



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Emotion in the Qur'an: An Overview

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Despite a huge surge in interest and production in the field of Qur'anic studies, very little has been said about emotion in the Qur'an. While some authors have commented on the text's emotive power,¹ and entries in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* include certain prominent emotions such as 'love', 'fear', and 'joy and misery', to my knowledge nobody has undertaken a study of emotions as such.² The studies that do acknowledge the power of emotion tend to concentrate on emotion as a response to the text's aesthetics.³ There can be no doubt that hearing the recited Qur'an can be moving. Yet an exclusive focus on aesthetics sidelines the emotional impact of the *content* of the text, which seems to be what is important to the listeners at Q. 5:83, *When they hear what has been sent down to the Messenger, their eyes fill with tears because of the truth that they recognise.*⁴ In this and other instances, an emotional reaction to the Qur'an is portrayed as natural. And at least some early believers exhibited fear of God, an emotion that is also encouraged in the text.⁵ In this article, I present a preliminary study of emotion in the Qur'an. I argue that there are two aspects of emotion in the text. First, the Qur'anic message encourages the believers to cultivate specific emotional attachments and understanding. Thus, emotional practices are akin to other ritualistic practices, such as praying or fasting. Second, the Qur'an is meant to have an emotional impact on the listener. Units of text, stories, and even whole *suras* (chapters) are conveyed in a manner that follows an emotional trajectory as the emotional tension rises and falls, and emotion words create resonance between different, seemingly unconnected, parts of the Qur'an. Thus emotion is a unifying element in this synoptic text.

This article is divided into four sections. The first section focuses on the nature of emotions, in order to get a sense of the object of study. What can we identify in the text as an emotion, how is it expressed, and what does it mean in its context? I explain the division between



constructivist and universalist approaches to the study of the history of emotions, and describe how these approaches have been reconciled by scholars who recognise that emotions have certain universal elements, but also that we cannot assume knowledge of how emotions will manifest, how they are understood, and what triggers them. Recent historical work has, moreover, shed light on the social function of emotion. I draw on some of this work to argue that emotional expressions are often expressions of social dynamics and power structures, and that the control of emotions can be as important as their expression. I conclude the first section by proposing a working definition of emotion for scholars of the Qur'an and Islamic history.

The second section gives a broad overview of the ways in which emotions function in the Qur'an as a part of its overall eschatological message. The emotional ties between the believers and God are an example of the structures of power in their relationship. God shows mercy/compassion to the believers and anger towards those who go astray, while ideal believers are portrayed as being fearful of God. Believers must control their natural emotions, and reconfigure their emotional attachments in this world, in order to prioritise an emotional attachment to God. Proper feeling is thus a part of the practices which make someone a true believer. Furthermore, understanding God's truth involves both knowing and feeling, which are in some sense connected: both occur in the heart. God enters into the hearts of the believers, while the hearts of the unbelievers remain hard and closed. A group of people who displease God are said to have a sickness in their hearts.⁶ This imagery fosters a sense of allegiance to God and community cohesion against a hostile other, who are not capable of true sensitivity or understanding.

In Section Three, I move to the analysis of emotion on the level of the Qur'anic *sura*. I propose to trace changes in the text's emotional tension by identifying 'emotional plots'. While 'plot' is a term usually used to describe a narrative progression of events, which make up a story, what I term an 'emotional plot' follows the emotional trajectory of a given *sura*, pericope, or unit of text. In this section, I draw on the earlier analysis on the universality of emotions (Section One) and the rhetorical purpose of the Qur'an's emotional discourse (Section Two) to argue that some of the



Qur'an's passages are meant to have an emotional impact on the listener. An emotional plot is not just a listener feeling an emotion. Instead, a plot is the process by which the listener's feelings are transformed from one state to another. The term 'emotional plot' is an abstraction, and as such it is useful for seeing how emotion functions in different types of text, from stories such as that of Joseph being cast into a well by his brothers, to the promise-and-threat passages that are common throughout the Qur'an. Considering emotional plots reveals how seemingly non-emotional passages, which contain few or no emotional words or symbols, may still lead the believer on an emotional journey.⁷

In the final section, I examine how word clusters create emotional resonance between Qur'anic *suras* and different pericopes, from stories to promise-and-threat passages. In this case, I examine examples of the word cluster of 'fear and grief' to show how a believer being comforted from his grief and fear acts as a binding force in the Qur'an's seemingly disparate parts. The final two sections of the article, then, propose methods which may shed new light on the structure and coherence of the Qur'an, as well as on its continued appeal to believers through time.

1. What is an Emotion? Towards a Definition of the Object of Study

The Qur'an contains many words that modern, Western, readers might consider to express emotion. 'Love', 'happiness', 'joy', 'hatred', 'anger', 'pain', 'grief', 'fear', 'shame'; each of these terms appears many times in the text, sometimes in several different ways. The frequency⁸ of some of the Qur'an's common emotion words, by root (meaning that all derivatives are taken into account), and from most to least frequent is: **fear**, 337 times total (root *w-q-y*, 165 times; root *kh-w-f*, 124 times; root *kh-sh-y*, 48 times);⁹ **mercy/compassion**, 327 times (root *r-h-m*); **happiness/rejoicing/granting joy/bringing glad tidings**, 179 times (root *b-sh-r*, meaning 'bring glad tidings', 84 times; root *m-t-*, meaning 'grant', 'bestow', 'provide a provision/joy', 70 times; root *f-r-h*, meaning 'rejoicing', 22 times; root *s-r-r*, meaning 'happy', 3 times); **love**, 124 times (root *h-b-b*, 95 times; root *w-d-d*, 29 times); **pain**, which I understand to include



spiritual as well as physical pain, 75 times (root *'-l-m*); **pleasure**, 73 times (root *r-d-w*); **grief**, 42 times (root *h-z-n*); **anger**, 39 times (root *gh-d-b*, 24 times; root *gh-y-z*, 11 times; root *s-kh-t*, 4 times); **shame/humiliation**, 28 times (root *w-h-n*, 24 times; root *m-h-n*, meaning 'despised', 4 times); **hatred**, 18 times (root *k-r-h* meaning 'hatred' rather than 'compulsion'); **weeping**, 7 times (root *b-k-y*); **laughter**, 6 times (root *d-h-k*).¹⁰

This list of words gives us some indication of the general emotional tone of the Qur'an: overall, while fear is very important (and due to the number of 'fear' words, the exact number of occurrences of 'fear' is somewhat underestimated above), this is balanced by the emotions of compassion, happiness, and love; positive words generally outnumber negative ones. The physical expression of emotions does not appear to be very frequent, if weeping and laughter are anything to go by: they occur only 7 and 6 times, respectively.

But how do we know that this list is complete (in fact, it is not), or that the items I have included are emotions, rather than something else (for example does compassion belong on this list)? In short, how do we define emotions? Are they related to cognitive processes, are they physical responses, or both? And do they remain constant across time and culture?

The simple answer is that there is no consensus on these questions. There is no agreed-upon academic definition of what an 'emotion' is, and there is no scholarly consensus about how to define emotions. One problem with defining this term is that simple definitions are circular: the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for instance, defines 'emotion' as 'a strong feeling deriving from one's circumstances, mood, or relationship with others'. 'Feeling' in turn yields 'an emotional state or reaction'. Another problem is that, until the advent of neuroscience, it was difficult to measure feelings in any scientific way. In 1968, Paul Ekman conducted an experiment in which people from across different cultures were shown pictures of people making faces that corresponded to eight 'basic' emotions (pleasure, disgust, anger, fear, sadness, surprise, contempt, and shame/guilt). The test subjects had to match the pictures with the given words. He argued from this that the eight facial expressions corresponding to these emotions were universally recognisable, across cultures.¹¹ His effort, however, was almost immediately criticised because the pictures did not show emotions



at all, but rather a simulation of emotion, like a theatre mask; a more recent critique states that his thesis is ‘bankrupt’ from the standpoint of the natural sciences: the methods were hardly scientific.¹²

Elkman’s was not the first list of emotions. Lists of emotions have been produced since ancient times, and have recently become fodder for historical study.¹³ Most studies now do not attempt to define emotions. However, since the idea of studying emotions is new to Qur’anic studies and to the study of Islamic history, a definition could be useful (even if only for future debate). Therefore, in the remainder of this section, I will review current scholarship on emotions and compare this to what we find in the Qur’an in order to propose a tentative working definition, which will apply to the study of emotion in the Qur’an and early Islamic writings. I begin with a question that is related to the idea of ‘basic’ emotions, namely, which aspects of emotions are universal, and which are learned?

Historian of emotions Barbara Rosenwein opens her most recent book with the simple question ‘How can there be a history of emotions?’¹⁴ Emotions historians were, in the past, generally divided into two camps regarding the nature of emotions: universalists and constructivists. Universalists believed that emotions are innate and essentially the same through time (though their expression might differ), whereas constructivists believed that they are historically contingent and culturally specific: emotions *themselves* change according to time and culture.¹⁵ Universalism was a trend in early theories of emotions; subsequent studies in emotions history and in anthropology argued that there were significant differences in actual emotions from one society to the next.¹⁶ These studies gave fuel to the constructivists, and for some time constructivism was the dominant trend in the field of Emotions History.

In contrast, universalism has always prevailed in the life sciences. Emotions historians have sought varying degrees of engagement with these scientific findings. In his 2015 overview of emotions history *The History of Emotions: An Introduction*, Jan Plamper focuses an entire section of 101 pages on the historical approaches to emotion in the life sciences.¹⁷ He does not, however, take a firm stance on constructivism versus universalism.¹⁸ Rosenwein’s 2016 *Generations of Feeling* also refers to recent work in the field of neuroscience: ‘Some neuroscientists today think



that emotions are as much products of top-down processing (in which case they depend on cognitive work) as of bottom-up (in which case they are connected to precognitive, automatic biological responses).¹⁹ She concludes from this that people have always felt emotions, but that ‘what those emotions are, what they are called, how they are evaluated and felt, and how they are expressed (or not) – all of these are shaped by “emotional communities”’.²⁰ While seeming to acknowledge scientific findings, this statement essentially amounts to a fairly strong constructivist conclusion, one that I am not certain is supported by the studies she cites.²¹

This leaves the question of whether the constructivist-universalist binary is useful at all. Following the groundbreaking work of William Reddy, it seems that most historians now see emotions on a continuum ranging from elements of emotion that are constructed through cultural and social forces, to those that exist innately.²² Some in the study of the history of emotions have become so frustrated with this debate that they have questioned whether it is even worth investigating the nature of emotions. As one author has asked, ‘Do historians need to know—at all—what emotions actually *are*? ... If the goal is to show not only how emotions have a history, but make history, then “emotion” is only a short-hand label that gives way to the language of the past as we find and reconstruct it.’²³

It is true that in textual studies we examine the language of the past. But there is some value in attempting to understand the nature of what is being described by that language. Recognising the scientific findings on the pre-cognitive, universal elements of emotion, and the physicality of emotional response, can confirm our interpretation of physical manifestations of emotion when they occur (weeping and laughing are the most obvious), or help us to interpret what can be classified as ‘emotional’. For instance, I shall argue below that the repeated threats of destruction and damnation in the Qur’an are meant to inspire fear. If there were no universalism in emotion, I would have very little basis for that argument. The Qur’an has an appeal across linguistic, cultural, and temporal divides precisely because it conveys its message in a way that people can relate to on a basic, universal level, and this is true of the emotional content of its message as much as, or perhaps more than, the other content. That is not to say that the religion is understood and expressed the same way



everywhere: such an argument would be absurd. Rather, my point is that if the text had no universal emotional resonance, it would not make sense to people from so many different cultures, across time. Its author may originally have intended to create a new emotional community. But the Qur'an appeals to people from various emotional communities, separated by time, space, and social class. A text documenting people who did not feel as we feel would have no resonance in these diverse societies. A text using emotional exhortation to convince people of its message would have little success if its emotional aspects were alien to them.

However, it is also important to recognise that many of the expressions of, triggers for, and meanings attached to emotion are historically constructed. What might cause shame, for instance, and the manifestations of shame, are not necessarily obvious from a perspective outside of particular cultures. In all cultures people feel shame about *something*, and to say that someone has no shame is an insult in many, but the exact trigger for shame varies widely. This learned aspect of emotional experience and response is what some modern authors refer to as the 'cognitive' or 'top-down' element of emotion. This is not cognitive in the same sense as a considered, rational, argument, but nevertheless it is learned, it is cultural, and it is behavioural, rather than biological and innate.

Biblical studies scholars have tended to focus less than historians on scientific debates about the nature of emotions. Nevertheless, recent work in the field of Biblical studies supports the approach of understanding emotions in context.²⁴ One of the prominent trends in the field is to examine the emotions in their historical context, for instance New Testament emotions in the context of Greek and Roman emotions.²⁵

Like historians, Bible scholars recognise that emotions are conceptualised differently in the Bible than we might imagine them today. Françoise Mirguet points out that general terms such as 'emotion', or the verb 'to feel' have no equivalent in the Hebrew Bible, and argues that the way that we conceptualise 'emotions' does not fit the way they are conceptualised in the Hebrew Bible.²⁶ Mirguet asserts that certain terms from the Hebrew Bible 'are not limited to the expression of what we call emotions; rather, they also include actions, movements, ritual gestures, and



physical sensations, without strict dissociation among these different dimensions'.²⁷ She gives examples of lists which include items that contemporary Western readers would likely see as unrelated, such as in 1 Sam. 18:6, 'with tambourines, with joy, and with musical instruments',²⁸ and shows that the expression of emotions may not depend on emotion words. Emotions may be distinguished by their physical manifestations, such as shaking in the body. She argues that, in these cases, there is no need to name the emotion; the physical manifestation *is* the emotion, because Biblical Hebrew does not distinguish between bodily sensations and emotions.²⁹

As in the Hebrew Bible, the Qur'anic expression of emotion does not always entail emotion words. However, I am not sure that I would classify a physical expression of an emotion *as* the emotion; rather, physical expression generally indicates strength of emotion. Such is the case when Moses falls unconscious in Q. 7:143 upon having a direct experience of God:

And when Moses came to Our appointed time and his Lord spoke with him, he said, 'Oh my Lord, show [Yourself to] me, that I may look at You!' He said, 'You shall not see Me; but behold the mountain—if it stays fast in its place, then you will see Me.' And when his Lord disclosed Himself to the mountain, He made it crumble; and Moses fell down swooning. When he awoke, he said, 'Immaculate are You! I turn to You in penitence, and I am the first of the believers.'

I would argue that Moses' swoon is not in itself an emotion, but rather it shows the strength of the emotion he is feeling when he sees the proof of his God in the form of a mountain crumbling to dust. Fainting is not necessarily something that we might readily associate with strong belief these days; furthermore, it might be considered a feminine response rather than a masculine one. The emotion itself is comprehensible to us, but its manifestation is culturally specific.

Because the manifestations and understandings of emotions are culturally specific, we must be careful not to attribute our own values to particular emotional manifestations.³⁰ As I cited in the introduction to this



article, weeping is a response encouraged by the Qur'an to its own recitation. Even modern, secular, academic readers can relate to the experience of being so touched by something that they tear up, or weep outright. But modern, secular, academics may not understand 'falling on our faces', with the attendant feelings of awe and humility. This is the reaction of the auditors of the Qur'an in Q. 17:106–109, which is undoubtedly culturally alien to some of the readers of the Qur'an today:³¹

¹⁰⁶We have sent the Qur'an in parts so that you may recite it to the people a little at a time, and We have sent it down in stages.

¹⁰⁷Say, whether you believe in it or do not believe in it. Indeed, those who were given knowledge before, when it is recited to them, fall down in prostration on their faces

¹⁰⁸and say, 'Immaculate is our Lord! Indeed, our Lord's promise is bound to be fulfilled.'

¹⁰⁹Weeping, they fall down on their faces and it increases them in humility (khushu'an).

The listeners in Q. 17:106–109 hear the Qur'an and are so moved that they have no control over their physical reaction: they fall on their faces, weeping. In the Qur'an, this lack of control is positive because it increases humility (*khushu'*) in the weepers. When faced with the direct experience of the Divine, they feel powerless over their own selves, humbled. Religious weeping was a recognised ritualistic response in the medieval West, and it is still a ritualistic practice in some contexts. But falling on one's face weeping may seem to be an exaggerated reaction to readers for whom loss of emotional control has negative associations. It is precisely such chronological, cultural, and ritual variations in emotional expression that can and should be studied by historians.

One further aspect of emotion that is useful to consider is the social function of emotions. Historians of emotion have shown that emotions are shaped by their social context.³² Recent studies point to three general findings about emotions and their social milieu. The first is that both emotional expression and understanding are shaped by language.³³ In the



words of historian Nicole Eustace, ‘conceptual processing and the cognitive categorization of affect fundamentally shape the perception of emotion’.³⁴ The second is that emotions are a type of social communication.³⁵ So, to take an example of a source that we might use in Islamic history, a pilgrimage account may reveal a personal journey, but the emotions described in these accounts are not necessarily a simple demonstration of an internal state. These accounts were meant to be read by others, and the expression of emotion, or lack thereof, in them is a demonstration of certain qualities that the author wishes to foreground. The third point is that it is crucial to consider not just emotional expression, but control of emotions. We do not express all of the emotions that well up from our psyche. What is suppressed can be as revealing as what is expressed.

Drawing on the above findings (that emotions are shaped by language, that they are a form of social communication, and that emotional control is a fundamental aspect of emotions), some historians have examined the political implications of emotional expressions. Nicole Eustace examined emotion in the American Revolution and in the War of 1812, and argued in both cases that the emotional discourse was central to political developments. In the following quote, she uses these findings to summarise her ‘basic position’ on the nature of emotional expression:³⁶

Emotional expression is a fundamental form of social communication critical to the exertion and to the contestation of power. As such, the language of emotion offers a code key by which historians can decipher hierarchical relationships in any society. Tracing patterns of emotional expression and control—from the micro-hierarchical levels of specific exchanges between particular social actors to the macro level of emotional prescriptions for and descriptions of large categories of people—allows us to examine ‘politics’ in the widest sense of power relations.

Eustace’s own field is far removed from seventh-century Arabia. But her remarks that emotions are a form of social communication, and that their control and expression is a key to hierarchical relationships, pertain to emotions as they appear in the Qur’an.



To take an example of the social function of emotional expression, the Qur'anic weeping cited above is not just an individual expression of internal feelings. The feelings are felt by a group, the expression is collective, it is public, and it conveys a strong message of the power dynamic in the weepers' humble attitude towards the Divine. Falling on their faces is the ultimate expression of humility and subservience. This expression of emotion has furthermore been recorded as a part of a book that is a collection of utterances meant to convince an audience of a particular truth. The weeping is therefore relational on many levels: the emoters relate to each other in their feeling of a collective emotion, the emoters relate to God in their display of being touched and humbled, and the person conveying the story of the emotions (presumed to be the Prophet Muhammad) relates to his audience, encouraging them to feel as the weepers do towards the divine message. Emotions are related to power structures both on the level of the weepers and God, and on the level of the reciter of this story and his audience. In the text of the Qur'an, the relational and hierarchical aspect of emotions is intimately connected to its rhetorical purpose.

Based on the above, we can propose a tentative working definition of emotion. An emotion is a feeling, universal in nature, but which has learned elements that affect its expression, the triggers for it, and the meanings attributed to it. Despite these cognitive elements, an emotion is not the result of a rational process of thinking, and often involves a physiological response. Emotions are a means of social communication, and as such they are related to language and structures of social power. The control of emotions can be as important as their expression, and can reveal hierarchies in society at both the macro- and the micro-level, as well as shedding light on the mores and norms of that society.

There is clearly much more to be done in the study of the emotions I listed at the beginning of this section, particularly on the historical context of Qur'anic emotions and contextual analysis of these particular terms and other emotion terms in the text. But it is also important to consider how emotion functions in the text as a whole, and what in the text might trigger an emotional response in a listener or reader. That is because the Qur'an is not a historical record or dry, impartial document: it is supposed to move



people, to convince them to believe, and moreover to act.³⁷ The strong emotional manifestations exhibited by the weepers in Q. 17:105, or Moses in Q. 7:143, serve a rhetorical purpose of convincing the current audience to ‘get it’ in the same way that those past audiences did. Without examining the overall rhetorical function of emotions in the Qur’an, we are missing a crucial part of their meaning, and the meaning that they impart to the text.

2. An Overview of Emotion in the Qur’an

In the previous section I focused on the nature of emotion, with the aim of gaining a better understanding of the object of study. In this section, I show how emotion is woven into the basic eschatological message of the Qur’an, and how it is an important part of creating a new community of believers whose emotional ties are to God and to each other, rather than to their former attachments. In order to show this, I begin with the opening *sura* of the Qur’an, and then examine several words, including directly emotional words, like ‘fear’, ‘love’, or ‘compassion’, and non-emotional words, like ‘loss’. I argue that God’s love and mercy is not automatic, it is earned. Emotional control, partially through the renouncement of former attachments and the establishment of new ones, is an important part of the practices that earn His approval.³⁸ The conditional nature of God’s approbation was recognised by medieval authors, who wrote extensively about God’s mercy.³⁹ Some modern scholars have also recognised the contingent quality of God’s approbation, mercy, and love.⁴⁰ God’s emotions (love, mercy/compassion, anger) are a manifestation of His power, and the believer’s emotion of fear is a manifestation of his or her recognition of this power.

I then argue that the heart is the main organ of perception, knowing, and feeling in the Qur’an. Understanding the Qur’anic conceptualisation of the heart is a key to understanding the conceptualisation of emotion in this text: feeling is not separate from knowing. It is not just essential to know the truth of the divine message, but also to feel it. The unbelievers are characterised by their hard hearts and their inability to perceive the message with their senses, minds, or feelings, but God enters into the hearts of the believers. Thus, believers are distinguished from the unfeeling,



unknowing, unbelievers through their perception of truth and their willingness to reconstruct their emotional attachments away from the world, and towards God.

The opening of the Qur'an, the *Fatiha*, contains some indications of the believer's relationship with God. According to this message, humans are not assured of God's love or mercy: they must earn His approval through their actions. God will respond with the appropriate emotions based on a person's behaviour.

¹*In the name of God, the all-Beneficent (al-Rahman) and all-Merciful (al-Rahim).*

²*Praise to God, Lord of the worlds,*

³*al-Rahman, al-Rahim, ⁴Master of the day of retribution,*

⁵*You we worship, and to You we turn for help.*

⁶*Guide us on the straight path,*

⁷*the path of those whom You have bestowed favours, not those who have incurred Your wrath (al-maghdubi 'alayhim), nor of those who are astray.*

In the *Fatiha*, emotion words emphasise God's role towards humans. God is in charge of the ultimate fate of humans, and people are divided into groups: those towards whom He bestows His mercy/compassion, those at whom He is angry, and those who are astray. The *Fatiha* tells the audience that God is intrinsically merciful, but that He can become angry. God's actions make sense because these actions are just: neither anger, nor mercy/compassion, are indiscriminate.

This message is elaborated upon in the beginning of *Surat al-Baqara* (Q. 2). The Qur'an is immediately described as being *a guidance to the God-fearing (al-muttaqin)* in Q. 2:2. The *sura* goes on to describe the concrete actions undertaken by the believer when in this state:

³*[who] maintain the prayer, and spend out of what We have provided them,*



⁴and who believe in what has been sent down before you, and are certain of the Hereafter.

⁵Those follow their Lord's guidance and it is they who are successful.

Undertaking correct actions is an indication that one is properly God-fearing.

Much has been written about what I have termed being 'God-fearing' (*taqwa*), with modern scholars debating the meaning of the word. Does it entail actual fear, or is it simply God-consciousness, an awareness of the importance of correct belief and righteous deeds, or even 'mindfulness', in the words of one modern translator?⁴¹ In my view, 'mindfulness' or 'God-consciousness' are not strong enough. Fear and wariness are an integral part of *taqwa*. Nevertheless, this term has implications not encompassed by modern understandings of 'fear'. The root *w-q-y* originally meant 'protect' or 'guard';⁴² in the Qur'an, the concept of *taqwa* develops through time, from the purely eschatological concerns of early *suras* to become a practice of piety, connected with other practices such as fasting, pilgrimage, and prayer, by the late Meccan ones.⁴³ The type of wariness changes from guarding oneself from the hellfire to a conscious adoption of practices and rituals that will protect the believer from such an outcome.

Taqwa is different from *khawf*, which is probably more like true fear in that it is something to be avoided rather than sought out. While believers are encouraged to embrace *taqwa*, they are told that they should not fear (*la khawfun 'alayhim*) in Q. 2:38, Q. 2:62, Q. 3:170, and elsewhere, and God reassures them when they *do* fear (for example, Q. 2:229, Q. 5:54). Being God-fearing is the main Qur'anic impetus to undertake pious actions, and it encompasses both a cognitive knowledge of what will happen in the afterlife, and an emotional response to that threat.⁴⁴

The consequences of not being on one's guard are clear when one examines another term, *khusr* ('loss'). Loss is not necessarily an emotion. Feeling loss, or feeling that one is in a state of loss, is emotional; but many of those who are in a state of loss in the Qur'an do not feel it at all. Rather,



they intentionally disbelieve or deny God. This unfeelingness is precisely why they do not heed the message.

Khusr is not a very common term in the Qur'an (the root is mentioned 65 times), but the study of this term encompasses ideas about the fate that befalls those who are not God-fearing, which is also expressed through many other terms and in many other ways. 'Loss' or 'being losers', is a threat to, or a description of, those who do not believe (Q. 6:20), those who reject (*kadhhabu*) the message (Q. 7:92), the deniers (*kafirun*, Q. 35:39, Q. 40:85), those who spread corruption in the earth (Q. 2:27). Being in a state of loss means that the ultimate destination is Hell (Q. 23:103); the losers will lose their families on the Day of Judgement (Q. 39:5); and endure the worst torture in the afterlife (Q. 27:5). The term 'loss' is instructive also because, like 'pain', it is a spiritual and physical state: repeatedly, the losers 'lose themselves' (Q. 39:15, Q. 39:5, and elsewhere).

The short Sura 103 describes how to avoid this fate:

¹*By the declining day,*

²*Surely man is in a state of loss (fi khusr),*

³*save those who believe and do good works, exhort one another to truth, and exhort one another to steadfastness.*

In this *sura*, unlike other instances in the Qur'an, 'loss' is the default state of humans. It is averted through belief, doing good works, and providing support to the other believers. The way out of this state of lack, therefore, is that which is embraced by those who are God-fearing: they undertake the correct actions and beliefs.

In Q. 17:82, the counterpart of loss is described as compassion/mercy and healing: *We have sent down this Qur'an which is a healing (shifa') and a mercy (rahma) for the believers, and for the wrongdoers it increases nothing except loss.* By undertaking the correct actions, the believer can hope to receive God's mercy, healing, and approbation. Mercy is not recognised as an emotion in English. But the word *rahma* also connotes compassion, pity, and tenderness. It is a term primarily associated with God: while God causes fear in the believer, He is also the source of compassion and tenderness towards them.



‘Compassion’ is bestowed by God, but it is also a human emotion: it occurs between spouses in Q. 30:21, *He created between the two of you love and compassion (rahma)*.

God wishes to make things easy for the believers, and does not punish them according to what they deserve (Q. 16:61, Q. 35:45).⁴⁵ But ‘God’s mercy is not bestowed indiscriminately’.⁴⁶ God’s mercy must be earned, and it is ultimately based on humans’ works (Q. 99:3–6, Q. 2:167).⁴⁷ God is just, and accepts repentance, but only in life. Deathbed repentance is not acceptable.⁴⁸ Therefore, humans’ good works, repentance, and correct belief in this life will earn His mercy.

It should then come as no surprise that God’s love is likewise conditional. God can feel love (and many other emotions); but this love is not bestowed on everyone, regardless of who they are or what they do. He loves specific actions. People can undertake these actions in order to win God’s love, but they cannot *expect* God to love them, or pretend to know that God loves them.⁴⁹ In the words of Denis Gril, ‘To say that one is loved by God is, in the view of the Qur’an, all the more unacceptable in that such a pretension is part and parcel of a certain confusion of the human and the divine (cf. Q. 5:18, “The Jews and the Christians have said: We are the sons of God and his well-beloved ones”)’.⁵⁰ The message here is that one cannot be beloved by God just by being a Muslim. To secure God’s approbation, one must behave as a Muslim should.

In order to behave correctly, the believer is encouraged to go against his natural feelings: love of family, worldly goods, wives, children, and even his own life, must be put second to his love for God. Humans are thus expected to re-calibrate their natural affections, transferring them from the life of this world to God and the hereafter.⁵¹ Some verses tell believers that they must give up what they love in the world (Q. 89:20), while others warn the believers that they may hate a thing that is good for them, as in Q. 2:216, *Fighting (qital) has been prescribed for you, though it is hateful to you. It may be that you hate something while it is good for you, and it may be that you love something while it is bad for you. God knows what you do not know.* Instead of loving their former attachments, believers are urged to love God, and also the other members of their new community (Q. 3:103), and to undertake good works, almsgiving, and



fasting. Again and again, believers are reminded that they must give up their worldly possessions for the life of the hereafter. In all of these examples, they are urged to go against their own emotional instincts and attachments in order to do the right thing, and assured that they will be rewarded for such emotional control.

There is some evidence that the object of these appeals changes through time, and that there is an emotional component in this change. Many authors have noted that the early Qur'an is focused generally on belief and basic actions such as prayer and fasting, while the later *suras* are much more focused on rules for the community, and on incitements to fight the unbelievers. In a recent study of the late Meccan *suras*, Q. 10–15, Walid Saleh connects this to a change in the mood of Muhammad himself. Saleh argues that in these *suras* the Prophet is doubting and melancholic, and that these despairing *suras* mark a break from the early Meccan triumphalism.⁵² Saleh relates Muhammad's despair to a crisis, centred on the end of mass conversions of unbelievers. The end of mass conversion, in his view, eventually led to the motivating calls for *jihad* found in later *suras*.

Jihad, fasting, prayer, and almsgiving are important. But merely undertaking the correct actions is not good enough. Believers are also expected to feel the correct feelings. In Q. 60:1, the believers are told that they cannot hide their emotions from God, who knows when they harbour affection for his enemies (*Do not take My enemy and your enemy for intimates, offering them affection (mawadda) ... you secretly nourish affection for them, while I know well whatever you hide and whatever you disclose*). In Q. 33:37, the Prophet himself is chastised for hiding what is in his heart and for fearing people, rather than fearing God: *you had hidden in yourself what God was to divulge, and you feared the people (takhsha 'l-nas), though God is worthier that you should fear him (ahaqu an takhshahu)*. Such verses tell the believers, even including the Prophet, that they need guidance to calibrate their emotions, and this guidance may lead them against their own emotional urges. They must submit their own feelings to God's authority.

As noted above, believers cannot count on God's love or mercy; but those who obey God, particularly by going against their own revulsion



to wage *jihad*, can hope for it: *those who have become faithful, and who have migrated, and waged jihad (jahidu) in the way of God—it is they who hope for God’s mercy, and God is all-forgiving, all-merciful* (Q. 2:218). Elsewhere, it is clear that those believers who wage *jihad* are privileged over other believers (as in Q. 4:95, *God has preferred those who wage jihad with their possessions and their persons by a degree over those who sit back*). Going against one’s natural feelings of love for relatives, friends, and one’s own life is surely the most powerful way to show devotion and subservience, and to earn the reward of the hereafter. Here the aim is to change the ties of affection, putting God as the first and foremost recipient of man’s love, because on the last day worldly attachments will come to naught: each person will have to fend for himself (cf. Q. 80:33). The believers *are* believers precisely because they are receptive to this message. This sensitivity and receptivity differentiates them from the unreceptive, imperceptive unbelievers.

The unbelievers’ unreceptivity is most obvious in the repeated images of their hardened hearts. The heart is a prominent theme in the Qur’an, and at least four different words mean ‘heart’, together occurring 208 times (*qalb*, ‘heart’, 132 times; *sadr*, ‘breast’/‘chest’, 44 times; *fu’ad*, ‘heart’, 16 times; *lubb*, ‘inner heart’, ‘mind’, 16 times). It seems that these terms are at least somewhat interchangeable (Q. 3:154 uses *qalb* and *sadr* interchangeably), and it is obvious from even a brief survey that the heart is more than a physical organ: according with ancient theories of the heart, such as that of Aristotle, it is the locus of both understanding and emotion.⁵³ The statement that unbelievers have ‘hard hearts’ means that they cannot understand God’s message rationally, or feel it emotionally. The notion of the heart as the central organ of perception is important for our understanding of the nature of emotion in this text, so it is worth going into some detail, which I do in the following paragraphs. My argument below is that, like understanding, emotion is a type of perception, so although there is no word for ‘emotion’ in the Qur’an, correct feelings work in conjunction with sensory perceptions and rational thought in order to bring the believer into a true awareness of God.⁵⁴ The physical centre of this multi-layered awareness is the heart.



Many verses in the Qur'an mention *'aql*, which is usually translated as 'reason' or 'understanding'. While modern readers may locate this capacity of rational understanding in the brain, in the Qur'an such understanding is located in the heart in Q. 22:46, *have they not travelled in the land so that they may have hearts by which they may understand (lahum qulubun ya'qiluna biha), and ears by which they may hear?* Other verses connect the heart with *fahm*, another word for 'understanding'.⁵⁵

The heart is also the locus of feeling. In Q. 2:260, Abraham asks God to '*Put my heart at rest (yatma'inna qalbi)*', and in Q. 13:28 those who have faith are those whose hearts find rest/are comforted (*tatma'innu qulubuhum*) in the remembrance of God. The hearts of the believers tremble (*wa-jilat qulubuhum*) when God is mentioned (Q. 8:2), and God promises to cast terror into the hearts of the deniers in Q. 3:151 (*sanulqi fi qulubi'lladhina kafaru'l-ru'ba*); Q. 3:156 refers to a sorrow in their hearts (*hasratan fi qulubihim*); and in Q. 3:103, God addresses the believers, telling them that He has united their hearts, or (possibly) made them love one another (*allafa bayna qulubikum*).

The multivalence of the heart is in contrast to the monovalence of the *ra's* ('head'), which occurs eighteen times in the text and refers solely to the physical head, rather than to thoughts or mind (cf. shaving heads in Q. 2:196, wiping heads before prayer in Q. 5:6, etc.). '*Aql*, 'reason'/'intellect'/'understanding', occurs 49 times and it is never connected with the head, only with the heart (as in Q. 22:46 cited above).

Knowing and feeling are connected with other types of perception. Many of the verses that mention the unbelievers' hardened hearts also mention their sensory imperceptions, such as Q. 2:6–7, *As for the deniers, it is the same to them whether you warn them or do not warn them, they will not have faith. God has set a seal on their hearts and their hearing, and there is a blindfold on their sight, and there is a great punishment for them.* Blindness, deafness, and hardness of heart refer to people's inability to understand the truth behind what they can see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and their resulting inability to perceive the truth of God's message. The unbelievers are devoid of any true perception.



The Qur'anic descriptions of the hardened, closed hearts of the unbelievers are juxtaposed with several passages in which God grants the true believer an expanded heart (Q. 6:125, Q. 39:22, and Q. 94:1, in contrast with those who open their breasts to denial in Q. 16:106).⁵⁶ The term *ishrah*, which I have translated as 'expand', may also be rendered as 'explain' or 'uncover' but the message is very similar. The Qur'an's author repeatedly warns believers that God knows what is in their hearts, and God can enter into the heart of the believer (as in Q. 33:37, quoted above, and many other passages). It is implausible that this sort of description refers simply to God imparting knowledge or understanding of the intellectual sort. Instead, it is best to understand all of these descriptions as referring to both intellectual and emotional perception, which occurs in conjunction with proper sensory perception to reveal the truth to the believer. The Qur'an itself resides in Muhammad's heart in Q. 2:97. This is one indication that the division that we moderns might assume between 'rationality' and 'feelings' are not so keenly observed in the Qur'an.

In sum, when the author of the Qur'an refers to the unbelievers' hardened hearts, which are described as *like stones, or even harder* (Q. 2:74), or when the author says that a group of people have a *sickness in their hearts* (Q. 2:10), this is in clear contrast to the community of true believers, who feel a particular emotional register in conjunction with a level of rational understanding not shared by the unbelievers. In the Qur'an, feeling is a part of believing, or perhaps more correctly belief entails being able to reorient one's natural feelings of affection for family and the goods of the world towards God, and the life of the hereafter, by maintaining a heart that is receptive to God and His message. This emotional control and reorientation also creates a sense of community and love among the new believers.

Removed from their context and exact expression, some of the basic elements of the message of community-building are familiar from other monotheist scriptures of the Qur'anic milieu. Do not the authors of the New Testament also seek to create a community of believers, who reorient their emotions to their God? This reorientation must be what is happening in Luke 14:26, 'If any man comes to me and does not hate his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brothers and sisters, and



yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple'.⁵⁷ It may even make sense to think about scripture as a genre, with the key characteristic of the aim of creating a community of believers by reorienting their past emotional affiliations, defining the norms by which they are to live, and encouraging the believers to live up to those norms.

This leads me to two points. The first is that, since some elements of the basic emotional message are common, it becomes important to think about what specifically in the emotional message of the Qur'an is different from that of the Bible, and also how this is conveyed in a way that is Qur'anic, rather than Biblical or more generically 'scriptural'. Though that task is beyond this paper, it would be interesting to investigate, for instance, whether God's love in the Hebrew Bible or New Testament shares the characteristics noted above in the Qur'an. My second point is that there may be new modes of analysis that would enable us to refine our understanding of how this general message is conveyed in particular texts. Above, I have given a sense of the overall emotional message of the Qur'an. In what follows, I propose a new method for analysis of how emotion functions at the level of the *sura*.

3. A New Method of Analysis: Emotional Plots

In the following, I propose the study of emotional plots: how different blocks of text follow a particular emotional journey. Thinking about plots makes sense because it is not individual emotions such as 'fear' or 'joy' that make someone a believer, it is the process by which emotion is cathartically transformed, by which a listener's fear is purged and replaced with something more sanguine. Similarly, believers' despair at worldly unfairness may change to a feeling of vindication when they hear of others' arrogance being punished by destruction and despair. By 'emotional plot' I mean the specific series of emotions that lead the listener from one emotional state into another emotional state, achieving an emotional transformation. As I mentioned in the introduction, the term 'plot' is often used to describe the arc of a narrative, in other words a series of events that make up a story. But what I call an emotional plot refers instead to the arc of feelings brought on by different types of address in the Qur'an, such as



promise and threat passages, exhortations, and stories. Thus, emotional plots occur in text that is not necessarily narrative, and that may not even use emotional language.

Rosenwein and others have noted that emotions come in context: they rarely come out of the blue and are not disconnected from each other. Rosenwein describes emotional ‘sequences’, because ‘emotional episodes often consist in a variety of emotions and emotional gestures, one after the other’.⁵⁸ So, for instance, someone might feel desire, and then shame for feeling that desire. The analysis of emotional sequences can help to define a society’s attitude towards particular emotions. Mirguet speaks of ‘clusters of responses’ to particular emotional scenarios; the idea of clusters of responses allows for a different response to the same emotional scenario.⁵⁹

However, emotional plots are different from the emotional sequences described by Rosenwein or the clusters of responses described by Mirguet, because an emotional plot is an abstraction. Whereas the study of emotional sequences is the study of specific emotion words and how they appear together, an emotional plot—a journey from despair to hope, for instance—does not require the same vocabulary each time. An emotional journey from despair to hope, or hope to despair, can be the same no matter whether the scenario uses the terms ‘hope’ or ‘despair’ at all, no matter what the specifics of the story. Gade has characterised emotions in the Qur’an as ultimately ‘transformative’.⁶⁰ Examining emotional plots in the Qur’an enables us to understand the frequency of the transformative moments for the believing auditor, and thereby to understand the rhythm of individual *suras* in a different way from those previously posited by scholars.

There are two main emotional plots in the Qur’anic *suras* that I have analysed: the plot that passes through fear or despair and ends in mercy, vindication, or salvation, and the plot that takes the opposite journey, passing through arrogance, disdain, or any of a number of emotions, and ending in destruction or damnation. The plots thus connect with the findings about individual emotion words and the overall emotional message of the Qur’an described above. As I have mentioned above, God’s love and compassion/mercy are not unconditional. Believers must live in



a state of God-fearingness and they must earn God's compassion and love through their beliefs and deeds. The emotional plot of a passage describes the arc of feelings in the believer who is being threatened with damnation, promised great reward, exhorted to do the right thing, or told a story of past peoples whose fates were either salvation or damnation. Plots may be long or short, and may follow a complex trajectory or a simple one. A *sura* can contain a number of plots; in some cases, an entire *sura* may be plotted, with many ups and downs on the way.

A key part of my argument is that certain terms and scenarios are used to *evoke* emotion in the Qur'an's audience, in order to encourage them to correct belief and action. Such a claim is obviously fraught, because we cannot know how the Qur'an's first audience actually reacted to it.⁶¹ Furthermore, it is not necessarily obvious that emotion can be evoked without explicitly emotional language. And yet, as I established above, we have good cause to believe that some basic human emotional responses are universal. Therefore, it is plausible to argue that eschatological threats were meant to inspire fear, and that the loss of divine approbation was indeed a terrifying prospect for early believers. In the words of Nicolai Sinai, 'the foremost objective of the early Qur'an's announcements and description of the judgment and the hereafter is quite obviously not to inform but to inspire terror'.⁶² This understanding also accords with what has been established about the rhetorical purpose of the Qur'an. If one considers it as a series of pronouncements intended to convince an audience, then emotion functions to spur them to action.

In the following paragraphs, I will give three examples of what I have termed emotional plots. These examples are in different types of narrative or textual unit. The first is from a story with an identifiable main character, Joseph, in *Surat Yusuf* (Q. 12). The second is a promise-and-threat passage, from *Surat al-'Asr* (Q. 103). The third is what I would term a battle story, in other words the story of a people vanquished by God or the believers in *Surat al-Shams* (Q. 91). These are common textual paradigms in the Qur'an, and emotion operates differently in each of them. The first invites sympathy with a recognisable character undergoing human suffering, the second puts the listener on guard with threats and promises



about their own potential fate, and the third puts the believers' triumph into historical perspective, casting it as an eternal fight between good and evil.

In *Surat Yusuf*, Joseph undergoes liberation through suffering. He is cast into a well and left for dead by his own brothers (Q. 12:15), but is rescued, and bought by a man and his wife (possibly the man is named al-Aziz, Q. 12:19–21). The wife of al-Aziz, Joseph's master, then tries to seduce Joseph (Q. 12:23), and after she falsely accuses him of assaulting her, he is imprisoned (Q. 12:36). Eventually, he triumphs over these adversities, reveals his identity to his brothers, and is reunited with his despairing father (Q. 12:94–100). He finally receives worldly reward, and praises God (Q. 12:100–101). Here there is a clear plot trajectory, and in this case the emotional plot follows this narrative plot, in all its ups and downs, despair and ultimate vindication. Emotional language increases the story's power to move an audience.

Joseph's father is the human face of the tragedy, and ultimately the triumph, of Joseph's story, which raises the question of whether the listener or reader is meant to identify with Joseph's father, rather than with Joseph himself.⁶³ It is Joseph's father whose *eyes had turned white with grief, and he choked with suppressed agony* in Q. 12:84. When they are reunited, *Joseph seated his parents high upon the throne, and they fell down prostrate before him. He said, 'Father! This is the fulfilment of my dream of long ago'* (Q. 12:100). Joseph's parents here have the emotional reaction of falling down. The root used here for falling (*kh-r-r*) is the same as that used to describe Moses falling when he saw the mountain crumble in Q. 7:143 (*kharra Musa sa'iqan*) and the listeners who fell down weeping in Q. 17:109 (*yakhirruna li'l-adhqani yabkuna*). This is an example of emotional resonance between different stories, which I will examine further in the last part of this article.

It is easy to see how a listener could be brought along on an emotional journey with a narrative like Joseph's, particularly when it is felt through the emotions expressed by Joseph's father. Furthermore, in this case, the emotional plot simply follows the narrative plot on its ups and downs.



Next I will move to the example of a promise and threat passage. Promise and threat passages are not overtly narrative, and do not usually contain emotion words. Therefore it is important to clarify why I argue that it is possible for such passages to follow an *emotional* trajectory. For the listener, the promise and threat is emotional not necessarily because of emotional language, but rather because of the real danger associated with being an unbeliever. The stakes here are high, which creates tension. This tension is amplified using various rhetorical devices. The listener is sometimes addressed directly, warned of the consequences of their actions. Equally, powerful and dramatic language or imagery can emphasise the high stakes, the need for the believer to believe the right thing and, ultimately, to act in correct ways.

For a simple example of such a passage, I will return to *Surat al-Asr*, which I quoted above (as it is short, I repeat the *sura* here):

¹*By the declining day,*

²*surely man is in a state of loss (fi khusr),*

³*save those who believe and do good works, exhort one another to truth, and exhort one another to steadfastness.*

The rhetorical devices in this *sura* create different levels of emotional tension. First there is an oath by a particular time of day, which is a well-established feature in the Qur'an and represents a pre-Islamic tradition.⁶⁴ Such oaths are a reminder of God's power over the regular patterns of the planets, the world, and the universe.⁶⁵ Oaths may also serve to remind the listener of the Day of Judgement, when this regular functioning of the universe will cease. By invoking God's ultimate might over all natural phenomena, oaths raise the emotional tension: they serve as a reminder of man's powerlessness. So this *sura* begins by putting the listener in a state of trepidation and tension. God has ultimate power: what will He do?

The tension is increased with the second verse. The listener is told that man is in a state of loss, using the emphatic *inna* ('indeed'). As I pointed out above, this statement goes further than others in the Qur'an. While usually it is unbelievers who are threatened with loss, here, all mankind is naturally in such a state. With the increase in emotional tension



in this verse, the mood is brought lower: the tone is one of despair. The rhythmic quality of the first two verses, and their brevity, serve to emphasise the fatalistic feeling.

Then, suddenly, the despair is lifted. The final verse of the *sura* gives a number of simple actions through which to fend off the state of loss. The tension is now gone: the believer has presumably undertaken such actions, perhaps on a daily basis. With the list of prosaic actions the foreboding rhythm of the *sura* is broken, which has led to recent speculation that this final verse may have been a later insertion.⁶⁶ Yet even if this verse is an insertion, it was clearly inserted because it needed to be there: believers are *not* in a state of loss. Their belief and works are rewarded. Despair is transformed into hope, and the emotional plot is complete.

The above two examples, of a narrative with a strong central character, and a promise and threat passage that puts the listener on the spot, are the most easily identifiable loci for emotional plots. But I would contend that emotional plots also occur in more subtle ways elsewhere in the Qur'an. *Surat al-Shams* (Q. 91) is a short, early *sura* describing a disagreement between the prophet Salih and a group of people who go against him, the Thamud. This *sura* is a simple example of a recurring theme in the Qur'an, which is the battle narrative, in which God or the believers vanquish the non-believing foe. Such scenarios are probably meant to spur on the Muslim warriors with tales of past victories. They could also, however, be considered as warnings to the unbelievers.

This *sura* moves from pre-Islamic images and oaths, to a realisation of God, to a direct act in which the Thamud defy and disobey God and His messenger, Ṣaliḥ, to destruction of the Thamud. I include the entire *sura* below to get a sense of how the tension builds from oaths, to confrontation, to the release of tension and vindication of Salih over the Thamud, and by extension, all believers over unbelieving enemies.⁶⁷

¹ *By the sun and the brilliance of it,*

² *By the moon when she follows it,*

³ *By the day when it reveals it,*



⁴ *By the night when it covers it,*

⁵ *By the sky and Him who built it,*

⁶ *By the earth and Him who spread it,*

⁷ *By the soul and Him who fashioned it*

⁸ *and inspired it [concerning what is] virtuous in it and wicked in it*

⁹ *He is successful, who increases it,*⁶⁸

¹⁰ *He is unsuccessful, who hides it.*

¹¹ *The Thamud denied with their disobedience of it*⁶⁹

¹² *when the most wretched of them rose up against it,*

¹³ *but the Messenger of God said to them ‘Let God’s she-camel drink it!’*

¹⁴ *But they impugned him and then hamstrung her, so their Lord destroyed them because of their sin, and levelled it.*

Verses 1–4 are oaths on the day’s natural phenomena, the sun, moon, day, and night. As I mentioned above, such oaths have cosmic significance, and serve to raise tension in the listener with their reminders that God has power over day, night, and everything in the universe. The references to day and night, the sun and moon, are not only references to natural phenomena but to time itself. While these oaths are a carry-over from pre-Islamic times,⁷⁰ their connection with the one true God is made explicit in verses 5–8. The first eight verses move from universal, cyclical, phenomena to the personal: in the seventh verse, humans are reminded that God has fashioned their own souls, and in the eighth, that He has taught the soul the difference between good and evil. This increases the tension dramatically. Suddenly, the listener knows that he or she must take personal responsibility for success or failure, because God (who has control over the world, the universe, and time) has inspired the soul with knowledge of right and wrong. This knowledge of personal responsibility increases the sense of potential doom.

Verses 9–10 make the choice between good and evil explicit, by describing the recipe for a person’s success or failure. The person who



wishes to succeed pays attention to the virtuous elements of his soul referred to in verse 8, and attempts to increase them. The person who hides the virtues of his soul will fail. The mention of failure in particular is emotive: the possibility of failure increases the tension, and emphasises the dualism between good and evil brought up in verse 8. Here, people have a choice. They can listen to their inner souls, the God-inspired wisdom of right, or they can disbelieve, covering and hiding such knowledge even from themselves. Verses 11–12 tell us that the Thamud have chosen the wrong path. There is more emotive language here: it was the ‘most wretched of them’ (*ashqaha*) who rose up against God, nature, and everything correct in their own souls.

Verses 13–14 describe what exactly they did. We know from other verses (cf. Q. 7:73) that God has given the Thamud a she-camel and that Salih encourages them to treat it well. Salih here encourages them to let it drink, but they impugn him (*kadhhabuhu*, meaning literally ‘called him a liar’) and hamstring the camel. The result is that God destroys them, flattening their city. There are no emotion words here, there is no explicitly emotional imagery, but it is a tale of triumph and destruction, with an implicit threat to anyone else who dares to defy God and any of His messengers, and a reminder of the total destruction (of the world, the universe, and time itself) which will be brought about on the Day of Judgement.

Surat al-Shams is only one of the Qur’anic references to particular incidents in which the believers, aided by God Himself, vanquish the unbelievers. Such scenarios may be emotional in different ways for the unbelievers/doubters, and for the new Muslim community. For the unbelievers, such tales are a warning. These tales tell the audience that there is real danger associated with disobedience. The human soul is at risk, but so are their very lives on earth. For the members of the community, and particularly the warriors among them, such descriptions provide validation and a sense of triumph over those vanquished people who dared to defy the truth. These stories recount past battles that have been won, and therefore shore up the sense that the victorious Muslims are righteously enacting the will of God.



The three examples that I have provided above give some sense of how emotional plots function in different narrative trajectories, whether stories with a strong central character, promise-and-threat passages, or battle tales. It is also important to note that not every part of the Qur'an follows an emotional plot. Emotional plots crop up periodically, and are a regular feature of the text that, I believe, keep the listener engaged and spur him or her to undertake the right actions. But there are also other ways in which emotion functions to engage the listener's attention. In the final section of this article, I describe the resonance created when similar language is used in seemingly unrelated passages of the Qur'an.

4. Emotional Resonance Between Suras

As I mentioned above, the analysis of emotion words and the links between them ('sequences' or 'clusters of responses') is a common strategy for many scholars of emotions history. In the *suras* that I have examined, specific emotional language creates resonances between parts of the Qur'an which seem to be thematically and narratively distinct. In this section, I focus on the emotion sequence of fear (*kh-w-f*) and grief (*h-z-n*). I show how these emotions appear in a specific sequence in narrative passages, and then appear again in seemingly non-related passages. This creates a sense of resonance between disparate parts of the Qur'an, while emphasising God's role as the comforter and reliever of fear and grief.

I will start by giving two examples from stories in which the listener is in a position of empathy with the protagonist. I will focus here on the stories of two women: Mary, mother of Jesus, and Umm Musa, the mother of Moses. In the Qur'anic telling, Mary gives birth to Jesus alone at the foot of a date tree. Her plight is recorded in the Qur'an when she cries out: '*I wish I had died before this, and become a forgotten thing, beyond recall!*' (Q. 19:23). Very few people who have had any experience of childbirth, even anecdotally, would not have sympathy for her at this moment. The pain she feels may not just be related to the physical pain of birth but also to the mental suffering of her solitude, for she has withdrawn herself to a secluded place to have this child. She is then comforted by a voice from below, which assures her that God has made a spring to run at



her feet, and which encourages her to shake the date palm for freshly picked dates (Q. 19:26). In this case, Mary is rewarded for her physical suffering in childbirth and her emotional isolation from her community by receiving emotional and physical comfort from God.

And who would not sympathise with Moses' mother, who almost breaks down because of having to give him away? Moses' story comes amid the killing of the firstborn in Egypt. In *Sura 28*, the God-narrator says, *We revealed to Moses' mother 'Nurse him, then when you fear for him, cast him into the river'* (Q. 28:7), which she does, thereby demonstrating that she trusts God with the life of her own child. Moses is found by Pharaoh and his wife and they decide to adopt him. However, Moses' mother misses him, or in the words of the author of the Qur'an, *the heart of Moses' mother became desolate (asbaha fu'adu Ummi Musa farighan) and indeed she was about to divulge it had We not fortified her heart (rabatna ala qalbiha) so that she might have faith* (Q. 28:10). Here God enters into her very heart in order to give her the emotional strength to go on. She then sends Moses' sister to suggest her as a wet nurse for Moses, and as the God-narrator says, *thus We restored him to his mother so that she might be comforted and not grieve, and that she might know that God's promise is true* (Q. 28:13).

In both of the case of Mary and Moses' mother, God is there to relieve emotional and physical suffering, bringing these exemplary women into a state of hope, relief, and, ultimately, knowledge of God's justice and mercy. They both prove their subservience to God and willingness to put aside all worldly emotional attachments to do His bidding. The listener is brought along on the emotional journey, and is able to empathise with the comfort they receive.

Promise-and-threat passages do not seem to share the same emotional register as the narratives which I have just quoted. And yet it is worth considering how specific emotional terms and clusters act as a unifying force between these different types of textual trajectories. By examining certain specific emotional vocabulary we might begin to understand some of the resonances that are created between passages and even *suras* that seem to be entirely different from each other. The use of the same language in a different context would remind the listener of the



story, particularly if the language is unusual or only used in particular ways. If the listener knows the Qur'an well, this resonance would be obvious.

Take for example the occurrences of 'grief' in the Qur'an (root *h-z-n*). This root appears 42 times in the Qur'an, 37 times in its verbal form. Of these, all but three instances are negated. In other words, the main message about grief in the Qur'an is that one should *not* grieve, because God relieves grief. The root *h-z-n* occurs most frequently in *Surat al-Baqara*, at seven times, and every time it is a part of a formula applied to the believers: *la khawfun 'alayhim wa-la hum yahzanun* (*Believers have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve*). Though it does not occur frequently throughout the Qur'an, this formula also occurs in five other *suras* (at Q. 3:170, Q. 5:69, Q. 6:48, Q. 7:35, Q. 7:49, and Q. 10:62).

If we examine the emotions felt by Mary and Moses' mother, we can note that they feel grief initially but are relieved of their suffering and grief by God, using these exact same words. In Q. 28:7 God reveals to Moses' mother that she should not grieve or fear when casting Moses into the river, and in Q. 28:13, God restores him to her so that she will not grieve and so that she will be comforted. This last element of God's relieving Umm Musa's grief and giving her comfort is reiterated in an abbreviated form in Q. 20:40. Likewise, in Mary's story in Q. 19:24–26, Mary is comforted when a voice *called to her from below saying 'Do not grieve! Your Lord has made a spring to flow at your feet. Shake the trunk of the palm tree, freshly picked dates will drop upon you. Eat, drink, and be comforted!'* Others who grieve and whose grief is comforted include Lot and Joseph's father.

These stories of the prophets and their families thus resonate with *each other* through their emotion words,⁷¹ and the language of these narratives is echoed in calls to the ordinary believer not to grieve or feel fear found primarily in *Surat al-Baqara*. It is my contention that this use of shared emotional vocabulary creates resonance between different textual trajectories (such as promise and threat and punishment stories), resonance which would be immediately recognisable to someone who knows the Qur'an well. This is particularly so since the words in question are relatively infrequent, and almost always come in the same formulas or



near each other in clusters. Thus, *Surat al-Baqara*, which may seem overtly to be far less emotional than the narrative *suras*, evokes the emotional responses created in other *suras*.

How do these observations help us to answer the question that I posed earlier about what makes specific emotional rhetoric Qur'anic, rather than Biblical? I have not made a systematic comparison with the Bible, but it is possible that the poetic, synoptic nature of this resonance is typical of the Qur'an, and sets it apart from the more narratively cohesive Biblical use of emotion. In the Qur'an, all parts presume all other parts and this is obvious when one considers how the emotional content is delivered in the different *suras*, with evocations in passages that otherwise seem to have little in common. A further investigation of the way in which emotion words, emotional plots, and emotional tension function in the *suras* may shed new light on issues of structure and coherence within *suras*, as well as shedding light on their ultimate message. How believers find cohesion in this fragmentary, synoptic, text may not be immediately obvious to outsiders. But the study of emotional plots and of the resonance created by emotion words shows that, far from being a hindrance to emotive experience, the synoptic nature of the Qur'an may actually increase its emotional resonance for the believer.

NOTES

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- 1 For instance, M.A.S. Abdel Haleem describes how the believers feel while reading *Surat al-Rahman* (Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an*, p. 201).
- 2 Though Anna Gade has a two-page summary of emotions in the Qur'an in her article 'Islam', at pp. 36–38.



- 3 The prime example of this is Kermani, *Gott ist schön*, translated into English as *God is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Qur'an*; there is also a section dedicated to sound in Robinson's *Discovering the Qur'an*, pp. 161–196. Sells' *Approaching the Qur'an* comes with a CD of Qur'an recitation.
- 4 See also Q. 19:58, Q. 17:106–109, and Q. 53:59–61. Many early examples of emotional responses to the Qur'an are recorded by Kermani, though he interprets them as a response to the aesthetics of the text, rather than to its content. For a much later medieval response of weeping, see the descriptions in the *Travels of Ibn Jubayr*. Qur'an translations in this article are modified from Ali Quli Qara'i.
- 5 Melchert, 'Exaggerated Fear'.
- 6 There are twelve references to those in whose hearts is a sickness: Q. 2:10, Q. 5:52, Q. 8:49, Q. 9:125, Q. 22:53, Q. 24:50, Q. 33:12, Q. 33:32, Q. 33:60, Q. 47:20, Q. 47:29, and Q. 74:31.
- 7 Cf. Barbara Rosenwein: 'I would not rule out anything as possibly having affective valence ... It all depends on culture and the emotional community. The historian must be open to the unexpected' (Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling*, p. 7).
- 8 This analysis is made possible by the database at corpus.quran.com. For the sake of simplicity, I do not list all variations of the words.
- 9 Erik Ohlander includes a more complete list of nine terms for 'fear' in the Qur'an, and an analysis of distinctions between them, and calls this 'the semantic range of fear' in the text (Ohlander, 'Fear of God (*taqwa*) in the Qur'an', at pp. 141–145).
- 10 It may be worth considering whether forgiveness is an emotion or if it is, strictly, an action, as this is another frequently occurring term: root *gh-f-r* occurs 234 times, and '-f-w 35 times.
- 11 Plamper, *The History of Emotions* (first published as *Geschichte und Gefühl, Grundlagen der Emotionsgeschichte* (Munich: Siedler, 2012)), pp. 152–154.
- 12 The first critique is Margaret Mead's, the second Jan Plamper's (Plamper, *The History of Emotions*, pp. 154 and 158). As I have already noted, Elkman's list was also extremely limited, not even including love. Interestingly, his list does include surprise, an emotion not named at all in the Qur'an.
- 13 Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling*, pp. 18–19, for instance. 14 Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling*, p. 1.



- 15 Plamper gives a good overview of some of the recent statements to this effect in *The History of Emotions*, p. 5. One important study in the constructivist vein is Wierzbicka, *Emotions Across Languages and Cultures*.
- 16 Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling*, goes through ancient theories of emotion and examines different emotional ideas through to Hobbes.
- 17 Plamper, *The History of Emotions*, pp. 147–248.
- 18 Having said that, one reviewer of his book says, ‘Though it is his intention to reveal “the study of emotion beyond the dichotomy of universalism and social constructivism,” it is clear that he is much more sympathetic to the anthropological relativists than to the universalism of the life sciences’ (Boddice, ‘Review of *The History of Emotions*’).
- 19 Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling*, p. 1.
- 20 Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling*, p. 3. The notion of emotional communities is an important one. ‘Emotional communities are groups—usually but not always social groups—that have their own particular values, modes of feeling, and ways to express those feelings.’
- 21 Rosenwein implicitly draws a parallel between these neuroscientific findings and the divide between universalists and constructivists described above. ‘Bottom-up’ emotion, because it is ‘automatic’ in nature, seems to be equated with universalism, and ‘top down’ with constructivism. However, it was unclear to me whether the fMRI research into the neural pathways involved in top-down emotions could be equated with historical constructivism. Such a question does not seem to be the concern of the authors of the papers. The study cited by Rosenwein was Otto et al., ‘Functional Overlap of Top-Down Emotion Regulation and Generation’. Other studies also speak about bottom-up and top-down processes, but I would again be hesitant to draw Rosenwein’s conclusions from them. See Ochsner et al., ‘Bottom-up and Top-down Processes’.
- 22 Eustace et al., ‘AHR Conversation: The Historical Study of Emotions’, p. 1,506; also, Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*.
- 23 Boddice, ‘Review’.
- 24 For the Qur’an, such contextualisation could include Syriac poems and pre-Islamic poetry, as well as comparisons with the Bible. Such an undertaking is, however, beyond the scope of the present article.
- 25 For instance, Roberts, ‘Anger, Emotion, and Desire’; Hockey, ‘Seeing Emotionally’.
- 26 Mirguet, ‘What is an “Emotion”?’’, pp. 446 and 443.
- 27 Mirguet, ‘What is an “Emotion”?’’, p. 443.
- 28 Mirguet, ‘What is an “Emotion”?’’, p. 446.



- 29 Mirguet, ‘What is an “Emotion”?’’, p. 451.
- 30 This point is made by Lambert, *How Repentance Became Biblical*. He repeats the point in the interview ‘Repentance & The Bible: A Q & A With David Lambert’.
- 31 Cf. Q. 19:58: *When the signs of the all-Merciful were recited to them, they fell down prostrate, weeping.*
- 32 See Frevert, *Emotions in History*.
- 33 One early publication to point in this direction was Lutz and Abu Lughod, *Language and the Politics of Emotion*.
- 34 Eustace, ‘AHR Conversation’, p. 1,506. 35 Eustace, *Passion is the Gale*, p. 12.
- 36 Eustace, ‘AHR Conversation’, p. 1,505.
- 37 In the words of Kate Zebiri: ‘Far from being an abstract, disinterested document which aims simply to impart information, the Qur’an continually confronts its audience (or readership) with the need to choose between God’s path and other paths, belief and unbelief, following guidance and going astray, truth and error, etc.’ (Zebiri, ‘Towards a Rhetorical Criticism’, pp. 95–96).
- 38 On emotion as a practice, see also Scheer, ‘Are Emotions a Kind of Practice...?’, pp. 193–220. 39 On this, see for instance Mayer, *Keys to the Arcana*, p. 31.
- 39 On this, see for instance Mayer, *Keys to the Arcana*, p. 31.
- 40 Mayer, as above; Isutzu, *Sufism and Taoism*, p. 116ff; Gril, ‘Love’; Peterson, ‘Mercy’; and, most recently, Reynolds, ‘Mercy in the Qur’an’.
- 41 Sells, *Approaching the Qur’an*, p. 38.
- 42 Ohlander, ‘Fear of God (*taqwa*) in the Qur’an’, p. 139. 43 Ohlander, ‘Fear of God (*taqwa*) in the Qur’an’, p. 150.
- 43 Sinai, ‘The Eschatological Kerygma’. In his article, Sinai also goes through the pious actions that are encouraged in the early Qur’an.
- 44 Peterson, ‘Mercy’. Note that this article focuses only on mercy as a quality of God’s. 46 Peterson, ‘Mercy’.
- 45 Peterson, ‘Mercy’.
- 46 Peterson, ‘Mercy’.
- 47 Peterson, ‘Mercy’.
- 48 Peterson, ‘Mercy’.
- 49 Gril, ‘Love’.
- 50 Gril, ‘Love’.



- 51 On this, see Sinai, 'The Eschatological Kerygma of the Early Qur'an', p. 13: 'it is only the existential dread to which the anticipation of the Judgment gives rise that enables man to overcome his innate love of possessions and fulfil the requirements of social solidarity.'
- 52 Saleh, 'End of Hope', at p. 109.
- 53 Gross, 'Aristotle on the Brain', p. 248. The table on this page compares Aristotle's ideas of the capacity of the heart and the brain.
- 54 The word *yash'uru*, usually understood to refer to sensory perception in the Qur'an, may require some re-evaluation. It could be that this root refers not just to the senses, but to understanding and feeling as well (as in modern Arabic, where it is used for feeling).
- 55 See also McAuliffe, 'Heart', subsection 'Heart as locus of understanding'.
- 56 Though Saleh notes that Muhammad has a narrowed heart at Q. 11:12, and that he is told not to despair at Q. 10:65. Further study of contracted and expanded hearts in the Qur'an might yield interesting results.
- 57 King James version, slightly modified.
- 58 Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling*, p. 8.
- 59 Mirguet, 'What is an Emotion?', p. 456.
- 60 'The Qur'an employs language about feeling to assert the immediate, transformative power of its revelation' (Gade, 'Islam', subsection 'Emotion and Qur'an, Sunnah, and the Law', p. 37).
- 61 It is possible that through the study of *sira* and *hadiths*, we can hope to understand how later authors portrayed this original reaction.
- 62 Sinai, 'The Eschatological Kerygma'.
- 63 Needless to say, this is a brief overview of the emotional plot of a complex sura, one that could do with a much more in-depth treatment.
- 64 Stewart, 'The Mysterious Letters', pp. 326–327.
- 65 This is a paraphrase of Stewart, 'The Mysterious Letters', p. 327.
- 66 As has been proposed by Walid Saleh in his presentation at the 'Unlocking the Medinan Qur'an' conference held at Pembroke College, Oxford University, 19–21 March, 2017.
- 67 I have heavily modified Quli Qara'i's translation here. Specifically, I have left in the '*ha*' ('it') at the end of the lines, to maintain a sense of the rhythm of the original.
- 68 With good works.
- 69 That is, disobedience of the knowledge imparted by God in verse 8 of virtues and vices.



70 Stewart, 'The Mysterious Letters', p. 327.

71 These resonances including the 'comfort' that is brought to those who grieve. 'Comfort', lit. 'cooling the eyes', occurs only four times in the Qur'an, and three of these are in the stories of Moses' mother or Mary (Q. 19:26, Q. 20:40, and Q. 28:13).

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