

THE *SŪRA* OF THE POETS, QUR'ĀN XXVI: FINAL CONCLUSIONS

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Abstract

The crucial verses in the Qur'ān (XXVI, 224-227) for understanding the theme of Islam and poetry have been re-examined in the light of recent publications and have reinforced the conclusion that the key word "*al-ghāwūna*" in verse 224 signifies not erring human beings, but demons, "*shayātin*." More importantly, verse 227 has been shown to involve not the poets' mendacity as such, but their inability to produce anything that can compare with the Qur'ān, declared inimitable, "*mu'jiz*." The traditional interpretation of verse 226, that poets are liars, has been traced through Islamic cultural history.

Islam and poetry is a major theme in the study of Islamic religion and civilization. The struggle between the two began during the lifetime of the Prophet in the early Meccan Period of the Call, and more importantly, is reflected in the Qur'ān itself, in *sūra* XXVI, titled the *Sūra* of the Poets hereafter. The *sūra's* interpretation is, thus significant to Quranic exegesis, Arabic literature, criticism, and the subsequent development of Arabic religious poetry.¹

The problem was first approached by this writer in 1965 in an article titled, "A Contribution to Koranic Exegesis",² which analyzed the *sūra* in its entirety and concentrated on the crucial verses that come at the end of it, namely, 224-227. The study left out verse 226, a most important and controversial verse, for a subsequent, separate treatment, which appeared in an article titled "Another Contribution to Koranic Exegesis",³ some twenty

¹ This forms the theme of the present writer's volume, *Islam and Poetry*, which hopefully will appear in the not too distant future.

² See "A Contribution to Koranic Exegesis," *Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of Hamilton A.R. Gibb*, ed. G. Makdisi (Leiden, 1965), pp. 563-580, henceforth referred to as *CKE*.

³ See "Another Contribution to Koranic Exegesis," *JAL*, XIV (1983), pp. 1-21, henceforth referred to as *ACKE*.

years later. Thus, all the relevant verses on poetry have been intensively analyzed in these two articles. But the separate treatment of verse 226 isolated it from the other of the verses on poetry and poets in the *sūra*. The appearance of some literature on this subject in the course of the last twenty years, stimulated by these two articles, has not contributed to a consensus on the correct interpretation of these verses. It is, therefore, imperative to return to the *sūra*, this time for a fresh treatment, which will unite what was divided in the two articles and will adduce new materials supportive of the position taken in my previous article. The study also will strive to bring together for discussion the recent literature that has been published in the course of the last twenty years, since the publication of *ACKE*, sporadic and intermittent as it is.

PART ONE

The relevant verses in the *sūra* read as follows:⁴

والشعراءُ يَتَّبِعُهُمُ الْغَاوُونَ (224) ألم ترَ أَنهم في كلِّ وادٍ يهيمون (225) وانهم يقولون
 ما لا يفعلون (226) الا الذين آمنوا وعملوا الصالحات وذكروا الله كثيرا وانتصروا من
 بعدما ظلموا وسيعلم الذين ظلموا أي مقلبٍ يَتَّقِلُونَ (227)

Verse 224

And the poets! Attending them (are) those who lead astray

والشعراءُ يَتَّبِعُهُمُ الْغَاوُونَ

In the new interpretation of this verse, the crucial term has been *al-Ghawūna*. The term was treated in detail in the first⁵ of the two articles cited above, and was further examined in the second⁶ where it was argued that the denotation of the term as “human beings who go astray” should rather be “demons who lead astray.” One of the arguments propounded for this new interpretation rested on the realization that the verb *ghawā* can be used transitively, meaning “to lead astray”. In addition to what has been said in the two articles on *ghawā* as a transitive verb, a precious pre-Islamic

⁴ The traditional translation of these verses reads as follows: “And the Poets, those who have erred and strayed follow them. Have you not seen how they wander in every valley? And how they say what they do not do? Except those who believe and do good works and remember God frequently and vindicate themselves after they have been unjustly treated; and those who have acted unjustly will soon know what an overturning they will experience.”

Quotations from the Qur’ān will be cited in this article in Arabic, essential for the better comprehension of the arguments, which the version in English tends to obscure.

⁵ See *CKE*, pp. 568-72.

⁶ See *ACKE*, pp. 2-6.

verse maybe cited for the transitiveness of *ghawā*, since the lexica which vouch for its transitivity do not give examples.

In a poem by 'Abīd ibn al-Abrāṣ, the verb *ghawā* is clearly used transitively. The poet says in the following verse that his tribe, "Banū-Asad, led the Ghassānids astray or caused their situation to go awry, and rarely has Ghassān stood in the path of right guidance."⁷

غَوَّتْ بَنُو أَسَدٍ غَسَّانَ أَمْرَهُمْ وَقَلَّ مَا وَقَفَتْ غَسَّانُ لِلرَّشَدِ

The case for the demonic interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna* has been presented by appeal to *ra'y*, "interpretation by appeal to reason" and not by *al-ma'thūr*, "appeal to what has been handed down by the old authorities." Yet, the latter cannot be entirely neglected.⁸ Two elements deriving from the interpretation may be salvaged:

One exegete, namely, 'Alī Ibn-Ibrāhīm, long ago trenchantly rejected the interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna* as erring mortals, beguiled mortals, and incredulously asked the very pertinent question: "Have you ever seen a poet followed by anyone?"⁹

وهل رأيتم شاعراً قطُّ تبعه أحدٌ

The great *Commentary* of Tabarī, as is well known, is based mainly on *ma'thūr*, although he avails himself of *ra'y*. In that *Commentary*, he gave decided preference to the demonic interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna* and cited not only one of the *Tabi'ūn*, "those who came after the Companions of the Prophet," but three, namely, Mujāhid, 'Ikrima, and Qatāda, of whom the first is the most important. In his *Tafsīr*, he says, "and *al-Ghāwūna* are the *shayaṭīn*"¹⁰

⁷ See *Dīwān*, 'Abīd Ibn al-Abrāṣ, ed. Tawfiq As'ad (Kuwait, 1989), p. 66, line 12. In the older edition of 1913, the verb appears as *ghawwat*, in the fa'al form, apparently following Nöldeke's note, in which he expressed some discomfort with *ghawat*, as a di-transitive verb, governing both غَسَّانَ and أَمْرَهُمْ. So, he suggested reluctantly the fa'al form, *ghawwat* as a di-transitive verb. But he did note that *ghawa* can be transitive, hence the derivative, *ghawwā*, as di-transitive. In this edition, وَقَفَتْ appears in the verse instead of وَقَفَتْ of the new edition; see *The Diwan of 'Abid al-Abrāṣ*, Gibb Memorial Series, ed. Dir Charles Lyall (Cambridge, 1913, Reprint, 1980), p. 47, line 12 and note d.

⁸ For a recent work on *tafsīr*, see *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988); and most recently, the entry, "Exegesis of the Qur'ān" in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Brill, 2002), vol. II; Classical and Medieval, pp. 99-124, by Claude Gilliot, and Early Modern and Contemporary, pp. 124-42, by Rotraud Wielandt.

⁹ Quoted by Tabarsī; see his *Majma' al-Bayān fi Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Dār al-Qur'ān) Vol. VII, page 208, lines 17-18.

¹⁰ For this, see *Tafsīr al-Imām Mujāhid ibn Jabr*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Nīl (Madīnat Naṣr, Egypt, 1989), p. 515; for the *tafsīr* of the whole *sūra* of the poets, see pp. 509-515. On Mujāhid's *Tafsīr*, see the comments in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, Vol. II, p. 105.

الغاون هم الشياطين Mujahid was a highly respected authority on *Tafsīr*. Even *le maître lui-même* spoke very highly of him in his standard work on *Tafsīr*.¹¹

The case for the demonic interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna* has so far been presented within the philological context of the verse 224. Now, it may be set within the larger context, both Qurʾānic and extra-Qurʾānic, Meccan, and Arab, as seen in the following section.

The Qurʾānic Context

The *sūra* of the poets is a unit of revelation which belongs to the Meccan period, with the exception of the last verse which is Madīnan. The *sūra*'s unity has been demonstrated in the two previous articles, *CKE* (575-77) and *ACKE* (4-6). It has also been argued that the interpretation of the crucial verses in the *sūra* can stand without appeal to the unity of the *sūra* as a whole. It has been argued in *ACKE* (4-6), that the small cluster of verses to which 224 belongs is a unit of revelation (224-226). The structural analysis of the *sūra*, as a whole, is, however, relevant to the understanding of 224 and even more so for 226. Support for verse 224 is as follows: The main theme of the *sūra* is that the Qurʾān is the miracle of the Prophet Muhammad, similar to those of the seven prophets, whose missions are related in the *sūra*. To the reaction of the Quraysh that the Qurʾān was not inspired by God, but was composed and inspired by the *shayāṭīn*, God replies by saying that the Qurʾān is divinely inspired, and that poetry, not the Qurʾān, is inspired by the *shayāṭīn*. It is the second part of the reply that is relevant to the demonic interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna*.

After the account of the seven punishment stories and their prophets, the Qurʾān introduces the *shayāṭīn* in verse 210 as beings not related to the revelation of the Qurʾān; indeed, they are excluded from revelation in a denunciatory fashion.

وما تنزلت به الشياطينُ (210) وما ينبغي لهم وما يستطيعون (211) إنهم عن السَّمْعِ
لمعزولون (212)

The *shayāṭīn* have not brought it down. It is not permitted to them and they are unable to do that. They are excluded from the (chance) of hearing it.

¹¹ See Ignatz Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der Islamischen Koranauslegung* (Reprint, Brill, Leiden, 1952), pp. 107-110, especially p. 107.

For a brief account of Mujāhid, see A. Rippin, in *EI*², Volume VII, p. 293, with bibliography. There is a misprint in the documentation of the earlier edition of Mujāhid's *Tafsīr* by al-Sūrati in 1975. The *Tafsīr* was not published in Islamabad, but in Doha, Qatar and was dedicated to its *amir*, Khalifa Ḥamad Al-Thāni.

Another cluster of these verses are even closer and more significant to this context (221-223), in which the *shayāṭīn* are introduced. The Qur'ān indicates explicitly that they inspire human beings, or more specifically, poets, in the opinion of the majority of exegetes.

هل أنبئكم على من نَزَّلُ الشَّيَاطِينَ (221) نَزَّلُ عَلَى كُلِّ أَقَاكٍ أَثِيمٍ (222) يُقْفُونَ السَّمْعَ
وَأَكْثَرُهُمْ كَاذِبُونَ (223)

Shall I inform you on whom the *shayāṭīn* come down; they come down on every sinful liar. They listen eagerly but most of them are liars.

Immediately after the last verse of this cluster, comes verse 224 with its *al-Ghāwūna* and *al-shu'arā'* introduced by this last verse, which points to the correct interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna*.

The verses that precede verse 224 and the two verses that follow point to the "satanic" interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna*.

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّهُمْ فِي كُلِّ وَادٍ يَهِيمُونَ (245) وَأَنَّهُمْ يَقُولُونَ مَا لَا يَفْعَلُونَ (226)

These two verses are as important, perhaps more important, than those that precede because they refute the denial of the *sura* as a unit of revelation. The two verses that follow are cast in the form of a question in two parts or components as a proof for the truth of the statement in verse 224, which precedes them as a declarative statement. The verses do not make much sense, if *al-Ghāwūna* is interpreted as "erring human beings," passive agents following poets, but the verses do make sense if they are interpreted as *shayāṭīn*, active agents, driving the poets to do what the two verses say they do. This is so because of the principle of commensurability. The two verses, 225-226, function as a proof of the truth of the statement in 224, which denounces the poets in strong terms. The denunciation expressed in the two verses therefore should be commensurate with that in 224. However, the denunciation is not commensurate with the denunciation in 224, if verse 224 is interpreted in the traditional way, as poets followed by erring human beings. On the other hand, the denunciation expressed in the two verses 225-226 is commensurate with the new interpretation and strong in its denunciation of the poets as individuals attended by satans, the power that drives poets to do and say what verses 225 and 226 suggest, quite unlike the erring human beings of the old interpretation, who are the ones who only follow the poets as passive beings. Furthermore, the two verses, 225 and 226, clearly refer to *al-shu'arā'*, and in so doing, confirm what has been argued, namely, that the term is given preeminence in the verse 224 by preposition and that preeminence can remain such if *al-Ghawuna* is interpreted as the active agents who target the poets, the object of denunciation for which the following two verses (225, 226) serves as corroborative of the denunciation.

Within the larger qur'ānic context outside the *Sūra* of the Poets, the case for the demonic interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna* has considerable corroboration. Of the many verses which refer to the *shayāṭīn*, *jinn*, as evil agents, who lead men astray, three are worth singling out.

Verse 112 in *Sūras* VI:

وكذلك جعلنا لكل نبي عدواً شياطينَ الإنس والجن يوحى بعضهم الى بعض زُخرفَ القول غروراً ولو شاء ربك ما فعلوه فذرْهُمْ وما يفترون (112)

And likewise we have set up for every prophet an enemy —, *shayāṭīn*, satans, from the *ins*, men, and the *jinn*, who suggest to one another flowery, ornamental discourses by way of deception. And if your Lord had wished it, they would not have done that. So, leave them alone together with what they invent and falsely concoct.

Noteworthy in the verse is the fact that the *shayāṭīn* among human beings and the *jinn* inspire the enemies of the prophets, including Muḥammad. The *shayāṭīn* are the enemies of the prophets in this verse not by deed, but by word. Especially significant is the word *zukhruf*, ornament, suggesting something aesthetic, apposite when applied to poetry, which is possible to conceive of as *zukhruf al-qawl* or *qawl muzakhruf*. Finally, the term *ghurūran*, “by way of deception,” is reminiscent of the concept of *ghawāya* in the term *al-Ghāwūna*. However, *zukhruf al-qawl* is the most revealing expression in the verse.

Verse 6 in *sūra* LXXII:

وأنته كان رجالاً من الإنس يعوذون برجالٍ من الجنّ فزادوهم رهقاً (6)

And indeed there were some among men, *ins*, who took refuge with some from the *jinn*, and these enhanced their perversion or error.

The verse tells how human beings have recourse to the *jinn* and the *shayāṭīn* who only increase their *rahaq*; whatever the last word means, it is nothing that meets the Qur'ān's approval. The denotation of *rijālun min al-insi* can easily refer to the poets, in conformity with the Arab conception of poets as the protégés of the demons.

However, the most explicit verse that articulates the relationship between poet and *shayṭān* in the Qur'ān is verse 36, in *sūra* XXXVII, al-Ṣāffāt. In this verse the Prophet himself is accused by his enemies of being a *shā'irun majnūn*, a poet possessed by a *jinnī*. It is possible to see verse 224 in which *al-Ghāwūna* occurs as the riposte of the Qur'ān to this false accusation of the Prophet, namely, that he was a poet possessed by a *jinnī*. The verse indicates that the Prophet is not *majnūn*, but rather, it is the poets who are;

they, the *shu'arā'*, are the *majānīn*, led astray by those who lead astray, *al-Ghāwūna*.

Finally, the fact that there is an entire *sūra* in the Qur'ān (LXXII) exclusively devoted to the *jinn* speaks for itself on the reality of their presence in the Qur'ānic *Weltanschauung*, and in the pre-Islamic Arab milieu.¹²

The Meccan and the Arab Contexts

The interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna* as "erring human beings" is an illustration of the dictum "text without context is pretext." The foregoing analysis has, therefore, set the interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna* and the entire verse within the context to which they belong: first the *Sūra* of the Poets itself and then the larger context of the Qur'ān in which the importance of the *shayāṭīn* and the *jinn* has been brought to bear upon the interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna*, with its demonic denotation.

The Qur'ān, however, was revealed in Mecca and was addressed to Arabs and to those of the Arabian Peninsula initially. This leads to the inclusion of two more levels of relevance or contexts for the interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna*. Consequently, these contexts become a hierarchy, tripartite in structure, of which the Qur'ān is only the first, although the most important.

The Qur'ān was revealed in Mecca. Although its inhabitants, the Quraysh, were a commercial community of hard-boiled business men, they were not immune to the blandishments of such supernatural beings (or so they were conceived) as the *jinn*. There was in Mecca actually a *masjid*, an oratory for the *jinn*. 'Abd al-Jinn was not unknown as a name among the Arabs.¹³

The relationship between the poets and the demons, the *shayāṭīn*, was well established among the Arabs and specifically Meccans of pre-Islamic times. The names of these *shayṭāns* who attended the poets and inspired them were also known.¹⁴ There was even a locality called 'Abqar, the abode of the *jinn* of pre-Islamic Arabia, from which the term for genius in Arabic,

¹² On the *jinn* in the Qur'ān and in the Islamic tradition, see the work of Badr al-Din al-Shiblī, *Gharā'ib wa 'Ajā'ib al-Jinn*, ed. I. Jamal (Cairo, 1982).

¹³ For *Masjid al-Jinn*, see al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makka*, ed. Rusdi Malḥas (Beirut, 1965), vol. II, pp. 200-201. That the worship of the *jinn* was not unknown among the Arabs is vouched for in the Qur'ān; XXXIV, verse 41.

¹⁴ And so much so that a volume could be written and indeed has been on this subject, for which, see 'Abd al-Razzāq Ḥamīda, *Shayāṭīn al-Shu'arā'* (Cairo, 1956), pp. 1-312. See also the article by Ignatz Goldziher, "Die Ginnen der Dichter," *ZDMG* (1891), pp. 685-690, which, despite its date, has not outlived its usefulness.

‘*abqarī*, was derived.¹⁵ The *shayāṭīn* who attended the poets and inspired them were called *tawābīʿ*, plural of *tābīʿ*, derived from the same verb as *yattabīʿuhum*. The verb was employed in verse 224, immediately preceding *al-Ghāwūna*, indicates an interpretation of the demonic. This conception persisted well into the Islamic period and was given literary expression in two of the masterpieces of medieval Arabic literature, namely, the *Risālat al-Tawābīʿ wa al-Zawābīʿ* of Ibn Shuhayd, the Andalusian author, and in *Risālat al-Ghufrān* of Abū al-‘Alāʾ al-Ma‘arrī, the philosopher-poet of the Arabs.

The cumulative effect of the foregoing arguments conducted at various levels, involving the three terms in verse 224, leads to the conclusion that the common and prevailing interpretation of the verse in practically all translations of the Qurʾān needs to be revised.

Verse 225

Have you not seen how they wander distraught in every valley?

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّهُمْ فِي كُلِّ وَادٍ يَهِيمُونَ

It has been argued in *CKE* (267-8, 271) that *wādī* in this verse means either a valley in the literal sense, which, according to the Arabs, the poets used to frequent, or the word is used metaphorically as an antonym to the “straight path,” *al-ṣīrāt al-mustaqīm*, and therefore may imply a crooked, meandering way of life. These two alternatives were suggested, since the interpretation of *wādī* as a *fann* in the sense of variety, kind, etc. of discourse is not borne out by Arabic usage of the period or later.

In accordance with the principle of *tafsīr al-Qurʾān bi al-Qurʾān*, for the nine other attestations of the term *wādī*, the meaning is always valley in the literal sense. To give *wādī* in this verse the meaning of *fann*, kind, is inconsistent with Qurʾānic usage and lexicon.

The Arab conception of the *jinn*, *shayāṭīn* was well-developed and centered around the famous locality called ‘*Abqar*, as has already been mentioned. Furthermore, the *wādī* was one of the venues where poets and *jinn* met.¹⁶ Two verses in the Qurʾān itself could possibly reflect the pre-Islamic Arab view of the *wādī* as the rendezvous of poet and *jinnī*:

¹⁵ For ‘*Abqar* and ‘*abqarī*, see ‘Abd al-Razzāq Ḥamīda, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-7; another place for the *jinn* in Arabia was called *Wabār*, for which, see *ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁶ See al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab*, ed. Ch. Pellat (Beirut, 1966), II pp. 299-300, in which a *shaykh*, a *wādī*, and a verse are involved. Tradition also associates the poet, Umayya Ibn Abī al-Ṣalt, with a *wādī*. References to the valleys as one of the abodes of the *jinn* have been collected by Jawād ‘Alī, in *al-Mufaṣṣal fi Tārīkh al-‘Arab Qabl al-Islam* (Beirut, 1970), Vol. VI, pp. 719-721, in which the Arabs, who would visit or pass through the valleys, would

One verse in *sūrat al-An'ām*, VI:71 depicts a situation that can be related to the interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna* in verse 224, as *shayāṭīn*, who lead poets astray and cause them to wander in valleys instead of the straight path, *al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*. The verse is *كَالَّذِي اسْتَهْوَتْهُ الشَّيَاطِينُ فِي الْأَرْضِ حَيْرَانَ*, “like the one whom the *shayāṭīn* seduced in this earth and caused him to wander bewildered, not knowing what to do.” Neither poet nor *wādī* is explicitly mentioned in the verse, but the four terms used could thereby refer to a poet bewildered in a *wādī*, recalling the line, *أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّهُمْ فِي كُلِّ وَادٍ يَهِيمُونَ*. Especially significant is the term *ḥayrān*, which brings to mind the term, *yahīmūna* in verse 225, “those wander about, not knowing what to do;” hence the term can be associated with *ḥayrān*, in VI:71.

Another verse that describes this relationship between the *shayāṭīn/jinn* and men occurs in the speech of the Jinn, who finally accepted Islam, in *Sūrat al-Jinn*, LXXII. The speech takes up the first 19 verses of the *sūra* in which the *jinn* enumerate the iniquitous acts they had performed among men before adopting Islam. One of the verses (6) is, *وَأَنَّهُ كَانَ رِجَالٌ مِنَ الْإِنْسِ يَعُو*, (6) *وَأَنَّهُ كَانَ رِجَالٌ مِنَ الْإِنْسِ يَعُو* “And indeed there were those among men or mankind who took refuge with persons of the Jinn and these enhanced their perversion or error.” In view of the relationship between *jinn/shayāṭīn* and poets in pre-Islamic Arabic, these persons can be identified as poets who sought the *jinn* for inspiration. The four terms in these verses, *istah-wathu*, *ḥayrān*, *ya'ūdḥūna* and *rahaqan*, all indicate this relationship. The career of Qays ibn-al-Mulawwaḥ, the famous love poet of the Umayyad period, illustrates this well, since his more famous name was his sobriquet, *al-Majnūn*, the one possessed by a *Jinnī*. The denotation of *rijālun mina al-ins*, as poets, is strengthened by the following verse (7) which states that *وَأَنَّهُمْ ظَنُّوا كَمَا ظَنَنْتُمْ* “and they thought, as you have thought, that God will not resurrect any one.” The rejection of the concept of the resurrection by Meccans was expressed trenchantly by the poets in fragments, some of which have survived as in the well-known case that pejoratively referred to the Prophet as Ibn-Kabsha.¹⁷

أَبُو عَدْنَا ابْنُ كَبْشَةَ أَنْ سَنَحْيَا وَكَيْفَ حَيَاةُ أَصْدَاءِ وَهَامِ

Does Kabsha's son warn us that we will live (be resurrected after we die); but how is this possible (when we will become) skulls thirsting for water.

invoke the chief *jinni*, by referring to him as *kabīr al-wādī*, *sāḥib al-wādī*, *sayyid al-wādī*, and *'azīz al-wādī*.

¹⁷ The poet was Bujayr al-Qushayrī. For him and for the fragment, see Ḥusayn 'Aṭwān, *al-Walīd ibn Yazīd* (Beirut, 1981), pp. 246-47.

Equal in importance to the Qurʾānic verses that suggest a literal interpretation of *wādī*, as “valley,” are the verses of the poets of early Islam, those of the Prophet Muḥammad himself and those composed during the Umayyad period. These verses reflect what the poets understood verse 225 to mean, since they were the ones targeted for opprobrium in the relevant Qurʾānic verses:

One of these verses occurs in a poem by Ḥassān ibn-Thābit, the poet-laureate of the Prophet Muḥammad in Madīna. He says that his poems are recited by the *ruwāt* (of poets) in every *wādī*.¹⁸

وَقَدْ سَارَتْ قَوَافٍ بِأَقْيَاتٍ تَتَأْتِدْهَا الرُّوَاهُ بِكُلِّ وَادِي

And rhymed verses that endure have moved about, which the (*ruwāt*), rhapsodes, have recited in every valley.

Another example is found in a verse of a love poem by the Umayyad caliph al-Walid ibn-Yazid: “His beloved has made his heart wander in every valley”:¹⁹

فَيَظَلَّ الْقَلْبُ مِنْهَا هَائِمًا فِي كُلِّ وَادِي

The employment of the Qurʾānic phraseology *kulli* and *hāʾiman*, in addition to *wādī*, indicate that these poets understood *wādī* in verse 225 literally as valley, not *fann*, “kind”, “variety”.

Verse 226

And they say that which they do not do

وَأْتَهُمْ يَقُولُونَ مَا لَا يَفْعَلُونَ

This is the most important of the cluster of four verses on poetry in Qurʾānic thought as discussed in *ACKE* (pp. 6-12).

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In that article, it was argued that the accusation levelled against the poets is not that they are simply liars, as the verse has been generally understood. If this had been the case, the Qurʾān would have used the common and regular words for the expression of that concept, terms such as *ifk*, *kadhīb*, used

¹⁸ For the verse, see *The Diwān of Ḥassān Ibn Thābit*, ed. W. ʿArafāt, Gibb Memorial Series, New Series (London, 1971), XXV.I, page 259, line 8.

¹⁹ For the verse, see *Shiʿr al-Walid Ibn Yazid*, ed. Ḥusayn ʿAṭwān (Amman, 1979), page 51, line 3.

often in the Qur'ān, even in the *Sūra* of the Poets itself (vv. 6, 12, 186, 189, 222 and 223). The rejection of such terms and the choice of others in verse 226 indicates that the mendacity of those targeted in verse 226 is different from that expressed in these other verses, as will be discussed. Furthermore, the denunciation of poets as simply liars would have run contrary to the Arab conception of poets, which was respectful, even adulatory. In fact, truthfulness in poetry was admired and one celebrated pre-Islamic verse reflects this:²⁰

وإنَّ أشعرَ بَيِّتٍ أنتَ قائِلُهُ بَيِّتٌ يُقَالُ إذا أنشَدْتَهُ صدَقًا

And the best verse you compose is the one which, when recited, it will be said that its composer has spoken the truth.

Even hyperbole in praising a patron was looked upon with disfavor. The poet was the revered champion of his tribe and its claim to glory, which the poet trumpeted in his poetry. In the Arab concept of the perfect men (*al-kamala*) the poet was one of them. It is, therefore, impossible to believe that the Qur'ān, revealed to an Arab and addressed to Arabs, would have denounced poets as liars without qualification. This briefly was the contention in *ACKE* set against the traditional understanding of this verse in various translations of, and commentaries on, the Qur'ān.

As a first step towards understanding the simple verbs of this verse, *وَأَنَّهُمْ يَقُولُونَ مَا لَا يَفْعَلُونَ* "and they say that which they do not do," it was noted that instead of condemning the poets in *one* word, such as *ifk* or *kadhib*, both of which were used before in the very *Sūra* of the Poets, the Qur'ān uses two different verbs for leveling the charge: *yaqūlūna* and *yaf'alūna*, usage that alludes to the failure of the poets to do what they had said they would do. As what they said was left unspecified, it was argued that this was none other than their acceptance of the *taḥaddī*, the challenge to produce a work similar to the Qur'ān a challenge in which they failed. It was also argued that while the *taḥaddī* in other *sūras* of the Qur'ān had been thrown to the Meccans with no indication as to who was being addressed and challenged, the referents in this verse are clear: they were the poets, who appear in the verse as ones who accepted the challenge, but failed to fulfill their promise to produce a work such as the Qur'ān. Needless to say, this involves one of

²⁰ For this verse attributed to Zuhayr, the well-known pre-Islamic poet, and for the ideal of truthfulness in Arabic poetry, see 'Abd al-Ḥamid al-Jundi, *Zuhayr ibn-Abī Sulmā* (Cairo, 1960), pp. 208, 215. It is noteworthy that this ideal of truthfulness was expressed by a poet who was an older contemporary of the Prophet Muḥammad. The sentiment therefore was prevalent not in the distant pre-Islamic past, but during the lifetime of the Prophet.

the Qurʾānic dogmas, which has reverberated throughout the many centuries of medieval Islam until the present does.²¹

In view of the importance of this interpretation and the fact that some literature contesting it has appeared since *ACKKE* was published, it is important to return to the verse and rearticulate the interpretation. First, the verse accused the poets not simply of lying in general but in the particular, namely, failing to fulfill a promise. Second, there is the issue of Iʿjāz in the Qurʾān.

The two conjugate verbs in verse 226 were conjugate terms in Arabic literary discourse and employed by the poets when they wanted to say that they were reliable and trustworthy. One of the verses of Ḥassān, the poet-laureate of the Prophet himself, expresses this clearly:²²

وإني إذا ما قلتُ قولاً فعلتهُ وأعرضُ عما ليسَ قلبي يفاعلُ

And if I say something, I will do it, but I turn my back to that which my heart will fail to do.

The two conjugate terms²³ in Ḥassān's verse express the concepts of promise and fulfillment (or non-fulfillment when the proposition in which they are cast is negative) and are the same terms employed in verse 226, in which they express the non-fulfillment of a promise. The terms also have been used in other *sūras* and in different contexts, such as the *Sūra* of al-Ṣaff, LXI, 2-3, in which the Qurʾān chides those who had promised to fight and take part in the battle, but did not:

يا أيها الذين آمنوا لِمَ تقولونَ ما لا تفعلونَ (2) كُبرُ مقتاً عند الله أن تقولوا ما لا تفعلون
(3) إن الله يُحبُّ الذين يقاتلون في سبيله صفاً كأنهم بنيانٌ مرصوصٌ (4)

O you who believe, why do you say what you do not do? It is especially odious in the sight of the Lord that you should say what you do not do. Verily, God loves those who fight in His way, in battle array as if they were a solid, well-articulated structure.

²¹ For the latest discussion of this dogma, see Richard F. Martin, "Inimitability," *The Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, Vol. II, pp. 526-536, with full bibliography.

²² See his *Diwan*, Vol. I, page 197, line 6.

²³ The two conjugate terms are also used by the pre-Islamic poet, Zuhayr, when praising Harim ibn-Sinān or al-Ḥārith ibn-ʿAwf, in a verse:

وفيهم مقاماتٌ حسانٌ وجوهُهُم وأنديةٌ ينتابها القولُ والفعلُ

And among them are gatherings of fine-looking men, and assemblies at which deeds (done, fulfill) words (spoken).

The issue for the two terms of promise and non-fulfillment in verse 224 is the poets' failure to produce what they had promised. Many verses in the Qur'ān give an answer unequivocally and form clearly defined clusters of verses, the so-called "Challenge Verses". Sometimes the idiom varies, but substitute verbs and phrases express the sense of *qawl* and *fi'l* employed in verse 226; sometimes one of the terms is used, while the other is expressed through a substitute word or phrase.

Sūrat Yūnus: X:38: Or do they say: "He forged it. Bring a *sūra* like it and call upon any one other than God, if you are speaking the truth."

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ افْتَرَاهُ قُلْ فَأْتُوا بِسُورَةٍ مِثْلِهِ وَادْعُوا مَنِ اسْتِطَعْتُمْ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ

Sūrat Hūd: XI:13: Or do they say that "he forged it. Bring then ten *Sūras* forged like it, and call upon whomsoever you can other than God, if you speak the truth. If then they answer not your call, know that (this revelation) was sent down with the knowledge of God."

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ افْتَرَاهُ قُلْ فَأْتُوا بِعَشْرِ سُورٍ مِثْلِهِ مُقْتَرِيَاتٍ وَادْعُوا مَنِ اسْتِطَعْتُمْ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ إِنْ

كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ (13) فَإِلْمٌ يَسْتَجِيبُوا لَكُمْ فَاعْلَمُوا أَنَّمَا أُنزِلَ بِعِلْمِ اللَّهِ. (14)

Sūrat al-Isrā': XVII:88: Say "If the whole of mankind, the *ins* and the *jinn* gathered together in order to produce the like of this Qur'ān, they could not produce the like of it, even if they backed each other in support."

قُلْ لَنْ يَجْتَمِعَتِ الْإِنْسُ وَالْجِنُّ عَلَىٰ أَنْ يَأْتُوا بِمِثْلِ هَذَا الْقُرْآنِ لَا يَأْتُونَ بِمِثْلِهِ وَلَوْ كَانَ بَعْضُهُمْ لِبَعْضٍ ظَهِيرًا (88)

Sūrat al-Ṭūr: LII:33-34: "Or they say that he fabricated the (Revelation), nay they have no faith" (33); "Then let them then produce a discourse such as this one, if they are speaking the truth." (34)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ تَقَوَّلَهُ بَلْ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ (33) فَلْيَأْتُوا بِحَدِيثٍ مِثْلِهِ إِنْ كَانُوا صَادِقِينَ (34)

Sūrat al-Baqara: II:23-24: Two verses are the clearest on the question of the challenge and the failure of the poets to produce similar discourse. "And if you are in doubt as to what we have revealed to our servant, then produce a *sūra* like unto it and call your witnesses, those besides God, if you are speaking the truth (23). But if you do not, and surely you will not, then fear the fire, the fuel of which are men and stones which has been prepared for the unbelievers."

وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ فِي رَيْبٍ مِمَّا نَزَّلْنَا عَلَىٰ عَبْدِنَا فَأْتُوا بِسُورَةٍ مِثْلِهِ وَادْعُوا شُهَدَاءَكُمْ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ (23) فَإِنْ لَمْ تَفْعَلُوا وَلَنْ تَفْعَلُوا فَاتَّقُوا النَّارَ الَّتِي وَقُودُهَا النَّاسُ وَالْحِجَارُ أُعِدَّتْ لِلْكَافِرِينَ (24)

These five clusters of verses from various *sūras* clearly reflect the struggle between the Prophet as the recipient of the Revelation and the Meccan opposition to the Qurʾān's *Iʿjāz*. But the opposition is left anonymous and, *mirabile dictu*, the commentaries do not deal with the question of the identity of those addressed and challenged in these verses. An indication of their identity can be found in the controversy surrounding the Qurʾān as the miracle of Muḥammad. The Qurʾān, however, is a miracle unlike those of the seven prophets, referred to earlier in the *sūra*: the Qurʾān is unique among them in the sense that it is a *literary* document. Consequently, only literary artists can be the ones who were challenged to produce similarly miraculous discourse. But who were these literary artists in seventh-century Mecca and Arabia? Surely they were the poets, since it was not prose that won the palm in pre-Islamic Arabic literary contests. There is no doubt, then, that the anonymous addressees in the "Challenge Verses" were the poets, of whom there were many in Mecca.²⁴ This argument is reinforced by the fact that the poets were considered intellectually prominent literary artists in Arabian society. They were the historians of the tribe's achievements and spokesmen for their tribes, as Nābigha was for the Dhubyān at the courts of the Lakhmids and the Ghassānids. From the fragments that have survived from the Meccan poets who opposed the mission of Muḥammad, it is clear that they discussed and contested Qurʾānic concepts such as the resurrection and life after death.²⁵

Verse 226 is unique within the context of the "Challenge Verses", in which the sequence of promise and non-fulfillment of poets is presented and in which the Qurʾān is the bone of contention. While the identity of addressees in the five Challenge Verses must be inferred, in verse 226, their identity is explicit—the poets. The verse therefore involves the Qurʾān and its *Iʿjāz*. The interpretation lays the foundation for the discussion of one of the most important Qurʾānic dogmas (Inimitability) *Iʿjāz*.

In addition to clusters of verses from various *sūras* for interpreting's verse 226's focus on the Qurʾān and the *Iʿjāz*, the *Sūra* of the Poets as a whole is also illustrative. The unity of the *sūra* has already been discussed in the interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna* in verse 224. The *sūra* as a whole and as a unit of revelation was discussed in *CKE* and *ACKE* in which it was pointed out that the main theme of the *sūra* was the Qurʾān as the miracle of Muḥammad and proof of his Prophethood. To what has been discussed in the two articles may now be added the function of the term, *āya*. In the

²⁴ For these with commentary, see Jawad ʿAli, *al-Mufaṣṣal fi Tārīkh al-ʿArab Qabl al-Islam* (Beirut, 1972), Vol. IX, pp. 694-718.

²⁵ On the Meccan poet who denied it, see *supra*, n. 17.

sūra, it has two senses: a *sign* of God and a *verse* in the *sūra*. This is a new element, partly stylistic, which pulls the various parts of the *sūra* together into one coherent whole and, therefore, can be added to the other arguments for unity and for the interpretation of verse 226.

The thread of continuity in the employment of the term *āya* runs through the three parts into which the *sūra* is divisible: I. the first part in which the Qur'ān is introduced; II. the second part, the longest, in which the seven prophets are introduced; and III. the third and final part, which returns to the Qur'ān.

Part I: 1-9: *āya* is used in the plural, *āyāt*, to refer to the verses of the Qur'ān (2); the term *āya* in the sense of miraculous sign of God is presented twice in verses (4) and (8); the reference in (8) is more significant, since there it is part of the refrain of the *sūra*.

Part II: 10-191: the term *āya* is used seven times in the refrain, which concludes the account of each of the seven prophets, his miracle, and the destruction of the people who rejected his message and *āya*. Hence, the importance of the term *āya* in verse 8, in the refrain that concludes portion I on the Qur'ān and its *āyāt* as the miracle of Muḥammad. The passage joins Muḥammad's miracle with the miracles of the seven prophets.

Part III: 192-227: the term *āya* is introduced again, recalling the reference in Part I (in the plural) applied to the Qur'ān. *Āya* recurs in verse 197 after five verses, 192-196, in which the Qur'ān is affirmed as the divinely inspired Book and Miracle.

Thus, a reference to the poets as those who did not fulfill what they had promised, in a *sūra*, the main theme of which, the Qur'ān, a literary document, is presented as the miracle of the Prophet, and in which seven *āyas* of seven peoples, who also rejected the *āyas* of God, are recounted, can only support the view that what is involved in verse 226 with its reference to the poets, is the Qur'ān and its *I'jāz*, its Inimitability.

Consonant with the methodology applied in this article, namely, *Tafsīr bi al-Ra'y* and peripherally *Tafsīr bi al-Ma'thūr* and only when the interpretation supports the conclusions that have been reached by Ra'y. In such a situation one of the *Tabi'ūn* may be cited, as another was, Mujāhid, in the interpretation of verse 224. Muqātil, like Mujāhid, a pupil of Ibn-'Abbās, says that the poets of Mecca, five of whom he enumerates, claimed, "we also can say the like of what Muḥammad says."²⁶ وقالوا نحن نقول مثل ما قال محمد²⁶ This, of course, recalls the verse, in *sūrat al-Anfāl*, VIII. 31, in which the *kuffār*, the infidels, hear the Qur'ānic verses, and say: "If we wished we

²⁶ See Tabarsi, *Majma' al-Bayān*, vol. VII, page 208, line 11.

could say something like this.²⁷ *لو نشاء لقلنا مثل هذا*. The identity of the *kuffār* in this verse is not disclosed, but in Muqātil's *Tafsīr* they are identified. They are the five Meccan poets and are enumerated by name.²⁸

In the battle for the Qur'ān which raged between Muḥammad and the poets, some fragments have survived recording what the poets thought of the Prophet and the ideals of the new faith he was preaching.²⁹ But it could not have been the response of the poets to produce something like the Qur'ān, which some of the *āyas* in the Qur'ān seem to imply. Such an *āya* may be verse 51 in *Sūrat al-Hajj*, XXII:

والذين سَعَوْا فِي آيَاتِنَا مُعَاجِزِينَ أُولَئِكَ أَصْحَابُ الْجَحِيمِ (51)

And those who have sought to compete with our *āyāt*, trying to frustrate them, will be the denizens of the fire of Hell.

Ambivalence attends the true meaning of *āyāt*, whether it means signs of God or verses of the Qur'ān. The following verse (52), however, with its *fayansakhu Allāhu*, "and God will abrogate," indicates that *āyāt* is used in the sense of verses of the Qur'ān and this suggests that the term, *mu'ājizīna* *معاجزين* refers to those who were trying to produce something they thought was better than the *āyas* of God, possibly some discourse in prose. But no such literary remains in prose of Meccan provenance have survived, although some have survived from the prose of some religious figures who appeared in Eastern Arabia such as Musaylima. The sources speak of one al-Naḍr ibn al-Ḥārith, who recited to the Meccans stories from Persian literature and history, such as the stories of Rostam, Isfandiyār, and Bahrām.³⁰ But nothing of this has survived. In any case, the text would not have been an original composition. There would have been probably accounts from Ḥira,³¹ where such accounts would have been circulating in the Persian sphere of influence.

²⁷ Another Qur'ānic verse may be cited in this connection, verse 121 in *surat* VI:

وَإِنَّ الشَّيَاطِينَ لَيُوحُونَ إِلَىٰ أَوْلِيَائِهِمْ لِيُجَادِلُوكُمْ

And verily the *Shayāfīn* do inspire their protégés to argue with you.

²⁸ Tabarsī, *op. cit.*, p. 208, lines 8-10.

²⁹ On the poet who denied the resurrection, see *supra*, n. 17.

³⁰ On al-Naḍr, see *The Life of Muḥammad*, trans. A. Guillaume (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990), pp. 135-136. He was, among other accomplishments, a poet, although a minor one. He therefore is especially important in this context, which captures the ambience in Mecca, relevant to the interpretation of verse 226, as one that involved the poets engaged in the issue of *Ijāz*; see Charles Pellat's entry, al-Naḍr ibn al-Ḥārith, *EP*, Vol. VII, pp. 872-873, and its bibliography.

³¹ That Ḥira was the provenance of such stories and accounts is confirmed by the *Commentary* of Zamaksharī on verse 6, of *Sūrat Luqmān*, XXXI, especially the phrase *lahw*

In one of the *sūras* of the Qur'ān, LXXXIX, however, there is a cluster of five verses, 1-5, which have been the despair of commentators. They are cast as oaths mold and read as follows: "By the dawn, by ten nights, by the even and odd, by the night when it passes, is there in these an oath for, or by, one who is possessed of reason?"

والفجر (1) وأليالٍ عشر (2) والشَّعْعِ والوتر (3) والليل إذا يسر (4) هل في ذلك قسم
لذي حجر (5)

Swearing by the dawn and the night is not altogether startling, since oaths by natural phenomena are common in the Qur'ān. But verse 3 is the crux because the two items in it as an oath are strange and inexplicable, the even and the odd, and do not blend with the other oaths in verses (1) and (4). Most important is the fifth verse: "Is there in that an oath which can be sworn to, or by, one who is possessed of reason?" The question expresses incredulity that such items as are included in the four preceding verses can be the objects by which one can swear.³²

It is difficult not to believe that these five verses are a parody.³³ Most probably the poets, who remained incredulous and hostile to the Qur'ān and the Prophet, wanted to produce an imitation of the rhymed style of the Qur'ānic discourse in order to ridicule it and thus composed these four verses. The fifth verse, هل في ذلك قسم لذي حجر؟ was probably a riposte ridiculing the composition of the four preceding verses dismissing them as nonsensical.³⁴ It is noteworthy that the rhyme suddenly changes after the fifth verse.

As poets of pre-Islamic and early Islamic times have been invoked in support of interpretation of verses 224 and 225, poets of later Islamic periods may now also be invoked in support of the new interpretation of verse 226. These poets behaved and composed in such a way as to strongly suggest that they understood this verse as it was interpreted in this article, namely, non-fulfillment of a promise. As mentioned previously, the poets were the target of the Qur'ān's offensive, and the relevance by invoking also the later Islamic ones is apparent.

al-hadīth, in which "mulūk al-Ḥīra" is added to Rustam and Bahrām; see *al-Kashshāf*, vol. III, p. 229.

³² The repetition of "night" in verse (4), after reference to it in verse (2), also poses a problem.

³³ Suspected by Richard Bell without contextualization; see *The Qur'ān*, trans. Richard Bell (T.T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1939), Vol. II, p. 654.

³⁴ For a different interpretation of *sūrat al-Fajr*, see Jan Peters, "No Security Against God: an Analysis of *Sūra* 89 of the Qur'ān," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* (1984), pp. 497-513.

When Abū-Nuwās, the ‘Abbāsīd poet, promised the historian al-Haytham ibn-‘Adī that he would not lampoon him but did, the historian remonstrated with him. The poet excused himself by quoting this verse in support of his failure to fulfill his promise.³⁵

Most interesting and relevant is Mutanabbī, since he was accused of having taken up the challenge in the Qur’ān, the *taḥaddī*, and is said to have produced 114 pieces, the number of the Qur’ānic *sūras*. While he was in jail, he composed a poem, a *dāliyya*, addressed to the governor for some offense and denied that he had done what he had been imprisoned for.³⁶ He asked the governor to draw a distinction between willing/wishing and actually doing, pointing out that the distance between the two is long.³⁷

وَكُنْ فَارِقًا بَيْنَ دَعْوَى أَرَدْتُ وَدَعْوَى فَعَلْتُ بِشَأْوٍ بَعِيدٍ

When al-Mutanabbī, whose name speaks for itself, penned that verse, the *āya*, 226, in the *sūra* of the poets, could not have been absent from his mind.

Of the three Qur’ānic dogmas, Eternity, *Qidam*, Arabness, ‘*Arabiyya*, and Inimitability, *I’jaz*, the last is the most important, since on it has rested the vilidity of Muḥammad’s mission presented to the Meccans as proof of his Prophethood. Of the three dogmas, *I’jaz* has been the most ambiguous and generated the most questions. Eternity also was the object of controversy during the reign of the ‘Abbasid al-Ma’mūn. The majority of Muslim scholars believed that *I’jāz* consisted in style, the *Naẓm* of the Qur’ān. The most eloquent proponent of this belief was al-Bāqillānī in his work, *I’jāz al-Qur’ān*.³⁸ Modern scholarship on *I’jaz* has continued in that tradition. But as Richard Martin says in his entry on Inimitability, scholars “refined the earlier arguments, rather than contributing new ones.”³⁹ The challenge pre-

³⁵ On this encounter between the poet and the historian, see Ibn-Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-A’yān*, ed. Iḥsan ‘Abbās (Beirut, 1968), Vol. VI, pp. 111-112; also Ibn-Manẓūr, *Abū-Nuwās*, ed. ‘Umar Abū al-Naṣr (Cairo, 1969), pp. 145-147.

³⁶ The declaration of his own prophethood was one explanation. For the term, *I’jāz*, which he applied to his own discourse, see “Medieval Islam . . .”, *infra*, n. 82.

³⁷ For the verse, see the *Dīwān*, ed. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb ‘Azzām (Beirut, 1978), page 76, line 5.

³⁸ For an excellent edition of Abū-Bakr al-Bāqillānī, see *I’jāz al-Qur’ān*, ed. Aḥmad Ṣaqr (Dār al-Ma‘ārif, Cairo, 1954). Al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013), the well-known Ash‘arite *mutakallim* and Mālikī jurist, is singled out in this article on the *Sūra* of the Poets for his impressive and detailed account of the *I’jāz*, which he conceived of in literary terms, related in *naẓm al-Qur’ān*, and paid special attention to the *muwāzana* between the *sūras* of the Qur’ān and the *qaṣīdas* of Arabic poetry. He devoted many pages to demonstrating the superiority of the former to the latter, with examples the famous Suspended Ode of Imru‘ al-Qays (pp. 241-279) and a *qaṣīda* of Buḥturī (*lāmiyya*) (pp. 333-373).

³⁹ See his entry, “Inimitability,” *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe (Leiden, 2002), Vol. II, p. 535.

sented by this statement is a sympathetic background for making the following observations on the new interpretation of the famous verse in the *sūra*, 226, namely, its involvement in I'jāz and its implications for how the concept was understood and treated in medieval and modern times:

The new interpretation makes clear that the meaning of I'jāz was given in the Qur'ān itself. The meaning was literary, as *taḥaddī* was addressed to the poets of the Arabs in Mecca. I'jāz has tested the ingenuity of one generation after another of Muslim scholars, but the answer was given authoritatively in the Qur'ān itself, during the lifetime of the Prophet, in the early Meccan period.

That the I'jāz, has turned out to be literary makes this miracle of the Qur'ān unique among the miracles of the various prophets of the three Abrahamic religions. While miracles of others consisted of something external to the word of God, such as healing the sick or raising the dead, and while those miracles were limited to the time and place of their occurrence, that of the Qur'ān is considered internal, integral to the word of God itself, and is considered a permanent feature of the text of the Qur'ān itself, when read or recited.⁴⁰

This new interpretation provides a solid foundation for the conclusions on the I'jāz by Muslim scholars in medieval times along literary lines. This interpretation supercedes other interpretations of I'jāz. In modern times, Muslim exegetes have followed the literary lines with new techniques worked out by scholars such as Ṭaha Ḥusayn and his disciples, 'Amin Khūly, and after him, Bint al-Shāṭi.⁴¹ The new interpretation, based on the Qur'ān itself, reinforces their interpretation.

The Qur'ān was held as the model of Arabic literary excellence throughout the ages and consequently its effect on the development of Arabic literature has been incalculable. The new interpretation of verse 226 gives *scriptural* support to the status of the Qur'ān as a model by indicating that the model was the self-image of the Qur'ān itself and not only the conjecture of later scholars or the expression of later Muslim piety.⁴²

⁴⁰ Points perceptively noted by Ibn-Rushd in his *Manāḥij al-Adilla*, ed. Maḥmūd Qāsim (Cairo, 1964), pp. 212-222. The new interpretation which anchors the conception of I'jāz in the Qur'ān itself, gives scriptural authority to the acute observations of Ibn-Rushd on I'jāz.

⁴¹ On these and others, see Rotraud Wielandt's section, "Interpreting the Qur'ān from the Perspective of Literary Studies," in *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, Vol. II, pp. 131-134.

⁴² After completing the interpretation of this verse, to the correct interpretation of which Medieval caliphs and judges had turned blind eye, the present writer feels as the boy who "told it like it is" in the tale, "The Emperor's New Clothes."

Verse 227: The Exceptive Verse

إِلَّا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَذَكَرُوا اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا وَانْتَصَرُوا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا ظَلَمُوا وَسَيَعْلَمُ
الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا أَيَّ مُنْقَلَبٍ يَنْقَلِبُونَ

Except those who have believed and have done good works and remembered God frequently and avenged themselves after they had been unjustly and wrongly treated; and those who have acted unjustly will know what an overturn they will experience.

After the blanket condemnation of poetry in Mecca, expressed in the three preceding verses, 224-226, the Qurʾān lifts in Madīna the sanction on poetry in almost legislative terms and, what is more, in a strikingly long verse in which certain conditions are laid down, according to which Muslim poets may compose poetry. The verse presents some problems, which were dealt with in *CKE*, pp. 572-575 and *ACKE*, pp. 12-18, but the verse is due for a brief re-examination and clarification in this article.

وَذَكَرُوا اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا in ذَكَرُوا, “and they remembered Allah frequently.” Remembering Allah frequently may sound superfluous after believing and doing good works, or specific, coming as it does, after the very *general* verses in the *sūra* of the poets, but it is very *à propos*. It is to remind the Muslim poets, who had been under the jurisdiction of the *shayṭāns* before their conversion, that God is their refuge from the *shayṭāns* and that frequent mention of his name will save them from backsliding and falling again under the influence of their former patrons, the *shayṭān*. The Prophet himself was subject to this temptation as the abrogated verses in *Sūrat al-Najm* (LIX) clearly indicate. The Islamic *basmalalistiʿādha*, illustrates clearly the involvement of both the Deity and the *shayṭān*: بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ. أَعُوذُ بِاللَّهِ مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ الرَّجِيمِ

Many verses in the Qurʾān express also express the duality, such as verse 36, in *sūrat al-Zukhruf*, XLIII “And he who withdraws himself from remembering God the Merciful, we will appoint for him a *shayṭān*, who will thus be an intimate associate of his.” وَمَنْ يَعْشُ عَنْ ذِكْرِ الرَّحْمَنِ نُقَيِّضْ لَهُ شَيْطَانًا فَهُوَ لَهُ قَرِينٌ (36). This verse is especially relevant because the word *dhikr* is mentioned in it, but not in the *basmala*, even though *dhikr* is implied.

This explication of وَذَكَرُوا اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا brings out its implication, which is even more important than what is expressed, and is related to the *shayṭān* and consonant with the Satanic interpretation of verse 224. The term, *al-Ghāwūna* especially gives further confirmation to its Satanic interpretation.

وَانْتَصَرُوا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا ظَلَمُوا in وَانْتَصَرُوا, “and they avenged themselves after they were unjustly wronged.” It must be emphasized that the verse has nothing to do with victory, but with revenge and retaliation. The verb *naṣara* primarily means to render help, usually to the oppressed; *intaṣara* is the reflexive and means to avenge oneself, an interpretation made clear by what

follows, *من بعدما ظلموا*. Hence, the translation of “*ont bénéficié de Notre aide*” has to be rejected, while, “*ont riposte victorieusement*” is closer to “*ont riposte*”, although the following adverb suggests “victory,” a concept alien in this context.⁴³

This interpretation of *intasaru* may be set against the Qur'ānic ambiance of *lex talionis* and is supported by various verses in the Qur'ān, such as verse 194 in *sūrat* II:

فَمَنْ اَعْتَدَىٰ عَلَيَّكُمْ فَاَعْتَدُوا عَلَيْهِ يَمِثِلْ مَا اَعْتَدَىٰ عَلَيْكُمْ

Thus, whoever commits aggression against you, retaliate against him in like manner.

It has been noted in *ACKE*, pp. 13-15, that this exceptive verse is striking for its length, when contrasted with the three preceding verses. Indeed, it is the longest verse in the entire *sūra* and consists of nineteen words. In that article (pp. 13-15), the view of some scholars that the long verse should be construed as two verses was entertained. Further reflection has convinced me that the long verse should not be so construed. Dividing the verse at the end of *kathīran* *كثيرا* would introduce an entirely different assonance and consonance, which would be the only instance of this phonetic aberration in a long *sūra* that is consistently assonant and consonant. Had *kathīran* been followed by another verse, which is consonant and assonant with it, such a division of the verse might be tolerated, but it is not. Hence, the argument for the division of the verse has little support.⁴⁴

The restoration of the unity of the long verse is also important for the question of provenance, Meccan or Madīnan. The length, as well as legislative character, definitely suggests Madīna, where the Prophet had poets around him, who could respond to the Meccan compositions against him. A clear parallel to the verse is the long legislative verse (20), in the Meccan *sūra*, LXXIII, which also happens to be the last verse, and which is not Meccan, but Madīnan. Similarly, is this last verse, 227, is Madīnan in the three aspects of length, legislation, and historical context.⁴⁵

The verse legislates for Muslim poets rules for the composition of poetry, consonant with the spirit of Islam. Unlike the preceding three, this verse presents no lexical difficulties of denotation and connotation. The interpretation benefits from a recognition of the component parts.

⁴³ For the two French renderings, see *ACKE*, p. 13.

⁴⁴ *Pace* the Basran recension and Richard Bell; see *ACKE*, p. 15, n. 40.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-18; for R. Blachère, who considers the verse Madīnan, see *ibid.*, p. 15, n. 42 as does Muḥammad I. Darwaza, perhaps the soundest of all modern commentators on the Qur'ān, see his *al-Tafsīr al-Ḥadīth* (Cairo, 1962), III, p. 149.

The verse is divisible into three units—the two categories of Islamic poets, and the third unit, that of infidel poets, those who attacked Islam and the Prophet.

The first three sentences:

إِلَّا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَذَكَرُوا اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا

Except those who have believed, have done good works and have remembered Allah frequently.

These three sentences are united as a description of the Muslim poets. They are excluded from the denunciation uttered against the infidel poets of the preceding three verses, who are attended by demons and who blaspheme by trying to imitate the Qurʾān. Unlike the fourth sentence that follows, *وَاتْتَصَرُوا*, *من بعدما ظلموا* these three sentences describe Muslim poets without any reference to the restriction on composition of poetry expressed in the fourth sentence. Thus, the Qurʾān opens before Muslims the prospect of composing poetry on Islam or any other subject, as long as the compositions maintain an Islamic point of view. It was important that these three sentences form part of the exceptive verse. Otherwise, composition of poetry by Muslims would have been permitted only to those referred to in the fourth sentence, those who would be expected to compose *retributive* verse. The explosion of Islamic poetry in later times could take place without fear of Qurʾānic sanctions.

وَاتْتَصَرُوا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا ظَلَمُوا

And they revenged themselves after they were unjustly wronged.

While the first three sentences contain no restriction on how the Muslim poets may compose poetry, other than that they be in good standing as Muslims, this sentence restricts the composition of Muslim poets and permits them to compose poetry of a special type, under a certain condition. Although clearly *hijāʿ*, satire, is frowned on in Islam, the genre is sanctioned when a Muslim is unjustly wronged. An apposite Qurʾānic verse has been quoted in the discussion of *وَاتْتَصَرُوا*. This verse and others illustrate the operation of *lex talionis* in the Qurʾān. In this *sūra*, that law was applied in the realm of poetry.

The sources provide ample material for interpreting this fourth sentence as a reference to the poetic competition that took place between the pagan poets of Mecca, who attacked the Prophet and Islam, and the Muslim poets of Madina, who defended the Prophet and Islam. Of the trio of poets who composed for the Prophet in Madina, Hassān illustrates well this fourth sen-

tence in a long verse. Two of his retributive verses will suffice: the first hemistich of a verse,⁴⁶

فَنُحْكِمُ بِالْقَوَافِي مَنْ هَجَانَا وَنَضْرِبُ حِينَ تَخْتَلِطُ الدَّمَاءُ

Those who lampoon us with verse we control by the bit and bridle of our rhymes.

هَجَوْتَ مُحَمَّدًا فَأَجَبْتُ عَنْهُ وَعِنْدَ اللَّهِ فِي ذَلِكَ الْجَزَاءُ

You have lampooned Muḥammad and I have answered for him, and my reward is with God.

وَسَيَعْلَمُ الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا أَيَّ مُنْقَلَبٍ يَنْقَلِبُونَ And those who have acted wrongly will know what an overturning they will experience. Those denoted in this sentence were Meccans and others who inflicted wrong or injustice on the Muslim poets as reflected in the terms *ẓulimū/zalamū* ظلموا / ظلّموا. Since those who were wronged (*ẓalimū* ظلّموا) were poets, the natural presumption is that those denoted in this verse were also poets in Mecca who had lampooned the Prophet and his poets. The group may have include other poets, who were not Meccans, but who composed poetry against Islam.

The denunciation of the anti-Muslim poets is couched in terms that suggest the fate of such peoples who rejected the message of their prophets in the *sūra* of the poets. The Qur'ān promises those poets a fate, a مُنْقَلَبٌ, similar to the one inflicted on the people of Lot in verse 74, *sūra* XV, فَجَعَلْنَا , عَلِيَّهَا سَافِلِهَا , “We turned it upside down”. Structurally, this last sentence, with its comminatory tone, is the appropriate conclusion of the third large portion of the *sūra* which began with verse 192 and was devoted to the Qur'ān. The sentence makes this portion analogous to each of the seven accounts of the peoples punished, as described in the second large portion of the *sūra*, verses 10-191. Each of these accounts concludes with a verse describing destruction as does this third portion, vv. 192-227, with the last sentence of verse 227. This forms a parallel between this portion, vv. 192-227 on the Qur'ān and poetry, and each of the seven punishment stories in the second portion, vv. 10-191. Each of the punishment stories contains four elements—the prophet, the miracle, the people, the destruction. One such story includes Ṣāliḥ, the

⁴⁶ For the two verses, see *Dīwān of Ḥassān ibn-Thābit*, ed. W. 'Arafāt, Gibb Memorial Series, New Series, XXV (London, 1971), Vol. I, page 18, lines 18 and 23.

These two verses come in a poem in which Allah is mentioned seven times and this suggests that the injunction in the verse on the frequent mention of Allah's name was also applicable to the composition of poetry; for the seven occurrences of Allah, see *ibid.*, p. 18.

she-camel, Thamūd, and their destruction, analogous to the last portion of the *sūra* (vv. 192-222) involving: Muḥammad, Quraysh, the Qurʾān, and destruction, the *munqalab*, expressed proleptically. The Quraysh are mentioned in this portion, though not by name in v. 214. But it was their poets who are singled out as objects of destruction in the last sentence, since they were the spearhead of the opposition that rejected the Qurʾān as a miracle, and in so doing, rejected also the Prophethood of Muḥammad.

The Four Verses: 224-227

To summarize:

Verse 224: Attention is warranted to the *transitive* use of the verb *ghawā*, from which *al-Ghāwūna* may be derived, and to the technical use of the verb *yattabiʿuhum*, related to the *tābiʿ* and *tābiʿa*, the demon who attends the poet. This points to *al-Ghāwūna* as demonic in denotation and active in connotation.

Verse 225: The meaning of the word *wādī*, traditionally translated metaphorically by the term *fann*, meaning “kind,” “sort,” has been rejected, based on citations from the poets of the period, who understood the term to mean “valley.” Similarly, the verb *yahīmūna* has been restored to its literal meaning, consonant with reference to a valley.

Verse 226: The verse cannot express the accusation that the poets were simply liars, since the words, *kadhib*, *ifk*, *iftirāʾ* are not used. Instead *yaqūlūna* and *yafʿalūna*, express the sequence of promise and non-fulfillment. Set against the *sūra* as a whole, I have argued that the promise/non-fulfillment sequence expressed in the two separate verbs involve the concept of Iʿjāz.

Verse 227: This verse is important in the history of Arabic culture, as the verse that re-entered poetry within the framework of Muslim orthodoxy. The verb *intaṣarū*, an important verb in the structure of the verse, has been redefined in light of Arabic morphology, lexicology, and contextualization.

PART TWO

The Debate

The problems posed by the crucial four verses on poetry in the *Sūra* of the Poets have been the concern not only of Qurʾānic scholars interested in *tafsīr*, but also literary critics, interested in poetry, since the four verses are not to be found in a secular work, but in the Qurʾān. A number of articles appeared after *CKE* and *ACKE* were published. The responses and the reactions naturally varied. The debate centered mainly around two of the four verses: verses 224, especially the interpretation of the term *al-Ghāwūna*, and

verse 226, which has been interpreted as related to I'jāz, the inimitability of the Qur'ān, and the failure of the poets to produce a comparable work. As these verses straddle both Qur'ānic exegesis and literary criticism and are for this reason unique in the comparatist context of the three sister religions, I have summarized the responses to my articles. The Qur'ān is the *locus classicus* for the study of the theme—Islam and poetry. An examination of the reaction of scholars to the new interpretation of the four crucial verses presented in *CKE* and *ACKE* is necessary.

One of the first scholars to take note of the article, *CKE*, was Wolfhart Heinrichs, whose favorable reaction may be conveyed in his own words. Of the four crucial verses, he wrote:

diese Verse hat IRFAN SHAHID jüngst in einer überzeugenden und sorgfältigen Interpretation einzeln und in Zusammenhang der ganzen Sure neu gedeutet.⁴⁷

Shortly thereafter, in 1973, the late Francesco Gabrieli published two articles,⁴⁸ in which he took issue with this writer on the interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna* and of the unity of the *sūra*. In so doing, he was expressing views not original, but derivative from those of his host, who convened the conference at UCLA, at which one of the two papers was delivered. The reply to Gabrieli's views appeared in the second article *ACKE* (pp. 4-6). More has been said on the two points in this article.

One year after the appearance of Gabrieli's articles, J. Christoph Bürgel published his monumental publication on poetry as a lie,⁴⁹ in which he accepted the interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna*, as expressed in *CKE*, and translated the relevant verse into German as:⁵⁰ *Und die Dichter- von ihnen ergreifen die in die Irre führenden (Scheitane) Besitz.*

In 1976, there appeared S.A. Bonebakker's "Religious Prejudice against Poetry in Early Islam,"⁵¹ in which he briefly noted the new interpretation of the Qur'ānic verses in *CKE* as an alternative to the traditional view. He also added an insightful remark:

If the new interpretation is accepted, the verses 224-228 could be taken as a repetition (and implicit refutation) of previous statements which mention how Muhammad is accused of being a possessed poet, though a clear connection is being made this time between being a poet and being possessed by *jinn*.⁵²

⁴⁷ See Wolfhart Heinrichs, *Arabische Poesie und griechische Poetik*, in *Beiruter Texte und Studien*, Bd. 8 (Beirut, 1969), p. 33.

⁴⁸ For these, see *ACKE*, p. 1, n. 2.

⁴⁹ See his "Die beste Dichtung ist die lügenreichste," *Oriens*, 23-24 (1974), pp. 7-102.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵¹ See the article in *Medievalia et Humanistica*, VII (1976), pp. 77-99.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 79. Speaking of these crucial verses, he says "It is difficult enough to establish the correct interpretation," *ibid.* His article appeared before *ACKE* was published in 1983,

In 1978, a reprint of Rudi Paret's German translation of the Qur'ān appeared, in which he gave the traditional translation of the four verses on the poets. In one of his *Anmerkungen*,⁵³ he registered disagreement with the new interpretation of the verses expressed in the first article, *CKE*.

Scholars who had followed the traditional exegesis of the four verses and, what is more, have published translations of the Qur'ān as did R. Paret,⁵⁴ were reluctant to change their minds. R. Paret has expressed his disagreement with the new interpretation without a supporting argument.

In all fairness to the distinguished German Koranicist, it should be mentioned that his *Anmerkung* was based on the article of 1965, *CKE*, before the second article, *ACKE*, appeared in 1983, in which the most important of the four verses, namely 226, was studied. This latter article has given the new interpretation of the four verses a further corroboration against whatever objections Paret might have advanced.

In the same year there appeared Michael Zwettler's *The Oral Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry: Its Character and Implications*,⁵⁵ in which he reacted favorably to the new interpretation of the four verses and even suggested an elegant rendering of the verb *yattabi'hum* in verse 224, as "attend," instead of the possibly ambiguous, even ambivalent "follow," which I had suggested.

In 1979, Richard Martin's "Structural Analysis and the Qur'ān: New Approaches to the Study of Islamic Texts"⁵⁶ appeared, in which he argued that "structural analysis helps to explain the text in its present form," and that *sūra* XXVI "lends itself to a structural analysis." Accordingly, he accepted the attention I paid to such an analysis of the *Sūra* of the Poets and found it "convincing" for the new interpretation of verse 224.

In 1980 an article by the poet-critic Nazeer El-'Azma, "The Qur'ān and Poetry,"⁵⁷ appeared, in which an interpretation of the two verses 224 and 225 was presented that was nearly identical to that given in *CKE*, especially

which completed the interpretation of all the four verses after verse 226 that had been left out in *CKE*. In a personal letter he addressed to me after 1983, he was enthusiastic about the new interpretation and wrote in such superlative terms of approbation that I am reluctant to quote verbatim. I mention this as an example of how the omission of verse 226 in *CKE* and its later interpretation in a separate article, *ACKE*, has sometimes affected the reaction of scholars to *CKE*, and why it has been necessary to bring all together in this article.

⁵³ Rudi Paret, *Der Koran, Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart, 1978), p. 372.

⁵⁴ When his first translation of the Qur'ān appeared in 1966.

⁵⁵ It was published by the Ohio State University Press, Columbus, in 1978.

⁵⁶ It appeared in *Studies in Qur'ān and Tafīr, JAAR Thematic Studies* (December, 1979), pp. 665-683.

⁵⁷ It was published in the *Journal of the American Association of Teachers of Arabic, Al-'Arabiyya*, Vol. XIII, Nos. 1-2, pp. 65-79.

in its interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna* as demons and *wādī* as valley. The article makes no reference to *CKE*, which appeared some fourteen years before, although written in a well-known *Festschrift* for the distinguished British Orientalist-Arabist, Sir Hamilton Gibb. If written independently of *CKE*, it is an even more welcome addition to the study of *sūra* XXVI.

Johann Bürgel's article, the standard work on poetry as a lie, in which he welcomed the new exegesis of verse 224, has already been cited. As the second article, *ACKE* had not been published, when his article appeared in 1974, he accepted the traditional interpretation of verse 226 on poets as liars. There was no discussion of my views on this verse expressed in 1983 in *ACKE*. Verse 226 was discussed in his long article without the benefit of the arguments presented in *ACKE* for the rejection of the old interpretation. Correspondence with him, however, took place in 1986, after *ACKE* appeared, in which, *inter alia*, I pointed out to the author in a letter dated March 18 that dependence on sayings attributed to the poet, al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī and the Prophet Muḥammad on p. 27 are hazardous, since the sayings are spurious. So, dependence on *Ḥadīth* in this context is dangerous. Perhaps the most spurious of *ḥadīths* on poetry is:

لله كنوزٌ تحتَ العرشِ مفاتيحُها ألسنةُ الشعراءِ

Under the throne of God, there are treasures, the keys of which are the tongues of poets.

This brings to the fore the problem of the equipollence of the sources or lack thereof, and the difficulty in drawing conclusions from sources that are not of the same reliability. Hence, this writer's avoidance of *ḥadīth* and dependence on the Qur'ān itself, although certain *ḥadīths* may be accepted after rigorous examination and resort to *tafsīr bi-al-ra'y* of them.

The two points of view may be narrowed down considerably through a suggestion made by Bürgel himself to the effect that the traditional interpretation supports lying in general, while that of this writer supports lying in the restricted sense of failing to fulfill a promise. The acceptance of the old interpretation of verse 226 does not affect the value of Bürgel's article, which remains a most valuable account of the history of poetry as a lie in Arabic-Islamic thought, both literary and philosophical.

Renata Jacobi's article on the same theme, "Dichtung und Lüge in der arabischen Literaturtheorie,"⁵⁸ was also published before the second article, *ACKE*, appeared, and therefore accepted the traditional interpretation of verse 226, and relied on Rudi Paret's translation of the Qur'ān, the first edition of which had appeared in 1966.

⁵⁸ For this article, see *Der Islam*, 49 (1972), pp. 85-99.

A strange response to the two articles, *CKE* and *ACKE* appeared in 1987 by Michael Schub.⁵⁹ It consisted of a torrent of propositions, converging on one single word out of the thirty-three⁶⁰ words of the four verses, namely, *al-Ghāwūna*, the “satanic interpretation and denomination,” of which he disapproved. He ignored the many reasons which have been given in the two articles for the rejection of the old interpretation and the suggestion of the new one. In so doing, he took the line of least resistance or so it seems. Instead of reading the two articles carefully and exercising his own independent judgment, he prefaced his response by appealing to R. Paret’s dissent with the new interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna*. Schub subjected the remaining thirty-two words of the four verses to an idiosyncratic interpretation in a style or tone which calls to mind the well-known verse in *sūra* III, 7. His points will be answered in the order which he chose to present them.

He suggests in the second paragraph of his response that the correct interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna* is to be sought in comparative Semitics. After consulting the lexica for Hebrew and Ethiopic, he returns to Arabic, and refers to the attestation of the term twice in two verses, (91) and (94), in the *Sūra* of the Poets, XXVI. The excursion into *Semitica* may without great loss be disregarded, but the two verses in the *sūra* may not be so treated. His citation of the two verses, however, is an example of the failure to realize that in the second attestation, the term is used in the sense of “those who *lead* astray,” the satanic denomination, an interpretation clearly required by the context, which he failed to note. In fact, the pericope in which the two verses are involved is a good example of the ambivalence of the term *al-Ghāwūna*, as it can mean both those who go astray and those who lead astray. Only contextualization can be a safe guide to which of the two interpretations is correct. Much has been written on *ghawā* and *al-Ghāwūna* in *CKE* and in *ACKE*. Briefly, in the former, it was pointed out for the first time that the verb *ghawā* can be used transitively and that its derivatives have to be understood in a transitive sense, but that in ambiguous cases only the context can decide the correct interpretation.

In the following paragraph of his response. Schub chooses two verses from *sūras* II, *al-Baqara* and XXXI, *Luqmān*, both of which are unrelated to the problem of Islam and poetry in the Qur’ān. He presents them as illustrative of one of Muḥammad’s early goals, namely, trying to “convince prospective converts that Islam would provide them with a firmly orienting hand-

⁵⁹ See “Qur’ān 26:224, GĀWŪN, Fundamentally Disoriented: an Orientalist Note,” in *JAL*, XVIII (1987), pp. 79-80.

⁶⁰ His own count by his own arithmetic.

hold on the camel saddle” and that he was a prophet and “not merely a charismatic poet.”

In addition to the irrelevance of the two *sūras* and their two verses, there is the question of the author's omission of the many references in the Qur'ān in support of its denial that Muḥammad was a charismatic poet. The most relevant of these immediately precede the four crucial verses in the *Sūra* of the Poets itself, namely, verses 192-223. Citing these with their references to the demons and the *shayāṭīn*, would have weakened his interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna* and would have supported the demonic or satanic denotation argued in *CKE* and *ACKE*.

The inconsistency involved in citing the two verses from *sūrat al-Baqara* and *Luqmān* is enhanced when the two verses are presented by the author as a recapitulation of the four crucial verses in the *Sūra* of the Poets. This amounts to a bizarre collocation of Qur'ānic pericopes which belong to entirely different contexts.

The limitations of this collocation become clear in a translation of the four crucial verses in the light of this collocation:

Verse 224: In addition to continuing to render *al-Ghāwūna* as, “fundamentally disoriented,” he adds the phrase “the only ones” not to be found in the Arabic text.

Verse 225: Instead of the original rhetorical question in which this verse is cast, Schub changes it into a declarative sentence and translates “You know well . . .” for “Have you not seen how . . .,” thus relieving the verse of its more impressive sting. He footnotes al-Suyūṭī and al-Maḥallī in support of this. But the verb “*tarā*” does convey the idea of knowledge in English as well as in Arabic; hence there is no need to abandon the meaning in favor of “know” and no need to appeal to the two medieval scholars. His rendering of *yahimūna*, however, as “flounder about” is attractive.

Verse 226: Instead of the normal and literally accurate “and that they say what they do not do,” he renders the verse in three words, “they are jinkers,” which he further explains as “those who dodge back into their holes like mice, *i.e.* hypocrites.”⁶¹

For nearly fourteen centuries, the verse has been understood to be an accusation of poets as liars. More recently the present writer has nuanced this as a lie in the particular, not in the general, that is, a lie involving the *I'jāz*. No one has ever diverged from the interpretation of the verse to such

⁶¹ It is generally accepted that the term, *munāfiqūn*, in the Qur'ān is an Ethiopic loan term for which, see A. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Baroda, 1938), p. 272. It is also generally accepted that the term appeared and was applied to certain individuals in Madīna, not Mecca. Schub is one of the few scholars in the USA who knows Ethiopic well.

a degree as to involve the concept of hypocrisy. Just as Schub invoked two verses from *sūrat al-Baqara* and *sūrat Luqmān*, and transposed them to *sūrat al-Shu‘arā’* as verses that recapitulate verse 227 of the last *sūra*, he does likewise with the concept of *nifāq*. Even though the concept appeared in Madīna, and was related to the battle of Uḥud, Schub applies it to a *sūra* which was revealed in Mecca and identifies the agents involved in verse 224 as hypocrites in Mecca, the counterparts of those in Madīna.

Of the same order is his interpretation of verse 227, in which Schub translates the verb *intaṣarū*, as “they fend for themselves.” Enough has been said on the necessity of a correct translation of this verb for the concept of revenge, especially since this particular verb more than any other in verse 227 legitimates the composition of poetry by Muslim poets as a riposte to what the poets of the Meccan opposition had composed against Muḥammad and Islam. Schub appeals to the venerable authority of the prince of lexicographers in support of his rendering, but disregards Lane and ACKE’s suggested meaning of “*intaṣarū*,” namely, “revenge.”

Objections may also be raised against his rendering of *munqalab* in the same verse as “revolution.” He translates the relevant sentence as “and the oppressors will find out how devastating the revolution they caused will be.” The term, literally “upside-down, turning over,” connotes “utter perdition” and conveys a comminatory note. There is no reference to a revolution, let alone a revolution caused by them, which “they caused.” The interpretation may have been influenced by the modern meaning of *munqalab*, more commonly, *inqilāb*, a neologism, which entered Arabic from Turkish, in which *inqilāb* does mean revolution, a *coup d’état*.⁶²

At the end, the author discusses verse 224, as a topic-comment sentence, what the Arab grammarians call “*Jumlatun dhātu wajhayn*,” (a two-faced sentence). The implication of this appeal to classical Arabic grammarians is not clear. Perhaps it is to question the position of prominence that is given to *wa al-Shu‘arā’* in the verse and the conclusion I drew from it.

The framework of classical Arabic Grammar was elaborated in later Islamic times and there is no need to quarrel with it. The natural order of the sentence in verse 224 is either “*al-Ghāwūna yattabi‘ūna al-shu‘arā’*” or

He interjects into the discussion the term *munāfiqūn*, a Madīnan term, which he applies to the Meccan poets, and does not present it as an Ethiopicism, meaning “heretic,” but speaks of “holes” and “mice”.

⁶² On *inqilāb/inqilāp* as an Ottomanism, an Ottoman Turkish neologism, which replaced Classical Arabic *dawla* for “revolution,” see Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1988), p. 96. The Classical Arabic term *dawla* quickly acquired the signification “state,” and has retained it ever since.

“*yattabī‘u al-ghāwūna al-shu‘arā*” (الغَاوُونَ يَتَّبِعُونَ الشُّعْرَاءَ or يَتَّبِعُ الْغَاوُونَ الشُّعْرَاءَ), but this order is not observed; it is disturbed by lexical metathesis.^{62a} The pre-position of the term *والشُّعْرَاءُ*, *wa al-shu‘arā*, at the beginning of the sentence can only be construed as an attempt to impart emphasis to it by position. The reader of, or listener to, this verse in seventh-century Mecca, long before the Arabic language received its formal classical grammatical framework in medieval Islamic times, can only have understood the verse to be one that gave prominence to the pre-positioned term *al-shu‘arā*. The reader/listener would not have expected this prominence to be diluted or diminished by the two terms that followed it, which would have been the case if *al-Ghāwūna* had been construed to denote human beings gone astray, (rather than demons who lead astray, the later traditional conventional interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna*), which draws attention away from *al-shu‘arā*, prominently pre-positioned at the beginning of the sentence.

The most substantial response to the two articles, *CKE* and *ACKE*, however, has come from Michael Zwettler.

Seven years after the appearance of *ACKE* in 1983, he published a long article,⁶³ in which he paid special attention to the *Sūra* of the Poets. It was a welcome addition to the growing corpus of literature on this important theme of Islam and poetry, despite the many areas of disagreement between him and the author of this article.

His article of seventy-six pages of text and notes is tripartite in structure: it treats mantic inspiration, Biblical and non-Biblical prophets in the Qur’ān, and the *Sūra* of the Poets. I will comment on the third part of his long article about the *Sūra* of the Poets that responds to the two articles, *CKE* and *ACKE*.

I have argued in both articles that *sūra* XXVI, on the poets, is a unit of revelation. I have found it divisible into three related parts—the proem on the Qur’ān; the middle part on the seven biblical and non-biblical prophets; and the final part on the poets. Michael Zwettler shares this view of the *sūra* as a unit of revelation, tripartite in structure. The most relevant part of his discussion occurs on pp. 109-119, in which he takes issue with this writer both in the text and in his copious notes. Before countering his arguments, two observations of a general nature may be made on his long article.

^{62a} On this, see Sven-Olaf Dahlgren, *Word Order in Arabic*, Orientalia Gothoburgensia, Vol. 12.

⁶³ See “A Mantic Manifesto: the *Sūra* of the Poets and the Qur’ānic Foundations of Prophetic Authority,” in *Poetry and Prophecy*, ed. James L. Kugel (Cornell University Press, London and Ithaca, 1990), pp. 75-119 and 205-231.

Zwettler used the word “mantic” in his title, “A Mantic Manifesto.” Although the term *mantis* does mean a prophet in Greek, in modern English parlance, “mantic” is the adjective for divination, exactly what the Qur’ān dissociates Muḥammad from. “Prophetic Manifesto” would have been better, although also objectionable, since this would imply that the Qur’ān was the work of Muḥammad, not God. “Qur’ānic Manifesto” would have been a better title. However, the term “manifesto” used for a Qur’ānic *sūra* or pericope is not devoid of flippancy, which might jar the sensibilities by the civilian Muslims who believe the Qur’ān to be the Word of God.⁶⁴ Yet the term is the least offensive. It is also strange that the author should not have undertaken “a systematic explication of these āyas,” to use his own phrase (page 109, line 36) about verses 192-227, the third part of the *sūra* which deals directly with poetry and happens to be the climax of the entire *sūra*; this despite the fact that the article deals mainly with the *Sūra* of the Poets, and in a volume, titled *Poetry and Prophecy*.

Although he goes along with the views expressed in *CKE* and *ACKE* on various points, Zwettler concentrates on two principal conclusions of the two articles: (1) *al-Ghāwūna* in verse 224, he argues, is not demonic or satanic in denotation, but human, meaning men who go astray or are perverse; (2) what is involved in verse 226 is simply the accusation that the poets are liars, and not rivals of the Prophet, who tried but failed to produce anything like the Qurān.

CKE (pp. 568-572) and *ACKE* (pp. 2-6) have stated the case for *al-Ghāwūna* as demonic in denotation and has done so with much detail. However, there are references in his article to *al-Ghāwūna*, which deserve to be addressed.

He maintains that the verb *ghawā* from which *al-Ghāwūna* in verse 224 is derived, is an intransitive verb in this case and that *ghawā*, which can be a transitive verb, is never so used in the Qur’ān. To this he devotes a very long note (p. 227, n. 146). At issue in verse 224 is the *denotation* of the term *al-Ghāwūna*, which it has been argued in both articles, *CKE* and *ACKE* and on non-philological grounds, that they are the satans, the *shayāṭīn*. Hence, they are the active agents in the verse, attending the poets. The *nomen agentis al-Ghāwūna*, it has also been argued, could derive from *ghawā* as a transitive verb or as an intransitive verb. Its derivation from the intransitive verb *ghawā* does not in the least affect its denotation as *shayāṭīn*. In Qur’ānic thought, Satan disobeyed God in Heaven and consequently became together with his followers, *ghāwūn*, “perverse,” “astray,” “errant,” to use the epithets employed by Zwettler in support of his argument. They could not be described otherwise, as *mughwawn*, since this

⁶⁴ The sensational title with its “Manifesto” calls to mind that of the Hylaea group of whom

would have been a description blasphemous in its implication of God as a “perverter.” Hence, the term that described them was *ghāwūn*, a term that remained after they departed heaven for earth, where they became the perverters of human beings, active agents in the process of perversion. Functionally, *ghāwūn* describes the *shayāṭīn* as active agents, while morphologically, the term may derive from either a transitive or an intransitive *ghawā*, but either derivation leaves *ghāwūn* functionally active agents. What matters in the interpretation of verse 224 in the *Sūra* of the Poets is the function of the *shayāṭīn* as active agents and not the question of the derivation of the term.

Zwettler’s argument is in view of the fact that a few years before his 1990 article appeared, Zwettler had completely accepted the new interpretation of *al-Ghāwūna* as demonic in denotation and even contributed a more adequate translation for the verb *yattabi’uhum*.⁶⁵

To prove the intransitiveness of *ghawā* in all its Qur’ānic attestations, he invokes from modern linguistics the concept of “complementary distribution;” according to him, the verse in XXXVII: (32) *فَأَعْوَبْتَكُمْ إِنَّا كُنَّا غَاوِينَ* is an illustrative example. But this concept applies to phonology and morphology and not to syntax, which is what is involved in the transitivity and intransitivity of the verb, *ghawā*. *Ghawīn*, *غَاوِينَ*, in the quoted verse carries with it the force of the verb *aghwaynākum*, *فَأَعْوَبْتَكُمْ*, a transitive verb. Although morphologically it can derive either from intransitive or transitive *ghawā*, the context provided by the verb *aghwaynākum*, preceding it, makes it very plausible that it is derived from *ghawā* as a transitive verb. This verse is important, since *ghawīn* is preceded by the clearly transitive verb *aghwaynākum*, which supports the derivation of *ghawīn* from *ghawā*, as a transitive, unlike the more famous verse 224 in the *sūra* of the poets, which does not have a preceding verb, *ghawā* or any of its derivative, increased forms. Hence, *ghawīn* in verse XXXVII: 32 is a valuable attestation of this *nomen agentis* used in the active sense, derived most probably from *ghawā* as a transitive verb. This may be cited in the discussion of the syntax of *al-Ghāwūna* in verse 224, in the *Sūra* of the Poets, as a Qur’ānic attestation, which, it has been argued, denotes the *shayāṭīn* as active agents.

Zwettler’s observations that in this *āya* one would expect not *ghāwīn*, but *mughwīn/mughwūn*, (the *nomen agentis* from the increased form, *af’al*), does not do justice to euphony or the law of phonetic facility in Arabic. This appositely introduces the next observation in the examination of Zwettler’s argument.

V. Mayakovsky was one, who issued their manifesto, “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste,” in 1912.

⁶⁵ See *The Oral Tradition of Arabic Poetry: Its Character and Implications* (Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 1978), p. 157.

The transitiveness of the verbs employed in the Qur'ān for *ghawā* has been commented on by Qur'ānic exegetes in medieval times, who spent a whole lifetime interpreting their Holy Book. There are areas of interpretation in which modern scholars are far ahead of them. In philological studies, especially grammatical *tafsīr*, earlier scholars' judgment cannot be lightly dismissed, especially al-Zamakhsharī, whose competence in *tafsīr* is universally acknowledged. He believed that *ghāwīn* in the verse فَأَغْوَيْنَاكُمْ إِنَّا كُنَّا غَاوِينَ, "we have led you astray" is used in a transitive sense, and not intransitively, as Zwettler has argued. In Zamakhsharī's *Commentary* on the verse, especially for the *ghāwīn*, he makes clear that referents are still the *shayāṭīn*, who open the verse by saying: *fa aghwaynākum*, "we have lead you astray," and explicates the term *ghāwīn* as فَأَرَدْنَا إِغْرَاءَكُمْ, *fa-aradnā ighrā'akum*,⁶⁶ with the understanding that the participle *ghawīn* still carries the force of the transitive verb *aghwaynākum*. The verb *ighrā'akum* is used instead of *ighwā'akum*; both are transitive verbs. I suspect that *ighrā'akum* is a misprint for *ighwā'akum*, since according to the rules of transcriptional probabilities, the *rā* and the *waw* are similar in form.

The concept of complementary distribution, therefore, does not explain the verb *ghawā*'s transitive and intransitive uses in the Qur'ān. This is an example of de-contextualization, of which another example will be noted later. In this case, it could be described as methodological de-contextualization. The principle of *tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān*, not complementary distribution, is the sounder guide for Qur'ānic interpretation.

Zwettler returns to *al-Ghāwūna* in an endnote (n. 154, p. 229). After expressing agreement with the view stated in *ACKE*, (p. 2), he goes on to observe that my view on the poets as not having followers clashes with my view (p. 7) that they were "a much-respected group." A pre-Islamic poet such as Labīd was very much respected as both a *sayyid* and as a poet and yet there is no record that he had followers. One can be respected without being the leader of a group. The term "group" is not used with the implication that Zwettler seems to have thought it had. "Individuals" could be used instead of "group" in the phrase, "much-respected individuals." The irony which he also says I missed is not entirely clear to me; it may derive from his own peculiar interpretation of verse 224 on the poets as leaders, as stated in the last paragraph of his text (p. 113).

I should like to thank Zwettler for the elegant rendering of verse 224, when his views coincided with mine: "And the Poets! Attending them (are) those who lead astray." (i.e. the demons, *al-Ghāwūna*).⁶⁷

⁶⁶ See *al-Kashshāf*, Vol. III, page 339, line 10.

⁶⁷ *The Oral Tradition*, page 157, lines 3-4, from the bottom, also p. 185, n. 134.

Zwettler's second and most important disagreement is in the interpretation of verse 226, which, it has been argued in *ACKE*, involves *I'jāz*, the failure of the poets to produce anything like the Qur'ān, rather than that poets were liars. Zwettler contests both new interpretations: what the poets are not and what they are, as explained in *ACKE* (pp. 6-12). This article has returned to the interpretation of this verse in greater detail, and new material has been added to what was presented in *ACKE*, all of which should answer Zwettler's doubts. Two points Zwettler discusses in detail in a long note are:

He conceded that the verse does not use one single word for expressing "lie" attested elsewhere in the Qur'ān, namely, *kadhīb* (lie), *ifk* (falsification), or *iftirā'* (fabrication), but employs two different words derived from *qāla*, "said" and *fa'ala*, "did." He rejects the view that the verse involves Qur'ānic *I'jāz*, and suggests that what is involved is *fakhr* (pride, self-praise). That verse 226 does *not* refer to *fakhr* had already been stated in *ACKE*, (p. 7, n. 15) and re-stated this article with more evidence. What Zwettler fails to observe is that *contextualization*, essential for understanding what the verse really means, clearly points to *I'jāz* when the verse and the cluster to which it belongs are set against the *sūra* in its entirety and its keynote, namely, the vindication of the Qur'ān as a divinely inspired book rejected by the Meccans, especially the poets. Between the two possibilities of what verse 226 involves, *fakhr* or *I'jāz*, the context indicates *I'jāz*. The two verbs in the verse are thus to be interpreted in terms of promise and non-fulfillment, involving the *I'jāz*, as indicated by the context.

Contextualization thus makes superfluous assembling more supportive material in the Qur'ān. However, since this material is available and relevant, it was given in *ACKE* and in this present article. However, Zwettler chose one example presented in *ACKE*, verses 2-3, in *Surat al-Şaff*, LXI, generally accepted as referring to the Battle of Uḥud (A.D. 625). The example illustrates the sequence of promise and non-fulfillment:

يا أيها الذين آمنوا لِمَ تَقُولُونَ مَا لَا تَفْعَلُونَ (2) كَبُرَ مَقْتًا عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَنْ تَقُولُوا مَا لَا تَفْعَلُونَ
(3) إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الَّذِينَ يُقَاتِلُونَ فِي سَبِيلِهِ صَفًا كَانَتْهُمْ بُنْيَانًا مَرْصُوعًا (4)

O you who have believed, why do you say what to do not do? It is very odious in the sight of God that you say what you do not do. Verily, God loves those who fight in his way as if they are a solid well-articulated structure.

Zwettler tries to re-interpret the verses as an example of *fakhr*, consonant with his view that nothing more than lying (as in *fakhr*) is involved in them. More serious is his reference to Zamakhsharī. He says that the latter suggested three alternatives to the interpretation of these verses other than the one related to the Battle of Uḥud:

- a. Exaggerated or false claims of prowess in battle, which he indicates as *fakhr* with a question mark.
- b. Attribution to oneself of the feats of others.
- c. The hypocritical protestations of the *munāfiqūn*.

The well-known *mufasssir*, Zamakhsharī, certainly gives precedence to the interpretation of the verses as related to Uḥud and the non-fulfillment of a promise and begins his *tafsīr* by devoting the first three lines to the interpretation.⁶⁸ He begins with *ikhhlāf al-waʿd* (the non-fulfillment of a promise) and ends with *wa lam yafū* (and they did not fulfill); this is repeated in explaining verse 3; *waʿadū . . . wa lam yafū*, “they promised, but they did not fulfill.”⁶⁹ (a) In the above enumeration, the first explanation is related to the Battle of Uḥud⁷⁰ and is not as Zwettler argues, an example of *fakhr*. Those who fled at the battle tried to protect themselves against the taunt that they were cowards, by saying, “I killed, I thrust with my spear, etc.” with no *fakhr* involved; (b) and (c) are not given any precedence by Zamakhsharī. These are included in his *tafsīr* only because he wanted to be comprehensive in his coverage. They have only a modest place in his *tafsīr* of the verses and do not represent his preference in interpretation, which is related to the Battle of Uḥud.

The fourth verse in this *sūra*, *al-Ṣaff*, that follows immediately the two verses of promise and non-fulfillment is crucial for the new interpretation: “Verily God loves those who fight in his cause in battle array as if they were a solid structure.” This establishes the interpretation of the two preceding verses as promise and non-fulfillment, by relating the verses to the Battle of Uḥud, lost by the Muslims to the Meccans.⁷¹ Verse 226 of the *Sūra* of the Poets has the identical terms of promise and fulfillment, but its full interpretation must be inferred from the *sūra* as a whole and from its theme, the Qurʾān and its defense as the word of God, not Muḥammad’s. In the

⁶⁸ See *al-Kashshāf*, Vol. IV, page 96, lines 4-7.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, page 97, line 9.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, page 96, lines 6, 7.

⁷¹ Zwettler animadverts on *asbāb al-nuzūl* as keys to the interpretation of this verse in *sūra* LXI; but what is relevant in the analysis of this verse in the *Sūra* of the Poets is not if it was related to the Battle of Uḥud in particular. It could have been related to another engagement. Its relevance in the context of this discussion is that it indicates that what is relevant in the two preceding verses, which are replicas of the crucial verse 226 in the *Sūra* of the Poets, is the sequence—promise and non-fulfillment.

As to whether or not the verse refers to the Battle of Uḥud, the chances are good that it does. The battle is more clearly referred to in *Sūrat Al-ʿImrān*, III. 121, 152, 149-160. In both *sūras*, *Al-ʿImrān* and *al-Ṣaff*, the name Uḥud is not expressed, but is clearly implied. These are Madīnan *sūras*, revealed when historical events were clearer than in Mecca, as were the references to them in the Qurʾān. The significant details in the *āyas* of both *sūras* dovetail. *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* in this case are a reliable key to interpreting the *āya*, unlike other *Asbāb*. For Zwettler on *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*, see *A Mantic Manifesto*, page 230, lines 17-18.

Sūra of *al-Şaff*, the concept of promise and non-fulfillment is clear in the two verses. The verses are *immediately* followed by this fourth verse, which explicitly states the context, unlike the case in verse 226 of the *Sūra* of the Poets, in which the concept had to be inferred from the *sūra* in its entirety and from structural analysis.

The two articles, *CKE* and *ACKE*, have many elements in support of the new interpretation of the four crucial verses in the *Sūra* of the poets. Zwettler avoids these and also the evidence from *sūra* II, 23-24, *Sūrat al-Baqara* on the *I'jāz*, discussed in *ACKE* (8-12). Those verses give support to the problem of the Inimitability of the Qur'ān, *I'jāz*, which has figured so prominently in the new interpretation of the four verses. Zwettler does not comment on verse 227 of the four crucial verses in the *Sūra* of the Poets. This is the verse that gives a positive view of poetry, unlike the three preceding verses that denounced it. As discussed at length in both *CKE* and *ACKE*, the verse legitimated poetry and reaffirmed it within the Muslim orthodoxy. Discussion of the verse would have been particularly relevant and apposite in a volume titled *Poetry and Prophecy*, in an article partly titled, "A Mantic Manifesto: the *Sūra* of the Poets . . ." Instead of dealing with the legitimating verse 227, Zwettler presents a different view of poetry and poets. The view did not deal with the context of the *sūra* of the poets itself and its theme, the divine nature of the Qur'ān and its defense against detractors. The view instead substituted a concept outside the *sūra* itself, that of *Ṭā'a*, obedience to the Prophet and his authority. With his explanation, which de-contextualizes the four crucial verses on the poets, Zwettler presented his own interpretation of the verses. The presentation contains many insightful comments, but this does not compensate for the omission, which could leave the reader wondering whether the Qur'ān abolished poetry from *Dār al-Islām* in much the same way that the founder of the Athenian academy had banished it from his ideal city.

Michael Zwettler's article, in spite of some errors, is a remarkable piece of Arabic/Islamic scholarship, coming as it does from a true Arabist and serious Islamicist. Differences of opinion are natural in scholarship and are welcome since they stimulate dialogue and the further exploration of problems, as indeed has happened in the case of this debate on Islam and poetry. Zwettler's article, however, welcome as it is, provides cause for surprise. An earlier part of this paper mentioned his very favorable reaction to the first article, *CKE*, and what is more, his refinement on the rendering of a crucial verb in verse 224, as "attending" rather than "following," which I have accepted. It was, therefore, a surprise to read in this second long article a complete reversal of his position on the new interpretation. Furthermore, at the beginning and end of a long note, in which he indicated the areas of disagreement with the two articles, *CKE* and *ACKE*, he used a number of adjectives

and adverbs, which are untrue as well as unfortunate, reflecting his reaction to reading the two articles (p. 229, n. 159). One of these was “inconsistency”,⁷² which he uses without examples. In *ACKE*, I devoted four pages (18-21) to the discussion of his views on Arabic poetry, as related to my review of his book, *The Oral Tradition of Arabic Poetry*. The review⁷³ was complimentary to his scholarship in the book, but expressed dissent with the basic thesis—the orality of pre-Islamic poetry and its transmission. Coming as it does between his acceptance of the new interpretation in 1978 and his rejection of it in 1990, the *ACKE* and the review make the rejection understandable. His dissertation, which appeared later as his book, ignores a work in Arabic on pre-Islamic poetry, namely, that of N. al-Asad, *Maṣādir al-Shiʿr al-Jāhili*, which contradicts the theory of the oral tradition of Arabic pre-Islamic poetry and the applicability of the Lord-Perry theory. In 1990, when his second work involving both Qurʾānic studies and Arabic poetry appeared, he still adhered to the theory of orality and the Lord-Perry theory.^{73a}

Simultaneously with the appearance of Michael Zwettler’s article, in 1990, a monograph on the four crucial verses was published by Ghāzī al-Quṣaybī, the well-known Saudi Arabian poet-critic.

Al-Quṣaybī reached conclusions almost identical with those of this writer, especially on the two most important controversial verses, verse 224 and its crux, *al-Ghāwūna*, which he concluded is demonic in denotation, and on verse 226, which he concluded involves the the Qurʾān’s *Iʿjāz*.⁷⁴ His conclusions stand in sharp contrast to those at Michael Zwettler on the two verses.

Al-Quṣaybī refers to Ibn ʿAbbās and his comment on verse 226, by quoting him on the two verbs involved in it, in his *Tanwīr al-Miqbās*,⁷⁵ *mā lā yaqdirūna an yafʿalū*. Ibn ʿAbbās was the father of Qurʾānic *tafsīr* and a Ṣaḥābī, a Companion of the Prophet. The authority of Ibn ʿAbbās’ interpretation lends support to the new interpretation of the verse.

Another noteworthy feature of this monograph is the commentary on the last sentence of the exceptive verse 227, “and those who did wrong will

⁷² Another is “pertinence,” which sounds strange, coming from an author who *de-contextualized* the verses in the *sūra* of the poets and introduced the concept of *Ṭāʿa*, obedience to the Prophets, instead of the concept of the divine nature of the Qurʾān, the keynote of the *sūra* to which the crucial verses on the poets belong.

⁷³ For this review, see *JAOS*, 100, 1 (1980), pp. 31-33.

^{73a} On the Perry-Lord theory on which Zwettler has relied, see his *The Oral Tradition . . .*, pp. 4-5, 28-34, 216-218.

⁷⁴ See Ghāzī al-Quṣaybī, *Man hum al-shuʿarāʾ alladhīna yattabiʿuhum al-Ghāwūna* (al-Manama, Bahrain, 1990).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

know or find out what a complete discomfiture they will experience," the comminatory note on the poets who had attacked Islam and the Prophet. It gives a list of the poets and explains what happens to most of them⁷⁶—those who accepted Islam and were pardoned by the Prophet, those whom the Prophet had executed (although he missed, Ibn Ṣabāba and his two songstresses), and those who did not adopt Islam, but, nevertheless, they were left alone, significantly those in Najran, whither they had fled (pp. 46-56).

Al-Mutashābihāt and Al-Muḥkamāt

As so much ink has been spilt over the exegesis of these verses both in medieval and modern times, it is well that the position of this writer should be explained *vis-à-vis* the two most controversial of these verses, namely 224 and 226 by the employment of two appropriate Qur'ānic terms. The Qur'ān distinguishes two kinds of *āyāt* (verses)—*mutashābihāt*, those which admit various interpretations and which only God knows, and *muḥkamāt*, those whose interpretation admit no doubt.

The complex argument propounded for the interpretation of verse 224 (the demonic, Satanic one), has yielded a conclusion that has so far proved to be impregnable. Yet, if another, better interpretation is suggested in the future other than this one, supported by cogent arguments, this writer will be ready to accept it. I would like to describe this *āya* as *mutashābiha*.

Of these two controversial verses, the second, verse 226, is the more significant, since it deals with the most important of three dogmas surrounding the Qur'ān. Unlike verse 224, the present writer harbors no doubts about the validity of his conclusions and therefore considers this *āya muḥkama*.

PART THREE

Methodology

At the conclusion of this intensive interpretation of these four verses, it is well that the principles that have guided it should be summed up, especially since an entirely new interpretation has been given to these four verses. These principles have been lightly touched on in *CKE* (pp. 578-580), but they have been elaborated and amplified with new elements in this section.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

al-Tafsīr bi al-Ra'y

Of the main currents or schools of exegesis, *al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y* (appeal to reason), and *al-tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr* (appeal to tradition), the former has been the principal guide. Occasionally, attention to *al-ma'thūr* has been given, but it has been strictly peripheral; the backbone of the argument has been *tafsīr bi al-ra'y*, the opposite of the principle that guided Tabari in his great *Commentary*.

The *ma'thūr* has been taken from the work of the *Tabi'ūn*, the successors of the *Ṣaḥāba*, the Companions of the Prophet, namely Mujāhid and Muqātil. What they said was accepted only because it was consonant with what has been established by *ra'y* and because the two *Tabi'ūn* were close to the period of the Revelation, and therefore cannot be entirely ignored.

In the application of *tafsīr bi al-ra'y* in the course of this article, the door of *ijtihād* has been opened and the following approaches have been explored. These are limited to the ones employed in the interpretation of this *Sūra XXVI*, but there are other new approaches, resources, and disciplines, which were unknown to the medieval exegetes and applicable to the interpretation of other *sūras*.⁷⁷

Lisānun 'Arabiyyun Mubīnun

The foremost principle that has guided this interpretation has been the dogma of the Arabic Qur'ān, i.e. that it was revealed in perspicuous, communicative, crystal clear Arabic. An interpretation that does not thoroughly emphasize the fact that these four verses are expressed in *lisānun 'arabiyyun mubīnun* will not do justice to their interpretation. Hence, the detailed attention to Arabic grammar and poetry in interpreting them.

Consonant with this, each of the three verbs in the first verse, 224, has been examined in detail: (1) the privileged position of “the poets,” والشعراءُ, which opens the verse; (2) the technical meaning that can and does attach to the second word, “follow them, attend them,” يَتَّبِعُهُمْ as demonic in connotation; and (3) the third word, *al-Ghāwūna*, الغاؤون whose denotation, it has been argued, are the “demons,” not “erring human beings.” It was also

⁷⁷ Such is the *Arabic* version of the Bible in pre-Islamic times. Although the existence of such a Bible in its entirety is still *sub iudice*, there is no doubt that there was an Arabic version of a portion of it, e.g. the Gospel. The case for this will be published in the not too distant future, will put some aspects of Qur'ānic studies, especially exegesis, on an entirely new footing. Another aspect is the knowledge of Arab-Byzantine relations on the eve of the rise of Islam, especially in Western Arabia, where the birthplace of Islam took place, and which was the Byzantine sphere of influence. These new resources will be presented in the next volume of this writer, the seventh in his series, *Byzantium and the Arabs*.

observed that the third word could derive from the verb *ghawā* as a transitive verb and this should confirm its “demonic” interpretation, as demons actively attending the poets and misleading them. Examples of the use of *ghawā* as a transitive have been collected both from the Qur'ān and Arabic pre-Islamic poetry. In support of this interpretation, attention has been drawn to the two verses that follow and which are cast interrogatively, as rhetorical questions. As such, their force as proof for verse 224 can be meaningful only if the denotation of *al-Ghāwūna* is demonic. Arabic verses of the early Islamic period support the denotation of *wādī* in verse 225 as “valley” and not as a metaphorical term, meaning “kind” or “variety” of discourse.

The more important verse, 226, also has been subjected to a detailed analysis, the gist of which has been not simply lying in general, but lying in particular. This is the failure of the poets to fulfill what they had promised to do; this was nothing less than imitating the Qur'ān. The analysis also examined the employment of the two verbs *yaqūlūn* and *yaf'alūn*, instead of one word, such as *ifk*, *kadhib*, or *iftirā'*, by appealing to early Arabic poetry, which expressed the non-fulfillment of a promise through the employment of the two terms. Verse 227 was also subjected to the same detailed examination. The crucial verb for the Muslim poets, which legitimated their compositions, was *intaṣarū*, which means not what is commonly understood, but “took their revenge.”

Contextualization

The next aspect after exploiting all the resources of *lisānun 'arabiyyun mubīnun* has been contextualization, in obedience to the dictum that “text without context is pretext.” The contexts within which the four verses have been set are a hierarchy, beginning with the Qur'ān itself, then Mecca, where the Prophet preached, and thirdly the Arab/Arabian context; hence, contextualization is tripartite in structure.

Tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān

The interpretation of the four verses in the Qur'ān through relating them to Qur'ānic thought is natural and has been conducted in this article on three levels—the “short passage”, the *Sūra* of the Poets in its entirety, and other parts of the Qur'ān. The order of these three levels has been necessary to follow in view of what has been said about the disjointedness of the 'Uthmānic text of the Qur'ān. It has been observed that the *sūras* are not units of revelation, but revelations that were put together by the committee that issued the 'Uthmānic text in which the *sūras* are composite, Meccan and Madīnan and sometimes pericopes, which do not seem to be sequential in

thought. There is a certain amount of truth in this, hence the exegesis of the Qurʾān through the Qurʾān has started with the non-controversial first level:

The interpretation of the crucial verses was conducted within the framework of the “short passage,” the small cluster of verses, 224-226. No one has denied their genuine sequence. Even Richard Bell, to whom is owed this important contribution to the Qurʾānic exegesis, did not doubt that they are a unit of revelation.

What has been said about the disjointedness of the Qurʾān has led to the neglect of the unity of the *sūra* as an element in Qurʾānic exegesis. This neglect has been detrimental to the exegesis of this particular *sūra*, the unity of which is an important key to its analysis. The unity of this *sūra* has been demonstrated in this article through the keynote, tripartite composition, and thread of continuity that runs through it from beginning to end. The structural analysis of this *sūra* as a unit of revelation has been a major key for unlocking the secrets of the four crucial verses.

In addition to recovering the unity of the *Sūra* of the Poets, other parts of the Qurʾān were drawn upon for the analysis of the four verses.

Various verses in the Qurʾān associate the demons, the *shayāṭīn*, with human beings whom they mislead. These have been noted in support of the demonic interpretation of verse 224.

Sūrat al-Fajr LXXXIX has been analyzed and its relevance to the *Sūra* of the Poets has been indicated. It has been argued that the first four verses of the *sūra* present insuperable difficulties for analysis, if they are *not* taken as a parody. It has, therefore, been argued that these verses may be assigned to one phase in “the battle for the Qurʾān, in the Qurʾān,” between the voice of God and the Meccan opposition represented by the poets. This confirms the interpretation of verse 226 as one that involves the problem of the Iʿjāz. The first four verses are those of the poets, who try to ridicule the Qurʾān, while the fifth verse is the contemptuous commentary of the Qurʾān on their poor performance.

The Meccan Scene

The second level in this hierarchy of contexts within which the verses on the poets have been set is that of Mecca and the Meccans to whom the Qurʾān was addressed in *lisānun ʿarabiyyun mubīnūn*. The Meccan milieu has been important in understanding much of the message of the Qurʾān; its outstanding exponent has been W. Montgomery Watt. For the interpretation of the four verses, two elements from the Meccan scene may be singled out as the most relevant:

The existence in Mecca of a substantial number of poets without whom the *Sūra* on the Poets would make no sense. They were the most eloquent

opponents of Muḥammad, and the most vocal representatives of the Meccan opposition. Fortunately, their names are known and what is more, fragments of their poetry have survived that shed light on the verbal contest between Muḥammad and the poets.

The case for the demonic interpretation of the crucial term, *al-Ghāwūna* in verse 224, has rested on various grounds, one of which was the existence in Mecca of a *masjid* called the *masjid* of the jinn.

The Arab and the Arabian Scene

The third level in this hierarchy of contexts, the macroscopic approach for solving the problem of the triplet of verses on the poets in the *sūra*, is Arabia, the peninsula where the Quraysh and their ethnic group lived with shared beliefs and customs.

The poetic *koinê* was one of the unifying forces operative among the pre-Islamic Arabs in the Peninsula and was the creation of poets who were non-Meccans, even though it quickly became the poetic language of the Meccan poets, who shared with other Arab poets their beliefs in the source of their inspiration. Such was the demonic inspiration of poetry and the belief that each poet is attended by a demon. Tradition has preserved the names of many poets and of the demons who possessed them, each called *tābi'* or *tābi'a*, a belief that supported the demonic interpretation of verse 224.

In addition to the sharing with other Arabs their belief in the unseen and the supernatural, there was also the idea of the *wādī* as an abode of the *jinn* who attended the poets, and where ward and warden met, relevant to the understanding of verse 225. Reference was also made to 'Abqar and Wabār, as two localities in Arabia, reserved for the jinn and exclusively occupied by them.

Finally, the corpus of pre-Islamic Arab/Arabian poetry is a mine of information for unlocking and understanding Qur'ānic lexical difficulties. It has been drawn upon for some of the problems of the triplet of verses. One such problem was the transitive use of *ghawā*, "to lead astray," whose attestation in pre-Islamic poetry proved very relevant to the demonic interpretation of the crucial term, *al-Ghāwūna*, in verse 224.

Echoes

Verse 226 in the *Sūra* of the Poets has had a fateful history in various facets of medieval Islamic culture. The inaccurate conception of it as a denunciation of the poets simply as liars without further qualification has led to confusion in the administration of justice, in literature, literary criticism, and among the philosophers.

The traditional misconception has been found convenient by caliphs and judges throughout Islamic history. When a poet said or did something that was objectionable or reprehensible from the Muslim point of view and was accused, the poet invariably invoked this verse to exculpate himself by maintaining that when he said or did the objectionable, he was only lying. Such was the encounter between the Umayyad Caliph, Sulaymān Ibn ‘Abd al-Malik and the poet al-Farazdaq, (*ACKE*, p. 11, n. 26). This encounter was not the only one of its kind in the annals of Islamic history.

It was not long before the concept of the poets as liars and poetry as a lie began to appear in the *dīwāns* of poets and in works of literary criticism. After admiring truthfulness,⁷⁸ poets such as al-Buḥturī started saying:

كَلَفْتُمُونَا حُدُودَ مَنْطِقِكُمْ وَالشَّعْرُ يُغْنِي عَنْ صِدْقِهِ كَذِبُهُ

You have asked us to observe the limits of your logic, but in poetry, its mendacity makes its truthfulness superfluous.⁷⁹

Literary critics articulated the concept by saying⁸⁰ “The best poetry is the most mendacious: “أَحْسَنُ الشَّعْرِ أَكْذِبُهُ”.

In an entirely different category are the philosophers, who dealt with poetry in their commentaries on Plato and especially Aristotle. An example was Ibn-Rushd to whom poetry as a lie and the crucial verses in the *Sūra* of the Poets were not unknown.⁸¹

⁷⁸ The verse of Zuḥayr, extolling truthfulness in poetry, has already been quoted, *supra*, p. 16 and n. 20.

⁷⁹ See the *Dīwān*, ed. Ḥasan K. al-Ṣayrafī (Cairo, 1963), Vol. I, page 209, line 14. In this edition, the second hemistich of the verse reads: فِي الشَّعْرِ يُلْغِي عَنْ صِدْقِهِ كَذِبُهُ, “In poetry, its falsehood cancels its truthfulness,” in which يُلْغِي is hardly the *mot juste*; يُغْنِي is the one presented in the text above.

⁸⁰ On this, see S.A. Bonebakker, in “Ḳudāma,” *EP*, Vol. V, pp. 318-322. For the term *kadhib*, “lie,” “lying” which appears in the work of Arab literary critics in various contexts, see Wolfhart Heinrichs, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-65, and also J.Ch. Bürgel, *op. cit.*

This curious misconception spilled over to Hebrew poetry in its golden period in al-Andalus (ca. 950-ca. 1150) under the influence of Arabic. The development is traceable in that poetry from Andalusian Spain to Renaissance Italy. On this, see Ross Brann, “The Dissembling Poet in Medieval Hebrew Literature,” *JAOS*, 107 (1987), pp. 39-54.

⁸¹ On this, see Charles Butterworth, *Averroes’ Middle Commentary on Aristotle’s Poetics* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1986), pp. 105, 108. For the Arabic text where the term *kadhib*, كَذِبٌ, and reference to the Qur’ānic verses on poetry occur, see Ibn Rushd, *Talkhīs Kitāb al-Shīr*, ed. Charles Butterworth and Aḥmad Haridī (Cairo, 1986), page 98, line 3, and page 101, lines 4-5.

I hope to discuss this in detail in a future publication, as a sequel to a paper I wrote as a student to my tutor in Oxford, John D. Mabbott, on Plato’s theory of poetry!

Conclusions

Poetry had been the artistic *forte* of the Arabs in pre-Islamic times, and remained so in Islamic and modern times. What then was the attitude of Islam towards this most important constituent in Islamic culture?⁸²

The Qur'ān, it is important to emphasize, did not denounce *poetry* as such and did not condemn its practitioners without any qualification. It denounced *poets*, certain poets, with a denunciation that took place in a specific place at a specific time, involving the poets of Mecca in the second and third decades of the seventh century. The occasion was the opposition of the poets as the spokesmen of unbelieving Mecca to the mission of Muḥammad and their rejection of the divine nature of the Qur'ān. The long exceptive verse entered poetry in the framework of orthodox Islam and laid down conditions for its composition. Thus, the two main divisions of the quatrain of verses were complementary to each other, while the tension between Islam and poetry was resolved in the Qur'ān itself during the lifetime of the Prophet.

Outside the purely literary context, the intensive examination of these four verses has revealed the relevance of the results to Islamic theology regarding the most important of the three dogmas related to the Qur'ān, namely *I'jāz*. The study has shown that the crucial verse, 226, not only involves *I'jāz*, but also affirms it. The analysis of the clusters of verses in various *sūras* related to *I'jāz* and the context of the *Sūra* of the Poets as a whole has also revealed the *genesis* of the dogma of *I'jāz* and the various stages of its development. These are the presentation of the Qur'ān as the miracle of Muḥammad, the rejection of its miraculous nature by the Meccans, the *taḥaddī* the challenge to produce a work similar to the Qur'ān, and the failure of the poets to do so, as expressed in the famous verse 226, in the *Sūra* of the Poets. This intensive analysis of the four verses, which has indicated the *genesis* of one of the three dogmas about the Qur'ān, may now be applied to the other two dogmas, namely the Arabness and eternity of the Qur'ān. Such analysis would reveal the genesis of these two dogmas and the various phases of their development.

One of the conclusions reached as a result of the analysis of the four verses was that the *I'jāz* was understood in *literary* terms by those involved in the confrontation between the Prophet Muḥammad and the Meccan opposition, which rejected his Prophethood. Consequently, the Qur'ān itself emerged as the model of literary excellence for all who were to use the

⁸² For this, see the present writer in "Medieval Islam: the Literary-Cultural Dimension," in *Religion and Culture in Medieval Islam* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001), pp. 66-78.

Arabic language as an artistic medium of literary expression, not in poetry, but in prose. The religious dogma has thus impacted literature for the last fifteen centuries and continues to do so. The *sūra* and the *āya* have emerged as new literary terms, but remained strictly applied to the Qur'ān, the counterparts of the *qasīda* and the *bayt* of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry.