

## RESPONSE TO DEVIN STEWART'S 2019 PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

TODD LAWSON  
University of Toronto, Canada

### Abstract

Devin Stewart's discussion of English translation problems in some of the otherwise most successful or respected translations of the Qur'an offers a timely opportunity to revisit issues that may be thought to have been sleeping for years and influencing, unbeknownst, the reading experience of those for whom the structure of the Book was already difficult enough, let alone the technical vocabulary. Some of the questions raised but not answered by Stewart, such as "Why on earth would anyone translate Noah's ark as Noah's ship?" are left for his reader to contemplate. It is difficult to resist the temptation to see such translation choices as reflecting perhaps culturally determined and perhaps unwitting desires to present the Qur'an as a text revered by aliens rather than as another stage and text in the unfolding of a specifically and quite familiar Abrahamic religiosity that it so obviously is.

### I. Introduction

Language, according to the Qur'an, is the primary mode of a religious experience that attracts and nourishes the soul of the future or current believer. It is also the case that no matter how much an uninitiated anglophone student of Islam is impressed by the great achievements of Islam, its humanity, nobility, and the civilizational and cultural progress in human history it symbolizes, most English translations of the Qur'an have sent people running in the opposite direction. Hodgson observed in clear terms this glaring and destructive cognitive or, more crucially formulated, cultural dissonance:

The Qur'an seems to most Western readers impossibly dull reading. To Muslims who read Arabic it has seemed the most beautiful composition in exis-

tence—its literary inimitability forming a unique evidentiary miracle which every generation can verify anew for itself.<sup>1</sup>

Devin Stewart wishes to lessen or attenuate the dissonance. And his meditation on the problem is instructive, hopeful, and his points well-taken.

It seems reasonable, in translating the Qur'ān, to take five major factors into consideration: 1) its poetic, literary, and artistic character; 2) its normativity; 3) its function as a mode, method, and tool of worship and divine encounter; 4) its obvious function as the first book in Arabic, elucidating a theory of the unknowable, otherwise utterly transcendent, and therefore potentially remote God, “His” existence and connection with the world and each individual—at the level of both history and the jugular vein; and finally, 5) the Qur'ān's audience. Not one of these features is absolutely free-standing and independent of the other four. Indeed, that which is “Qur'ān” represents an instance in which all five elements are at work, and one in which none of them is Qur'ān without the other four. The great impact of the Qur'ān on its “original audience” seems to have been its undoubted literary-cum-poetic vitality carried by its innovative, perhaps even “modernist” or avant-garde, literary and compositional challenge, especially as it may have been heard abroad in the wider world. It was not like current poetry; Muhammad was not a poet. But this does not mean that the Qur'ān is not poetic. It was not like more familiar scriptures or holy books (or, in fact, any other existing literature) since it seemed to account for the current historical situation with its references to various religious communities, languages, and other books. It may have been one of the most intellectually and artistically exciting and challenging literary compositions of its time and place. As such, it transformed the imagination and the imaginary (*l'imaginaire*). So, later it became common to characterize the Qur'ān as neither poetry nor prose, and therefore the representative of a genre of literature of which it was the only member. The power of its expression, delivery, and performance have remained, through the centuries, a signal feature of its identity as “scripture”—more accurately and properly thought of as revelation: its deftly combined literary and religious appeal. Whether on account of the sheer vastness of its readership or its truly unparalleled “poeticity” and expressive effect, the Qur'ān, more than any other linguistic religious work today, is associated with verbal (of course, lawful) magic: *sihr ḥalāl*. This feature is frequently adduced as a proof of its divine origin and inimitability. I think there is

---

1. Marshal G. S. Hodgson, “A Comparison of Islām and Christianity as Framework for Religious Life,” *Diogenes* 8.32 (1960): 49–74, 61.

near unanimous agreement here. But because much of this poeticity is simply and forever beyond the reach of translation we must not squander genuine opportunities to communicate accurately what the Qur'ān does say and how it says it.

The second feature that must be taken into consideration when translating the Qur'ān is its status as a normative, religious “law” or guidance about how best to live as a human being in addition to its overall or foundational *da'wah* or kerygmatic dimension: its challenge to the audience to live godly lives, to control the appetites, to do good, and to form prosperous communities, and to instill in the mind of readers the absolutely non-negotiable doctrine of the unity of the human race, which is seen to reflect the unity of God, who in the Qur'ān is most frequently referred to as *allāh* amongst a vast plurality of other names and designations. This consideration entails treating the elements of such law and guidance not only for their illocutionary or normative function but also their literary, rhetorical, and poetic function: the spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down? Perhaps. This redounds to the Qur'ān's status as a *sui generis* literary event in addition to whatever else it might be. A law is a law and *also* a literary or poetic device: a marvelous sign of God's supreme artistry and authorship.

The third feature, extraordinarily connected with the second, is the teaching—also a law—of the deeply intimate interconnectedness of human experience on the planet, which includes a theory of history and “religion,” suggesting a theory of language that takes shape through the periodic—however irregular such periodization may be—revelational, literally “apocalyptic,” events of the type that the Qur'ān represents. All human communities have had such an experience in their history. And all these revelations have been couched in the language of their host community. Again: the focus is on shared experience. Stewart emphasizes, quite rightly, that such focus be preserved in translation and his special case is the way in which the Qur'ān in Arabic makes its kinship with the Bible a pillar of its message.

The fourth feature is in some ways the most difficult to convey either through translation or simple description. In Hodgson's words, it is that aspect of the Qur'ān through which its recitation and reading represents not a mere intellectual, homiletic, pedagogic, or nomothetic engagement in quest of information, instruction about the law, or even salvation, but precisely an anagogical engagement with “the Unseen” by means of worship, which entails an experience of reading the words of God that had first come alive—vibrated the air—through the voice of Muḥammad. The impli-

cation of the following quotation is that the Qur'ān is at bottom a prayer no matter how much information it may also contain:

What one did with the Qur'ān was not to peruse it but to worship by means of it; not to passively receive it but, in reciting it, to reaffirm it for oneself: the event of revelation was renewed every time one of the faithful, in the act of worship, relived the Qur'ānic affirmations.<sup>2</sup>

The fifth factor entails the also impossible reading experiment of trying to channel the original, “pre-creational” audience in Mecca, where the embryo was conceived that would later be born as historical Islam in its highly variegated, cosmopolitan birthplace, conveniently designated as the Nile-to-Oxus region of the seventh–tenth centuries. Here the Qur'ān was heard by a philosophically and religiously sophisticated audience. Surely its prominence and, to use a perhaps inappropriate category, popularity, had something to do with the degree to which this “classical” audience saw itself, severally and universally, in the Qur'ān's wondrous signs (verses: *āyāt*), whether or not they all agreed with their meaning. Here and now, in the “New World,” existing English translations of the Qur'ān have not made it a matter of course for the contemporary reader to experience such intimacy with the “text,” and while it may be true, as Stewart said in his presentation, that the early Muslim community felt as if it were stepping into a Cecil B. DeMille film of the Bible when first hearing the Qur'ān, nothing in the experience of the contemporary English reader could be further from reality. The sometimes tortured syntax and strange usages committed on the part of even the frequently miraculous Arberry boggles the mind. It is as if “strangeness” not connection were a primary consideration of translation.

These five factors are, of course, in addition to what is the single most important consideration in translating the Qur'ān: the literary, poetic, normative, and “religious” profile of the target language and whatever this implies, including the culture and skill of the, in this case English, translator. Although it is doubtless impossible to delineate or describe with complete accuracy, one must attempt to use words in the target language that resonate accurately with regard to both lexical “meaning” and poetic/literary “musicality” and figuration: sound and sense and their reception. The perhaps somewhat heretical thought is: if we get the music right, everything else will fall into place. In the Qur'ān, possibly more than in any other translation “problem,” the syzygy of meaning and form (i.e., sound) is most

---

2. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (3 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1.104.

crucial. The revelation after all, was phonic, auditory. The “scripture,” the written version of the oral composition, is a recording of the audio, as the Islamic tradition teaches.

## II. The Words

If the road to hell is paved with good intentions, it may be that the road to paradise is paved with bad intentions. Thus, Montgomery Watt is singled out by Stewart as a leading culprit in the distancing of Islam from its original insistence on the close connection between the message of the Qur’ān and the Bible in its contemporary ecumene, and, by extension and circumstance, the one world in which we all now live and try to get along. Europe, at least in the modern sense, is that large part of the globe that managed to remain un-Muslim/non-Islamic, not part of the *Dār al-Islām* (now inevitably and irreversibly capitalized) during its rise and geographic spread up until the pre-modern period, to use a Eurocentric scheme of periodization. This is subconsciously, and sometimes consciously, understood as a great and heroic achievement. However, the historical *Kulturkampf* for which the current map of Europe functions as hologram indicates that whatever serious translation of the Qur’ān this or that faithful citizen of Europe managed to produce, it was not in the service of what from the Islamic side might be considered a pure, vertical quest for, and celebration and love of, qur’ānic truth. This is generally agreed upon and stated here now simply to introduce this section of our response.

### Noah’s Ship or Noah’s Ark

The word “ark,” Stewart says, should be used in those numerous passages to do with the flood where the Arabic word for Noah’s large vessel is either *fulk* or *safinah*. This is because “ark” is the familiar, mythic, and natural word with which the English reader thinks of the vessel by whose means Noah (*nūḥ* in the Qur’ān; thirty-three occurrences) saved humanity. There is no argument against this perfectly sound suggestion. As it happens, most English translations also agree. Of the nearly sixty English translations listed on the useful website *Islam Awakened*, forty opt for “ark” in their translation of Q al-ʿAnkabūt 29:15. Nor does there appear to be any compelling reason to use the alternate words “boat,” “ship,” or “vessel.” The word “ark” has been used in English for a very long time for this purpose, and conveniently elides, through paronomasia, both the “ark of the covenant” and Noah’s Ark—two completely different Hebrew expressions. The English

“ark” could not have more serious intent. By its use a transposition occurs in which the “ark of the covenant” becomes symbolized in Noah’s Ark and vice versa. This conflation is a singular narratological moment in English translations of the Hebrew Bible. The God-sent disaster of the flood, the annihilation of most of humanity, and the salvation of Noah’s retinue perfectly reflect both biblical and qur’ānic readings of respective doctrines of covenant and humanity’s uneven response to its demands. For this reason alone it should appeal to translators of the Qur’ān in which the covenant, its fulfilment, and its violation are main topics of concern. (Note also that a floating ark, that of Moses, and the covenantal ark are also “punned” in the qur’ānic *tābūt* at Q 2:248 and 20:39). Not all such terminology is so richly charged with mutually enhancing significance, and therefore such opportunities should not be missed.

“Ark” is equated in the English reader’s mind with a story of salvation and faithfulness to the covenant. If this word is not used to translate “Noah’s boat,” then the alchemy of typological figuration will be sadly vitiated. This is the same alchemy by which, for example, Jesus Christ is understood as the antitype of the both the marine Ark and the covenantal ark—the New Ark—in addition to his being seen as the antitype of the entire inventory of Hebrew Bible typological figures. Not to show that the Qur’ān is announcing an even newer covenant, or renewal of the original covenant, in such clear and unmistakable terms represents a missed opportunity. Whether or not one actually concurs with the Qur’ān’s claims, such a lapse represents a clear translation error. And, not to emphasize such commonality is spiritually and intellectually miserly as well as wrong. Islam is largely about the inter-relatedness of humans through time and across linguistic borders. If such interrelatedness is disguised or hidden, it becomes less obvious as a major concern of the Qur’ān, a book which is already susceptible of much erroneous interpretation. By muting references to the Ark of Noah in English translation for a contemporary readership, poisonous interpretations at odds with the purpose of the Qur’ān and its concern for a common humanity are given artificial life support.

There is another instance of translators missing the boat. The Ark of our salvation today is surely the imagination by which we are able to transform an enemy into a friend and difference into similarity or commonality and deal with existential threats, whether political, biological, or ecological. The imagination, today as in the past, requires tools very much along the lines of the Qur’ān’s theme of the oneness of humanity, which enabled and reflected such a lasting shift in consciousness. This is why resonance between a “poetics of relation” amongst the various types of humanity the Qur’ān speaks

of and the literary poetics of the text are so important to observe. Stewart hints that the biblical story has a theme at variance with the qur'ānic story in that the Noah of the Bible and his Ark symbolize God's faithfulness and protection whereas the story as told in the Qur'ān wishes, primarily, to remind the reader that God is able and willing to punish violations of the covenant even in modern times, i.e., from the seventh century CE, the time of the Qur'ān's revelation. In the Bible such divine solicitude, love, and protection is represented by the beautiful "arc of colors"—the rainbow (French *arc-en-ciel*) shining above Mount Ararat after the flood recedes. By refusing to use the word "ark," translators efface this third element of the paronomastic triad of meaning and connection.

Several of the remaining eight words taken up by Stewart also connote or even denote the covenant through other associations. Perhaps it is, in the end, a disinclination—conscious or otherwise—to see Islam as a renewal of the Abrahamic covenant so dear to Judaism and Christianity that prevents some of our more talented English translators from using the word Ark instead of ship or boat (Arberry, Irving, Jones, Khalidi, Rodwell, *The Study Quran*)? Such could suggest that talent is not the only crucial factor determining the success of a Qur'ān translation. Thus, the appositeness of Stewart's use of the otherwise somewhat unexpected terms "tactics" and, more frequently, "strategy."

In some ways, it is more difficult to understand why "Muslim translations"—e.g., those thirty-five classed as "generally accepted translations of the meaning" on the above-mentioned website—avoid the word "ark." Ten translations, such as those in Pickthall, *The Study Quran*, and Shabbir Ahmed, use instead the obfuscating terms "ship," "boat," or "vessel." Why these translators would insist on avoiding the word "ark" in trying to reach an English audience is something of a mystery. Is it an example of self-censoring due to a kind of weird Stockholm Syndrome? However, the clear majority of English translations, Muslim or otherwise, do use the word "ark." It is supposed they not only have no difficulty in seeing Islam as a renewal of the ancient covenant but, in fact, draw much inspiration from this interpretation of history or understand such an interpretation to be an authentic and essential element of the Qur'ān's message. Not to highlight it explicitly through translation would be to distort such a message.

### **The Disasters of Sodom and Gomorrah**

While the covenant is not evoked here through a direct reference, as in the "ark of the covenant" above, the biblical event surrounding Sodom and Gomorrah certainly contains references to breaking the covenant and ensu-

ing punishment. By disguising Sodom and Gomorrah as “the disasters,” the immediate covenantal and biblical connection is cauterized. It is a commonplace deserving of unwavering respect in translation and yet another salient typological moment in the scriptural conversation going on at this time in late antique and cosmopolite Islamdom. A qur’ānic improvisation may be seen in the characterization of the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah by the use of *ja’alnā ‘āliyahā sāfilahā* at Q 11:82 and 15:74, which Stewart translates as “We made its uppermost part its lowermost part” or “We made its high part its low part.” This captures, perhaps, the perversion (instead of subversion or inversion) implicated in the original biblical story. Islam represents a simultaneous break with and preservation-through-validation of such history. The words “Sodom and Gomorrah” should obviously be retained or inserted at the appropriate passages in any English translation.

### **The Burning Tree or the Burning Bush**

Here we have the Abrahamic covenant once more exemplified in Moses’s meeting with God at the burning bush, never tree. I have not much to add here except to say that while it is so that *shajarah* may also “correctly” be translated as “bush,” even if it were not, “bush” should be used in English translation. What does *Islam Awakened* tell us? Amazingly, only ten of its fifty-eight English translations of the Qur’ān use “bush,” one translation avoids the problem altogether by leaving *shajarah* completely untranslated (Moeinian), and one uses “voice from the woods” (Shafi).

### **The Chest of Tranquility or Divine (Military) Support: War Chest...?**

The chest of tranquility implies, as Stewart observes, the ark of the covenant and God’s glory, which must be portable because of the homelessness of the Hebrews. Already acknowledged as a perfect cognate for the Hebrew *shekhinah*, it signifies God’s connection with humanity, an analogue of covenant, especially, in the case of the Qur’ān, the pre-existent covenant of the Day of *Alast* (Q 7:172). Stewart’s criticism is that “tranquility” is simply not effective enough to communicate the qur’ānic, and biblical, account of God’s presence and that this deficiency is particularly acute when the context is battle. And one agrees. If we consult the five dozen English translations at *Islam Awakened*, we find a wide variety of alternate translations, several along the lines of “promise of security” or “assurance,” while nearly all point out the identity of the *tābūt* with the ark of the covenant. Tranquility for *sakīnah* in the six passages of the Qur’ān where it occurs may in fact be too weak. But sheer military power and triumph misrepresents the



more numinous and therefore, in the context, more powerful and preferable ideas of divine presence, glory, or manifestation and its abiding—even though utterly transcendent—amongst the believers, whether they are at war or not. It is clear that in using such language the Qur'ān is connecting with biblical history and indicates that the early community felt strongly such a connection with biblical history and that God was indeed on the side of the communities of the Bible and is now on the side of the community of the Qur'ān. In this way, a proper translation of the word *sakīnah* would communicate the message of covenantal renewal from Old to New to Newer and capture something essential about the Qur'ān's view of what the uninitiated call "history."

### God's House, the House, or the Temple

A temple is a place one enters in order to worship. The Ka'bah is not entered for the purposes of general worship. It functions rather as an icon of the aniconism of Islam. This is why "temple" is not a good alternative in translating the Qur'ān. "House" (always capitalized) is the best choice in English translations. It is idiomatic: Christians and Muslims refer to their churches and temples as "houses of God." There is, because of the history of the Jews, a clear resonance with paganism in the use of the word "temple." Here the usage in English (since 1590) emblemizes a triumph of the Hebrews in extricating themselves from what the Qur'ān calls *shirk*, almost always translated as "polytheism," but which might better be thought of as paganism in the context of the eventual urban cosmopolitanism whose consolidation and regulation represents one of the greatest and enduring contributions of the venture of Islam. Again, in speaking of what we might think of as the soul of the Qur'ān and its workings, highlighted in the way in which the Qur'ān revolves simultaneously around the specific experience of Muḥammad and his community and also points toward a much wider arena of human life and experience where such commonality is also at the center, Hodgson observed:

This intimate interweaving with the far-reaching experience it illuminates, perhaps even more than its single-mindedness and the monumentality of its formal impact, accounts for the enormous power of the Qur'ān as the charter and touchstone of a concrete historical community which has tried in its generations to express the universal.<sup>3</sup>

---

3. Hodgson, "A Comparison," 62.

In English, “temple” frequently connotes the High God, Babylonian and Egyptian royal and exclusive religion and, in popular culture, Indiana Jones. “House of God” is much more hospitable and welcoming and, in fact (therefore), more accurate both with regard to usage and etymology. The word “house” may derive from “hide” just as *bayt* means “tent.” Finally, the House of God is a building for the worship of God, not the place where Islam’s unknowable and infinitely transcendent God actually lives, apart from any place else. “Temple” as a place or occasion for *contemplation* of this supreme mystery is, of course, perfectly apposite but this may be a rarified usage.

### **Jesus the Messiah / Jesus Christ**

Jesus is subjected to interesting treatment in the Qur’ān. Much of it has to do with the freshness of the qur’ānic vision and *da‘wah*: to renew and extend the terms of the Abrahamic covenant throughout its world. In some sense, the Qur’ān wishes to broker a peace between Jews and Christians, especially—one might speculate—in the famous instance of the so-called denial of the crucifixion at Q 4:156. A steady reading of this verse of course confirms that it is not the crucifixion that is denied, it is the Jewish boastful claim to have crucified Jesus, son of Mary, the Messiah. In this qur’ānic moment (Q 4:156–157), Christians are asked to give up divine incarnation and Jews are asked to give up the finality of revelation. The word “Christ,” because of its theopathic implications, would here run the risk of misrepresenting the Qur’ān’s Jesus.

### **The Table / the Last Supper**

Cuypers has convincingly demonstrated that the center of Sūrat al-Mā’idah (Q 5) is not the comparatively parochial event of Jesus and his beleaguered followers sharing a meal. Rather, the “table spread” here is an invitation to all humanity, represented in the *sūrah* that bears this name by the various religious groups of the Qur’ān. The hospitality here has more in common with the sacramental hospitality shown by Abraham, the so-called *philoxenia*.

### **The Book / the Bible**

Leaving aside the “intention” of the author of the Qur’ān, it remains that such a word as *kitāb* may be understood as meaning the Holy Bible (*al-kitāb al-muqaddas*) and its constituents, the “Old Covenant” (*al-‘ahd al-qadīm*) and the “New Covenant” (*al-‘ahd al-jadīd*), while also leaving room for the conceptualization of the Qur’ān and the revelation it implies and represents as the Newest Covenant (*al-‘ahd al-ajadd*). In addition, *kitāb* and *ahl al-*

*kitāb* may be understood as referring to those who are able to read and write, an ability that Islamic tradition freely emphasizes was largely absent among the Qur'ān's first audience.

### Allāh/God

A similar strategy is taken to an extreme, for example, when *allāh*, the Arabic term for the biblical God, is not translated as “God,” but left in its Arabic form, transliterated, a practice that is quite common. Surely there is no more important or challenging word in the Qur'ān: the word الله, transliterated as Allāh, is guaranteed to alienate the “average” English reader, who cannot help pronounce it, silently or aloud, as a near homonym for “alley.” The word is important not only because of what it means, but also for “how” it means. First, it denotes the ultimately unknowable unique source of the cosmos, all created things, revelation, laws and guidance and the education of humanity, history and the emotions and faculties of the human being including the human heart, mind and spirit. Secondly, the word *allāh* is incalculably powerful—didactically, heuristically, spiritually, pedagogically, and poetically, and also because of its sound in Arabic. It is rather naturally formed in the velar region of the throat, the channel of all qur'ānic revelation, which it thus highlights through the doubling of the liquid l-sounds and the final onomatopoeic breath-like aspirant soft aitch. Thus the word bespeaks by its very sound, and therefore emblemizes, the entire process of oral revelation—not the only kind the Qur'ān enshrines, but a major one, of course. It is also a beautiful sound—a sound or potential that is frequently exploited and sometimes overdone—in qur'ānic recitation in which the reverberant melisma is “long drawn out” as if to conjure the very presence of Allāh, who may be felt to actually inhabit the space indicated in the final syllable—even though this is technically, “rationally,” and dogmatically acknowledged to be impossible in anything resembling a realistic conjuration. Thus, the word embodies numerous tensions and points to their resolution, which perhaps redounds also to its eschatological and apocalyptic programmatic musicality and verve.

Acknowledging the truth of Frost's dictum “poetry is that which is lost in translation,” how can the English word “God” possibly compete? With its monosyllabic, “minimal pair” clippedness and its hard consonants book-ending (truncating) whatever numinous and luminous “Allāh-meaning” might otherwise be encountered, it is a very queer choice. It might be more effective simply not to try to translate the word and to leave it completely out, as in the Jewish refusal to write the name of God. However, to insist on using “Allāh” rather than the usual, customary and idiomatic word

“God” in English translations of the Qur’ān is also to do a disservice to the message of “*the Book*” and the religiosity of Muslims. I think we have here a singular dilemma. This is so because to insist upon the word “Allāh” enhances precisely the opposite of the Qur’ān’s intention, which is to educate, illumine, and enlighten humanity, especially that version of it abroad during the seventh century in the Nile-to-Oxus region of the globe, as to its essential commonality and relatedness despite—and this is key—*apparent* differences, multiplicity, variegation, chaotic fissiparousness, which late antique society had thrown up in the form of a relatively unregulated cosmopolitanism. The word “Allāh” still strikes the English ear as strange, foreign, “interplanetary.” And its use, rather than cultivating a sense of oneness with the humans of Islam on the part of largely non-Muslim but also non-Arabic-speaking Muslim anglophones, tends to “Klingon-ize” those for whom the word represents the highest values and most noble aspects of what it means to be human *by virtue of what such humans worship as divine*. Historically, of course, the word “Allāh” symbolizes cosmopolitan enlightenment and imaginative acceptance of and engagement with a new historical and social reality.

Before proceeding to a conclusion, I would like to note another translation anomaly or dilemma not mentioned by Stewart but one that merits the kind of serious analysis and contemplation focused on the other words in his presidential address: *raḥmān* and *raḥīm*. The words *raḥmān* and *raḥīm* are nearly universally translated as “merciful and compassionate.” Behold the strange alchemy of the handicapped imagination! While these words are perfectly expressive of the most laudable and life-affirming virtues and energies when thought of in terms, say, of the compassion of Mary, or Mother Theresa, or Noam Chomsky, their “semiology” is magically transformed to a nearly monstrous attribute when applied to Allāh. And even if such a transformation never takes place, the significance of these words—representing as they do one of the thematic pillars of the Qur’ān and Islam—is frequently and bewilderingly neglected and muted during “travel,” when connotations of maternal, unconditional love (*agapē*) fall completely away.

### III. Conclusion

You must have seen children playing with a string and a pebble. They tie a string to a pebble and they start swinging it over their head. And slowly they keep letting [out] the string, and it makes a bigger and bigger circle. Now, this pebble is the revolt from the tradition. It wants to move away. But the string is the tradition, the continuity, it is holding it. But if you break the string, the pebble will fall. If you remove the pebble, the string cannot go

that far. This tension of tradition and revolt against the tradition are, in a way, contradictory. But as a matter of fact, it is a synthesis. You will always find the synthesis of tradition and revolt from the tradition, together in any good art.<sup>4</sup>

It is perhaps as it should be that several of the problematic vocabulary items above indicate covenant. Stewart mentions Islam's claim to superiority to previous religions. But in what does such a claim lie? Again, the theme of the covenant in the Qur'ān, despite strenuous attempts to attenuate its obvious universality, points to a thematic or literary/doctrinal gesture of balancing such claims to superiority with a benign hierarchical assertion of common humanity. The sociology of the Qur'ān functions somewhat as a *roman à clef* for its readership with the difference that the characters keep renewing themselves: Jews, Christians, *kāfirūn*, and so forth: so many human types. The population of Nile-to-Oxus late antique cosmopolitanism is made religiously, historically, and mythically meaningful through the Qur'ān. One word for this is enlightenment.

While there are of course many different approaches and methods suited to the scholarly, readerly, religio-literary understanding of the relation between the Qur'ān and the Bible, there is one without which all other approaches will remain impoverished with regard to their explanatory power of the Qur'ān's narratological élan. The Qur'ān without question sees itself as the fulfillment of biblical aspirations, promises, and fears. The Qur'ān also sees itself as a renewal, continuation and expansion of the terms of the biblical covenant. In this way, the Qur'ān, and its committed readership, function as a typological response to the biblical type in much the same way the so-called New Testament, and its believing readership, sees itself as the typological fulfillment of the so-called Old Testament myth, challenge, summons, and message. We hasten to add, as indicated above, that this is not the only choice available for an analysis of the—for lack of a better word—literary relation between the Qur'ān and the Bible. But this feature may be thought to stand for the “more than” in Northrop Frye's pronouncement: “The Bible is literature and more than literature.”<sup>5</sup> By this, he means to

---

4. Javed Akhtar interviewed in *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*, episode 11, “The 1970s and Onwards, Innovation in Popular Culture,” directed by Mark Cousins, aired September 2011, on More4, 32:57–34:00.

5. Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), xvi:

“A literary approach to the Bible is not in itself illegitimate: no book could have had so specific a literary influence without itself possessing literary qualities. But the Bible is just as obviously ‘more’ than a work of literature ...”

emphasize that “mere” literature does not see itself as imparting a code for living, a moral and religious agenda—even though some literature clearly has what might be more safely thought of as an existential *da‘wah* or “political message.” Frye seems here to tacitly agree with Nathaniel Hawthorne, who observed, in a letter to Melville, that no great work of literature has been made greater literature by the addition of a “message.”

The opposite, as the Qur’ān itself stands as unimpeachable witness, is not the case. The literary artistry of the Qur’ān has breathed new life into familiar biblical themes and, yes, commonplaces—those things Professor Wansbrough celebrated as *topoi*. Thus, to give one example, the biblical covenant, a rather straightforward contract between God and the Jews and Christians, is honored, validated, highly esteemed, *and* imposed upon the readership. However, by this time—the seventh century CE—this readership has become a new creation having vastly expanded beyond the linguistic, religious, and ethnic borders of the original and even traditional covenantal range. (After all, the formulation *dār al-‘ahd*, “abode of the covenant,” is frequently used as a synonym for *dār al-islām*, “abode of *islām*.”) This Abrahamic (not Ibrāhīmīc) covenant is presented by the Qur’ān in a new language and mode that unmistakably presents it not to a communal elite but proposes that this covenant is indeed the “property” and obligation of all humanity. While the idea of such an alliance, contract, or agreement is as old as time itself, the language and imagery with which it is certainly preached by the Qur’ān is fresh and, as a result of the passage of time and the unfoldment of the historical process (something of which the Qur’ān itself seems to be, in the context, newly aware), is now heard in a new setting that can perhaps best be described as late antique cosmopolitanism. Thus, the Qur’ān’s insistence on a single humanity is, it would seem, perfectly timed.

Devin Stewart’s discussion of translation problems points to much-needed improvements for the way in which the Qur’ān is rendered in English and raises a number of important questions precisely because the problems in translation he identifies seem to be at odds with the literary, social, and “religious” expectations of this late antique cosmopolitanism. The universal and universalizing message of the Qur’ān is, in fact, parochialized and cheapened by perverting its unmistakably and essentially universal *da‘wah* in translations which—whether this is the object or not—succeed in presenting its voice as one foreign to the human ear. His remarks on the exoticizing manner in which even the most well-known proper names—well-known to a primarily English-speaking, biblically-formed culture—are perversely or mischievously or lazily cast by translators, whether Eastern or Western, as

near transliterations of their Arabic cognates are very much to the point. Beginning with the proper name *allāh*, which very few anglophones bother to try to pronounce as indicated in this spelling, these names in their “translated” form may be thought to serve more to distance the target audience from the Qur’ān and Islam rather than offer an invitation to understanding and common human spiritual feeling. Who is Ibrāhīm? Who is ‘Īsā? Who is Mūsā? Who is Nūḥ? Who is Yūnus? Yūsuf? We, of course, have a right to be puzzled by such names as Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, and ‘Ād and Thamūd. And we are sort of okay with Ishāq, Sulaymān, not forgetting Ādam. But if the translators wish to be true to the universalizing, cosmopolitan humanism of the Qur’ān and much of Islam’s venture, then there needs to be some serious thought about the manner in which the Qur’ān’s views on humanity and those figures whom it clearly conceives as the most important humans ever to have drawn breath—prophets and messengers from God—is presented to the uninitiated. Perhaps it is initiation that is at play here. In a real sense, to understand and concur with the Qur’ān’s doctrine or teaching about the interconnectedness of humanity is really to be “of” the Qur’ān, at least as “lower-case *muslim*,” to the extent that this striking and revolutionary late antique modernist world-view is seen for what it was, and is. To persist in the obfuscation is tantamount to deadening the persuasive and salubrious universalism the Qur’ān takes to be part of God’s message to earthlings; and willfully to present to the English reader and scholar these common cultural heroes in such impenetrable and alien guise represents a process of “Klingonization” especially baleful at this moment in history. We should be seeking commonality not difference. We should be celebrating our human kinship. We should be teaching and studying the workings of our shared blessings and curses. Islam represents nearly a quarter of the population of the earth.

Not only does the Qur’ān enhance its timeless message by a new, in the context of religious history, Arabic literary poetics, it also repeats the ancient Abrahamic ethical values over the music of what would be interestingly described in a far-off future as the above-mentioned “poetics of relation.”<sup>6</sup> Although Édouard Glissant meant perhaps something not precisely analogous to qur’ānic universalism, just the idea of a poetics of relation has profound qur’ānic resonance, for it could be argued that the literary poetics of the Qur’ān speaks to the predicament into which its voice proclaimed human unity: a chaos of religions. The Qur’ān wishes the reader to impose the qur’ānic map of a variegated community onto the human geography

---

6. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

of the time and place and transform such chaos into *communitas*: ponder its puzzles, just as the sometimes daunting pronouncements and connections, or apparent lack of them, puzzles its readership. The key is, of course, Q 7:172 and its many referents throughout the Qurʾān: in the beginning humans were united in the pure *muslim fiṭrah* state (in this context, *muslim* would seem to stand for a naturally observant human rather than yet another “trademark religion” vying for market share in the human welter of this same Late Antiquity) in their acknowledgement of, love for, and obedience to “their Lord.” Here, “natural” is used in the sense in which the Qurʾān asserts that all created things are naturally in a state of praise to God (Q 17:44). The “nightmare of history” has destroyed or denatured (no pun intended) such primordial unity. The Qurʾān wishes people to wake up to such primal—later understood as ontic—unity, through recollection (*dhikr*). The originary state of natural unity is to be embodied and (typologically) reiterated through practice. Here, it is impossible not to think of Eliot’s uncannily apposite lines near the end of his *Four Quartets*:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.<sup>7</sup>

I would, without hesitation, join my voice to Stewart’s with regard to the dismaying manner in which translators of the Qurʾān have missed (purposely or otherwise) an opportunity to highlight the way in which this otherwise very foreign and “blockaded” book preaches the oneness of humanity with the same intensity that it preaches the oneness of God, the equally famous (sometimes infamous) Islamic desideratum of *tawḥīd*: “thinking in terms of oneness.” Calling for a “biblicizing” translation limits in some ways the universal epic scope, the chronotope, of the Qurʾān. Biblicizing can give the wrong impression: we are not trying to biblicize the Qurʾān in this study of words and their translation. Rather, we are trying precisely to reveal the deep conversation that the Qurʾān carries on *with* the Bible. This is why we must be careful in the use of terms for method. Here, the expressions “strategy” and “tactic” also give a misleading impression. These terms make the composition of the Qurʾān sound too much like the result of planning an advertising campaign. While it is true that Islam has frequently, and especially in today’s exquisitely multicultural and multireligious cosmopolitan world, embarrassingly been presented by proselytes as a “superior product,”

---

7. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943), 39.



it is wrong to assume that such literary imperialism is the driving vision of the original revelation even if the result of the Islamic “openings” led to what would later, in another conversation, be condemned as colonialism. Once again, we are all in the same boat, or, perhaps more accurately, we are all in the same flood (some of us have better boats than others): we have all committed the same sins, we have all done the same good deeds. More of the latter and less of the former is what is called for. Objectivity is a phantom. We need now to read such books as the Qur’ān for their gospel of universal salvation/survival and conviviality. However a word of the Qur’ān is translated, it must be heard as the word of God in the voice of Muḥammad—which blends with the voice (silent or aloud) of the reader. Moreover, it is a voice charged with powerful “trope” of deep connection through the periodic yet incessant, often fugue-like, literary energies of epic and apocalypse.<sup>8</sup> Thus, a key element in the challenge of translation is a deeper understanding of Muḥammad and his voice: his heroism, his wisdom, and his compassion. Otherwise the sound of the Qur’ān we hear will be false and its message deadened. Such a muted and distorted rendition of the Qur’ān’s singular music becomes, then, like the alien noise leaking from headphones worn by someone else. Hodgson’s insights on the nature of the Qur’ān and the problem of translation, especially when compared with the Bible, are more timely today than when originally formulated. We will end our discussion with them:

[T]he Qur’ān reveals itself as a comprehensive cosmic challenge, monumentally delivered. It is at once more comprehensive in outline and more involved in the details of individual living than are its closest analogues, the Old Testament prophets, taken in themselves. ... It maintains an ultimate perspective on every point that arises, large or small. This it does even verse by verse in its sonorous endings recalling the power and the mercy of God and, more substantially, in the very mixture of passages exalted and prosaic. In Arabic, at least, the exalted passages manage to win out in such contests and give their tone to the whole. This can be seen in the Chapter of Light, which contains the most ethereal passage in the Qur’ān juxtaposed with what might seem some of its most sordid, dealing with matters of etiquette, with sexual decency, and in particular with an accusation of infidelity levied against a wife of the Prophet. The exalted effect is aided by an effective use of language, which lends an untranslatable dignity even to quite ordinary ideas, so that the phrases seem to take on a more general reference; much of real substance is lost when the thought is cast into less noble rhythms in another tongue.<sup>9</sup>

8. Todd Lawson, *The Quran: Epic and Apocalypse* (London: Oneworld, 2017).

9. Hodgson, “A Comparison,” 61–62.