

COGNATE AND PARONOMASTIC CURSE  
RETORTS IN THE QUR'ĀN: SPEECH GENRES  
AND THE INVESTIGATION OF  
QUR'ĀNIC LANGUAGE\*

DEVIN J. STEWART

Abstract

This study focuses on a sub-genre of the genre of curses in Arabic, the cognate or paronomastic curse, one of the many forms of regular cognate paronomasia (*ishṭiqāq*) that have been common in Arabic usage from pre-Islamic Arabic to the modern Arabic dialects. It argues that such curses occur in several passages of the Qur'ān and that an understanding of the genre's usage in general sheds light on its sense and rhetorical effect in those passages. Moreover, the curse *qāṭalahu'llāhu* ("may God fight him!"), one of the most common qur'ānic curses, serves as a retort to forms of the verb *qāla*, *yaqūlu* ("to say"). Overall, this investigation suggests that interpretation of the Qur'ān may be advanced by attention to such common Arabic speech genres as well as to biblical language and to high registers of Arabic such as poetry or oratory.

Keywords

blessings, curses, retorts, speech genres, paronomasia, qur'ānic language

This study investigates curses in the qur'ānic text, arguing that a number of them belong to an important sub-category of Arabic curses, that of cognate and paronomastic curse retorts. A qur'ānic example of the cognate curse retort is *ghullat aydīhim* ("may their hands be shackled!") which repeats the

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root consonants *gh-l-l* of a key word in the preceding statement, *yadu'llāhi maghlūlah* (“the hand of God is shackled”) (Q Mā'idah 5:64), the word *maghlūlah* (“shackled”) serving as the trigger for the curse. Instances of the curses *qātalahu'llāh* (“may God fight them!”) and *qutīla* (“may he be killed!”) are distinct from *ghullat aydīhim* in that they are not based on exact cognates, responding not to derivatives of the same root consonants, *q-t-l*, but rather to derivatives of the root consonants *q-w-l*, such as *qālū* (“they said”). Paronomastic curses of the latter class have not been pointed out as retorts, to the best of my knowledge, in commentaries on the Qur'ān, works on Arabic rhetoric, or modern scholarship in Qur'ānic studies. Nor has the cognate curse retorts' connection with a common speech genre been generally recognized. Both sets of curse retorts share in the same rhetorical and pragmatic function and belong to the same genre. The Qur'ānic forms evidently draw on a common genre that occurred regularly in pre-Islamic Arabic speech, and the particular curse retort *qātalaka'llāh* was probably used as a paronomastic retort to forms not only of the cognate verb *qatala*, *yaqtulu* (“to kill”) but also of the phonetically similar verb *qāla*, *yaqūlu* (“to say”).

### The Language of the Qur'ān

Several Qur'ānic passages boldly identify Arabic as the language of Islam's sacred text. Questions remain, however, regarding the particular variety of Arabic intended, and the answers to those questions have repercussions for the interpretation of the sacred text. On the one hand, Islamic tradition reports that the Qur'ān reflects the Arabic usage of the Hijaz, the Prophet Muḥammad's native region. Indeed, Karl Vollers suggested in 1906 that the Qur'ān was couched entirely in the colloquial Arabic of the Hijaz, but critics such as Geyer and Nöldeke rejected this view soon after Vollers' work appeared, and it has not found favor since.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, it is generally agreed that the Qur'ānic text is not couched in the vernacular but rather in a high, literary variety of a language that resembles the linguistic medium of classical Arabic poetry. Analysis of Qur'ānic orthography suggests that the answer lies between the two poles: the text of the Qur'ān originally reflected some West Arabian dialectal features, such as the omission or elision of

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1. Karl Vollers, *Völkssprache und Schriftsprache im alten Arabien* (Strassburg: Trübner, 1906); Theodor Nöldeke, “Zur Sprache des Korāns,” in *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft* (Strassburg: Trübner, 1910), 1–30, esp. 1–5; Rudolf Geyer, “Rezension zu Karl Vollers, *Völkssprache und Schriftsprache im alten Arabien*,” *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen* 171 (1909): 10–55.

*hamzah*, but was later revised to include written *hamzahs* in keeping with the poetic *koine* or the more conservative dialects of Central and Eastern Arabia.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, even if most scholars of the Qurʾān agree that the sacred text is expressed primarily in a high, non-vernacular form of Arabic, several varieties could be involved. Many interpreters of the Qurʾān within the pre-modern Islamic tradition looked to poetry as the main body of material that might throw light on the linguistic particularities of the Qurʾān.<sup>3</sup> This occurred for two main reasons: the tremendous prestige of poetry, which was viewed as the Arabs' most sublime literary and cultural achievement, and the availability of a substantial corpus of texts with a plausible claim to authenticity and early date. Margoliouth and other scholars in Western Europe challenged the value of pre-Islamic poetry for interpretation of the Qurʾān in the early twentieth century, raising questions about its authenticity.<sup>4</sup> Most famously, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's questioning of the pre-Islamic poetry's authenticity in his work *Fī'l-shiʿr al-jāhili* provoked a heated controversy in the early twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> As Angelika Neuwirth points out, in Western scholarship from the mid-twentieth century onwards, many of the standard introductions to the Qurʾān suppressed the consideration of poetry altogether.<sup>6</sup> Recently, Neuwirth and others have called for renewed attention to poetry as a variety of Arabic, and perhaps the most important variety, that might throw light on the qurʾānic text.<sup>7</sup> A long controversy has surrounded the poetry of Umayyah b. Abī'l-Salt, which has some obvious connections in content with passages of

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2. Chaim Rabin, *Ancient West-Arabian* (London: Taylor's Foreign Press, 1951).

3. Ignaz Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der Islamischen Koranlegung* (Leiden: Brill, 1920), 92–93; John Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121, 216–218; Claude Gilliot, *Exégèse, langue et théologie en Islam: L'exégèse coranique de Tabarī* (Paris: Vrin, 1990); Herbert Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam: The Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period* (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2000), 149–150; Muḥammad Mālikī, *Juhūd al-Ṭabarī fī dirāsāt al-shawāhid al-shiʿriyyah fī Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān* (Fez: Jāmiʿat Sīdī Muḥammad Ben ʿAbd Allāh, 1994).

4. Wilhelm Ahlwardt, *Bemerkungen über die Aechtheit der alten arabischen Gedichte* (Greifswald: Bamberg, 1872); Samuel Margoliouth, "The Origins of Arabic Poetry," *JRAS* 3 (1925): 417–449.

5. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *Fī'l-shiʿr al-jāhili* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub, 1926); idem, *Fī'l-adab al-jāhili* (Cairo: Lajnat al-Taʿlīf wa'l-Tarjamah wa'l-Nashr, 1927); Yaron Ayalon, "Revisiting Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's *Fī al-Shiʿr al-Jāhili* and Its Sequel," *WI* 49 (2009): 98–121.

6. Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011), 674, n. 7.

7. James E. Montgomery, "The Empty Hijaz," in idem (ed.), *Arabic Theology, Arabic Philosophy, From the Many to the One: Essays in Celebration of Richard M. Frank* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 37–97; Thomas Bauer, "The Relevance of Early Arabic Poetry for Qurʾānic Studies including Observations on *Kull* and on Q 22:27, 26:225, and 52:31," in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx (eds.), *The Qurʾān in Context:*

the Qurʾān but has been surrounded by doubts concerning authenticity. The latest publication concerning his poetry, by Nicolai Sinai, suggests that it is indeed useful for the interpretation of qurʾānic material.<sup>8</sup>

However, in focusing on poetry, scholars have relatively neglected several other varieties of pre-Islamic Arabic. The Arabic of oratory and the Arabic of the *kuhhān*, the soothsayers or pagan religious specialists, both arguably exerted considerable influence on the Qurʾān.<sup>9</sup> One may also detect the influence of Hebrew and Aramaic/Syriac religious terminology and forms on the language of the Qurʾān.<sup>10</sup> Thus, at least four varieties of “literary” Arabic—i.e., including the forms of Arabic use in oral literature—may be seen as forming the background of qurʾānic Arabic. That the Qurʾān is not presented in ordinary speech is obvious on account of the tremendous roles that rhyme and rhythm play in the text. Nevertheless, the importance of these literary varieties for the qurʾānic text does not rule out the influence of common forms of Arabic speech, including ordinary greetings, politeness formulae, oaths, blessings, curses, taunts, promises, and other forms of everyday talk. André Jolles addressed a number of such common forms in his 1930 work, *Einfache Formen*, and their analysis has been influential in form-critical studies of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.<sup>11</sup> This essay

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*Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾānic Milieu* (TSQ 6; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 699–732; Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike*, 672–722.

8. Nicolai Sinai, “Religious Poetry from the Quranic Milieu: Umayya b. Abī al-Salt on the Fate of the Thamūd,” *BSOAS* 74 (2011): 397–416.

9. On the characteristic pronouncements of soothsayers, see Devin J. Stewart, “The Mysterious Letters and Other Formal Features of the Qurʾān in Light of Greek and Babylonian Oracular Texts,” in Gabriel S. Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Qurʾān: The Qurʾān in Its Historical Context* 2 (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), 321–346; Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike*, 682–685. On Arabic oratory, see Tahera Qutbuddin, *Classical Arabic Oration* (forthcoming).

10. Theodor Nöldeke, “Zur Sprache des Korans,” in *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft*, 23–30; Carl Anton Baumstark, “Jüdischer and Christlicher Gebetstypus im Koran,” *Der Islam* 16 (1927): 229–248; idem, “Zur Herkunft der monotheistischen Bekenntnisformel im Koran,” *OrChr* 37 (1953): 6–22; Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and Its Biblical Subtext* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2010); Emran El-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013); Arthur J. Droge, *The Qurʾān: A New Annotated Translation* (London: Equinox, 2013), *passim*; Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), *passim*.

11. André Jolles, *Einfache Formen: Legende, Sage, Mythe, Rätsel, Spruch, Kasus, Memorabile, Märchen, Witz* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1930). See, among the many possible examples, Marion C. Moeser, *The Anecdote in Mark, the Classical World, and the Rabbis* (London: Sheffield Press, 2002); Shelley L. Birdsong, *The Last King(s) of Judah* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017). The early proponents of form criticism often assumed that simple

attempts to show that a specific genre of ordinary Arabic speech, the cognate curse retort, has been incorporated into the Qurʾān. An understanding of the generic conventions and rhetoric of this particular form of Arabic speech, which exists in all major dialects of Arabic and is recorded throughout the history of Arabic literature from the early Islamic period until the present, helps the observer interpret a number of passages in the Qurʾān. The Qurʾānic evidence corroborates other evidence that the cognate curse retort existed in pre-Islamic Arabic and strongly suggests that the Qurʾān draws on pre-Islamic everyday, oral speech genres to a greater extent than has been recognized in scholarship to date.

### Form Criticism and the Circumstances of Revelation

*tabbat yadā abī lahabin wa-tab(b)*<sup>12</sup>

May the hands of Abū Lahab perish! And may he perish!  
(Q Masad 111:1)

Many commentators identify this curse, which opens Sūrat Abī Lahab (Q 111), as a retort. In justifying this interpretation, they draw on reports included in the literature of *asbāb al-nuzūl* (“circumstances of revelation”) which explain that the *sūrah* originated as a condemnation of the Prophet’s uncle ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā, who was known by the nickname Abū Lahab, “the Father of Flames,” i.e., “the man destined for Hellfire.” Abū’l-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī (d. 468/1076), for example, gives three *ḥadīth* reports to this effect in his *Asbāb al-nuzūl*.

- I. One day the Messenger mounted [the hill of] al-Ṣafā and exclaimed, “Woe on this morning!” The Quraysh gathered around him and asked, “What troubles you?” He responded, “Consider this: If I informed you that the enemy would attack you at dawn, or at night, would you not believe me?” They answered, “Yes, of course.” He continued, “So, I am a warner to you with a terrible punishment before me.” Abū Lahab exclaimed “Perdition to you (*tabban laka*)! Have you called us all together for that?!” Then God sent down: “May the hands of Abū Lahab perish!”

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forms were characteristic of oral discourse and that these regularly preceded more complex, written forms, but such assumptions were later questioned.

12. The verse-final word is *wa-tabba* (“and may he perish”), but the rhyme of the *sūrah* requires that this word be pronounced *wa-tab*, reducing the geminate *-bb-* to match the final words of the following verses—*kasab(a)*, *lahab(in)*, *al-ḥaṭab(i)*, *masad(in)*—in form.

- II. The Messenger of God stood and declared, “O descendants of Ghālib! O descendants of Lu’ayy! O descendants of Murrah! O descendants of Kilāb! O descendants of ‘Abd Manāf! O descendants of Quṣayy! I have no power to grant you either benefit from God or a portion from this world, unless you say, ‘There is no god but God!’” Abū Lahab exclaimed, “Perdition to you (*tabban laka*)! You called us for that?!” Then God sent down: “May the hands of Abū Lahab perish!”
- III. When Exalted God revealed “Warn your nearest clan...” (Q Shu‘arā’ 26:214), the Messenger of God came to al-Ṣafā, climbed it, and then exclaimed, “Woe on this morning!” The people gathered around him; some attended themselves, while others sent a messenger. He spoke, “O sons of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib! O sons of Fihri! O sons of Lu’ayy! If I were to inform you that a cavalry were waiting at the top of this ridge, intending to attack you, would you believe me?” They answered, “Yes.” He said, “So, I am a warner to you with a terrible punishment before me.” Abū Lahab exclaimed, “Perdition to you (*tabban laka*)! You called us the whole day just for this?!” Then God sent down: “May the hands of Abū Lahab perish!”<sup>13</sup>

The literature of the circumstances of revelation has come under criticism in qur’ānic studies since the nineteenth century, and some scholars opt to ignore the material completely. That such reports could present accurate recordings of rather complex statements and conversations that occurred generations or even centuries before they were demonstrably fixed in written documents is considered historically highly improbable. Like the story of George Washington and the cherry tree, they were presumably invented at later dates for particular ideological purposes. Even if, or perhaps especially if, they were created and transmitted with pious intentions, they cannot be trusted as historical sources, and they should be eschewed as a basis on which to build responsible interpretations of the text.<sup>14</sup>

What scholars who adopt this view have largely ignored, however, is that while the circumstances of revelation may not pass muster as authentic historical reports, they may nevertheless be valuable. The genre of *asbāb al-nuzūl*, while it claims to be concerned with historical criticism of the qur’ānic text by identifying the specific historical situations to which

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13. ‘Alī b. Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī, *Asbāb al-nuzūl* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-‘Arabī, 1992), 263–264.

14. On *asbāb al-nuzūl* in general, see Andrew Rippin, “The Exegetical Genre *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*: A Bibliographical and Terminological Survey,” *BSOAS* 47 (1985): 1–15; idem, “Al-Zarkashī and al-Suyūṭī on the Function of the Occasion of Revelation Material,” *IC* 59 (1985): 243–258; idem, “The Function of *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* in Qur’ānic Exegesis,” *BSOAS* 51 (1988): 1–20.

particular qur'ānic texts responded, is actually more successful as a type of form criticism. This is a bit different, and in a way more specific, from the general point made by Rippin that the *asbāb al-nuzūl* serve, like the *sūrah*, to fit the qur'ānic material into a particular narrative or interpretive framework. While the authenticity and specifics of the historical accounts provided are often doubtful, the accounts often correctly identify the genre of the text in question, and an understanding of the formal conventions of the genre so identified helps scholars interpret the text more reliably. In other words, such accounts may accurately identify the genre to which the revealed passage in question belongs, performing a fundamental operation that facilitates the interpretation of the text.

It is crucial to note that all three of al-Wāḥidī's accounts share in identifying *Sūrat Abī Lahab* as a retort to Abū Lahab's curse of the Prophet, *tabban laka* ("perdition to you!"), despite the differences between them.<sup>15</sup> Al-Wāḥidī's first and third accounts are very similar, both mentioning the Prophet's gathering of Quraysh to address them at the hill of al-Ṣafā and his warning them of an approaching attack, while the second differs, lacking these elements. Nevertheless, the second account includes the same exclamation by 'Abd al-'Uzzā, *tabban laka* ("perdition to you!"), identifying it as the trigger that provoked the revelation of *Sūrat Abī Lahab*. Even *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, among the tersest of qur'ānic commentaries, begins the section on *Sūrat Abī Lahab* the section on *Sūrat Abī Lahab* with a short account similar to those cited by al-Wāḥidī, thus suggesting the importance of identifying the *sūrah* as a retort: "When the Prophet—God bless him and keep him—called for his tribe to assemble and declared, 'I am a warner to you with a terrible punishment before me,' his uncle Abū Lahab exclaimed, 'Perdition to you (*tabban laka*)! You called us just for this?'"<sup>16</sup> Most commentaries on *Sūrat Abī Lahab* include some version of these *asbāb al-nuzūl* accounts, an admission that identifying the *sūrah* as a retort is fundamental for its interpretation. The circumstances of revelation may in this case be linguistically accurate, even if they are not historically accurate. In other words, even if the events described did not occur, or occurred under different circumstances and involved different actors and speakers, it still appears quite likely that the text of *Sūrat Abī Lahab* is in

15. The *Sūrah* of Ibn Hishām presents a different and altogether unlikely account, in which Abū Lahab curses his own hands, arguing that the Prophet promises him things that he cannot see and are supposed to reach him in the afterlife, while his hands receive nothing. According to that account, *Sūrat Abī Lahab* would be reporting on or describing his curse of his own hands. See Ibn Hishām, *Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq's [sic] Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, trans. Alfred Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 159–160.

16. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, n.d.), 825.

fact a retort. The same may be true, *mutatis mutandis*, for many other reports of the circumstances of revelation.

In the *asbāb al-nuzūl* accounts cited above, the Prophet Muḥammad addresses the Quraysh tribe with a message of warning and concern. Abū Lahab's curse, *tabban laka* ("perdition to you!") is a forceful rebuke of the Prophet, reprimanding him for wasting the time of his audience and perhaps for his presumption in presenting himself as a religious authority. The reprimand is bolstered and authorized by Abū Lahab's status—it reflects an understanding that he, as a senior member of the Quraysh tribe and of the Prophet's own clan, the Banū Hāshim, has the right to criticize and correct the Prophet's behavior. Thus, the curse retort that appears at the opening of the *sūrah* serves to reject Abū Lahab's rebuke. The use of cognates, *tabbat... wa-tabba*, stresses that the curse has been turned back on itself, through the automatic or magical action of language. It is as if, by uttering his curse, Abū Lahab brought about his own condemnation. Not only his reprimand but also his prerogative to judge and correct the Prophet's behavior has been rejected.

What these reports do not make explicit is that Sūrat Abī Lahab draws on a particular type of retort common in popular Arabic speech: the cognate curse retort. The cognate curse retort is the negative counterpart of the cognate blessing response, which occurs frequently in the formulaic exchanges of politeness formulae in the modern Arabic dialects, such as the Egyptian dialect *mabrūk* ("blessed!"; i.e., "congratulations")—*allāh yibārīk fik* ("may God bless you!") in which the key verb in the blessing response, *yibārīk*, repeats the root consonants of the key term in the trigger *mabrūk*, *b-r-k*, or *ma'ā s-salāma*—*allāh yisallimāk* ("[may you go] with safety"—"may God keep you safe") in which the key term in the blessing response repeats the root consonants of *as-salāma*, *s-l-m*.

Dialectal cognate curse retorts occur in such exchanges as Egyptian Arabic *iftaḥ—fataḥ fi-rāsak ṭā'a* ("Open"—"May God open a window in your head!") and *khalās—khalīṣit rōḥak* ("Enough!"—"May your soul run out!") or Moroccan Arabic *ddīni m'āk—ddāk wād ḥāmel* ("Take me with you"—"May a flooded river take you away!") and *khallīni—ykhallīk blā rās* ("Leave me be!"—"May God leave you without a head!").

The cognate blessing responses generally serve to accept an initial statement, thus indicating approval and recognition that a social obligation was properly fulfilled or that an act of kindness was successfully conveyed and has been appreciated by the recipient. The cognate curses generally do the opposite, rejecting an initial statement, indicating that the utterer spoke or behaved improperly, committing some social infraction, and reprimanding or scolding him or her for doing so. In both cases, the use of cognate paronomasia stresses the swift and automatic nature of the response, as if it were already contained—in embryonic form—in the initial statement. The good expression

of the well-wisher brought about appropriate acceptance and appreciation, while the impropriety of the perpetrator of a social infraction elicited a deserved rebuke. There is a sense in which this occurs almost independently of the wills and intentions of the parties involved, through the magical power of language. The response is not a promise or a threat in which the speaker will act directly to reward or punish. Rather, the reward or punishment will be brought about through a third party, often God, but sometimes by a more impersonal force like the flooded river mentioned above.

This genre is an old one in Arabic, occurring both in classical Arabic literature and religious texts. *Ḥadīth*, the body of oral reports attributed to the Prophet, provides a number of examples of cognate paronomasia used in similar fashion. In the following, the Companion ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb utters a cognate blessing response to the Prophet:

‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb requested permission to enter upon the Messenger of God when attending him were women of the Quraysh tribe addressing him and asking him as many questions as possible, with their voices louder than his. When ‘Umar asked permission to enter, they stood and hastily donned their headscarves. Then the Messenger of God gave him permission, and ‘Umar entered, while the Messenger of God was smiling (*yaḍḥaku*), so ‘Umar said, “May God cause your teeth to smile” (*adhaka’llāhu sinnak*).<sup>17</sup>

Here, the Prophet’s act of smiling or laughing provokes the blessing response, “May God cause your teeth to smile” (*adhaka’llāhu sinnak*), thus registering the acceptance of this act as appropriate and beneficial behavior.

Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī (d. 275/889) reports the following *ḥadīth* report about arranging the rows of congregants when praying together in the mosque, on the authority of ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar (d. 74/693): *aqīmū’l-ṣufūfa wa-ḥādhū bayna’l-manāqib wa-suddū’l-khalal wa-lā tadharū farajātin li’l-shayṭān man waṣala ṣaffan waṣalahu’llāh wa-man qaṭa’a ṣaffan qaṭa’ahu’llāh* (“Make straight the rows, align the congregants’ shoulders, and fill in the gaps so that no spaces are left for Satan. Whoever connects a row, God will connect him, and whoever cuts off a row, God will cut him off”).<sup>18</sup> Another *ḥadīth* report uses similar cognate paronomasia as part of an exhortation to maintain close contact with relatives (*ṣilat al-raḥim*): *al-raḥimu mu’allaqatun bi’l-‘arshi taqūlu man waṣalanī waṣalahu’llāh wa-man qaṭa’anī qaṭa’ahu’llāh* (“The womb is attached to God’s Throne, saying: ‘Whoever connects me, God will connect, and whoever

17. Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Ismā‘il al-Bukhārī, *Al-Ṣaḥīḥ, kitāb faḍā’il al-ṣaḥābah, bāb manāqib ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb*, 5.

18. Abū Dāwūd Sulaymān b. al-Ash‘ath al-Sijistānī, *Al-Sunan, kitāb al-ṣalāh, bāb taswīyat al-ṣufūf*, 6.

cuts me off, God will cut off”).<sup>19</sup> Another version reads *al-rahīm shajanah min al-rahīmān fa-man waṣālahā waṣālahu’llāh* (“The womb is a branch of the Merciful One. Whoever connects it, God will connect”).<sup>20</sup>

In all these cases, the cognate blessings and curses serve to stress the immediate consequences, reward and punishment, for proper and improper behavior. Another *ḥadīth* report depicts the Prophet blessing and cursing particular Arab tribes from the minbar: *aslamu sālamahā’llāh wa-ghifāru ghafarā’llāhu lahā wa-’uṣayyatu ’aṣati’llāha wa-rasūlah* (“As for Aslam, may God afford them peace; as for Ghifār, may God forgive them; as for ‘Uṣayyah, they have disobeyed God and His Messenger”).<sup>21</sup> The fact that the cognate expressions are based on the very names of the tribes suggests that they are like inevitable verdicts, attached to the identity of the tribes. It is reported ‘Uqbah b. ‘Amir heard the Prophet make the following pronouncement about wearing amulets: *man ’allaqa tamīmatan fa-lā atamma’llāhu lahu wa-man ’allaqa wada’atan fa-lā wada’ā’llāhu lahu* (“Whoever fastens an amulet (*tamīmah*), may God not fulfill (*atamma*) [any plan] for him, and whoever fastens a seashell (*wada’ah*), may God not mitigate (*wada’ā*) for him [any danger he might face]”).<sup>22</sup> The curses in this statement serve to reject the practice of wearing protective amulets, implying that doing so is based on a certain lack of trust in God’s protective power. Similar turns of phrase abound throughout pre-modern Arabic literature.<sup>23</sup> One well-known example explains how the Batriyyah, a sub-sect of Zaydī Shi’ism, got their name. Representatives of this group appeared before Muḥammad al-Bāqir and his brother Zayd b. ‘Alī and asked whether they should pledge allegiance to ‘Alī, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn and denounce their enemies, to which al-Bāqir replied in the affirmative. They asked whether they should also pledge allegiance to Abū Bakr and ‘Umar and denounce *their* enemies. Zayd b. ‘Alī supposedly upbraided them, “Do you denounce Fāṭimah?! Do you denounce Fāṭimah?!” because she would number among their enemies. He then cursed them, “You have cut off our affair—may God cut you off (*batartum amranā—batarakumu’llāh*)!” and this curse became the basis of the name of their sect, al-Batriyyah.<sup>24</sup>

19. Abū’l-Ḥusayn Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī, *Al-Ṣaḥīḥ, kitāb al-birr*, 17.

20. Abū ‘Isā Muḥammad b. ‘Isā al-Tirmidhī, *Al-Jāmi‘ al-ṣaḥīḥ, kitāb al-birr*, 16.

21. In a number of versions, only the ‘Uṣayyah tribe is mentioned; the Prophet cursed them after they killed all the members of a military expedition he had sent against them. Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, al-manāqib*, 6; *al-maghāzī*, 28; *al-masājid*, 294, 297, 299, 303, 307, 308; *faḍā’il al-ṣaḥābah*, 186, 187.

22. Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥākīm al-Nīsābūrī, *Al-Mustadrak ‘alā al-ṣaḥīḥayn, kitāb al-ṭibb*, 79 (no. 7501).

23. See Devin J. Stewart, “Cognate and Analogical Curses in Moroccan Arabic: A Comparative Study of Arabic Speech Genres,” *Arabica* 61 (2014): 697–745, 720–721.

24. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *Ikhtiyār ma’rifat al-rijāl*

Knowledge of the conventions of this particular genre helps to confirm that the opening verse of *Sūrat Abī Lahab* is indeed a cognate curse retort. That this formal interpretation is plausible is suggested by the occurrence of the optative verb as the first word in the *sūrah*. As will be seen, the cognate curse tends to follow the trigger expression immediately, so that the *sūrah* appears to be an immediate response to the understood curse *tabban laka*. The structure produced often places the cognate terms in adjacent position, even though they are separated by an utterance boundary, caused by the change in speaker. Also in keeping with the logic of retorts is that the curse in the first verse of the *sūrah* represents an escalation to a more emphatic form. The retort's repetition of the root letters *t-b-b* in *tabbat ... wa-tabba*, coupled with the metonymic, concrete reference to Abū Lahab's hands, serves to compound the emphatic rejection of Abū Lahab's putative statement. Such physical metonymies, references to particular body parts such as the hands, feet, belly, back, heart, or head, are a frequent means of emphasis in curses.

Curses that function in a similar formal fashion are widely attested in the modern Arabic dialects, as well as in Arabic literature from classical times to the present. As will be shown below, they also occur in *ḥadīth* and in the *Qurʾān* itself. Though the accounts presented above do not state this explicitly, the compiler, al-Wāḥidī, as well as many of their readers who were native speakers of Arabic or well versed in common modes of Arabic speech, may have nevertheless understood this implicitly.

### The Cognate Curse in Arabic

Arabic has many cognate blessings, occurring primarily in politeness formulas; an initial phrase provokes a conventional polite response in the form of a blessing, and a key word in the response, often the main, optative verb, echoes the tri-consonantal root of a key word in the initial phrase. The most common of these cognate blessing responses occurs in the polite exchange *mabrūk—bāraka'llāhu fīk* (“[May it be] blessed [i.e., congratulations]”—“May God bless you”) which occurs, with minor variations, in all major Arabic dialects. Cognate blessing responses represent a large category in Arabic speech, each dialect having its own repertory of standard expressions of this form, and some dialects allowing for significant variation and innovation of particular phrases.<sup>25</sup>

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[= *Rijāl al-Kashshī*], ed. Jawād al-Qayyūmī al-Iṣfahānī (Qum: Muʾassasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 2005), 204–205.

25. Devin J. Stewart, “Root-Echo Responses in Egyptian Arabic Politeness Formulae,” in Alaa Elgibali (ed.), *Understanding Arabic: Essays in Contemporary Arabic Linguistics in Honor of El-Said Badawi* (Cairo: American University Press, 1996), 157–180.

Less well known are their negative counterparts, cognate curse retorts, which also occur in all the major dialects of Arabic. Examples include Egyptian *ḥabbak burṣ* (“May a gecko kiss you!”), a retort to *baḥibbik* (“I love you”); Lebanese *shāwī yishwīk wi-nār ti ḥīk* (“May a griller grill you, and a fire fry you!”), a retort to *shū* (“What?”); the Moroccan *ddāk el-wād* (“May the river carry you off!”), a retort to *ddīni m’āk* (“Take me with you”); or Negev Arabic *yikhull bātak* (“May He [God] sew up your armpit!”), a retort to *yā khāl* (“O maternal uncle”). Though on the whole they may be used less frequently in social exchanges than the cognate blessings, the dialects generally have larger repertoires of such phrases and allow for more variation and innovation within the genre. I have recorded and analyzed extensive corpora of cognate curses in the modern Egyptian and Moroccan dialects, and Roni Henkin has discussed cognate curses in Negev Arabic, showing, among other things, their widespread use to scold, reprimand, and correct perpetrators of social infractions.<sup>26</sup> Similar cognate curses may be found scattered in classical Arabic literature.<sup>27</sup> The old attestations, together with the ubiquity of cognate curses in Arabic dialects, some of which parallel the old forms almost exactly, suggest that this particular genre of speech goes back to pre-Islamic Arabic usage.<sup>28</sup> In my 1997 study of cognate curse retorts in Egyptian Arabic, I mentioned what is perhaps the most obvious example of this genre in the Qurʾān, Q 5:64, and Werner Diem included a short discussion of this verse in his 2005 work on root-repetition in “wish-sentences,” drawing on medieval qurʾānic exegesis. In 2014 I called attention to both Q 5:64 and Q Tawbah 9:127 as members of this genre. Otherwise, to the best of my knowledge, nothing has been written on the specific topic of cognate curses in the qurʾānic corpus.<sup>29</sup>

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26. Devin J. Stewart, review of *Arabisches Volkstheater in Kairo im Jahre 1909: Ahmad ilFar und seine Schwänke*, ed. and trans. Manfred Woidich and Jacob M. Landau, *JAOs* 117 (1997): 190-192; idem, “Impoliteness Formulae: The Cognate Curse in Egyptian Arabic,” *JSS* 42 (1997): 327-360; idem, “Curse,” *EQ*, s.v. (2001); idem, “Cognate and Analogical Curses in Moroccan Arabic: A Comparative Study of Arabic Speech Genres,” *Arabica* 61 (2014): 697-745; Roni Henkin, “The Cognate Curse in Negev Arabic: From Playful Punning to Coexistence Conflicts,” *Israel Studies in Language and Society* 2 (2009): 169-206; eadem, *Negev Arabic: Dialectal, Sociolinguistic, and Stylistic Variation* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 182-184.

27. Stewart, “Impoliteness Formulae,” 329; idem, “Cognate and Analogical Curses,” 720-721.

28. Idem, “Cognate and Analogical Curses,” 721-722, 740.

29. Idem, “Impoliteness Formulae,” 329; idem, “Cognate and Analogical Curses,” 719; Werner Diem, *Wurzelrepetition und Wunschsatz: Untersuchungen zur Stilgeschichte des arabischen Dokuments des 7. bis 20. Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 2-3, 22-24.

## Scholarship on Cognate Blessings and Curses

There has been limited attention to the cognate curse retort in studies of Arabic. They do not appear in Arabic textbooks, and if some of the curses themselves appear in dictionaries, they are not identified as retorts. This is despite the general recognition by students of Arabic grammar, rhetoric, style, and literature that Arabic makes frequent use of cognate paronomasia. The most common example is the grammatical construction of the *mafʿūl mutlaq*, literally “accusative absolute,” which has been labeled “the cognate accusative” in English. This involves the use of a cognate verbal noun following some verbal form, such as *ḍarabtuḥu ḍarban* (“I beat him a beating”) meaning “I beat him soundly, or severely.” Other common turns of phrase that exhibit cognate paronomasia are *qāla qāʾilun* (“a sayer said”), meaning, “someone said,” or *yawman min al-ayyām* (“on a day from among the days”), meaning “one day.”<sup>30</sup> Also well known are the cognate blessing responses that occur in politeness formulae; a few are presented in most European grammars of Arabic, both of the written language and of the dialects. Some scholars of the dialects have presented a more substantial list of such responses, such as Dornier in his major collection of the politeness formulae of the Arab tribes in northern Tunisia.<sup>31</sup> The linguist Charles Ferguson, best known in Arabic studies for his seminal article on diglossia, wrote two focused studies analyzing what he termed “root-echo responses” in Syrian Arabic politeness formulae, and I wrote an analysis of similar material from the Egyptian Arabic dialect. Building on this work, and drawing from long experience editing Arabic private letters and other documents found in the collections of major European libraries, Werner Diem published a substantial monograph on “root-repetition” in “wish-sentences” in 2005, including a long list of examples drawn from documents from all periods, but primarily from the late medieval and early modern periods.<sup>32</sup>

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30. Hermann Reckendorf, *Über Paronomasie in den semitischen Sprachen* (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1909).

31. Père François Dornier, “La politesse bédouine dans les campagnes du nord de la Tunisie,” *Revue de l’Institut des Belles Lettres Arabes* 15 (1952): 17–48; idem, “La politesse bédouine dans les campagnes du nord de la Tunisie (suite),” *Revue de l’Institut des Belles Lettres Arabes* 16 (1953): 47–69; idem, “La politesse bédouine dans les campagnes du nord de la Tunisie, la maladie,” *Revue de l’Institut des Belles Lettres Arabes* 16 (1953): 391–399; idem, “La politesse bédouine dans les campagnes du nord de la Tunisie, la mord,” *Revue de l’Institut des Belles Lettres Arabes* 17 (1954): 99–109; idem, “La politesse bédouine dans les campagnes du nord de la Tunisie, le mariage,” *Revue de l’Institut des Belles Lettres Arabes* 17 (1954): 251–267; idem, “La politesse bédouine dans les campagnes du nord de la Tunisie, le mariage,” *Revue de l’Institut des Belles Lettres Arabes* 18 (1955): 93–126.

32. Diem, *Wurzelrepetition und Wunschsatz*.

The cognate blessing responses that figure in Arabic politeness formulae have a negative counterpart in the cognate curse retorts. Whereas the blessing responses generally serve to accept an initial statement and recognize the successful completion of a social duty, the curse retorts generally serve to reject an initial statement and scold the first speaker for a social infraction. Perhaps the first to recognize such curse-retorts as a category was William Marçais, who included several curses that belong to this genre in his study of euphemisms in Algerian Arabic, especially the dialect of Tlemcen and the province of Oran:

*yā bbwá—allāh yūbīk* “o mon père!”—“que Dieu te donne la peste”  
*yā mmwá—allāh yūmīk* “o ma mère!”—“que Dieu te donne des clous (ūmāya).”  
*yā xāi—allāh yexwīk* “o mon frère!”—“que Dieu te vide le ventre”  
*yā ‘ūmmi—allāh yō mīk* “o mon oncle paternal”—“que Dieu t’aveugle”  
*yā xāli—allāh yexlīk* “o mon oncle maternel!”—“que Dieu te ruine!”

Marçais describes these as formulaic curses with which one responds to an importune child.<sup>33</sup> He did not label or define the genre, but the fact that he placed them together and gave some indication of their usage suggests that he understood them to form a distinct category of speech.<sup>34</sup>

In 1994, I included a brief discussion of paronomastic and cognate curses in Egyptian Arabic in the course of a discussion of the *Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic* of El-Said Badawi and Martin Hinds, which had been published in 1986.<sup>35</sup> In 1997, I published a study of cognate curse retorts in the modern Egyptian Arabic dialect, in which I attempted to define the genre, gather the core repertory of such curses in the dialect, address some of the obscure

33. W. Marçais, “L’Euphémisme et l’antiphrase dans les dialectes arabes d’Algérie,” in Carl Bezold (ed.), *Orientalische Studien: Theodor Nöldeke zum siebenzigsten Geburtstag (2. März 1906) gewidmet von Freunden und Schülern* (2 vols.; Giessen: Töpelmann, 1906), 1.425–438, 434, n. 1. I was unaware of Marçais’ inclusion of these curses in his work on euphemism when I wrote the studies mentioned above on cognate curse retorts in Egyptian Arabic (1997) and in Moroccan Arabic (2014).

34. On cognate curse retorts of this specific sub-category, those that respond to terms of address, in Egyptian, Moroccan, Negev, and Tunisian Arabic, see Stewart, “Impoliteness Formulae,” 344–346; idem, “Cognate and Analogical Curses,” 726–728; Henkin, “The Cognate Curse,” 175–176; eadem, *Negev Arabic*, 182–183; Veronika Ritt-Benmimoun, “A Formal Analysis of Curses and Blessings in a Bedouin Dialect of Southern Tunisia,” *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik* 64 (2016): 34–68, 58.

35. Devin J. Stewart, “A Contribution to the Lexicography of Egyptian Arabic,” *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik* 28 (1994): 36–86, 59–61. I also discussed such curses briefly in my review of Woidich and Landau (ed. and trans.) *Arabisches Volkstheater*, 191.

vocabulary found exclusively within the genre (or nearly so) and determine its formal, rhetorical, and pragmatic conventions. In 2014, I published a study of cognate curse retorts, along with analogical curses, in Moroccan Arabic. Roni Henkin has addressed cognate curse retorts in the Arabic dialect of the Negev, Luca D'Anna has discussed such curses in North African dialects, primarily Libyan Arabic, and recently, Veronica Ritt-Benmimoun has likewise discussed them in the Arabic dialect of the Marāzīg tribe in the Nefzaoua region of southern Tunisia.<sup>36</sup> In addition, Werner Diem's 2005 monograph, though it deals mainly with cognate blessing responses, covers a number of cognate curse retorts such as *wa-lam yadhhab—adhhaba'llāhu sharwāh wa-ab'ada minnā najwāh* ("He did not go—may God banish his like and rid us of intimate ties with him") and *wa-hādhā'l-'aduwwu'l-muqāṭalu—qāṭalahu'llāhu* ("And this enemy combatant—may God fight him").<sup>37</sup>

### An Eye for an Eye

The Qur'ān is replete with statements that promise rewards or punishments for various meritorious or nefarious deeds, acts of obedience or righteousness as opposed to crimes or infractions. They are often couched in conditional sentences—or forms that show an affinity with conditional sentences—and they are arguably part of an ancient Semitic traditional structure that has manifestations in laws, omens, proverbs, and other forms. The use of the conditional sentence to portray an act and its recompense, whether positive or negative, has an ancient pedigree in the Near East and in Semitic languages in particular. Scholars' attention focused on its use in series of laws, such as Hammurabi's Code or the Laws of Eshnunna, early on, but they subsequently noted its prominent use in other genres of text such as medical treatises and omen series. In all cases, the conditional sentence conveys a logic of correct, and in some sense automatic, retribution for acts, whether they are propitious or not, fulfillments of obligations or infractions.<sup>38</sup> The most

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36. Henkin, "Cognate Curse"; idem, *Negev Arabic*, 182–184; Luca D'Anna, "Aspects of Verbal Politeness in Maghrebi Arabic Dialects" (Ph.D. diss., University of Naples, 2013–2014), 307–311; Ritt-Benmimoun, "A Formal Analysis," 57–63.

37. Diem, *Wurzelrepetition und Wunschsatz*, 235, 535. Diem was aware of my study on cognate blessing responses in Egyptian Arabic but not my 1997 study that defined the cognate curse retort in Egyptian Arabic.

38. Fritz Rudolf Kraus, *Ein Edikt des Königs Ammi-Šaduqa von Babylonien* (Leiden: Brill, 1958); idem, "Ein zentrales Problem des altmesopotamischen Rechtes: Was ist der Codex Hammu-rabi?" *Genava* 8 (1960): 283–296; J. J. Finkelstein, "Ammi-Šaduqa's Edict and the Babylonian 'Law Codes,'" *JCS* 15 (1961): 91–104; Reuven Yaron, "Forms in the Laws of Eshnunna," *RIDA* 9 (1962): 137–153; Jean Bottéro, "Le 'Code' de Hammurabi," *Annali della Scuola normale superiore di Pisa* 12 (1982): 409–444.

abbreviated, elliptical form of these legal pronouncements is of course the *lex talionis*, “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth...” (Lev 24:20; cf. Ex 21:24; Deut 19:21; Q Mā'idah 5:45). Analysis of such “legal” forms has been used in the interpretation of a variety of biblical passages, especially legal texts.<sup>39</sup> Ernst Käsemann, for example, discussed eschatological pronouncements in the New Testament, calling them eschatological judgment pronouncements or the eschatological correlative.<sup>40</sup>

Many Qur'ānic passages present pronouncements reminiscent of this “legal” form, whether they consist of plain conditional sentences or of other logically related forms. One salient set of examples, though there are many more, consists of verses that adopt the phrase *ḥabīṭat a'māluhum* (“their deeds came to naught”):

*wa-man yartadid minkum 'an dīnīhi fa-yamut wa-huwa kāfirun fa-ulā'ika ḥabīṭat a'māluhum, fī'l-dunyā wa'l-ākhirah* (“Whoever of you reverts from his religion and dies while he is an unbeliever, those, their works will come to naught in this world and the next.”) (Q Baqarah 2:217)

*inna'lladhīna yakfurūna bi-āyātī'llāhi wa-yaqtulūna'l-nabiyyīna bi-ghayri ḥaqqi... ulā'ika'lladhīna ḥabīṭat a'māluhum fī'l-dunyā wa'l-ākhirah* (“Those who reject the signs of God and kill prophets unjustly... those are the ones whose works will come to naught in this world and the next.”) (Q Āl 'Imrān 3:21–22)

*wa'lladhīna kadhdhabū bi-āyātīna wa-liqā'ul-ākhirati ḥabīṭat a'māluhum* (“Those who reject Our signs and the meeting of the afterlife, their works will come to naught.”) (Q A'rāf 7:147)

*mā kāna li'l-mushrikīna an ya'murū masājida'llāhi shāhidīna 'alā anfusihim bi'l-kufri ulā'ika ḥabīṭat a'māluhum wa-fī'l-nāru hum khālidūn* (“The polytheists have no right to maintain the worship places of God while witnessing against themselves that they are disbelievers. Those, their works will come to naught, and they will abide eternally in the Fire.”) (Q Tawbah 9:17)

*ulā'ika'lladhīna kafarū bi-āyātī rabbihim wa-liqā'ihī ḥabīṭat a'māluhum* (“Those who deny the signs of their Lord and the meeting with Him, their works will come to naught.”) (Q Kahf 18:105)

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39. S. M. Paul, *Studies in the Book of the Covenant in the Light of Cuneiform and Biblical Law* (Leiden: Brill, 1970); G. J. Wenham, “Legal Forms in the Book of the Covenant,” *TynBul* 22 (1971): 95–102; Raymond Westbrook, “Biblical and Cuneiform Law Codes,” *RB* 92 (1985): 247–264.

40. Ernst Käsemann, “Sätze heiligen Rechtes im Neuen Testament,” *NTS* 1 (1954–1955): 248–260.

These verses conform to the logic of a conditional sentence. In recompense for specific acts, “their works will come to naught.” The cause is evidently divine intervention, but the use of the verb *ḥabītat*, with “their works” serving as the agent, emphasizes the automatic nature of the punishment. Furthermore, similar structures pervade qur’ānic discourse, especially passages referring to divine retribution.

Such statements that express retribution often involve the use of cognate or paronomastic terms in close proximity. The most basic version of this is of course the *lex talionis*: *wa-katabnā ‘alayhim fiḥā anna’l-naḥsa bi’l-naḥsi wa’l-‘ayna bi’l-‘ayni wa’l-anḥa bi’l-anḥi wa’l-udhuna bi’l-udhuni wa’l-sinna bi’l-sinni* (“We decreed for [the Jews] in [the Torah]: a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, and a tooth for a tooth”) (Q Mā’idah 5:45). Another example is *jazā’u sayyi’atin sayyi’atun mithluhā* (“The recompense for an evil deed is an evil deed like it”) (Q Shūrā 42:40), which likewise involves simple repetition. Another example is a type of conditional sentence: *fa-man i’tadā ‘alaykum fa’tadū ‘alayhi bi-mithli mā’tadā ‘alaykum* (“Whoever assaults you, assault him in the same way that he assaulted you”) (Q Baqarah 2:194). Here, the verb *i’tadā* “assaults” in the protasis is echoed in the imperative *fa’tadū* “assault” in the apodosis, which shows that the second act is a reaction to the first. In this case, the third use of the cognate, *bi-mithli mā’tadā ‘alaykum* (“in the same way that he assaulted you”), shows that the two acts are supposed to be not only directly, causally related but also commensurate.

A sustained example of this structure in which retribution is underscored by cognate paronomasia appears in a famous speech attributed to the Umayyad governor of Basra, Ziyād b. Abīhi (d. 53/673). The newly appointed governor, introducing himself to the inhabitants of Basra, delivers to them a series of stern warnings that adopt the form of legal pronouncements:

*fa-man gharraqa qawman gharraqnāhu wa-man aḥraqa qawman aḥraqnāhu wa-man naqaba baytan naqabnā ‘an qalbihi wa-man nabasha qabran dafannāhu ḥayyan fihi fa-kuffū ‘annī aydiyakum wa-alsinatakum akfuf ‘ankum yadī wa-lisānī*

Whoever drowns someone, we will drown him. Whoever burns someone, we will burn him. Whoever breaches the wall of a house, we will breach the wall of his chest, exposing his heart. Whoever robs a grave, we will bury him alive in it. If you hold back your hands and tongues from me, I will hold back my hand and tongue from you.<sup>41</sup>

The use of pairs of cognate verbal forms—*gharraqa/gharraqnāhu* (“drowns/we will drown”), *aḥraqa/aḥraqnāhu* (“burns/we will burn”), *naqaba/naqabnā*

41. Abū ‘Uthmān ‘Amr b. Baḥr al-Jāhiz, *Al-Bayān wa’l-tabyīn*, ed. A. M. Hārūn (4 vols. in 2; Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1985), 2.41.

(“breaches, we will breach”), *kuffū/akfuf* (“you hold back/I will hold back”)—emphasizes the causal relationship between the initial act and the threatened retribution. The punishment fits the crime, and the repetition of the root consonants emphasizes the automatic, swift, and inevitable connection between the two.

In ancient Near Eastern tradition, legal pronouncements were also expressed in the form of curses. A striking example of this occurs in a series of laws for the tribes of Israel that Moses instructed should be read out to them on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal:

And the Levites shall speak, and say unto all the men of Israel with a loud voice, Cursed be the man that maketh any graven or molten image, an abomination unto the Lord, the work of the hands of the craftsman, and putteth it in a secret place. And all the people shall answer and say, Amen. Cursed be he that setteth light by his father or his mother. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be he that removeth his neighbour’s landmark. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be he that maketh the blind to wander out of the way. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be he that perverteth the judgment of the stranger, fatherless, and widow. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be he that lieth with his father’s wife; because he uncovereth his father’s skirt. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be he that lieth with any manner of beast. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be he that lieth with his sister, the daughter of his father, or the daughter of his mother. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be he that lieth with his mother in law. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be he that smiteth his neighbour secretly. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be he that taketh reward to slay an innocent person. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them. And all the people shall say, Amen.<sup>42</sup>

The curses in this series are based on the underlying logic of the conditional sentence: if someone commits an infraction of the rule, he will suffer the consequences. The example of *Sūrat Abī Lahab* cited above may be viewed in a similar fashion. ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā’s initial reprimand of the Prophet—*tabban laka!*—provoked the curse with which the *sūrah* begins, in which the key optative verb is parallel to and cognate with that reprimand—*tabbat yadā abī lahab*. After presenting an overview of curses in the Qur’ān, the following remarks will focus on qur’ānic passages that resemble the opening curse of *Sūrat Abī Lahab*, that is, that contain cognate and paronomastic curse retorts.

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42. Deut 27:14–26 (KJV).

## Curses in the Qurʾān

Curses and blessings occur regularly in the Qurʾān, something that is not surprising given the focus of the text on the ultimate destiny of humanity: alternatively torment in Hell or bliss in the gardens of Paradise. The verb *laʿana* (“to curse” or “to damn”) and the noun *al-laʿnah* (“curse”) occur thirty-two times in the Qurʾān; related terms include *ghaḍab* (“anger”) and its cognates, which occur twenty-six times in the Qurʾān, and *sakhat* (“wrath”) and its cognates (Q Āl ʿImrān 3:162; Māʾidah 5:80; Tawbah 9:58; Muḥammad 47:28). God regularly curses unbelievers, apostates, hypocrites, and Satan. On other occasions, perpetrators of specific legal infractions such as Sabbath-breakers, murderers, and those who accuse innocent women of adultery are cursed (Q Nisāʾ 4:47, 93; Nūr 24:23). While in some cases the curse of God entails only eternal damnation (Q Nisāʾ 4:93; Aḥzāb 33:64; Faṭḥ 48:6), in other cases it causes both destruction in this world and damnation in the afterlife (Q Hūd 11:60). Prophets such as Noah, Moses, and Jesus curse the unbelievers among their people for rejecting God’s message.<sup>43</sup>

Curses are often expressed by perfect verbs with an optative sense, either in the active voice, as in *laʿanahumuʾllāh* (“may God damn them”) (Q Baqarah 2:88; Aḥzāb 33:57), or in the passive voice, as in *luʿnū* (“may they be damned”) (Q Māʾidah 5:64). Because the optative mood is formally identical to the perfect indicative, differences of opinion have arisen among the commentators regarding many of the curses in the Qurʾān: what some interpret as a *duʿāʾ* (curse or blessing), others interpret as a declarative sentence with a verb in the indicative mood (*khabar, ikhbār*). A well-known example of this occurs in Sūrat Abī Lahab (Q 111), which has been mentioned above. The opening verse, *tabbat yadā abī lahabīn wa-tabba*, means “may the hands of Abū Lahab be destroyed, and may he be destroyed!” if the verbs are interpreted as optative, but “the hands of Abū Lahab have been destroyed, and he has been destroyed” if the verbs are considered indicative.

Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī (d. 864/1459) in *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* adopts a compromise of sorts, interpreting the first verb as an optative curse and the second as a declarative statement in the indicative: “May the hands of Abū Lahab be destroyed, and he has indeed been destroyed,” an equivalent to the putative statement *ahlakahuʾllāhu wa-qad halaka* (“may God destroy him, and he has indeed been destroyed”). These are both understood to emphasize the inevitability of the threatened event once it has been decided.<sup>44</sup> Several

43. See Devin J. Stewart, “Curse,” *EQ*, s.v. (2001).

44. *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, 825. Indeed, Abū Muḥammad Sulaymān b. Mihrān al-Aʿmash (d. 148/765–766) is supposed to have read the end of the verse *wa-qad tabba* “and he was indeed destroyed.” Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Anṣārī

other instances of curses gave rise to similar differences of opinion among the commentators. Thus, al-Ṭabarī interprets the text *qutila aṣḥābu'l-ukhdūd* (Q Burūj 85:4) to mean “may the Companions of the Trench be killed!” an equivalent of the common curse *lu ʿīna* (“may they be damned!”). However, he also reports some commentators’ interpretation of this phrase as a declaration on the part of God that the fire indeed killed them.<sup>45</sup> Abū’l-Khayr ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286) observes that the curse *ṣarafa’llāhu qulūbahum* (“May God turn their hearts”) (Q 9:127) “supports interpretation both as a declarative sentence and as a curse” (*yaḥtamilu’l-ikhbār wa’l-du ʿā*).<sup>46</sup>

In addition to *la ʿāna* (“to curse, damn”), several Qur’ānic curses involve forms derived from the verb *qatala*, *yaqtulu* (“to kill”): specifically, *qātala* (“he fought”) and the passive *qutila* (“he was killed”). The verb *qātala* occurs as a curse twice: *qātalahumu’llāh* (“may God fight them!”) (Q Tawbah 9:30; Munāfiqūn 63:4). The passive *qutila* (“may he be killed!”) occurs five times (Q Dhāriyāt 51:10; Muddaththir 74:19, 20; ‘Abasa 80:17; Burūj 85:4). Their relative frequency suggests that they were standard curses already in pre-Islamic Arabic; they will be discussed in greater detail below.

Another formal type of curse that occurs in the Qur’ān consists of a noun-phrase in which an accusative noun is understood to be an accusative absolute modifying a suppressed verb. Examples include *fā-ta ʿsan lahum wa-aḍalla a ʿmālahum* (“May misery befall them, and may He make their actions vain!”) (Q Muḥammad 47:8), and *fā-suḥqan li-aṣḥābi’l-sa ʿr* (“May the denizens of Hell-fire be far removed!”) (Q Mulk 67:11), in which the accusative verbal nouns *ta ʿsan* (“misery”) and *suḥqan* (“distance”) express the curse. The similar noun phrase *bu ʿdan li-*, lit. “distance to,” is the most common curse of this type: *bu ʿdan li’l-qawmi’l-zālimīn* (“May the wrongdoing folk be far removed!”) (Q Hūd 11:44; see also 11:60, 68, 95; Muʿminūn 23:41, 44). A curse of similar form is created by inversion of the greeting *marḥaban* (“welcome!”): *lā marḥaban bikum* (“May you not be welcome!”) (Q Ṣād 38:60).

Yet another type of curse consists of a nominal sentence such as *waylun li-* (“woe, misfortune to”) which may be interpreted as a case of ellipsis as well: “may there be woe unto...” The curse *waylun yawma ʾidhīn li’l-mukadhdhibīn* (“Woe on that day to the deniers!”) serves as a refrain in Sūrat al-Mursalāt

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al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān wa’l-mubayyin li-mā taḍammanahu min al-sunnah wa-āy al-furqān* (24 vols.; Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Risālah, 2006), 22.544.

45. Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān*, ed. Muḥammad Maḥmūd Shākīr and Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākīr (24 vols.; Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Risālah, 2000), 24.337.

46. Abū’l-Khayr ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-taʾwīl*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Marʾashlī (5 vols.; Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1998), 3.103.

(Q Mursalāt 77:15, 19, 24, 28, 34, 37, 40, 45, 47, 49) and also in other verses in identical form (Q Tūr 52:11; Muṭaffifīn 83:10). It occurs in modified forms in other texts as well, such as *fa-wayḥun li'lladhīna kafarū min yawmihimu'lladhī yū'adūn* (“Woe to the unbelievers from their day that they have been promised”) (Q Dhāriyāt 51:60) and so on (Q Baqarah 2:79; Ibrāhīm 14:2; Maryam 19:37; Anbiyā’ 21:18; Šād 38:27; Zumar 39:22; Fuṣṣilat 41:6; Shūrā 43:65; Jāthiyah 45:7). These are the three main formal types of curses that occur in the Qur’ān.

### Functions of Cognate Paronomasia in the Qur’ān

Both general paronomasia (*jinās*, *tajnīs*), in which two or more words with similar sounds occur in close proximity, and cognate paronomasia (*ishtiḳāq*), in which the phonetically similar elements in close proximity share the same tri-consonantal root, occur frequently in the Qur’ān.<sup>47</sup> Western scholarship in Qur’ānic Studies has paid little attention to paronomasia, with the exception of an article by Andrew Rippin; modern Arabic scholarship includes a number of relevant studies. These studies discuss scores of Qur’ānic puns, including cases of cognate paronomasia, but tend to focus on exceptional or idiosyncratic uses of this rhetorical figure while omitting consideration of entire classes of paronomastic expressions that represent stylized, regular features of Qur’ānic discourse and occur so frequently in the text as to become commonplace.<sup>48</sup> In some cases, one must entertain the possibility that such constructions belonged to spoken Arabic usage and were adapted and incorporated into the sacred text.

Paronomasia appears most frequently in the Hebrew Bible in folk etymologies in connection with personal names. Thus Adam’s name is related to *ādāmā* (“earth”) because he was formed out of clay; Jacob was called Jacob (*ya āqōb*) because he grabbed Esau’s heel (*āqeb*); and Isaac is named *yishāq*, literally “he laughs,” because his mother, Sarah, “laughs” (*tishāq*) when she is

47. Werner Diem suggests that the two categories of paronomasia proper (*jinās* or *tajnīs*) must be distinguished from repetition (*takrār*, *tikrār*, *tardīd*) and cognate paronomasia (*ishtiḳāq*), the last of which is very common in the Semitic languages. He suggests for the last the term *figura etymologica* or “etymologische Figur” instead. Werner Diem, “Paronomasie: Eine Begriffsverwirrung,” *ZDMG* 157 (2007): 299–351.

48. Andrew Rippin, “The Poetics of Qur’ānic Punning,” *BSOAS* 57 (1994): 193–207; Ma’had b. Mukhtār, *Fann al-jinās fi’l-Qur’ān al-karīm* (Jordan: al-Jāmi’ah al-Urdunniyyah, 1995); Muḥammad al-Sayyid Mūsā, *Fann al-jinās fi’l-Qur’ān al-karīm* (al-Manšūrah, Cairo: Kulliyat al-Tarbiyah, 1421/2000); Ḥusayn Aḥmad ‘Alī Abū Kattah al-Darāwīsh, “*Jinās al-ishtiḳāq fi’l-Juz’amma fi’l-Qur’ān al-karīm: dirāsah balāghiyah dalāliyyah*,” *Šaḥw li-Nahdah Ilmiyyah* 3 (July 2013): 608–620.

told that she will bear him.<sup>49</sup> This last pun is repeated in the Qurʾān despite the fact that it does not work well in Arabic, the verb for her laughter being *dahīkat* and the name of Isaac *Ishāq*—so that only one of the three root consonants, *h*, matches (Q Hūd 11:71).<sup>50</sup> Rippin discusses several other such puns that occur in the Qurʾān. He argues that the Queen of Sheba’s statement, *rabbī innī ḡalamtu nafsī wa-aslamtu maʿa sulaymāna liʾllāhi rabbīʾl-ʿālamīn* (“O my Lord, I have wronged myself! I submit alongside Solomon to God, the Lord of all Being”) (Q Naml 27:44), stresses that Solomon in particular, and not any other prophet, brought about Sheba’s submission.<sup>51</sup> Overall, Rippin’s study is concerned with the occasional or exceptional use of paronomasia as a literary device, whereas the concern here is with its regular, repeated use, drawing on common forms of Arabic speech which follow similar conventions and embedded rhetorical strategies.

In a number of cases, cognate paronomasia occurs in a structure that suggests a causal relationship. Typical examples are the following: *istaʿīnū biʾl-ṣabri waʾl-ṣalāti innaʾllāha maʿaʾl-ṣābirīn* (“Seek succor through patience and prayer—God is with those who are patient”) (Q Baqarah 2:153) and *waʾṣbirū innaʾllāha maʿaʾl-ṣābirīn* (“Have patience—God is with those who are patient”) (Q Anfāl 8:46). Both passages convey a causal connection, suggesting an understood conditional sentence, “If you are patient, then God will support you,” because God tends to reward patience. A similar example indeed takes the form of a conditional sentence: *idhā qīla lakum tafassahū fiʾl-majālisī faʾfahū yafsaḥiʾllāhu lakum* (“When you are commanded, ‘Make room!’ in the assemblies, then make room, and God will make room for you”) (Q Mujādilah 58:11). Here the imperative *faʾfahū* (“make room”) is the protasis of a conditional sentence in which the jussive verb *yafsaḥ* (“God will make room”) is the apodosis. The meaning understood is, “If you make room, then God will make room for you.”

A similar structure occurs in a report about the Egyptians who rejected Moses’ preaching: *fa-lammā zāghū azāghaʾllāhu qulūbahum* (“When they went astray, God sent their hearts astray”) (Q Ṣaff 61:5). Here the cognate paronomasia between *zāghū* and *azāgha* is striking, particularly because they appear adjacent to each other without any intervening elements, as is the case in *faʾfahū yafsaḥiʾllāhu lakum*, and as often occurs in other cognate curses and blessings. The contiguity of the two cognate words highlights the automatic and rapid nature of the response, as well as the idea that it is an

49. See Gen 18:16. These folk etymologies generally do not withstand scrutiny. Isaac is presumably the incomplete form of a theophoric name meaning “(the god) smiles on him.”

50. See Gabriel S. Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and its Biblical Subtext*, 87–96.

51. Rippin, “The Poetics of Qurʾānic Punning,” 202–203.

equal and opposite reaction to an initial infraction. In this case, one may argue that the “hearts” mentioned are not literal but metonymic, referring to the offenders themselves. For this reason, the lexicographer and grammarian Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. Sahl al-Zajjāj (d. 311/923), author of the influential work *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān*, paraphrases *azāghaʾllāhu qulūbahum* as *aḍallahum* (“he led them astray”).<sup>52</sup> The use of *qulūbahum* (“their hearts”) instead of *them* serves as a type of escalation, mention of a particular body part rendering the curse more physical, something that occurs commonly in modern dialectal curses. Even though this example is not formally a curse, it closely resembles a cognate curse retort proper. In fact, Abū Ḥayyān Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Gharnāṭī (d. 745/1344) compares this statement with a cognate curse that will be discussed below, *thummaʾnsarafū šarafaʾllāhu qulūbahum* (“Then they departed—may God turn their hearts!”) (Q Tawbah 9:127).<sup>53</sup> Other verses that seem to convey a similar logic include *thumma tāba ʿalayhim li-yatūbū* (“Then He forgave them, that they might repent”) (Q Tawbah 9:118) and *nasūʾllāha fa-ansāhum anfusahum* (“They forgot God, so He caused them to forget themselves”) (Q Hashr 59:19). In both cases, the cognate paronomasia emphasizes the logic of action and reaction while suggesting that the result was predetermined, contained in embryo in the initial step.

### Cognate Curses in the Qurʾān

Cognate curses occur in the Qurʾān, and some medieval rhetorical works in fact cite them as examples of *jīnās* or paronomasia, without, however, noting that they are cognate curses in particular and thus belong to a particular speech genre with its own formal, semantic, and rhetorical conventions.<sup>54</sup> The example of the opening verse of Sūrat Abī Lahab, which may be considered a cognate curse retort even though the trigger to which it responds does not appear in the text, has been examined above. In the following cases, both the initial statement or trigger and the cognate curse retort occur in the text itself.

- I. A salient example is the text *qālātīʾl-yahūdu yaduʾllāhi maghlūlatum—ghullat aydihim wa-luʾnū bimā qālū bal yadāhu mabsūtātāni yunfiqu kayfa yashāʾu* (“The Jews said, ‘God’s hand is shackled’—May their hands be shackled, and may they be damned for what they said! Nay! His hands

52. Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. Sahl al-Zajjāj, *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān wa-iʾrābuhu*, ed. ʿAbd al-Jalīl ʿAbduh Shalabī (5 vols.; Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 1988), 5.164.

53. Abū Ḥayyān Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Gharnāṭī, *Al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, ed. ʿĀdil Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Mawjūd et al. (8 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1983), 5.120.

54. Stewart, “Impoliteness Formulae,” 329; “Cognate and Analogical Curses,” 719.

are open wide, and He spends however He wishes”) (Q 5:64). Here the optative verb in the curse, *ghullat*, repeats the tri-consonantal root of the key term in the preceding statement, *maghlūlah* (“shackled”). The structure places the two cognate words next to each other, without any intervening words. Indeed, the statement creates the chiasitic structure C B A—A’ B’ C’—*qālat... yadu... maghlūlah / ghullat aydihim... qālu*—as if it were reversing the effect of their statement by inverting it. Neal Robinson has pointed out this chiasitic structure, though he adds an additional parallel between *al-yahūdu* (“the Jews”) and *lu ʿinū* (“they are cursed”), creating a structure D C B A—A’ B’ C’ D’. He observes, “the rhetorical effect of the chiasmus is to predispose the reader to accept the correctness of the Qur’ānic verdict.”<sup>55</sup> In my view, this captures the automatic aspect of the curse retort, but not its function as an emphatic reprimand.

The commentators are in general agreement that the initial statement is figurative—otherwise it would be too anthropomorphic—and that it reports a claim on the part of certain Jews that God withholds His bounty. A number of commentators attribute the statement to Finhās b. ʿĀzūrā, a Jew of Medina.<sup>56</sup> The context suggests that it is a curse, but because of the ambiguity involved in the use of the perfect verb, some commentators adopt the opinion that it is a declarative sentence. Most commentators report that it could be either.

For example, Abū ʿAlī al-Faḍl b. Ḥasan al-Ṭabrisī (d. 548/1153) reports the interpretation that the phrase *ghullat aydihim* is a declaration (*ikhbār*) that the Jews were shackled in Hell; the conjunction *wa-* or *fa-* would be understood. He attributes this view to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) and states that the Muʿtazilī theologian Abū ʿAlī Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Jubbāʿī (d. 303/915) preferred it. He also reports the view that it is a curse.<sup>57</sup> My view is that it definitely is a curse, expressing a wish that a punishment befall the utterers of the blasphemous statement in the future. Abū ʿl-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. ʿUmar al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) states that the phrase could be taken figuratively, meaning that the Jews have been condemned

55. Neal Robinson, “Hands Outstretched: Towards a Re-reading of Sūrat al-Māʿida,” *JQS* 3 (2001): 1–19, 10–11.

56. E.g., al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 14.201. On the possible connection of this statement with rabbinic literature, see Gordon Darnell Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia: From Ancient Times to Their Eclipse under Islam* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 58–59.

57. Abū ʿAlī al-Faḍl b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabrisī, *Majmaʿ al-baḥrayn fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, ed. al-Sayyid Hāshim al-Rasūlī al-Mukhallilātī (10 vols.; Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1992), 3.275.

to a life of stinginess because they claimed that God was stingy, or literally, as a wish that they be taken prisoner in this world and have their hands shackled, and be shackled in Hell.<sup>58</sup> Many commentators prefer the former interpretation. Al-Bayḍāwī reports that the text curses the Jews to become stingy and miserable, or to suffer poverty and humiliation (*du'ā' 'alayhim bi'l-bukhl wa'l-nakad aw bi'l-faqr wa'l-maskanah*).<sup>59</sup> 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Alī Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) reports three interpretations in the commentarial tradition. According to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, the phrase should be taken literally and interpreted to mean that the Jews' hands will be shackled in Hell. According to Abū'l-Ḥasan Muqātil b. Sulaymān al-Balkhī (d. 150/767), it means *umsikat 'an al-khayr* ("May their hands be prevented from doing good"). According to al-Zajjāj, it means *ju'ulū bukhālā'* ("May they be made stingy"), following the clear parallelism in the text.<sup>60</sup> Al-Zajjāj cites Arabic language experts as stating, *ujībū 'alā qadri kalāmihim* ("They were answered in proportion to what they said").<sup>61</sup> This expresses the rhetorical essence of the cognate curse: the root-consonant echo serves to counter the initial statement while suggesting that the initial statement contained the seeds of its own downfall: the Jews who made the claim about God have had their words turned against them.

Al-Zamakhsharī is the only commentator in the tradition who recognizes that this—or any other curse retort in the Qur'an—belongs to a common genre of Arabic speech.<sup>62</sup> With regard to this curse in particular, he makes the insightful observation that the phonetic parallelism is accompanied by a semantic shift, because the second term *ghullat* retains the original sense of the word "to shackle" rather than the figurative meaning "to cause to withhold, make stingy" intended in *maghlūlah* ("stingy") (*al-tibāq min haythu'l-lafz wa-mulāḥazat aṣl al-majāz*). He then compares it to a cognate curse that derives from general Arabic usage rather than the text of the Qur'an: "As when you say, *sabbanī sabba'llāhu dābirahu* 'He insulted me—may God cut his root.'" His point is that the curse *sabba'llāhu dābirahu* uses the original or root meaning of the verb *sabba*, "to cut," rather than the

58. Abū'l-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf 'an ḥaqā'iq al-tanzīl* (4 vols.; Cairo: Dār 'Ālam al-Ma'rifah, n.d.), 1.350–351.

59. Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, 2.135.

60. 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Alī Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr fī 'ilm al-tafsīr* (9 vols.; Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1984), 2.392.

61. Al-Zajjāj, *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, 2.190.

62. Werner Diem observed this already in *Wurzelrepetition und Wunschsatz*, 22–24.

conventional meaning “to insult, revile.”<sup>63</sup> This sort of semantic shift serves to increase the shock value of cognate curses, and it is prevalent in modern dialectal curses.<sup>64</sup> Al-Zamakhsharī’s comparison of this verse with a profane Arabic curse retort shows that he understands it to follow the ordinary conventions of such curses in Arabic speech.

Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. ‘Umar Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) assigns a special status to the curse in Q 5:64 when he claims that God means by it to provide instruction on how to curse, or to show that cursing is in fact an acceptable practice. Al-Rāzī compares it with the text *la-tadhkhalunna’l-masjida’l-hārām in shā’ullāhu āminīn* (“You will indeed enter the Sacred Mosque, if God wills, safely”) (Q Fath 48:27), in which God taught use of the prophylactic phrase *in shā’ allāh* (“if God wills”) when referring to the future, a practice termed *istiḥnā’* (“exception”).<sup>65</sup> The verse therefore serves as an archetype, a model for all other curses, just as other verses in the Qur’ān sanction and provide models for other speech genres.

- II. A second cognate curse in the Qur’ān is *thumma’nṣarafū—ṣarafa’llāhu qulūbahum* (“Then they withdrew—may God turn their hearts!”) (Q 9:127). Al-Bayḍāwī makes the typical statement that the phrase could be either a declaration or a curse.<sup>66</sup> In my view it is certainly a curse, and this is the view of Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Anṣārī al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272), who states that it is a curse like *qātalahumu’llāh* (“May God fight them.”)<sup>67</sup> He adds that on account of this verse, Ibn ‘Abbās held that one should not say *inṣarafnā ‘ani’l-ṣalāt* to announce the end of prayer, so as to avoid a phrase that God had used to curse unbelievers. Instead, one should state, *qaḍaynā al-ṣalāt* (“We have completed prayer.”) Al-Qurṭubī reports that when a preacher at a funeral told the attendees *inṣarifū raḥimakumu’llāh* (“Depart, may God have mercy on you”), he was reproached on the grounds that God blamed a group and said, *thumma’nṣarafū ṣarafa’llāhu qulūbahum* (“Then they departed—may God turn their hearts”). Rather, one should say, *inqalibū raḥimakumu’llāh* (“Return—may God have mercy

63. Al-Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf*, 1.351.

64. Stewart, “Impoliteness Formulae,” 333–334; idem, “Cognate and Analogical Curses,” 718.

65. Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. ‘Umar Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī al-shahīr bi’l-Tafsīr al-Kabīr wa-Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* (32 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), 12.44.

66. Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, 3.103.

67. Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi’ li-ahkām al-Qur’ān*, 10.438.

on you”) because God said about a group that He praised, *fa’nqalabū bi-ni’matin min allāhi wa-fadlin lam yamsashu sū’* (“So they returned with grace and favor from God, no harm having touched them”) (Q Āl ‘Imrān 3:174).<sup>68</sup>

In any case, it is clear that the optative verb in *ṣarafa’llāhu qulūbahum* echoes the root consonants in the initial statement *inṣarafū* (“they departed”). The curse serves to denounce them for doing so, suggesting that they brought on their own condemnation by acting against God’s will. “Their hearts” serves as a metonymic reference to their persons, and is one of the ways in which the curse is made emphatic. Use of this same type of metonymy may be seen in the opening verse of Sūrat Abī Lahab and in many ordinary curses.

- III. A clear example of the cognate curse occurs in Q Tawbah 9:79: *alladhīna yalmizūna’l-muṭṭawwi’īna min al-mu’minīna fī’l-ṣadaqāti wa’lladhīna lā yajidūna illā juhdahum fa-yaskharūna minhum sakhira’llāhu minhum wa-lahum ‘adhābun alīm* (“Those who deride such of the believers as give alms willingly and such as can find naught to give but their effort and who mock them—may God mock them! Theirs will be a painful doom”) (Q 9:79). Here, the curse *sakhira’llāhu minhum* (“May God mock them”) responds to the statement *yaskharūna minhum* (“They mock them”) using the same root consonants (*s-kh-r*). Al-Qurṭubī identifies this phrase as a curse. He also reports an assessment attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās, according to which it is a report of God’s completed action: God mocked them by sending them to Hell. However, al-Qurṭubī’s presentation makes it clear that, in his view, this suggestion is incorrect, and the statement is a curse.
- IV. Another instance of the cognate curse, though of slightly different form, is Q Baqarah 2:10: *fī qulūbihim maraḍun fa-zādahumu’llāhu maraḍan wa-lahum ‘adhābun alīmun bimā kānū yakdhibūn* (“In their hearts is a disease, so may God increase their disease! A painful doom is theirs because they lied”). Here, the noun *marad* that occurs in the initial phrase *fī qulūbihim maraḍun* is repeated in the curse *zādahumu’llāhu maraḍan*. The cognate root consonants do not occur in the optative verb, *zādahum*, as is usually the case in this construction. Al-Qurṭubī states that this is a curse against the hypocrites and compares it to the curse *fa-zādahum rijsan ilā rijsihim* (Q Tawbah 9:125), which occurs in the following passage:

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68. Ibid.

*wa-idhā mā unzilat sūratun fa-minhum man yaqūlu ayyukum zādathu hādhihi  
īmānan fa-ammā'lladhīna āmanū fa-zādathum īmānan wa-hum yastabshirūn  
wa-ammā'lladhīna fī qulūbihim maraḍun fa-zādathum rijsan ilā rijsihim wa-  
mātū wa-hum kāfirūn*

When a *sūrah* is revealed, among them are those who ask, “Which of you did this increase in belief?” Those who believe, may they be increased in faith, while they see this as glad tidings. Those in whose hearts is a disease, may it increase them in filth upon their filth, and may they die unbelievers. (Q 9:124–25)

In both cases, even though these sentences begin with the conjunction *fa-*, it appears preferable to interpret them as curses. The verse may thus be counted as a proper cognate curse.

- V. Later on in the same passage of *Sūrat al-Baqarah* devoted to the hypocrites, another cognate retort occurs that I would interpret as a curse:

*wa-idhā laqū'lladhīna āmanū qālū āmannā wa-idhā khalaw ilā shayāfīnihim  
qālū innā ma'akum innamā nahnu mustahzi'ūn / allāhu yastahzi'ū bihim wa-  
yamudduhum fī tughyānihim ya'mahūn*

And when they fall in with those who believe, they say, “We believe,” but when they go apart to their devils, they declare, “We are with you; verily we are but mocking.” / May God mock them and leave them to wander blindly on in their arrogance. (Q 2:14–15)

This passage presents a statement of the hypocrites, *innamā nahnu mustahzi'ūn* (“We are but mocking”), and this triggers a denunciation in the form of a cognate retort: *allāhu yastahzi'ū bihim*. One may question whether this is to be understood as a simple statement or as a curse. The commentators generally do not interpret it as a curse, mainly because it uses the imperfect form of the verb rather than the perfect. Though the optative is most often expressed in classical Arabic with the perfect verb, this is not categorically so—the imperfect also occurs. For example, a famous *ḥadīth* of the Prophet provides the correct politeness formula to utter when someone sneezes: *yarḥamukumu'llāh* (“may God have mercy on you”) using the imperfect verb. The polite response on the part of the one who has sneezed also uses imperfect verbs: *yahdīkumu'llāhu wa-yusliḥu bālakum* (“May God guide you and set your mind aright”). So, it is at least possible that the imperfect in *allāhu yastahzi'ū bihim* could convey a curse. If it were a straight statement, then it would seem a bit less emphatic as a denunciation

of their statement, and as evident from the example of *yadu'llāhi maghlūlatun—ghullat aydihim*, curses often serve to denounce specific quoted statements.

There are many other cases in the Qur'ān of cognate constructions used to emphasize God's superior power, and these tend to be straight statements that place God and the culprits in parallel position, implying a comparison. Those, however, tend to use the same cognate forms such as two participles, for example, and they use conjunctions or other linguistic elements to establish the parallelism. In this case, the forms are different, a participle on the one hand and an imperfect verb on the other. Importantly, there is no conjunction. Both points caught the attention of commentators. The passage could have read *innamā nahnu mustahzi 'ūn*, followed by an answer such as *wallāhu mustahzi 'un bihim* ("but God is mocking"). Comparison with the example *yaskharūna minhum—sakhira'llāhu minhum* suggests the possibility that it is also a curse.

#### *Qātataka'llāh* and *Qutila*: Paronomastic Curses

The curses *qātataka'llāh* ("may God fight you!") and the passive *qutila* ("may he be killed!") feature relatively frequently in the Qur'ān. While they were evidently used in cognate curse retorts in other discourses, they do not appear in the Qur'ān as such. Rather, they occur in contexts in which they respond to terms that resemble *qātala* phonetically but are not strictly cognates. In particular, they respond especially to forms of the verb *qāla*, *yaqūlu*, *qawlan* ("to say").

The curse *qātataka'llāh* ("may God fight you!") is one of the most common in classical Arabic. While in the modern Arabic dialects it is only heard in classicizing and religious contexts, such as plays and movies about early Islamic history (belonging to the same register as the insult *yā 'aduwwa'llāh* ["O enemy of God"]), it occurs in the Qur'ān, in the *ḥadīth*, and in classical Arabic poetry, in addition to medieval Arabic literature, something which suggests that it was probably in use already in pre-Islamic times. According to some accounts, the curse even occurs in Paradise. Whenever a mundane wife torments her husband, she becomes the object of curses uttered by her paradisiacal co-wife, who rushes to the husband's defense, cursing her rival, "may God fight you!" (*qātalaki'llāh*).<sup>69</sup>

69. Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Ḥādī al-arwāḥ ilā bilād al-afrah*, ed. Zā'id b. Aḥmad al-Nushayrī (Mecca: Dār 'Ālam al-Fawā'id, 2007), 512.

Several pieces of evidence suggest that *qatalaka'llāh* was a standard curse. Qur'ānic commentators regularly gloss it as *la'ānaka'llāh* ("may God damn you"), making it equivalent to the archetypal curse. Commentators often use it as the example to which other curses are compared. Discussing the phrase *wa'nṣarafū ṣarafa'llāhu qulūbahum* (Q 9:127), al-Qurṭubī writes, "This is an expression by which one curses, like *qatalahumu'llāh* 'God fight them.'"<sup>70</sup>

In addition, the curse *qatalahu'llāh* gave rise to common euphemisms, ordinarily an indication of frequent usage. Al-Ṭabarī reports that the Arabs would say *qatalaka'llāh* and *qāta'aka'llāh* and that the latter is "less harsh" (*ahwan*) than the former.<sup>71</sup> Abū'l-Faḍl Muḥammad b. Mukarram Ibn Manzūr al-Khazrajī (d. 711/1311–1312) reports in *Lisān al-ʿArab* that *qāta'ahu'llāh* and *kāta'ahu'llāh* are both substitutes (*badal*) for *qatalahu'llāhu*.<sup>72</sup> Abū Zakariyyā Yahyā b. Ziyād al-Farrā' (d. 207/822) explains, "It was a custom of the Arabs to say, 'may God fight him!' (*qatalahu'llāh*), but that would sound unseemly, and they would say instead *qāta'ahu'llāh* and *kāta'ahu'llāh*. Belonging to the same category are the expressions *wayḥak* and *waysak*, which are equivalent in meaning to 'Woe to you!' (*waylak*) but are less strong (*dūnahā*)."<sup>73</sup> In other words, *qāta'ahu'llāh* and *kāta'ahu'llāh* are euphemistic distortions of *qatalahu'llāh*, just as *wayḥak* and *waysak* are euphemistic distortions of *waylak*.

Constant usage led *qatalaka'llāh* to lose its original sense as a serious curse in some circumstances and to serve merely as an expressive interjection. As the medieval writers put it, the curse came to be used to express *ta'ajjub* ("amazement" or "wonderment") for something that was either good or bad. In his commentary on Q 9:30, Abū Ishāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035) reports this interpretation on the authority of Abū'l-Walīd 'Abd al-Malik b. 'Abd al-'Azīz Ibn Jurayj (d. 150/767), an early Meccan authority who transmits from Abū Muḥammad 'Aṭā' b. Abī Rabāḥ (d. 114–115/732–734): *qatalahumu'llāhu wa-huwa bi-ma'nā' ta'ajjub* ("God fight them!" which indicates amazement").<sup>74</sup> Al-Ṭabarī states that the curses *qatalahumu'llāh* and *qutla* both have the same meaning, which is to convey amazement (*al-ta'ajjub*).<sup>75</sup> Al-Qurṭubī reports, *wa-ʿadatu'l-ʿArab idhā ta'ajjabū min shay'in qālū qatalahu'llāhu mā aḥsanah wa-akhzāhu'llāhu mā azlamah* ("It is a custom of the Arabs that, when they are amazed at something, they say 'May God fight it,

70. Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi' li-ahkām al-Qur'ān*, 10.438.

71. Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 14.207.

72. Abū'l-Faḍl Muḥammad b. Mukarram Ibn Manzūr al-Khazrajī, *Lisān al-ʿArab* (15 vols.; Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1955–1956), 8.260, 360.

73. *Ibid.*, 8.260.

74. Abū Ishāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Tha'labī, *Al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, ed. Abū Muḥammad Ibn 'Ashūr (10 vols.; Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 2002), 5.34.

75. Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 14.208.

how beautiful it is!’ and ‘May God disappoint it, how oppressive it is!’).<sup>76</sup> For instance, in his commentary on Q 9:30, one of the verses in which the curse *qātalahumu’llāh* appears, al-Tha’labī cites the poet Abū Sa’īd Abān b. Taghlib al-Kindī (d. 141/758), who used the phrase in a poem: *qātalahā’llāhu talhānī wa-qad ‘alimat annī li-nafsī ifsādī wa-iṣlāhī* (“May God fight her!—She blames me even though she knows that my ruin and my betterment are up to me alone”).<sup>77</sup> The curse conveys consternation at her behavior rather than a wish for her death. Al-Qurṭubī adds another poetic citation from Abū Sa’īd ‘Abd al-Malik b. Qurayb al-Aṣma’ī (d. 213/828): *yā qātala’llāhu laylā kayfa tuḡibunī wa-ukhbīru’l-nāsa annī lā ubālīhā* (“May God fight Laylā! How she captivates me, yet I tell everyone that I don’t even notice her”).<sup>78</sup> The function of the curse in these cases might be conveyed by the English “Damn!” or some weaker expression such as “Confound the woman!”

One use of this curse is attributed to ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb in a *ḥadīth* report recorded in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870). When he was informed that Samrah b. Jundub b. Hilāl al-Fazārī sold wine, he exclaimed: *qātala’llāhu samrah* (“May God fight Samrah!”).<sup>79</sup> Ibn Ḥajar (d. 852/1449) explains that the curse should not be understood literally: *lam yurid zāhirahu bal hiya kalimah taqūluhā al-‘arabu ‘inda irādati’l-zajr fa-qālahā fī ḥaqiqihi taghlīṣan ‘alayhi* (“He did not intend the plain meaning of the statement. Rather, this is an expression that the Arabs utter when they intend to upbraid someone, and he said it with regard to him in order to rebuke him harshly”).<sup>80</sup> It is evident that curses serve pragmatic functions other than damnation or invoking retribution, such as reprimand (*tawbīkh*), rebuke (*zajr*), or denunciation (*inkār*), in addition to the expression of amazement (*ta‘ajjub*), as explained above.

The commentators provide several interpretations of the curse’s literal meaning. The opinion attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās is that *qātalahumu’llāh* means *la‘anahumu’llāh* (“God damn them!”). This suggests not only that *qātala* and *qutīla* do not express their literal meaning but also that they are generic verbs of imprecation, on a par with *la‘ana*. Ibn al-Jawzī lists three traditional interpretations of *qātalahumu’llāh*: *la‘anahumu’llāh* (“may God damn them!”) attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās; *qatalahumu’llāh* (“may God kill them”) adopted by Abū ‘Ubaydah (d. 209/824–825); and *‘ādahumu’llāh* (“may God oppose

76. Al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmi‘ li-ahkām*, 22.79.

77. Al-Tha’labī, *Al-Kaṣḥf wa’l-bayān*, 5.34.

78. Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi‘ li-ahkām al-Qur’ān*, 10.176.

79. Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-buyū‘*; *bāb lā yudhābu shaḥm al-maytah wa-lā yubā‘u wadakuḥ*, 1; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-musāqāh*, *bāb taḥrīm bay‘ al-khamr wa’l-maytah wa’l-khinzīr wa’l-aṣnām*, 2.

80. Abū’l-Faḍl Aḥmad b. ‘Alī Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Fath al-bārī sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (13 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-Rayyān li’l-Turāth, 1986), 4.485.

them!") adopted by Ibn al-Anbārī (d. 328/939).<sup>81</sup> While the literal meaning "may God fight them" is close to that of *ʿādāhum* ("may God oppose them!") the functional meaning appears closer to that of *laʿanahumu'llāh* ("may God damn them!") This is corroborated by many interpreters who gloss the curse as *laʿanahumu'llāh* without further comment. In *al-Mufradāt*, al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 422/1031) defines the curse *qātalahumu'llāh* as *laʿanahumu'llāh* ("God damn them!") preferably, though he reports the meaning *qatalahum* ("may He kill them!") adopted by some authorities. In his view, *qātala*, being of the pattern *mufāʿalah* (Form III), indicates that one undertakes to fight God, but whoever fights God will surely be killed, and whoever tries to defeat God will surely be defeated, as evident in God's word, "Our host will verily be the victors" (Q. Ṣāffāt 37:173).<sup>82</sup> This is essentially a theological rather than a linguistic interpretation: since God is omnipotent, if He fights someone, He will inevitably kill him.

Al-Ṭabarī cites experts in Arabic linguistic usage (*ahl al-maʿrifah bi-kalām al-ʿarab*) as arguing that in this case the pattern *fāʿala* (Form III) of the verb *qātala* is exceptional in that it means *qatalahu'llāh* ("may God kill him!") literally, and not "may God fight him!" as one would ordinarily expect. He cites the parallel expressions *shāqāhu'llāh* and *bāqāhu'llāh*, which both use Form III verbs but are held to mean *ashqāhu'llāh* ("may God make him wretched!") and *abqāhu'llāh* ("may God preserve him, grant him long life!") and not what a Form III verb usually denotes: an action that one performs on someone else but is at least potentially reciprocated, as in *šāraʿa* ("to wrestle"). Al-Ṭabarī cites as a possible parallel case as well the blessing *ʿāfāhu'llāh*, which means *aʿfāhu'llāh* ("may God give him health!").<sup>83</sup> In this case I would argue that the literal meaning is not actually *qatalahumu'llāh* ("may God kill them"), but rather, "God fight them!" Such unusual senses, including anthropomorphic descriptions of God as well as the personification of animals and inanimate objects, are common in curses in general.

While *qātalaka'llāhu* can occur as a free curse, it often occurs as a cognate curse retort, as shown by the following anecdotes. On the way from Iraq to Aleppo early in the fall of 354/965, the famous poet al-Mutanabbī was ambushed by the forces of an Arab chieftain whom he had lampooned in a sarcastic poem earlier that year. He was about to seek safety in flight when his servant asked how he could possibly retreat from danger, for he had uttered the immortal verse: *al-khaylu wa'l-laylu wa'l-baydā'u ta'rifunī wa'l-sayfu wa'l-rumḥu*

81. Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masār*, 3.425.

82. Abū'l-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Al-Mufradāt fi gharīb al-Qurʾān*, ed. Muḥammad Sayyid Kilānī (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1961), 393.

83. Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 14.207–208.

*wa'l-qirtāsu wa'l-qalamu* (“Horses, the night, and the desert know me, and the sword and the lance, so too the parchment and the pen!”). Thus shamed into proving his valor in battle, al-Mutanabbī turned to face his attackers and meet his demise, but not before berating his servant, *qataltanī qatalaka'llāh* (“You have killed me—may God fight you!”).<sup>84</sup> Al-Mutanabbī’s exclamation is a cognate curse: *qatalaka'llāh* (“may God fight you”) echoes the root consonants *q-t-l* of the preceding statement, *qataltanī* (“you have killed me”).

This was not an isolated rhetorical flourish on the part of the eloquent poet. A similar exclamation is recorded by Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. ‘Umar al-Wāqidi (d. 207/822) in *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*. After Khālid b. al-Walīd recounted how he had killed the Prophet’s uncle Ḥamzah in battle, his interlocutor ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Awf scolded him, *yā khālid akhadhta bi-amri'l-jāhiliyyati qataltahum bi-'ammika'l-fākih qatalaka'llāh* (“O Khālid, you have adopted the way of the Time of Ignorance and killed them in retaliation for your paternal uncle al-Fākih—may God fight you!”).<sup>85</sup>

On one occasion the poet Dhū'l-Rummah (d. 117/735) had an ode describing his love for Mayy recited in front of her and the other women of her tribe. His reciter ‘Uqbah b. Mālik al-Fazārī was interrupted when he reached the verse *idhā sarāḥat min ḥubbi mayya sawāriḥun 'ani'l-qalbi ābathu bi-laylin 'awāzibuhu* (“In the morning the worries caused by my love for Mayy leave my heart freely, like camels trotting out to graze, but at night, from far pastures, those distant camels return”). At that point, their witty hostess exclaimed to Mayy, *qataltihī qatalaki'llāh* (“You have killed him—may God fight you!”).<sup>86</sup> The fact that this structure, an instance of the verb *qatala* followed by the cognate curse *qatalaka'llāh*, occurs frequently in classical Arabic literature in similar linguistic and pragmatic contexts suggests that what a casual reader might view as an *ad hoc* rhetorical figure was actually a stylized, standard form in common Arabic speech.

Examination of the qur’ānic passages in which the expressions *qatalahumu'llāh* (“may God fight them”) and *qutila* (“may they be killed”) appear suggests that they are often used as paronomastic curses, something the qur’ānic commentaries I have examined fail to point out. The surprising aspect of this is that they seem to be echoing not instances of the tri-

84. Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām wa-wafayāt al-mashāhīr wa'l-a'ālam*, ed. ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Salām Tadmurī (53 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1989), 26.105.

85. Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. ‘Umar al-Wāqidi, *Kitāb al-maghāzī*, ed. Marsden Jones (3 vols.; London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 2.880; Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, kitāb al-maghāzī, bāb qatīl Ḥamzah b. ‘Abd al-Muttalib*.

86. Abū ‘Alī Ismā‘īl b. al-Qāsim al-Qālī, *Dhayl al-Amālī*, published with *al-Amālī* and *al-Nawādir* (2 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah, n.d.), 2.124.

consonantal root *q-t-l* such as *qatalū*, *qatalū*, and so on, but rather instances of the tri-consonantal root *q-w-l*, forms derived from the verb “to say.”

- I. The first example is *qālati'l-yahūd... qātalahumu'llāh* (Q 9:30). In this case, the functional equivalent of the curse *qātalahumu'llāh* would be a notch down from the literal meaning, just as a curse like *lā abā laka* (“may you be bereft of a father”) might be understood as “you sly dog!” In this case, something like “God confound them!” would be the correct level of invective, since the verse rebukes the Jews and the Christians for making heretical statements. At first glance the curse appears to recall the imperative *qātīlū* in the preceding verse (Q 9:29). However, the lengths of the verses in question suggest instead that it responds to the forms of the verb *qāla* that occur earlier in the same verse: *wa-qālati'l-yahūdu 'uzayru'bnū'llāh wa-qālati'l-naṣārā al-masīhu'bnū'llāh dhalikā qawluhum bi-afwāhihim yuḍāhūna qawla'lladhīna kafarū min qablu qātalahumu'llāhu annā yu'fakūn* (“The Jews *have said* that Ezra is the son of God, and the Christians *have said* that Christ is the son of God. That is *their saying* [i.e., what they said] with their mouths, imitating the *saying* of [i.e., what was said by] those who disbelieved of old. May God fight them! How are they deluded?!”) (Q 9:30). Four forms derived from the verb *qāla*—*qālat* (“they said”) (twice), *qawluhum* (“their saying”), *qawlu* (“the saying”)—appear in quick succession, and they lead up to the optative *qātalahumu'llāh*. The structure suggests that *qātalahumu'llāh* is a paronomastic curse triggered by the preceding derivatives of the verb *qāla*, *yaqūlu* (“to say”). The paronomasia is not complete because the root consonants of *qāla* are *q-w-l*, while those of *qātalahum* are *q-t-l*. Nevertheless, they are quite close, and the *-t-* actually occurs twice in the verb *qālat*, making the paronomasia closer, although with metathesis. It is worth noting as well the occurrence of *qablu*, also with an additional *q* and *l*, in the word immediately preceding *qātalahum*, an additional flourish of paronomasia. The addition of *bi-afwāhihim* (“with their mouths”) serves an emphatic function here, the reference to their physical bodies stressing the certainty and severity of the infraction, and leads into the curse, while calling attention to the physicality of their act of speaking.<sup>87</sup>

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87. Rudi Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1971), 201. As Paret notes, similar phrases—*bi-afwāhikum*, *bi-afwāhihim* “with your mouths,” “with their mouths”—are often used to suggest a contradiction between outer statements and inner convictions (e.g., Q Āl ‘Imrān 3:167; Q Tawbah 9:8; generally, the opposition is between “mouths” and *qulūb* “hearts” or *ṣudūr* “breasts”).

As seen above, cognate curses occur in the Qurʾān in similar passages that denounce theologically incorrect or offensive statements: *qālātīl-yahūdu yaduʾllāhi maghlūlatun—ghullat aydihim wa-luʿnū bimā qālū* (“The Jews said, ‘The hand of God is **shackled**’—May their hands **be shackled**, and may they be cursed for what they have said!”). The proximity of the cognates *maghlūlah* and *ghullat*, and other key terms in similar constructions, suggests that *qātīlū* (“fight them”) in the preceding verse, Q 9:29, is too far back to serve as the trigger of this particular curse. *Qātalahumuʾllāh* is logically, as well as phonetically, a direct response to what the Jews and Christians have said.

- II. A similar example occurs in the course of a description of the hypocrites: *wa-idhā raʾytahum tuʿjibuka ajsāmuhum wa-in yaqūlū tasmaʿ li-qawlihim ka-annahum khushubun musannadatun yaḥsabūna kulla ṣayḥatin ʿalayhim humuʾl-ʿadūwu faʾhdharhum qātalahumuʾllāhu annā yuʿfakūn* (“When you look at them, their exteriors please you, and if they **say** something, you listen to **what they say** [literally, “their saying”]. But they are like pieces of timber propped up, and they think that every cry is against them. They are the enemies, so beware of them. May God fight them! How are they deluded?!”) (Q Munāfiqūn 63:4). Here one may interpret the curse *qātalahumuʾllāh* as a response to *q-w-l* once again, in the phrase *wa-in yaqūlū tasmaʿ li-qawlihim* (“And if they say something, you listen to what they say”), the consonants in *qātalahum* echoing those in *yaqūlū* and *qawlihim*.

As mentioned above, the curse *qutīla* (“may he be killed”) occurs five times in the Qurʾān, and several of these instances may be interpreted as paronomastic curses as well. Commentators explain the meaning of the curse in various ways. In al-Thaʿlabī’s view, all instances of *qutīla* (“may he be killed”) mean *luʿna* (“may he be damned!”).<sup>88</sup> To Muḥammad b. Muslim Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124/741–742) is attributed the opinion that it means *ʿudhdhiba* (“may he be tormented”).<sup>89</sup>

- I. One example of *qutīla* being used as a paronomastic curse retort occurs in the passage *waʾl-samāʾ dhātīl-ḥubuk / innakum la-fī qawlin mukhtaliḥ / yuʿfaku ʿanhu man ufik / qutīlaʾl-kharrāṣūn* (“By the heaven full of paths / You are of divided opinion / He who is averse is

Here and in Q Nūr 24:15 and Aḥzāb 33:4, however, they serve to convey the truth and objective reality of oppositional statements.

88. Al-Thaʿlabī, *Al-Kashf waʾl-bayān*, 5.34; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 22.399.

89. Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmiʿ li-ahkām al-Qurʾān*, 21.378.

turned away from it. / May the mongers of falsehood **be killed!**") (Q Dhāriyāt 51:7–10). One may argue that the verb *qutila* ("may he be killed") in the curse in verse 10 of this passage responds to the noun *qawl* ("opinion") in verse 8. This is not entirely certain; against this interpretation, one could argue that the oath in verse 7 and the following two verses form an integral unit, and that verse 10 begins a new, distinct section. This might be corroborated by the fact that the curse is in the third person, while the *qawl* is attributed to the second person. However, the change in person suggests a typical qurʿānic example of *iltifāt* (change of person for rhetorical effect) and the third person in verse 10 could easily refer to the second person in verse 8. The passage that begins in verse 10 is a commentary on the previous three verses, so a sharp break should not take place between verses 9 and 10. This particular curse is probably triggered by the *qawl mukhtalif* in verse 8, and it takes the particular form it does in order to create paronomasia.

- II. Two other instances of *qutila* used as a paronomastic curse retort occur in adjacent verses (Q Muddaththir 74:19–20); the curse is repeated for emphasis. The commentaries identify the man being cursed as al-Walīd b. al-Mughīrah, an elder of Quraysh who was asked his opinion of the Prophet Muḥammad and, after careful reasoning and deliberation, pronounced the verdict that he was a wizard, an opinion reported in verses 24–25.<sup>90</sup> The trigger for the curse at first appears to be the verb *qaddar* ("to consider, estimate"). The passage reads, *innahu fakkara wa-qaddar / fa-qutila kayfa qaddar / thumma qutila kayfa qaddar* ("He considered and planned. May he be killed—How he planned! Again may he be killed—How he planned!") (Q 74:18–20). Here, the instances of the verbs *qutila* and *qaddara* share the initial root consonant *q*, and the second root consonants, the dentals *t* and *d*, resemble each other, as do the third root consonants, the liquids *r* and *l* (these often rhyme in the Qurʿān). While the phonetic match is not as close as that found in *q-t-l* > *q-w-l*, one may argue that the curse is paronomastic to a degree. A more compelling interpretation, however, is that these curses anticipate the statement that serves as the climax of the passage: *fa-qāla in hādihā illā siḥrun yuṯhar / in hādihā illā qawluʾl-bashar* ("Then he said, 'This is nothing but magic transmitted. This is nothing but human speech'") (Q 74:24–25). The verbs *qutila* respond to *qāla* and *qawl* in that statement, for, as the ultimate verdict of the detractor identified as al-Walīd b. al-Mughīrah, it is the main

90. Al-Zajjāj, *Maʿānī al-Qurʿān*, 5.247.

idea the passage as a whole sets out to reject. That statement therefore represents the most logical trigger of the curse, even though the curse in this case anticipates the statement.

In several other cases, by contrast, *qutīla* is not a paronomastic or cognate curse. The curse *qutīla aṣḥābu'l-ukhdūd* (“May the Companions of the Trench be killed!”) (Q 85:4) is not adjacent to any use of the verbs *qatala*, *qāla* or similar forms. The trench is a fiery pit into which victims, identified in the commentaries either as the Christian martyrs of Najran in 523 CE or the denizens of Hell, are burned. In the former case, the “Companions of the Trench” are the persecutors who have thrown the Christians into the pit; in the latter, the “Companions of the Trench” are the wrongdoers being burned.<sup>91</sup> Like other curses, it is sometimes interpreted as a report that they have in fact been killed. Al-Ṭabarī states that it is a declarative sentence meaning *al-nāru qatalathum* (“the fire killed them”) instead of a curse.<sup>92</sup> Again, this interpretation appears to me untenable, and the interpretation of the verse as a curse would be in line with the other uses of *qutīla* in the Qurʾān. Al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī provide a typological interpretation, whereby the unbelievers of Quraysh are compared to those earlier culprits. On this logic, al-Zamakhsharī states that it means *qutīlat quraysh* (“may Quraysh be killed!”) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī paraphrases, *uqsimu anna kuffāra qurayshin malʾūnūn* (“I swear that the unbelievers of Quraysh are damned!”).<sup>93</sup>

Another example that is certainly not a cognate curse is *qutīla'l-insānu mā akfārah* (“May man be killed! What an ingrate he is!”) (Q ‘Abasa 80:17). Al-Qurṭubī remarks that this curse is used in Arabic to express amazement.<sup>94</sup> This is in keeping with the following exclamation *mā akfārahu*, which likewise expresses amazement, meaning, “How ungrateful he is!” No form of the verbs *qatala* or *qāla* occurs in the vicinity.

The expression *qātālaka'llāh* (“may God fight you!”) is used as a paronomastic curse in the Qurʾān responding to forms of the verb *qāla*, and the same may be said of the curse *qutīla* (“may he be killed”). That this usage reflects an ordinary Arabic speech genre on which the Qurʾān drew is corroborated, to some degree, by the pair of opening verses in a poem by the pre-Islamic poet ‘Antarah (d. ca. 608 CE).

91. Rudi Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz*, 505–506.

92. Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 24.337.

93. Al-Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf*, 4.199–200; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 31.117. Al-Rāzī adds that commentators have interpreted the phrase both as a curse and as a report, and that the Companions of the Fire could be the ones killed in the fire or the killers themselves. *Ibid.*, 31.119.

94. Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi‘ li’l-āḥkām*, 10.176.

*a-lā qātala'llāhu'l-ḥulūla'l-bawāliyā / wa-qātala dhikrāka'l-sinīna'l-khawāliyā*  
*wa-qawlaka li'l-shay'illadhī tā tanāluhu / idhā mā huwa'hlawlā a-lā layta dhā liyā*

May God fight the effaced traces of the beloved's campsite! And may He fight your memories of bygone years!

And your saying to the thing that you cannot attain, when it appears sweet, "If only I had that!"<sup>95</sup>

Like many of the qur'ānic commentators, the compiler of 'Antarah's *Dīwān*, Abū Zakarīyā Yaḥyā b. 'Alī al-Khaṭīb al-Tibrīzī (d. 503/1109), explains that *qātala'llāh* is used to express amazement (*ta'ajjub*).<sup>96</sup> Again, a functional equivalent in English might be "Damn them!" Al-Tibrīzī paraphrases: *qātalahā'llāhu mā aḥlabahā li'l-ahzān* ("May God fight them!—How they stir up sadness!"). The point that al-Tibrīzī does not make is that the curse *qātala'llāhu* is triggered by—anticipates, to be precise in this case—the noun *qawlaka* ("your saying") in the second verse. This is out of the usual order, but as pointed out above in connection with Q 74:19–25, a cognate curse may be uttered in anticipation. One may interpret the two verses as the inversion of an ordinary statement such as: *qulta layta dhā lī—qātalaka'llāhu* ("You said, 'If only I had that'—May God fight you!"). The fact that this figure of speech occurs both in the Qur'ān and in the poetry of 'Antarah suggests that both are drawing on an established figure in ordinary speech. In other words, in pre-Islamic Arabic usage, *qātalaka'llāhu* likely served as a cognate curse triggered not only by uses of the verb *qatala*, *yaqtulu* but also by uses of the verb *qāla*, *yaqūlu*.

Suggestive parallels may be sought in the modern Arabic dialects, in which particular paronomastic curses respond to uses of the verb *qāla*, *yaqūlu*, *qawlan*. In Negev Arabic, the curse that commonly retorts to the verb *gāl*, *yigūl* is *allāh yigillak* ("May God reduce you [to misery]!") In Egyptian Arabic, the corresponding curses that respond to *āl*, *yi'ūl* are *'allak il-ʔill* ("May want reduce you [to misery]!") and the extended version, *'allak il-ʔill wi-ta'ab is-sirr* ("May want and mental anguish reduce you [to misery]!"). Both curse retorts are based on the root transformation *q-w-l > q-l-l*. These curse retorts use the verb *gall* or *'all*, from classical Arabic *'aqalla*, *yuqillu* ("to reduce") and the noun *al-ʔill*, from classical Arabic *al-qull* ("lack, want, poverty") to echo the root consonants of the key term in statements that may have triggered this response, such as Egyptian *m-ana ʔult-i-lu* ("But I told him!"), *m-ana ʔult-ilak* ("But I told you!"), *ʔul-lī* ("Tell me!"), and so on.

While some cognate curses preserve the root consonants of the initial trigger exactly, as in *yadu'llāhi maghlūlatun—ghullat aydihim* ("God's hand is

95. Abū Zakarīyā Yaḥyā b. 'Alī al-Khaṭīb al-Tibrīzī, *Sharḥ Dīwān 'Antarah*, ed. Majīd Ṭarād (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1993), 214.

96. Al-Khaṭīb al-Tibrīzī, *Sharḥ Dīwān 'Antarah*, 214.

shackled—may their hands be shackled!”) and in Egyptian *nām*—*nāmit* *‘alēk hēta* (“Lie down”—“May a wall lie down on top of you!”) or *iftah*—*fatah* *fī rāsak* *ṭā’a* (“Open”—“May [God] open up a window in your head!”), a number involve a phonetic distortion, so that exact cognate paronomasia is not maintained. This is perhaps to be expected with the verb *qāla*, *yaqūlu*, since it is somewhat difficult to come up with a violent or devastating meaning using the same exact verb “to say.”

Phonetic distortion is fairly common in cognate curses. Such phonetic distortions occur only rarely in polite blessing responses, which tend to preserve the tri-consonantal root intact.<sup>97</sup> It is clear, though, that the paronomastic curses form part of the same genre as the exact cognate curses. They are used in the same way and are seen to have the same effect. For example, in Egyptian Arabic, one curse retort to *imshi* (“go away!”) and its cognates is *mishyit* *‘alēk maṣarīnak* (“May your intestines walk on you!”), meaning, “may you get diarrhea/dysentery!” In this case, the key optative verb in the curse, *mishyit*, is an exact cognate of *imshi*, both having the root consonants *m-sh-y*. However, another common curse retort to the same trigger is *gak mashash fi-rukabak* (“May you get cattle-rot in your knees!”), in which the root consonants *m-sh-y* are transformed into *m-sh-sh*, so strictly cognate paronomasia is not maintained. Nevertheless, there is no understanding that the two curses are substantially different in verbal category or in rhetorical effect.<sup>98</sup> It is argued here that the curse *qātalaka’llāhu* functions in a similar way. It belongs to the general class of cognate curses that include *yadu’llāhi maghlūlah—ghullat aydihim*... and *inṣarafū—ṣarafa’llāhu qulūbahum*, but with the added feature that it distorts the tri-consonantal root of the initial statement responding to uses of the verb *qāla*, *yaqūlu* (“to say”).

97. Stewart, “Impoliteness Formulae,” 333–334.

98. In his erudite and thoroughly documented article “Paronomasie’: Eine Begriffsverwirrung,” Werner Diem argues that general paronomasia (*jinās* or *tajnīs*) must be distinguished strictly and carefully from cognate paronomasia (*ishtiqāq*), and that the latter should properly be labeled with a different term altogether, such as *figura etymologica*. He also argues that paronomasia refers properly to cases in which there is a semantic difference between the two terms that show phonetic similarity. While there may be some benefit to noticing these differences for rhetorical analysis in general, examination of the genres of cognate blessing responses and cognate curse retorts shows that expressions which are indisputable and common members of the genre show both semantic similarity and semantic difference, and both strict repetition of root consonants and incomplete or partial repetition of root consonants. Both the semantic distortions and the phonetic distortions tend to be more prominent in curses than they are in blessings.

## Conclusion

The Qur'ānic examples discussed above draw on, and at the same time provide testimony of, a historical speech genre found in pre-Islamic Arabic. Scattered evidence attests to the prevalence of cognate paronomasia in Old Arabic in general and in curses in particular. Abū 'Alī Ismā'īl b. al-Qāsim al-Qālī (d. 356/967), an expert on Arabic linguistic usage and old Arab lore, records a collection of “curses of the Arabs” in *Dhayl al-Amālī*, and many of them make use of paronomasia, including cognate paronomasia.<sup>99</sup> Several paronomastic curses invoke a man's loss of wealth or herds of camels: *māluhu ghālat-hu ghūl* (“May a ghoulish seize his herds”); *sha'abat-hu sha'ūb* (“May the Separating One [i.e., Death] separate them”); *wala'at-hu'l-walū* (“May the Greedy One snatch them away”). Others refer to death indirectly: *zāla zawāluhu* (“May his cessation pass”); *zāla zawāluhu* (“May his cessation be made to vanish”); *īla mā ālahu* (“May what removed him be removed”). Quoting Abū 'Ubaydah Ma'mar b. al-Muthannā (d. 209/824–825), al-Qālī gives the meaning of this last curse as *uhlika halākahu* (“May his destruction be destroyed”). Abū 'Ubaydah explains this as a type of euphemism by indirection: *arāda al-du'ā' 'alayhi fa-da'ā 'alā al-fi'l* (“He meant to curse him, but then cursed the act itself”).<sup>100</sup> Still others include *hattahu'llāhu hatta'l-baramah* (“May God crush him as the fruit of the mustard tree [*arāk*] is crushed”) and *lā tabi'ā lahu zīlfun zīlfan* (“May not one hoof belonging to him follow another hoof”); *thalīla thalāluhu* (“May his destruction be demolished”) and *athalla'llāhu thalāluhu* (“May God demolish his destruction”).<sup>101</sup> In all cases, the paronomasia performs an emphatic function, while at the same time serving to create humor. In many cases, the paronomastic expression is a euphemism that avoids direct mention of death. A paronomastic tour de force occurs in the compound curse *sulla wa-shulla wa-ghulla wa-ulla* (“May he suffer consumption, become crippled, be thrown in chains, and get transfixed on a spear”). One indication of the importance of linguistic form in such expressions is that the verb “may he become crippled or paralyzed” is ordinarily *shalla*, but has been altered by attraction to the other verbs in the curse (*li-muzāwajāt al-kalām*).<sup>102</sup>

The cognate curse is one of a number of rhetorical features of the Qur'ān that are used not just for emphasis but also for humorous effect, and it resembles in this aspect the many ironic inversions of the text, such as *bashshirhum bi-'adhābin alīm* (“Give them the glad tidings of a painful punishment!”) (Q. Āl 'Imrān 3:21; Tawbah 9:34; Inshiqāq 84:24) and *dhuq innaka al-'azīzu'l-ḥakīm*

99. Al-Qālī, *Dhayl al-Amālī*, 2.57–62.

100. Ibid., 2.57–58.

101. Ibid.

102. Ibid.

(“So taste [hellfire], for you are the Powerful and Wise!”) (Q Dukhān 44:49). Cognate curses continue to serve this function in classical Arabic literature, including Abū ‘Uthmān ‘Amr b. Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ’s (d. 255/869) *Book of Misers*, in which a host upbraids his guest for not sharing the bread at a dinner: *mā laka waylaka lā taqta ‘hu baynahum qaṭa ‘a’llāhu awṣalak* (“Why, woe be to you, don’t you cut it [the bread] up among them—may God cut off your limbs!”).<sup>103</sup> They also serve this function in modern Arabic literature, in the works of such authors as Yūsuf Idrīs and Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs.<sup>104</sup>

The example of the cognate curse is one among many indications that the Qur’ān draws on pre-Islamic Arabic speech genres. As Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh Ibn Sinān al-Khafājī (d. 466/1073–1074) states in his rhetorical manual *Sirr al-faṣāḥah: inna’l-qur’āna unzila bi-lughati’l-‘arabi wa-‘alā ‘urfihim wa-‘ādatihim* (“The Qur’ān was revealed in the languages of the Arabs and according to their usage and custom”). He intends by this statement to refer to their linguistic customs in particular, which include the formal conventions of Arabic speech genres. Investigation of the Qur’ān with an eye to such conventions may reveal aspects of the scriptural text that have escaped the notice of scholars while at the same time throwing light on pre-Islamic Arabic usage. All such investigations are made difficult by the paucity of sources that date to the early years of Islamic history that might reliably purport to reveal the conventions of pre-Islamic Arabic usage, so that one must rely on later evidence and a presumption of linguistic continuity. Nevertheless, many commentators accepted that some such continuity indeed existed, so that the medieval exegetes were able to identify specific features of *kalām al-‘arab* (“the speech of the Arabs”) with confidence and to draw on such understanding for interpretation of the Qur’ān.

103. Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Al-Bukhalā’* (Beirut: Dār al-Hilāl, 1998), 83.

104. See Stewart, “Impoliteness Formulae,” 327, 346–347; idem, review of Woidich and Landau (ed. and trans.), *Arabisches Volkstheater*, 190–192. In modern literary works, the appearance of cognate curses also serves to mark the speaker as belonging to a low socio-economic level or to indicate a low-class urban or rural setting.