

Structural Dividers in the Qur'an

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3 Beyond Ring Composition

A Comparison of Formal Features in
Sūrat al-‘Alaq (Q 96) and Bavli *Bava
Batra* 8a*

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Introduction

This essay approaches some of the literary features of the Qur’an in formal comparison with those of the Babylonian Talmud, the foundational text of rabbinic Judaism which consists of the foundational law code, called “Mishna” and its secondary commentary, called the “Gemara.” While both the Qur’an and the Talmud were collected and collated toward the end of the late antique period, they stem from different parts of the Middle East (Arabia and Mesopotamia, respectively), they are written in different languages (Arabic and a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic, respectively), and they differ in age, since the Talmud reflects a much longer gestation period than the Qur’an. Despite many thematic overlaps, the literary affinity between the textual surface of both religious writings is limited: the former implies human authorship and constitutes a legal commentary that embeds narrative, whereas the latter implies divine authorship and constitutes a direct address that embeds both narrative and law. Regardless, I hold that the analytical tools developed for the study of rabbinic literature may prove *partially* useful for the study of the Qur’an, and that the intended audiences of the two texts were attuned to process similar formal features. Insofar as the Talmud and at least parts of the Qur’an tend to display a fairly homogeneous literary style, the comparison of two small textual units from each text may teach us much about the features found throughout the two texts, and about the literary sensibility of their respective audiences.

At the example of a comparison of two such brief textual units—on the one hand, a narrative preserved in the Talmud, in *Bava Batra* 8a, and on the other hand, Sūrat al-‘Alaq (Q 96)—I will illustrate that both of these texts invite their audience to partition these textual units into discrete subunits based on content, and that the resulting structural borders are both created and crossed by a number of literary devices. These devices are generally based on the repetition of a combination of concepts and sounds, and include, but are not limited to, well-known literary techniques such as rhyme, alliteration, and *inclusio*. The partitioning of either text based on content and on formal features can therefore be justified as well as questioned in light of a more comprehensive

literary analysis. I agree with an emerging broad consensus in the field that we can indeed identify the main structure of most brief textual units both in the Qur’an and in the Talmud. Yet, at the same time, I will caution that we simultaneously have to point to structural devices that complicate or undermine any literary structure of either text, emphasizing that we must recognize a number of overlaying structures within and beyond each established unit. The division of a text into subunits can therefore be only a preliminary analytical device, preparing us for a perception of more complex textual structures, some of which may stand in tension with each other or even elude objective categorization.

The present essay therefore reassesses the merits and limits of so-called ring theory more broadly, or Biblical rhetoric in particular, in light of three insights. First, repetition, pure and simple, is a better guide to structural analysis than pre-conceived notions of parallelism or chiasms, important as they may be. Second, the formal features of any text always stand in close relationship to the text’s respective message; the ensuing relationship between form and content emerges as a complex network of literary signification. Third, while proponents of Biblical rhetoric and Qur’anic literary studies tend to compare the Islamic scripture to that of the Jews and the Christians, we are at least equally well guided in reading the Qur’an in light of the formal features of contemporaneous late antique bodies of literature, including pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and those Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Ethiopic, and Arabian texts that are the result of centuries of close and subtle dialogue which Jews and Christians held with the Bible and with its literary features. While some headway has been made in reading the Qur’an in dialogue with these literary traditions in terms of their shared content, the time may be ripe to revisit the Qur’an’s relationship to the same traditions in terms of their literary form.

This essay, then, will seek to illustrate that the Qur’an and the Talmud, which historically were likely addressed, respectively, to a multiethnic and multicultural group of Hejazi Arabs and to an ethnically, religiously, and even academically very homogeneous group of Mesopotamian Jews, shared an understanding of their audience as possessing a number of distinctive qualities: both audiences will have been finely attuned to a large number of similar rhetorical and literary strategies that play out at the interface of the spoken and the written word, and at least part of both audiences will have been capable of identifying the various overlying literary structures that are created through the repetition of phrases, words, sounds, and concepts. This is a preliminary study that will hopefully soon be superseded by broader studies that would take into account a wider range of literary structures in late antique literatures. At the same time, I hope that its identification of a particular form of late antique “Biblical” literary culture, shared at least by rabbinic Jews and by the nascent Islamic community, and likely by many others, will prove more enduring.

Torah in the Years of Famine: Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Batra* 8a

In order to illustrate the fruits of research available in Talmudic studies, we will first read a Talmudic story that has been previously analyzed in a very brief study by Jonah Fraenkel, one of the key figures in the literary study of the Talmud, and then discuss the relevance of the analysis for the study of the Qur'an. (The following assumes no familiarity with Talmudic studies; indispensable terms and concepts will be explained when they are first introduced.) Fraenkel strove to assess the degree to which the insights of the much older discipline of Biblical literary studies were applicable to the rabbinic corpus.¹ There has been much criticism of Fraenkel's work, and especially of his assumption that rabbinic stories should be understood within their *segirut* (i.e., their hermetical and self-referential seclusion),² but Fraenkel's basic insights remain as relevant as they were when first published. In what follows, I will first present my own analysis of the story's structure and meaning (all the while drawing on a few of Fraenkel's valid observations), and then turn to Fraenkel's own structural analysis of the story, whose insights and shortcomings will help us to hone our methodology when it comes to analyzing both the Talmud and the Qur'an. As we will see, Fraenkel's perceptive analyses are not beyond reproach since he, just as many students of the Qur'an, tends to overlook variegated *secondary* literary devices within a text, and thereby fails to assess the identifiable messiness as well as the structural hierarchies within the Talmud.

The story we will examine illuminates aspects of a difficult halakhic—legal, ethical, and moral—question: how far one is allowed to derive material benefit from one's study of the Torah. The text was chosen for its formal features alone, on the assumption that the difference in content and genre of the two literary units in the Talmud and in the Qur'an allows us fully to focus on the affinity of the formal devices we encounter in both texts. Nonetheless, the content of each text remains the focus of our analysis, since content will be crucial for assessing the ways in which literary devices form part of modes of signification of each text: form, to reiterate, is part of the message.³ The story describes how "Rabbi," the leader of the Palestinian Jewish community at the turn of the third century CE, initially seeks to exclude Jewish *ignoramuses*, the *'Ame ha'Areš*, from emergency rationing during a famine, but eventually relents in doing so. The *'Ame ha'Areš*, literally "folk of the land," are those Jews who reject rabbinic learning.⁴ The brief narrative, which likely reflects much later Babylonian rabbinic reflections on the early phase of the Palestinian rabbinic movement, actually criticizes Rabbi by illustrating that the exclusion of Jews from receiving sustenance based on their ignorance in rabbinic learning leads to the unintended consequence that learned rabbinic Jews would, inversely, derive financial benefit from their study of Torah and Talmud—an outcome at odds with rabbinic ethics. The story in Bavli *Bava Batra* 8a, following manuscript Hamburg 165 (with variants provided in the endnotes), is depicted in Figure 3.1.⁵

<p>r. pth `wšrw bšny bšrw `m. yknsw b`ly mqr`, b`ly mšnh, b`ly tlmwd w`my h`rš `l yknsw</p>	<p>(I) Rabbi opened the storehouses in the years of shortages. He said: “In may go the masters of Scripture, the masters of Mishna, the masters of Talmud.⁶ But the <i>ignoramuses</i> may not go in!”</p>
<p>dhq ywntn bn `mrm wnkn `m. lw r. prnsny `m. lw qryth l`w šnyth l`w w`l` bmh `prnsk `m. lw prnsny kklb wk`wrb prnsyh</p>	<p>(II) Yonathan ben `Amram pressed and went in. He (Yonathan) said to him: “Rabbi, sustain me!” He said to him: “Did you study Scripture?”⁷ “No.” “Did you study Mishna?” “No.” “And on what (grounds) can I sustain you?” He said to him: “Sustain me like a dog and like a raven.”⁸ He sustained him.</p>
<p>lbtr dnpq ytyb r. wq` mšt`r w`mr `wy ly šntty pty l`m h`rš `m. lpnwy r. šm`wn br. šm` ywntn bn `mrm hwh š`ynw rwšh lyhnwt bkbwd twrh bdqw wms`w kdbryw `m. r. yknsw hkl</p>	<p>(III) After (Yonathan) went out, Rabbi sat down, and he was aggrieved⁹ and said: “<i>Oy</i> to me that I gave my bread to an <i>ignoramus</i>.” Rabbi Shim`on, the son of Rabbi, said to him: “Perhaps it was Yonathan the son of `Amram,¹⁰ who does not want to enjoy¹¹ (material benefit) from the honor of the Torah?” They inquired and they found that it was as he (Rabbi Shim`on) had said.¹² Rabbi said: “Everyone may go in.”</p>

Figure 3.1 Bavli Bava Batra 8a

The Talmudic story is easily identifiable as a discrete literary unit, a narrative that constitutes part of the tail end and forms an integral part of a much longer Talmudic discussion on the Mishna’s law on the duties for building a defensive wall (Mishna *Bava Batra* 5:1, with the discussion beginning in Bavli *Bava Batra* 7b and ending on 8a).¹³ The story can be summarized most effectively within this larger literary framework:

- In the story’s prequel, we learn that Rabbi—the famous leader of the rabbinic community whose fuller title is “Rabbi Judah the Prince”—compelled the sages to participate financially in the building of defensive walls, which then leads to a discussion of the fiscal benefits and obligations of being a rabbi.¹⁴
- This discussion is then followed by our story, which depicts Rabbi as realizing that by restricting the food rations to the rabbis alone, he had actually compromised the internal legal, ethical, and moral standards of his own rabbinic community, as we will discuss below.
- Our story concludes with Rabbi’s decision, yet the Talmudic discussion in which we find it continues by relating that Rabbi indeed held that the *‘Ame*

ha'Areš bring misfortune to the world, thereby explaining his unaltered negative attitude toward them. Rabbi's persisting negative view of the *ignoramus* is then illustrated with another story in which Rabbi is portrayed in a political struggle with non-rabbinic Jews. Here, Rabbi perseveres in exempting the rabbis from taxation, arguably at very high cost, since much of the population ends up being displaced as a result of his actions. Still on the same folio, the Talmud repeats Rabbi's negative doctrine about the misfortune caused by the *'Ame ha'Areš* and then returns to another passage of the Mishna, marking a clear caesura in the text.

The story's framework, within the Talmudic tractate more broadly, thus guides the audience to pay close attention to the complex interplay of legal, financial, and ethical considerations attached to Rabbi's decisions. The content of our story, in my view, is best understood with a focus on its personae, the alternation of whom allows us to divide the narrative into three subunits which I have marked by Roman numerals.

- The first subunit (I) sets the scene during a famine. Here, Rabbi distributes food from the storehouses to rabbinic scholars alone. He thereby condemns to starvation all those Jews who do not study at all, or at least do not follow the rabbinic path of learning, the often-disparaged group the Talmud designates as *ignoramus*, the *'Ame ha'Areš*, literally "folk of the land" (as noted above).
- In the second subunit (II), one person by the name of Yonathan ben 'Amram demands food in spite of Rabbi's discrimination. Denying his knowledge of Torah or Mishna when questioned by Rabbi, Yonathan misleadingly suggests that he, too, is an *'Am ha'Areš*. Yonathan pleads to be sustained regardless, "like a dog and like a raven," two animals that the Bible and the Talmud (esp. in *Kritot* 18a) elsewhere link; both are disparaged and portrayed as being fed by God in the Bible.¹⁵ Rabbi relents and feeds Yonathan.
- In the third subunit (III), Yonathan having left the stage, the focus returns to Rabbi, who experiences a second change of mind and comes to regret his generosity toward an *ignoramus*. His own son, Rabbi Shim'on, enters the scene and deduces Yonathan's real identity as a sage who had misled Rabbi in order to avoid enjoying material benefit from his status. When Shim'on's conjecture is confirmed, it is made implicit to the audience that Rabbi now realizes that his denial of food to the *'Am ha'Areš* inversely constituted an invitation to the other sages to derive material benefit from their status as rabbis—a *halakhic* transgression. Rabbi's third change of mind is illustrated by his decision to rectify his error: he opens the storehouses to anyone, rabbi and *ignoramus* alike.

A few basic historical, cultural, and linguistic points of reference help us appreciate the literary craft of the Talmudic story. Rabbi is perhaps the most prominent of the Tannaitic rabbis and is held to have been a figure of political

prominence in Roman Palestine at the turn of the third century; he could very well have had power over storehouses, as the narrative in *Bava Batra* 8a suggests. Rabbi is traditionally accredited with the compilation of the Mishna, the basis of all rabbinic law, and he is usually portrayed as a formidable legal scholar.¹⁶ The fact that the story criticizes his initial actions, however, is not uncommon in the Talmud, where prominent rabbis repeatedly are depicted in the process of improving their behavior or their understanding based on their gained insights.¹⁷

The story itself alternates between Hebrew and Aramaic, another common Talmudic feature: most of the narrative, as well as all of the dialogue, is composed in a form of Mishnaic Hebrew, thereby giving the impression of preserving an actual story from the time of Rabbi himself. Yet the short section beginning in the last line of subunit II and stretching to the beginning of subunit III (from “[h]e sustained him ...” to “... was aggrieved and said”), as well as the discourse preceding and following the entire story, is set in Babylonian Jewish Aramaic. Moreover, to the best of my knowledge, even the very topic of disdain-ing material benefit from one’s knowledge of the Torah is first expressed in *Pirke Avot*, likely an addition to the Mishna that post-dates its edition and its alleged editor, Rabbi: “He that makes profit out of the words of the Torah,” we learn here, “removes his life from the world” (*Mishna Avot* 4:5). The ensuing prohibition to derive benefit from one’s rabbinic learning gave rise to a complex and prominent Talmudic discourse, which forms the halakhic backbone of the story.¹⁸ The story, then, as many of the terms and concepts it uses illustrate, is likely a composition post-dating the life of Rabbi, possibly of Palestinian or more likely of Mesopotamian rabbinic origin.¹⁹ None of this amounts to proof that the story is not an ancient one. However, it remains highly likely that the story projects a later discussion on the earlier sages. By restricting access to the scarce resources during the time of famine to rabbinic scholars, the Talmud imagines Rabbi as effectively forcing the rabbis to transgress the pertinent teaching on deriving material benefit from the Torah that is now retrojected onto the earlier rabbis, whereas Yonathan ben ‘Amram’s actions are then portrayed as correcting Rabbi’s misguided policy.

The rabbi depicted as the real hero, Yonathan the son of ‘Amram, is a marginal figure about whom we know little. Given his name, however, he is very well chosen for his role in the narrative.²⁰ The name *yo-natan*, a contraction of the Tetragrammaton YHWH and the verb *ntn*, indicates that “God gave”; it is to Yonathan that Rabbi states his regrets “that I *gave* (*šntty*) my bread,” twice evoking the repeated verb *ntn*. (The same verb will point to the passage’s relationship to the Hebrew Bible, as we will see.) Yonathan’s full name, *son of ‘Amram*, secondly, evokes the figure of Moses, whom the rabbis also frequently designate by the reference to his respective father’s same name as “the son of ‘Amram.”²¹ The name *‘Am-ram*, thirdly, signifies the “lifting” of “the folk,” evoking the betterment of the status of the “folk of the land,” the *‘Ame ha’Ares*.²² Yonathan’s polysemic name and moral exactitude therefore correspond precisely to the argument he uses to convince Rabbi: it would be in line

with the heritage of Moses *ben 'Amram* himself, who was given the divine law, that even the beast-like *'Am ha'Areš* should be “raised” and fed, just as the divinity feeds the actual beasts, as we learn from the story’s implicit reference to the Psalms.

In asking Rabbi to feed him “like a dog and like a raven,” Yonathan evokes the Jewish tradition in two further ways. On the one hand, as Fraenkel pointed out, Yonathan makes an implicit reference to a Talmudic teaching that includes the phrase “a dog or a raven” and involves Rabbi himself; the collocation of beasts and gentiles in that teaching further sharpens the juxtaposition between beast and *'Am ha'Areš* in our story.²³ On the other hand, a point also observed by Fraenkel, the very idea of being fed like an animal, or like a raven in particular, especially in the mouth of Yonathan, evokes Psalm 147. There we learn, in v. 9, that God, depicted as responsible for the entire creation, also “gives (*nwt*) to the beast its bread (*lbh* *lhm*), and to the sons of the ravens (*lbny 'rb*), which cry.”²⁴ Hence, when Rabbi regrets that “I gave (*nty*) my bread (*pty*)” to an *ignoramus* (i.e., Yonathan the son (*bn*) of *'Amram*, who in turn asked to be fed like a raven (*k'wrb*)) the story effectively evokes the Psalm, and thereby communicates its message to an audience that is assumed to know the Talmudic law as well as the Psalm by heart. The evocation of the Psalm generates the critical message by inviting a textual juxtaposition—and thereby revealing the discrepancy—between Rabbi’s actions and those of God. The story’s audience may continue to view the *'Ame ha'Areš* as beasts, but as beasts that need to be fed, at least in certain circumstances. It was therefore not Rabbi’s intermediate generosity toward an *ignoramus* which was questioned, but inversely his initial severity along with his later regret for his compassionate act.

The story thus works on two levels: hearing it in conjunction with the Talmud more broadly highlights how Rabbi’s actions fall short of rabbinic teaching. Hearing the story in conjunction with Psalm 147, as the Talmud invites us to do, leads to the impression that the bread in question was not Rabbi’s to begin with, but that of the creature to be fed, as in the Psalm, which speaks about “its” (i.e., the beast’s and the raven’s) “bread.” The fact that God, introduced as YHWH in Ps 147:2, gives (*nwt*) bread (in v. 7), finally, sends us back to *Yonathan*’s name, which, as we have seen, signifies that “God” (*yw*) himself “gave” (*ntn*), meaning that *God gave* the bread to the raven, and that therefore Rabbi ought not to regret having given it to an *ignoramus*. The message of the entire Psalm is thus evoked in many ways: in the Psalm, most importantly, God is depicted as the One who “brings in (*ykns*) the outcasts (*ndhy*) of Israel” (Ps 147:2), evoking one of our story’s key concepts.²⁵ The idea of “going in” (*kns*), namely, is repeated in each of the story’s three subunits, to which we can now turn.

The story, through the repetition of terms and concepts, seems to reinforce the three-partite segmentation that is equally formed by the narrative itself, creating an initial unity of content and form (as depicted in Figure 3.1). The repetition of terms and concepts, I would hold, establishes the unity of the story as a whole, all the while creating, as well as occasionally crossing, the borders between the suggested subunits. Three sets of such repetitions stand out:

- The verb *kns*, “going in,” determines the action and forms an *inclusio* around the entire story, as recognized by Fraenkel.²⁶ Additional internal narrative frames based on the repetition of the verb “to go in,” as well as on spatial movements (a feature so often highlighted by rabbinic narrative), can be seen within subunits I and III. In the first subunit, Rabbi’s statement begins by depicting who may enter (*yknsw*, “in may go,” i.e., the rabbis), and ends with specifying who may not (*’l yknsw*, “may not go in,” i.e., the *ignoramuses*), forming an *inclusio* internal to this subunit. The second subunit equally opens by stating that Yonathan “pressed and *nkns*” (i.e., “went in”), to which we will return below. The third subunit opens by stating that Yonathan has gone out (*npq*), linking it closely to the second subunit by using a verb of spatial displacement that expresses the movement opposite to entering. The third subunit then ends by stating that *yknsw hkl*, “everyone may go in,” forming, along with Yonathan’s initial “going out,” another *inclusio* within this subunit. At the same time, this last repetition of the verb *kns* in the third subunit abolishes the initial distinction of those who may and those who may not go in, which was specified in the story’s opening. The inversion of the story’s opening in its ending thus forms a primary *inclusio* around the entire story. The abolishment of the opening in the ending, at the same time, is the direct result of Yonathan’s transgressive “pressing and entering” in the second subunit, firmly linking all three parts of the story in showing that Yonathan indeed managed to “bring in (*ykns*) the outcasts of Israel,” as the Psalm has it (in Ps 147:2; see above). The measured repetition of the verb *kns*, “going in,” therefore, guides the audience to appreciate Rabbi’s initial and intermediate fallacy and later rectification thereof, neatly emphasizing the cohesion of the narrative’s content and form. This first one among the story’s formal devices points to the compositional unity of the story as a whole (marked by the notion of being or not being allowed to “go in”), as well as reinforcing its suggested division into three subunits. At the same time, the way in which the story juxtaposes Yonathan’s forceful “entering” in subunit II with his “having left,” of which we are informed only in subunit III (in the preterite as indicated by *lbtr*, “after,” rather than already at the end of subunit II in the simple past), crosses the border dividing subunits II and III.
- The term “Scripture” (i.e., God’s Written Torah) and the associated concepts of “Mishna” and “Talmud” (i.e., the rabbis’ Oral Torah) equally contribute to the compositional unity of the story as a whole, and simultaneously point to the structural integrity of its three subunits.²⁷ In the first subunit, Rabbi allows access only to the “masters of Scripture (*mqr*), the masters of Mishna (*mśnh*), and the masters of Talmud”; the unity of the subunits is here enhanced by the repetition of the term “masters of,” as Marianna Klar has pointed out to me. In the second subunit, Rabbi asks Yonathan whether he has “studied Scripture” (*qryth*) and whether he “studied Mishna” (*śnyth*). The audience, having encountered the repetition of the first two of the three categories of rabbinic study introduced in subunit I, would now expect, as a

third question, whether Yonathan also studied Talmud.²⁸ Instead, we are faced with Yonathan's oblique reference to the Talmud inherent in his request to be fed "like a dog and like a raven." The phrase, we have seen, points to a Talmudic ruling involving a dog and a raven (a case in which Israelites are declared liable for their actions interrelated with those of a gentile, a dog, or a raven in Bavli *Kritot* 18a), in which Rabbi himself plays a role, as well as to Scripture (where God takes responsibility for feeding the beast and the sons of the raven, in Ps 147:9). In this case, hence, the imperfect repetition allows the audience to savor the irony inherent in Yonathan's coded language, and more precisely inherent in the fact that Rabbi himself does *not* seem to grasp the reference: Yonathan's oblique allusion marks him as master of Scripture *and* of Talmud, whereas Rabbi, the master of Mishna, misses the hint. The third subunit, finally, resolves the halakhic drama by revealing Yonathan's intention not to derive material benefit from the "honor of the Torah." This last repetition of the concept of "Torah" in the third subunit is structurally ambiguous and depends on one's understanding of the story's content. On the one hand, the term "Torah" continues the descending scale created by the partial repetition of the initial triplet "Scripture/Mishna/Talmud" in subunit I, which would then be followed by its partial repetition as "Scripture/Mishna" in subunit II and by the term "Torah" *as* Scripture in subunit III. On the other hand, if one understands the repetition of Torah and Mishna along with Yonathan's reference to the Talmud in the second subunit as a *complete* repetition of the three initial concepts Scripture/Mishna/Talmud in the first subunit, then the term "Torah" in subunit III (as opposed to the partial equivalent "Scripture" in subunits I and II) points to the overarching continuity of God's Written Torah with the rabbis' Oral Torah, which is a central theme in the Babylonian Talmud.²⁹ Either way, the three instances in which the notion of "Scripture" appears strongly enhance the integrity of each of the three subunits (through the variation of the notion), as well as their intricate interrelation in the narrative as a whole.

- While the main structural devices of the text, hence, establish the unity of the story as well as that of the integrity of its subunits, one further set of repetitions *crosses* the neat borders between subunits I and II. Subunit I, namely, ends with a reference to the 'Ame ha'Areš not being allowed to *enter* the storehouse, whereas subunit II begins with Yonathan ben 'Amram *entering* the scene and the storehouse. The same sequence of actors is repeated within subunit III, where Rabbi laments that he fed an 'Am ha'Areš just before his son Rabbi Shim'on suggests that it may have been Yonathan ben 'Amram. We have seen that the association between the *ignoramuses*, the 'Ame ha'Areš, and the name of the story's hero, ben 'Am-ram, pointing to the "lifting" of the "folk of the land," prepares the key plot device of unravelling Yonathan's pretended identity. The placement of the two lexemes *across* subunits I and II as well as their repetition *within* subunit III therefore adds to the unity of the story as a whole, at the same time as crossing the border between subunits I and II—just as the

border between subunits II and III has also been crossed through the placement of Yonathan’s having “gone out” of the storehouse, as we saw above.

The use of repetition, therefore, largely corroborates the subunits based on the story’s shift in *dramatis personae*. The prominence of the terms “to enter” and “Scripture” will have guided the audience to appreciate a primary structure that fully overlaps with the division proposed on content. Fraenkel, as I mentioned above, draws attention to the structural importance of the story’s primary *inclusio* based on its opening and ending, as well as on the repetition of Yonathan ben ‘Amram, as we will see. In his analysis of the story, which does not suggest any internal subdivisions, Fraenkel seeks to identify the “chiastic design that is typical for a rabbinic story,” a design that he presents graphically (in a slightly simplified way, as is shown in Figure 3.2).³⁰

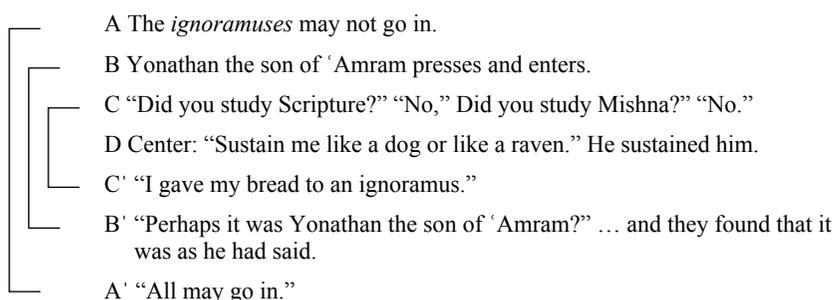


Figure 3.2 Concentricism in the Talmudic Story according to Fraenkel

According to Fraenkel’s reading, the sentence “like a dog and like a raven” constitutes the center of a chiastic structure that is formed in turn by parts AA’ (based on the repetition of *nkns*, “to go in”), BB’ (based on the identity of Yonathan the son of ‘Amram) and CC’ (based on the *juxtaposition* of Yonathan’s denial of having studied in C and the term *ignoramus*, describing an unstudied man, in C’). There is much to be said in favor of some aspects of this proposed structure. I agree of course with Fraenkel’s identification of the *inclusio* AA’, and with the importance of the repetition of Yonathan in BB’, as outlined above. Moreover, one could easily add to Fraenkel’s structure, pointing out, for example, that the same phrase D (“like a dog and like a raven”) is highlighted by constituting the middle part of the (incomplete) repetition of the concepts “Torah,” “Mishna,” and “Talmud,” as I argued earlier. There is, finally, another layer one could also add to Fraenkel’s chiastic structure that becomes apparent when subdividing his phrase D: the phrase “like a dog and like a raven,” namely, is preceded by the verb “sustain” (in “sustain me”) which equally occurs in the sentence immediately after the phrase (“he sustained him”), forming another concentric structure within the phrase.

Yet one must ask whether the phrase “like a dog and like a raven” really constitutes the structural middle as well as the key message of the story, as Fraenkel

holds. To a degree, of course, the importance of the sentence cannot be denied, since the phrase contains the coded reference to the passage in the Talmud (Bavli *Kritot* 18a) as well as to Psalm 147, which in conjunction guide the audiences to appreciate Yonathan's learning and piety. Even so, however, I would rather hold that this phrase is but an arrow pointing to the *halakhic* backbone of the story, which is clearly the outspoken maxim not to derive any material benefit from the Torah. In my view, the story's ultimate "message" is not concentrated in its putative center, but is distributed across all three of its parts and most explicitly expressed in subunit III, where the issue of deriving benefit from the Torah is made apparent, a passage clearly set apart from the story's structural center in subunit II.

Moreover, the identification of the phrase "sustain me like a dog and like a raven" as the structural center of the narrative can be challenged, not only on grounds of content but also on formal grounds. Fraenkel's analysis, namely, largely ignores the many ways in which the narrative is divided into three subunits, based on the change of personae and on the repetition of verbs and concepts as laid out above. It is by focusing on secondary structural devices (or those whose function I would only acknowledge as secondary) that Fraenkel creates a concentric structure that ignores those many features I would argue to be the primary ones. An alternative approach, incorporating the primary structural elements and Fraenkel's insights into the story's concentric features, would be to start with the fact that the middle of the story's tripartite structure is constituted by subunit II. If one then chooses to be guided by the repetitions of terms and concepts *within* this subunit, then a neat concentric structure indeed emerges, which can equally be illustrated graphically (as is shown in Figure 3.3).

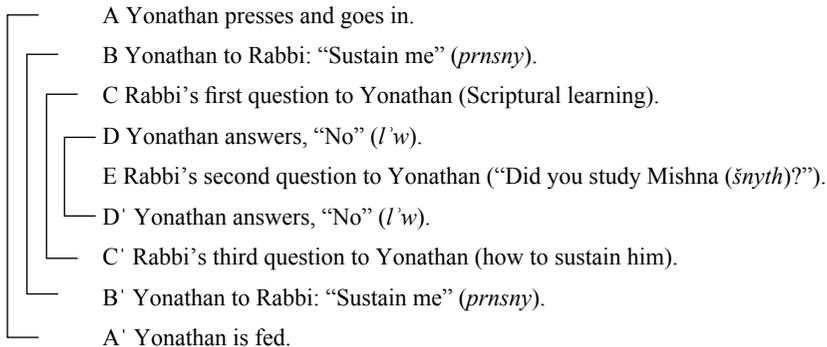


Figure 3.3 Concentricism within subunit II

The verbatim repetition of words and phrases in BB' (Yonathan asks Rabbi, "Sustain me") and DD' ("No") would have jumped out to an audience accustomed to such structures, and they would easily have perceived the repetition of concepts in AA' (Yonathan presses / Yonathan is fed) and CC' (Rabbi's first and third question to Yonathan). The parallel of this "center" in Rabbi's first

question (“Did you study Scripture?”), admittedly, further complexifies this otherwise crisply depicted center, as does the fact that the verb *prns*, “to sustain,” is equally repeated in C’ and A’. If one focuses on the verbatim repetitions of words and on the conceptually mirrored aspects of the subunit, however, its structure emerges as neatly concentric, with a clearly identifiable middle in Rabbi’s second question, in E: “Did you study Mishna?” This concentric-structured second subunit, hence, may have been more immediately apparent to the audience than that put forward by Fraenkel: it is more solidly built on the repetition of words and phrases, it accommodates the tripartite structure of the story and leaves all its three subunits intact, and it reflects a more evenly balanced amount of textual material. It would of course be somewhat nonsensical to build one’s interpretation of the story on the structural middle thus identified. The phrase E: “Did you study Mishna?” is no more important than any other element of the story (despite the mordant irony inherent to Rabbi, the ultimate “master of Mishna,” asking the misguided question). Yet there is a good argument here for emphasizing the endpoints in A and A’, especially if one takes some of Fraenkel’s broader observations into account.

The opening and ending of subunit II, in A and A’, namely, creates another internal *inclusio*: Yonathan’s “pressing” and going in in A eventually leads to his being fed in A’, at the end of the subunit. This *inclusio* in subunit II mirrors the *inclusio* (based on the verb “to enter”) within subunits I and III described above. At the same time, it also corresponds neatly to the broader *inclusio* that encompasses the story as a whole: this broader *inclusio*, to reiterate, begins with the sentence “Rabbi opened the storehouses” in subunit I, and ends with “Rabbi said: all may go in” in subunit III, creating a satisfying narrative frame of *general* entering (in subunits I and III) around the notion of *private* entering in subunit II. The *inclusio* within subunit II, in other words, not only mirrors the ones in subunits I and III but also neatly folds into the broader *inclusio* connecting subunits I and III, again strengthening the unity of the story as a whole as well as the integrity of its three nicely balanced subunits, which do actually form a concentric structure.

The alternate chiasmic structure that I have suggested, based on subunit II, may be more robust than that identified by Fraenkel. At the same time, we should recognize that the elements on which Fraenkel’s structure is built correspond, to a degree, to the repetition of the pairing of ‘Am ha’Ares and Yonathan ben ‘Am-ram, whose affinity crosses the borders of the story’s main structure by fusing subunits I and II, as noted above. Fraenkel, in other words, identified as the primary structure something that I would designate as a secondary element of the story’s overall structure, yet both proposed structures point to real and present elements of the story. And this is my point: different scholars will identify different structures, not because our methods are arbitrary but because different overlaying structures are usually present in the texts we read. This is the case for the Talmud as much as it is for the Qur’an. While both texts can be argued always to contain some form of literary structure, and while some elements of creating structure recur in both texts, we must assess each case based

on its own unique combination of structural devices. The text's *main* structure should be identified as that which would be most apparent to the intended audience. This will usually be the one that integrates the largest part of a text's most apparent formal attributes with the structure suggested by content, which in the present case may well be the structure I suggest. The structure put forward by Fraenkel is equally present as a secondary one. The structures even overlap at the point of the story's main *inclusio*. We cannot of course be sure how a story was first told, elocuted, remembered, recorded in writing, and retold, and how it was actually heard and heard again by its historical audiences, but we can approach this question based on objective parameters of what seems most prominent and most pervasively emphasized. At the same time, in my view, those literary critics who prioritize the *meaning* of the story in any formal analysis are right. Formal analysis, in other words, may help us advance in our reading, but it may never tell us when we really "get" the story—only a comprehensive reading that integrates form and content can do that.³¹

There is, to conclude the reading of this Talmudic story, no real end to the number of literary devices one may see in a literary unit. There is, for example, also a rhyme within subunit I, emphasizing the juxtaposition between "store-houses" (*ʿwōšrōwł*) and the years of famine (*bšārōwł*), both ending (with a female plural) on *-šrōwł*. One could add to this, within subunit III, the alliteration on *mš-* juxtaposing how Rabbi worried (*mišta'ēr*) and how "they found" (*māšūw*) confirmation of Yonathan's identity, thereby removing the very cause for Rabbi's worry.³² The amount of such literary devices is limited mainly by the literary sensibility of the intended audience as well as by that of the scholar seeking to "hear" such a text, and we can safely assume that we may be guilty both of overstating and of missing some of the encoded literary devices of any ancient text. Yet there are more robust rules to the literary analysis of Talmudic texts than it may seem if confronted with diverging structural analyses of the same text by different scholars. The lessons we can take away from the analysis of the Talmud—the ideas to be assessed in the context of the Qur'an—thus include the following:

- We must try to "hear" rather than "see" the text. The most important audial markers should guide our sense of the structure of a text.
- Looking for concentric or chiasmic structures is a useful but dangerous method, since one will always be able to rationalize one's initial impression of what seems important. Simply mapping the repetitions in a story offers a far more objective approach that allows us to build any structures "bottom-up" rather than "top-down." In many cases, concentric and chiasmic structures do eventually emerge, yet these are not always the ones we first notice.
- The segmentation of a unit into subunits can be based on content but needs to be confirmed by structural devices.
- Any literary unit will contain a number of overlaying literary structures. The borders of subunits that are created by some structural devices may be crossed by others. It is sometimes, but by no means always, possible to rank

the prominence of overlaying structures by pointing to the number and clarity of structural devices (e.g., by weighing verbatim repetition more highly than conceptual affinity, or by listening to prominent cues).

- The interrelation of a text’s whole to its subunits should not distract us from the importance of carefully examining literary devices *within* each subunit, across select subunits alone, or in the relationship of the whole to select subunits. A text may well suggest that its audience was familiar with certain formal habits, yet these habits are not rules to be followed—each text needs to be read on its own terms.
- The structural center of a literary unit, or its beginning and end, usually contains something of importance, yet this is not always the case, and what we find there by no means necessarily constitutes a text’s key message. It is thus generally a fallacy to emphasize the importance of one aspect of a text at the expense of others.

These findings are broad and general. They are, of course, not based solely on the story that I have chosen here to illustrate them, but rather reflect my take on a broad tradition of reading the Talmud, and on the many lessons I learned from Fraenkel and from some of his students.³³ When assessing the applicability of these findings to the Qur’an, we should note that we are dealing with different genres of literature, with messages generated in different ways, and with different audiences. The following reading, then, is not so much a fully comparative one as it is an attempt to triangulate historical insight by transferring some of the lessons learned in deciphering one ancient text to the study of another one. We will see, however, that while the texts to be compared are starkly different, their respective implied audiences share some of their literary sensibilities—the Talmud and the Qur’an clearly speak to different audiences, yet both texts’ audiences are part of the same world of late antique Biblical literary culture.

Who Forbids God’s Servant, When He Prays? Sūrat al-‘Alaq (Q 96)

Sūrat al-‘Alaq (Q 96) is marked by its strong cohesion as well as by a clear end-rhyme scheme, on which some comments are necessary before turning to the text itself. Our understanding of the Qur’an’s relationship to *saj‘*, “accent poetry,” despite important recent contributions, remains preliminary.³⁴ Regardless, however, we can state that the Qur’an’s prominent end-rhymes constitute one of its most distinctive formal features, offering a basis for a literary analysis that is absent in the Talmud, yet present in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, in Palestinian rabbinic liturgical poems, as well as in (possibly later) Syriac Christian literature.³⁵ In Sūrat al-‘Alaq, as we will see, the rhyme scheme stands in intimate relationship to the surah’s structure, dividing the surah into five subunits:

- the first subunit, vv. 1 and 2, rhymes on *Calaq*
- the second subunit, vv. 3–5, rhymes on *–Cam*

- the third subunit, vv. 6–14, rhymes on –Cā
- the fourth subunit, vv. 15–18, rhymes on –CāCiCah
- the fifth and final subunit, v. 19 on its own, contains the only non-rhyming verse in the surah, and instead ends on *wa-qtarib*.³⁶

In my view, the consistency of end-rhymes in the Qur'an should, where applicable, guide—yet not ultimately determine—any formal study of a surah. This is reflected in the following representation of Q 96 (Figure 3.4), which I have divided into five provisional subunits numbered one to five (omitting the traditional introductory formula *bi-smi llāhi l-rahmāni l-rahīm* which is not an integral part of the text's structure).³⁷

(I)

¹ *iqra' bi-smi rabbika lladhī khalaqa*
² *khalaqa l-insāna min 'alaqa*

Read in the Name of your Lord who created;
 Created man from a clinging mass.

(II)

³ *iqra' wa-rabbuka l-akram*
⁴ *alladhī 'allama bi-l-qalam*
⁵ *'allama l-insāna mā lam ya 'lam*

Read, since your Lord is the most noble,
 Who taught by the pen,
 Taught man what he did not know.

(III)

⁶ *kallā inna l-insāna la-yaṭghā*
⁷ *an ra 'āhu staghnā*
⁸ *inna ilā rabbika l-ruj 'ā*
⁹ *a-ra 'ayta lladhī yanhā*
¹⁰ *'abdan idhā ṣallā*
¹¹ *a-ra 'ayta in kāna 'ala l-hudā*
¹² *aw amara bi-l-taqwā*
¹³ *a-ra 'ayta in kadhhaba wa-tawallā*
¹⁴ *a-lam ya 'lam bi-anna llāha yarā*

No, indeed! Man becomes rebellious
 When he sees himself self-sufficient.
 Indeed to your Lord is the return.
 Have you seen him who stops
 A servant when he prays?
 Have you seen, is he on guidance,
 Or does he bid [others] to Godwariness?
 Have you seen, does he call him [the
 Prophet] a liar and turn away?
 —Does he not know that God sees?

(IV)

¹⁵ *kallā la-in lam yantahi la-nasfa 'an*
bi-l-nāṣiyah
¹⁶ *nāṣiyatin kādhibatin khāṭi 'ah*
¹⁷ *fa-l-yad 'u nāḍiyah*
¹⁸ *sa-nad 'u l-zabāniyah*

No! If he does not stop, We shall seize him
 by the forelock,
 A lying, sinful forelock!
 Then let him call out his gang!
 We [too] shall call the keepers of hell.

(V)

¹⁹ *kallā lā tuṭi 'hu wa-sjud wa-qtarib*

No! Do not obey him, but prostrate and draw
 near [to God]!

Figure 3.4 Sūrat al-'Alaq

As Neuwirth has correctly stated, we can relate the segmentation of the surah based on rhyme form directly to its content, especially when paying close attention to the Qur'an's unique prophetic mode.³⁸ The text's implied author, I will assume henceforth, is God, here explicitly portrayed with symbolic reference to

a conventional “scribal” image of authorship evoked by the *qalam*, the pen (in v. 4).³⁹ Yet the Qur’an not only takes the place which the Written Torah occupied for the rabbis; it also supersedes at least the orality of their Oral Torah. The text is equally implied to constitute a prophet’s *oral* recitation of God’s word. I will thus assume, for the sake of our analysis, that the Prophet is the man who spoke the words we read in the surah, yet the Prophet, while speaking, also constitutes the implied primary audience throughout the Qur’an. In addition to the Prophet, however, there is a wider audience implied in a secondary way: since the text is self-consciously recited aloud, there are those who listen to the Prophet’s locutions and, in the case of this surah, mention is made of one of the Prophet’s opponents, who is equally implied to be exposed to the text’s message.⁴⁰ Throughout the subunits, in other words, the Prophet remains the primary addressee of the surah, while the way in which he and the secondary audiences are addressed changes subtly in each subunit.

- In the first subunit (vv. 1–2), God instructs the Prophet to read, uttering a direct command to him. God here evokes His role as a creator, which He illustrates by pointing to the fact that He created human beings from a “clinging mass,” an *‘alaq*.⁴¹
- In the second subunit (vv. 3–5), God reiterates His direct command to read, and then elaborates His own role as that of the Prophet’s teacher of the unknown and the master of the pen.
- The third subunit (vv. 6–14) begins with God’s description of the tendency of human beings to forget their dependency (vv. 6–8) in general terms, which then leads Him to evoke the incident in which an unnamed opponent tries to stop “a servant”—likely the Prophet himself seen as God’s servant—from praying (vv. 9–14).
- In the fourth subunit (vv. 15–18), God threatens the Prophet’s unnamed opponent indirectly—speaking of him in the third person—with His intervention and chastisement should he persist in his impiety.
- In the fifth subunit (v. 19), God returns to a direct address, likely to His prophet, instructing him to disobey his opponent and instead worship as intended.

Subunits I, II, and V are thus set apart as containing a direct address to the Prophet (even though the presence of a secondary audience is implicit throughout), creating an opening and closing frame around subunits III and IV, which expand the implied address to the secondary audience composed of those listening and the Prophet’s adversary. This opening and closing frame is reinforced by the alliterative affinity of the first and the last words of the surah: *iqra’ bi-* (“read”) and *wa-qtarib* (“draw near”) not only sound very similar, but are (along with the preceding *sjud*, “prostrate,” in v. 19) also the only verbs in the singular imperative in the entire surah. These two words thereby form an *inclusio* around the surah, as Michel Cuypers has correctly pointed out; this *inclusio* reinforces the opening and closing frame I mentioned above, which is created by content.⁴²

In order to understand the structure of the surah and its relationship to the structure of the Talmud—in which we also saw such a primary *inclusio* functioning as an opening and closing frame for the entire story—in any further detail, a consideration of the surah’s content, and therefore of its relationship to the Biblical world of Late Antiquity, may prove helpful. We have seen that the Talmudic story discussed above forms an integral part of a discussion of the laws of the Mishna and is moreover based on the implementation of a lesson drawn from the early post-Mishnaic tractate *Pirque Avot*. While the Qur’an, unlike the Talmud, is decidedly not a commentary, an interesting parallel to the Qur’an’s surah on the creation of a human being from a “clinging mass” can equally be found in a saying preserved in *Pirque Avot*, to which Claus-Jürgen Thornton has partially drawn our awareness.⁴³

The saying in *Pirque Avot* 3:1 deserves our attention in its entirety:

Akabya n. Mahalalel said:

Consider three things (*hstkl*) and you will not come near transgression.

Know (*d’*) from where you came,

and where you are going,

and before whom you will give account and reckoning in the future.

From where you came: from a stinking drop (*m’ph srw’hh*)

and where you are going: to the place of dust, worm, and maggot;

and before whom you will give account and reckoning in the future: before the King of kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.

Thus the Mishna, in a triad, invokes us to avoid transgression. It achieves this by first stating that we were created from a “drop.” It then reminds us that we are going to “the place of dust.” There, moreover, judgment awaits us. Sūrat al-‘Alaq, in turn, evokes God’s teaching and the fact that we were created from a “clinging mass” (*min ‘alaq*, v. 2). It does this in order to remind us that “to your Lord is the return” (v. 8). Finally, we are told that judgment awaits the transgressor (vv. 15–18).

The parallel is apparent and could even be extended,⁴⁴ yet the themes of uterine growth, death, and judgment are not exactly rare in late antique discourse. As Neuwirth has pointed out, moreover, the Qur’anic term *‘alaq* seems to designate a later state of embryonic development than that of a “drop,” since the Qur’an elsewhere speaks of a liquid “drop” (*nutfah*) more specifically.⁴⁵ The “parallel” is thus slightly less precise than it may first appear, and in order to assess whether or not the Qur’an intends its audience to grasp it as significant we need to cast the intertextual net a bit further.

The Talmudic narrative we have analyzed, in addition to engaging Mishna, equally stood in close dialogue with Psalm 147. A similar case of considering the Psalms has unsurprisingly been made for Sūrat al-‘Alaq, and for good reason: the Qur’an, unusually, here evokes the Psalms, and the Psalms, in turn, share some of the topics we have seen in Sūrat al-‘Alaq.⁴⁶ Ps 139:16, for example, combines a reference to a human being’s unformed substance (*glm* in

the Hebrew) with God’s “book in which all things are written,” furnishing a striking precedent to the rather unexpected fusion of the image of a more developed form of an embryo with that of God’s penmanship that we have seen in Q 96:1–5.⁴⁷ The surah’s relationship to the Psalms, moreover, has also been considered on the phonetic level. The surah’s opening *iqra’ bi-smi rabbika*, “read in the name of your Lord” (v. 1), may well evoke similar *sounding* passages in the Psalms, for example, in Ps 16:4: “and in the name (*bšm*) of *YHWY* I will cry out (*‘qr*).” Even if the denotation of the Semitic root *q-r-* is a different one in Hebrew and Arabic, not to mention in Aramaic and in Syriac, it is likely that part of the Qur’an’s implied audience would have heard in Q 96:1 and 3 the echo of a Psalm, or at least would have perceived a Psalmic quality to the Qur’an.⁴⁸ Neuwirth, finally, persuasively pointed out that the notion that God “sees” everything, even if a transgressor may not be aware of this, as expressed in v. 14 of our surah, equally occurs in the Psalms, for example, in Ps 64:6.⁴⁹

Reading the Qur’an in light of the Psalms is thus certainly a helpful exercise.⁵⁰ Yet even the more convincing affinities between the surah and the Psalms, when compared with the Talmud’s concrete and specific *use* of Psalm 147 that we saw above, illustrate nothing more than the limits of such comparative readings of the Qur’an and the Psalms. In clear contrast to the case of the story of Rabbi in the Talmud, where knowledge of the Psalm was a key to understanding the narrative, no new or more subtle message is generated if we attempt to hear the Qur’an as evoking an echo of the Psalms. There is no indication at all that the Qur’an might have expected any part of its audience to know, and certainly not to recall, any of the Psalms mentioned, or at least not in detail.⁵¹ Some may have been familiar with the genre, yet the “psalmic” character of aspects of the surah seems to confirm to me mainly what the Qur’an explicates in the surah: that the Prophet is witnessing the revelation of a unique Arabic scripture, that he is taught, at least on a symbolic level, by the *pen*, and that any reference to existing scriptures, which are both confirmed and superseded, would not necessarily change the surah’s message.⁵²

The same difference between the Qur’an’s and the Talmud’s ways of referring to the Psalms (part of the rabbis’ Written Torah) seems equally applicable to the difference between the Qur’an’s and the Talmud’s ways of referring to the Mishna (part of the rabbis’ Oral Torah). Both Sūrat al-‘Alaq and the Talmudic story we have analyzed, it is true, implement a teaching equally found in the Mishna, just as the Medinan Sūrat al-Mā’idah (Q 5) will later explicitly quote a saying that is quite in line with another Mishnaic passage.⁵³ The Talmud, we have seen, takes knowledge of the Mishna for granted and is structured as a commentary thereon, seeing itself as a vehicle to convey the Mishna’s meaning. The Qur’an, by contrast, does not require its audience to be familiar with the Mishna at all, and sees itself as a vehicle to convey God’s word directly: the Mishna is not abrogated, yet any affinity between the Jewish tradition and the newly revealed Arabic scripture has little function other than to authenticate the Qur’an’s revelation. This function is, nonetheless, quite central to the Islamic scripture, and focusing on the said hermeneutical, canonical, and, as we will see,

structural *differences* between the Talmud and the Qur'an in light of the hermeneutical, canonical, and, as we will see, structural *affinities* between the two texts, helps us to appreciate the uniqueness of both corpora within a partially shared, broader, Biblical, literary landscape. One could even venture as far as holding that Sūrat al-ʿAlaq uses *aspects* of the Psalms in order to offer a *ritual-poetical reiteration* of a Mishnaic teaching preserved in *Pirqe Avot* in a way that is comparable to (i.e., different from) the way in which the Talmud uses one Psalm in order to offer a *halakhic-narrative implementation* of a different teaching preserved in the same Mishnaic tractate *Avot*. Turning to a full structural analysis of the surah will show how broadly both texts share their Biblical literary landscape, and how differently they inhabit it.

As mentioned above, the Islamic tradition holds that the surah actually consists of two parts whose related historical context, its “occasion of revelation,” differs. The first part recognized by the tradition, consisting of vv. 1–5 (subunits I and II), is held to be the first revelation received by Muḥammad. The second part, consisting of vv. 6–19 (subunits III, IV, and V), is held to reflect a later conflict between Muḥammad, who tried to pray in the Kaʿbah in Mecca, and an idolater. The Islamic tradition itself, of course, merely posited a chronological not a literary segmentation of the story, and Neuwirth, quite rightly, questioned this two-partite structure altogether, citing the story’s literary cohesion as an argument against it.⁵⁴ While it is impossible to falsify or verify the traditional story, we will see that the traditional (chronological) partition of the surah in two parts happens to correspond to what I consider to be the text’s most prominent (literary) structural features, based on rhyme and the repetition of initial words. This basic division of the surah (what I will henceforth call the “traditional one”) into two parts corresponds to the fact that vv. 1–5 are set apart from vv. 6–19 by means of the repetition of initial words, which, crucially, also corresponds to the remaining shifts in rhyme scheme between all subunits. The resulting two-partite structure is represented graphically on the left side of the following representation (Figure 3.5) alongside the subdivisions based on rhyme scheme (its right side representing contemporary formal analyses which we will discuss below). The following rendering also represents those aspects that structure the entire surah in bold and structural devices internal to subunit III in regular typeface.

The verb *iqraʿ* (“read”) marks the beginning of vv. 1 and 3, thereby linking as well as differentiating between subunits I and II, as based on the rhyme scheme. Likewise, the interjection *kallā* (“no”) occurs at the beginning of vv. 6, 15, and 19, which marks subunits III, IV, and V, as based on the rhyme scheme. The repetition of the terms *iqraʿ* and *kallā*, in other words, exactly maps onto the shift of the rhyme scheme according to which the subunits are represented above.⁵⁵ The repetition of these two forceful interjections in *initial* verse position, alongside the changing rhyme scheme in the *pausal* position, arguably constitutes the strongest of the surah’s formal features, those which would have been the most apparent to the contemporary audience.⁵⁶ Hence, I will argue that the traditional two-partite structure, if overlaid with the rhyme scheme and initial word change as indicated above (to the left), seems to me to be, among those we

Traditional division overlaid on
subdivision based on rhyme:

Neuwirth’s (sub)division Cuyper’s (sub)division

<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> ¹ <i>iqra’ bi-smi rabbika lladhī khalāq</i> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>
<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> ² <i>khalāqa l-insāna min ‘alaq</i> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>
<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> ³ <i>iqra’ wa-rabbuka l-akram</i> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>
<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> ⁴ <i>alladhī ‘allama bi-l-qalam</i> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>
<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> ⁵ <i>‘allama l-insāna mā lam ya ‘lam</i> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>
<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> ⁶ <i>kallā inna l-insāna la-yaṭghā</i> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>
<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> ⁷ <i>an ra’āhu staghnā</i> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>
<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> ⁸ <i>inna ilā rabbika l-ruj‘ā</i> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>
<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> ⁹ <i>a-ra’ayta lladhī yanhā</i> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>
<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> ¹⁰ <i>‘abdan idhā ṣallā</i> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>
<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> ¹¹ <i>a-ra’ayta in kāna ‘ala l-hudā</i> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>
<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> ¹² <i>aw amara bi-l-taqwā</i> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>
<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> ¹³ <i>a-ra’ayta in kadhdhaba wa-tawallā</i> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>
<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> ¹⁴ <i>a-lam ya ‘lam bi-anna llāha yarā</i> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>
<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> ¹⁵ <i>kallā la-in lam yantahi la-nasfa’an bi-l-nāṣiyah</i> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>
<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> ¹⁶ <i>nāṣiyatin kādhibatin khāṭi’ah</i> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>
<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> ¹⁷ <i>fa-l-yad ‘u nāḍiyah</i> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>
<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> ¹⁸ <i>sa-nad ‘u l-zabāniyah</i> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>
<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> ¹⁹ <i>kallā lā tuṭi ‘hu wa-sjud wa-qtarib</i> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; border-left: 1px solid black; border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 0 10px;"> </div>

Figure 3.5 Alternative divisions of Sūrat al-‘Alaq

will discuss, the most robust. We will also confirm Neuwirth’s view that the surah contains strong markers of its literary integrity as a whole (such as its strong opening and closing frame mentioned above), as well as additional structural elements that link the subunits in various ways.

In order to assess the surah’s hierarchy of structural markers, we should consider structures identified in previous Western scholarship on the surah, for which the works of Michel Cuypers and Angelika Neuwirth seem pertinent examples.⁵⁷ Among other Western scholars, Cuypers and Neuwirth have dismissed the traditional two-partite structure of the surah and have instead understood it to be a three-partite structure, with important differences among them. Cuypers bases his analysis on a putative concentric structure of the surah as a whole. In light of this concentric structure, and as graphically represented on the far right of Figure 3.5, he has suggested that vv. 1–5 form the first part of the surah (in agreement with the tradition), that vv. 6–8 form the second and central part (apparently based on the repetition of the term *inna* in vv. 6 and 8), and that

vv. 9–19, where we learn about the Prophet’s opponent, form the third part.⁵⁸ As Sinai has previously remarked, Cuypers does not offer much support for his division; he furthermore largely ignores the surah’s rhyme scheme, which changes between vv. 5 and 6 but *not* between vv. 8 and 9.⁵⁹ While some structural features of the surah obviously transcend the subunits based on the rhyme scheme, as we will see below, the repetition of one single particle (i.e., *inna* in vv. 6 and 8) does not in my view form an adequate basis in order to establish the integrity of vv. 6–8 as an independent unit, and I will challenge Cuypers’ analysis on a number of levels. That being said, Cuypers did identify a few, noteworthy, other literary elements. In addition to the surah’s overarching *inclusio*, noted above, he observes the internal rhymes in v. 2 (*khalaq* ... ‘*alaq*) and in v. 4 (*‘allam* ... *qalam*); internal rhymes being a feature we also saw in the Talmud.⁶⁰ Cuypers also makes mention of the repetition of individual words within specific subunits (e.g., *khalaq* in vv. 1 and 2, *‘allama* in vv. 4 and 5), another central feature of the Talmudic story, whose importance in the Qur’an has recently been emphasized by Nevin Reda.⁶¹ We could add to this other devices we have seen in the Talmud, such as the alliteration on *r* of *rabb* and *ruj‘ā* in v. 8. There is obviously ample merit to Cuypers’ broader attempt to read the Qur’an in light of certain stylistic devices. Nonetheless, regarding this particular surah, it is only those stylistic devices internal to specific verses (to which we will turn below) that are of help—Cuypers’ proposed structure, in my view, does not ultimately convince, nor does it enhance our understanding of the surah’s message.

An alternative segmentation of the surah has been proposed by Angelika Neuwirth. In a volume published slightly before Cuypers’ study, Neuwirth pays very close attention to the rhyme scheme, noting that the surah’s “rhyme schemes change along with the units of meaning.”⁶² As mentioned before, Neuwirth, while aware of the surah’s segmentation, equally established that the entire surah constitutes a literary “unit,” rejecting the argument brought to the contrary by Nöldeke/Schwally.⁶³ Neuwirth’s own segmentation establishes a three- rather than a two-partite structure, and subdivides these three parts mostly according to the change in rhyme scheme. As is graphically indicated in Figure 3.5 (on the near right), she combines subunits I and II (i.e., vv. 1–5) into a first part, subunits III and IV (i.e., vv. 6–18) into a second part (in turn subdivided into three sections, vv. 6–8, 9–14, and 15–18), and she sees subunit V as an independent third part of the surah.⁶⁴ Neuwirth’s commentary encompasses—and surpasses—many of the stylistic devices identified by Cuypers (who seems not to have had access to Neuwirth’s volume); in general, I find that Neuwirth’s segmentation of the surah strikes a persuasive balance between content and form. At the same time, however, Neuwirth’s internal segmentation of subunit III, by setting apart vv. 6–8 *within* it, makes it difficult to see a crucial structural element that establishes the cohesion of this subunit that is based on the repetition of the verb *r-’-y* (“to see”).

Both Neuwirth and Cuypers, of course, pay close attention to the intricate repetition of the phrase *a-ra’ayta* (“did you see”) in vv. 9, 11, and 13, in the emphasized initial position, within subunit III. Cuypers sees in this repetition the

first part of a concentric structure that is mirrored by the repetition of the term *kallā* in vv. 15 and 19, thereby creating a concentric structure in which, he holds, v. 14, *a-lam ya ‘lam bi-anna llāha yarā* (“does he not know that God sees?”), serves as a pivot.⁶⁵ This suggestion is quite problematic on formal grounds. On the one hand, it ignores the first iteration of the structurally significant term *kallā* in v. 6 (as laid out above).⁶⁶ On the other hand, Cuypers, even though he notes the two occurrences of the verb *r-‘y* (“to see”) in vv. 7 and 14 that precede and follow the triple repetition of the phrase *a-ra ‘ayta* (“did you see”), does not consider the structure created through this fivefold repetition in its entirety. The repetition of the same verb *r-‘y* throughout vv. 7, 9, 11, 13, and 14 creates a concentric structure in its own right (as indicated in regular typeface in Figure 3.5). The three repetitions of the question “did you see” (*a-ra ‘ayta*, in the second-person perfect) in vv. 9, 11, and 13 are preceded by one instance of the verb in the third-person perfect (*an ra ‘āhu*, “when he sees himself”) in v. 7, in initial position, describing how wayward human beings see themselves in general. They are then followed by one instance of the verb in the third-person imperfect (*yarā*) in the final position, describing God seeing the opponent’s actions, in v. 14, as is shown in Figure 3.6.

A	<i>an ra ‘āhu staghnā ...</i>	“when he <i>sees</i> himself as self-sufficient ...”	v. 7
B	<i>a-ra ‘ayta lladhī yanhā ...</i>	“ <i>have you seen</i> him who stops ...”	v. 9
B	<i>a-ra ‘ayta in kāna ‘ala l-hudā ...</i>	“ <i>have you seen</i> , is he on guidance ...?”	v. 11
B	<i>a-ra ‘ayta in kadhdhaba ...</i>	“ <i>have you seen</i> , does he call him a liar ...”	v. 13
A’	<i>a-lam ya ‘lam bi-anna llāha yarā</i>	“does he not know that <i>God sees</i> ?”	v. 14

Figure 3.6 *r-‘y* (“to see”) as a structural device in vv. 7–14

The artful structure ABBBA’ may not conform to typical concentric forms favored by Cuypers, yet the prominence of its fivefold repetition of the same verb would have struck the audience regardless. The structure accomplishes two effects. On the one hand, through an internal *inclusio*, the repetition of “seeing” in A and A’ juxtaposes the wayward human being, the *insān* of v. 6 who, in v. 7, “sees himself as sufficient,” to God, who, in v. 14, sees *him*. This thereby continues a theme of the juxtaposition of the human being and his Lord in subunits I and II (to which we will return) by adding the juxtaposition of wrongful self-perception (in v. 6) to God’s clear perception (in v. 14).⁶⁷ On the other hand, the fivefold repetition condenses the dramatic encounter of all three dramatic personae in the surah. The action of the wayward human being in general, who “sees himself,” in v. 7, and the action of God, who “sees” the Prophet’s opponent, in v. 14, form a frame around God’s address to the Prophet, asking him three times whether he in turn has seen his opponent’s impious actions. Rather than emphasizing its center or its beginning and end, this concentric structure *in its entirety* dramatizes the encounter between the surah’s three personae: God, His Prophet, and the unnamed opponent. Setting apart vv. 6–8 from the rest of subunit II, as

Cuypers and, in a softened form, even Neuwirth do, obscures this concentric structure, a structure which defines the surah's central subunit, around which subunits I and V as well as II and IV are neatly balanced.

Regardless, the question of whether one divides the surah into five subdivisions based purely on rhyme scheme, whether one also takes content into account and thereby creates three parts, or whether one combines the repetition of initial words *iqra'* and *kallā* with the end-rhyme, as the modified traditional two-partite structure does, is not a question of correct and incorrect analysis. It is, rather, a question of how one constructs the implied audience. In my view, we can use the traditional partition of the surah, based on the sequence of revelation, as an invitation to define what is perhaps its most robust structure (based on literary features), and arguably is the structure that would have been most apparent to the intended audience. Yet other structures, especially that of Neuwirth, are just as plausible, and the suggested five-, three-, and two-partite subdivisions can well be seen as three overlaying structures of the surah. It is not my intention to claim that my analysis is necessarily more objective than that of others, but to draw attention to the fact that any certitude regarding formal analysis is defied by the text's complexity, with which scholars have to reckon—ideally by pointing to a hierarchy of overlaid structures.

To complicate matters, then, there are a number of further structural features in the surah that cross the borders between all the divisions hitherto suggested, creating a number of *secondary* literary structures within the surah to which neither Cuypers nor Neuwirth have given due attention. While one could argue that these features would question the segmentation based on rhyme scheme and initial words, the relative obliqueness of these repetitions (most of which are in secondary verse position), when compared with the ones discussed thus far (all of which stood in initial or final verse position), suggests that these are indeed secondary structural devices.

First, in vv. 1 and 2, 3 and 4, as well as 6 and 8, to begin with, we find the repeated juxtaposition of *rabb* ("Lord") and *insān* ("human"). Cuypers recognizes the importance of the repetition in vv. 1 and 2, and in vv. 3 and 4, and accordingly proposes a parallel structure of vv. 1–2 and 3–4 within subunits I and II.⁶⁸ Cuypers also highlights the last repetition of the two words "Lord" and "human" in vv. 6 and 8, which effectively link the textual units I designated as subunits I, II, and III of the surah.⁶⁹ As in the case of the Talmud, the borders between the subunits here are being trespassed upon, but they are not being dissolved. There are, namely, some subtle differences which set the last occurrence of the two terms in subunit III apart from the first two occurrences in subunits I and II. The sequence of the two terms *rabb* and *insān* in vv. 6 and 8, firstly, inverses that which we find in the first two subunits (as Cuypers correctly states). The terms, moreover, are spread apart further than in the first two instances in which they appear (which Cuypers ignores), and both terms are, uniquely in their last iteration, preceded by *inna* (which Cuypers takes as an occasion to mark a concentric structure, as discussed above). In light of the subtle differences between the repetitions in subunits I and II, on the one hand, and in subunit III,

on the other, one could conclude that the repetition merely enhances the literary unity of the surah as a whole without questioning the clearly marked subunits. While this is surely the case to a degree, we should note that one further literary device establishes the affinity of subunits II and III, again crossing the borders between them.

Second, the affinity between subsections II and III, namely, is further strengthened through the repetition of the phrase *lam ya ‘lam* in v. 5 (with a preceding *mā*), in subunit II, and in v. 14 (here with a prefixed interrogative *a-*), in subunit III. The repetition again fulfills two functions. On the one hand, it juxtaposes God’s teaching of what His prophet “does not know” to the willful ignorance of his opponent whose own “does not know” God sees, stressing the emphasis on the phrase, as Cuypers correctly realizes.⁷⁰ On the other hand, the repetition of the phrase *lam ya ‘lam* forms a second frame around the threefold repetition of the question “have you seen” (in addition to the one formed by the repetition of the word “to see” in the third-person singular described above). This again strengthens the affinity between subunits II and III, across the shift of the rhyme scheme between vv. 5 and 6. We can thus see an apparent tension between the traditional two-partite structure on the one hand and, on the other, the relatively strong thematic and structural affinity of the surah as a whole, especially between its subunits II and III. No matter what the temporal relation of the second part of the surah, consisting of subunits III, IV, and V, to its first part, consisting of subunits I and II, it seems that the traditional “later” part stands in very close literary and thematic dialogue with the “former” part.

Third, one single structural device arguably crosses the border separating subsections III and IV: the verb “to stop” (*n-h-y*) is utilized both in v. 9 (*yanhā*, “he who stops”) and in v. 15 (*in lam yantahi*, “if he does not stop”), both times in the third-person singular imperfect, and both times describing the opponent. The repetition juxtaposes the opponent’s impious restraint of the Prophet’s prayer with God’s order to the opponent to restrain himself. Intriguingly, as in the case of the Talmud, the repetitions crossing the border in this case appear very close to them. Even clearly separated subunits such as III and IV, hence, are linked by such repetitions, again pointing to the literary unity of the surah as a whole, or at least of its second part (according to the traditional structure).

Finally, one intricate concentric structure, partially recognized by Cuypers, that crosses the border separating subsections IV and V, can be graphically represented, as shown in Figure 3.7.

In both A and A’ we find a doublet of positive words designating the Prophet’s way of approaching God, as Cuypers correctly emphasized.⁷¹ In B and B’ we find the verb *k-dh-b*, which is used to state that the opponent—wrongfully—calls the Prophet a liar in B, and that God—rightfully—calls the opponent a liar in B’. The pair C and C’, finally, repeats and qualifies the term “forelock” with an immediate repetition (not unlike that of the verbs *khalaqa* in vv. 1 and 2 and *‘allama* in vv. 4 and 5, as noted above). While another set of doublets could be added to the same structure, the concentricity is clearly perceivable as it stands.⁷² Cuypers equally argues for a concentric cohesion of the same segment of the

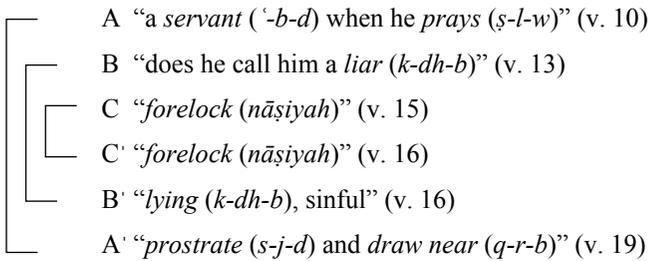


Figure 3.7 Overlying concentricism in vv. 10–19

surah, which in his view is also framed by vv. 10 and 19, A and A'. Yet, as indicated above, Cuypers then seeks to balance vv. 9–13 and vv. 15–19 as frames around v. 14, which he argues to be the pivot of this putative unit. As I remarked above, this ignores not only the surah's rhyme scheme but also *part* of the structures that the surah creates by repeating the term *kallā* and the verb *r-'y* (“to see”). We could, of course, agree with Cuypers that vv. 10 and 19, A and A', frame a concentric structure, but would its center, as marked by the repetition of the verb *k-dh-b* (“lying”) in vv. 13 and 16 (which Cuypers ignores), not then be the immediate repetition of the term *nāṣiyah* (“forelock”) in vv. 15 and 16? And would the center of the structure not, then, seem as incidental as the center of the concentric structure we saw in the Talmud: the opponent's forelock hardly bears greater narrative importance than the surrounding parts?⁷³ I would argue that it is, rather, the end parts, and thereby the Prophet's interrupted and commanded actions in vv. 10 and 19, which are emphasized, whereas the strong conceptual affinity between A and A' gives us good reason to question the structural independence of subsection V—in this, again, I agree with Cuypers and with the traditional reading of the surah. Verse 19 thus closes not only the *inclusio* opening in v. 1 (based on the affinity of *iqra' bi-* and *wa-qtarib*) but also the second *inclusio*, folded into the larger one, that opens in v. 10—again a structure we have seen in the Talmud.

Not all of the structural devices the surah creates through repetition, hence, reinforce the subdivisions that I have posited as the surah's primary structure. The threefold linkage, both in terms of form and content, of subunits II and III questions any strict segmentation of the surah into discrete parts. The linkage of subdivisions III and IV, and IV and V, inversely, enhances the traditional two-partite structure.

We are thus faced with various overlying structures that coexist within the text. These present themselves dependent on which aspect of the text one considers: its rhyme scheme, its other formal features created through repetition, or its content. Each of the three fragmentations we discussed has its advantages, if one were to argue for its suitability to describe the text: the five-partite structure based on the rhyme scheme alone clearly exists in a formal way, Neuwirth's three-partite structure strikes a balance between form and content, and even Cuypers' different three-partite structure, while inadequately setting vv. 6–8

aside, incorporates many pertinent insights. A two-partite structure, especially if subdivided based on the rhyme scheme, of course interferes least with the text and gives due attention to the two key words *iqra*’ and *kallā* that stand in initial verse position *and* mark the change of the rhyme scheme throughout the surah, and to the fivefold repetition of the verb *r-’-y* (“to see”) within the central subunit III. In light of the structural affinity between subunits I and II, on the one hand, and between III and IV, and IV and V, on the other, the two-partite structure is thus the one that may pay closest attention to form and content. This two-partite structure, in turn, is integrated into the clear opening frame created by the alliterative affinity of the first and the last word of the surah: *iqra*’ *bi- ...* (“read”) and *wa-qtarib*. This marks the literary unity of the surah in the same way that the opening and closing of the frame marked the Talmudic story.

My criticism of Cuypers’ analysis should not distract from appreciation for his work. Yet, especially in the case of the present study, it seems to me that Cuypers de-emphasized or entirely ignored certain key elements in order to subsume other elements of the surah into a structure which he invented as much as perceived—a criticism already voiced by Sinai.⁷⁴ If the analysis suggested by myself relies on some of Cuypers’ findings while rejecting many others, however, the discrepancy of results simply reiterates my main point: structural analysis can seem subjective because it can be subjective, yet it can also seem so because there *are* many overlaying structures within a text. Emphasizing one set of repetitions over another will lead careful scholars to different readings, and even the most perceptive reading should *refrain* from seeking to subsume all elements into one main structure. Literary texts, and especially those standing in the Biblical tradition, are artful creations that transcend any attempt to categorize them based on simplistic formal descriptions. In order to make sure that we do not reject structural analysis based on its apparent subjectivity, however, I would suggest a few basic rules for the formal study of the Qur’an:

- We should pay keen attention to repetition of phrases, terms, concepts, and sounds throughout the text.
- *All* repetitions of a literary feature must be taken into account. Cuypers’ analysis of *Sūrat al-‘Alaq* illustrates how arbitrary it can be to ignore, or to bracket off, select elements of structures created through repetition.
- Not all of these repetitions create concentric or chiasmic structures, yet this does not make them less important.
- Any analysis must, where applicable, take the text’s rhyme scheme into account—rhyme, after all, is the most prominent repetitive feature of the Qur’an, and, Marianna Klar reminds me, we are nowhere near to fully understanding its function.
- When several overlaying literary structures are manifest, scholars should not dismiss the secondary ones but rather seek to identify and describe a hierarchy between a primary and a number of secondary structures.
- This hierarchy should not be based on a static understanding of the “rules” of Biblical rhetoric, and it should not be based on a “graphic” sense of these

texts. Rather, the text's *intended* hierarchy should be based on what would have been aurally perceivable by its original audience.

- While it may not be possible objectively to decide which elements stand out most, some types of repetitions would have clearly jumped out to the audience: rhymes within a verse or, most importantly, at the end of a verse; lexemes and especially exclamations repeated in initial or final verse position; the repetition of lexemes throughout a surah, especially in high frequency or in structurally prominent positions (e.g., accompanied by a shift in theme or genre).
- In general, I would suggest seeing the repetition of specific phrases and words as more immediately apparent to the audience than that of concepts, even if the two modes of repetition—lexical and conceptual—are often interwoven.

The present study constitutes but a modest foray into the vast and exceedingly complex task of comparative literary studies. Its findings will have to be replicated in other contexts in order to assess their full relevance. Yet, in light of the fairly homogeneous literary structure of the Babylonian Talmud on the one hand and of parts of the Qur'an on the other, some of the lessons learned from the comparison likely seem pertinent. The transfer of tools developed for the literary study of the Talmud, it may thus be argued, can move us toward a more sophisticated reading of the Qur'an. The phenomenon of divergent structural divisions of Talmudic as well as of Qur'anic texts in different analyses may in effect not usually point to a lack of scholarly attentiveness but to the presence of overlying structures in both texts. Even if my respective analysis here was but superficial, we have seen that the Talmud and the Qur'an not only share a plethora of literary devices built on repetition but also other formal aspects such as internal rhymes and alliteration. This is not surprising in and of itself; rather, it forms the basic arguments of the proponents of Biblical rhetoric.

This is not the place in which to engage this theory in all its details, yet it may be time to question its underlying notions in two ways. On the one hand, the creation of meaning and structure through repetition is neither a "Biblical" nor a "Semitic" but a universal phenomenon. Even if it is especially prevalent in many Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic texts, we find similar structures, including chiasms and concentric ones, in many other related and unrelated cultures, as has long been noted.⁷⁵ On the other hand, students of the literary features of the Qur'an should by all means continue to compare the Arabic scripture to the Hebrew one. Yet, in doing so, they may want to begin their studies by starting comparative readings of the Qur'an not in dialogue with the Bible but in dialogue with literatures that were circulating at the time of the Prophet. The Qur'an's audience would have been most familiar with the structural devices of pre-Islamic literary poetry alongside forms of Jewish and Christian literature. This is, of course, no easy task: there are studies comparing the Qur'an to aspects of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, and the literary study of the Babylonian Talmud and of Palestinian Midrash is well established, yet the same can hardly be said for much of

Palestinian Jewish liturgical poetry or large swaths of Syriac literature, and the present essay can only be described as a first attempt at integrating a large body of scholarship and an even broader number of scholarly *desiderata*.⁷⁶ It is easy to see how differently the Babylonian Talmud and the Qur’an are structured. The present study, however, has illustrated quite clearly that the tools developed for the study of the former can be of help in the appreciation of the latter. These two disparate texts share more than the occasional affinity in content: they are both addressed to an audience that is finely attuned to the perception of various overlying literary structures created through the repetition of phrases, words, sounds, and concepts.

Notes

- * The writing of this essay was made possible by the generous support of the Leverhulme Trust. I also want to express my gratitude to all those who have given me feedback on the oral versions of this paper presented at the *International Qur’anic Studies Association* Annual Meeting in 2015, as well as to the participants of the 2016 symposium *Structural Dividers in Qur’anic Material: A Synthesis of Approaches*, and especially to the organizer of that symposium, and the editor of this volume, Marianna Klar, whose comments have much improved an earlier draft. Note that I have previously addressed some of the existing scholarship on Q 96 in Zellentin, “Q96 *Sūrat al-‘Alaq* Between Philology and Polemics: A (Very) Critical Assessment of Günter Lüling’s *Ur-Qur’ān*,” in *Die Koranhermeneutik von Günter Lüling*, ed. George Tamer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 159–85. The English translation of the Qur’an is loosely based on that of Sayyid ‘Ali Quli Qara’i, ed. and trans., *The Qur’ān with an English Paraphrase* (Qom: Centre for Translation of the Holy Qur’ān, 2003). Jewish Aramaic and Hebrew, as well as Christian Aramaic (i.e., Syriac), will be generally transliterated in accordance with the early defective (i.e., non-vocalized) traditions as follows: ‘ *B g d h w z ḥ ṭ y k l m n s ‘ p ṣ q r š t*; full vocalization follows the *SBL Handbook of Style*. Note that all translations from ancient texts are my own unless otherwise noted; I have, moreover, translated all relevant French and German scholarship into English.
- 1 A convenient summary of Fraenkel’s work is provided by the author himself in Fraenkel, *Darkhe ha-agadah veba-midrash* (Givataim, IL: Yad La-Talmud, 1991).
 - 2 See, e.g., Hillel Newman, “Closing the Circle: Yonah Fraenkel, the Talmudic Story, and Rabbinic History,” in *How Should Rabbinic Literature be Read in the Modern World?*, ed. Matthew Krauss (Atlanta, GA: Gorgias Press, 2006). The most important contemporary scholars standing in the tradition of Fraenkel may be Jeffrey Rubenstein and Joshua Levinson, who have moved far beyond Fraenkel’s pioneering work; see, e.g., Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative, Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), and Joshua Levinson, *The Twice-Told Tale: A Poetics of the Exegetical Narrative in Rabbinic Midrash* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005).
 - 3 The relationship between form and content has occupied literary critics for decades; see, e.g., Verena Theile and Linda Tredennick, eds., *New Formalisms and Literary Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). In my view, form should always be understood pragmatically as an aspect of content, allowing us to use the construction of a clear message as a controlling device to assess our understanding of the inseparable issue of literary form and vice versa.
 - 4 The rabbinic notion of the “people of the land” is likely derived from the usage of the term in Ezra 4:4. On the as yet understudied issue of the identity of the ‘*Ame ha’Ares* and their relationship to the rabbis, see, e.g., A’haron Oppenheimer, *The ‘Am ha-Aretz*:

- A Study in the Social History of the Jewish People in the Hellenistic-Roman Period*, trans. I.H. Levine (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977), and Peter Jerome Haas, “The “am ha’arets” as Literary Character,” in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Intellect in Quest of Understanding*, ed. Jacob Neusner et al. (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989).
- 5 Manuscript Hamburg 165, closely followed by Paris 1337, seems to offer the best witness of the story, while other manuscripts and prints I have consulted (manuscripts Florence II-I-9, Escorial G-I-3, Vatican 115, and JTS ENA 2596, as well as the Vilna and Pesaro print) contain material that is best explained as showing traces of later additions and emendations. The story is retold in the medieval *Massekhet Kallah Rabbati* 2 in a relatively faithful way.
 - 6 Following manuscripts Hamburg 165, Paris 1337, and Florence II-I-9. Manuscripts Escorial G-I-3, Vatican 115, and the Vilna and Pesaro prints add “the masters of *halakhot* and the masters of *agadol*”; the Vilna print also substitutes “Gemara” for “Talmud.”
 - 7 Following manuscripts Hamburg 165, Paris 1337, Florence II-I-9, JTS ENA 2596, and the Pesaro print. In manuscript Vatican 115 and the Vilna print, Rabbi addresses Yonathan as “my son” (*bny*).
 - 8 Manuscript Vatican 115 transposes “raven” to Rabbi’s answer.
 - 9 Following manuscripts Hamburg 165, Escorial G-I-3, and the Vilna and the Pesaro prints. Manuscripts Paris 1337 and Florence II-I-9 omit that Rabbi was grieved. Manuscript Vatican 115 translates the information that Rabbi was grieved into Hebrew.
 - 10 Following manuscripts Hamburg 165 and Paris 1337. Manuscripts Florence I-II-9, Vatican 115, Escorial G-I-3, and the Vilna and Pesaro prints, add that Yonathan was “your,” i.e., Rabbi’s, “student” (*tlmydk*).
 - 11 Manuscript Escorial G-I-3 has *lhtg’wt*, “to be proud.”
 - 12 Following manuscripts Florence II-I-9, Hamburg 165, and Escorial G-I-3. Manuscript Paris 1337 omits the fact that “they inquired.” The Vilna and Pesaro prints have *mymyw bdaqw w’skh*; manuscript Hamburg 115 has *bdq’hryw*.
 - 13 It has been a growing trend in Talmudic as well as in Qur’anic studies to emphasize reading literary units in the broader context in which they have been placed; note the respective criticism of Fraenkel’s notion of hermetically sealed and self-referential stories (n. 2, above). The attempt to assess the literary structure of entire Talmudic tractates, however, has not yet fully established itself, since the sheer mass of information is overwhelming. A noteworthy foray in this field is Julia Watts Belser, *Power, Ethics, and Ecology in Jewish Late Antiquity: Rabbinic Responses to Drought and Disaster* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), which seeks to make sense of the Bavli tractate *Ta’nit* as a whole. On similar debates in Qur’anic studies see n. 59 below.
 - 14 The basic historicity of the reports about Rabbi are plausible, yet impossible to verify. For the problem of establishing an economic history based on rabbinic texts, see, e.g., Hayim Lapin, *Economy, Geography, and Provincial History in Later Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001); many of Lapin’s insights also hold true for rabbinic Mesopotamia, where non-rabbinic sources are even scarcer. The issue of rabbis and charity, of course, is much better studied; see, e.g., Tzvi Novick, “Poverty and Halakhic Agency: Gleanings from the Literature of Rabbinic Palestine,” *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 22 (2014), with reference to previous literature.
 - 15 The raven appears as impure already in Lev 11:15 and Dtn 14:14; likewise, the dog is a negative symbol (e.g., in Dtn 23:19 and 2Kgs 8:13); on Bavli *Kritot* 18a, see n. 23 below. See Richard Whitekettle, “The Raven as Kind and Kinds of Ravens: A Study in the Zoological Nomenclature of Leviticus 11,2–23,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 117 (2005), and Joshua Schwartz, “Dogs and Cats in Jewish Society in the Second Temple, Mishnah and Talmud Periods,” *World Congress of Jewish Studies* 12, B (1997).

- 16 For a good summary on Rabbi and the status of the Jewish patriarch, see Lee I. Levine, “The Emergence of the Patriarchate in the Third Century,” in *Envisioning Judaism, Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Ra‘anan Boustan et al., 2 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).
- 17 See, e.g., Holger Zellentin, *Rabbinic Parodies of Jewish and Christian Literature* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), esp. 27–50 and 95–136; see also Watts Belsler, *Power, Ethics, and Ecology*.
- 18 On the relative dating of the very likely post-Mishnaic tractate *Pirqe Avot*, see Günther Stemberger, “Mischna Avot: frühe Weisheitsschrift, pharisaisches Erbe oder spätrabbinische Bildung?,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 96 (2005). Note that the Talmud legislates remuneration for some aspects of teaching Torah; see, e.g., Bavli *Nedarim* 64a.
- 19 Among the many “soft” markers of a post-Tannaitic composition, the concept of distinguishing between “masters of Scripture,” “masters of Mishna,” and “masters of Talmud” is a good example; such language occurs only once in the Tannaitic literature (see Sifre *Berakha* 14); it is much more common in later rabbinic literature; see, e.g., *Bereshit Rabbah* 41:1, *Wayiqrah Rabbah* 36:2, *Pesiqta deRav Kahana* 2:4, and Bavli *Eruvin* 64b. Note also the exclusively or mainly Amoraic forms *qryth*, *šnyth*, and *prnsny* (but see Sifre *Nitzavim* 2). On the type of post-Mishnaic Hebrew found in later citations of allegedly earlier material (the so-called *Baraitot*), see, e.g., Eduard Yechezkel Kutscher, *Hebrew and Aramaic Studies* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977), vol. 1, as well as M. Moreshet, “The Language of the Baraytot in the T. B. is not MHe¹ [Hebrew],” in *Henech Yalon Memorial Volume*, ed. Kutscher et al. (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1974).
- 20 This is another common feature of Talmudic literature. See, e.g., Zellentin, *Rabbinic Parodies*, 105; Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 246–47; as well as Shamma Friedman, “*Nomen est Omen*: Rabbinic Dicta of Talmudic Sages which Echo the Author’s Name,” in *These are the Names*, ed. Aaron Demsky (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1999).
- 21 For the designation of Moses as “son of ‘Amram” see, e.g., *Bereshit Rabbah* 54:4, *Ekha Rabbah Petichta* 24, Bavli *Shabbat* 89a, and Bavli *Sanhedrin* 82a. Note that Yonathan ben ‘Amram, to the best of my knowledge, only appears twice elsewhere in rabbinic literature, namely, in Qohelet Rabbah 9:10 and in Bavli *Hagiga* 20a.
- 22 See G. Buchanan Gray, *Studies in Hebrew Proper Names* (London: Black, 1896), 45–51, esp. 45, n. 3. The etymology of *‘Am-ram* from *‘m* and *rm*, parallel to *Ab-ram* and *Ahi-ram*, Gray notes, is “far from certain” (a derivation from *‘mr* is equally plausible), yet the name’s folk-etymological meaning as indicating the “lifting” of the “people” is well attested in antiquity and would thus have likely been clear to the rabbis as well (see, e.g., Aramaic Levi Document 72–80, in Henryk Drawnel, *An Aramaic Wisdom Text From Qumran: A New Interpretation of the Levi Document* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 150 (Aramaic) and 153 (translation); see also the Zohar on Ex. 19a).
- 23 See Fraenkel, *Darkhe ha-agadah*, 269 and 630, n. 53; see also Bavli *San* 108b (erroneously as 8b in Fraenkel, *ibid.*). In Bavli *Kritot* 18a, Rabbi himself declares an Israelite liable for a guilt-offering in relationship to permitted or forbidden fat which was eaten either by a gentile or “by a dog or by a raven” (*wkn klb wkn ‘wrb*).
- 24 Fraenkel, *Darkhe ha-agadah*, 268–69; see also 1 Sam 17:43 and 24:14. While the phrasing and the words used in the Talmud differ from those in the Psalm (e.g., *pth* instead of *lhm* for “bread”), the story’s allusion to the Bible is clear.
- 25 The “outcasts” in the Psalm, in light of the rebuilding of Jerusalem in the first part of Ps 147:2, are most like the exiles, yet the “bringing in” of the *ignoramus* clearly reverberates when reading the Psalm in light of our story. There are more details suggesting that the Talmud expects its audience to consider Psalm 147 in its entirety; Ps 147:14, for example, designates God as the one who “fills you with the finest of the wheat,” evoking the similar theme of feeding the needy in the story.

- 26 See Fraenkel, *Darkhe ha-agadah*, 268.
- 27 On the concept of the Written and the Oral Torah, see esp. Martin Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism 200 BCE–400 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- 28 The expectation of a third question containing a reference to the Talmud proved so strong that a later, likely medieval hand, probably inspired by a similar phrase in *Berakhot* 47b, “corrected” the story by adding a third question to manuscript Hamburg, which at least contains the “missing” root *tlmd*: “have you waited upon scholars (*tlmydy hkm*),” a question which Yonathan here equally denies.
- 29 The theme of the unity between Written and Oral Torah may be described as the most central issue in the meta-discourse of the late Babylonian rabbinic stories, and therefore was even subject to ironic self-reflection; see, e.g., Shaye Cohen, “Antipodal Texts: B. Eruvin 21b–22a and Mark 7:1–23 on the Tradition of the Elders and the Commandment of God,” in *Envisioning Judaism, Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Raanan Boustan et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), and Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 34–63; see also n. 53 below.
- 30 See Fraenkel, *Darkhe ha-agadah*, 268.
- 31 While I would argue that the multiple formal and narrative markers I discussed strongly indicate that the suggested segmentation is the primary one, the matter clearly is not a zero-sum game. Indeed, I hold that different scholars can legitimately reach different conclusions about the segmentation of literary units in the Talmud (as well as in the Qur’an). If the arguments are carefully made, then the discrepancy is by no means a sign of the arbitrariness of literary analysis, but rather a sign of the simultaneous presence of overlaying structural devices within each unit. We must not forget that the segmentation of a story based on either content or form has no value in and of itself; it is nothing but a preliminary step in our attempt to understand a story. Seeing in the structure or segmentation a necessary or reified aspect of the text would overrate the importance of structure. In other words, the story’s message is complex and sometimes ambiguous, including utter disdain for the *ignoramus* alongside references to God’s care for all creatures in the Hebrew Bible and the ensuing necessity to feed the needy, including the *ignoramuses*. This holds even if the halakhic requirement is based not precisely on compassion but instead, indirectly, on avoiding the abuse of the Torah’s honor. The story’s literary structure is no less complex than its “content”; rather, structure is an integral part of content, offering a multitude of overlapping structures; see n. 3 above.
- 32 Note that this alliteration is only present in manuscripts Hamburg 165 and Escorial G-I-3, as well as in the Vilna and the Pesaro prints; but not in manuscripts Paris 1337, Florence II-I-9, and Vatican 115; see n. 9 above.
- 33 See notes 1 and 2 above.
- 34 The rules and complexities of Qur’anic *saj’* are well sketched by Devin Stewart; while *saj’* is often translated as “rhyming prose,” Stewart’s suggested translation of the term as “accent poetry” may be more astute (see Stewart, art., “Rhymed Prose,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001–2006); Stewart, “Saj’ in the Qur’ān: Prosody and Structure,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 21 (1990). See also Marianna Klar (Chapter 6, this volume).
- 35 For the relationship of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry to the Qur’an, see, e.g., Nicolai Sinai, “Religious Poetry from the Quranic Milieu: Umayya b. Abī l-Šalt on the Fate of the Thamūd,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 74, no. 3 (2011), and Thomas Bauer, “The Relevance of Early Arabic Poetry for Qur’anic Studies, Including Observations on *Kull* and on Q 22:27, 26:225, and 52:31,” in *The Qur’ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’ānic Milieu*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx (Leiden: Brill, 2010). The state of research on late antique poetry in general, and especially on the development of forms with end-rhymes in the Jewish and Christian tradition, by contrast, remains

tenuous; even the basic questions of the time and cultural context of the emergence of such forms have not yet been firmly established. Brock states that rhyme only emerged as a regular feature in Syriac poetry “from the ninth century onwards; this was evidently introduced under the influence of Arabic poetry”; see Brock, “Poetry and Hymnography (3): Syriac,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 658; see also Gerrit J. Reinink and Herman L.J. Vanstiphout, *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Mediaeval Near East: Forms and Types of Literary Debates in Semitic and Related Literatures* (Louvain: Peeters, 1991). Ophir Münz Manor, at the same time, who dates Jewish Aramaic liturgical poems that rhyme to the sixth or seventh century, argues for a comparison between the Syriac and the Jewish material partially based on rhyme; see Münz Manor, “Liturgical Poetry in the Late Antique Near East: A Comparative Approach,” *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 1 (2010). It seems that the comparison of Palestinian Jewish liturgical poems, pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, the Qur’an, and even some aspects of Syriac poetry may help us better contextualize the formal features of all these bodies of text.

- 36 On the rhyme scheme of the surah, see Stewart, “Saj’ in the Qur’ān,” 137 (see also 111); Stewart correctly identifies only the last syllable of the first rhyme as “-aq,” yet the fuller rhyme extraordinarily extends over two syllables as –*alaq*; see also Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 1: Frühmekkanische Suren. Poetische Prophetie* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011), 266.
- 37 While the preliminary segmentation of the surah based on rhyme scheme alone is my own, I will, in the following and for the sake of convenience, identify the textual units indicated in the following with reference to these same “subunits” I to V also when discussing the work of other scholars who would not necessarily agree on their relevance.
- 38 Neuwirth rightly notes that the “rhyme scheme changes with the units created by content,” yet she subdivides subunit III (which has a consistent rhyme scheme) into two parts as vv. 6–8 and vv. 9–14 based on content alone; see Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 1*, 266.
- 39 In Q 31:27, the term *qalam* is equally related to the writing of God’s words (cf. also Q 68:1, the opening of the eponymous Sūrat al-Qalam, as well as Q 3:44). “Pen,” just as all terms relating to writing such as “scroll” (*ṣuḥuf*, e.g., Q 20:133 or *sijil*, Q 21:104), “papyrus” (*qirtās*, Q 6:7), “inscription” and “tablet” (*muskah* and *lawh*, Q 7:154), “parchment” (*raqq*, Q 52:3), “ink” (*midād*, Q 19:109), “volume” (*asfār*, Q 62:5), and of course “Scripture” (*kitāb*, Q 2:2), are usually interpreted as relating to the Qur’an itself; see Nicolai Sinai, “Qur’ānic Self-Referentiality as a Strategy of Self-Authorization,” in *Self-Referentiality in the Qur’ān*, ed. Stefan Wild (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2006). As is well known, Jesus is associated with God’s word at a later stage (see Q 3:39 and Q 4:171). According to Neuwirth, the Qur’an’s self-referential symbolism based on writings begins in Q 96 and Q 87, which she considers to be a pair; see Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 1*, 274.
- 40 See Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 1*, 278–79. For my reading of the Qur’an based on implied author and implied audience, see Zellentin, “The Synchronic and the Diachronic Qur’ān: Sūrat Yā Sīn, Lot’s People, and the Rabbis,” in *The Making of Religious Texts in Islam: The Fragment and the Whole*, ed. Asma Hilali and S.R. Burge (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2019), and n. 52 below.
- 41 The word *‘alaq* occurs only once in the Qur’an, yet the very closely related word *‘alaqa* is not uncommon; Q 22:5, Q 23:14, Q 40:67, and Q 75:38 equally evoke the human being’s creation from a clinging mass. Man’s uterine creation is a common theme in the Qur’an. On the related term *nutfah* see n. 45 below.
- 42 See Michel Cuyper, “L’analyse rhétorique face à la critique historique de J. Wansbrough et de G. Lüling. L’exemple de la sourate 96,” in *The Coming of the Comforter:*

When, Where, and to Whom?, Studies on the Rise of Islam and Various Other Topics in Memory of John Wansbrough, ed. Carlos A. Segovia and Lourie Basil (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012), 361.

- 43 See Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 1*, 268, with reference to an oral communication by Claus-Jürgen Thornton highlighting the Mishnaic parallel regarding human provenance from a “drop” (without further elaboration).
- 44 Note that both *Sūrat al-‘Alaq* and Mishna *Avot* 3:1 emphasize the intellectual, yet in different ways: while the Mishna invites its audience “to consider” (*skl*) and “to know” (*yd’*) based on the rabbinic tradition and the intellect itself, the Qur’an, in its repeated usage of the term “to know” (*‘-l-m*), stresses God’s direct teaching and humankind’s dependence on it.
- 45 See Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 1*, 269. The Qur’an, we should note, elsewhere uses the cognate to the Hebrew *ṭph* used in the Mishnaic passage: in Q 22:5, Q 23:13–14, Q 40:67, and Q 75:37, the term *nutfah* even appears in conjunction with the term *‘alaq* in order to evoke the unformed human being; see also n. 41 above. The embryo was, in turn, also an object of fascination for the rabbis; see Gwynn Kessler, *Conceiving Israel: The Fetus in Rabbinic Narratives* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).
- 46 On the Psalms in the Qur’an, see, e.g., Q 21:105, as well as Walid A. Saleh, “The Psalms in the Qur’an and in the Islamic Religious Imagination,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), and Angelika Neuwirth, “Qur’anic Readings of the Psalms,” in *The Qur’ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’anic Milieu*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx (Leiden: Brill, 2010).
- 47 On the Biblical notion of the *golem* and its development in Jewish culture, see, e.g., Peter Schäfer, “The Magic of the Golem: The Early Development of the Golem Legend,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 46 (1995).
- 48 This point has been made by numerous scholars; see, e.g., Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 1*, 267, and Cuypers, “L’analyse rhétorique,” 351. Related Qur’anic passages include Q 56:74 and Q 69:52; a similar phrase can also be found in Ps 79:6 and Ps 80:19, in Is 12:4, and in other Biblical texts. Many proponents of studying the Qur’an in the light of the Bible tend to confine their interest to the Hebrew Bible, rather than considering the Bible’s later Aramaic reiterations that would have been at least as, if not more, familiar to many Jews and Christians of Late Antiquity. Note, for example, that the Aramaic versions of Ps 116:4, *wbšm’ d’yhwh ’yqry* in the Targum of Psalms and especially *wbšmh dmry’ ’qr’*, “in the name of the Lord I will cry out” in the Peshitta, are more closely related to the Qur’an than the Hebrew version, both in terms of form and content. Yet the Hebrew text remains front and center: a reference to an embryo, for example, is not kept in the Aramaic translations of Ps 139:16; see n. 40 above. On the Jewish Targumic tradition, see, e.g., Willem Smelik, *Rabbis, Language and Translation in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); on the Peshitta translation, used by many Syriac Christians, see Michael P. Weitzman, *The Syriac Version of the Old Testament: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- 49 See Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 1*, 271–72, with an additional reference to Ps 94:9.
- 50 Not all parallels between the surah and the Psalms that have been suggested, however, are equally relevant. Cuypers, for example, argues that the beginning of the surah somehow resembles that of Psalm 95; see Cuypers, “L’analyse rhétorique,” 352. Cuypers points out that the Qur’an’s exhortation to “invoke,” or “read” in the name of the Lord (in v. 1), is followed by a reference to God as the One who created (in v. 2), and by the statement that God is “the most noble” (in v. 3). Cuypers compares this sequence to the Psalm’s exhortation to “rejoice in the Lord” in the initial verse (i.e. Ps 95:1), which is followed by a reference to God’s creation of the sea (in Ps 95:5), and eventually by the statement “since He is our God” (in Ps 95:7). I must admit that I

find this alleged parallel quite far-fetched: I do not see any particular affinity between the Psalm’s “rejoicing,” and the Qur’an’s exhortation to “read” or “invoke” either in sound or content, and I find the parallel between the creation of human beings and that of the sea, or between the statements that God is “ours” and that God is “the most noble,” far too broad. Likewise, Neuwirth’s suggestion that Ps 21:13 would stand in any relationship to Q 96:15–16 seems less pertinent than her other references; see Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 1*, 272, as well as Zellentin, “Q96 *Sūrat al-‘Alaq*,” forthcoming.

- 51 The Talmud is an inward-looking document, and its implied audience is extremely well defined in terms of culture, gender, language, and education, as David Kraemer has well observed; see Kraemer, *Reading the Rabbis: The Talmud as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). The Qur’an’s audience, by contrast, is outward looking; it seeks to convert and comfort a much more diverse audience. For a preliminary attempt to argue this point, see Zellentin, “The Synchronic and the Diachronic Qur’ān,” esp. 148–59; see also n. 40 above.
- 52 This is not to challenge the broader pertinent points made by Saleh and Neuwirth; see n. 46 above. On the Qur’an’s affirmation and abrogation of legal aspects of previous scripture, see, e.g., Holger Zellentin, *The Qur’ān’s Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum as a Point of Departure* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), esp. 55–76.
- 53 On Q 5:32 and Mishna *Sanhedrin* 4:5, see most recently *The Qur’an Seminar Commentary: A Collaborative Study of 50 Qur’anic Passages*, ed. Mehdi Azaiez et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 107–10. Intriguingly, Q 5:32 introduces the teaching with close affinity to Mishna *Sanhedrin* 4:5 as having been “written” by God for the Israelites, a detail that has not received sufficient attention. We should note that, in a comparable way, the Amoraic Palestinian rabbinic tradition holds that not only Scripture but also rabbinic writings such as the Mishna were revealed by God to Moses among the Scripture given at Sinai; see Yerushalmi *Pe’ah* 2:6 17a; Yerushalmi *Meggilah* 4:1 74a; Yerushalmi *Hagiga* 1:8 76d; *Ekha Rabbah* 22:1; *Qohelet Rabbah* 1:9; see also notes 27 and 29 above.
- 54 Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 1*, 269; and Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike: Ein europäischer Zugang* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2010), 408–13, and see already Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur’ān*, 69.
- 55 As discussed below, Cuypers mentions the repetition of the term *kallā* in vv. 15 and 19, and considers it to be a structural device, but he sidelines the first occurrence in v. 6; see Cuypers, “L’analyse rhétorique,” 356–67 and n. 66 below. On the uniqueness of *kallā* in this surah, see also Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur’ān*, 70.
- 56 Note that the pausal forms in recited Qur’anic Arabic constitute a formal parallel to the traditional recitation of the Hebrew Bible: in the Masoretic text, however, the pausal form causes the stress to recede to the penultimate syllable in which short vowels are either lengthened or otherwise altered; see, e.g., Edward Lipiński, *Semitic Languages: Outline of a Comparative Grammar* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), # 26:2 (191).
- 57 See Cuypers, “L’analyse rhétorique,” 348–62, and Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 1*, 264–79; see also Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1981); on previous commentators, see Zellentin, “Q96 *Sūrat al-‘Alaq*.”
- 58 Cuypers, “L’analyse rhétorique,” 348–61; see also his similar presentation of Q 96 in Cuypers, *The Composition of the Qur’an*, 162–66.
- 59 More specifically, Sinai, who discusses the presentation of Q 96 in Cuypers’ *The Composition of the Qur’an*, 164, notes that “another instance in which Cuypers’ presentation of a Qur’anic passage implies that two verse clusters stand in a mirroring relationship without any specific correspondences being pointed at is Q. 96:9–13 and Q. 96:15–19.” See Nicolai Sinai, “Review Essay: ‘Going Round in Circles’: Michel Cuypers, *The Composition of the Qur’an: Rhetorical Analysis*, and Raymond Farrin,

- Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation: A Study of Symmetry and Coherence in Islam's Holy Text*," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 19, no. 2 (2017), 122 n. 22. Oddly, Cuypers only discusses the rhymes in vv. 1–5 (see below) but does not even acknowledge those in vv. 9–19.
- 60 Cuypers, "L'analyse rhétorique," 350.
- 61 Cuypers, "L'analyse rhétorique," 350, and Nevin Reda, *The al-Baqara Crescendo: Understanding the Qur'an's Style, Narrative Structure, and Running Themes* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 50–63. The cases of repetition in vv. 1–2 involves concatenation, i.e., "the recurrence of a keyword at the end of a strophe or other structural unit and the beginning of the next, and it has the effect of transition or unification" (ibid., 52). Reda, building on the previous study by David Heinrich Müller, emphasizes the presence of concatenation "both in the Qur'an and the [Hebrew] Bible, among other Semitic texts" (ibid.), yet Neuwirth, who had also identified the stylistic device in Q 96:1–2, designates it as an "im Koran selten[e] rhetorische Figur" (see *Der Koran. Band 1*, 278). The question regarding immediate repetition of individual words in the Qur'an thus needs further inquiry, yet Reda's consideration of concatenation as a form of *iqtiṣās*, in turn defined as "the expansion and clarification of a single word in another verse" (see *Al-Baqara Crescendo*, 50), constitutes an excellent starting point.
- 62 Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 1*, 266.
- 63 See n. 54 above.
- 64 See Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 1*, 264–67.
- 65 Cuypers, "L'analyse rhétorique," 356–57; it is this structure that Sinai criticized; see n. 52 above.
- 66 Cuypers simply notes the difficulties in *understanding* this first occurrence but does not discuss how it relates to the putative structural function of the term's occurrence in vv. 15 and 19. Cuypers states that the term *kallā* "poses a problem of interpretation and translation"; see Cuypers, "L'analyse rhétorique," 358; see also n. 55 above.
- 67 See also Cuypers, "L'analyse rhétorique," 360. Cuypers, moreover, notes correctly that the term "God," rather than "Lord," occurs only in v. 14, thereby marking its importance; see Cuypers, "L'analyse rhétorique," 357.
- 68 Cuypers, "L'analyse rhétorique," 350. Cuypers, in this case alone, does pay some attention to the end-rhymes on *-alaq* in vv. 1 and 2, and on *-am* in vv. 4 and 5, but he ignores the same rhyme on *-am* in v. 3, which would make the parallelism he suggests a little less "perfect" than is implied.
- 69 Cuypers, "L'analyse rhétorique," 359–60.
- 70 Cuypers, "L'analyse rhétorique," 360. Cuypers identifies this verse as the pivot of a concentric structure, arguing that the repetition of the term in vv. 5 and 14 shows the "displacement" of a phrase from the center of one structure to the periphery of another.
- 71 Cuypers, "L'analyse rhétorique," 357.
- 72 The doublet of positive reverential attitudes, in vv. 11 (*hudā*, "guidance") and 12 (*taqwā*, "Godwariness"), stands in structural balance to the doublet of words designating two groups of henchmen in vv. 17 (*nādiya*, "gang") and 18 (*zabāniya*, "keepers of hell"), whose affinity is not only indicated by rhyme but also by their qualification with the same verb *d-*-*w*, "to call out," as Marianna Klar reminds me. Structurally, these two sets of doublets would expand the structure as ABCDD'C'B'A', yet their lack of semantic affinity would weaken the clarity of the concentric structure described above.
- 73 The seizing of forelocks is well attested in the Qur'an. Q 11:56 states in general terms that "there is no living being but He holds it by its forelock (*ākhidhun bi-nāṣiyatihā*)." The image here shows God sovereignly supporting, or perhaps more likely controlling, all of His creatures. More closely related to our passage is Q 55:41, where we learn that "the guilty will be recognized by their mark; so they will be held by the forelocks (*fa-yu'khadhu bi-l-nawāṣit*) and the feet." On the seizing of forelocks in the Talmud and Late Antiquity more broadly, see Zellentin, "Q96 *Sūrat al-'Alaq*," 179–82.

74 See n. 59 above.

75 I am not quite clear why Cuypers insists on the term “Semitic” rhetoric when he relies so heavily on the presence of chiasmic structures in the New Testament; see Cuypers, *The Composition of the Qur’ān*, 109–32, and Nils Wilhelm Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament: A Study in Formgeschichte* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942). For other “non-Semitic” uses of ring composition, see also Mary Douglas, *Thinking in Circles: An Essay on Ring Composition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), and John W. Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis* (Provo, UT: Research Press, 1999).

76 See n. 35 above.

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