

Call for Research Papers

## **Narrative and Ethics: The Morals of the Qur'anic Stories and Beyond**

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The Research Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics (CILE)  
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Background Paper

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### **Background Summary:**

Since the mid-twentieth century, a number of ethical readings of the Quran has introduced valuable contributions on the level of both theory and analysis, e.g. the philosophical study of Muhammad 'Abdullah Draz and Daud Rahbar, the linguistic philosophical analysis by Toshihiko Izutsu beside several other studies by Fazlur Rahman, George Hourani and others. None of these studies, however, paid any attention to a large portion of the Quran, i.e. its narratives, which amounts to the quarter of the qur'anic text. This qur'anic genre, in general, not yet has its due literary analysis, let alone its proper ethical analysis.

The intersections between the domain of stories and storytelling and that of moral values is gaining more attention in moral philosophy, literary theory and bioethics. In moral philosophy there was a "turn to literature," a move that aims to embed moral philosophy's abstract investigations into the concrete domain of human and social relations opened up by literature. At the same time, philosophy's turn toward literature has coincided with a turn of literary studies toward ethics.

This project aims at calling the attention to this special genre of the Quran and its rich potential as source of moral orientation and ethical reasoning. The ethical study of the qur'anic narratives is *per se* an interreligious and interdisciplinary enterprise. A comparative analysis of the qur'anic narratives with their counterpart in Biblical and post-Biblical tradition, i.e., the Jewish and Christian lore, is a critical requisite to understand the moral worldview introduced by the qur'anic version of the biblical stories as well as non-biblical stories (stories of the Arabs). The aftermath of the qur'anic narrative in the Muslim tradition (in *sīra*, *tafsīr*, *qīṣaṣ literature*...) and its role in building the traditional Muslim piety and moral values is still *terra incognita*. The ethical study of the religious narrative is not only useful for the moral theory, but for several growing fields, like psychotherapy, bioethics and environmental ethics, not to mention education and pastoral care.

### **Ethics of the narrative and narrative ethics:**

Although narrative ethics emerged as a clearly identified realm of study only in the 1980s, the interest in literature's capacity to influence its audience for good or for ill goes back to Plato and Aristotle. Neither philosopher explicitly uses the term ethics in his discussion of literature, but each implicitly recognizes ethics as a substantial part of its appeal to audiences. In addition, the commentaries of the two philosophers provide striking examples of how ethics and aesthetics may overlap and of how a theorist's understanding of ethics is often part and parcel of a broader philosophical vision.

Moral philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur, Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre and Martha Nussbaum, developed this notion that narration constitutes an act of forming identity and suggest that a human being needs a life story in order to develop fully as a person. Stories always have normative content, describing what is important, what is unimportant, what is better, what is worse, what is good, and what is bad. Our sense of meaning and purpose and our values and motivations are based on these narratives. Charles Taylor argues that stories about self and society are how humans construct the "horizons of meaning" that form the critical background for social relations and life choices. Narratives always represent a kind of movement in moral space. They are our way of constructing coherence and continuity in our lives.

Nussbaum noted that ethics is that branch of philosophy concerned with Aristotle's question of what the good life consists of, but she was dissatisfied with the ways analytic philosophy approached that question. Its style of reasoning, she argued, created a disconnect between its form and its content: how can one adequately discuss, say, an ethical struggle arising out of being in love through the abstractions of analytic philosophy? Narratives, by contrast, seek to fit content to form (and vice versa), i.e. to set up mutually reinforcing relations between the ethics of the told and the ethics of the telling. As a result, stories conduct ethical inquiry in ways that are superior to those of analytic philosophy. More specifically, novels explore the concrete particularity of ethical dilemmas faced by fully realized characters, and those explorations harness the cognitive power of the emotions.

### **The qur'anic narratives and ethics:**

The proportion of the narratives in the Qur'an is very large: 1453 verses, or about a quarter of the Quran. They consist of accounts concerning prophets, messengers, sages, historical or mythical persona of ancient times. Their binary oppositional form puts the listener/reader in a state of ethical or theological decision or choice concerning his or her own status. Some of these binary oppositions are: good vs. evil; staying on the right path (*hudā*) vs. straying from it (*ḍalāl*); believers vs. unbelievers; submission (*islām*) to God vs. "rebellion"; hero vs. anti-hero; "messenger" or "prophet" vs. Pharaoh or "tyrant"; good cities vs. subverted or destroyed cities.

Muslim exegetes, with the help of extra-qur'anic traditions, use these passages to establish a real typology of submission to God and rebellion against him, adding many other narratives or details, so that the allusive text of the Quran might be plausible. It is therefore no wonder, given the importance of the narratives in the Quran, that the tales/stories of the prophets became a genre in its own right in Islamic literature, which had its beginnings

towards the end of the first century. These traditions, like those contained in the qur'anic commentaries are borrowed from the Jewish, Christian, Arabic, Hellenistic, Persian, etc., but they are chosen, reinterpreted and adapted according to the *Weltanschauung* of the Quran and Islam. These prophet narratives can therefore be considered one of the most important vehicles of qur'anic and Islamic theology and ethics.

The classical approaches to the qur'anic narratives can be put roughly in three sorts: first, the historical and philological approach, which is interested in collecting the historical details and linguistic origins of the qur'anic stories. The second is the exegetical approach, which is interested in explicating the outward meaning of the stories with less interest in historical details. The third is the symbolic approach, which seeks to go beyond the outward or literal meaning of the stories unveiling their hidden theological and moral message.

The influence the qur'anic narratives appeared very early in Muslim literature. We see it in: exegesis and other narrative literature, like *sīra*, *ḥadīth*, hagiography, biblical/postbiblical stories and history.

Abu 'Ubayd in *Gharīb al-Ḥadīth* while talking about the outward and inner meaning of the Quran says: the qur'anic narratives of 'Ād and Thamūd.. might be in their outward meaning stories or reports, but the inner meaning of them is mainly typological and moral, in other words, they should be understood as a source of moral orientation for the Muslim community. The majority of Muslim exegetes, nonetheless, were more interested in the outward and historical aspect of the qur'anic narrations, the fact that pushed al-Biqā'ī to criticise them harshly. "What actually prevented the Muslims from understanding the Quran is that they understood the stories of the early and vanished nations as if their main message (*maqṣūd*) was reporting and historical documentation. No! The main message (*maqṣūd*) of the qur'anic narratives is the (*al-'tibār*)". *al-'tibār* as explained by al-Biqā'ī and his teacher al-Ḥarrālī is a complex hermeneutical process which aims at crossing (*'Ubūr*) the outward historical meaning of the qur'anic narrative to its moral values and typological structure, which acts as orienting model for individuals as well as the Muslim community. This hermeneutic approach flourished mainly in the Sufi and mystical exegeses like that of Ibn 'Arabī. There are, however, some other scholars, who suggested a symbolic reading of the qur'anic narrative like al-Dihlawī.

On the other side, several genres of narrative literature flourished since the early seven century. The emergence of *al-quṣāṣ*, the development of their profession and the very early debate about its legality are rich literary sources for understanding the influence of the qur'anic narratives. This debate shows how the early Muslim generations were aware of the power of narratives in forming the morals of the masses. Ibn al-Jawzī attributed the harsh attack on *al-quṣāṣ* to the fact that they mix the canonical narratives, which can act as moral models for Muslims with other non-canonical narratives, which are not allowed to be source of moral orientation. The debate about the fictional and factual in the narration played also a crucial role in forming the attitude toward the narration in general in the circles of later *ḥadīth* and *fiqh* scholars.

In theology (*kalām*), there was a long discussion about the "infallibility of the prophets" (*'iṣma*). This principle became a moral guideline for the right understanding of the prophetic stories in the Quran and elsewhere.

The narratives of the Quran have, until the present day, continued to be very popular in Islam. Those on the prophets are especially so: they are presented in special books (even for children), together with the post-qur'anic traditions about the prophets. Even if a number of contemporary Muslim scholars try to "purify" the Islamic exegetical literature of such "*Isrā'iliyyāt*", these "fairy tales" continue to be prized as narrative entertainment and for the religious and ethical messages they convey.

Today, debate occasionally arises among Muslim scholars concerning the literary qualification of qur'anic narratives. All, or nearly all, are agreed upon the "inimitable" qualities of the Quran, both in content and in style. However, some have insisted that the purpose of the narrative passages is not primarily "historical," but, rather, that the Quran utilized the "narrative art" to convey its theological, social and ethical message. For instance, Khalaf Allāh wrote a thesis on the qur'anic narratives, where he took a psychological approach towards the narratives. Some suspected him of doubting, or bringing into question, the "historicity" of the qur'anic accounts.

A number of ethical readings of the Quran in the last decades has introduced valuable contributions on the level of both theory and analysis, like the philosophical study of Muhammad 'Abdullah Draz, the linguistic analysis of Toshihiko Izutsu and studies of Fazlur Rahman. Qur'anic narrative, albeit ubiquitous presence, not yet has its due literary analysis, let alone its proper ethical analysis.

### **Narrative in medical ethics**

During the past two decades, stories have been important to medical ethics in at least three major ways: firstly, as case examples for the teaching of principle based professional ethics, which has been the dominant form of medical ethics. Secondly, as moral guides to living a good life, not just in the practice of medicine but in all aspects of one's life. Thirdly, as narratives of witness that, with their experiential truth and passion, compel re-examination of accepted medical practices and ethical precepts.

Acquiring the narrative skills of "recognizing, absorbing, interpreting, and being moved by the stories of illness," affords healthcare professionals insight into the patients' world and their suffering. While scientific medical competence is indispensable in order to treat the patient's medical problem, narrative competence invites "a move toward engagement, toward the intersubjective encounter which "incurs in us both responsibilities toward the other and transformations within the self".

### **Research Questions:**

Narrative ethics regards moral values as an integral part of stories and storytelling and focuses on one or more of four issues:

- (1) The ethics of the told: What are the ethical dimensions of characters' actions, especially the conflicts they face and the choices they make about those conflicts? What are the ethical dimensions of any one character's interactions with other

characters? How does a narrative's plot signal its stance on the ethical issues faced by its characters?

- (2) The ethics of the telling: What are the ethical responsibilities, if any, of storytellers to their audiences? What are the ethical dimensions of the narrative's techniques? How does the use of these techniques imply and convey the values underlying the relations of the storytellers to their materials (events and characters) and their audiences?
- (3) The ethics of writing/producing: What are the ethical implications of choosing to tell one kind of story rather than another in a given historical context? Does developing a narrative about one's own life help one become a better, more ethically sound person?
- (4) The ethics of reading/reception: What are the ethical obligations of the audience to the narrative itself, to its materials, and to its author? What are the consequences of an audience's success or failure in meeting those obligations? Does reading narrative help one become a better, more ethically sound, person?

Against this general background, as suggested by several literary critics, we propose the following broad themes as a basic framework for studying the qur'anic narratives from interreligious and interdisciplinary perspective. Researchers are free to add other theoretical dimensions they deem innovative or worthy of research within these overall themes:

1. The moral language of the qur'anic narrative:

This part will discuss the basic concepts and terminology related to the qur'anic narratives, their moral language, structure, function and development. Other basic methodological questions might be addressed about the main concepts and approaches of narrative ethics and its applicability on the Quran in particular and Islamic literature in general.

- a. Terminology: e.g. *Qaṣaṣ*, *Khabar*, *ḥadīth*, *Nabā'*,
- b. The qur'anic justification of narration
- c. Ethic-religious Terms of the qur'anic narration: e.g. *'Ibra*, *Ḍhikrā*, *Maw'īza*,
- d. Moral function of the qur'anic narration
- e. History, morality, or entertainment!

2. The interreligious analysis of the qur'anic narratives

This part will be dedicated to the comparative study of the qur'anic stories with their biblical and pre-Islamic parallels. The focus will be here on the moral analysis of this narrative tradition, its concepts, structure as well as the developments introduced in the Quran.

- a. Arabic pre-Islamic narration tradition
- b. Biblical narratives and qur'anic narratives: common tradition, different virtues?
- c. Typological interpretation of the Quran's prophetic stories

3. The reception of the qur'anic stories

The Muslim engagement with the qur'anic stories has long history and complicated trajectories. This section should limit its focus to the different hermeneutics, interpretations and implementation of the qur'anic narratives that stem from ethical concerns and moral interest.

- a. qur'anic stories in the Muslim exegesis (*Tafsīr*)
- b. "Prophetical stories" (*Qiṣas al-Anbiyā*) genre
- c. Sufi interpretation of the qur'anic stories
- d. Literature of the Storytelling (*Quṣṣās*)

#### 4. Narrative ethics and the medical care

How do the qur'anic narratives contribute to medical ethics through the content of stories and through the analysis of their form? Can the techniques of literary criticism be applied to the analysis of ethical texts and practices and inform the understanding of different perspectives in an ethical dilemma. To which extent can the illness narratives in Quran or in Muslim literature help the patient and practitioner in understanding and exploring the different moral choices?

#### 5. Narrative and environmental ethics

Do we have in the qur'anic stories and Islamic tradition narratives, which could be taken as a basis for environmental ethics? What are the values/virtues conveyed in these narratives, and to which extent they were influenced by their historical worldview of nature and human being?

### **Deadlines and Submission Information:**

"Narrative and Ethics: The Morals of the Qur'anic Stories and Beyond" will be held in Doha, Qatar, during January 27-29 2020, under the auspices of the Research Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics (CILE). Accepted papers will be published in a peer-review outlet, in collaboration with Brill Publishers. Applicants should keep the following in mind:

- a. August 08, 2019: Deadline for receiving abstract (300-500 words only) identifying the research statement of the problem, the main question and the sub-questions to be addressed - and the proposed methodology to answer the questions.
- b. August 15, 2019: Authors whose abstracts are accepted will be notified and invited to write the full papers.
- c. November 25, 2019: Deadline for receiving a draft of the paper. Drafts should be 2,000 to 7,000 words in length and written in either English or Arabic. They should be sent to [QuranicStories@cilecenter.org](mailto:QuranicStories@cilecenter.org) Please also include a 250-word author biography
- d. December 05, 2019: Participants will receive an official invitation.
- e. January 27-29, 2020: The seminar will be held at the Research Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics (CILE) in Doha, Qatar.
- f. Costs of travel and accommodation will be covered by CILE.

- g. Costs of open-access publication in a refereed venue will be covered by CILE, as well as costs of translation from English into Arabic, or from Arabic into English.
- h. April 01, 2020: Participants will be expected to offer complete versions of their papers within two months after the seminar. These should be between 7,000 and 10,000 words.
- i. Questions about the theme or scope of this symposium should be sent to Dr. Samer Rashwani at [srashwani@hotmail.com](mailto:srashwani@hotmail.com)