Themed section

Towards New Perspectives on

Ethics in Islam

Casuistry, Contingency, and Ambiguity

Guest editor

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Contents

Introduction

FERIEL BOUHAFI	7
Towards New Perspectives on Ethics in Islam: Casuistry, Contingency, and Ambiguity	

I. Islamic Philosophy and Theology

FERIEL BOUHAFI	25
The Dialectics of Ethics: Moral Ontology and Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy	
FRANK GRIFFEL	55
The Place of Virtue Ethics within the Post-Classical Discourse on <i>ḥikma</i> : Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's <i>al-Nafs wa-l-rūḥ wa-sharḥ quwāhumā</i>	
AYMAN SHIHADAH	81
Psychology and Ethical Epistemology: An Ash'arī Debate with Mu'tazilī Ethical Realism, 11th-12th C.	
HANNAH C. ERLWEIN	103
The Moral Obligation to Worship God Alone: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Analysis in the <i>Tafsīr</i>	
ANNA AYSE AKASOY	121
Philosophy in the Narrative Mode: Alexander the Great as an Ethical Character from Roman to Medieval Islamic Literature	

II. Islamic Jurisprudence

ZIAD BOU AKL.....	141
From Norm Evaluation to Norm Construction: The Metaethical Origin of al-Ghazālī's Radical Infallibilism	
FELICITAS OPWIS.....	159
The Ethical Turn in Legal Analogy: Imbuing the <i>Ratio Legis</i> with <i>Maṣlaḥa</i>	
ROBERT GLEAVE.....	183
Moral Assessments and Legal Categories: The Relationship between Rational Ethics and Revealed Law in Post-Classical Imāmī Shī'ī Legal Theory	
OMAR FARAHAT.....	209
Moral Value and Commercial Gain: Three Classical Islamic Approaches	

III. Hadith, Quran, and Adab

MUTAZ AL-KHATIB.....	229
Consult Your Heart: The Self as a Source of Moral Judgment	
TAREQ MOQBEL.....	259
“As Time Grows Older, the Qur’ān Grows Younger”: The Ethical Function of Ambiguity in Qur’ānic Narratives	
ENASS KHANSA.....	289
Can Reading Animate Justice? A Conversation from <i>Alf Layla wa-Layla</i> (<i>The Thousand and One Nights</i>)	
NUHA ALSHAAR.....	313
The Interplay of Religion and Philosophy in al-Tawḥīdī's Political Thought and Practical Ethics	

Contents

WILLIAM RYLE HODGES	339
Muhammad ‘Abduh’s Notion of Political <i>Adab</i> : Ethics as a Virtue of Modern Citizenship in Late 19th Century Khedival Egypt	

“As Time Grows Older, the Qur’ān Grows Younger”: The Ethical Function of Ambiguity in Qur’ānic Narratives*

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Abstract

This article explores the role of ambiguity in the Qur’ān. It examines the concept of ambiguity, its ethical function in literature, and its reception in the *tafsīr* tradition with special reference to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s (d. 606/1210) exegetical programme. Further, and by way of focusing on the narrative genre of the Qur’ān, the article analyses a Qur’ānic pericope, Q. 12:52-53, to illustrate the extent to which ambiguity impacts on the text, and what that means for the ethical teaching of Qur’ānic narratives. Without denying that ambiguity is located in the reader too, the article argues that ambiguity resides in the Qur’ānic text itself, and that this ambiguity has the function of expanding the Qur’ān’s interpretive universe and ethical potential.

Keywords: Ambiguity, Narratives, Polysemy, Qur’ānic hermeneutics, al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*

1. Introduction

In his book *The Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, Vishanoff argues that the main concern of al-Shāfi’ī (d. 204/820) in the *Risālah* was the textual ambiguity of the Qur’ān. In particular, the ambiguous nature of the text was accepted by al-Shāfi’ī as a positive feature which provides a space for interpretive work:

[I]n his *Risāla* he did not assume ambiguity and try to overcome it, as one would expect if he were offering a method for determining law from an accepted canon of texts; instead he defended the existence of all kinds of Qur’ānic ambiguities, against those who insisted that the Qur’ān was a transparent expression of its meaning.¹

Although al-Shāfi’ī’s project was not universally accepted—there was, for instance, a view conceiving of the Qur’ān as unambiguous²—it is remarkable that, as one of the founders of

* I am grateful to Dr. Ferial BOUHAFI, Dr. Tony STREET, and an anonymous reviewer for their comments, corrections, and useful suggestions. I am responsible for the flaws that remain. All translations are by the author unless stated otherwise.

¹ VISHANOFF 2011: 51.

² See, for example, VISHANOFF 2011: 137-141.

Islamic hermeneutics, al-Shāfiʿī was content with the notion of ambiguity. Against this backdrop, and consistent with Bauer's thesis that ambiguity was tolerated in the classical Islamic hermeneutical tradition, which I elaborate on below, this article attempts to explore the ethical function of ambiguity in the narratives of the Qur'ān. In particular, it seeks to answer the following question: what *ethical* role could we assign to Qur'ānic ambiguity? The focus on the narrative genre stems from the fact that not much work has been done to excavate the ethical potential of Qur'ānic narratives;³ more generally, Qur'ānic ethics is a relatively understudied area.⁴

I shall argue that ambiguity is a characteristic possessed by the text of the Qur'ān, and that this textual ambiguity is intentional. To put the matter differently, I will attempt to show that ambiguity is not only a function of reading but also an inner-textual attribute that forms a central part of the very fabric of the Qur'ān. In particular, and through focusing on the narrative genre of the Qur'ān, I hope to convey how the inherent ambiguity of Qur'ānic narratives carries ethical implications; it is through a lack of clarity that Qur'ānic narratives become complex sites of moral pedagogy.

The article is arranged as follows: after this introduction, Section 2 provides the general context for the concept of ambiguity. Section 3 lays down the theoretical background, in so much as it presents how ambiguity is perceived as *ethically functional* in related domains. Next, Section 4 comments on ambiguity in the Qur'ān and its reception in the exegetical tradition, with special reference to the contribution of al-Rāzī. Section 5 offers a concrete example: Q. 12:52-53 is taken as a case study to illustrate the extent to which ambiguity impacts on the text, and what that means for the ethical teaching of the Qur'ān. The findings of this section are then taken further, in Section 6, to reflect on what the interpretive possibilities say about the theology of revelation: that is, it attempts to forge a bridge between (seemingly abstract) ontological discussions on the nature of Divine revelation and the domain of scriptural interpretation. Section 7 concludes with the main findings.

2. The Concept of Ambiguity

Ambiguity is itself an ambiguous term. The various attempts to conceptualise it vary between broad and restrictive definitions. Empson provides an extended definition of ambiguity: "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language".⁵ The concept of ambiguity is stretched by Page even further when she writes that ambiguity, in her usage, "enlarges 'double meaning' to polyvalence, that is, the way in which anything may be interpreted or evaluated in a variety of ways according to one's point

3 RASHWANI n.d.: 1 rightly points out that although there have been valuable ethical readings of the Qur'ān since the mid-twentieth century—including the works of Drāz, Rahbar, Izutsu, and Fazlur Rahman—a proper ethical analysis of Qur'ānic narratives has been neglected.

4 RAHMAN 1979: 257 remarked that "the greatest desideratum of medieval Islamic thought is in the field of ethics", and that "[o]ne cannot point to a single work of ethics squarely based upon the Qur'ān". Similarly, DRĀZ 2008: 4 shares this concern.

5 EMPSON 1953: 1.

of view, intention, practice, or culture”.⁶ On the other hand, a restrictive definition of ambiguity is provided by Rimmon, who advances that ambiguity has to fulfil four defining properties: an ambiguous expression has two or three different meanings; the meanings cannot be reduced to each other, nor identified with each other; they are mutually exclusive in the context; and the expression requires choosing between its different meanings without providing the grounds for that choice.⁷

Ambiguity takes different forms. According to Ullmann, ambiguity comes in three forms: phonetic, grammatical and lexical.⁸ However, for our purposes we can dismiss the first type—in fact, it has been questioned whether phonological ambiguity is a genuine form of ambiguity.⁹ Grammatical ambiguity results from two factors: grammatical forms and sentence structure. The former type of grammatical ambiguity includes cases where prefixes and suffixes are open to more than one meaning, and the latter is “where the individual words are unambiguous but their combination can be interpreted in two or more different ways”. Lexical ambiguity, on the other hand, represents the phenomenon of *polyvalency*, where the same word may have more than one meaning.¹⁰

The case study presented in this article is an exemplar of grammatical ambiguity, in particular, pronominal ambiguity. It is also useful to highlight in this regard that some parallels could be established between these two types of ambiguity—grammatical and lexical—and the *uṣūlī* tradition. Al-Rāzī, for instance, argues that revelation cannot yield certain knowledge because it relies on several inconclusive factors, among which at least two factors correspond to the forms of ambiguity delineated above: the point he makes that grammar is in itself inconclusive overlaps to a certain degree with *grammatical* ambiguity, and his inclusion of polysemy (*al-ishtirāk*) in the factors that render revelation inconclusive corresponds to *lexical* ambiguity.¹¹

3. The Function of Ambiguity

In order to establish the role of ambiguity in the Qur'ān, I begin by illustrating its general function in narratives. In so doing, I will take Langlands' illuminating *Exemplary Ethics in Ancient Rome* as my point of departure. This study analyses Roman exemplary stories and is of great relevance to my enquiry and particularly so if we are to regard Qur'ānic narratives as exemplary stories.

Langlands observes that “Roman exempla easily incorporate moral ambiguity and troubling elements”. This characteristic presence of ambiguity enables the stories to voice multiple responses to the same incident. Since the narratives cannot be reduced to simple propositions, they become dynamic and function “at the heart of a practical ethics”. What Langlands

⁶ PAGE 1985: 13.

⁷ RIMMON 1977: 17.

⁸ ULLMANN 1967: 156.

⁹ RIMMON 1977: 62.

¹⁰ ULLMANN 1967: 156-159.

¹¹ AL-RĀZĪ 1987: IX, 114.

describes as the “moral borderline or uncertainty” that is encountered in Roman exempla is the very aspect that enriches the narratives, fuelling “ethical debates by provoking moral questions to which there are no definitive answers, but which put important ethical ideas in play”.¹²

One of Langlands’ primary arguments regarding exempla, which I would argue applies equally to Qur’ānic narratives, is that we must be “sceptical about claims that they are univocal and unambiguous”, in the sense that we should resist the tendency to regard their meanings as fixed. In turn, this poses a threat to the typical representations of exempla as direct narratives, of which the messages are unambiguous. Even the narratives that at first sight appear to bear clear messages are, when attended to carefully, far more complex. Therefore, the meaning of an exemplum is deliberately *multivalent*. Multivalency not only indicates the openness of a story to multiple interpretations, but also the ability of an exemplum “to convey multiple moral messages at once, and even messages that may be in logical conflict with one another”.¹³ These notions of multivalency can also be viewed in the works of Bakhtin, who describes the potential of literary works to generate new meanings using the idea of *great time*, which he defines as the “infinite and unfinalized dialogue in which no meaning dies”.¹⁴ Throughout its lifespan, a work is enriched with new significance as contexts change; it is thus *re-accentuated*. The “image becomes polysemic, like a symbol. Thus are created the immortal novelistic images that live different lives in different epochs”.¹⁵

From the wider world of literature, I now turn to an area more specific to the Qur’ān: the cognate field of biblical studies. Here I wish to underline two main points: first, the existence of ambiguity in the Bible and, second, the profound ethical implications of this ambiguity. Of particular significance to this article is Weiss’ *Ethical Ambiguity in the Hebrew Bible*, which, focusing on the notion of ambiguity, attempts to analyse scriptural narratives in the light of ethical considerations and philosophical debates. The manifestations of ambiguity in Hebrew Bible narratives include, according to Weiss, the fact that the Bible does not usually explicitly evaluate the moral status of its characters’ behaviour.¹⁶ This ambiguity in moral judgement gives rise to various interpretations, complicating the task of the exegetes: “Due to the omission of explicit moral evaluation of biblical characters, it is unclear if the Bible approves, disapproves, or is indifferent to the morally questionable acts depicted in its narratives, which are left open for the reader’s response.”¹⁷ Furthermore, ambiguity in the narratives could trigger alternative interpretations that illustrate the complex factors, motivations, and competing values at play.¹⁸

In view of these points, I would like to suggest that acknowledging the capacity and significance of ambiguity offers a good entry point to our understanding of Qur’ānic narrative ethics. The upshot is that ambiguity in narratives is *functional*—it is intentional and has a

¹² LANGLANDS 2018: 50-56.

¹³ Ibid., 59-64.

¹⁴ BAKHTIN 1986: 169.

¹⁵ BAKHTIN 1982: 410.

¹⁶ WEISS 2018: 2-3.

¹⁷ Ibid., 215.

¹⁸ Ibid., 216.

practical and pragmatic function.¹⁹ And it is through this functional ambiguity that we are better positioned to appreciate Qur'ānic narratives as productive ethical resources, and as tools for moral education.

However, before we proceed, one possible objection to ambiguity and its role in narrational exegesis needs to be addressed: does this polyphonic approach, which allows for a plurality of interpretations, not lead to instability and relativism?²⁰ Similarly, does the idea that Qur'ānic narratives are open to re-interpretation and to being shaped over time, undermine their normativity in that no neat moral messages can be derived? In the context of the Bible, Steinmetz argues that biblical language “opens up a field of possible meanings”, and that an interpretation is valid if it falls within that field.²¹ This allows for a degree of objectivity, as Collins puts it: “A text, biblical or not, may have more than one meaning, but we can at least set limits to the range of acceptable interpretations.”²²

The assumption that there exists a *field of possible meanings* is also found in the Muslim exegetical tradition. By way of example, in his commentary on the last part of Q. 4:83, “you would almost all have followed Satan”²³ (“*la-ttaba‘umu l-shayāna illā qalīlan*”), al-Rāzī offers three possible interpretations with regard to the referent of the exceptive expression “*illā qalīlan*”, and then—and this is crucial—comments: “Know that the interpretations could not go beyond these three” (“*wa-‘lam anna l-wujūha lā yumkinu an tazīda ‘alā hādhīhi l-thalāthati*”).²⁴ This statement appears to indicate that al-Rāzī operated with the notion of a *field of possible meanings* beyond which the interpretation is closed. This approach provides an answer to the charge of relativism: there are interpretive limits that should not be exceeded.²⁵ In other words, all the meanings that are subsumed under that *field* are valid, given that they pass rigorous hermeneutical scrutiny. The upshot of this is that Qur'ānic polysemy is different from the post-structuralist literary concept of indeterminacy: the former

19 Cf. PATTERSON 1991: 141. Moreover, SALEH 2003: 167-178 speaks about what he calls *functional hermeneutics* in al-Tha‘labī’s (d. 427/1035) *tafsīr*: “The Qur’ān in these instances comes to life, speaks and admonishes. Exegesis in these instances performs a pragmatic function; it admonishes and exhorts the believers” (ibid., 167). Through this functional approach to Qur’ānic interpretation, “[t]he word of God was not only explained but was expanded to become an authoritative moral voice in regulating human conduct. Furthermore, functional exegesis created what I would call a dialogical Qur’ān—a Qur’ān with which the believers conversed and argued” (ibid., 175). Building on Saleh, I would like to suggest that the ambiguity of the Qur’ānic text is what makes *functional exegesis* possible.

20 Cf. WINKEL 1997: 101: “When first confronted with this fundamental ambiguity of *fiqh*, many Muslims will surely get nervous and distressed. They might think that embracing ambiguity will send them over the brink to hedonism or nihilism, because if a particular activity is not the only truth, maybe nothing is true. The concept of multiple truths, however, means that activities can be mutually exclusive, firmly in the ambiguity of *ikhtilāf*, and be meaningful.”

21 STEINMETZ 2011: 8.

22 COLLINS 2019: 6.

23 The translation of this Qur’ānic verse, as that of all others, is from ABDEL HALEEM 2005 (though I occasionally modify the translations).

24 AL-RĀZĪ 1981: X, 207.

25 These interpretive possibilities are not conditioned by the subjective psyche of the reader, but by the text itself: “this is not simply a subjectivity of interpretation, determined by what the reader brings into the work, but a subjectivity of creation, invited by the work itself” (RIMMON 1977: 12).

is not entirely open.²⁶ Viewed in this way, polysemy “is to be understood as a claim to textual stability rather than its opposite, an indeterminate state of endlessly deferred meanings and unresolved conflicts”.²⁷ Thus, one could remain faithful to the text, and at the same time realize its deep interpretive potential. Even Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), whose works are read by some as opening the doors for overinterpretation, acknowledged that a valid interpretation is one that is supported by the language of revelation,²⁸ and hence he was limiting the hermeneutical field. To summarise, I argue for a middle position between monolithic exegesis and overinterpretation—Boyarin expresses this idea with regards to the midrash:

The effect of the midrashic text as a whole is to present a view of textuality which occupies neither the extreme of assuming a univocal “correct” reading of the text, nor the extreme of “Whoever finds a lesson there useful to the building of charity, even though he has not said what the author may be shown to have intended in that place, has not been deceived, nor is he lying in any way.” Rather, the midrash seems to present the view of an ancient reader who perceives ambiguity encoded in the text itself with various dialectical possibilities for reducing that ambiguity, each contributing to but not exhausting its meaning(s).²⁹

4. Ambiguity in the Qur’ān and Exegetical Practice

Following from his discussion of the preservation of Qur’ānic textual variants, Bauer, in Chapter 4 of *Die Kultur der Ambiguität*, asks the question of whether God speaks ambiguously (“Spricht Gott mehrdeutig?”).³⁰ In addressing this question, and in an attempt to show the openness of classical scholars to hermeneutical diversity, Bauer quotes the prominent scholar of the Qur’ān Ibn al-Jazarī (d. 833/1429):

The scholars of this nation—from the first generation until recently—have continuously deduced from the Qur’ān evidence, arguments, proofs, and wisdom, among other things, which no predecessor has known, and which no later scholar will exhaust. The Qur’ān is the great ocean which has no floor to be reached, and to which there is no limit for one to stand upon. And, therefore, this nation did not need a prophet after its Prophet.³¹

²⁶ Cf. STERN 1988: 141.

²⁷ Ibid., 155.

²⁸ CHITTICK 2000: 155. A fascinating example of Ibn ‘Arabī’s close adherence to language is his reinterpretation of the etymology of the word “*khalīlan*” in Q. 4:125. Similarly, his innovative interpretation of Abraham’s dream verse, Q. 37:105, shows how he can balance between his creative hermeneutics on one hand, and his faithfulness to the linguistic boundaries of the Qur’ānic text on the other. On these two examples, see SINAI 2020: 294-295. MCAULEY 2012: 65 also makes this point: “Ibn ‘Arabī can thus combine daring interpretive flights with a rigorous commitment to the Qur’an as God’s literal word.”

²⁹ BOYARIN 1990: 45.

³⁰ BAUER 2011: 115.

³¹ IBN al-JAZARĪ 1980: I, 5.

Bauer understands this passage to indicate the tolerance of ambiguity in pre-modern Islam, contending that it shows the extent to which Ibn al-Jazarī appreciated the richness of the Qur'ān in terms of the meanings it generates. He then asks the question: “if this is not a mentality that wants to be open to the future, then what is” (“Wenn das keine »Mentalität, die wirklich offen für die Zukunft sein will«, ist, was dann”)? Furthermore, Bauer submits that, for Ibn al-Jazarī, it was self-evident that the Qur'ānic text allowed for the existence of a variety of meanings.³² This, he says, is diametrically opposed to the modern notion—which has its roots in Cartesian ideology—that the Qur'ānic text bears only one meaning.³³ Bauer supports his argument—that pre-modern Muslim scholars were comfortable with a multiplicity of meanings—by resorting to the *locus classicus* of Qur'ānic polysemy; a statement attributed to ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661) to the effect that the Qur'ān allows for multiple meanings (“*al-Qur’ānu ḥammālun dhū wujūhin*”).³⁴

Bauer further attempts to show the toleration of ambiguity in pre-modern Islam by presenting the flexibility of classical exegetes in interpreting the Qur'ān, that is, their toleration of ambiguity in the Qur'ān. His case study is Q. 79:4, “*fa-l-sābiqāti sabqan*”. Bauer notes that al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058), a representative of the classical exegetical tradition, lists five interpretations (“*ta’wīlāt*”) as to what is meant by “*al-sābiqāt*”: angels; stars; death; human souls; and horses. Al-Māwardī then adds a sixth interpretation, which Bauer takes as al-Māwardī’s own addition to the *tafsīr* tradition: that “*al-sābiqāt*” denotes the soul as it precedes the body to its destiny in heaven or hell.³⁵ Bauer uses the model of al-Māwardī to make a number of useful observations. The first is that al-Māwardī aligned the six interpretations alongside each other *without* preferring any one of them—a feature that Bauer attributes to the majority of Qur'ānic commentaries (“Und dies gilt nicht nur für sein Werk, sondern für die Mehrheit der klassischen Korankommentare”).³⁶ Secondly, Bauer underscores the fact that, although al-Māwardī relied on his pre-cursors in deriving the majority of interpretations (“Die meisten Deutungsmöglichkeiten”), he did not shy away from adding his own view on the matter, a view which he prefaced by saying “and it is possible” (“*wa-yahtamilu*”) to indicate inconclusiveness and probability. Thirdly, Bauer takes al-Māwardī’s treatment as evidence for the positive acceptance of the notion of limitless meanings (“Die Theorie der unerschöpflichen Bedeutungsfülle des Korans”) in classical Muslim exegesis; a notion also indicated in a tradition quoted by al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) to the effect that a true scholar is one who appreciates the polyvalent nature of the Qur'ān.³⁷ Fourthly, and against

32 BAUER 2011: 115–118.

33 Ibid., 118–119.

34 Ibid., 119.

35 AL-MĀWARDĪ n.d: VI, 193–194.

36 One should note, however, that it is not uncommon to find a pre-modern *mufasssīr* choosing *one* interpretation as the correct view. Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), for example, frequently evaluates the different interpretations and selects which of them he finds plausible. WATT 1973: 261–262 briefly alluded to this observation. Nonetheless, Bauer is right in that classical commentators were not, generally speaking, deeply invested in reaching final and conclusive answers. SINAI 2011: 130 has also observed this feature when he looked at al-Rāzī’s interpretation of Q. 103:1, noting that al-Rāzī did not feel compelled to provide a conclusive interpretation of the word “*wa-l-‘aṣr*”.

37 AL-SUYŪṬĪ 2005: III, 976.

this backdrop, Bauer takes the practice of including different (and sometimes relatively obscure) interpretations *without commenting on them* as an indication that classical exegetes—as opposed to the modern Muslim exegetes influenced by reductionist Cartesian notions—not only embraced polysemy, but also allowed for the possibility of the existence of parallel truths (“Prinzip der Möglichkeit paralleler Wahrheiten”). Bauer also observes that although classical exegetes were, on the one hand, willing to accept the polysemy of the Qur’ānic text, they were also, on the other hand, unwilling to deviate far from previous recorded interpretive traditions. This, he explains, was an attempt by the scholars to *control* the ambiguous nature of Scripture (“Diese conservative Herangehensweise, die auf einer progressiven Theorie aufbaut, läßt sich wiederum durch das Bemühen um *Ambiguitäts-zählung* erklären”).³⁸ Bauer’s main conclusion is that, generally speaking, any interpretation that is in line with the assumptions of Western modernity will not be more tolerant of polysemy than a classical traditional interpretation (“Generell gilt: Eine an den Prämissen der westlichen Moderne ausgerichtete Koranexegese ist keineswegs *an sich* offener und ambiguitätstoleranter als ein traditionelle”).³⁹ What we take from Bauer, then, is that the Qur’ān retains an element of ambiguity *by design*, and that the classical Islamic exegetical tradition *tolerated* the polysemous nature of its holy text. Indeed, according to Bauer, classical scholars were more tolerant to ambiguity than their later colleagues who worked under the paradigms of modernity. Ambiguity was not a problem for classical scholars; it was the solution.⁴⁰

Bauer’s thesis was also made by Ahmed, though in connection to early *tafsīr* literature. He argued, on the basis of his analysis of the Satanic verses, that the “defining characteristic” of the early exegetical tradition was that it was *exploratory, uncertain, and multivocal*: “The literature of early Qur’ān exegesis comprises a range of interpretations on almost every verse of the Qur’ān, with strikingly little attempt to invest interpretations with the finality of categorical Prophetic authority.”⁴¹ He also noted with regard to the contradictory interpretations attributed to the major figure of Islamic hermeneutics, Ibn ‘Abbās, that the early exegetes did not dispute the attribution of those incompatible interpretations to him, and thus no attempt was made to prefer one view over the other.⁴² This is clearly indicative of their willingness to accept diversity, even to the extent of contradictory views assigned to the same person. Ahmed writes: “Early *tafsīr* seems, thus, to have been in the first instance, an exploration of the Divine Word, and, as such, was apparently more concerned with the *range of possibilities* contained in the Divine Word than with exclusive truth claims about the Divine Word.”⁴³ The argument of Bauer and Ahmed was succinctly captured by Van Ess

³⁸ BAUER 2011: 120-124.

³⁹ Ibid., 130.

⁴⁰ See, on this point, RIPPIN 2014: 59. In this context, THAYER 2018: 24 has shown, in a study of al-Raḍī’s (d. 406/1015) Qur’ānic commentary, how the ambiguity of the Qur’ān could be employed for a purpose.

⁴¹ AHMED 2017: 31.

⁴² Ibid., 277.

⁴³ Ibid., 31. It is noteworthy that WATT 1973: 261 advanced that in the period from 850 to 945 CE *tafsīr* stabilized, that is, there was more agreement on many issues, and “some of the wilder suggestions of the previous centuries have been eliminated”. (This comment that there existed some “wilder suggestions” in the previous centuries, seems to be referring to issues such as the interpretation of the Satanic verses incident regarding which AHMED 2017: 265 convincingly argued that in the first two centuries of Islam

when he noted: “For more than a millennium, until a very recent period, the Islamic Scripture was thus treated with relative liberty.”⁴⁴ In like manner, and after an illuminating observation on how the notion of consensus, *ijmāʿ*, paradoxically negates itself and thus serves to open up interpretive possibilities, Saleh wrote:

Quranic exegesis became Sunnī by becoming polyvalent. The Qurʾān spoke in many meanings, and they were all true, unless there developed an *ijmāʿ* (a consensus) concerning a particular meaning. Since few interpretations became subject to an *ijmāʿ* and hence no unanimous meanings were ever attached to them, each varied interpretation was true on its own. A verse could have conflicting interpretations, each of which could be adduced as part of the meaning of the word of God without disrupting the notion of the clarity of the Qurʾān.⁴⁵

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify that Bauer is essentially advancing two theses: the first, as discussed above, is that pre-modern *tafsīr* embraced the polysemic nature of the Qurʾān. I am in agreement with this thesis—in fact, it is the premise upon which this article is founded. The second thesis Bauer advances, which I find problematic, is that modern Muslim exegesis of the Qurʾān is reductionist and monolithic.⁴⁶ In order to make his case that modern Muslim interpreters of the Qurʾān do not appreciate Qurʾānic polysemy, Bauer looks at how the modern Salafī scholar al-ʿUthaymīn (d. 2001) interpreted Q. 79:4. On the basis that al-ʿUthaymīn, in contrast to al-Māwardī, provided only one interpretation of the term “*al-sābiqāt*” in “*fa-l-sābiqāti sabqan*”, and that his interpretation is not known by the classical scholars, Bauer submits that al-ʿUthaymīn’s interpretation of the Qurʾān is not anchored in the classical exegetical tradition (“Die Deutung des »Traditionalisten« Ibn ʿUthaymīn erfolgt mithin ohne Rückgriff auf die Tradition”), and that al-ʿUthaymīn maintains—in line with modernist Cartesian assumptions—that there could only be *one* correct interpretation (“nur eine Deutung könne wahr sein”).⁴⁷

However, Bauer’s findings regarding al-ʿUthaymīn warrant a measure of scepticism. First of all, Bauer is correct to observe that, on this occasion, al-ʿUthaymīn limited himself to one interpretation. In fact, it is common practice for al-ʿUthaymīn, across his *tafsīr* corpus, to prefer one interpretation as the correct (*al-ṣaḥīḥ*), or apparent (*al-aẓhar*) view. This is, however, not enough to argue that al-ʿUthaymīn did not acknowledge the polysemic nature of the Qurʾānic text. There are multiple instances across his exegetical project where he provides parallel interpretations of a verse (or a word) *without preferring* one over the other,

there was a general acceptance of its truth.) WATT 1973: 262 also posited that the commentary of al-Ṭabarī “marks the close of an era”. By this he seems to indicate that Qurʾānic interpretation during the formative two centuries of Islam was even more open than the later periods. And on the argument that the *tafsīr* genre gradually became a reductionist discipline that restricted the meanings of the otherwise rich Qurʾān, see the important comments given by IBN ʿĀSHŪR (d. 1973) 2006: 161-165.

⁴⁴ VAN ESS 2018: 1736.

⁴⁵ SALEH 2003: 18.

⁴⁶ On this issue, PINK 2016: 779 explains that “many modern exegetes had difficulties” with accepting “a multiplicity of meanings as equally true” because their focus was on extracting practical guidance from the Qurʾān, and guidance “is dependent on a clear and unambiguous reading of the text”.

⁴⁷ BAUER 2011: 125-128.

though he might add a note to the effect that the parallel interpretations do not contradict each other. Examples include his commentary on Q. 2:218,⁴⁸ Q. 18:22,⁴⁹ and Q. 50:40.⁵⁰ It follows, then, that this generalisation, based on a single example, is not entirely correct: it risks being a selective reading that inaccurately depicts al-‘Uthaymīn. Secondly, Bauer’s contention that al-‘Uthaymīn’s interpretation of the verse—namely, that “*al-sābiqāt*” are the angels *racing* to God’s command, in the sense that they are more observant of God than humans—does not go back to the classical tradition is, again, inaccurate. For instance, al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273) records almost the same interpretation, attributing it to previous authorities, one of whom is Mujāhid (d. 104/722), namely that “*al-sābiqāt*” are the angels who surpassed humans in good deeds (“*hiya l-malā’ikatu sabaqat-i bna ādama bi-l-khayri wa-l-‘amali l-ṣālihi*”).⁵¹ Therefore, the claim that al-‘Uthaymīn’s interpretation of Q. 79:4 has no grounds in the classical tradition should be revised. Bauer would have perhaps been able to make a better case by appealing to a different commentator, though I am not entirely sure which commentator will *consistently* meet Bauer’s criteria.⁵² The upshot is that Bauer’s second thesis is not without its problems. Griffel seems to share this concern: he writes that Bauer’s book—as well as Ahmed’s *What is Islam*—portrays modern Islam in a “reductionist and coarse” manner.⁵³ Furthermore, Bauer’s seeming generalization does not line up with the general state of the field—Pink has rightly observed that “contemporary Qur’ānic exegesis is a highly fragmented field” and thus “pluralization seems inevitable”.⁵⁴ In addition to this, the continuity between medieval and modern Muslim *tafsīr* has been noted by Sinai:

48 AL-‘UTHAYMĪN 2002(a): 64.

49 AL-‘UTHAYMĪN 2002(b): 41-42.

50 AL-‘UTHAYMĪN 2004: 112.

51 AL-QURṬUBĪ 2006: XXII, 42.

52 In theory, a potential candidate for Bauer may be the twentieth-century scholar al-Farāhī (d. 1930) who wrote in *al-Takmil fī uṣūl al-ta’wīl* that the Qur’ān only admits of one interpretation (“*lā yaḥtamilu illā ta’wīlan wāḥidan*”) (AL-FARĀHĪ n.d.: 31). Nonetheless, whether or not al-Farāhī’s exegetical practice tallies with his theory is a different question: if we look at his *Tafsīr niẓām al-Qur’ān* we can find indications to the effect that he does not subscribe totally to his hermeneutical principle. For instance, in his exegesis of Sūrat al-‘Aṣr, Q. 103, he states that this chapter has two interpretations; one general and one specific (“*li-l-sūratī ta’wīlāni; ‘āmmun wa-khāṣṣun*”) (AL-FARĀHĪ 2008: 381). Although he observes the link between both, it appears to me that this weakens, to some extent, his theoretical principle that the Qur’ān admits of only one interpretation. Perhaps a better option for Bauer would be the contemporary short commentaries such as Majma’ al-Malik Fahd’s *al-Tafsīr al-muyassar*, and Tafsir Center’s *al-Mukhtaṣar*. However, this would entail the risk of comparing non-identical categories. This is to say that comparing al-Māwardī’s *tafsīr*, for example, with Tafsir Center’s *al-Mukhtaṣar* obscures the differences between both in terms of style and the targeted audience. In a related discussion, SALEH 2003: 22 wrote that “[we] should not judge the *madrasa* style commentaries by the same criteria we use to judge the encyclopedic ones”. Additionally, if we apply Pink’s typology of modern *tafsīr* to these two works—retrospectively in the case of al-Māwardī—then al-Māwardī’s could be classed as a “scholar’s commentary” whereas *al-Mukhtaṣar* falls under the “institutional commentaries” category (PINK 2010: 61).

53 GRIFFEL 2017: 19.

54 PINK 2016: 789.

From my reading of Riḍā's and Qutb's introductions to Sūrat al-An'ām, I come away with the impression that a due appreciation of the multifarious ways in which modern Islamic exegesis can be in conversation with the antecedent tradition—by re-evaluating ancient reports, by scrutinising and critiquing the views of earlier authorities, by reconfiguring existing topoi—is indispensable to gauging its full sophistication.⁵⁵

Moving on, the notion that the Qur'ān contains ambiguous verses is also attested in the Qur'ān, particularly in Q. 3:7, part of which reads: “it is He who has sent this Scripture down to you [Prophet]. Some of its verses are definite in meaning—these are the cornerstone of the Scripture—and others are ambiguous”. I do not intend to go into the various technicalities of this verse which have already been dealt with elsewhere.⁵⁶ Rather, I would like to adduce the verse as evidence of the Qur'ān's positive framing of its inherent ambiguity. Further, I would like to corroborate this notion by presenting al-Rāzī's threefold classification of Qur'ānic verses in terms of ambiguity—a classification which he provides by way of summarising his comprehensive treatment of Q. 3:7—and then providing a sample of his exegetical treatments to show how a towering figure in the interpretive tradition tackled the issue of ambiguity. However, in order to understand al-Rāzī's hermeneutics of ambiguity, we must first grasp his conception of whether or not scriptural indicants engender certitude.

Al-Rāzī submits that revelation is incapable of yielding definitive knowledge. In *Asās al-taqdīs*, for instance, he writes that lexical proofs (“*al-dalā'il al-lafziyyah*”)—or scriptural proofs (“*al-dalā'il al-sam'iyyah*”), as he describes them in *al-Maṭālib*⁵⁷—can never be definitive because they are dependent on various inconclusive factors, such as grammar and the transmission of language. And given that these factors are inconclusive in themselves, that which relies on them cannot engender certitude.⁵⁸ Clearly, al-Rāzī is raising the bar high. It follows, then, that both the *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt* are non-conclusive categories. It

⁵⁵ SINAI 2016: 151. And of the various contemporary commentaries which display a continuity with the classical exegetical tradition is Ibn 'Āshūr's, which is described by MUBARAK 2018: 4 “as one that revives the relevance of classical hermeneutics by applying them to deliver new meanings”. WIELANDT 2006: 124 also writes in this regard that many “Qur'ān commentaries of this time hardly differ from older ones in the methods applied and the kinds of explanations given”, and thus one should “always bear in mind that in the exegesis of the Qur'ān there is a broad current of unbroken tradition continuing to this day”. Nonetheless, I do not mean to deny that many modern commentaries betoken a discontinuity with the classical tradition. Recently, and in an excellent contribution to this topic, COPPENS 2021 supported the view that there has been a shift from a polyvalent *tafsīr* tradition to a monovalent one in modern times, arguing that one of the main reasons for this shift is the rise of the ‘*sūrah*-unity’ approach to *tafsīr*. He also notes two issues with Bauer's case study: the focus on a small set of verses, and Bauer's choice of al-'Uthaymīn, who is not a central name in contemporary *tafsīr* (37).

⁵⁶ See, for example, KINBERG 1988: 143-172, and EL-TOBGUI 2008: 125-158.

⁵⁷ AL-RĀZĪ 1987: IX, 113.

⁵⁸ AL-RĀZĪ 1986: 234-235. Ten factors are listed in AL-RĀZĪ 1987: IX, 113-118. For more nuanced discussions on al-Rāzī's views on this matter, and on the possibility of revelation engendering conclusive knowledge if supported by *tawātur*, see JAFFER 2015: 77-83 and 102-104, and EL-TOBGUI 2019: 133-134. In understanding and translating parts of al-Rāzī's passage, I was immensely helped by EL-TOBGUI 2008: 140.

is through this conceptualisation of certainty that we discover many ramifications for al-Rāzī's entire exegetical project.

Yet another prefatory explanation is in order: al-Rāzī's definition of the *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt*. On the semantic level, a term is considered a *muḥkam*, al-Rāzī contends, in one of two cases: first, if it is capable of signifying only one meaning. Put differently, the first case is when the word is univocal (“*idhā kāna l-lafẓu mawḍū‘an li-ma‘nan wa-lā yakūnu muḥtamilan li-ghayrihī*”). A second type of *muḥkamāt* are those words which allow for more than one meaning, yet one of the meanings is preponderant, that is, immediate (“*an yakūna ḥtimālūhū li-aḥadihimā rājiḥan*”). The *mutashābihāt*, on the other hand, are those words in which more than one meaning is possible but neither meaning is preponderant.⁵⁹ It is crucial to note that at this stage we are only speaking of “the primordial semantic denotation of words considered in isolation and *before* they enter into any actual linguistic context”.⁶⁰

So, what happens when the words appear in actual *usage*, in a *context*; in our case, the Qur’ān? That is to say, how is one to determine whether a word found in the Qur’ān is to be interpreted according to its preponderant meaning, or according to another, non-preponderant meaning? This discussion is stimulated by the following dilemma posed by al-Rāzī: what if the preponderant meaning is (theologically) false, and the non-preponderant meaning (theologically) true (“*innamā l-mushkilu bi-an yakūna l-lafẓu bi-aṣli waḍ‘ihī rājiḥan fī aḥadi l-ma‘nayayni wa-marjūḥan fī l-ākharī thumma kāna l-rājiḥu bāṭilan wa-l-marjūḥu ḥaqqan*”)? In his answer to this question, which essentially, and in an *implied* manner, differentiates between the *isolated semantic usage* and the *Qur’ānic usage*, al-Rāzī proposes a universal rule: if we construe a word that has two meanings—one apparent and one non-apparent—according to its *apparent meaning*, the word is said to be *muḥkamah*. If the word is construed—by virtue of an independent indicator—according to its *non-apparent meaning*, it is described as *mutashābihah*.⁶¹ It follows from this that a word could be, at one time, *muḥkamah* in its primordial denotation, but *mutashābihah* in its Qur’ānic application.

We are now, I hope, better equipped to look at al-Rāzī's classification of Qur’ānic verses with reference to the presence or otherwise of ambiguity, with the objective of ascertaining al-Rāzī's final statement on the matter. The rigorous and impartial scholar (“*al-muḥaqqiqu l-munṣifū*”), according to al-Rāzī, classifies the verses into three classes: first, the truly unambiguous verses (“*al-muḥkamu ḥaqqan*”), where the apparent meaning of a verse is confirmed by rational evidence. Second, those verses whose apparent meanings (“*ẓawāhiruhā*”) have been precluded by decisive (rational) proofs (“*al-dalā’il al-qāṭi‘ah*”). These verses, according to al-Rāzī's definitions, are considered *mutashābihāt*—they are of *definitive ambiguity*, as El-Tobgui puts it.⁶² Third are those verses for which there exists no such evidence either to confirm or preclude their apparent meaning. Given that neither of these two options outweighs the other, al-Rāzī describes this category as entailing confusion (“*wa-yakūnu dhālika mutashābihan*”). Yet he submits that such verses should be interpreted according to their apparent meanings (“*alā ẓawāhiriḥā*”), as if to indicate that interpreting

⁵⁹ AL-RĀZĪ 1981: VII, 181.

⁶⁰ EL-TOBGUI 2008: 138.

⁶¹ AL-RĀZĪ 1981: VII, 182.

⁶² EL-TOBGUI 2008: 147.

the verses according to the apparent meanings is the default position.⁶³ Will this still render these verses ambiguous, that is, *mutashābihāt*? It seems so, at least on El-Tobgui's reading of al-Rāzī.⁶⁴ The main concern that arises from this account of al-Rāzī's views is that he not only acknowledges the existence of definitely ambiguous verses, but goes so far as to say that the meanings of non-ambiguous verses are confirmed through an extra-revelatory means, namely, rational evidence. What this appears to imply, if I have understood al-Rāzī correctly, is that even clearly unambiguous verses ("*al-muḥkamu ḥaqqa*") are in effect *ambiguous* per se, and that their disambiguation, the *confirmation*, is only possible through reason. Al-Rāzī clearly goes a long way in expanding the notion of ambiguity.

This theorisation—namely the notions of definitive knowledge and ambiguity—was heavily reflected in al-Rāzī's magisterial exegetical project. This is illustrated, for example, in his commentary on Q. 73:12-13: "We have fetters, a blazing fire, food that chokes, and agonizing torment in store for them." Here, al-Rāzī begins by interpreting the four items in the verse as denoting various forms of *physical* punishment ("*sā'iru anwā'i l-'adhābi*"). He then goes on to suggest that these four items could *possibly* be taken to indicate four levels of progressive spiritual punishments ("*yumkinu ḥamlu ḥādhihi l-marātibi l-arba'ati 'alā l-'uqūbati l-rūḥāniyyati*"). Importantly, al-Rāzī ends his discussion with a useful methodological remark. He affirms that he is not suggesting that only the spiritual interpretation is intended by the verse. Rather, he asserts that it is not impossible to entertain both readings ("*wa-lā yamtani'u ḥamluhū 'alayhimā*"), the physical punishment as the real sense, and the spiritual punishment as the non-literal, figurative meaning.⁶⁵

Another example that could serve to make my point on al-Rāzī's *Ambiguitätstoleranz* is his explanation of what is meant by "*al-ḥikmata*" in Q. 2:251, where David is described as having been assigned "sovereignty and wisdom". After providing the standard definition of wisdom ("*al-ḥikmah*"), al-Rāzī contends that wisdom only becomes complete with prophethood, the consequence of which is that it is not unlikely ("*fa-lā yab'udu*") that wisdom in this verse denotes prophethood.⁶⁶ The way in which he frames his comment, "*fa-lā yab'udu*", tells us how al-Rāzī conceived of the richness of Scripture, and how cautious he was in navigating through its layers of meaning, consciously retaining as many layers as he could.

The idea that al-Rāzī was operating with the notion of ambiguity in mind, and that it was affording him relative interpretive freedom, can also be inferred from his frequent use of the phrase "and it is possible" ("*wa-yaḥtamilu*"), a phrase that indicates he is cautious not to issue categorical interpretations, and that betokens his appreciation of the polysemic nature of the Qur'ān. An illustration of this is found in al-Rāzī's treatment of Q. 57:13, part of which reads: "On the same Day, the hypocrites, both men and women, will say to the believers, 'Wait for us! Let us have some of your light!'" In particular, his interpretation of the word "*unzurūnā*" is useful to us. Al-Rāzī comments on this verse by saying that the reading, "*unzurūnā*"—as opposed to the variant reading "*anzirūnā*"—bears two *possible* meanings ("*unzurūnā yaḥta-*

⁶³ AL-RĀZĪ 1981: VII, 189.

⁶⁴ EL-TOBGUI 2008: 147.

⁶⁵ AL-RĀZĪ 1981: XXX, 181.

⁶⁶ Ibid., VI, 204.

milu wajhayni”): the first one is ‘wait for us’, whereas the second is ‘look at us’. And given that al-Rāzī does not prefer one over the other, it seems that he approved of both.⁶⁷

Nonetheless, depicting al-Rāzī as an exegete who embraces ambiguity should not be taken to mean that al-Rāzī was necessarily a proponent of the notion of parallel truths, as mentioned above by Bauer. Al-Rāzī clearly set some limits to this notion and failing to clarify this on our part risks misrepresenting his writings. One example of this surrounds the question of whether or not the equivocal (*al-mushtarak*) could be understood to signify more than one *literal* meaning simultaneously. To present the matter in a different way, if a word is capable of signifying two different meanings literally, could we entertain *both* meanings in *one* usage, namely, the *same* context? In the course of his discussion of Q. 4:1, in particular the unit that reads “be mindful of God, in whose name you make requests of one another. Beware of severing the ties of kinship” (“*wa-ttaqū Llāha lladhī tasā’alūna bihī wa-l-arḥāma*”), al-Rāzī raises the problem of equivocity. According to the reading, “*wa-l-arḥāma*”, which is in the accusative case, the verse could be rendered as “*wa-ttaqū Llāha, wa-ttaqū l-arḥāma*”. By this it is meant that the verb “*wa-ttaqū*” is linked to both God *and* the kinship; the same imperative applies to two different nouns. However, the former *taqwā* could not have the same meaning of the latter: *taqwā* towards God—obeying Him—is different from *taqwā* as it is applied to the relatives (“*ma’nā taqwā Llāhi mukhālifun li-ma’nā taqwā l-arḥāmī*”). Therefore, al-Qāḍī (‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1024), perhaps), as quoted by al-Rāzī, says that this verse is proof that the same word could be intended to mean different meanings concomitantly. Al-Rāzī—congruent with his position on the double meanings of a *mushtarak* term⁶⁸—finds this notion problematic, and moves on to dispel it by suggesting that God might have uttered the same word—“*wa-ttaqū*”, in this case—twice (“*la’allahū takallama bi-hādhihi llaḥẓati marra-tayni*”).⁶⁹ Al-Rāzī is essentially attempting to refute the notion that a single word, in its *literal sense*, could denote two meanings at once,⁷⁰ with a cryptic counter argument, which he himself rejects in *al-Maḥṣūl* as invalid on the grounds that there is consensus against it (“*wa-huwa bāṭilun li-n’iqādi l-ijmā’i ‘alā ḍiddihī*”).⁷¹ This would seem to indicate that although al-Rāzī somehow held a relaxed conception of Qur’ānic ambiguity, he did not extend this to allow for a word to signify two different *literal* meanings in one usage. This, however, should not be confused with figurative readings: as we have seen above, al-Rāzī does allow for the same verse to have a literal (*ḥaqīqī*) *and* figurative meaning (*majāzī*) in tandem.

⁶⁷ Ibid., XXIX, 225.

⁶⁸ AL-RĀZĪ 1997: IV, 160.

⁶⁹ AL-RĀZĪ 1981: IX, 171. He also uses the same argument when commenting on a similar problem in Q. 22:18 (Ibid., XXIII, 20).

⁷⁰ This issue is dealt with in detail in *uṣūl al-fiqh* literature. For a detailed exposition, see AL-RĀZĪ 1997: I, 261-284.

⁷¹ Ibid., IV, 160.

5. The Tolerance of Ambiguity in Qur'ānic Narratives

Having highlighted that ambiguity is indeed present in the Qur'ān, I should like to take some time to look at Qur'ānic narrative ethics in light of classical exegetical practice with an eye to analyse how ambiguity functions in expanding the universe of Qur'ānic meanings. I will also explore the ethical implications thereof. In particular, I will look at one Qur'ānic pericope, focusing my treatment, again, on the *Mafātīḥ* of al-Rāzī, a work described by Goldziher as a monumental Qur'ānic commentary (“monumentalen Korankommentar”), and considered by him as the culmination of Qur'ānic commentaries (“Abschluss der produktiven Tafsir-Litteratur”).⁷²

Not only is it hoped that this pericope will reveal the ambiguous quality of the narrative unit, but also how this ambiguity functions in expounding the ethics of the Qur'ān, its *practical ethics* in particular.

5.1. Q. 12:52-53: Polysemy and the Interpretive Imagination

The Qur'ānic story of Joseph, the last verse of which begins by declaring that “There is a lesson in the stories of such people for those who understand” (Q. 12:111), has served as a significant source of spiritual and moral guidance to Muslims. The exegetical texts, coupled with the associated secondary literature, are replete with moral lessons.⁷³ On this basis, I have selected a short pericope from this narrative to show two things: the prevalence of ambiguity in the Qur'ānic text, and the ethical implications of this phenomenon. My case study relates mainly to Joseph and the Governor's wife, as presented in Q. 12:52-53:

[Joseph said, ‘That was] for my master to know that I did not betray him behind his back: God does not guide the mischief of the treacherous. I do not pretend to be blameless, for man's very soul incites him to evil unless my Lord shows mercy: He is most forgiving, most merciful.’

*Dhālika li-ya'lama annī lam akhūnu bi-l-ghaybi wa-anna Llāha lā yahdī kayda l-khā'inīna. Wa-mā ubarri'u nafsī inna l-naḥsa la-ammāratun bi-l-sū'i illā mā raḥīma Rabbī inna Rabbī ghafūrun raḥīmūn.*⁷⁴

These verses, 52 and 53, are a continuation from the previous scene presented in verse 51, where the women are summoned by the King and interrogated about their seduction of Joseph (“*mā khaṭbukunna idh rāwadtunna yūsufā 'an nafsihī*”), to which they respond by acknowledging his chastity. Thereupon, the Governor's wife—whom the Qur'ān designates as “*imra'atu l-'azīzi*”—comes forward to declare Joseph's innocence: that it was she who seduced him (“*anā rāwadtuhū 'an nafsihī*”). The following verse, construed literally—and

⁷² GOLDZIHHER 1920: 123. Also note RAHBAR 1962: 303: “The Commentary of al-Rāzī, in eight massive volumes, is the greatest speculative tafsir. It is an ocean of various waters.” It is unfortunate, given the high value of this work, that no critical edition of the Arabic text has been published. With respect to translations, SAEED (2018) produced a masterful, and much welcomed, English translation of al-Rāzī's commentary on *Sūrat al-Fāṭīḥah*.

⁷³ For a summary compilation of the objectives (including the moral lessons) of this narrative, see IBN 'ĀSHŪR 1984: XII, 198-200. JOHNS 1999: 111 also summarises the moral lessons of this narrative.

⁷⁴ I have relied on the Qur'ānic transliteration of ZIRKER 2020 although I have taken the liberty to modify it.

note here that I am deviating from Abdel Haleem's translation which is essentially an attempt to *disambiguate* the verse⁷⁵—, says: “That was for him to know that I did not betray him behind his back ...” Here we find the following ambiguities:

1. Who is the one making this statement (*Ambiguity 1*)?
2. To which incident does the demonstrative pronoun, “*dhālika*”, refer (*Ambiguity 2*)?
3. Who is the subject of the verb “*li-ya'lama*” (*Ambiguity 3*)?
4. Who is meant by the connected object-suffix in “*akhunhu*” (*Ambiguity 4*)?
5. Who said the statement, “I do not pretend to be blameless” (*Ambiguity 5*)?

For purposes of coherence, I will analyse the first four ambiguities together, and then move on to discuss the fifth one, which is located in a separate verse.

Ambiguity 1. Although one would expect the statement “That was for him to know that I did not betray him behind his back” to flow from the previous verse, as part of the conversation, and therefore be attributed to the Governor's wife, the majority view (“*qawlu l-aktharīna*”) is that the speaker here is Joseph. This claim is supported by two similar occurrences in the Qur'ān, one of which is Q. 27:34, “She said, ‘Whenever kings go into a city, they ruin it and humiliate its leaders’—that is what they do”, where the latter part of the verse is understood by some exegetes to be disconnected from the former: the first part is accredited to the Queen of Sheba, and the latter part of the verse is held to be a (meta-narrative) comment by God.⁷⁶ Now, maintaining that the speaker in Q. 12:52 is Joseph, we move on to the next ambiguity.

Ambiguity 2. Which event is expressed with the demonstrative pronoun, “*dhālika*”? Al-Rāzī says that the pronoun refers to the incident mentioned in the previous verse, where the women were interrogated, and the Governor's wife pleaded guilty. A second view—which is weak as implied in al-Rāzī's utilisation of the word “*wa-qīla*”—holds that the event in question is a previous happening, mentioned in Q. 12:50, in which Joseph refused the King's invitation and rather preferred to remain in captivity until his accusation is investigated. This invites us to take up another question: *when* did Joseph say this? Al-Rāzī offers us two possibilities: first, that Joseph made the statement when he met with the King—though al-Rāzī does not specify when that took place; perhaps he is alluding to the later verse, Q. 12:54,

⁷⁵ That translations naturally tend to be reductionist, disambiguating, and that they do not usually accommodate the multiplicity of meanings of a text, is a point made by Bauer (“Eine Übersetzung ist ... immer *disambiguierend*”). Although inevitable, this is problematic, especially with regards to those places in the Qur'ān which allow for (and maybe also require) multiplicity. That is why, Bauer continues, only the original language of a text preserves its flexibility and openness to interpretation (“Somit ist allein im Original die Interpretationsoffenheit des Textes bewahrt”). It is upon this premise that Bauer understands the resistance to translating the Qur'ān in the classical Islamic world; for, on one hand, it compromises the literary beauty of the text, and, on the other, it means losing the Qur'ān's generative potential for meaning (“Zum einen geht die ästhetische Dimension verloren, die man als wichtige Eigenschaft des göttlichen Textes ansah (anders als im Christentum). Zum anderen erleidet der übersetzte Text einen Ambiguitätsverlust und büßt damit gegenüber dem ursprünglichen an Bedeutungspotential ein”) (BAUER 2011: 140-142). In this regard, T. J. Winter says: “To translate the Koran is to strip it of its orchestral accompaniment, which is its splendidly Arabic matrix” (quoted in SAMSEL 2016: 78). Also see BLANKINSHIP 2020: 146.

⁷⁶ AL-RĀZĪ 1981: XVIII, 157.

“The King said, ‘Bring him to me: I will have him serve me personally,’ and then, once he had spoken with him, ‘From now on you will have our trust and favour.’” Second, that Joseph said it to the messenger when he returned to him with the news.⁷⁷

Ambiguity 3 and Ambiguity 4. The question here is: to whom was Joseph alluding when he said, “so that he knows” (“*li-ya'lama*”), and who did Joseph have in mind when he said, “I did not betray him” (“*lam akhunhu*”)? Al-Rāzī offers us three ways to read the verse. According to the first interpretation, the implied subject of the verb “*li-ya'lama*” is the King, and the object of the second verb “*akhunhu*”, expressed in the form of a third-person masculine singular attached pronoun, is the Governor, the woman’s husband. That is, Joseph is saying, when we substitute the pronouns: “That was for the King to know that I did not betray the Governor”. A second approach to the verse is to say that both pronouns refer to the King, in the sense that a betrayal of the King’s minister—the Governor—entails, in some aspects (“*min ba’di l-wujūhi*”), a betrayal of the King. Thus, the verse is rendered as: “That was for the King to know that I did not betray the King”. One may also understand both words—and this is the third interpretation—as associated with the Governor,⁷⁸ making the verse akin to: “That was for the Governor to know, that I did not betray the Governor”.

Alternative disambiguation. Having explained the four ambiguities in light of the majority view—that it was Joseph who was speaking—I will now look at the other possibility; that the statement was made by the Governor’s wife. The meaning of this alternative construal, according to al-Rāzī, is that although the Governor’s wife allowed herself to betray Joseph in his *presence*—that is, when she accused him in front of her husband (Q. 12:25)—she did not betray him *in absentia*; rather, she admitted her guilt in Joseph’s absence. This reading is supported by the observation that Joseph was in the jail when the women were summoned by the King. What follows, then, is that it is inconceivable that Joseph would have made the statement, unless the news of what happened in the King’s court was relayed to him through a messenger, to which he would have responded with those words. If this is the case (that Joseph made the statement *later*), it will require an abrupt change in the flow of the narrative. Put differently, taking Joseph to be the speaker implies an abrupt coordination between two *independent statements*—in verses 12:51 and 12:52—made in two different settings. According to those objecting to the view that Joseph was the speaker, such a coordination is unknown in prose nor poetry (“*wa-mithlu hādhā l-waṣli bayna l-kalāmāyini l-ajnabiyyayni mā jā’a l-battata fī nathrin wa-lā naẓmin*”).⁷⁹ In this way, one is justified in maintaining that the speaker was the Governor’s wife. Accordingly, with the resolution of *Ambiguity 1* in this way (that is, attributing the statement to the Governor’s wife), we are left with fewer exegetical gaps, and thus fewer possibilities with regards to ambiguities 2, 3 and 4. This could be explained as follows: if we say that it was the Governor’s wife who issued the statement, “That was for him to know that I did not betray him behind his back: God does not guide the mischief of the treacherous”, then we will be left with only one option regarding the construal of the demonstrative pronoun “*dhālika*”. It denotes the incident whereupon she admitted her guilt before the King, thus solving *Ambiguity 2*. By the same token, this line of reasoning

⁷⁷ Ibid., 157-158.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 158.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

entails that both verbs, “*li-ya‘lama*” and “*akhunhu*”, are associated with Joseph. The result of this is the following rendition of the verse: “I admitted my guilt before the King so that Joseph knows that I did not betray Joseph”. The upshot here is that the three ambiguities—2,3, and 4—will convey only *one* interpretation.

Having completed an analysis of the ambiguities contained in the first verse of the pericope under examination, we now proceed to the next verse, Q. 12:53. As mentioned above, there is one ambiguity in this verse. It is the identity of the character uttering “I do not pretend to be blameless, for the human soul is prone to evil unless my Lord shows mercy: He is most forgiving, most merciful”—that is, whether it is Joseph or the Governor’s wife (*Ambiguity 5*). Establishing the identity of the speaker in this verse, according to al-Rāzī, is contingent upon our construal of the previous verse, Q. 12:52 (“*i‘lam anna tafsīra hādhihi l-āyati yakhtalifu bi-ḥasabi khtilāfi mā qablahā*”): if we say that the previous sentence was Joseph’s, it follows that this sentence is part of his speech too. Otherwise, the sentence will be attributed to the Governor’s wife—and al-Rāzī is happy to interpret the verse both ways (“*wa-naḥnu nufassiru hādhihi l-āyata ‘alā kilā l-taqdīrayni*”). Al-Rāzī is conscious, however, that to attribute the statement to Joseph is not without its problems. For example, it could be taken—and in fact it was—as evidence that Joseph desired the Governor’s wife and was about to succumb, the consequence of which is that Joseph is deserving of (some) blame. Consistent with his standard position on prophetic infallibility (*‘ismah*), al-Rāzī responds to this problem in two different ways. According to the first proposal, when Joseph said, in the previous verse, “That was for him to know that I did not betray him behind his back”, he was asserting his goodness and purity (“*kāna dhālika jāriyan majrā madḥi l-naḥsi wa-tazkiyatihā*”), and given that the asserting one’s own purity is discouraged—as advanced in Q. 53:32, and quoted by al-Rāzī as a proof-text—Joseph had to rectify what he did by saying, “I do not pretend to be blameless”. He was in no way admitting that he had any desire for the Governor’s wife; rather, his choice of words was motivated by a sense of self-humbling and redress for falling short of the (high) moral standard expected of him. In his second response, al-Rāzī turns the argument of the *ḥashwiyyah* on its head. When Joseph said, “That was for him to know that I did not betray him behind his back”, contends al-Rāzī, he did not mean that he refrained from the betrayal because he had no natural inclination to the Governor’s wife (“*mā kāna li-‘adami l-raqhbati wa-li-‘adami mayli l-naḥsi wa-l-ṭabī‘ati*”). Rather, Joseph withdrew from the sin due to the fear of his Lord (“*li-qiyāmi l-khawfi min-a Llāhi*”).⁸⁰ Thus, al-Rāzī is implying, the fact that Joseph had the natural desire yet refrained from acting upon it does not threaten to undermine Joseph’s normativity. On the contrary, this reading presents Joseph’s behaviour in line with morality.

Alternatively, if we adopt the view that it was the Governor’s wife who said “I do not pretend to be blameless”, then the verse could again be understood in two ways. First, it conveys that the Governor’s wife was (again) admitting that she seduced Joseph, attesting to Joseph’s testimony in Q. 12:26, “She tried to seduce me”. The second interpretation understands her assertion as follows: her previous statement, “That was for him to know that I did not betray him behind his back”, appears to be an *unqualified* statement, in the sense that she is exonerating herself *completely* of any betrayal. But given that she in fact betrayed

⁸⁰ Ibid., 159-160.

Joseph—when she accused him in the first place, as in Q. 12:25, “She said, ‘What, other than prison or painful punishment, should be the reward of someone who tried to dishonour your wife?’”—this was an attempt on her part to retract her previous unqualified assertion.⁸¹

After discussing these two different approaches to construing the ambiguity in Q. 12:53, that is, whether it was Joseph or the Governor’s wife, al-Rāzī asks which of the two views is more compelling. Al-Rāzī, in a rare moment of exegetical crisis, admits that both interpretations are problematic: in the former case—attributing the statement to Joseph—the general narrative flow will be disrupted, whereas in the latter case it implies that the Governor’s wife who was strenuously seeking the sin (“*istafraghat juhdaḥā fī l-ma‘ṣiyati*”) is issuing a self-humbling statement, one which befits a person who has stayed aloof from sinning, and says it by way of humbling himself (“*‘alā sabīli kasri l-naḥsi*”).⁸² The difficulty al-Rāzī is facing here, the hermeneutical dilemma, highlights the fact that textual ambiguity, although functional in enabling different readings, could nevertheless puzzle even some of the finest minds to have studied the Qur’ān.

Taking the two verses together (Q. 12:52-53), while relying on the various interpretations stated by al-Rāzī, I propose to reconstruct the *exegetical possibilities* of these two verses in the following numbered scheme. Before presenting these hypothetical reconstructions, I should first note that by *exegetical possibilities* I mean a wider concept that goes beyond strict interpretation, in the sense that it also includes *why* a statement was said. Amalgamating both verses together, we have the following interpretations:

1. Joseph is saying that the interrogation of the women (and the Governor wife’s confession) was for the King to know that he, Joseph, did not betray the Governor (*al-‘azīz*). Joseph then said, “I do not pretend to be blameless”, by way of humbling himself.
2. Joseph is saying that the interrogation of the women (and the Governor wife’s confession) was for the King to know that he, Joseph, did not betray the King. Joseph then said, “I do not pretend to be blameless”, by way of humbling himself.
3. Joseph is saying that the interrogation of the women (and the Governor wife’s confession) was for the Governor to know that he, Joseph, did not betray the Governor. Joseph then said, “I do not pretend to be blameless”, by way of humbling himself.
4. Joseph is saying that his refusal of the King’s invitation was for the King to know that he, Joseph, did not betray the Governor. Joseph then said, “I do not pretend to be blameless”, by way of humbling himself.
5. Joseph is saying that his refusal of the King’s invitation was for the King to know that he, Joseph, did not betray the King. Joseph then said, “I do not pretend to be blameless”, by way of humbling himself.
6. Joseph is saying that his refusal of the King’s invitation was for the Governor to know that he, Joseph, did not betray the Governor. Joseph then said, “I do not pretend to be blameless”, by way of humbling himself.

⁸¹ Ibid., 160.

⁸² Ibid.

7. Joseph is saying that the interrogation of the women (and the Governor wife's confession) was for the King to know that he, Joseph, did not betray the Governor (*al-'azīz*). Joseph then said, "I do not pretend to be blameless", to indicate that he only refrained out of his fear of the Lord.
8. Joseph is saying that the interrogation of the women (and the Governor wife's confession) was for the King to know that he, Joseph, did not betray the King. Joseph then said, "I do not pretend to be blameless", to indicate that he only refrained out of his fear of the Lord.
9. Joseph is saying that the interrogation of the women (and the Governor wife's confession) was for the Governor to know that he, Joseph, did not betray the Governor. Joseph then said, "I do not pretend to be blameless", to indicate that he only refrained out of his fear of the Lord.
10. Joseph is saying that his refusal of the King's invitation was for the King to know that he, Joseph, did not betray the Governor. Joseph then said, "I do not pretend to be blameless", to indicate that he only refrained out of his fear of the Lord.
11. Joseph is saying that his refusal of the King's invitation was for the King to know that he, Joseph, did not betray the King. Joseph then said, "I do not pretend to be blameless", to indicate that he only refrained out of his fear of the Lord.
12. Joseph is saying that his refusal of the King's invitation was for the Governor to know that he, Joseph, did not betray the Governor. Joseph then said, "I do not pretend to be blameless", to indicate that he only refrained out of his fear of the Lord.
13. The Governor's wife is saying that she admitted her guilt before the King so that Joseph knows that she did not betray Joseph (in his absence). She then said "I do not pretend to be blameless", to admit her seduction of Joseph.
14. The Governor's wife is saying that she admitted her guilt before the King so that Joseph knows that she did not betray Joseph (in his absence). She then said "I do not pretend to be blameless", to qualify her previous absolute statement.

We have thus identified fourteen different ways for understanding the pericope. And these are all possible due to its inherent ambiguity. I should emphasise here that these possibilities are based on al-Rāzī's work only; including other exegetical works in our analysis will expand the exegetical potential of the pericope. For example, in *Zād al-masīr*, Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) records a view holding that the speaker in Q. 12:52, "That was for him to know that I did not betray him behind his back", is the Governor, and thus adding another interpretive possibility. Furthermore, he says that, on the view that the speaker in Q. 12:52 was Joseph, the subject of the verb "*li-ya'lama*" could be God, that is, Joseph was saying: "That was for God to know".⁸³ This opens up further exegetical possibilities.

5.2. Q. 12:52-53: *Muḥkamatān* or *Mutashābihatān*?

On the basis of the analysis conducted above, I would like to ask the following questions: are both verses in the pericope determinate, or are they ambiguous? Or is one of them clear and

⁸³ IBN al-JAWZĪ 2002: 702-703.

the other ambiguous? If we defer the matter to al-Rāzī's threefold classification—that verses are either truly unambiguous, definitely ambiguous, or vaguely ambiguous (where there is no evidence either to confirm or preclude their apparent meaning)—we will not be able to answer this question. This is because, if I have understood al-Rāzī correctly, this classification applies to those verses which have an *apparent meaning*. For the pericope under question, at least for some of its fourteen possible readings, it does not seem to me that there is an apparent meaning; indeed, our attention was directed towards al-Rāzī's perplexity regarding Q. 12:53. It follows, then, that the notion of preponderation, on which al-Rāzī's threefold classification rests, is not in question here.

To remedy this, I will resort to al-Rāzī's linguistic classification, according to which a *lafẓ* is a *mutashābih* if it conveys two meanings and none is preponderant; this is what he also describes as the *mushtarak*.⁸⁴ Taking this classification—which is also found in *al-Maḥṣūl*⁸⁵—and applying it to the pericope in its entirety, that is, going beyond the micro approach which is concerned with individual words, I tentatively suggest that, by al-Rāzī's standards, these two verses fall within the category of the *mutashābihāt*. This is by virtue of their admitting more than one meaning without there necessarily being a preponderant interpretation; they generally have equal probative weight. In advancing this argument, I would like to ground my assertion in al-Rāzī's interpretation of what is meant by the phrase “*qurū*” in Q. 2:228: does it denote the menstruation period or purity? After discussing both views and their arguments, al-Rāzī commented that when the different arguments are in opposition, preponderation is not feasible (“*‘inda ta’āruḍi hādhihi l-wujūhi taḍ’ufu l-tarjīhātu*”).⁸⁶ The same applies, I suggest, to our pericope. To be sure, this is my general assessment of both verses taken together; for I am not denying that we can conceive of some interpretations as stronger relative to others. Rather, there is a distinction between the capacity of a verse to be interpreted, and the hermeneutical power of that interpretation—in fact various evaluations are found in the *tafsīr* tradition, alluding to the fact that some interpretations point more clearly to the intended meaning.⁸⁷

5.3. The Moral Possibilities of Ambiguity

How do these variant readings and construals of the verses affect the moral implications of the story? What difference do they make to our appropriation of Qur'ānic narrative ethics? It is to these questions that I shall now turn. I will not, however, exhaust all the fourteen interpretations, but instead offer some examples of how the different interpretations bear unique ethical lessons. This, I hope, will serve to show how scriptural ambiguity is central to ethical discourse.

⁸⁴ AL-RĀZĪ 1981: VII, 181.

⁸⁵ AL-RĀZĪ 1997: I, 229-230.

⁸⁶ AL-RĀZĪ 1981: VI, 98.

⁸⁷ Cf. AARON 2001: 81: “just because there are cases in which authorial or contextual meaning is, in fact, impossible to ascertain with a comfortable degree of certainty, we are not obliged to declare all forms of meaning equal, or give up on meaning altogether”.

Verse 52: The main lesson handed down by this verse, across all its readings, is the immorality of betrayal, *al-khiyānah*. However, we may ask, what further moral specificities depend on the *identity* of the speaker? If we hold that the author of “That was for him to know that I did not betray him behind his back” was Joseph, and that he was pointing to the Governor—the woman’s husband—in both verbs, then this betokens the *special moral obligation* owed by Joseph to the Governor, by virtue of the latter hosting Joseph in his house and treating him decently. We know from Q. 12:21 that the Governor told his wife, regarding Joseph, “Look after him well!” In other words, this reading of the verse could be taken as an expression of the idea that Joseph owed the Governor *more* gratitude, the general moral lesson of which is that there is a positive moral correlation between favour and gratitude. If, however, we entertain the reading that says Joseph was referring to the King, then this perhaps underscores the ethics of *loyalty*. Furthermore, under this interpretation—that Joseph was addressing the King with the verb “*li-ya’lama*”—another moral possibility opens. It is the question of why Joseph addressed the King in the third person, “*li-ya’lama*”? According to a report adduced by al-Rāzī, Joseph used this form of speech out of glorification for the King (“*ta’zīman li-l-maliki*”).⁸⁸ Thus, it draws our attention to the ethics of respect.

Regarding the construal of the demonstrative pronoun, “*dhālika*”, if we follow the interpretation maintaining that Joseph was referring to his refusal of the King’s invitation until after the investigations were completed, then it could be understood as a demonstration of the importance of upholding one’s moral reputation. It also shows the ethical importance of stressing one’s innocence; according to al-Rāzī, if Joseph actually committed the sin, it would have been impossible for him, according to custom (“*la-stahāla bi-ḥasabi l-’urfī*”), to insist on investigating the matter; for only an innocent person would be so eager for an investigation.⁸⁹

Alternatively, let us look at the ethical implications entailed by the second interpretation regarding the identity of the speaker, that it was the Governor’s wife, “*imra’atu l-’azīzi*”. Her saying “That was for Joseph to know that I did not betray him behind his back” perhaps shows us that betraying someone behind their back is graver than betraying them in their presence. This highlights the notion that moral transgressions are of different levels, and that betraying Joseph in his absence was considered by the Governor’s wife a moral red line which she was not willing to cross; she was morally conscious. Furthermore, and as al-Rāzī noticed, she was perhaps attempting to apologise *genuinely* for her wrongdoing through repeating the assertion, though in different words, that she did not betray Joseph on the second occasion, “God does not guide the mischief of the treacherous”.⁹⁰ I also take this statement as an allusion to the moral complexity inherent in humans, that good and evil co-exist and committing a sin does not strip one of his morality. The Qur’ān, through the example of the Governor’s wife, may be trying to convey the message that the doors of repentance and moral progression are always open, and that moral transgressions could serve as instructive experiences from which we learn to become better people. In this way, the

⁸⁸ AL-RĀZĪ 1981: XVIII, 158.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Governor's wife could be looked at from a different angle; rather than censuring her, she could be presented as a moral exemplar.

Verse 53: Through reading the words “I do not pretend to be blameless”, as being Joseph's, at least two different moral lessons could be derived. If we maintain that his words were chosen with the purpose of humbling himself even though he did not commit any sin, then he is setting an example in humility. According to the other reading of the verse, that Joseph said “I do not pretend to be blameless”, in the sense that he did indeed feel inclined towards the Governor's wife, but only refrained out of fear for his Lord, a different lesson could be discerned. His behaviour might be taken as a demonstration of the moral struggle that one is destined to go through in this life. The verse emphasises, in particular, the need to appreciate the demands of morality and the struggle involved therein; that to remain true to one's moral standards will require sacrifice and much internal struggle. A further moral lesson from this second reading is that Joseph's susceptibility to sin (even if he did not ultimately sin) renders him more relatable to the Qur'ānic audience, thus leaving him better positioned for ethical education.

As stated above, Verse 53 could equally be attributed to the Governor's wife, and here we have two interpretations, each with a distinct moral lesson. The first interpretation, that her statement “I do not pretend to be blameless” was by way of admitting that she seduced Joseph, draws attention to her *moral sensitivity*. She was eager to emphasise that it was she to whom blame belonged, and this reflects her sincere repentance. The alternative reading, on the other hand, submits that her assertion was in order to qualify her previous statement in which she said that she did not betray Joseph when in fact she did. This is to say that she accused Joseph, and accusation amounts to betrayal in one way or another. This reading promotes the notion of honesty, serving to emphasise the importance of precision, and taking words seriously.

I hope that through highlighting some of the moral possibilities of the pericope I have been able to convey some of the richness of the Qur'ānic text, and to demonstrate how the inherent ambiguity of the verses enables us to generate various ethical lessons. Next, we will examine the theological grounding of this productive ambiguity.

6. Theology of Revelation, Interpretation, and Ethics

In an illuminating symposium paper, Vishanoff observed how the ontological question of the nature of Divine speech is profoundly entwined with exegetical practice: “How a Muslim thinker imagines God's speech has (or logically ought to have) crucial implications for how that thinker understands and interprets the Qur'ān.”⁹¹ Whereas the Ash'arī conception of Divine speech, that it is essentially an eternal attribute of God, allowed “a greater role for the appropriation of revelation's meaning by the community”,⁹² Mu'tazilī metaphysics of the created Qur'ān, concomitant with the notion of Divine justice, meant that God's speech

⁹¹ VISHANOFF 2015: 2. Also see GLEAVE 2013: 35-36.

⁹² FARAHAT 2019: 103.

“contains no irresolvable ambiguity”.⁹³ It follows, then, that the Ash‘arī theology of Divine speech looks at interpretation as an attempt to approximate the meaning of revelation, thus resulting in greater hermeneutical freedom.⁹⁴

Taking this into consideration, we may now ask: is al-Rāzī’s commentary on Q. 12:52-53, as presented above, consistent with his theology of revelation? In other words, is there a continuity between his Ash‘arī commitments and his exegetical practice? First, I should note that al-Rāzī affirms the Ash‘arī theology of Divine speech in his commentary on Q. 42:51, “It is not granted to any mortal that God should speak to him except through revelation or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger to reveal by His command what He will: He is exalted and wise.” In this regard, he writes: “As for al-Ash‘arī and his followers, they have claimed that God’s speech is an internal attribute (of His) expressed in these letters and sounds.” He then proceeds to respond to the Mu‘tazilī notion that the Qur’ān was created at a given point in time.⁹⁵ This clearly evidences that he had the Ash‘arī theology of Divine speech in mind whilst writing his *tafsīr*. Based on this theorization and the various interpretations he has given us regarding Q. 12:52-53,⁹⁶ I am tempted to conclude that there is a coherence between al-Rāzī’s theology and his exegesis: the notion of the eternality of God’s speech was practically translated into a *wide* conception of Qur’ānic interpretation.⁹⁷ To borrow the words of Stern—though his are in relation to the midrash—al-Rāzī, in recording multiple interpretations, was “simply putting into practice an ideological belief about the nature of Scripture, namely, the hermeneutics of polysemy”.⁹⁸ And this, in turn, had its consequences on ethics, in that various ethical lessons were generated from the pericope—an abstract idea of philosophical theology has profound ethical implications.

7. Concluding Remarks

On the topic of ambiguities of interpretation, Chittick wrote that in studying “all forms of literature that quote and explain Qur’anic verses ... one becomes aware that the only issue that the Qur’an leaves unambiguous is the fact that God *is*”. He also adds that “there can be no consensus on meanings understood from words, because that pertains to consciousness,

⁹³ VISHANOFF 2011: 138.

⁹⁴ Cf. WINKEL 1997: 102: “Both positions allow for seeing the divine “behind” the physical workings of the world. But the Ash‘arī position sets up a framework that sees more clearly and insistently the living God and the living Law. As with fractal geometries, Escher’s drawings, and chaos theories, the universe is not less orderly and meaningful just because it does not admit of manipulation and prediction.”

⁹⁵ AL-RĀZĪ 1981: XXVII, 188-189.

⁹⁶ Further support for my argument, that al-Rāzī acknowledged the ambiguity of the Qur’ān, could be found in his treatment of the question of whether or not humans create their own acts. After extensively presenting the arguments of both sides on this matter, he concludes that because the scriptural verses employed by both sides are in conflict, we should resort to rational evidence (AL-RĀZĪ 1987: IX, 353-354). This, it appears to me, is an acknowledgement on the part of al-Rāzī that it is an unresolvable Qur’ānic ambiguity.

⁹⁷ This chimes, to some extent, with Ibn ‘Arabī’s conception of Qur’ānic hermeneutics; see CHITTICK 2000: 154.

⁹⁸ STERN 2004: 123.

the living substance of the soul. The only possible place where consensus might exist is in the *expression* of meaning”.⁹⁹ Interestingly, Chittick finds a theological explanation for the existence of ambiguity in the Qur’ān. For him, the reason why scholars cannot reach unanimity on issues in the Qur’ān is because “that would contradict *tawhīd*, the axiom that ‘Nothing is truly one but God’”. Put differently, “[t]he multiple verses of the Qur’an (not to mention other scriptures) show that the One Speech, once it enters into manifestation, takes myriad forms, because all that is not God—including scriptures and prophets—is many by definition”.¹⁰⁰ The findings of this article point in this direction. Furthermore, I would go as far as to venture the hypothesis that the language of the Qur’ān, to borrow from Aaron, “is essentially natural language ... a language that is essentially non-theological, in that it is devoid of highly construed controls on semantic variables”.¹⁰¹

To sum, this article has aimed to make a case for the function of ambiguity in making Qur’ānic narratives fertile sites of moral education. I have attempted to illustrate how ambiguity contributes to expanding the meanings of the Qur’ān. It has been demonstrated, mainly through al-Rāzī, how the classical exegetical tradition was open to a variety of meanings of the text, an openness that is accounted for through the existence of *functional ambiguity*. In other words, the Qur’ān is ambiguous by design,¹⁰² and ambiguity forms one of the distinctive characteristics of the Qur’ān’s textual poetics. We have also seen, by way of one case study, the capacity of Qur’ānic narratives to communicate moral ideas and thus contribute to ethical theory and practice. While various clear and practical moral messages could easily be derived from the narratives, there is still room for multivalency, and it is this attribute that grants narratives their moral power and allows them to endure over time. Additionally, multivalency has the virtue of facilitating deep moral thinking. Taken altogether, this article cautions against univocal, reductionist readings of the Qur’ān and seeks to call for a nuanced moral philosophy of Qur’ānic narratives.

Mirroring Bakhtin’s notion of *great time*, Nursi once remarked that “As time grows older, the Qur’ān grows younger”.¹⁰³ I would add that ambiguity makes this possible.

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⁹⁹ CHITTICK 2013: 76-77.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 79.

¹⁰¹ AARON 2001: 21.

¹⁰² Cf. INGRAM 2006: 42 commenting on ambiguity in Ecclesiastes: “I believe that Ecclesiastes is ambiguous *by design* precisely to engage the reader in the process of creating or discovering meaning.”

¹⁰³ Quoted in MERMER and YAZICIOĞLU 2017: 63.

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Page | 287