

Their Very Words? A Preliminary Evaluation of Reported Speech in the Qur'an

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Introduction

The Qur'an frequently includes the direct speech of both protagonists and antagonists. The speech of the Qur'an's antagonists, including opponents of the prophets and unbelievers generally, has been carefully studied in the 2016 book of Mehdi Azaiez, *Le contre-discours coranique*.¹ Nevertheless, a systematic study of reported speech generally in the Qur'an is still a desideratum for the field of Qur'anic studies. Here I mean to make a modest contribution to this end by asking whether reported speech—principally the reported speech of Muhammad's own opponents in the Qur'an—bears qualities of historical speech. Put otherwise, I will ask

whether reported speech in the Qur'an represents, or even is meant to represent, the very words of Muhammad's opponents, or verbatim quotations. As an alternative, I will propose that Qur'anic repeated speech is part of a *mise-en-scène* scripted by the Qur'an's author in order to advance his arguments.

Reported Speech

In a 1990 article in the journal *Languages*, Herbert Clark and Richard Gerrig argue that direct speech, or quotations, are best considered not as descriptions but rather as demonstrations.² They write, "Demonstrations work by enabling others to experience what it

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¹ Azaiez (*Le contre-discours coranique* [2016]) distinguishes between the "counter-discourse" of Qur'anic antagonists in the past (i.e., the opponents of pre-Muhammadan prophets), in the present (Muhammad's own opponents), and in the future (the damned on the Day of Judgment). Azaiez refers also to the earlier work of Gwynne, *Logic, Rhetoric, and Legal Reasoning* (2004). See also Mir, "Dialogue in The Qur'an" (1992).

² Clark and Gerrig, "Quotations as Demonstrations" (1990). For a more recent discussion of direct speech (and in particular as it appears in the Hebrew Bible), see Sandler and Pascual, "In the Beginning There was Conversation" (2019). They consider a number of examples from the Hebrew Bible (especially the Pentateuch) and consider the text's use of "fictive direct speech" (that is, direct speech that represents thought or other articulations that are not meant to be verbatim quotations) in particular. On direct speech in the Hebrew Bible, see also Meier, *Speaking of Speaking* (1992). Also relevant is Authier-Revuz, "Hétérogénéité(s) énonciative(s)" (1984). I am grateful to Mehdi Azaiez for these final two references.

is like to perceive the things depicted.”³ While their analysis is particularly focused on quotations within speech-acts, their conclusions are also relevant for reported speech in a text. Their point is that quotations are not meant to describe but to demonstrate or depict. They compare “direct quotation” as a speech act to a demonstration of a tennis serve, or a friend’s limp.⁴ According to this understanding of a quotation, speakers who quote imply that they are reproducing speech verbatim but they may not be doing so (as one’s demonstration of a tennis serve or a limp might be close but not exact). In addition, speakers who quote do not take responsibility for the things said and speakers may quote only a “snippet” of an event; thereby they evince a sort of solidarity with the audience by implying that the audience will have the necessary background information to understand the context and underlying meaning. Quotations also allow for the depictions of events that cannot be described (including interior, unarticulated thought). For our purposes, their key point is that while a quotation *implies* verbatim reproduction, this does not mean that such reproduction is actually obtained, or even desired.

Indeed, the key question in Clark and Gerrig’s study for our purposes is assessing whether quotations tend to involve verbatim reproduction. Clark and Gerrig question an earlier assumption that in the act of quoting, the speaker “commits himself to repeating the actual words spoken.”⁵ They contend that the very nature of quotation as a demonstration implies that it does *not* involve verbatim reproduction. In reported speech, they hold, the speaker depicts, and does not reproduce. This is so in part because reported speech tends to be articulated in a way that makes ungrammatical speech grammatical and syntactically awkward speech less awkward. Thus, for example, they note that an original statement: “I—I’ve only been—we’ve only been to like, four of his I—five of his lectures, right?” might be “quoted” as follows “Sidney says, ‘We’ve only been to five of his lectures.’”

One could imagine a similar process unfolding in the Qur’an. Qur’an 15:7, for example, has an opponent of Muhammad say: *law mā ta’tinā bi-l-malā’ikati in kunta minā l-ṣādiqīna* (“Why dost thou not bring

the angels unto us, if thou speakest truly?”).⁶ Without attempting to speculate on what a “syntactically awkward” original of this quotation might have looked like, I would submit that the original oral phrase (assuming for the moment that there was such a phrase) could have been articulated very differently, perhaps with “nonsense” or “filler” words like those in the quotation about lectures above (one might think of how *ya’ni* is used in spoken Arabic today as a filler word), with re-articulation/repetition, or perhaps with entirely different words. Of course, with the case of Arabic, other questions arise, such as the relationship between Qur’anic Arabic and the spoken Arabic of the *Ḥijāz*, since one should consider the sort of register of Arabic in which the historical conversations that supposedly lie behind the Qur’an were conducted. In addition, one might consider the possibility that the Qur’anic text was later emended or “improved” (for example, with case endings).⁷ I will address some of these possibilities below.

Another important point in Clark and Gerrig’s study is that reported speech tends not to be verbatim because of the basic limitations of human memory. They write (referring to a number of earlier studies): “Empirical research shows that people can’t recall an utterance word for word, even after a few seconds, without taking special pains to rehearse and memorize it,”⁸ adding: “We suggest that speakers and addressees tacitly recognize this limitation.”⁹ In fact, in different studies, participants tend to assess their own quotations as falling short of verbatim. Quoted speech also tends to involve repairs or “improvements” to original utterances, and they are of course selective. In brief, the authors argue (convincingly, in my opinion) that quotations generally do not reproduce the content of what was originally uttered, but rather *show* the audience the gist of what was said.¹⁰ This is the case even when

⁶ Trans. Arberry, *Koran Interpreted* (1955).

⁷ See also in this same issue of the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* Devin Stewart’s article, “Qur’anic Periphrases for the Sake of Rhyme and Rhythm and the Periphrastic Use of *Kull*.”

⁸ Clark and Gerrig, “Quotations as Demonstrations” (1990): 796; they refer to (among others) Isaacs, *Mutual Memory for Conversation* (1989) and Lehrer, “Remembering and Representing Prose” (1989).

⁹ Clark and Gerrig, “Quotations as Demonstrations” (1990), 796.

¹⁰ One of the cases noted by Stephen Shoemaker shows the difficulty of verbatim reproduction in cases where there is no written recording. Shoemaker discusses the research of Jack Goody among

³ Clark and Gerrig, “Quotations as Demonstrations” (1990): 765.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 764.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 785; quoting Leech, *Semantics* (1974), 353.

speech is reported a day or an hour after the original event. In the case of the Qur'an's reported speech, the report—depending on how one thinks of the composition of the text—might be composed weeks, months, or years after the original utterance. While interest in the field of memory studies has only just begun to appear in Qur'anic studies, there is good reason to think, on the basis of this field, that humans generally are incapable of reproducing earlier (even recent) speech verbatim when it is not written down immediately.¹¹

Reported Speech in the Qur'an

In his discussion of the conversations between Muhammad and Muhammad's opponents as reported by the Qur'an, Nicolai Sinai writes that while these exchanges "are not unreasonably seen as having some grounding in real debates, it would of course be naïve to treat them simply as unfiltered transcripts."¹² This is more or less as close as we come to a contemporary scholar questioning whether the quotations in the Qur'an are verbatim representations of historical conversations. It is much more common for scholars to assume that these quotations include the very words of Muhammad's opponents.¹³ This is implied, although not explicit,

in the comments of Montgomery Watt in his work *Muhammad, Prophet and Statesman*: "The Qur'ān reflects the war of words and ideas between Muḥammad and his opponents throughout the remainder of his life in Mecca. As well as expounding and defending the new religion, it quotes the arguments used against it."¹⁴ Mustansir Mir says something similar about the Meccan Quraysh in his article on dialogue in the Qur'an, written three decades later.¹⁵

Indeed, one might conclude that Qur'anic dialogue in general—and not only the particular dialogue of Muhammad's own opponents—has received relatively little attention in either western and Islamic scholarship. Mir comments that western scholarship in the 20th century generally neglected Qur'anic dialogue, adding the following regarding "Muslim" scholarship:

Neither does Muslim scholarship offer a more satisfactory treatment of Qur'anic dialogue. For example, Sayyid Qutb of Egypt studies the Qur'anic narrative art in his well-known *At-Taswir al-Fanni fi l-Qur'an*, but the book, which otherwise contains some excellent insights, shows little appreciation of Qur'anic dialogue as a literary technique.¹⁶

the LoDagaa people in northern Ghana. Goody studied different performers reciting a sacred text known as the Bagre, which is recited in rhythmic speech and in a type of liturgy. While the performers generally assumed that they were all reciting the same "text," in fact Goody found numerous and substantial variations in the difference performances. Goody also transcribed a version of the Bagre in an initial visit (1949–50). He returned twenty years later and recorded different performances of the same text (fifteen in all) and found significant differences between all of the versions, including the earlier version. See Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur'an* (2022), Ch. 5. As Shoemaker notes, the ability to recall texts verbatim is dramatically improved when a performer is able to refer to a written version of that text.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 150–55. Shoemaker, however, is principally concerned with the claims of Islamic tradition that Muhammad's followers would have remembered his words verbatim between the time of his initial proclamation and the recording of the Qur'an in writing. In this article, my interest is in the Qur'anic author's reproduction of the (supposed) conversations of the opponents of Muhammad which took place *before* his proclamations.

¹² Sinai, *Qur'an* (2017), 14.

¹³ In academic writing on the Qur'an, authors often present passages attributed to the Prophet's opponents as quotations (without explicitly endorsing the idea that they are verbatim quotations). To give one example, Daniel Madigan writes in *The Qur'an's Self-Image* (2001): "In what is traditionally considered the earliest passage with this kind of demand, the Meccans insist . . .," (p. 54);

further along (p. 56), "In case there were any doubt that the Meccans were asking for something physically written, in Q 6:7 we find . . ."; and again (p. 63): "In a context once again related to Moses, the Prophet's critics demand to know why the recitation he claims is from God is being given to him only piecemeal. . . ."

¹⁴ Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* (1961), 70.

¹⁵ Mir ("Dialogue in the Qur'an" [1992]: 8) focuses on the second and third Meccan periods: "Only beginning with the Second Meccan period did the Quraysh realize that the challenge posed by Muhammad's message was a serious one. They then began to criticize it in earnest: they raised questions, expressed doubts, and made objections. Without trivializing the whole issue, one might say that the Quraysh now entered into a 'dialogue' with Muhammad and his followers. The opposition begun in the Second Meccan period continued into the Third." One might also note how Angelika Neuwirth speaks of a polyphony, or multiple voices, that can be heard in the Qur'an: see especially her "Qur'an and History" (2019), esp. 116.

¹⁶ Mir, "Dialogue in the Qur'an" (1992): 2. Mir's assessment, however, might be tempered by the substantial list of Arabic and Persian works on dialogue in the Qur'an compiled by Devin Stewart in his unpublished article, "Notes on Reported Speech" (n.d.), which I cite here by permission of the author. Some of these works date from after Mir's article. Two Arabic monographs in particular (noted by Stewart) are completely dedicated to dialogue in the Qur'an: Faḍl Allāh, *al-Ḥiwār fī al-Qur'an* (1996) and Abd al-Murḍī Zakariyyā, *al-Ḥiwār wa-rasm* (1998). Stewart also refers to

For his part, Mir carefully addresses dialogue as a literary technique in the Qur'an, but he does not address the particular question that concerns us here, namely the relationship between historical speech and Qur'anic quotations. Indeed, it is notable that while Mir offers thoughtful insights on the types and functions of dialogue in the Qur'an, he never asks if the Quraysh (or others) actually said the things they are made to say in the Qur'an.

Before presenting some arguments that reported speech in the Qur'an should not be seen as verbatim reproductions, I would like briefly to summarize the ways in which the Qur'an reports speech. Here, I am principally dependent on an unpublished article of Devin Stewart: "Notes on Reported Speech in the Qur'an."¹⁷ An important insight that Stewart makes here is the use by Solomon in the Qur'an of the invocation (which otherwise opens 113 of the Qur'an's surahs): *bi-smi llāhi al-raḥmāni l-raḥīm* (the "basmalah") in his letter to the Queen of Sheba. For our purposes, it is interesting to note that Solomon (taking the incident, for argument's sake, to be historical) presumably did not write in Arabic to the Queen of Sheba. Nevertheless, the Qur'an has him use a standard Arabic invocation. Thus, one might conclude that the Qur'an is not seeking to reproduce the original (say, Hebrew) speech or writing of Solomon, or even an Arabic translation of the Hebrew original (in which the Arabic formulation is not known), but rather offers an Arabic "recasting" of the original scene.

Otherwise, Stewart offers a careful study of the Qur'an's use of the verb *qāla*. He notes that in the Qur'an (as in other Arabic literature), the verb *qāla* is an "all-purpose introduction to quoted speech."¹⁸

benShea, *Talking with Prophets* (2018). One should consult now as well Flowers, *Genres of Qur'anic Discourse* (2022), esp. 46–49.

¹⁷ Stewart, "Notes on Reported Speech" (n.d.). I also benefited from Stewart's article, "Approaches to the Investigation of Speech Genres in the Qur'an" (2022), esp. 4–7. Indeed, this discussion might apply too to the quotations of pre-Muhammadan prophets and their opponents in the Qur'an. In any case, this observation might suggest that the "present" speech of Muhammad's own opponents (even if it were originally in some register of Arabic) is likewise a recasting and not an attempt at a verbatim reproduction.

¹⁸ Stewart, "Notes on Reported Speech" (n.d.), 4. Accordingly it might be rendered in various ways in English, e.g. "he said," "he replied," "he asked," "he commanded," etc. On *qāla*, see also Dror, "Verbs of Saying in the Qur'ān." On *qul* commands, see Radscheit, "Word of God or Prophetic Speech." Regarding genres in the Qur'an, see Flowers, "Reconsidering Qur'anic Genre." While

Stewart provides an exhaustive taxonomy of the use of *qāla* and other verbs that introduce speech, highlighting features that distinguish Qur'anic use from the use of *qāla* in other pre-modern Arabic texts.¹⁹ He notes that the four most common ways in which the Qur'an reports speech are: *qāla* followed immediately by reported speech;²⁰ another verb followed immediately by reported speech;²¹ a verb such as *nādā* or *awḥā* followed by *an al-mufasssrah*;²² the imperative *qul* followed immediately by reported speech.²³

Stewart also points out interesting cases of ambiguity. Particularly interesting are passages in which a statement can be read as direct or indirect speech,²⁴ or ambiguous cases where *an al-mufasssrah* (or "explicative *an*") is assimilated. Take the following verse (Q 19:24):

Flowers does not study direct speech systematically here, he does cover "exhortation" as a device that links Muhammad with his interlocutors (p. 37). On this category, see also Stewart, "Vocatives in the Qur'an" (2022).

¹⁹ Notable among these is the use of *an al-mufasssrah*; that is, *qāla*—or more often another verb such as *awḥā* or *nādā* introducing speech—*an* followed directly by the quoted speech, as opposed to *qāla inna* which is more common in other pre-modern Arabic texts. See Stewart, "Notes on Reported Speech" (n.d.), 10.

²⁰ For example: Q 2:32: *qālū subḥānaka lā 'ilma lanā illā mā 'allamtanā innaka anta l-'alīmu l-ḥakīmu*, "They said, 'Glory be to Thee! We know not save what Thou hast taught us. Surely Thou art the All-knowing, the All-wise'."

²¹ Q 21:89: *wa-zakarīyā idh nādā rabbahu rabbi lā tadḥarnī fardan wa-anta khayru l-wārithīna*, "And Zachariah — when he called unto his Lord, 'O my Lord, leave me not solitary; though Thou art the best of inheritors.'"

²² Q 7:44: *wa-nādā aṣḥābu l-jannati aṣḥāba l-nāri an qad wadjadnā mā wa'adanā rabbunā ḥaqqan*, "The inhabitants of Paradise will call to the inhabitants of the Fire: 'We have found that which our Lord promised us true.'"

²³ Q 2:139: *qul atuḥājjūnanā fī allāhi wa-huwa rabbunā wa-rabbukum wa-lanā a'mālunā wa-lakum a'mālukum wa-naḥnu lahu mukhlisūna*, "Say: 'Would you then dispute with us concerning God, who is our Lord and your Lord? Our deeds belong to us, and to you belong your deeds; Him we serve sincerely.'"

²⁴ An interesting case is Q 36:60: *a-lam a'bad ilaykum yā-banī Ādama an lā ta'būdū al-shayṭāna innahu lakum 'aduwwun mubīn*. This can be read as involving indirect speech: "Made I not covenant with you, Children of Adam, that you should not serve Satan—surely he is a manifest foe to you" (Arberry, *Koran Interpreted* [1955]). It could also be read as involving direct speech, "Did I not exhort you, O children of Adam, saying, 'Do not worship Satan. He is indeed your manifest enemy.'" This case is particularly interesting, because it could potentially be seen as God's quoting an earlier statement of his own (perhaps 11:2, 11:26, 12:40, 17:23, 41:14, or 46:21).

Fa-nādahā min taḥtībā allā taḥzanī qad ja'ala rabbuki taḥtaki sariyyan

But the one that was below her called to her,
 “Nay, do not sorrow; see, thy Lord has set below
 thee a rivulet.”

Here, the *an al-mufasssirah* has been assimilated to the beginning of the direct speech (attributed by some exegetes to Gabriel and by others to the infant Jesus)—*lā taḥzanī* (“Do not sorrow”)—forming the particle *allā*. One assumes, however that Gabriel (or Jesus) did not say the word *allā*, since this word combines the *an al-mufasssirah*, an introductory particle that is not reported speech, with the first word (*lā*) of the reported speech. The upshot seems to be that the Qur'an is less concerned with verbatim reproduction than it is with demonstrating the gist of a statement, and that in a highly stylized manner.²⁵

Qur'anic Language

We have already alluded to the possibility that the Qur'an might render one register of Arabic (say, colloquial Hijazi) into a different register (say a more formal, stylized Hijazi, if not a poetic *koiné*) and therefore recreate, rather than reproduce, the words of the Prophet's opponents. Here we might discuss further what can actually be known about the nature of Qur'anic Arabic. The classical theory among western scholars is that the Qur'an is written in a “poetic register” of Arabic and not in the spoken language of the Hijaz at all. Kees Versteegh offers a distinctive explanation for this theory in his book *The Arabic Language*:

The delivery of a revelational document in a “vulgar” variety of the language is hardly likely in itself. The existence of a poetic register of the language is undisputed, and it is not very likely that for the revelation anything but this prestigious variety of the language would have been chosen.²⁶

If Versteegh (and before him, Friedrich Schwally)²⁷ is correct, then it would be seem unlikely that the Qur'an

would include verbatim quotations, since the opponents of the Prophet (and his opponents) would have spoken in one register, and the Qur'an would have been composed in another register (transforming “vulgar” speech into “prestigious” speech).²⁸ There are scholars, however, who have argued that the Qur'an is preserved in a local, popular register of Arabic. This would not prove that the Qur'an includes verbatim quotations, of course, but it would eliminate one possible objection.

In his 1906 work *Volkssprache und Schriftsprache im alten Arabien*, Karl Vollers argued that the Qur'an was originally written in a dialect or local, popular language (“Volkssprache”) of the Hijaz and later edited to conform to classical Arabic (“Schriftsprache”).²⁹ *Volkssprache* was harshly criticized by Theodor Nöldeke in the latter's *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft*, published in the same city four years later.³⁰ Nöldeke disagreed with Vollers' proposal that the original Arabic of the Qur'an was not inflected for case (he also objected to Vollers' reliance on Gustav Flügel's 1834 edition of the Qur'an). There are some other reasons to object to Vollers' argument, for example the idea that the skeletal text of the Qur'an (*rasm*) was substantially edited. (Recent attempts at dating the earliest Qur'anic manuscripts suggest that the *rasm* was standardized quite early—the Ṣan'ā' palimpsest being the principal exception).³¹ However, Marijn van Putten has recently (and convincingly) argued that Vollers' notion of *Volkssprache* has merit. To make this case, van Putten points to elements of the Qur'anic Consonantal Text. For example, manuscripts of this “skeletal” text suggest that many Qur'anic words were originally pronounced without a *hamza*; thus: *bīr* (“well”), *mūmin* (“believer”), and *nāyim* (“sleeping”) instead of *bi'r*, *mu'min*, and *nā'im* (as they are found in standard 'arabiyya or Classical Arabic). The appearance of these

dialect at all but rather has a language identical to that of the pre-Islamic poems.” This point is assumed by David Cohen (“Koinè, langues communes et dialects arabes” [1962]: 119), who speaks of “la koinè poétique-coranique.” He follows Blachère, *Introduction au Coran* (1947), 159–69 and Rabin, *Ancient West-Arabian* (1951), 3–4. On the virtual consensus of twentieth-century western scholars on this point, see Van Putten, *Qur'anic Arabic* (2022), 15–19.

²⁸ One might then compare this hypothetical situation (*mutatis mutandis*) with the Gospels, where originally Aramaic speech is represented with quotations in Greek.

²⁹ Vollers, *Volkssprache* (1906).

³⁰ Nöldeke, *Neue Beiträge* (1910).

³¹ See Sadeghi and Goudarzi, “San'ā' 1” (2010), and (for a different perspective) Puin, “Ein früher Koranpalimpsest” (2008).

²⁵ Cf. Stewart, “Notes on Reported Speech” (n.d.), 26.

²⁶ Versteegh, *Arabic Language* (2014), 46.

²⁷ It is in Nöldeke et al., *History of the Qur'ān* (2013 [1919], 260), that we find an unambiguous affirmation to this effect: “Generally, any tradition connecting the 'Uthmānic text in any way with dialectal questions must be rejected, since the Koran is not written in a local

words in the skeletal text matches the grammarians' description of Hijazi Arabic.³² Other features of the Qur'anic Consonantal Text too seem to line up with the grammarians' description of Hijazi Arabic, including the Qur'an's use of the demonstratives *dhālika*, *tilka*, and *hunālika* (and never of *dhāka*, *tika*/*dhika*, or *hunāka*),³³ or the use of *zawj* for both the male and female member of a pair.³⁴

If Vollers and van Putten are correct, then there is a reason to take seriously the possibility that the Qur'an could preserve verbatim speech. According to this view, the Qur'an is recorded in the language of the people whom it is quoting (unlike, for example, the Gospels, which record in Greek sayings that were originally proclaimed in Aramaic).³⁵ In addition, according to Vollers and van Putten, the Qur'an would seem to have been recorded in the same register of that language—that is, in the *Volkssprache* that would have actually been spoken, more or less, in the streets of Mecca and Medina.

³² Van Putten, *Qur'anic Arabic* (2022), 5–6, observing that scholars seem to have missed this point in part because of their reliance on the Ḥafṣ reading (of the 1924 Cairo edition) where the *hamzah* appears in these words. The reading of Warsh, on the other hand, does not include the *hamzah* for these words. See further van Putten and Stokes, "Case in the Qur'anic Consonantal Text" (2018).

³³ Van Putten, *Qur'anic Arabic* (2022), 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

³⁵ This point would not obtain for the speech of (most of the) pre-Muhammadan prophets in the Qur'an. Even classical Muslim scholars generally concede that Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and others did not speak Arabic (in part because of Q 14:4). Accordingly, the Qur'an would be presenting an Arabic translation of their words, and not their very words. The question of divine language in Islamic thought, and its representation in human language, is the subject of the rich study of Zadeh, *Vernacular Qur'an* (2012). Regarding the question of whether revelation can be in non-Arabic languages, the Ḥanafī jurist Abū Bakr b. Mas'ūd al-Kāṣānī (d. 587/1191) wrote: "The Arabic nature (*kawn*) of the Qur'ān does not negate that other [scriptures] could also be a *qur'ān*. There is nothing in the verse ['We revealed it as an Arabic *qur'ān*,' Q 12:2] which negates this. The Arabic is called a '*qur'ān*' because it indicates what is *qur'ān* and that is the attribute which is the very essence of speech (*ḥaqīqatu l-kalām*). For this reason we said, 'Indeed the Qur'ān is not created,' that is with reference to that attribute and not to the Arabic expressions ('*ibārāt*); the meaning of the indication is found [also] in Persian. So it is licit to name [a scripture not in Arabic] *qur'ān* as is indicated in His statement, 'If we had made it a foreign *qur'ān*' [Q 41:44]. Thus he communicated that if He were to express it in a foreign tongue, it would be a *qur'ān*' (Al-Kāṣānī, *Kitāb badā'i*' [2003], 1:529–31; see further Reynolds, "God Has Spoken Before" [2018]).

Of course, this does not seal the deal, since a text could be in the same register and language of speakers and still not represent their speech verbatim. Furthermore, the Qur'an went through a later, and rather complicated, process of development, leading ultimately to ten systems of readings (each of which has two versions) in which the text can be read, along with many non-canonical readings. This leads to another problem, at least for those lines of reported speech for which there are variants: which version (if any) was the one truly spoken? To give one example: Qur'an 2:88, in the text of Ḥafṣ, reads as follows:

*wa-qālū qulūbunā ghulfun bal la'anahumu
allāhu bi-kufrihim fa-qalīlan mā yu'minūna*

("And they say, 'Our hearts are uncircumcised.'
Nay, but God has cursed them for their unbelief;
little will they believe)."

Most commentators attribute the reported speech here (*qulūbunā ghulfun*, "Our hearts are uncircumcised") to the Jews of Medina and explain that they meant thereby to tell Muhammad, "Our hearts are covered" (that is, "We will not listen to you."). However, a variant appears for their reported speech, namely *qulūbunā ghulufun*, which would mean "Our hearts are containers," or (according to most *mufasssīrūn*), "Our hearts are already filled with knowledge [from the Torah]." For our purposes, the point is that there is a real difference between two canonical versions of what was said. Although the difference is only one vowel, the meaning is substantially different—and in any case one might ask: did they say *ghulf* or *ghuluf*?³⁶

The point about variants is interesting inasmuch as it sheds light on the problem of reported speech, but it does not really solve the problem. After all, it is possible that the Jews of Medina really said *ghulf*, or that they really said *ghuluf*, and that the Qur'an is really attempting to communicate verbatim speech. Indeed, one could still say in a general way that the Qur'an means to preserve the words once spoken by Muhammad's opponents. The point of the present investigation is to ask whether that is the case at all, or if rather the Qur'an means to create, or recreate, dialogues. For this reason, it is worth looking at reported speech, or "counter-discourse," in the Qur'an more carefully.

³⁶ On this problem see, for example, Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr* (1983), 1:113.

Features of Counter-Discourse in the Qur'an

Azaiez distinguishes between the speech of opponents of the pre-Muhammadan prophets (“contre-discours passé”), the speech of Muhammad’s opponents (“contre-discours présent”), and the speech of the damned on the day of judgment (“contre-discours futur”); most of this last category consists of their pleas for mercy or for a second chance at life. He offers a number of reasons to think of the counter-discourse of the Qur'an as a literary construction. For example, he notes that the cast of characters in the Qur'an can be neatly divided into a “schéma binaire,” with faithful believers on one side and unbelievers and hypocrites on the other.³⁷ This “binary scheme” seems to fit generally with a strategy the Qur'an uses to inculcate belief in its audience, a point emphasized by Jacques Jomier.³⁸ Azaiez also notes the similarity of past and present discourse in the Qur'an. The same sorts of arguments, and the same turns of phrase, are used by the opponents of the pre-Muhammadan prophets and the opponents of Muhammad.³⁹ One might note, for example, a Qur'anic motif through which opponents accuse prophets of practicing magic. This plays out with Muhammad in Q 6:7, 11:7, 34:43, 37:15, 46:7, 54:2, and 74:24, with Jesus in 5:110 and 61:6, Moses in 27:13 and 28:36, and Abraham in 43:40. I will give another example of this at greater length below. Finally, Azaiez notes that the opponents of the prophets tend to be anonymous: “Un fait patent et largement partagé par l'ensemble des [contre-discours] est l'absence de désignations explicites des opposants.”⁴⁰ This, Azaiez holds, is a thoughtful decision meant to increase the effectiveness of the Qur'an's arguments by allowing for a more general application of its accusations or condemnations.⁴¹

To this one might add an important distinction between the speech of prophets and antagonists in the Qur'an. Prophets tend to speak as individuals, whereas antagonists of the prophets tend—in the overwhelm-

ing majority of cases—to speak collectively. Thus, the speech of the antagonists seems to be far removed from the experience of everyday speech, in which (usually) one individual speaks at a time. Instead, one is closer to theatrical speech, in which a chorus speaks in unison. This point might be illustrated by taking Surah 34 (*Saba*) as an example and noting the cases of counter-discourse (in bold in the passages below) therein:

Q 34:3

wa-qāla lladhīna kafarū lā ta'tīnā l-sā'atu qul balā wa-rabbī la-ta'tiyannakum 'ālīmī l-ghaybi lā ya'zubu 'anhu mithqālu dharratin fī l-samāwāti wa-lā fī l-arḍi wa-lā asgharu min dhālika wa-lā akbaru illā fī kitābin mubīnin

The unbelievers say, “**The Hour will never come to us.**” Say: “Yes indeed, by my Lord, it shall come to you, by Him who knows the Unseen; not so much as the weight of an ant in heaven and earth escapes from Him, neither is aught smaller than that, or greater, but it is in a Manifest Book.”⁴²

Q 34:7

wa-qāla lladhīna kafarū hal nadullukum 'alā rajulin yunabbi'ukum idhā muzziqtum kulla mumazzaqin innakum la-fī khalqin jadīdin

The unbelievers say, “**Shall we point you to a man who will tell you, when you have been utterly torn to pieces, then you shall be in a new creation?**”

Q 34:23

wa-lā tanfa'u l-shafā'atu 'indahu illā liman adhīna lahu ḥatta idhā fuzzi'a 'an qulūbihim qālū mādhā qāla rabbukum qālū l-ḥaqqā wa-huwa l-'aliyyu l-kabīru

Intercession will not avail with Him save for him to whom He gives leave; till, when terror is lifted from their hearts, they will say, “**What said your Lord?**” They will say, “The truth; and He is the All-high; the All-great.”

³⁷ Azaiez, *Contre-discours* (2016), 59.

³⁸ Jomier (*Dieu et l'homme* [1996], 168) describes how the Qur'an foregrounds a series of binary choices: “There is God or there is not God, there is the blind and the seeing, truth and falsehood, the believer and the unbeliever, the good to do and the evil to avoid, paradise and hell.”

³⁹ Azaiez, *Contre-discours* (2016), 30–32.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 156: “Ne pas nommer joue ici un rôle de dévalorisation de l'adversaire. Il élargit dans le même temps l'audience des potentielles personnes concernées, conséquence de ce même anonymat.”

⁴² An important point in this verse is the integration of reported speech into a *qul* (“Say!”) statement. The implication of this rhetorical formulation is that the Prophet has heard the words of opponents and then received instructions from God regarding how to reply. It is attractive to see this formulation not as a transcript but rather as a mise-en-scène in which the *qul* statement has an overarching value as a general teaching. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for this suggestion.

Q 34:29

*wa-yaqūlūna mata hādhā l-wa'du in kuntum
ṣādiqīna*

They say, "When shall this promise come to pass, if you speak the truth?"

Q 34:31

*wa-qāla lladhīna kafarū lan nu'mina bi-hādhā
l-qur'āni wa-lā bi-lladhī bayna yadayhi wa-law
tara idhi l-zālimūna mawqūfūna 'inda rabbihim
yarji'u ba'dhum ilā ba'din al-qawla yaqūlu lla-
dhīna stuḍ'ifū li-lladhīna stakbarū lawlā antum
la-kunnā mu'minīn*

The Unbelievers say: "We shall neither believe in this scripture nor in (any) that (came) before it." Couldst thou but see when the wrong-doers will be made to stand before their Lord, throwing back the word (of blame) on one another! Those who had been despised will say to the arrogant ones: "Had it not been for you, we should certainly have been believers!"

Q 34:33

*wa-qāla lladhīna stuḍ'ifū li-lladhīna stakbarū bal
makru l-layli wa-l-nahāri idh ta'murūnanā
an nakfura billāhi wa-naj'ala lahu andādan
wa-asarrū l-nadāmata lammā ra'awu l-'adhāba
wa-ja'alnā l-aghlāla fī a'nāqi lladhīna kafarū
bal yujzawna illā mā kānū ya'malūn*

Those who had been despised will say to the arrogant ones: "Nay! it was a plot (of yours) by day and by night: Behold! Ye (constantly) ordered us to be ungrateful to Allah and to attribute equals to Him!" They will declare (their) repentance when they see the Penalty: We shall put yokes on the necks of the Unbelievers: It would only be a requital for their (ill) Deeds.

Q 34:43

*wa-idhā tutlā 'alayhim āyātunā bayyinātin qālū
mā hādhā illā rajulun yurīdu an yaṣuddakum
'ammā kāna ya'budu ābā'ukum wa-qālū mā
hādhā illā ifkun muftaran wa-qāla lladhīna
kafarū li-l-ḥaqqi lammā jā'ahum in hādhā illā
siḥrun mubīn*

When Our Clear Signs are rehearsed to them, they say, "This is only a man who wishes to hinder you from the (worship) which your

fathers practised." And they say, "This is only a falsehood invented!" and the Unbelievers say of the Truth when it comes to them, "This is nothing but evident magic!"

In every case of reported speech in Surah 34, it is an anonymous group who speaks. Never do we hear from a specific individual. The speech of opponents is attributed to the following groups:

- v. 3 "unbelievers"
- v. 7 "unbelievers"
- v. 29 "they"
- v. 31 "unbelievers," "those who had been despised"
- v. 33 "those who had been despised"
- v. 43 "they," "unbelievers"

Thus, here the Qur'an does not name its opponents or provide other contextual details that would allow one to situate a dialogue in a particular place and time.⁴³ The anonymous nature of the Qur'an's counter-discourse is true generally, and not only for this particular Surah. As Azaiez points out, the only opponent of Muhammad mentioned by name in the Qur'an is Abū Lahab (and he is not given any lines in the Qur'anic drama).⁴⁴ The second point to be made about counter-discourse in Surah 34 is that each case involves the declaration of a group and not of an individual.⁴⁵ Yet one does not imagine that the "unbelievers" spoke these words in unison, as though in a chorus.

⁴³ The group referred to as "those who had been despised" are not strictly opponents; the audience is meant to have some sympathy for them, since they have a real excuse for their unbelief. However, they are still condemned for that unbelief.

⁴⁴ Azaiez, *Contre-discours* (2016), 33. Whether Abū Lahab is a historical name or rather a moniker is a question I have discussed elsewhere: see Reynolds, *Qur'an and Its Biblical Subtext* (2010), 16. I am grateful for the observation of one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper, that the mention of Abū Lahab by name might be accounted for if *Sūrat al-Masad* is seen as a type of *hijā'*, a genre of Arabic poetry that involves lampooning an opponent, at times by name. On this, see Ḥawī, *Fann al-hijā'* (1998).

⁴⁵ This too is true of counter-discourse in the Qur'an generally. The principal exceptions to this rule are certain characters in the accounts of pre-Muhammadan prophets, especially Pharaoh (Q 2:49, 7:103–13, 17:101–3, 20:24, 20:43–79, 26:11–53, 27:12, 28:3–43, 40:23–52, 43:46–56, 44:17–31, 54:40–42, 69:8, 69:10, 73:15–16, 80:18), Abraham's father (Q 6:74–83; 19:41–48; 21:51–67; 26:69–82; 29:16–25; 37:83–96; 43:26–27; 60:4). However, in Q 21, 26, 29, 37, 43, and 60, Abraham disputes with his father's people generally, the Queen of Sheba (Q 27:29–35), Noah's son (Q 11:43), and the wife of Potiphar or al-Azīz (Q 12: 23). Below, I will discuss a short statement (Q 66:3) attributed to one of Muhammad's wives.

Instead, the collective speech in these statements seems to be part of a larger, theatrical, representation of the forces of evil against the forces of good. By naming the prophets, but not the opponents, the drama is rendered more dramatic: one faithful character is heard demanding obedience to God alongside an anonymous chorus that stubbornly refuses his demands.

To these two points a third might be added, namely the stylized nature of reported speech in the Qur'an. In particular, there are cases where the speech of the Qur'an's opponents is made to rhyme with the non-reported discourse around it. One of these cases is found in Qur'an 34:6–8:

6. *wa-yarā lladhīna ūtū l-'ilma lladhī unzila ilayka min rabbika huwa l-ḥaqqu wa-yabdi ilā sirāṭi l-'azīzi l-ḥamīd*

7. *wa-qāla lladhīna kafarū bal nadullukum 'alā rajulin yunabbi'ukum idhā muzziqtum kulla mumazzaḡin innakum la-fī khalqin jadīd*

8. *a-iftarā 'alā allāhi kadhiban am bibi jinna-tun bali lladhīna lā yu'minūna bil-akhirati fī l-'adhābi wa-l-ḍalāli l-ba'īd*

6. And those to whom knowledge has come see that the (Revelation) sent down to thee from thy Lord—that is the Truth, and that it guides to the Path of the Exalted (in might), Worthy of all praise.

7. The Unbelievers say (in ridicule): “**Shall we point out to you a man that will tell you, when ye are all scattered to pieces in disintegration, that ye shall (then be raised) in a New Creation?**”

8. “Has he invented a falsehood against God or has a spirit (seized) him?”—Nay, it is those who believe not in the Hereafter, that are in (real) Penalty, and in farthest error.

The passage above includes reported speech in verse seven (in **bold**), ending with and including the rhyming phrase *fī khalqin jadīd* (shaded text). This phrase rhymes with the phrases that conclude verses six and eight (in **bold**), neither of which are part of reported speech. A second example of this phenomenon is in Qur'an 36:45–49:

45. *wa-idhā qīla lahumu ttaqū mā bayna aydī-kum wa-mā khalfakum la-'allakum turḥamūn*

46. *wa-mā ta'tihim min āyatin min āyati rabbi-him illā kānū 'anhā mu'ridīn*

47. *wa-idhā qīla lahum anfiqū mim mā razaqa-kumu llāhu qalā lladhīna kafarū li-lladhīna āmanū a-nuṭ'imu man law yashā'uallāhu aṭ'amahu in antum illā fī ḍalālin mubīn*

48. *wa-yaqūlūna mata ḥādhā l-wa'du in kuntum ṣādiqīn*

49. *mā yanzurūna illā ṣayḥatan wāḥidatan ta'khubhuhum wa-hum yakbiṣṣimūn*

45. When they are told, “Fear ye that which is before you and that which will be after you, in order that ye may receive Mercy,” (they turn back).

46. Not a Sign comes to them from among the Signs of their Lord, but they turn away therefrom.

47. And when they are told, “Spend ye of (the bounties) with which Allah has provided you,” the Unbelievers say to those who believe: “**Shall we then feed those whom, if Allah had so willed, He would have fed, (Himself)?—Ye are in nothing but manifest error.**”

48. Further, they say, “**When will this promise (come to pass), if what ye say is true?**”

49. They will not (have to) wait for aught but a single Blast: it will seize them while they are yet disputing among themselves!⁴⁶

In this passage we find reported speech in both verses 47 and 48, ending in rhyming phrases *fī ḍalālin mubīn* and *in kuntum ṣādiqīn*. It is notable that the reported speech here rhymes only in the verse ending position. A reported speech phrase appears earlier in verse 47 (albeit the speech of a protagonist), namely *anfiqū mim mā razaqakumu allāhu*, but it does not rhyme. Thus, the reported speech of the Qur'an follows the rhyme pattern when it is in a position that calls for a rhyme, but it does not do so when it is in a different position. Another intriguing example of the reported speech of a protagonist appears earlier, in verse 45: “When they are told, ‘Fear ye that which is before you and that which will be after you, in order that ye may receive Mercy (*la'allakum turḥamūn*).’”⁴⁷ In this case, too, the reported speech rhymes at the end of the verse.

⁴⁶ For another example of rhyming reported speech, see Q 7: 137–41. This is a different sort of example, since it involves the speech of a protagonist (Moses). Nevertheless, like the reported speech of Muhammad's opponents, the speech of Moses rhymes in this passage with the verses the precede and follow.

⁴⁷ Keep in mind that, according to the Qur'anic rules of rhyme (or *fāṣilah*), words ending in *ūn* rhyme with words ending in

This (like the phrase at the beginning of verse 47) is an interesting example of reported speech, since it is not clearly a quotation of God's words; it is introduced with the passive *wa-idhā qāla lahumu*. It is instead presented as the reported speech of what Muhammad (or another believer) said to the unbelievers. In other words, the reported speech of both protagonist and antagonist follows the rhyme scheme of the larger passage. Thus, this passage presents us with both sides of the Qur'anic "drama," all of which is articulated in stylized, rhymed speech.

The literary, or theatrical, quality of such passages suggests that reported speech in the Qur'an is not a reproduction of historical conversations between Muhammad (or other believers) and the unbelievers (the Quraysh of Mecca or otherwise). Instead, it seems to be an element of a carefully scripted drama meant to portray (or perhaps, to caricature) the arguments of the Qur'an's opponents in contrast to its own superior arguments. This observation, although reached through different means, is close to the thought of Azaiez (who refers to the work of Mustapha Bentaibi and Mohammed Arkoun):

Pour illustrer cette notion appliquée au terrain de notre étude, nous serions enclins, à l'instar d'une image proposée par Mohammed Arkoun envisageant le discours coranique comme une immense symphonie, de suggérer que le Coran est un immense théâtre de voix mise en scène par un locuteur que l'on identifiera selon les éléments textuels au «Dieu coranique».⁴⁸

Indeed, a complete consideration of the Qur'anic mise-en-scène should involve attention to the role played by the Qur'anic God. Without going into detail, the most important point to be made here is that God in the Qur'an speaks in the same sort of highly stylized, rhymed Arabic as the human characters being quoted. Those passages with reported speech attributed to God (*qāla llahu* . . . , e.g. Q 5:115–16), like those passages that simply have God speak in the first person singular (Q 5:111) or plural (Q 5:70; 97:1), show similar stylis-

tic qualities to those passages that are meant to present the speech of Muhammad's opponents. The same can be said for passages in which the God of the Qur'an instructs humans how to speak.⁴⁹ One may accordingly ask whether anything in the Qur'an marks an exception to the rule of its stylized speech. That is, is there any passage that might preserve historical dialogue?

Possible Exceptions

We have seen a number of reasons to believe that reported speech in the Qur'an bears the features of Qur'anic speech generally (notably the rhyme) and bears certain characteristics (anonymity, attributions to a group) that suggest it is not (as a rule) remembered verbatim but rather created for the purpose of the Qur'an's arguments. If this is the rule, however, could there not be exceptions? One way to search for those exception is to look at places of reported speech that do not bear those characteristics.⁵⁰

There are four passages (to my knowledge) that include reported speech attributed to an individual, not a group, and which also seem to be connected to a specific historical incident. The first of these is Q 33:37:

wa-idh taqūlu li-lladhī an'ama allāhu 'alayhi wa-an'ama 'alayhi amsik 'alayka zawjaka wa-ttaqi llāha wa-tukhfi fī nafsika mā llāhu mubdihi

⁴⁹ As Stewart explains, most cases in which the God of the Qur'an instructs people how to speak (using a second-person plural imperative) involve simply the command to speak well. There are a few cases, however, where God provides the words which people should use, for example Q 2:136: (*qūlū āmannā billāhi wa-mā unzila ilaynā wa-mā unzila ila ibrahīma wa-ismā'ila wa-ishāqa wa-ya'qūba wa-l-asbāti wa-mā ūtiya mūsā wa-'īsa wa-mā ūtiya l-nabiyyūna min rabbihim lā nufarriqu bayna ahādin minhum wa-naḥnu lahu muslimūna*) and Q 29:46: (*wa-lā tujādilū abla l-kitābi illā billati hiya aḥsanu illā lladhīna ḡalamū minhum wa-qūlū āmannā bi-lladhī unzila ilaynā wa-unzila ilaykum wa-ilāhunā wa-ilāhukum wāḥidun wa-naḥnu lahu muslimūna*). Both of these verses show the same stylized speech and rhyme with the verses that precede and follow. See Stewart, "Notes on Reported Speech" (n.d.), 35–36.

⁵⁰ In addition to the examples below, I would like to note an important suggestion made by one of the anonymous reviewers of this article, namely that the Qur'an includes passages that seem to be liturgical (or even creedal)—statements such as Q 2:136 (quoted in the preceding note) and Q 3:84: "Say: We believe in God and that which revealed unto us. . . ." If indeed these passages were used in a ritual context, then they may indeed be counted as verbatim speech. While this article focuses on the speech attributed to the Prophet's opponents, the question of whether the Qur'an includes material that was used liturgically by the nascent Islamic community might be explored further. Regarding liturgy in the Qur'an, see Neuwirth, "Meccan Texts—Medinan Additions?" (2004).

in. On this (and the importance of rhyme generally to the Qur'an's articulations) see Stewart, "Poetic License" (2009).

⁴⁸ Azaiez, *Contre-discours* (2016), 59. The reference to Arkoun is to his work *Lectures du Coran* (1982), 6, where he speaks of the Qur'an as "une orchestration musicale et sémantique." See also Bentaibi, *Quelques façons* (2009).

wa-takhsba l-nāsa wa-llāhu aḥaqqu an takhsbahu fa-lammā qaḍā zaydun minhā waṭaran zaw-wajnākahā li-kay lā yakūna 'alā l-mu'minīna ḥarajun fī azwājī ad'iyā'ihim idhā qaḍaw minhunna waṭaran wa-kāna amru llāhi maf'ūlā

When thou saidst to him whom God had blessed and thou hadst favoured, “**Keep thy wife to thyself, and fear God,**” and thou wast concealing within thyself what God should reveal, fearing other men; and God has better right for thee to fear Him. So when Zaid had accomplished what he would of her, then We gave her in marriage to thee, so that there should not be any fault in the believers, touching the wives of their adopted sons, when they have accomplished what they would of them; and God’s commandment must be performed.

The reported speech in this passage (in bold) is presented as a quotation of something Muhammad had earlier said. In other words, what was once Muhammad’s own speech (not God’s speech given to Muhammad) is here quoted by God. This is a case of a specific individual speaking, and it refers to a specific historical incident—as suggested by the (rare, or indeed singular) reference to a companion of Muhammad later in the verse, Zayd. The traditional story recounted to explain this verse says that Zayd, one of the first converts to Islam, was Muhammad’s adopted son (or *mawlā*) and was married to a woman named Zaynab bint Jahsh.⁵¹ After seeing Zaynab uncovered, the Prophet developed an affection for her. When Zayd offered to divorce her, Muhammad told him to keep his wife (with the words in Q 33:37) but God intervened, instructing Muhammad to marry her. The reported speech (Muhammad’s earlier statement to Zayd) *amsik ‘alayka zawjaka wa-ttaqi llāha* could be thought of as consequently bearing a certain authenticity as a relic of this incident. Indeed it is notable that the text has Muhammad exceptionally (and unknowingly) oppose the divine will (like the opponents whose direct

speech I have discussed above).⁵² It is also interesting to note that the imperative *amsik* (in the singular) appears only one other time in the Qur’an, and not in the context of reported speech (Q 38:39).⁵³ However, there is reason to doubt that the story of Zayd and Zaynab is in fact an authentic report and offers the original context of Q 33:37 (and reason to suspect instead that this verse gave birth to the story). Even if one were to accept the authenticity of this story in light of what we have seen regarding memory science, one might be skeptical that these were the exact words that Muhammad said to Zayd.

A second, similar case, which also involves a wife of Muhammad, is Q 66:3. This verse contains two bits of reported speech, one from an unnamed wife of Muhammad, and one from Muhammad himself:

wa-idh asarra l-nabiyyu ilā ba‘ḍi azwājihī ḥadīthan fa-lammā nabba‘at bihi wa-aḥbarahu allāhu ‘alayhi ‘arrafa ba‘ḍahu wa-a‘raḍa ‘an ba‘ḍin fa-lammā nabba‘ahā bihi qālat man anba‘aka hādihā qalā nabba‘aniya l-‘alīmu l-khabīru

And when the Prophet confided to one of his wives a certain matter; and then, when she told of it, and God disclosed that to him, he made known part of it, and turned aside from part; then, when he told her of it, she said, “**Who told thee this?**” He said, “**I was told of it by the All-knowing, the All-aware.**”

As with the previous case, the reported speech in this verse is not that of an anonymous group, but of a specific individual (or in this case, two individuals). Here, the verse is thought by the exegetes to be a commentary on an incident that took place among two of Muhammad’s wives. Different traditional accounts offer different contexts for this verse. The most common one involves Māriya, Muhammad’s Egyptian concubine (given to him as a gift from the leader of Alexandria). According to the story, one of Muhammad’s wives,

⁵¹ See, for example, Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr* (1983) 6:385–91. For a comprehensive study of the figure of Zayd in Islam and western scholarship see Powers, *Zayd* (2014). In the Introduction, Powers offers a succinct description of Q 33:37 and the standard account of Zayd and the Prophet’s marriage to Zaynab in classical Islamic biography.

⁵² I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for this observation.

⁵³ By contrast the phrase *ittaqi llāha* is perhaps a Qur’anic formula, although the plural imperative *ittaqū* is more common (cf. Q 2:194, 196, 203, 223, 231, 233, 282; 3:130, 131, 200; 4:1; 5:2, 4, 7, 8, 11, 57, 88, 96, 108; 8:69; 15:60; 49:1). I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing my attention to this possibility.

Ḥafṣa, finds him with Māriya in Ḥafṣa's own chamber, on a day which was to be 'Ā'isha's turn to be with him. The Prophet swears to her that will not lie with Māriya again and asks Ḥafṣa not to tell 'Ā'isha what has taken place. Ḥafṣa, however, tells her anyway.⁵⁴ Again one might question the historical authenticity of this account, which seems to do a good job of explaining the allusive language in the verse. Nevertheless, because they are unlike the group statements that are typical of the Qur'an's reported speech, one could argue that both statements, that of the wife (*man anba' aka hādhā*) and that of Muhammad (*nabba'aniya l-'alīmu l-khabīr*), could be memories or relics of a historical conversation, if not verbatim quotations thereof.

Mehdi Azaiez has drawn my attention to an interesting third case (and thence to a fourth), namely Qur'an 21:4, which seems to include a quotation of an earlier statement of Muhammad: "He says [or "said": Ar. *qāla*]: 'My Lord knows what is said in the heavens and the earth, and He is the All-hearing, the All-knowing'" (*qālā rabbī ya'lamu l-qawla fī l-samā'i wa-l-arḍi wa-huwa l-samī'u l-'alīm*). Azaiez describes this (referring to an observation of A.-L. de Prémare) as the only example in the Qur'an in which the divine word gives in to the human word. He does note, however, that something similar is found in Q 25:30: "The Messenger says (or "said"), 'O my Lord, behold, my people have taken this Koran as a thing to be shunned'" (*wa-qāla l-rasūlu yā-rabbi inna qawmī ittakhadhū hādhā l-qur'āna mahjūran*).⁵⁵

Conclusion: The Qur'anic Drama

Even if one considered these cases to be true exceptions, however, they would seem to prove the rule as concerns reported speech in the Qur'an. Indeed, my study largely confirms the arguments of Mehdi Azaiez that counter-discourse in the Qur'an is part of the larger mise-en-scène in the text.⁵⁶ It is also worth

noting that my conclusions in regard to the Qur'an are close to those of Robert Alter in regard to the Hebrew Bible. After discussing the dialogue between David and Ahimelech in 2 Samuel 18, he comments:

I would stress that the speech reported, though dramatically convincing, is not meant to be altogether naturalistic. We of course have no way of knowing what ordinary spoken Hebrew was like around the turn of the first millennium BCE, but there is some internal evidence here – and a good deal more throughout biblical dialogue—that the "bias of stylization" affects the words assigned to the speakers.⁵⁷

The Qur'an is a good example—indeed perhaps a better example—of the "bias of stylization." One might say that reported speech is woven into the fabric of Qur'anic theology. Here I would agree with the thoughts of Mir where he contrasts dialogue in the Qur'an to that of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament:

While in the Bible theology sometimes recedes into the background—though without disappearing—the theology of the Qur'an always remains in the foreground, as the exceedingly frequent Qur'anic references to the power, omniscience, mercy, justice, and other attributes of God would indicate. This in turn means that the relationship between narration and dialogue in the Qur'an is a little different than in the Bible: narration in the Qur'an does not simply perform the function of summarizing and establishing connections, it also lays down the parameters within which dialogue will take place, setting the terms and conditions of dialogue, and furnishing guidelines for "correctly" evaluating and interpreting a given dialogue.⁵⁸

I would go a step further, however, than Azaiez and Mir. The observations of Mir (above) have consequences for our evaluation of the nature of reported speech in the Qur'an. That speech is itself an expression of the "foregrounding" of theology in the Qur'an. It appears to be a (theologically-minded) creation more than the verbatim recording of historical speech. We have seen different signs of this quality of reported

⁵⁴ On this account see Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr* (1983), 8:302–303. See also Cannuyer, "Māriya" (2008).

⁵⁵ See Azaiez, *Le Coran des historiens* (2019), 2a:802. See de Prémare, *Aux origines* (2004), 129.

⁵⁶ I do not explore here in depth what it means to read a scripture as theatrical performance. This is perhaps a topic for exploration in a future study. The idea of a "theatrical" reading of the Qur'an might be put in conversation with the notion of "narrative theology" in Christian discourse. Narrative theology presents doctrines or beliefs themselves as stories and thus is different from (although analogous to) reading scripture itself as a story. For a description of (and response to) narrative theology, see Murphy, *God is Not a Story* (2007).

⁵⁷ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981), 88.

⁵⁸ Mir, "Dialogue" (1992): 18. In the reference to Biblical narration, Mir is in conversation with the aforementioned work of Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981).

speech in the Qur'an: the anonymous nature of the Prophet's opponents, the attribution of speech almost invariably to a group and not an individual, and the way in which reported speech is incorporated into the rhyme scheme of the text. All of this makes it implausible to think of reported speech in the Qur'an as records of historical conversations. It does, however, offer new opportunities for thinking through the Qur'anic theology as it is embedded in reported speech.

Here one might begin with the observation of Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau that the Qur'an, with its quotations of opponents, does not mean to attack specific people but rather certain theological dispositions:

Ce qu'il veut signifier par ce type de passage, c'est que l'attitude est la même quelle que soit l'époque. Ce ne sont pas tant les personnages réels—les opposants—qui sont visés par le texte, que leur attitude. Et leur attitude, c'est l'attitude d'opposition au prophète, qui se caractérise avant tout par un refus, une dénégation, de l'Écriture (ou du message) apportée par celui-ci.⁵⁹

She then adds, quite convincingly, a note regarding the Qur'anic asides to the Prophet, which insist that the opponents will not change their mind: "Cette hypothèse—le texte vise non pas tant les opposants que l'attitude de dénégation—se trouve confirmée par le fait que le texte établit clairement qu'il est vain de vouloir changer le comportement des opposants."⁶⁰

If my arguments regarding reported speech as part of a mise-en-scène in the Qur'anic text are convincing, then further studies might explore further the dramatic quality of the Qur'an. Indeed, the notion of the Qur'an as drama is still largely waiting to be explored. I would note here an example raised by Adam Flowers in his recent dissertation, *The Genres of Qur'anic Dis-*

course. Flowers introduces the concept of "manufactured speech" in the Qur'an and discusses Qur'an 5:72, in which certain opponents (one would assume, Christians), are made to say: "God is the Messiah, Mary's son." This particular formulation runs contrary to Christian theological discourse (it would be more common to find Christians saying "Christ is God" rather than "God is Christ") and may be a sort of caricature meant to implicate Christians in theological impertinence (or worse).⁶¹ Flowers comments,

Whether or not those who may have held this belief in fact said *inna allāha huwa al-masīḥu ibnu maryama*, "Indeed, God is the Messiah, son of Mary," cannot be known definitively from reading the Qur'ān alone. What can be known, however, is that the Qur'ān presents this speech as if it occurred and, in doing so, provides its own rebuttal in the remainder of the verse.

I would add to this that the dramatic effect of the Qur'an's presentation of this speech is worth further study from both a literary and theological perspective. From a literary perspective, one might ask whether our current models for reading the Qur'an do justice to its dramatic concerns. Have scholars missed something fundamentally important about the Qur'anic text by not considering it as a drama? From a theological perspective, how might these insights help scholars consider, or re-consider, Qur'anic teaching regarding the other? If the discourses of the other are "manufactured speech" (or perhaps, "dramatic speech"), then one might consider whether the Qur'an indeed intends to judge (or condemn) the other as much as it means to judge certain theological dispositions. Both of these matters (the literary and the theological) might be developed in future research and cannot be considered at length here.

In any case, while my approach to the question of reported speech has been philological rather than theological, it seems to me that this study might nevertheless help orient theological studies on the text of the Qur'an. If the argument regarding the "dramatic" nature of reported speech in the Qur'an might run contrary to some traditional assumptions about the

⁵⁹ Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même* (2014), 346. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for these references. Boisliveau adds in a footnote (*ibid.*, 27): "Il élargit dans le même temps l'audience des potentielles personnes concernées." Elsewhere, Boisliveau (*ibid.*, 354) argues that the particular issue at stake in these dramatic dialogues is the divine origin of the Qur'an (as the Qur'an engages in something like a "self-canonization"): "L'«auteur» du texte a mis en scène des accusations et des attentes à propos de l'origine du Coran, et cette mise en scène lui permet alors d'argumenter et de polémiquer dans toute la latitude qu'il souhaite. En effet l'enjeu—et la conséquence, parce que l'argumentation est réussie—des passages polémiques est indubitablement la réaffirmation sans faille de l'origine divine du Coran." One might note also the references to reported speech in Sanji, *Qur'ān: A Form-Critical History* (2018), 140–41.

⁶⁰ Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même* (2014), 346.

⁶¹ Compare Q 9:30, in which the Qur'an (after mentioning a different statement of Christians regarding Christ), declares: "That is the utterance of *their mouths*, conforming with the unbelievers before them. God assail them! How they are perverted!"

text, it might also nourish new and productive ways of thinking theologically. The Qur'an does not seem to tell us "what was really said" at the time when Muhammad was preaching. Instead, the Qur'an tells us its own dramatic story with its own script and its own characters. It thereby makes arguments about God and prophethood for the sake of its audience. All of the characters of the Qur'an—one might say even the antagonists—become theological voices. Accordingly, one should not hasten to connect the Qur'an too closely to history, but rather allow the Qur'an to be what, after all, it claims to be: a scripture.

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