

ILTIFĀT AND NARRATIVE VOICE IN THE QUR'ĀN: GRAMMATICAL SHIFTS AND NESTED DIALOGUE IN SŪRAHS 19, 20, AND 18

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Abstract

This article analyzes the Qur'ān's use of an Arabic rhetorical device called *iltifāt*, the shift of person within a text. It addresses the way *iltifāt* has been interpreted by medieval Muslim exegetes and the implications of its use for the structure and cosmology of the Qur'ān. By analyzing the use of *iltifāt* in the Qur'ān, the article demonstrates that the qur'ānic narrator exclusively refers to itself in the first-person plural, and that shifts to other persons (e.g., first-person singular) signify shifts into nested dialogues, asides, and/or narratives within narratives. Furthermore, the way this narrator refers to earthly and heavenly beings suggests that this first-person plural narrator holds a distinct place in the Qur'ān's cosmology, one that is linked to but distinct from God and other inhabitants of the heavens.

In *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Robert Alter presents a literary approach to the Bible, noting several aspects of literary analysis he finds lacking in biblical studies: “discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sounds, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units, and much else.”¹ He argued that such types of analysis were in their infancy within biblical studies. While several major publications have emerged in decades since, such subfields remain neglected in comparison to more traditional fields such as biblical philology.

It is hard to say whether qur'ānic studies suffers similarly: Arabic grammar and vocabulary have been focal points of qur'ānic studies and interpretation since the field's inception in the late antique/early medieval era, but

1. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 13. Other biblical scholars such as Lindbeck have also made similar cases; see George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984), 79–84 and 117–119.

exploration of the issues Alter emphasized in the passage above is lacking. Alter wanted his audience (meaning biblical scholars and, perhaps implicitly, all biblical readers) to read the Bible as scholars read Dante, Shakespeare, and Tolstoy. Some scholars do that in qur'ānic studies, as in biblical studies—the last two decades have seen the publication of several texts along these lines in qur'ānic studies—but both texts would benefit from more sustained attention to these and other literary elements.² Alter noted that in the Bible, “a remarkably large part of the narrative burden is carried by dialogue, the transactions between characters typically unfolding through the words they exchange, with only the most minimal intervention of the narrator.”³ He also wrote that Hebrew dialogue in the Bible is highly stylized (repetitive, emphasis for the sake of narrative, etc.). These points are also true of the Qur'ān. Finally, Alter also notes that biblical dialogue is used to emphasize a particular point, to direct the audience's attention to that event.⁴ This, too, is quite common in the Qur'ān. In the Qur'ān, however, dialogue is more about creating a sense of time as immediate and present, even for stories that are presented as having occurred in the distant past.⁵

2. Mustansir Mir was an early adopter of this perspective; Mustansir Mir, “The Qur'an as Literature,” *Religion and Literature* 20 (1988): 49–64. For examples of more recent work, see Angelika Neuwirth, *Scripture, Poetry, and the Making of a Community: Reading the Qur'an as a Literary Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx (eds.), *The Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'anic Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Daniel Madigan, *The Qur'an's Self-Image* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Stefan Wild (ed.), *Self-Referentiality in the Qur'an* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006); Ayman A. El-Desouky, “Between Hermeneutic Provenance and Textuality: The Qur'an and the Question of Method in Approaches to World Literature,” *JQS* 16.3 (2014): 11–38. El-Desouky conducts a survey of the modern study of the qur'ānic voice, in which he memorably notes the “theological and institutional risk” of taking a modern literary approach to qur'ānic hermeneutical work (citing an earlier warning by Navid Kermani, “Poetry and Language” in Andrew Rippin [ed.], *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an* [Oxford: Blackwell, 2009], 5–6), 16. Both of these scholars may be referring to the case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, whose humanistic qur'ānic hermeneutical work resulted in loss of promotion at Cairo University, a lawsuit in which he was declared an apostate by an Egyptian court, death threats, and ultimately exile from Egypt.

3. Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 226.

4. *Ibid.*, 227–228.

5. Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1999), 187. Tarif Khalidi has referred to this as the “eternal present” tense in *The Muslim Jesus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 31.

This study centers on how the Qur'ān uses pronouns to identify dialogue and shifts in narrative voice, both within those timeless stories and beyond them. It is commonly understood that the narrator of the Qur'ān, assumed to be God, is most frequently represented in the first-person plural (*nahnu/we*), but at times in the first-person singular (*anā/I*). The addressee, which is not necessarily the same as the audience, at times seems to be one person (based on use of a singular verb or noun), usually assumed to be Muḥammad, and other times many people (varying depending on context), and the narration shifts rapidly from one to the other. The narration also shifts from direct to indirect address and back again frequently and without apparent reason or warning. This latter type of shift is termed *iltifāt* in Arabic commentaries on the Qur'ān.

In what follows, I will offer a framework for reading and following the Qur'ān's sometimes confusing shifts in speaker, tone, and content through an examination of qur'ānic usage of *iltifāt*. I argue four main points. One, the qur'ānic narrator is an unnamed first-person plural narrator. Any usage of the first-person singular to refer to God (self-reference) occurs within a narrative told by the first-person plural qur'ānic narrator, in which God speaks directly to another person or audience. Two, the qur'ānic narrator has a direct relationship to God and is perhaps more specifically the executor of God's will. The narrator's cosmological role may be identified through the ways in which its relationship with heavenly beings, including God, is described (with a focus on how the term *rabb* is used with various pronominal suffixes). Three, the first-person plural qur'ānic narrator's speech acts as the outer layer of communication with an audience, within which there may be any number of narratives, dialogues, and commanded speech, all of which may be identified by the use of *iltifāt*. Finally, reading the Qur'ān as a dramatic form can significantly clarify its shifts in speaker, addressee, and tone. The role of the qur'ānic narrator may be compared to that of a Greek chorus. Reading the Qur'ān as a dramatic form also underscores the importance of orality and public recitation: it is best understood as performative material.

I focus in this study on examples from Q Maryam 19, Ṭāhā 20 and al-Qaṣaṣ 28, though this framework may be applied to many other *sūrahs*, and arguably throughout the entire text of the Qur'ān as we know it. In order to better understand the Qur'ān's use of *iltifāt*, I examine classical studies of *iltifāt*, modern studies of *iltifāt* and its near-synonym *enallage*, and comparative phenomena in biblical studies and classical Greek performance studies. Building on these studies and usage of relational and divine terminology in the Qur'ān, I examine the use of *iltifāt* and the implications of

this usage for the qur'ānic narrator. I do not offer a rejection of standard interpretations of audience and speaker in the Qur'ān, but an alternative method of interpretation which clarifies the purpose and intention of these shifts throughout these *sūrah*s (and in the Qur'ān in general).

The Qur'ān does not use the term *iltifāt*. The term emerged as a term of art in the formative period of exegesis and maintained its currency among medieval exegetes such as Ḍiyā' al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr (d. 637/1239), al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392), and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), who noticed and attempted to understand the Qur'ān's use of shifts in person and pronoun usage, indicating in the *tafāsīr* what appear to be irregular and inconsistent changes in speaker, addressee and audience. Such shifting came to be identified as a stylistic device, one later defined as *iltifāt*—literally, “turning”—and its presence in other Arabic literary works signified an elevated use of the Arabic language, likely because of its occurrence in the Qur'ān. Eventually the term came to denote a grammatical transition or a parenthetical aside.⁶

While the word *iltifāt* is not found in the Qur'ān, its meaning and usage may be examined through classical exegetical and grammatical works, as well as classical Arabic dictionaries. Al-Zamakhsharī's (d. 538/1144) *Kashshāf* defines *iltifāt* as a transition of person, providing several examples and details of its effects.⁷ Ibn al-Athīr cites definitions from earlier sources that use the example of turning one's face from one side to another, com-

6. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, “Grammatical Shift for Rhetorical Purposes: *Iltifāt* and Related Features in the Qur'ān,” *BSOAS* 55 (1992): 407–432, 409. Abdel Haleem also covers *iltifāt* extensively in his *Understanding the Qur'ān: Themes and Style* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 187–208. Sometimes the term “apostrophe” is used in translation, though as Blankinship notes, this is not a direct parallel. Van Gelder also identifies distinctions in classical definitions, citing al-Ḥātimī for the simpler definition of what he translates as apostrophe, and Ibn al-Mu'tazz as apostrophe specifically from one grammatical person to another, sometimes specifically in the context of an aside, though not always. Geert Jan van Gelder, “Arabic Poetics and Stylistics according to the Introduction of *al-Durr al-Farīd* by Muḥammad Ibn Ayydamir (d. 710/1310),” *ZDMG* 146 (1996): 381–414, 402, cf. Abū 'Alī al-Ḥātimī, *Ḥilyat al-muḥāḍarah fi šinā'at al-shi'r*, ed. Ja'far al-Kattānī (2 vols., Baghdad: Dār al-Rashīd, 1979), 215. Khalid Yahya Blankinship also devotes a chapter to *iltifāt* in his *The Inimitable Qur'ān: Some Problems in English Translations of the Qur'ān with Reference to Rhetorical Features* (Leiden: Brill, 2019). See also Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'ān*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003), 119 and 245–255 for *iltifāt* and 224–255 for a general study of qur'ānic discourse.

7. Jār Allāh al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf 'an ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl wa-'uyūn al-aqāwīl fi wujūh al-ta'wīl*, ed. 'Adīl Ḥamad 'Abd al-Mawjūd et al. (6 vols., Riyadh: Maktabat al-'Ubaykān, 1998), 1.118–121.

paring it to *iltifāt*'s turning from one form to another.⁸ Al-Zarkashī brings in the idea that *iltifāt* is a shift for rhetorical or entertainment purposes only; he defines it as “change of speech from one mode to another, for the sake of freshness and variety for the listener, to refresh his interest, and to keep his mind from boredom and frustration in having one mode continuously at his ear.”⁹

Later scholars develop ever more precise definitions. Al-Sharīf al-Jur-jānī's *Kitāb al-Ta'rifāt* (d. ca. 816–817/1413–1414) defines *iltifāt* as a shift from the third person to the first or second person, or the opposite. Al-Suyūṭī defines *iltifāt* as a shift of dialogue from the third person, second person, or first person, or each of them to the other, and he argues that it is a transition from one of three grammatical forms to another to direct one's attention to something else such as an anecdote.¹⁰ Al-Munāwī (d. 1031/1621) defines *iltifāt* as digressing or turning away from the third person to the second or first person, or the opposite of that.¹¹ Lastly, Habib Salmone defines *iltafata*, the verbal form of which *iltifāt* is the *maṣdar*, as “a. Attention; regard; care, solicitude. b. Abrupt digression, change of subject.”¹² Thus, we see that the meaning of *iltifāt* evolves somewhat over time, becoming at times more expansive and other times more precise in its definition and grammatical and rhetorical roles. Nonetheless, the basic understanding of the term identifies a shift, often abrupt, and usually happening either at the start of, end of, or within a narration or an address.

However, as Abdel Haleem observes, most scholars referred to the same sample of verses in examining the qur'ānic usage of *iltifāt*, when indeed it is used throughout the Qur'ān much more extensively; if anything, it is a defining characteristic of qur'ānic style.¹³ In particular, Abdel Haleem notes that these scholars identified *iltifāt* exclusively in Meccan *sūrah*s—even those scholars, such as al-Suyūṭī and al-Zarkashī, who covered the topic

8. Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Mathal al-sā'ir fī adab al-kātib wa'l-shā'ir*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Ḥamīd (2 vols., Beirut: al-Maktabah al-ʿAṣriyyah, 1990), 2.2–16.

9. Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad Abū 'l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (4 vols., Cairo: Dār Ihyā' al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyyah, 1957–1958), 3.314–337.

10. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Iqtān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (4 vols., Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyyah al-ʿĀmmah li'l-Kitāb, 1967), 3.253–259.

11. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Ra'ūf b. Tāj al-ʿArifīn al-Munāwī, *Tawqīf 'alā muhammāt al-ta'arīf*, ed. Muḥammad Riḍwan al-Dāyah (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1990), 85.

12. Habib Salmone, *An Arabic-English Dictionary on a New System* (London: Trubner and Co., 1890), 925.

13. Abdel Haleem, “Grammatical Shift for Rhetorical Purposes,” 407–408.

most extensively.¹⁴ Yet even al-Zarkashī only referred to some 30–50 verses, and all of these were Meccan. We might charitably assume these scholars examined the same verses in order to participate in a long-standing academic conversation; from that perspective, such a focus makes sense. However, in doing so, Abdel Haleem argues that they unintentionally under-represented the frequency with which *iltifāt* is used in the Qurʾān, a finding clearly supported by the evidence. *Iltifāt* can be found in many *sūrah*s.¹⁵

Abdel Haleem’s critical work on Qurʾānic *iltifāt*, while fundamentally important, largely ceases here – he demonstrates that *iltifāt* is a stylistic device used frequently throughout the Qurʾān, and identifies, categorizes and defines different types of *iltifāt*. He also notes that specific instances of Qurʾānic *iltifāt* sometimes have a particular purpose or effect on the audience. However, upon closer examination, *iltifāt* seems to be not merely a stylistic device, but more specifically a structural shift in narration, one always made with clear intention and purpose, particularly in the context of dialogue.

We may see an example of *iltifāt* used to denote dialogue in Q 28:48–50:

48 But when the truth reached them from Us, they said, “Why was he not given the like of what Moses was given?” Did they not previously disbelieve in what Moses was given? They said, “Two sorceries supporting each other!” And they said, “We disbelieve in all of it.”

fa-lammā jā’ahumu ’l-ḥaqqu min ’indinā qālū law lā ūtiya mithla mā ūtiya mūsā a-wa-lam yakfurū bimā ūtiya mūsā min qablu qālū sihrāni tazāharā wa-qālū innā bi-kullin kāfirūn

49 Say: Then bring a book from God that is a better guide than both of them so that I may follow it, if you are truthful.’

qul fa’tū bi-kitābin min ’indi ’llāhi huwa ahdā minhumā attabi’hu in kuntum ṣādiqīn

50 But if they do not respond to you, then know that they only follow their desires. And who is more lost than someone who only follows his desire without guidance from God? Indeed, God does not guide the people who do wrong.

fa-in lam yastajībū laka fa’lam annamā yattabi’ūna ahwā’ahum wa-man aḍallu mimmani ’ttaba’a hawāhu bi-ghayri hudan mina ’llāhi inna ’llāha lā yahdī ’l-qawma ’l-zālimīn

14. Ibid., 408.

15. Ibid. For a study building on this article, see Ma’ahad Mokhtar, “The Significance of *Iltifāt* in the Qurʾān: A Holistic Approach,” *JQS* 8.2 (2006): 179–202.

In the above passage, *iltifāt* is the primary indicator of when dialogue begins and ends. When one examines the Qur'ān's shifts in pronoun and person in the context of speaker and addressee, as may be seen in the passages immediately above and below, certain trends emerge. Usually exhortative verses are addressed to a second-person singular addressee, commonly assumed to be Muḥammad, and they often include a command to tell "them" something. "Them" indicates an audience comprised of a selected group of persons, sometimes (though not always) categorized by a signifier such as belief or behavior (polytheism, for example). In one such instance, Q Maryam 19:75 instructs a second-person singular addressee to recite a statement, commenting on how "they" will respond:

Say: "Whoever is in error, may the Merciful grant him extension"; until, when they see what they were promised, either the punishment or the Hour, then they will know who is worse in position and weaker in forces.
qul man kāna fī 'l-ḡalālāti fa-l-yamdud lahu 'l-raḥmānu maddan ḥattā idhā ra'aw mā yū'adūna immā 'l-adhāba wa-'immā 'l-sā'ata, fa-sa-ya'lamūna man huwa sharrun makānan wa-aḍ'afu jundā

The composition of the audience seems to shift depending on the particular message being conveyed. Sometimes, however, the qur'ānic speaker seems to skip over the Prophet Muḥammad himself and addresses the group directly. An example is Q al-Qaṣaṣ 20:54–55, which states:

54 Eat and feed your cattle. Surely there are signs in that for those who possess intelligence!
kulū wa'r'aw an'āmakum inna fī dhālīka la-āyātin li-ulī 'l-nuḥā

55 From it We created you, and to it We will return you, and from it We will bring you back once again.
minhā khalaqnākum wa-fihā nu'idukum wa-minhā nukhrijukum tāratan ukhrā

When this direct form of communication occurs, it is signified by the second-person plural (with the exception of narrative dialogue, which will be discussed later in this article). In these instances, it may be assumed that Muḥammad is part of the group being addressed, though this remains uncertain.

The most common understanding of the grammatical person of the qur'ānic speaker is that it is sometimes first-person singular and sometimes first-person plural. This is at least partially incorrect. The source of these addresses, the qur'ānic speaker, is always a first-person plural (*naḥnu*). Situations where it appears to be first-person singular are, upon examination,

always found in narrative dialogue. That is, any use of the first-person singular in the Qurʾān is within the dialogue of a narrative, or the qurʾānic speaker taking on the voice of a third party in some other fashion, and is not a direct address by the qurʾānic speaker to Muḥammad or any other audience. An example may be found in Q 19:17–21, where angel conveys to Mary in Q 19:9 God’s speech to her, “It is easy for me” (*huwa ‘alayya hayyin*):

17 Then she took cover from them. Then we sent to her our spirit in the shape of a well-proportioned man.

fa’ttakhadhat min dūnihim ḥijāban fa-arsalnā ilayhā rūḥanā fa-tamatthala lahā basharan sawiyyā

18 She said, “I seek refuge in the Merciful from you, if you are God-fearing.”

qālat innī a‘ūdhu bi’l-raḥmāni minka in kunta taqīyyā

19 He said, “I am but a messenger from your Lord to bestow on you a pure son.”

qāla innamā anā rasūlu rabbiki li-ahaba laki ghulāman zakiyyā

20 She said, “How can I have a son when no man has touched me and I am not unchaste?”

qālat annā yakūnu lī ghulamun wa-lam yamsasni basharun wa-lam aku baghiyyā

21 He said, “Thus, your Lord said, ‘It is easy for me.’” And so we will make him a sign for the people and a mercy from us.

qāla kadhāliki qāla rabbuki huwa ‘alayya hayyinun wa-li-naj’alahu āyatan li’l-nāsi wa-raḥmatan minnā wa-kāna amran maqḍīyyā

Thus, when directly addressing its audience, regardless of whether that audience is Muḥammad or a group of people or both, the qurʾānic speaker refers to itself only in the first-person plural (or uses a verb conjugated in the first-person plural). For example, the last forty verses of Sūrat Maryam, Q 19:58–98, relate to apocalyptic themes. Here we will examine the first few verses of that section, Q 19:58–64, which are all spoken from a first-person plural perspective, with frequent explicit self-reference using “We,” and addressed to a group of persons almost certainly intended to include all of humanity:¹⁶

16. Interestingly, in Q 19:64, medieval Muslim exegetes argue that Gabriel is now speaking, or perhaps the angels, though the speaker still references itself as “We,” as in the verse beforehand, and there is no indication that the speaker has shifted.

58 Those were they upon whom God bestowed grace from among the prophets of the descendants of Adam, and of those We carried with Noah, and of the descendants of Abraham and Israel, and of those We guided and chose. When the signs of the All-Merciful were recited to them, they fell prostrating and weeping.

ulā'ika 'lladhīna an'ama 'llāhu 'alayhim mina 'l-nabiyyīna min dhurriyyati Ādama wa-mimman ḥamalnā ma'a Nūhin wa-min dhurriyyati Ibrāhīma wa-Isrā'īla wa-mimman hadaynā wa'jtabaynā idhā tutlā 'alayhim āyātu 'l-raḥmāni kharrū sujūdan wa-bukiyyā

59 Then there succeeded after them a succession who neglected the prayer, and followed lusts; therefore, soon they will encounter evil.

fa-khalafa min ba'dihim khalfun aḏā'ū 'l-ṣalāta wa-ttaba'ū 'l-shahawāti fa-sawfa yalqawna ḡhayyā

60 But whoever repents, and believes, and does good, they will enter the garden, and will not be wronged by anything:

'illā man tāba wa-āmana wa-ʿamila ṣāliḥan fa-ulā'ika yadkhulūna 'l-jannata wa-lā yuzlamūna shay'ā

61 the gardens of Eden that the All-Merciful promised His servants in the Unseen. Indeed, His promise is sure to come.

jannāti 'adnini 'llatī wa'ada 'l-raḥmānu 'ibādahu bi'l-ḡhaybi innahu kāna wa'aduhu ma'tiyyā

62 There they will not hear vain talk, but only peace. And for them will be their provision, morning and evening.

lā yasma'ūna fihā ḡhwan illā salāman wa-lahum rizquhum fihā bukratan wa-ʿashiyyā

63 This is the Garden which We give as inheritance to those among Our servants who are devout.

tilka 'l-jannatu 'llatī nūrithu min 'ibādīna man kāna taqiyyā

64 We do not come down except by the command of your Lord. To Him belongs what is before Us [lit. between Our hands] and what is behind Us and what is between that. And your Lord is not forgetful.

wa-mā natanazzalu illā bi-amri rabbika lahu mā bayna aydīna wa-mā khalfanā wa-mā bayna dhālika wa-mā kāna rabbuka nasiyyā

Given that the narrator of the Qur'ān is commonly assumed to be God, use of the plural by the Qur'ānic speaker to identify itself seems odd. Medieval and modern scholars have identified this discrepancy and have attempted to address it.¹⁷ Arguments include the idea that “We” is essentially

17. For a list of scholars, see Thomas Hoffman, “Agonistic Poetics in the Qur'ān,” in

a royal or divine We; one basis for this argument is the concept that God is greater than one being or entity; He is without number.¹⁸ Other scholars have argued that it is simply a matter of rhetorical emphasis.¹⁹ The concept of using one grammatical form in place of another, which incorporates all of the above arguments, is called *enallage* (sometimes rendered as “interchange” in English), and there have been several studies of its use in the Qurʾān. *Enallage* also incorporates, and is sometimes synonymous with, the grammatical shifts embodied in the term *iltifāt*, which we have already examined. Nicolai Sinai notes the importance of *enallage* in the Qurʾān, citing Q al-Baqarah 2:172 and Q al-Aʿrāf 7:143 as examples while referring to its widespread usage in the Qurʾān. He argues that its frequent usage suggests some kind of deliberate rhetorical meaning and function, as opposed to an amalgamation of previously independent verses, and that such shifts do not undermine the notion that the Qurʾān is divine speech.²⁰ The term *enallage* is also used in biblical studies, where it refers to an exchange or shift in person, gender, or number. Here, too, *enallage* in the Hebrew Bible has historically been seen as a rhetorical device or simply as cases of textual corruption or error.²¹

None of these theories, however, is consistent with the textual or cosmological structure of the Qurʾān. The plural first-person narrator is clearly distinct, or at least semi-distinct, from God: God is referred to as Allāh frequently, along with other names, but most often as *rabb* + a pronominal suffix; e.g., *rabbuka* (“your Lord”) or *rabbuhu* (“his Lord”), as we saw in Q 19:64 (*rabbuka*) above, *wa-mā natanazzalu illā bi-amri rabbika* (“We do not come down except by the command of your Lord”). There are also occurrences of *rabbunā* (“our Lord”), which, upon examination, all occur in dialogue spoken (or instructed to be spoken) by humans. These usages imply that while this Lord (*rabb*) is the Lord of its audience and its narrative subjects, it is

Wild (ed.), *Self-Referentiality in the Qurʾān*, 39–58, 43–44.

18. This is a common interpretation among Muslim theologians as well as non-scholars. Abdel Haleem (“Grammatical Shift for Rhetorical Purposes,” 413–415 et passim), using the term “majestic plural,” notes that such usage did not exist in Arabic prior to the Qurʾān.

19. Nicolai Sinai, “Qurʾānic Self-referentiality as a Strategy of Self-authorization,” in Wild (ed.), *Self-Referentiality in the Qurʾān*, 103–134, 109.

20. Nicolai Sinai, *The Qurʾān: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 12–13.

21. Caspar Leviaš, “Enallage in the Bible,” *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 50.2 (1934): 104–108; cf. Carl Ernst, *How to Read the Qurʾān* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 243.

not the Lord of the qur'ānic speaker (despite apparently delegating power to it, as we will see later). It should also be noted that *al-rabb* ("the Lord") does not occur at all in the Qur'ān; *rabb* is always connected to a possessive pronominal suffix or is part of an *iḏāfah* or other grammatical construction that specifies its jurisdiction (however vast that may be).²² In any case, and particularly in the cases of *rabbuka* and *rabbuhu*, the narrator seems to set itself apart from God.²³

On the other hand, this narrator has divine agency. He sends down (or perhaps they send down) the Qur'ān, just as he or they sent plagues, miracles, and revelations to earlier peoples and prophets. This narrator is not comprised of the angels, another agentive group in the Qur'ān, because he sometimes exhibits agency over them.²⁴ Nor is he the *jinn*, for similar reasons: he addresses them as a distinct group, one that does not overlap with the narrator.²⁵ If anything, one might identify him as something resembling a divine executive task force or some sort of agentive group acting directly (and presumably only) on behalf of God. Allāh and *rabb*, if we assume they are synonyms, do indeed have jurisdiction over the narrator, but the narrator executes the divine will, sometimes semi-independently, and has near total executive dominion.

A variety of terms could be used to emphasize these aspects of the qur'ānic narrator. One could call it "the divine speaking presence," in the manner of Ayman El-Desouky, which appropriately conveys both its role and the ambiguity of its identity in relation to other aspects of the divine.²⁶

22. *Rabbī*, "my Lord," and *rabbunā*, "our Lord," are used either in the context of commanded speech, as we shall see, or by a speaker who is not the qur'ānic narrator.

23. Determining the audience implied by common use of the second person singular is beyond the scope of this article; however, it remains a related thorny problem. Sinai argues that the use of *rabbuka* might imply that the qur'ānic speaker was meant to address a/the qur'ānic audience in the form of the individual listener, rather than Muḥammad per se. Nicolai Sinai, "Qur'ānic Self-referentiality," 108.

24. E.g., Q 17:95; Q 6:8; Q 51:4.

25. For example, Q 15:27; Q 37:158; Q 55:15; Q 55:31–33; and Q 72:5 all identify the *jinn* as separate and distinct from the narrator. For more on self-distinction of the qur'ānic speaker, see Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau, "Présentation coranique des messages prophétiques anciens: l'attitude de *kufr* dénoncée," in Claude Gilliot, Andrew Rippin, and Roberto Tottoli (eds.), *Books and Written Culture of the Islamic World: Studies Presented to Claude Gilliot on the Occasion of His 75th Birthday* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 144–158, 154.

26. Ayman A. El-Desouky, "Between Hermeneutic Provenance and Textuality: The Qur'an and the Question of Method in Approaches to World Literature," *JQS* 16.3 (2014): 11–38, 16.

Nicolai Sinai refers to “the Qur’ān’s dramatis personae” and its “divine voice,” both of which also convey these meanings.²⁷ Another appropriate term might be mantic speech or more precisely the mantic speaker, though the term “mantic” implies prophecy as well as divinity, and perhaps suggests a connection to the speech of pre-Islamic soothsayers or *kuhhān*, one that the Qur’ānic speaker actively and repeatedly rejects (despite some apparent similarities in the style of speech used by the divine speaker to that of pre-Islamic *kāhins*). In order to render the concept with the scriptural import it ought to convey, I will follow the example of Michael Sells and henceforth refer to it as the Qur’ānic voice;²⁸ when I wish to emphasize the particular elements of the Qur’ānic voice that may be comparable to a Greek chorus, I will sometimes use the term Divine Chorus.

In Sūrat Ṭāhā (Q 20), *iltifāt* features prominently in a narrative of Moses. Within the context of this narrative, which is told by the Divine Chorus, God and Moses converse:

8 God, there is no god but He. To Him belong the most beautiful names.
Allāhu lā ilāha illā huwa lahu 'l-asmā'u 'l-ḥusnā

9 Has the story of Moses reached you?
wa-hal atāka ḥadithu mūsā

10 When he saw a fire, he said to his family, “Wait here; I spotted a fire. Perhaps I can bring you a brand from it, or I shall find at the fire some guidance.”
idh ra'ā nāran fa-qāla li-āhlihi 'mkuthū innī ānastu nāran la'alli ātikum min-hā bi-qabasin aw ajidu 'alā 'l-nāri hudā

11 When he came to it, he was called, “Moses!”
fa-lammā atāhā nūdiya yā mūsā

12 Indeed, I am your Lord. Take off your shoes; you are in the holy valley of Ṭuwā
innī ana rabbuka fa'khla' na'layka innaka bi'l-wādī 'l-muqaddasi Ṭuwā

13 And I have chosen you, so listen to what is revealed.
wa-ana 'khtartuka fa-stami' limā yūḥā

14 Indeed, I am God; there is no god but Me. So worship Me, and establish prayer for My remembrance.
innanī ana 'llāhu lā ilāha illā ana fa'budnī wa-aqimi 'l-ṣalāta li-dhikrī

27. Sinai, *The Qur'an*, 12.

28. Michael Sells, “Sound, Spirit, and Gender in Sūrat al-Qadr,” *JAOS* 111 (1991): 239–259, 240.

15 Indeed, the Hour is coming. I all but conceal it, that every soul may be recompensed for that to which it strives.

inna 'l-sā'ata ātiyatun akādu ukhfihā li-tujzā kullu nafsin bi-mā tas'ā

16 So do not let one who disbelieves in it and follows his own desire distract you from it, or you will perish.

fa-lā yašuddannaka 'anhā man lā yu'minu bihā wa'ttaba'a hawāhu fa-tardā

17 And what is that in your right hand, Moses?"

wa-mā tilka bi-yamīnika yā mūsā

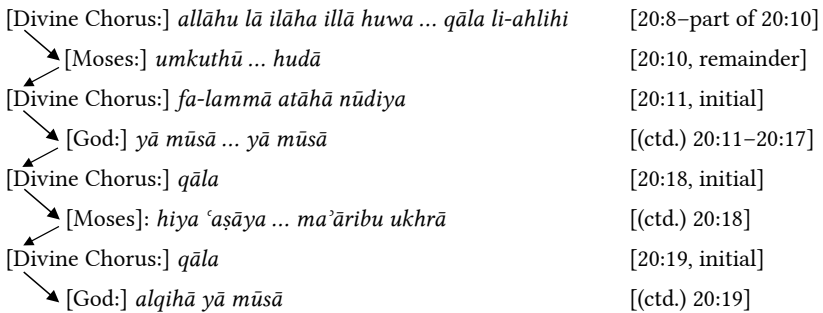
18 He said, "It is my staff; I lean on it and I bring down food with it for my sheep, and I have other uses for it."

qāla hiya 'ašāya atawakka'u 'alayhā wa-ahushshu bihā 'alā ghanamī wa-liya fihā ma'āribu ukhrā

19 He said, "Throw it down, Moses!"

qāla alqihā yā mūsā

Q 20:14–16 in particular cover apocalyptic themes. They provide a clear example of nested speech, in which the qur'ānic voice narrates a story to its audience in the form of a dialogue between two characters. The tone and content shift in Q 20:17, in which God asks Moses a question. The subject shifts abruptly from apocalyptic themes to asking Moses what he carries in his hand (it also switches from indirect to direct speech to do so). The narrative proceeds to tell the story of Moses and the soothsayers, alternating dialogue between Moses, who speaks to his family and later to God; God, who speaks to Moses; and the Divine Chorus, who speaks first to Muḥammad and later to Moses. If we were to diagram the narration of this section, it might look like this:



Such shifts to address Moses, Muḥammad, or the qur'ānic audience in the middle of a story, or sudden changes in topic to explain further a character

or detail in a story, may best be viewed as structurally parallel to asides in a play – usually narrated by the chorus, though not always. In reading this particular Divine Script, a lack of “stage directions” or indicators of speaker in these nested narrations means that shifts in pronoun, in reference to either speaker or addressee, are often the main, if not the only, identifiers of when asides, conversations, and even narrations of entire stories begin and end. When read through this framework, using pronominal shifts as identifiers, Sūrah 19, 20, and 28 all follow very clear rules of narration and dialogue. Rapid shifts, in which the Divine Chorus is speaking to Muḥammad, quickly move to the story of Moses, for example (which begins with very clear narration by the Divine Chorus, in which it asks Muḥammad if he has heard it). Dialogue between Moses and, say, God or Pharaoh, occurs throughout the narration of the story, and at times the Divine Chorus offers an aside during the narration, in which it warns the audience or Muḥammad that a behavior just displayed will result in negative consequences. The story then resumes without any indication of a shift back to either the inner story or even the dialogue nested within the inner story – unless one looks for a shift in pronoun.²⁹

Thomas Hoffman uses Q al-Kahf 18:109 as an example of *iltifāt* in his “Agonistic Poetics in the Qur’ān,” which provides a poetic example of the use of the Divine Chorus as intermediary:³⁰

Say: “If the sea were ink for the Words of my Lord the sea would be spent before the Words of my Lord are spent” though we brought replenishment the like of it.

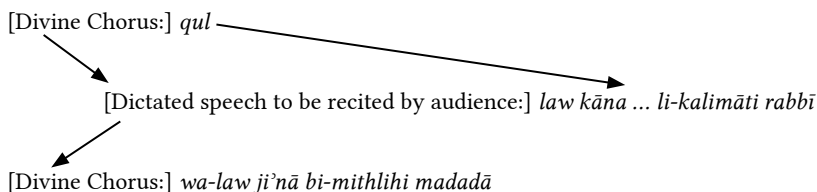
qul law kāna 'l-baḥru midādan li-kalimāti rabbī la-nafida 'l-baḥru qabla an tanfada kalimātu rabbī wa-law ji'nā bi-mithlihi madadā

Here one might argue is a case in which “my Lord” (*rabbī*) is used by the Divine Chorus. But again, it is not the Divine Chorus saying “my Lord.” Rather, the Divine Chorus addresses Muḥammad and/or the audience directly, telling him/them what to say. When viewed from the perspective of the Divine Chorus, it is clear where the dictated section ends: it begins with “If the sea were ink” (*law kāna*) and ends with “the Words of my Lord are spent” (*tanfada kalimātu rabbī*). The next clause, “though we brought replenishment the like of it” (*wa-law ji'nā bi-mithlihi madadā*), is not part

29. In a discussion of the story of David in Q 38:21–24, Nicolai Sinai discusses narratological shifts within the Qur’ān and the layers of temporality and discourse that they construct for the Qur’anic audience, though here he does not note the importance of *iltifāt* in doing so. Sinai, “Qur’anic Self-referentiality,” 123.

30. Hoffman, “Agonistic Poetics,” 44.

of the dictated speech, but rather commentary in the form of an aside from the Divine Chorus to Muḥammad – they are adding that this would be true even if they were to replenish the sea. “My Lord” (*rabbī*) here is, again, Muḥammad’s Lord, not that of the Divine Chorus. The shift from singular to plural is itself the indication that the dictated speech has ceased. A structural diagram of the verses might look like this:



Examples of *iltifāt* used in the way I have described above are abundant in the Qur’ān. A closer examination of verses in Sūrahs 19, 20, and 28 will clarify the use of *iltifāt* in the qur’ānic context. In examining these *sūrahs*, I have chosen to focus on verses with apocalyptic themes. Because verses containing apocalyptic material in these and other *sūrahs* sometimes occur in the middle of narratives of, say, pre-Islamic prophets, they provide robust examples of the use of *iltifāt* and nested dialogue to shift into and out of a dramatic scene. However, *iltifāt* is not limited to the verses in these *sūrahs* specifically; as noted earlier (and by others), it is found throughout the Qur’ān in general. I have found that it consistently serves as a marker of narratological shifts and specifically nested dialogue throughout the Qur’ān, and, surprisingly, demonstrates consistency in terms of its role or relationship to God, regardless of other chronological developments or other signifiers of evolution in qur’ānic speech.

Q 19: Maryam

Apocalyptic verses in Sūrat Maryam (Q 19) include the following excerpt, Q 19:36–42:

36 [Jesus said:] “Indeed, God is my Lord, and your Lord, so serve him. This is a straight path.”

wa-inna ’llāha rabbī wa-rabbukum fa’budūhu hādha širāṭun mustaqīm

37 But the parties differed among themselves, and woe to those who disbelieve when they witness a tremendous day!

fa’khtalafa ’l-aḥzābu min baynihim fa-waylun li’l-ladhīna kafarū min mash-hadi yawmin ’azīm

38 How they will hear and see on the day that they come to Us! But the wrongdoers even today are in manifest error.

asmi‘ bihim wa-abšir yawma ya’tūnanā lākini ‘l-ẓālimūna ‘l-yawma fī dalālin mubīn

39 Warn them of the Day of Regret, when the matter is decided, while they are mired in carelessness and do not believe.

wa-andhirhum yawma ‘l-ḥasrati idh quḍiya ‘l-amru wa-hum fī ghaflatin wa-hum lā yu‘minūn

40 Indeed, We will inherit the earth and whoever is upon it, and to Us they will be returned.

innā naḥnu narithu ‘l-arḍa wa-man ‘alayhā wa-ilaynā yurja‘ūn

41 And mention in the Book Abraham; indeed, he was a man of truth, a prophet.

wa’dhkur fī ‘l-kitābi ibrahīma innahu kāna ṣiddīqan nabiyyā

42 When he said to his father, “Father, why do you worship that which cannot hear or see, and does not accrue to you a thing?”

idh qāla li-abihi yā abati lima ta’budu mā lā yasma‘u wa-lā yubširu wa-lā yughnī ‘anka shay’ā

Q 19:37 comes at the end of the story of Mary and the birth of Jesus; in this narrative, he speaks as an infant to her critics, then the text identifies him as Jesus, son of Mary, and addresses the question of God having a son in Q 19:35. In Q 19:36, there is a shift from the third person to the first person; the common assumption is that Jesus is speaking in the verse, as is the case for Q 19:30–19:33. The tense shifts back to third person in Q 19:37, as identifiable both by content and the particle *fa-*. The next verse, Q 19:38, is also in the third person. Both lines reference a particular day (either a “tremendous” one or the one when “they come to Us”). In Q 19:39, the audience and mood shift to a command to Muḥammad to warn the people mentioned in the previous verses. It then modifies its description of those people, shifting subtly to use of the descriptive instead of imperative. The tense then shifts to the first-person plural (the qur’ānic “We”) in Q 19:40. It is interesting here to note that it is not mankind that will inherit the earth, but this divine We/Us, who will also be the ones to which mankind returns, all presumably on some sort of Last Day.

In Q 19:42, a narrative involving Abraham is invoked by the Divine Chorus, who commands its audience to recall the story, before recounting it in the form of a dialogue between Abraham and his father. The dialogue between Abraham and his father continues through Q 19:48, before returning the narration to the Divine Chorus in Q 19:49. In diagram form, the above excerpt might look like this:

[Divine Chorus discusses Jesus and God's power]	[19:35]
↘ [Jesus said:] <i>wa-inna 'llāha rabbī ... mustaqīm</i>	[19:36]
↙ [Divine Chorus:] <i>fa'khtalafa 'l-aḥzābu ... nabiyyā</i>	[19:37–19:41]
[Divine Chorus:] <i>idh qāla li-abīhi</i>	[19:42, beginning]
↘ [Abraham:] <i>yā-abati lima ... 'anka shay'ā</i>	[19:42, remainder]

Q 20: Tāhā

In Q 20:99, the qur'ānic voice addresses Muḥammad, describing itself (“We have certainly given you from Us the Qur'ān”):

99 Thus We relate to you stories of what happened before, and We have given you a reminder from Us.

kadhālika naqūṣṣu 'alayka min anbā'i mā qad sabaqa wa-qad ātaynāka min ladunnā dhikrā

100 Whosoever turns away from it, then indeed, he will bear a burden on the Day of Resurrection.

man a'raḍa 'anhu fa-innahu yaḥmilu yawma 'l-qiyāmati wizrā

101 Abiding forever in it, and evil on the Day of Resurrection is that burden for them!

khālidīna fihi wa-sā'a lahum yawma 'l-qiyāmati ḥimlā

102 The day the Trumpet will be blown; and We will gather upon that day the wrongdoers with blurred eyes.

yawma yunfakhu³¹ fi 'l-ṣūri wa-naḥshuru 'l-mujrimīna yawma'idhin zurqā

103 They will murmur one to another, “You stayed not but ten [days on earth]”

yatakhāfatūna baynahum in labithtum illā 'ashrā

104 We know best what they will say, when the best of them in manner will say, “You stayed but for a day.”

naḥnu a'lamu bi-mā yaqūlūna idh yaqūlu amthaluhum ṭarīqatan in labithtum illā yawmā

105 They will ask you about the mountains. Say: “My Lord will blast them into pieces,

wa-yas'alūnaka 'ani 'l-jibāli fa-qul yansifuhā rabbi nasfā

31. Abū 'Amr b. al-'Alā' al-Basrī (d.154/770) read *nunfikhu*, which changes the meaning slightly but not the narrative structure.

106 then He will leave it a level plain.

fa-yadharuhā qā'an ṣafṣafā

107 You will not see in it any crookedness or curve.

lā tarā fīhā 'iwajan wa-lā amtā

108 On that day they will follow the caller in whom is no crookedness. Voices will be hushed before the All-Merciful, so that you will hear nothing but a murmur.

yawma'idhin yattabi'ūna 'l-dā'iyā lā 'iwaja lahu wa-khasha'ati 'l-aṣwātu li'l-rahmāni fa-lā tasma'u illā hamsā

109 Upon that day no intercession will benefit except for him to whom the All-merciful gives permission and whose word He accepts.

yawma'idhin lā tanfa'u 'l-shafā'atu illā man adhina lahu 'l-rahmānu wa-raḍīya lahu qawlā

110 He knows what is before them and what is behind them, and they do not comprehend Him."

ya'lamu mā bayna aydīhim wa-mā khalfahum wa-lā yuḥīṭūna bihi 'ilmā

The next twelve lines address the apocalypse in rather descriptive biblical terms. In Q 20:100, the speaker addresses a single hypothetical sinner ("whoever turns away") who will bear the burden of his choices on the Day of Resurrection. In the next verse, however, that same subject becomes plural, and all burdens will be borne by everyone, not just an individual, who turns away. It also puts words in the mouth of a hypothetical sinner in Q 20:104: "We know best what they will say, when the best of them in manner will say, 'You stayed but for a day.'" The plural references to sinners or forsakers continue for the remainder of this pericope. The qur'ānic voice does, however, address Muḥammad, and instructs him on what to say to people when they ask about the Day of Resurrection (Q 20:105–107). Following these lines, the qur'ānic voice returns to the subject of itself again, noting in Q 20:113 that *wa-kadhālika anzalnāhu qur'ānan 'arabiyyan* "We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'ān," though the audience remains in the third-person plural ("them").

Q 28: Al-Qasas

An example of nested dialogue may be seen in Q 28:71–75. In Q 28:71–73, the qur'ānic voice asks its audience (addressed with a singular pronoun, which we may assume to be Muḥammad) to exhort a group of people (identified by the second-person plural within the proposed speech) to consider God. In Q 28:74, the qur'ānic voice then describes to Muḥammad the day on

which “He” (assumed God) would directly address “them” (assumed plural audience addressed in Q 28:71–73), asking where his so-called “partners” are – meaning, the other gods that polytheists worshipped alongside him.

71 Say: “Do you see – if God made the night eternal upon you until the Day of Resurrection, what god other than God could bring you light? Will you not hear?”

qul a-ra'aytum in ja'ala 'llāhu 'alaykumu 'l-layla sarmadan ilā yawmi 'l-qiyāmati man ilāhun ghayru 'llāhi ya'tikum bi-ḍiyā'in a-fa-lā tasma'ūn

72 Say: “Do you see – if God made the day eternal upon you until the Day of Resurrection, what god other than God could bring you night in which to rest? Will you not see?”

qul a-ra'aytum in ja'ala 'llāhu 'alaykumu 'l-nahāra sarmadan ilā yawmi 'l-qiyāmati man ilāhun ghayru 'llāhi ya'tikum bi-laylin taskunūna fihī a-fa-lā tubṣirūn

73 From His mercy He has made for you the night and the day so that you may rest and seek His bounty, and so you may be thankful.

wa-min raḥmatihī ja'ala lakumu 'l-layla wa'l-nahāra li-taskunū fihī wa-li-tabtaghū min faḍlihi wa-la'allakum tashkurūn

74 And on the day He will call them and say, “Where are my partners who you used to claim?”

wa-yawma yunādihim fa-yaqūlu ayna shurakā'īya 'lladhīna kuntum taz'umūn

75 And We will bring a witness from every nation, and We will say, “Bring your proof!” Then they will know that the truth belongs to God, and what they used to invent will be lost.

wa-naza'nā min kulli ummatin shahīdan fa-qulnā hātū burhānakum fa-'alimū anna 'l-ḥaqqā li'llāhi wa-dalla 'anhum mā kānū yaftarūn

An earlier passage presents the same question about God’s partners, but within a different narrative structure. In Q 28:56, the qur’ānic voice speaks to an audience (addressed with a singular pronoun, which we may assume to be Muḥammad). It then presents the dialogue of a plural audience in Q 28:57 *wa-qālū in nattabi'i 'l-hudā ma'aka nutakhaṭṭaf min arḍinā*, “They say, ‘If we were to follow the guidance with you, we would be snatched from our land,’” and responds to it, using the third-person plural (“them” in that verse and the next, Q 28:58). In the next two verses, Q 28:59–60, it addresses that same group directly in the second-person plural (*a-fa-lā ta'qilūn*, “Will you not use reason?”). In Q 28:61, it clearly continues to address this group, but describes a single, hypothetical individual. It then narrates a future conver-

sation between God and the polytheists in Q 28:61–62, describing the day on which “He” (assumed God) would ask “them” (assumed plural audience addressed directly in Q 28:59–60) where his so-called “partners” are – the same question asked in Q 28:74.

56 Indeed, you cannot guide whomever you love, but God guides whomever He wants, and He knows best who receives guidance.

innaka tahdī man aḥbaba wa-lākinna 'llāha yahdī man yashā'u wa-huwa a'lamu bi'l-muhtadīn

57 They say, “If we were to follow the guidance with you, we would be snatched from our land.” Have We not established for them a secure sanctuary, to which fruits of all kinds are brought as a provision from Us?

wa-qālū in nattabi'ī 'l-hudā ma'aka nutakhaṭṭaf min arḍinā a-wa-lam numakkin lahum ḥaraman āminan yujbā ilayhi thamarātu kulli shay'in rizqan min ladunnā wa-lākinna aktharahum lā ya'lamūn

58 How many a city We have destroyed that exulted in its livelihood! And these are their dwellings, undwelt in after them, except a little. And indeed, We are the inheritors.

wa-kam ahlaknā min qaryatin baṭirat ma'ishatuhā fa-tilka masākinuhum lam tuskan min ba'dihim illā qalilan wa-kunnā nahnu 'l-wārithīn

59 Yet your Lord never destroyed the towns until He sent into their mother-city a messenger, to recite to them Our verses, and We would not destroy the towns were it not that that their people were wrongdoers.

wa-mā kāna rabbuka muhlika 'l-qurā ḥattā yab'atha fī ummihā rasūlan yatlū 'alayhim āyātinā wa-mā kunnā muhliki 'l-qurā illā wa-ahluhā zālimūn

60 Whatever you have been given of things is an enjoyment of worldly life and its adornment; and what is with God is better and more lasting. Will you not use reason?

wa-mā ūtītum min shay'in fa-matā'u 'l-ḥayāti 'l-dunyā wa-zīnatuhā wa-mā 'inda 'llāhi khayrun wa-abqā a-fa-lā ta'qilūn

61 Is he to whom We have promised a good promise, and he receives it, like him to whom We have given the enjoyment of worldly life, then he on the Resurrection Day shall be of those presented,

a-fa-man wa'adnāhu wa'dan ḥasanan fa-huwa lāqīhi ka-man matta'nāhu matā'a 'l-ḥayāti 'l-dunyā thumma huwa yawma 'l-qiyāmati mina 'l-muḥḍarīn

62 And the day He will call them, and He will say, “Where are My partners that you used to claim?”

wa-yawma yunādīhim fa-yaqūlu ayna shurakā'iya 'ladhīna kuntum taz'umūn

These two passages are distinctive examples of the common use of sarcasm (*sukhriyyah*) in the Qur'ān, but they are also examples of an extremely complicated narration style. This format, each involving two or possibly three layers of dialogue and at least four different parties communicating with one another, continues for the rest of the *sūrah*, and also maintains a norm present throughout the Qur'ān. Multiple individuals or groups communicate with one another either directly or indirectly, through dialogue or instructions regarding dialogue that one assumes will or should occur in the future, or through recollections of dialogue that occurred in the past. These may be either direct, in that the qur'ānic voice spoke directly to its individual or mass audience, or indirect, in which the qur'ānic voice told someone such as Muḥammad to speak to its intended audience. The text again reads rather like dramatic form – without stage notes. In connection with these uses of nested dialogue, it is important to note the effect *iltifāt* has on the Qur'ān's sense of time. Michael Sells has written extensively on the question of temporality in the Qur'ān, specifically in the context of what he refers to as the “eternal now.”³² Such concerns are best put in his own words:

The language of revelation is caught in the dilemma of the boundary moment; the goal is to express the timeless, but language has ingrained patterns of temporality. Arabic verbs, for example, are either perfect (completed time) or imperfect (ongoing time), but the notion of eternity transcends such a division...In many sacred traditions, the language depicting the moment of revelation is transformed through the encounter with the subject of timelessness. In the Qur'ān, a rapid shift back and forth between the perfect and the imperfect tenses destabilizes the normally mutually exclusive division between completed time and ongoing time.³³

The use of *iltifāt* and particularly nested dialogue has the same effect: the creation of “windows of time,” so to speak, in conversations within conversations that simultaneously and/or alternatively address past, present and future and thus intentionally conflate them. This is what creates Sells' “eternal now.” The Divine Chorus implies throughout the Qur'ān that it was involved in earlier revelations and interactions between the earthly and heavenly – as with other heavenly bodies, it has existed for much (or perhaps all) of the Qur'ān's record of human history. This, too, supports the concept of the eternal now – it is a feeling also created by a narrator who has apparent-

32. Michael Sells, “Sound and Meaning in Sūrat al-Qāri'a,” *Arabica* 40 (1993): 403–430, 429.

33. Sells, *Approaching the Qur'ān*, 187.

ly always existed, and uses stories of the past to explain present urgencies. As is the case with the biblical narrator, this sense of timelessness is partly the result of narration from the perspective of an entity that is distinct from God, and which can, therefore, describe the will of God and its role in both scriptural narratives and the revelation of those scriptures over time.

At this point there is no way to prove who or what this mysterious first-person plural narrator might represent. What may be observed is how it is used. Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau examines the Qur'anic speaker in its own language, as does the earlier work of Daniel Madigan.³⁴ Boisliveau writes that the Qur'an describes itself as "venu de Dieu et transmis à un messenger."³⁵ The use of the root *q-w-l* suggests that the Qur'an is the "parole de Dieu" and the "manifestation de la puissance divine."³⁶ It is a divine text revealed to an envoy.³⁷ None of these statements, which align with common theological interpretations of the Qur'an and the beliefs of most (perhaps all) Muslims, is invalidated by the distinct role of the Qur'anic narrator described above. As a divine collective agentive force of God, the narrator can only ever act or speak as a manifestation of divine power. It clearly identifies itself as coming from God and being transmitted to a messenger, who is identified as Muḥammad. The difference is that the narrator is subservient to God's will, always acting on behalf of the divine, but it presents itself as a semi-independent force.

It may be useful to draw comparisons to other well-known uses of the first-person plural in the historical socio-cultural and religious milieu in seventh-century Arabia and the Late Antique Near East. There is use of first-person plural narration (through speech) in the Hebrew Bible, for example.³⁸ We also know that fifth-, sixth-, and seventh-century Christian

34. Daniel Madigan, *The Qur'an's Self-Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

35. Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même: vocabulaire et argumentation du discours coranique autoréférentiel* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 105.

36. *Ibid.*, 135.

37. *Ibid.*, 130–162.

38. E.g., Gen 1:26: "Let us make man in our image." Most of the academic conversation about dialogical shifts in the Hebrew Bible centers around credibility of narrators in quoted direct speech. There is also *ēlōhīm*, a plural word originally denoting many gods, and which is often used in the Hebrew Bible to denote YHWH (singular), as well as plural gods who are not YHWH, often combined with derogatory adjectives (e.g. *ēlōhīm āḥērīm*, "other gods"). *Ēlōhīm* is also used in the Bible to describe ghosts and lesser divinities. To compound the issue, biblical cosmologies contain other divinities whose roles and identities are often not clearly defined (e.g., heavenly host, sons of God, angels, etc.). S. David Sperling, "God: God in the

monks throughout the Near East were translating classical Greek texts into Arabic, Syriac, and other forms of Aramaic, and that some of these texts also employed the first-person plural. Hellenism was very much alive as a cultural influence in the seventh-century Near East, though this may be overlooked because of the division of Late Antique scholarship into different fields. *Ilṭifāt* also exists in pre-Islamic poetry, but the way it is used in the Qur'ān is unique. In pre-Islamic poetry, use of the first-person plural pronouns usually refers to the social group to which a first-person singular narrator belongs. This may be neighbors, travelling companions, a tribe or family, etc. In these contexts, use of *iltifāt* in the form of a shift between first-person singular and first-person plural acts to differentiate between the narrator as an individual and the narrator as part of a social group.³⁹

I speculate that a reader seeking to make sense of the frequent shifts in voice and tone and apparent audience in the Qur'ān—the use of *iltifāt*—should read the Qur'ān as dramatic form, with the qur'ānic “We” occupying a role akin to that of the Greek chorus. In ancient Greek theater, the role of the chorus was manifold: it was or could be simultaneously omniscient narrator, commentator on (and on behalf of) the narrative itself, and, perhaps to a lesser extent, executor of narrative action or direct communicator with characters. So, too, does the first-person plural qur'ānic narrator maintain all of these roles throughout the Qur'ān. This narrator presents itself, simultaneously, as omniscient narrator, commentator on the material it presents to its audience, commentator on behalf of God, executor of God's will, and, of course, the line of communication between God and the qur'ānic audience (or audiences).

Helene Bacon argues that the existence of the Greek chorus was the function or result of having emerged and developed in what was a primarily oral culture. Bacon argues that “Greek audiences would have experienced

Hebrew Scriptures,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. M. Eliade (New York: MacMillan, 1987) 6.35–38.

39. For example, al-Shanfarā's *Lāmiyyāt al-ʿArab*, in which *iltifāt* is fundamental to the structure of the text. Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, “Archetype and Attribution in Early Arabic Poetry: al-Shanfarā and the *Lāmiyyāt al-ʿArab*,” *IJMES* 18 (1986): 371. Another pre-Islamic example is that of the beginning of a poem sometimes attributed to Imru' al-Qays, as cited by al-Zamakhshari:

<i>taṭāwala layluka bi'l-athmudī</i>	<i>wa-nāma 'l-khaliyyu wa-lam tarquḍī</i>
<i>wa-bāta wa-bātat lahū laylatun</i>	<i>ka-laylati dhī 'l-ʿā'iri 'l-armadī</i>
<i>wa-dhālika min naba'in jā'anī</i>	<i>wa khubbirtuhu 'an Abī 'l-Aswadī</i>

See al-Zamakhshari, *al-Kashshāf*, 1.119. Cf. Geert Jan van Gelder, “The Abstracted Self in Arabic Poetry,” *JAL* 14 (1983): 22–30, 24–25.

the choruses of Greek drama as a natural and necessary form of human interaction which they had witnessed and participated in since childhood, a social reality, rather than the artificial artistic convention they seem to us.⁴⁰ This reflects the conditions of pre-Islamic Arabia rather well, in which a primarily (though likewise not entirely) oral culture allowed for the development and flourishing of various (spoken) rhetorical forms and strategies. Bacon argues that as the original source of dramatic form, “dramatic choruses should be seen as an integral part of the action, and not ... as a source of interludes and peripheral lyrical commentary on an action performed by the actors.”⁴¹ Bacon presents the chorus as a “constant presence, *in some way participants in every onstage event, even when they are silent.*”⁴² This, too, reflects the role of the qur’ānic speaker, which constructs the outer frame of narration and communication into which the “actors”—often biblical figures whose narratives are presented as moral examples or warnings—are presented. The qur’ānic narrator consistently presents itself as the central figure and the ultimate source of all action (or “onstage events”), not merely a peripheral commentator. (Here, Aristotle distinguishes between different playwrights, among whom Sophocles’ construction of the role of the chorus more closely matches this description and is thus superior to that of Euripides.) Bacon writes that the source of the events necessitating the presence of the tragic chorus come from “the traditional stories we call myths. These were not thought of as fictions but as memorable events of the distant past, whose meanings choral performances re-created for later generations.”⁴³ Later she adds, “Frequently a chorus participates in an event by giving it context and meaning in terms of traditional values so that it can be understood and become a permanent possession of the society.”⁴⁴ There is a direct parallel to the Qur’ān here, in which biblical narratives and other stories from the Arabian past are presented as memorable events whose meanings needed to be interpreted within a moral framework and shared with current and future generations. The chorus thus “represent[s] the social reality” of Greek society, one that demonstrates the opinions of a community, Bacon argues, and which applies social pressure on individual characters as a moral imperative. As she writes, “It re-creates a natural and

40. Helene H. Bacon, “The Chorus in Greek Life and Drama,” *Arion* 3.1 (1994–1995): 6–24, 6.

41. *Ibid.*, 7.

42. *Ibid.*, 8.

43. *Ibid.*, 8. She also notes that “very occasionally a contemporary event received such dramatic treatment.”

44. *Ibid.*, 16.

traditional response to what was imagined to be an actual past event important enough to have implications which need to be reaffirmed or assimilated and understood by society as a whole and by posterity.⁴⁵ So, too, the qur'ānic narrator plays this role: recounting biblical and other narratives of the past in order to present a morally (and theologically) sound opinion on them and apply a form of collective or social pressure (if perhaps that pressure comes from heavenly society rather than human) on the community that forms its audience.

Friedrich Schiller famously wrote of the chorus that it “leaves the narrow boundaries of the action in order to encompass the past and the future, distant times and nations, and humanity in general, so as to draw conclusions on the grand results of life and pronounce the teachings of wisdom.”⁴⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche responded to Schiller, defining the chorus as “an ‘ideal’ domain ... raised far above the actual path of mortals.”⁴⁷ He argues that the essence of Greek tragedy is the chorus, which generates scenes as mere visions, and serves as administrator for the divine and wise, enthusiastic truth-teller for humans. As an intermediary between the past and the present and the divine and earthly, the chorus thus plays with human understandings of time and space, alternately condensing and lengthening them. This, too, may be seen in the role of the qur'ānic narrator, whose shifts to different geographical settings and from past to present create a sense of the “eternal now” (we will examine this concept further later).

This should not imply that pre-Islamic Arabs in the Ḥijāz were reading or staging Greek theater, or that the structure of the Qur'ān was modeled on it in any fashion. Greek texts were not translated into Arabic until centuries after the rise of Islam, and there is no direct evidence of Greek theater having been part of the Abbasid-era Graeco-Arabic translation movement. The tragic chorus fell out of favor in Greek theater in the fourth century BCE in favor of other dramatic forms and narrative structures.⁴⁸ The role of the chorus in Greek tragedy also varied even when it was in fashion, and, unlike the qur'ānic narrator, the Greek chorus was not always omniscient, and often acted in a spontaneous, entirely reactive manner.⁴⁹ It was often made up of lower-status members of society, or individuals who were of the same

45. *Ibid.*, 18.

46. Friedrich Schiller (trans. Guido Avezzi), “Über den Gebrauch des Chors in der Tragödie / On the Use of the Chorus in Tragedy,” *Skene* 1.1 (2015): 153–156.

47. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy, or Hellenism and Pessimism*, trans. William A. Haussman (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1910), 59, 69–70.

48. Bacon, “The Chorus in Greek Life and Drama,” 8–9.

49. *Ibid.*, 17.

age and gender as the protagonist.⁵⁰ The chorus also never spoke in the voice of the playwright or poet (at least purportedly), whereas the qurʿānic narrator always speaks on behalf of God, and never without explicit order or at least tacit approval from God.⁵¹ Unlike the Greek chorus, the qurʿānic narrator never dances. There are many other differences, of course. The similarities between the qurʿānic narrator and the Greek chorus are noted in this essay in order to highlight the specific role and status of the qurʿānic narrator in relation to the original author (whether this original author is God, as in the Qurʿān, or, for example, Sophocles), the other characters it observes and mentions (prophets and biblical figures, for example), the work it conducts in terms of developing and identifying moral imperatives for its audience, and the audience it seeks to persuade.

A comparison of qurʿānic and biblical cosmologies may also be fruitful in assessing the role and status of the Divine Chorus. Gerald Hawting compares the qurʿānic concept of the heavenly assembly (*al-malāʾ al-aʿlā*) to that of “the academy on high” (*yeshivah shel maʿlah*) or “the academy of the sky” (*metivtā de-rakīʿā*) in Jewish tradition.⁵² The latter examples are comprised of angels (and possibly stars) and deceased scholars who debate interpretations of the Torah with God in something of an academic debate, in which God does not necessarily hold final authority.⁵³ Fascinatingly, Paul Eichler compares the qurʿānic heavenly assembly (*al-malāʾ al-aʿlā*) to “an impersonal choir similar to classical theater” in that the angels comprising it merely hear and obey orders.⁵⁴ While angels (collectively and individually) are an important part of the connection between earthly and heavenly realms in the Qurʿān’s understanding of its own transmission, the Divine Chorus is clearly distinct from the angels, jinn, and other named entities of heaven.

50. Helene Foley, “Choral Identity in Greek Tragedy,” *Classical Philology* 98 (2003): 1–30 (1–2); H.C. Montgomery, “Some Later Uses of the Greek Tragic Chorus,” *The Classical Journal* 38.3 (1942): 149.

51. Bacon, “The Chorus in Greek Life and Drama,” 135–166, 18.

52. Gerald Hawting, “Eavesdropping on the Heavenly Assembly and the Protection of the Revelation from Demonic Corruption,” in Wild (ed.), *Self-Referentiality in the Qurʿān*, 25–38, 27.

53. *Ibid.*, 27. Hawting notes that “[t]he idea of the stars as guardians of the heavens is known both from Jewish or Christian and from Zoroastrian sources and relates to the close association, or even identification, of stars and angels.” *Ibid.*, 31.

54. Paul A. Eichler, *Die Dschinn, Teufel und Engel im Koran* (Leipzig: R. Berger, 1928),

85. Eichler did not develop this observation, but it would benefit from further research.

Hawting notes that in the biblical context, interaction between God and the heavenly assembly or court centers on discussion of earthly matters, beyond mere revelatory material – God’s decisions about such matters are not necessarily communicated to humans (an example in the qur’ānic context is God’s edicts for the coming year on *laylat al-qadr*).⁵⁵ Other possibilities, also noted by Hawting, are represented in Job, in which chapters 1 and 2 refer to “*bnê hā-ēlōhim*,” most directly translated as “sons of God.”⁵⁶ Hawting notes that this term was largely understood to refer to God’s angels and was translated into the Greek in the Septuagint as such – perhaps in part on account of the inclusion of Satan (or ‘the satan’) among them. In chapter 15, Job is asked whether he has been an audience member in “God’s council,” perhaps a closer term to what we seek in the Divine Chorus.⁵⁷ Importantly, and in line with the role of the Divine Chorus, the source of divine action is God’s command, and nothing is undertaken without such approval.⁵⁸ Indeed, the Divine Chorus is perhaps most similar in its qur’ānic structure and role to the biblical heavenly assembly or heavenly council described at various points in the books of Job and Psalms and in a vision of Micaiah in 1 Kings 22.⁵⁹ The Hebrew terms used in these chapters, *bnê hā-ēlōhim* and others, are often translated as either “angels” or “sons of God.” While the Divine Chorus is not made up of gods, sons of God, or angels, it retains a similarly subordinate and executive role to that of the heavenly council in these texts. The divine council in Jewish tradition derives in turn from the tradition of a divine council of gods that exists in Sumerian, Akkadian, ancient Egyptian, and other ancient Near Eastern religious texts.⁶⁰ In these traditions, a supreme god seeks the counsel of an assembly of subordinate gods. However, unlike the heavenly council in these texts, the Qur’ān’s Divine Chorus does not debate with God.

When comparing the concept of a chorus to the qur’ānic voice, I wish to emphasize the semi-independent narrative role the chorus embodies. Adapting this role to a scriptural message allows for greater flexibility in communicating with an audience, and more modes of doing so. Though shifts in tone and directness of speech might be confusing in, say, a script

55. Hawting, “Eavesdropping,” 36; *laylat al-qadr* reference, Q 97:1–5.

56. *Ibid.*, 31.

57. *Ibid.*, 30–31 also refers to the question addressed to Job at 15:8: “Have you been a listener at God’s council, or established a monopoly of wisdom?”

58. *Ibid.*, 31.

59. See Job 1, 2, 15, and 38; Psalms 29, 82, and 89; and 1 Kings 22.

60. Thanks very much to the anonymous reviewer who identified this as a potentially fruitful avenue of research.

that lacks stage directions or indicators of whose “lines” are whose, in performance such communication is abundantly clear. It may be pointed out that classical Greek drama had no such stage directions, either. Indeed, Carl Ernst describes reading the “dramatic passages in the Qur’ān” as akin to reading Shakespeare without stage directions.⁶¹

Such a perspective would also assist a reader with perhaps the most difficult problem to untangle with regard to qur’ānic voice: that of dialogue. Differentiation of speaker and addressee and audience only become more complicated when the qur’ānic voice narrates a story containing dialogue. The Qur’ān employs direct speech from the first-person plural narrator to a second-person addressee; that speech in turn often narrates individual stories which utilize dialogue (direct speech) among the story’s characters. In essence, it frequently makes use of a sort of nested dialogue, in which the qur’ānic voice instructs Muḥammad to tell his audience a story, then the same qur’ānic voice narrates the story, often giving active lines of dialogue to major figures such as Moses and Pharaoh.⁶² The Qur’ān’s movement into this dialogue within, and then its sometimes abrupt shift out of it to, say, remind Muḥammad of a particular message, or warn him against a particular action, is what creates the somewhat mystifying effect of *iltifāt*.

Thus, to conclude: I suggest that the first-person plural qur’ānic voice represents an entity that is subordinate to, but functionally independent from God as referred to by the noun *rabb*, “Lord,” and that this relationship may be determined by, among other things, the suffixes applied to (and not applied to) *rabb*. This entity most closely resembles the heavenly assembly of the Torah in its relationship to God. Regardless of whom or what it is intended to represent, the first-person plural qur’ānic voice functions in many ways like the chorus in Greek drama. It both allows and is allowed

61. Carl Ernst, *How to Read the Qur’an* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 50–51. Versteegh discusses the concept of stage directions in the way Muqātil used grammatical terms in his *tafsīr*. C.H.M. Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar and Qur’ānic Exegesis in Early Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 110. Terms used in this context include *ista’nafa* and *istathnā*.

62. Ayaz Afsar examines the structure of qur’ānic narratives told in dialogue, in which “the reported speech [in dialogue] is the encoding norm and often important information is encoded in non-reported form [directly from the qur’ānic speaker].” Evaluation of a narrative, in the form of commentary usually done by the qur’ānic speaker, is considered the most important part of the narrative, while also constituting a temporary suspension of that narrative. Afsar notes that the evaluation of the narrative is thus external, as the narrator (the qur’ānic speaker) “steps out of storytelling and addresses the narratee directly.” Ayaz Afsar, “A Discourse and Linguistic Approach to Biblical and Qur’ānic Narrative,” *IS 45* (2006): 493–517, 509.

greater flexibility in communication and dialogue because of its role as both direct and indirect purveyor of information, instruction, dramatic narration, and other scriptural content. *Ilṭifāt*, in the context of the Qur'ān, denotes a related shift in speaker and dialogue through the use of pronominal shifts, and acts as an indicator of when and where dialogue, whether inner (nested) or outer, begins, ends, or shifts to an aside or another form of narration. The use of *iltifāt* and nested dialogue allows for a blending of narratives, temporalities, and audiences which, combined with the use of other literary and rhetorical devices, have a profound and powerful effect on the listener in the context of recitation.

