion for a time',¹⁰ and that the series of discrete subsections gives way to a discourse with a less obvious structure.
3. The structural homologue of the 'virtue list' in vv.1–11, is not vv.78–80 but rather vv.54–63, which has a second virtue list as its core.¹¹
4. In view of the words 'Little thanks you give!' and 'Will you then understand?', vv.78–80 should be classified as a third person signs controversy¹² rather than as a hymnic passage.
5. If this signs controversy marked the opening of Part III, one would expect it to be preceded by a hiatus. That is not the case. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī asks, 'What is the relationship between, "He it is who furnished you with hearing, eyesight and hearts..." and the preceding material?' He then supplies a plausible answer:

It is as though Allāh, to whom all praise is due, having first demonstrated the unreasonableness of those unbelievers who turned away from hearing the indications, seeing the lessons and contemplating the truths, then said to the believers, 'He it is who gave you those things and acquainted you with them', warning them that the person who does not use these members for the purpose for which they were created is in the same position as the one who lacks them. As Allāh Most High said [in Q.46:26], 'Their hearing, eyesight and hearts availed them nothing when they went on repudiating Allāh's signs', warning that the deprivation of those unbelievers and the consciousness of these believers comes from Allāh alone.¹³

In support of Rāzī's explanation, note the references to the summoning of the unbelievers (v.73), their wandering blindly (v.75), and their failure to humble themselves (v.76), which correspond to 'hearing', 'eyesight' and 'hearts' respectively.

6. Although Neuwirth's division of the *sūra* into subsections is based, for the most part, on sound formal criteria, there is a danger of the *sūra* being perceived as a mosaic of unrelated passages unless attention is also paid to other factors that give it cohesion.

There is thus ample justification for a reconsideration of the structure of the *sūra*.

The New Proposal in Outline

In the Standard Egyptian Edition of the Qur'an, *Sūra* 23 comprises 118 numbered *āyas*, of varying length, rhyming in *-ūn*, *-īn* or *-īm*. It is preceded by the *basmala*, which is unnumbered and which we will therefore indicate with a zero. In broad outline, the proposed structure is as follows:

Opening, vv.0–1

Initial Tableau, vv.1–11

PART I – From the creation to the current religious sectarianism,
vv.12–53

Central Hinge, vv.54–63

PART II – Present polemic and the impending judgement, vv.64–108

Final Tableau, vv.109–118

Ending vv.117d¹⁴–18

This structure is approximately symmetrical. The *sūra* consists of two principal parts: PART I (42 *āyas*) and PART II (45 *āyas*). However, whereas PART I contains a substantial amount of narrative arranged in chronological order, PART II is more diffuse and might therefore be described as comparatively 'hollow'.¹⁵ The two parts are framed by the Initial Tableau (11 *āyas*) and the Final Tableau (10 *āyas*), and are joined by the Central Hinge (10 *āyas*). Whereas the Initial Tableau and the Central Hinge have a complex chiasmic structure, the Final Tableau appears hollow, being merely demarcated by an *inclusio*. When the Qur'an is considered as an oral-aural phenomenon, the discrepancy in the length of Parts I and II is less than it appears in the text of the Standard Egyptian Edition. This is because, if we count the internal rhymes in v.33 (*ta'kulūn*) and v.45 (*Hārūn*), PART I has a total of 44 rhyming segments.¹⁶ Moreover, if we take into account the internal rhyme in v.109 (*yaqūlūn*), the Initial Tableau and the Final Tableau are of equal length.¹⁷

Considering the Qur'an as an oral-aural phenomenon also helps to explain the structural ambivalence of the *basmala*. Because, strictly speaking, the *basmala* is not part of the *sūra*, it is not an integral part of the Initial Tableau. However, because it is

heard at the beginning of every recitation, and because it has the same rhyme as the *sūra*,¹⁸ it does form part of the *Opening*. As we shall see shortly, the *Opening* is echoed in the *Ending*, which consists of the last one and a half *āyas* of the Final Tableau.

The Presence of Chiasmus and *Inclusio*

The *basmala*, v.0, contains two divine names that are derived from the verbal root *RḤM*, namely *al-rahmān* and *al-rahīm* ('the Most-merciful' and 'the All-merciful'). The final *āya* of the *sūra*, v.118, also contains two words derived from this root: *arḥam* ('have mercy') and *al-rāḥimīn* ('the merciful').¹⁹ Moreover, whereas the *basmala* is a formula indicating that the words that follow it are a revelation from Allāh, v.118 is a divinely-revealed prayer that the Envoy is recommended to address to him. Thus v.188 both echoes the *basmala* and contrasts with it. A similar relationship exists between v.1 and v.117d. These *āyas* contain the verb *aflaḥa*, 'to prosper',²⁰ but in v.117d it is preceded by a particle of negation. Moreover, whereas the rhyme word and grammatical subject of the verb in v.1 is *al-mu'minūn* ('the believers'), the rhyme word and grammatical subject in v.117 is its semantic opposite, *al-kāfirūn* ('the unbelievers'). These observations may be tabulated as follows:

A – v.0	In the name of Allah the Most-merciful the All-merciful (<i>al-rahmān al-rahīm</i>)
B – v.1	Prosperous are the believers (<i>aflaḥa 'l-mu'minūn</i>)
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B' – v.117d	The unbelievers will not prosper (<i>lā yufliḥu 'l-kāfirūn</i>)
A' – v.118	And say, '...have mercy (<i>wa-rḥam</i>), ... the best of the merciful (<i>al-rāḥimīn</i>)

The relationship between the *Opening* and the *Ending* of the *sūra* is thus one of crossed symmetry or chiasmus,²¹ in which A corresponds to A', and B corresponds to B'.

For reasons mentioned earlier, v.54 marks a turning point in the *sūra*. This *āya* contains the word *ghamra*, which is variously translated 'confusion',²² 'perplexity'²³ or 'error'.²⁴ According to Zamakhsharī, however, it literally means 'water that rises above the stature of a man' and it is used here figuratively to indicate that the unbelievers are steeped in ignorance and folly, or that in their futility they are like people playing in a flood of water.²⁵ I have therefore rendered it as 'overwhelming confusion'. This word, which is attested only three times in the Qur'an,²⁶ occurs

again in v.63. These two *āyas*, v.54 and v.63, are the first and last in a series of ten that span the numerical centre of the *sūra*. This Central Hinge is a five-part chiasmus:

- A (54) So leave them in their *overwhelming confusion* for a time
- B (55) Do they reckon that in enlarging them with wealth and children
- C (56) We are *hastening* on their behalf with *good things*? Nay they do not perceive.
- D (57) Verily those who on account of the fear of *their Lord* are worried
- E (58) And those who in the signs of *their Lord* believe
- E' (59) And those who with *their Lord* no partner join
- D' (60) Those who give what they give with hearts frightened that they to *their Lord* are returning.
- C' (61) These are *hastening to good things*, and they in them out-strip.
- B' (62) We task not any soul beyond its capacity, and with us is the Book that utters the truth; they will not be wronged.
- A' (63) Nay but their hearts are in *overwhelming confusion* in regard to this and they have deeds besides that that they are doing.

A corresponds to A' because of the word *ghamra*. B and B' both deploy similar spatial metaphors: 'enlarging' and 'capacity'. C and C' have two lexical items in common: *nusāri'ul/yusāri'ūn* ('hastening') *al-khayrāt* ('good things'). D and D' both mention the believers' fear but use different words to denote it. Finally E and E', which occur at the very centre of the *sūra*, present two of the *sūra*'s chief concerns: belief, and its corollary, the avoidance of *shirk*. Belief was commended at the beginning of the *sūra*, in v.1, the first *āya* after the *basmala*:

- (1) Prosperous are the believers
- (58) And those who in the signs of their Lord believe

Shirk will be condemned in v.117, the last *āya* before the liturgical conclusion:

- (59) And those who with their Lord no partner join
- (117) Anyone who calls on another deity along with Allāh – a deity for whom he has no proof – his reckoning is with his Lord. The unbelievers will not prosper.

The Initial Tableau at the beginning of the *sūra* appears to have a similar structure to the Central Hinge, although the parallels between its members are less obvious:

- A (1) Prosperous are the believers
- B (2) Those who in their *prayer* are humble
- C (3) And those who from vain talk turn away
- D (4) And those who for *zakāt* (lit. 'purity') are active
- D' (5–7) And those who over their private parts are watchful, except with regard to their spouses or those whom their right hand possesses, for they are not to blame. But if they go beyond that in their desires – they are the transgressors
- C' (8) And those who their pledges and their covenant respect
- B' (9) Those who over their *prayers* are watchful
- A' (10–11) These are the inheritors, who shall inherit paradise in it eternally dwelling.

A refers to the prosperity of the believers, whereas A' explains what this prosperity comprises. B and B' both mention prayer. C and C' are opposites.²⁷ D refers to *zakāt* – almsgiving which purifies the giver – whereas D' refers to purity in sexual relations.²⁸

The Final Tableau seems not to exhibit chiasmus. Appropriately, like PART II it is hollow. It is merely demarcated by the repetition of the same prayer in vv.109 and 118, so that these two *āyas* form an *inclusio*:

- (109) There was a group of My servants who used to say, 'Our Lord, we believe. *Forgive us and have mercy on us; thou art the best of the merciful*'.
- (118) And say, 'My Lord, *forgive and have mercy; thou art the best of the merciful*'.

The Coherence of Vv.1–53

The *sūra* begins with the particle *qad*, which is followed by a verb, *aflaha*, and then by the subject of the verb, *al-mu'minūn*. Although the verb is in the perfect tense, the construction implies that the believers will indeed prosper, rather than that they have already prospered.²⁹ However, the subsequent occurrences of *wa-la-qad* in vv.12, 17, 23 and 49, introducing references to Allāh's decisive actions in the past,

serve to bind PART 1 to the Initial Tableau by forging a link between this series of actions and the divinely-willed prospering of the believers.

The words *wa-la-qad* introduce Allāh's creation of Man; his creation of the seven firmaments; his sending of Noah; and his bestowal of the Scripture on Moses. We should therefore be cautious about drawing a hard and fast distinction between the 'signs' in vv.12–22 and the legends of the prophets in vv.23–53. There are two additional reasons for this. In the first place, the verb *ansha'nā*, ('We produced'), occurs in connection with both. In v.14, speaking of the creation of Man, Allāh says, 'Then We produced him another creature' (*thumma ansha'nāhu khalqan ākhara*). This is echoed in v.19, when he says, 'And We produced (*fa-ansha'nā*) for you gardens', and in vv.31 and 42, when he says, 'Then We produced after them other generations' (*thumma ansha'nā min ba'dihim qurūnan ākharīn*). Second, although the reader familiar with the Qur'an would instinctively identify vv.12–22 as a signs passage,³⁰ the word *āya*, 'sign', does not actually occur there. It does, however, occur three times in vv.23–53, twice in the plural and once in the singular:

'Surely in that are signs...' (v.30)

'Then We sent Moses with Our signs...' (v.45)

'And We made the Son of Mary and his mother a sign...' (v.50)

To understand why the Initial Tableau, vv.1–11, is followed by an account of the creation of Man, vv.12–16, one needs to be familiar with Qur'anic usage. The word *firdaws* ('paradise'), which occurs in v.11, is attested elsewhere only at Q.18:107, where it likewise denotes the abode that the righteous believers will be granted in the hereafter, an abode which the Qur'an usually refers to simply as *al-janna*, 'the garden'.³¹ Although vv.11–16 do not mention that the first Man lived in 'the garden' until Allāh expelled him, this is explicitly stated in other *sūras*.³² Thus the juxtaposition of a reference to paradise and an account of the creation of man is entirely natural. Moreover, much of the vocabulary employed in this particular account of his creation occurs elsewhere when the resurrection is in question. This is the case with *nutfā* ('a drop of semen'),³³ *alaqa* ('a clot'),³⁴ *mudra* ('a lump'),³⁵ *izām* ('bones'),³⁶ and *kasā* ('to clothe').³⁷ It therefore comes as no surprise that the account culminates in a reference to death and resurrection, thereby implicitly bringing us back to the notion of paradise as the inheritance of the believers.

From the Qur'anic perspective, the envoys, whom the *sūra* later mentions, were exemplary believers. We may therefore infer that they embodied the virtues listed in the Initial Tableau. In fact, to anyone familiar with the other Qur'anic versions of their stories, the links with the Initial Tableau are obvious. Noah, whose story is narrated first (vv.23–30), prayed for forgiveness for 'the believers'.³⁸ The envoy sent to

Thamūd, who is probably the anonymous individual mentioned next (vv.31–43), is elsewhere introduced with the words *qad aflaha man zakkaha* – ‘whoever purifies his soul will prosper’.³⁹ After a brief reference to the sending of a series of envoys (v.44), the *sūra* has a summary account of the mission of Moses and Aaron (vv.45–49). In the longer version of their story found in *Sūra* 20, Pharaoh makes his magicians compete with them, roundly declaring that whoever wins will prosper (*wa-qad aflaha ... man ista'la*).⁴⁰ However, the magicians are defeated and throw themselves to the ground affirming their belief in the Lord of Aaron and Moses.⁴¹ Finally, *Sūra* 23 contains a tantalisingly brief allusion to Jesus and Mary (v.50). From other *sūras*, we learn that Mary was a model of chastity,⁴² and that Jesus spoke of prayer and *zakāt* while he was still only a child.⁴³

The narrative episodes also have links with the accounts of the creation of Man (vv.12–15) and of Allāh’s providential care for his creation (vv.16–22). In the story of Noah, the gushing forth of the water by Allāh’s command and the drowning of the wrongdoers, contrast with the earlier reference to Allāh’s sending down water ‘in due measure’.⁴⁴ In the episode of the anonymous envoy, the elders’ denial of the resurrection, despite Allāh’s abundant provision for them, harks back to the references to the Day of Resurrection and Allāh’s earthly provision of food, drink and livestock.⁴⁵ The brief mention of Allāh’s sending Moses with signs and authority evokes the more detailed accounts of how he called him from the side of the Mount (*al-Ṭūr*),⁴⁶ and thus resonates with the earlier reference to a tree growing on Mount Sinai (*Ṭūr Saynā*).⁴⁷ The statement that Allāh gave Mary and Jesus refuge on a height with ‘a secure resting place and a spring’ (*qarārin wa-ma'in*) echoes the fuller version of that story, where we learn how Allāh furnished Mary with ripe dates and a stream, and instructed her to eat and drink and ‘refresh’ herself (*qarri 'aynan*).⁴⁸ It also evokes the parallel between the miraculous conception of Jesus and the creation of the first Man,⁴⁹ by echoing the account of how Allāh ‘placed’ the latter as a drop of semen in ‘a secure resting place’ (Q.23:50 *ja'alnā...dhāti qarārin wa-ma'in*, cp. Q.23:13 *ja'alnā...fi qarārin makīn*).⁵⁰

The various narrative episodes are themselves interrelated as is evident from the repetition of whole sentences and the recurrence of key words:

- ‘Serve Allāh. You have no deity beside him. Will you not protect yourselves/ be god-fearing (*tattaqūna*)?’ (v.23b = 32), compare ‘I am your Lord so fear Me (*fattaqūnī*)’ (v.52)
- ‘The chief men of those who disbelieved of his people said... (v.24a = 33a with slight difference in word order), compare. ‘his chief men’ (v.46)
- ‘This is nought but a mortal like yourselves...’ (v.24b = 33b), compare. ‘...are we to believe in two mortals like ourselves?’ (v.47)

- He said, ‘O my Lord help me for that they cry me lies’ (v.26 = v.39)
- away with the people... (v.28 = v.41)
- Then after them We produced another generation (v.31 = v.42)
- ‘they cried lies’ *kadhhaba* (vv.26, 33, 39, 44, 48); ‘lie’ *kadhib* (v.38)
- ‘they acted unjustly’ *zalamū* (v.27); ‘doers of injustice’ *zālimīn* (vv.28, 41)
- ‘We sent’ *arsalnā* (vv.23, 32, 44, 45); ‘envoy/s’ *rasūl/rusul* (vv.32, 44, 51)
- ‘believers’ *mu’minīn* (v.38); ‘believe’ *yu’minūn* (v.44), ‘shall we believe?’ *anu’minū* (v.47).
- ‘has outstripped’ *sabaqa* (v.27); ‘outstrip’ *tasbiq* (v.43).
- ‘Lord’ *rabb* (vv.26, 29, 39, 52).
- ‘sign/s’ (vv.30, 45, 50)

In vv.51–52, the envoys are addressed as though they were all present at once. Some interpreters, mindful of the fact that the envoys were sent at different times, argue that only one of them is addressed in this instance – either Jesus or Muḥammad – and that the use of the plural is merely a stylistic device.⁵¹ This seems improbable, however, because in v.54, where Muḥammad is clearly the addressee, the singular imperative is employed. There is no real difficulty with these *āyas* if we recognise that, although ostensibly addressed to the envoys as a group, the words are really directed at Muḥammad’s contemporaries in order to convince them that the various envoys preached basically the same message.⁵² This point is reinforced by v.53, which makes clear that it was not the envoys, but those who came after them, who split the community into different confessional groups.

Now that the network of interrelations between the various subsections of vv.1–53 has been examined, it remains for us to discuss the sequential arrangement of the material. The *sūra* begins with the Initial Tableau that lists the seven virtues possessed by those who will inherit paradise (vv.1–11). This is followed by an account of the seven stages by which Allāh created the first Man who was expelled from paradise (vv.12–14). As these are the stages by which all human beings are created, the speaker turns to the addressees to inform them that the next stage is that they will die, after which they will be raised on the Day of Resurrection (vv.15–16). The account of the creation of Man is followed, naturally enough, by an account of Allāh’s providential care for his creation (vv.17–22). The speaker draws attention to seven items, beginning with the seven celestial ways. The last two items are livestock and ships, the principal means of transport by land and sea respectively. With the mention of ships (*fulk*), the list has turned full circle, for the Arabic word is related to the word for the orbit (*falak*) of a celestial body.⁵³ In addition, the reference to ships (v.22) provides the cue for the story of Noah (vv.23–30) where the word recurs

(v.27). In the account of the providential care for the creation, stress was put on Allāh's sending down water 'in due measure'. In the Noah story, however, by Allāh's command an excess of water gushes forth and drowns the unbelievers. Other episodes follow in chronological order: the episode of an unnamed envoy (vv.31–41), the episode of a series of envoys (vv.42–44), the episode of Moses and Aaron (vv.45–49), and the episode of Jesus and Mary (v.50). There are thus five stories in all. However, if we count Moses and Aaron separately, and the series of unnamed envoys as a unity, the total comes to six – one short of seven – leaving Muḥammad to complete the number.

The Function of the Central Hinge

The Central Hinge, vv.54–63, serves as a transition between PART I and PART II. It echoes the former and announces themes that will be elaborated in the latter.

In v.54, the Envoy is instructed to leave the unbelievers 'in their overwhelming confusion for a time'. As we shall see later, this is highly ironic. For the moment let us merely note that Noah's opponents, who told the people to watch him 'for a time',⁵⁴ were subsequently overwhelmed by a flood.

In vv.55–56, mention is made of Allāh's providing the unbelievers with wealth and children, thus harking back to the statement in v.33 concerning those on whom he bestowed the good things of life.

We may infer that the virtues mentioned in vv.57–61 were exemplified in the lives of the envoys and those who responded to them, as was the case with the virtues cited in the Initial Tableau. Such an inference is encouraged by the fourfold repetition of 'their Lord' (vv.57, 58, 59, 60), taking up the earlier references to Allāh as 'my Lord' (vv.26, 29, 39) and 'your Lord' (v.52). There is a close parallel to the words 'those who go in awe for fear of their Lord' (v.57) in *Sūra* 21, where the reference is to Allāh's envoys, especially Jesus.⁵⁵ The statement about believing in the signs of their Lord (v.58) harks back to the signs section (vv.12–22) and takes up the references to specific signs mentioned in the narrative episodes (vv.30, 45, 50). It also recalls the initial assertion about the believers (v.1) and subsequent references to people who did not believe in the envoys (vv.38, 44). The statement about not ascribing partners to their Lord (v.59) accords with the monotheistic stance of the envoys (vv.23, 32).⁵⁶ The statement about giving 'with hearts afraid because they are about to return to their Lord' (v.60) recalls the reference to *zakāt*, in the Initial Tableau (v.4), and the reference to the Day of Resurrection in the account of the creation of mankind (v.16). It also contrasts with the comportment of those who rejected the message of Noah, for fear that he wished to make himself superior to them (v.24), and those who rejected the message of the envoy who succeeded him, because they disbelieved in the hereafter (vv.33–37). Finally, the assertion that all these are

'outstripping' (*sābiqūn*) in hastening to good things (v.61) recalls Allāh's word which 'outstripped' (*sabaqa*) the unbelievers in the time of Noah (v.27), and the warning that no nation can 'outstrip' (*tasbiq*) its term (v.43).

Allāh's warning that he possesses a book which speaks the truth, and his promise that the unbelievers will not be dealt with unjustly (v.62) contrast with the unbelievers' injustice (vv.27, 28, 41) and the accusation of lying which they levelled at the envoys (vv.26, 33, 38, 39, 44,48).

In addition to containing these multiple echoes of PART 1, the Central Hinge mentions issues that are dealt with further in PART 2. The 'until a time' (*hattā hīn*) of v.54 is followed up by the 'until We seize' (*hattā idhā akhadhnā*) of v.64. The importance of not ascribing partners to Allāh, which is referred to in v.59, is elaborated in vv.91–92 and 116, and finally condemned in v.117. The eventual return to Allāh for the judgement, which is alluded to in v.60 (*ilā rabbihim rāji'ūn* 'to their Lord returning') is described in detail in vv.99–115. The description begins with an ironic account of the deathbed request of an individual unbeliever to be sent back to this world (*rabbī rji'ūnī* 'My Lord return me' v.99). It culminates with Allāh asking the unbelievers as a group whether they imagined that they would not be returned to him (*ilaynā turja'ūn* 'returned to us' v.115). The mention, in v.62, of Allāh's not tasking any soul beyond its capacity, paves the way for v.103, which speaks of those who will lose their souls because their scales will be light. Finally, the reference to the book that speaks 'the truth', in v.62, introduces an important leitmotiv that recurs in vv.70, 71, 90 and 116.

The Coherence of Vv.64–118, and Their Relationship to Vv.1–53

In PART II and the Final Tableau, the scene shifts to and fro between the eschaton and the present polemical context. The first eschatological section (vv.64–67) culminates in a flashback (vv.66–67). This fades into a long polemic (vv.68–100) that includes a signs-controversy (vv.78–80), and a diatribe (vv.81–89), and incorporates a brief interlude in which the Envoy is the sole addressee (vv.93–98). The polemical references to death and the *barzakh* (vv.99–100) provide the cue for a second eschatological section (vv.101–115). This includes a flashback (vv.109–110) which constitutes the beginning of the Final Tableau. The *sūra* ends with a hymnic assertion of the divine unity (v.116), a polemical condemnation of those who associate other deities with Allāh (v.117), and a concluding directive (v.118) in which the Envoy is instructed to repeat the supplication of the believers which was mentioned in the flashback (v.109).

Although PART II is less structured than PART I, it exhibits the same configuration of actors: Allāh, his envoys, believers and unbelievers. The only difference is that

PART II focuses on Muḥammad and his contemporaries, whereas PART I focuses primarily on previous envoys and those who heard them preach.

In PARTS I and II, Allāh is proclaimed as the sole deity (vv.91–92, 116–117 cp. vv.23, 32); the Creator (vv.78–80, 84, 115 cp. vv.12–14); all-powerful (v.95 cp. v.18);⁵⁷ Lord of the seven heavens (v.86 cp. v.17); who provides for His creatures (v.72 cp. vv.18–22); sends them envoys (vv.69 cp. vv.23, 32, 44); promises them post-mortem resurrection (vv.82–83 cp. vv.16, 33–35); furnishes them with signs (vv.66, 78–80, 105 cp. v.21, 30, 45, 50); imparts revelations (v.71 cp. vv.27, 49); and punishes wrongdoers (vv.64, 76–77, cp. vv.27, 41, 44).

Like the envoys mentioned in PART I, in PART II Muḥammad addresses Allāh as 'my Lord' (v.118 cp. vv.26, 29, 39). Like them he is given the precise words to say in specific situations (vv.84–89, 93–94, 97, 118 cp. vv.28–29), and asks his people, 'Will you not protect yourselves?' (v.87 cp. vv.23, 32).

The Initial Tableau begins by affirming that the believers will 'prosper', and by listing their characteristic deeds (vv.1–9). PART II alludes to the weighing of deeds at the Judgement and asserts that those whose scales are heavy will 'prosper' (v.102), whereas those whose scales are light will 'lose' their souls (v.103). This is ironic in view of the earlier reference to unbelievers telling their people that they would be 'losers' if they obeyed a mortal like themselves (v.34). The real losers will 'dwell eternally' in Hell (v.103), whereas the believers will 'dwell eternally' in Paradise (v.11).

In PART II, the characterisation of the unbelievers is very similar to that in PART I: they are a 'wrong-doing people' (v.94 *al-qawm al-zālimīn*, cp. vv.28, 41); they act proudly (v.67 *mustakbirīn* cp. v.46 *fa-stakbarū*); they dismiss the envoy as *jinn*-possessed (v.70 *bihi jinna*, cp. v.25); they are liars or accuse their envoy of lying (v.90 *kādhībūn*, cp. vv.26, 33, 39, 44, 48 *kadhhabū*); they reject what is not in accordance with ancestral teaching (v.68 *ābā'ahum al-awwālīn* cp. v.24 *ābā'inā 'l-awwālīn*); and they ridicule the promise that they will be resurrected after they have become dust and bones (vv.82–83 cp. vv.36–37). Moreover, they turn away from the reminder (v.71 *hum 'an dhikrihim mu'riḍūn*), in contrast with the believers who turn away from vain talk (v.3 *hum 'ani 'llaghwi mu'riḍūn*).

Three of the narrative episodes in PART I imply that the 'chief men' (vv.24, 33, 46 *al-mala'ū*) played a leading role in stirring up unbelief. This almost certainly mirrors the situation in Muḥammad's time. There is, however, no explicit mention of 'chief men' in PART II, although the reference to those 'endowed with the good things of life' is probably an allusion to them (v.64 *mutrafiḥim* cp. v.33 *al-mala'ū...atrafnāhum*).⁵⁸ Moreover, we know from other *sūras* that Muḥammad's opponents objected that he was a mortal who needed to eat and drink (Q.25:7) and

that if Allāh wished he would have sent angelic messengers (Q.6:8; 25:7). It is thus not fortuitous that these objections are attributed to the 'chief men' in PART I (vv.33, 24).

PART II implies that some of the unbelievers alleged that Allāh had taken a son (v.91). It is probably Christian doctrine that is envisaged at this point. Although there is no exact parallel in PART I, the ground was prepared there by what was said about Jesus, namely that he was the son of Mary; that together with his mother he served as a sign; and that he was one of the envoys commanded to eat wholesome food and fear Allāh as their Lord (vv.50–51).⁵⁹

The numerous references to divine retribution may provide a further key to the structure of the *sūra*. PART I mentions that in the past Allāh destroyed unbelievers. Those who rejected Noah, He drowned in a flood (v.27). Those who rejected the envoy whom He sent after Noah, He seized with a blast that left them like *ghuthā'* (v.41), the blackened refuse of sticks and leaves born along by a torrent.⁶⁰ The way in which he destroyed the succeeding generations is not specified (v.44), nor are we given details of how Pharaoh and his chief men perished (v.48). We know from other accounts, however, that he drowned the latter when they pursued the Israelites.⁶¹ PART II warns that in the hereafter Allāh will punish the unbelievers who rejected Muḥammad (vv.103–104, 108). What is less clear is how and to what extent he has already punished them. This depends on the interpretation of vv.64–65 and 75–77.

Taken in isolation, vv.64–65 might refer to a punishment that has already taken place, to one that is currently in progress, or to one that still lies in the future. However, these *āyas* come immediately after the Central Hinge, vv.54–63. The presence of the rare word *ghamra* in the preceding *āya* sends us back to its earlier occurrence in v.54 and encourages us to treat vv.55–63 as a parenthesis: 'So leave them in their overwhelming heedlessness until a time ...until when we seize...' (vv.54 and 64). Thus the reference is almost certainly to the future eschatological punishment.

Vv.75–77 are more problematic. If our interpretation of vv.64–65 is correct, v.75 also probably refers to the eschatological punishment. What is implied is that Muḥammad's contemporaries had become so recalcitrant and obstinate that even if in the future Allāh were to release them from Hell they would still not obey him.⁶² However, v.76 seems to refer to a different punishment, one that was meted out in the past. Moreover, the fact that it is introduced by *wa-la-qad*, followed by a verb in the first person plural, suggests that it is something of major significance, a fitting sequel to the series of divine acts that were introduced in this way in PART I (vv.12, 17, 23 and 49). The most obvious candidate is the defeat of the Meccans at Badr, a possibility that is considered by Rāzī despite the fact that it would require a Medinan dating.⁶³ For the nascent Muslim community, the victory at Badr was the equivalent

of the drowning of Pharaoh and his army in the time of Moses. Both incidents took place at the Red Sea, and both involved Allāh's punishment of tyrants and His deliverance of the believers.

We are left with v.77. It mentions Allāh's opening against them a door of severe punishment, so that they are seized with despair about it (*fī-hi mublīsūn*). This must refer to something that occurred after Badr, or lies in the future, and which is deemed to be even more harrowing. Rāzī suggests two possibilities: either their present experience of famine, which is more severe than slaughter or captivity, or their future punishment in hell-fire.⁶⁴ In favour of the latter, one might cite Q.43:75, which is the only other instance of the expression *fī-hi mublīsūn*, and Q.30:12, 'On that day when the hour is established the sinners will be dismayed (*yublisu 'l-mujrimūn*).' On the other hand, Q.6:44 refers to Allāh's opening doors in the past, and Q.30:49 speaks of His servants despairing (*mublīsīn*) before He sends them rain.⁶⁵ If we assume that the *sūra* was in fact given its final form at a time of drought, a number of things would fall into place, including the stress on Allāh's sending water from the sky to furnish food and drink for His creatures (vv.18–21); the ominous reference to the fact that although He causes water to lodge in the earth He is also capable of taking it away (v.18); the admission that an envoy needs to eat and drink like other mortals (v.33); the reference to the provision of a spring for Mary and her son (v.50); and the instruction to the envoys to eat and drink wholesome things (v.51). Moreover, there is an appropriate irony in the references to the punishment of past peoples, who were known to have been destroyed by an excess of water (vv.27, 48), or who were left looking like debris swept along by river (v.41). Finally, the references to 'overwhelming confusion' at the two ends of the Central Hinge would take on added irony.

NOTES

1 A first draft of this paper was presented at the conference on 'The Qur'an: Text and Interpretation' held at SOAS in the University of London, 18–19 October 1999. I am indebted to Angelika Neuwirth, Alford T. Welch and others for the helpful comments that they made on that occasion.

2 T. Nöldeke and F. Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorans*, (Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1909) pp. 74–117.

3 See A. Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1981) pp. 179–237; Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, (London: SCM, 1996) pp. 99–146. The only exceptions are *sūras* 1, 109, 112, 113, and 114.

4 Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, pp. 148–150.

5 Neuwirth, *Studien*, pp. 238–321.

6 See Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, 152–154, 188–195 for tentative analyses of

sūras 67, 72 and 17. Neuwirth is now more interested in the liturgical Sitz im Leben of the various types of *sūras* than in their precise structure. See her recent article, 'Vom Rezitationstext über die Liturgie zum Kanon: Zu Entstehung und Wiederauflösung der Surenkomposition im Verlauf der Entwicklung eines islamischen Kultus', in S. Wild, (ed.), *The Qur'an as Text*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996) pp. 69–105.

7 Neuwirth, *Studien*, pp. 246f.

8 Ibid. p. 272. In the German original, Neuwirth indicates the number of *āyas* in each part, section and subsection.

9 I fail to see how her observation that the total number of *āyas* in IIA and IIB also comes to forty-two in any way compensates for this.

10 Unless otherwise stated, the translation of excerpts from the Qur'an are my rendering from the Standard Egyptian text.

11 Genuine virtue lists, as distinct from brief definitions, are relatively rare. They occur at Q.2:2–5, 3:134–6, 8:2–4, 8:74, 9:18, 13:22, 25:72–75, 31:3–5, 49:15, 70:32–5, 90:17–18. Note in particular the resemblance of 23:1–10 to 2:2–5 and 31:3–5; all three passages occur at or near the beginning of their respective *sūras* and all three include the verbal root *FLH*.

12 See Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, pp. 110–112.

13 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, (8 vols, Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1398/1978) vol. VI, p. 204.

14 The letter d indicates the fourth and final colon of this long *āya*.

15 I owe this term to Mathias Zahniser. It arose in conversation about other *sūras*.

16 The verse numbering of the Standard Egyptian Edition follows the Kufan tradition. According to Tabarsī (*Majma' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* [5 vols, Qom: Dār al-Ma'rifā, 1418] part 7, p. 156) in all other traditional numbering systems, the *sūra* has 119 *āyas*, with v.45 ending on *Hārūn*. I have not found any ancient evidence for dividing v.33 at *ta' kulūn*, although Flügel treats it as a rhyme word.

17 There are internal rhymes in other *āyas*: v.11, *yarithūn*; v.55, *yaḥsabūn*; v.67, *mustakbirīn*; v.70, *yaqūlūn*; v.74, *yu'minūn*; and vv.85, 87, and 89, *yaqūlūn*, but they are always too near the beginning of a sentence to justify considering them as rhyme words.

18 For the purpose of rhyme, *-ūn*, *-īn* and *-im* are considered equivalents.

19 Eight other *sūras* have a word from the root *RHM* in the final *āya* (see Q.2:286; 6:165, 12:111, 21:112, 31:34, 33:73, 73:20, 76:31). However, only *Sūra* 23 has two such words.

20 The verb is attested forty times in the Qur'an, but the only occurrences in *Sūra* 23 are here and in v.102.

21 Named after the Greek letter χ, chi. On the subject of chiasmus and its presence in Biblical and *ḥadīth* texts, see R. Meynet, L. Pouzet, N. Farouki and A. Sinno, *Rhétorique sémitique: textes de la Bible et de la Tradition musulmane* (Paris: Cerf, 1998). Very little research has been done on chiasmus in the Qur'an. Mustansir Mir, 'The Qur'anic Story of Joseph: Plot, Themes and Characters' *The Muslim World* (Hartford, Connecticut, LXXVI: 1986) pp. 1–15, showed that the episodes in *Sūra* 12 are arranged chiastically. The analysis was taken further by M. Cuypers in 'Structure rhétorique dans le Coran: une analyse structurelle de la sourate 'Joseph' et de quelques sourates brèves' *MIDEO* (Cairo, XXII: 1994) pp. 107–195. Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, pp. 141–2, 151–2, 312, argued that *Sūra* 85 had a chiastic structure and that chiasmus was present in the introduction and conclusion of *Sūra* 36.

- 22 Richard Bell, *The Qur'ān* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1937).
- 23 Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (Oxford: OUP, 1964).
- 24 Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (New York: Mentor, n.d.); Muḥammad Taqī-ud-Dīn Al-Hilālī & Muḥammad Muḥsin Khān, *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'ān in the English Language* (Riyadh: Maktaba Dar-us-Salam, 1993).
- 25 Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf 'an ḥaqā'iq al-tanzīl wa-'uyūn al-aqāwil fī wujūh al-ta'wīl* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.) vol. III, p. 34.
- 26 Cp. Q.51:11. The plural is attested at Q.6:93, where it refers to death throes.
- 27 For the link between *laghw* ('vain talk') and *aymān* ('pledges') see Q.2:225.
- 28 The link between these two adjacent *āyas* was noted by Sayyid Qutb in *fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 1992/1412) vol. IV, p. 2455. In his view they are concerned respectively with purity of 'heart and wealth' and of 'spirit, household and society'.
- 29 See al-Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf*, vol. III, p. 25.
- 30 See Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, pp. 109–112.
- 31 E.g. Q.2:82; 2:111.
- 32 Q.2:35ff.; 7:19–24; 20:117–23.
- 33 See especially Q.22:5; 36:77–9; 53:44–7; 75:36–40; 80:18–22.
- 34 Q.22:5; 75:38.
- 35 Q.22:5.
- 36 Q.2:259; 17:49ff.; 17:98; 23:82; 36:78ff.; 37:16–18, 53, Q.56:47–50; 75:2; 79:10ff.
- 37 Q.2:259 where once again it is a matter of clothing bones with flesh. The only other occurrence of the verb is at Q.4:5.
- 38 Q.71:28.
- 39 Q.91:9 cp. 23:1, 4.
- 40 Q.20:64. The Arabic expression *qad aflaha*, which, as we have seen, also occurs in Q.23:1 and 91:9, is attested elsewhere only in 87:14, where it stands at the beginning of a brief list of virtues.
- 41 Q.20:70.
- 42 *Aḥṣanat farjahā* Q.21:91; 66:12, cp. *li-furūjihim ḥāfiẓūn* Q.23:5.
- 43 Q.19:31.
- 44 Q.23:27 contrast 23:18.
- 45 Q.23:33–37 cp. 23:15, 19–21.
- 46 Q.23:45 cp. 19:52; 20:80; 28:29; 28:46.
- 47 Q.23:20.
- 48 Q.23:50 cp. 19:24–26. The similarity of the two passages is noted by C. Schedl, *Muhammad und Jesus* (Vienna: Herder, 1978) p. 323.
- 49 Q.3:59.
- 50 The noun *qarār*, which occurs in both of these *āyas*, is attested elsewhere only seven times.
- 51 Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, vol. VI, p. 198.

52 See R. Paret's remarks in *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1980) p.355.

53 See Q.21:33 and 36:40 which refer to celestial bodies floating in their orbits. I. Lichtenstadter argues that both of these *āyas* reflect the ancient Near Eastern belief that the sun and moon floated in a boat. Accordingly, she suggests that *falak* should actually be vocalised as *fulk*. I. Lichtenstadter, 'Origin and Interpretation of some Qur'anic Symbols' in *Studi orientalistici in onore di Giorgio Levi Della Vida* Rome: Istituto per l'Oriente, vol. II: 1956, pp. 59–80 esp. p. 77.

54 See v.25 where the same Arabic expression, *hattā hīnin*, is employed.

55 Compare Q.23:57, *al-lladhīna hum min khashyati rabbi-him mushfiqūn*, with Q.21:28, *wa-hum min khashyatihi mushfiqūn*. In *Sūra* 21 this applies especially to those envoys wrongly revered as sons of Allāh.

56 Noah and the anonymous envoy who followed him. For the monotheistic stance of Moses and Jesus, see Q.20:98 and Q.5:72 respectively.

57 In both instances: *wa-innā 'alā...la-qādirūn*.

58 The root *trf* is attested only eight times in the Qur'an.

59 For the stress on Jesus being a mortal who ate food see Q.5:75.

60 So Zamaksharī, *Kashshāf*, vol. III, p. 32, who cites a line of Imru 'l-Qays. The word is attested only twice in the Qur'an: here and at Q.87:5.

61 See e.g. Q.2:50; 8:54; 17:103, and the Biblical account in *Exodus* 14:21–30.

62 This is the third of three possibilities suggested by Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, vol. VI, p. 203.

63 Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, vol. VI, p. 204. For evidence that Badr was regarded as a decisive event in Muslim salvation history see Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, pp. 40, 230–232.

64 Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, vol. VI, p. 204.

65 Note also the following *ḥadīth* reported by Rāzī, although it concerns the alleged occasion of revelation of v.76 rather than v.77: 'When Thumāma b. Athāl al-Hanafī became a Muslim and reached Yamāma, he prevented supplies from reaching the people of Mecca and Allāh seized them with famine so that they ate hides and corpses. Then Abū Sufyān came to the Messenger of Allāh (PBUH) and said, 'Did you not allege that you were sent as a mercy to the worlds, and then you killed the fathers by the sword and the sons by starvation? So ask Allāh to remove this drought from us.' He asked and it was removed. Then Allāh sent down this *āya* which means, 'He seized them with hunger but they did not obey'. Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, vol. VI, p. 204.