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AL-RĀZĪ'S TREATMENT OF THE QUR'ANIC EPISODES TELLING OF ABRAHAM AND HIS GUESTS QUR'ANIC EXEGESIS WITH A HUMAN FACE

par

Anthony H. Johns

> As Abraham was sitting at the opening of his tent in the heat of the day, he looked up and saw three men standing in front of him...
>
> (*Genesis* 18, 1–2)

The presentation of Abraham in the Qur'an occurs in episodes which occur singly or in combination at various points throughout the book.

These episodes include such events as Abraham's obedience to the command to slay his son (al-Ṣāffāt 37:102–111); his destruction of Namrud's idols and ordeal in the fire (al-Anbiyāʾ 21:55–69); his request for God to show him how the dead are brought back to life (al-Baqara 2:260) and his presentation as founder of the Kaʿba, father of the Arabs and the first monotheist (al-Baqara 2:124–133). Some of these episodes occur on a single occasion. Others occur and recur with shifts of emphasis, either alone or in combination with others, sometimes telescoped and sometimes fragmented.

The episode to be discussed here is the visit of guests who announce to him that he is to have a son despite his old age, and that Sodom is to be destroyed. It is presented in some detail in Hūd 11:69–76, al-Ḥijr 15:51–60, and al-Dhāriyāt, 51:24–37, and referred to briefly in al-ʿAnkabūt 29:31–32.

It furnishes a useful starting point for any discussion of Abraham in the Qur'an: it is brief and relatively self-contained; the events it presents are relevant to his role in the Muslim tradition as father of the Arabs and scion of a line of

prophets that is to reach its apogee in Muhammad, ant it illustrates two special features of Abraham's personality: his love of hospitality and his tenderness of heart.

There is the additional interest that, if Noeldeke's[1] periodisation is accepted, these passages represent each of the three Meccan periods of revelation, al-Dhāriyāt, 49th in order of revelation, the first; al-Ḥijr, 59th, the second; and Hūd and al-ᶜAnkabūt, 77th and 83d respectively, the third. There is no absolute certainty in Noeldeke's order, and Blachère[2] has modified it to a degree. Moreover, since the suras are composite, it is impossible to be sure if the order of the passages in which it occurs correspond to the order attributed to the suras. Nevertheless it is not imprudent to accept this order as a working hypothesis and to regard each of the first three re-presentations of the episode as separated by two years, with the tangential reference in al-ᶜAnkabūt marginally later than that in Hūd.

The apparent separation in time of these retellings suggests that a comparative study of them could form a useful contribution to the study of the internal history of the Qur'an. Equally interesting however is their separation from each other in the Qur'anic order—the order in which an exegete would normally come to them, his mind enriched by a meticulous study of the parts of the Qur'an on which he had already written, his techniques of analysis growing in sophistication, and his spiritual insights deepening. In the case of a scholar of the stature of al-Rāzī[3] one would expect to discover new emphases and dimensions in his perceptions of an episode as it occurred on successive occasions, and it is this aspect of his work that this essay explores. Al-Rāzī has a high place among the very greatest commentators on the Qur'an—not simply those of the classical period. Equally important, he was not an exegete in the traditional sense. The formal title of his work *Mafātiḥ al-Ghayb*—The Keys of the Unseen World, a Qur'anic phrase (al-Anᶜam 6:59), is more appropriate to it than *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, for this is what his work is. And in his treatment of the Qur'an, he discovers keys to the understanding of an incredible range of diverse issues. He began the work in his maturity, in 1199, and brought to it a mind already richly stocked as a result of study, teaching and religious and intellectual experience. Thus the *Mafātiḥ* is a living human mirror of a whole range of emphases and traditions within the religious, moral and social life of Islam of his time, refracted, yet held together as a unity, by an unusually strong and complex personality.

For convenient reference, suggested English renderings of the Qur'anic passages to be discussed are set out below. The punctuation and wording attempts

to reflect the nuances of al-Rāzī's understanding of them. They are presented in order of revelation:

Sura 51 (al-Dhāriyāt)

24. Has the story of Abraham's honoured guests reached you?
25. When they entered in to him and said, 'Peace', He replied 'Peace?'. An unknown people!
26. Then he went apart to his family, and returned with a plump calf,
27. and brought it to them.
    He said: 'Aren't you eatings?'
28. Then he was filled with fear of them.
    They said: 'Do not be afraid,' and gave him good tidings of a son filled with knowledge.
29. Then his wife approached screaming and slapping her face, and said: 'A barren old woman!'
30. They replied: 'Thus says your Lord. He indeed He is the Wise, the Knowing,
31. He said: 'What important business do you have, O messengers?'
32. They replied: 'We are sent to an evil-doing people
33. to cast upon them stones of clay
34. each destined by your Lord for those who do evil.'

Sura 15 (al-Ḥijr)

51. And tell them of Abraham's guests,
52. when they entered in to him and said 'Peace.'
    He replied, 'We are afraid of you.'
53. They said, 'Do not be afraid. We indeed we bring you good tidings of a son filled with knowledge.'
54. He said, 'Do you give me such good tidings despite old age having touched me. Of what do you give good tidings?'
55. They said, 'We bring good tidings in truth, so do not be one of those who despair.'
56. He said, 'Who would despair of the mercy of his Lord, other than those who go astray?'
57. He said, 'What important business do you have, O messengers?'

58. They replied, 'We are sent to an evil-doing people
59. except the family of Lot, them we are to save, all of them,
60. apart from his wife. We have decreed that she is one of those to be left behind.'

Sura 11 (Hūd)

69. Our messengers came with good tidings to Abraham:
They said, 'Peace.'
He replied, 'Peace'.
then forthwith brought them a roasted calf.
70. But when he saw their hands did not reach out towards it, he was uncertain of them, and was filled with fear of them. They said: 'Do not be afraid, we, indeed we are sent to the people of Lot.'
71. His wife was standing nearby, and she laughed. Then we gave her good tidings of Isaac and after Isaac of Jacob.
72. She said, 'Woe is me! Am I to bear a child, although an old woman, and this husband of mine is an old man. This indeed is an extraordinary thing'.
73. They replied, 'Are you surprised at God's decreee?
God's mercy and blessings are upon you, people of the House.
He indeed is worthy of praise, is glorious.'
74. When the fear had passed from Abraham, the good tidings having come to him, he began to plead with Us for the people of Lot.
75. Indeed Abraham was forbearing, trusting in God.
76. 'Abraham, turn aside from this! The decree of your Lord has arrived!
—an irrevocable punishment is coming upon them'.

Sura 29 (al-ʿAnkabūt)

31. When our messengers came to Abraham with good tidings, they said, 'We are to destroy the inhabitants of this city'. Its inhabitants have been doing evil deeds.
32. He replied, 'Lot is in it!'
They said, 'We know full well who is in it! We will save him and his family, apart from his wife.' She was one of those left behind.

★ ★ ★

al-Dhāriyāt is distinguished from al-Ḥijr and Hūd by its opening with the dramatic oaths and restless urgency characteristic of the early suras. After this introduction, the sura contrasts the punishment of the evil doers with the reward to be given to those who spend the night in prayer and give alms to the poor.

This leads to the episode of Abraham's guests. It is followed by brief references to Moses, the peoples of ʿAd and Thamūd, and Noah. The sura concludes with re-assurance to Muḥammad, and a confirmation of his mission. The Abrahamic episode is presented with extreme economy. There is no mention of the name of the people to be destroyed, nor that of the messenger sent to them, nor that of Abraham's wife or of the son to be born to her. The dramatic effect of the episode is nevertheless striking. The words, like deft strokes of a painter's brush, are filled with energy: they set the scene and point to where the action is heading. Despite the tightly condensed expression, the meaning is vividly projected. The two words 'unknown people' immediately convey Abraham's reaction to his guests. His fulfillment of the responsibilities of host are compressed into three brief sentences: 'He turned to his family; he came with a plump calf; he brought it to them'. His question 'Aren't you eating?'—colloquial in its simplicity—makes the situation crystal clear without need of further words to explain that they had left their food untouched. His fear is a natural consequence. The good tidings of a son quiets his fear. In his wife's reaction there is a striking realism—her screaming and slapping of her face. Her exclamation has a peasant, earthy directness, as she sums herself up in two words—*ʿajūz ʿaqīm* (a barren old woman?).

al-Ḥijr opens with a justification of the Qur'an and follows this by warnings to the unbelievers. It then outlines the bounty of God to his creatures, and proclaims His omnipotence; 'We bring to life and we slay; we are the inheritors' (v. 23). This section is followed by a series of exemplary narratives: of the creation of man and the disobedience of Iblīs; of Abraham and his guests; of the punishment of the people of Lot; and of the punishment of the people of al-Ḥijr. The sura concludes with an assurance that Muḥammad will be supported against those who mock at him, and a command that he praise and worship his Lord..

Hūd likewise falls into three sections: an introduction, a middle section of six exemplary narratives: of Noah, Hud, Salih, Abraham and his guests, Shuʿayb and Moses, and a conclusion. Blachère in fact describes it as a perfectly structured sermon of the third Meccan period.[4]

The three retellings of the episode are clearly related, and that in al-Dhāriyāt is the earliest, appears certain. Yet despite its early date, and the omission of the

names of Lot, Sarah and Issac—which must have been known by the hearers—it is fully shaped, and structurally contributes to the subsequent re-tellings both in al-Ḥijr and Hūd, although in different ways. In al-Ḥijr the episode is reduced to a straight dialogue between Abraham and the angels, and the astonishment that Sarah expresses, is transferred to Abraham, who asks: 'Do you give me good tidings of a son although old age has touched me?' The question: 'What important business do you have?' (v. 57) is however retained. In Hūd, the dramatic structure of al-Dhāriyāt re-appears; the expression of astonishment is restored to Abraham's wife, and Lot, Isaac and jacob are referred to by name. The question 'What important business do you have?' however, does not occur. It is as though the telling in al-Dhāriyāt 'seeds' the two later versions.

Content apart, however, the two later versions are distinguished from the first by the way in which they make explicit what is implicit in the compact language of the first. In al-Dhāriyāt, Abraham and Sarah speak with great succinctness. Apart from verse 31 'Of what do you give me good tidings, O Messenger', no utterance of Abraham consists of more than two words. Sarah likewise expresses her astonishment in two words *ʿajūz ʿaqīm*. In al-Ḥijr on the other hand, Abraham expresses his surprise (v 54) in eight when he says: 'Do you give me good tidings of a son despite old age having touched me, of what do you give me good tidings?' In Hūd, the two words Sarah utters in al-Dhāriyāt, *ʿajūz ʿaqīm*, become thirteen: 'Alas! Am I to give birth although I am an old woman, and this my husband is an old man? This is an extraordinary thing' (v. 72). There is likewise an increase in number of words by which the angels quiet Abraham's fear. In al-Dhāriyāt, they say simply, 'Thus says your Lord; He, indeed he is the Wise, the Knowing (v. 30). In al-Hijr, this becomes, 'We bring you good tidings of the truth, so do not be one of those who despair' (v. 55). In Hūd the utterance is longer still, 'Are you astonished at the decree of God? God's mercy and blessings are upon you, people of the House. He is praiseworthy, glorious!' (v. 73).

The reference to Abraham and his visitors in al-ʿAnkabūt is brief. However it requires special consideration since it has been argued that this sura belongs to a section of the *Mafātīḥ* not written by al-Rāzī himself.[5] It is discussed last in order to examine it in the light of the treatment of the episode in the three places which are directly from al-Rāzī's pen.

Al-Rāzī apparently treats these episodes in the order in which they occur in the Qurʾanic text, and thus discusses the chronologically latest and most complex version first—although clearly all the tellings were present simultaneously in his mind—and appears to regard it as the reference form. Since our purpose is to

examine the development of al-Rāzī's thought through the *Mafātīḥ*, this is the order to be followed.

The issues that al-Rāzī raises in commenting on the various presentations of the episode are many. Those selected for discussion here have been chosen on the basis of their concern with a human need, emotion or relationship, or in order to highlight a difference of emphasis or insight in the treatment of one or another component of the episode in one or another of these suras. Despite his great skill in handling issues related to grammar, philology and *fiqh*, and *qirā'at*, these matters are not relevant to this discussion.

– I –
Hūd

To facilitate reference to al-Rāzī's exposition it is useful to set out the elements of the episode. They fall conveniently into four groups, comparable to scenes in a dramatic exposition.

1

69. The messengers come to Abraham with good tidings
They greet him (*salāman*)
He returns their greeting (*salām*)
He hurriedly brings them a roasted calf.

2

70. He sees their hands do not reach for food.
He distrusts and fears them.
They tell him not to fear, they are sent to the people of Lot.

3

71. His wife standing nearby laughs.
They give her good tidings of a son Isaac, and his posterity.
72. She responds with an exclamation.
She queries whether she is to give birth despite her
and her husband's old age.
She comments that this would be extraordinary.

73. The angels ask whether she is astonished at the power of God.
They tell her God's mercy and blessings are on her
and the people of the House,
that He is worthy of praise (*ḥamīd*) and glorious (*majīd*).

4

74. Abraham's fear has gone and good tidings comes to him.
He argues on behalf of the people of Lot.
75. His action is justified
by his compassionate nature.
76. He is ordered to desist because an inexorable punishment is coming to them.

Al-Rāzī introduces his discussion of the episode by identifying its position in the sura as the fourth in a series of narrative passages about the prophets (TK 18:22).

He discusses the significance of the particle *qad* in verse 69 *wa la qad jāʾat rusuluna Ibrāhīm* — our messengers came to Abraham (TK 18:22). Having located the episode as one in a series of stories, he analyses it as a device to attract attention by awakening anticipation in a manner that is appropriate to a series of stories.

He discusses the exchange of greetings: *qālū salāman, qāla salām* (TK 18:22–24). He analyses the syntax of the words, suggesting that the angels single word greeting implies *sallamnā ʿalayka salāman* (we greet you with peace), and Abraham's single word reply: *amrī salām* (I am at peace). He then turns to the semantic distinction between *al-salām* and *salām* to explain the significance of the Qurʾanic use of the indefinite form: That *al-salām* signifies simply the generic abstraction, whereas *salām* indicates a greeting of peace that is total and unconditioned.

He then discusses the words in verse 69, 'He swiftly brought a roasted calf' (TK 18:24).

He sets the episode in a context. Abraham is distressed because he has been a fortnight without guests. The angels come to him (in human form) and they appear to him as guests the like of whom he has never seen before. Thus he swiftly brings them a meal. However they do not react in the manner expected of guests. They do not reach out to take the meat. Abraham is puzzled, and then frightened.

Al-Rāzī explains why they did not eat: they were angels, and angels do not eat or drink. He adds that they had come as guests so that they might be in a form that

would give him pleasure, for he loved providing hospitality.

He explains Abraham's fear in the light of two possibilities: either he did or did not realize that they were angels.

If he did not realize that they were angels, then there was a double reason for his fear. One is that he lived in a remote region, thus when they did not eat, he feared they meant him harm. The other is that when a stranger arrives, and he accepts the food offered to him, the inviolable relationship between host and guest is established. If however the food is refused (an act which implies the rejection of this relationship) the result is fear. He then considers the other possibility, that Abraham realized that they were angels. In this case his fear would have been due to his concern whether he had done something to incur God's displeasure, or whether his people were to be punished.

He discusses the words 'She laughed' (v. 71) at length (TK 18:25–26). He presents nine reasons put forward to explain this laughter.

The first is attributed to ʿAbd al-Jabbār who argues that the reason for her laughter must be something in the verse itself, and this could only be her joy at the quieting of Abraham's fear when the angels said to him, 'Do not be afraid!' (v. 70). She was filled with joy on account of his joy at the passing of his fear—and a human being may well laugh in such a situation. In short, she laughed when the angels said to Abraham, 'Do not be afraid'. Thus these words were like good tidings to her, as though it was said to her: 'We make these good tidings twofold: just as they quieten fear, so also they bring conception of the child that you have been praying for all your life'.

This, (says al-Rāzī), is an extremely good explanation.

The second is that she was revolted by the unbelief of the people of Lot, and their filthy behaviour, thus when the angels announced that they had come to destroy them, she was overwhelmed with joy, and so laughed.

The third is an explanation attributed to al-Suddī. When Abraham said to the angels 'Aren't you eating?' (al-Dhāriyāt 51:27) they replied, 'We do not eat food, except for a price.' Abraham then said, 'The price is that you mention the name of God when you begin your meal, and praise him when you finish it'. Gabriel (on hearing this) said to Michael, 'It is right that the Lord should take such a man as his friend'. It was on hearing these words, that his wife laughed for joy.

In the fourth, the scene is set before the angels arrive. Sarah is saying to Abraham, 'Summon your brother's son (Lot) and embrace him for God is surely going to punish his people'. At this moment the angels enter, and tell Abraham

they have come to destroy Lot's people. Their words correspond with hers. She laughs because she is overjoyed that the angels should say just what she has just said.

The fifth is that when the visitors have informed Abraham that they are angels, he asks for a miracle in proof of their claim. They thereupon call on their Lord to revive the roasted calf. It leaps from its dish back to its pasture. Abraham's wife, standing by, laughs at the sight!

The sixth is that she laughs in wonder that punishment is to befall a heedless people.

The seventh is that when she learns that she is to suffer labour pains she laughs either out of amazement, because she was over ninety and Abraham over a hundred, or because she is overjoyed.

The eighth is that she is astonished that Abraham should be frightened at three visitors, when he has with him his attendants and servants, and so laughs.

The ninth is that the Qurʾan makes use of the rhetorical device of transposition. Her laughter, the effect, is made to precede its cause, the good tidings that she is to have a son. Accordingly she laughs on hearing the good tidings.[7] Al-Rāzī concludes this section with the remark that the first is sound and the remainder are supplementary (*zawāʾid*).

We move now to his discussion of Sarah's words, 'Am I to give birth, I an old woman, and this my husband an old man? This is an extraordinary thing, (v. 72 TK 18:27).

He introduces the question as to whether Sarah's astonishment involves unbelief (*kufr*). He establishes the fact that her astonishment was real from the Qurʾanic text first by her question—'Am I to give birth, I, an old woman?' Secondly by her comment, 'This indeed is an extraordinary thing!', and thirdly by the angels' question, 'Are you astonished at God's decreee?' Now astonishment at God's power implies ignorance of the divine power, and this implies unbelief on her part.

The answer is unequivocal: She is astonished in relation to what is normal and in accordance with the natural law (*ʿurf* and *ʿāda*) not at God's power. For if a truthful informant told a Muslim man that God would turn a particular mountain into gold, he would certainly be astonished, having regard to the character of the natural law (*aḥwāl al-ʿāda*) not because he denied the power of God to do this.

The angels' reply, 'Are you astonished at God's decree?' indicates their astonishment at her astonishment. Al-Rāzī then shows how the angels' words, 'God's mercy and blessings are upon you, people of the House' (v. 73), are to allay her astonishment, just as earlier their good tidings had allayed Abraham's fear, by this promise of blessings made to her and Abraham as people of the House (i.e. the shrine at Mecca). This, al-Rāzī continues, is tantamount to their saying to her: Since God's mercy and blessings, in the form of prophecy, great miracles, and the performance of good deeds are to flow upon you without interruption, how can anyone be surprised that God disrupts the natural law (*kharaqa'l-ʿāda*) by singling you out for these exalted and lofty favours.

From this material, certain of al-Rāzī's interests can be elucidated: The relation between God and man; the relations of human beings with each other; the psychology of the individuals concerned; and certain of his philosophical ideas. In addition some aspects of the character of his students and his relationship with them as a teacher emerge.

Throughout the *Mafātīḥ* al-Rāzī refers to God's kindness to man, and His readiness to console him in trouble. A classical example is his treatment of God's care for Moses and his mother in Ta Ha 20:17–18 and 37–40 (TK 22:14–15). In the first point that we selected, his discussion of the particle *qad*, his interest goes beyond its grammatical significance. He explains its function as a device to awaken anticipation, and thus perceives it as one of the means by which the Qur'an holds the attention of its readers. It is thus an indication that part of its linguistic genius is in the way it holds the attention, so that the Qur'an can nurture its readers. In this particle *qad*, then, is an example of God's concern for mankind.

The story he tells, setting out the background to the arrival of Abraham's visitors likewise illustrates this loving kindness. Abraham took pleasure in giving hospitality. No guests had come to him for a long time. He longed to receive guests. Therefore God sent the messengers to him in a form he loved, that is guests, in order, by so doing, to prepare him for the good tidings he is to receive. It is possible that in this there is an echo of the conclusion of the chapter on Moses in Ibn ʿArabi's *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, that when God wishes to bring someone close to Him, He attracts him in a form that at first he does not recognize as divine. Thus Moses saw the fire when he was in need of warmth and light, and in the Fire, he found God.[8]

The proper exchange of greetings is central to Muslim etiquette. Indeed it is more than etiquette, since the formula *al-salām alaykum* establishes a relationship of

trust and mutual respect between Muslims. This is why al-Rāzī spends so much space discussing this exchange between Abraham and his guests. His concern here, by drawing attention to the fact that the word *salām* is indefinite, is to stress that the greeting of peace is without any qualification. He is to turn again to this exchange of greetings in his treatment of al-Dhāriyāt. In al-Dhāriyāt too, we will see an even more detailed exposition of the norms of human relationships.

Several of the points he raises are concerned with primal emotions, and indeed it is a perception of the realities of human psychology, and identification with human experience in the narrative passages of the Qur'an that is so characteristic of al-Rāzī. Thus he is particularly concerned with Abraham's fear. The Qur'an does not make explicit why he was afraid, therefore al-Rāzī is concerned to elucidate the reason. A guest who does not behave as a guest should, is a cause for disquiet. In the bedouin tradition, for a visitor to refuse the food offered to him has ominous implications. Even if Abraham had realised that his visitors were angels, there would still have been, al-Rāzī points out, valid reasons for fear. He pays special attention to Sarah's amazement that she is to bear a child. He is careful to establish that this feeling was real, indicating a three-fold proof from the Qur'anic text: she expresses her surprise, she says she is surprised, the angels ask her why she is surprised! Only having done this, does he proceed to show that this amazement was not sinful. He treats in a similar manner the compassion that led Abraham to attempt to persuade the angels to postpone the punishment of the people of Lot, and cites the Qur'anic words 'He was indeed kind-hearted, compassionate and devoted to God', words in fact which both prove that he experienced these human emotions, and praise him for them.

The series of possible explanations for Sarah's laughter is intriguing. Despite al-Rāzī's give away final comment that only one of them is sound, the list is so long that even despite himself, it is clear he finds several of them of acute psychological interest.

This is particularly true of the first, his preferred explanation: that Sarah laughed as a reaction to a sudden release from fear. This is a striking psychological perception, and there is a need to stress both its attribution to ʿAbd al-Jabbār, and al-Rāzī's approval of it. But others are equally interesting. The fourth for example, that she laughed because when the angels arrived, they repeated her very words: that the people of Lot deserved destruction. She laughed with pleasure because she had been proved right! In the seventh, she is credited with a sense of the ridiculous. She laughs at the prospect of parturition at the age of

ninety. In the eighth she simply laughs at her husband: why should he be afraid of just three visitors when he has with him all his attendants and servants?

One explanation, the fifth, seems both out of place and out of character: she laughed because the roasted calf was restored to life, and leapt from its dish (possibly inspired by the story of the salted fish carried by the servant of Moses, when they were on their way to meet Khidr told in al-Kahf 18:60–64). Granted that al-Razi was expounding the text to a large and diverse group of students, and the seriousness of his exposition, perhaps he saw in the possible reaction of laughter,—after all, Sarah laughed—a means of relaxing tension, and giving students a chance to regain their concentration.

There are other places in the *Mafātīḥ* where he shows a capacity for humour. One delightful example is al-Rāzī's playful construction of what God would be like were the physical descriptions of Him in the Qur'an to be taken literally (TK 26:229). Another is His explanation of the term *rūḥ* in sura Maryam 19:17 as meaning something or someone close and beloved, and to drive the point home al-Rāzī says to his students—*kamā taqūlū li ḥabībika: rūḥī*—as you say to your beloved: my soul (TK 21:196).

In his treatment of this particular episode, there is little explicit reference to his underlying theological or philosophical ideas. There is however evidence of his commitment to the idea of the sinlessness of the prophets (and Sarah) and to establish that their spontaneous reactions do not involve sin. In his discussion of Maryam (TK 21:197) he treats the astonishment of Zakaria that he is to have a son in his old age as he did that of Sarah, referring to his discussion of Sarah in this sura. There is also revealed, although only as the tip of an iceberg, his fundamental interest in the concepts of *ʿurf* and *ʿāda*, and the circumstances in which these may be disrupted.[9]

– II –
al-Ḥijr

The elements in al-Ḥijr are as follows:

51. God orders Muḥammad to tell of Abraham's guests.

52. The guests enter his compound.
They say 'Peace' (*salāman*).
Abraham replies, 'We are afraid of you'.

53. They tell him not to be afraid
that they bring him tidings of a boy.

54. He asks if this is to be despite his old age?
    He asks of what is their good tidings.
55. They reply that their message is true; they tell him not to despair.
56. He denies despair.
57. He asks what is their important business?
58. They reply they are to destroy a wicked people
59. apart from the family of Lot.
    All are to be saved.
60. Except his wife.

It will be noted how in this presentation, the episode is reduced to a single scene: a dialogue between Abraham and the visitors. There is no reference either to the preparation of the meal, or to Sarah's reaction on hearing that she is to have a child. Equally striking is that no response is put in Abraham's mouth to the angels' greeting.

Al-Rāzī introduces his discussion of this presentation of the episode (TK 19:195) with a summary of the preceding part of the sura, and the lessons to be drawn from it.

He first explains why *ḍayf* is singular in form, although plural in meaning, and then discusses why the visitors are referred to as guests although they did not eat. He offers two explanations. One is that since Abraham thought that they had come to him to ask for hospitality, this term is appropriate. The other view is that a person who enters a house to take refuge with the owner, is a guest, even if he does not eat.

He explains the form *salāman* by saying that the words *nusallimu ʿalayka* are to be understood as preceding it, thus the meaning is 'We greet you with peace.'

Of Abraham's fear, he says it was caused by their not eating, then gives another opinion, that it was because they had entered the house without permission at an inappropriate time. He concludes this section by saying that a full version of the episode is given in Hūd.

He raises a series of points related to the words 'We, indeed we give you good tidings of a son filled with knowledge' (v. 53).

One is that the good tidings themselves are a guarantee of security — for if harm befell him how could the promise be fulfilled (TK 19:196)? Another is that the good news has two components: that the child is to be male and that he is to

be filled with knowledge, knowledge being understood either as his vocation as a prophet, or an understanding of religion.

He discusses Abraham's reaction to the good tidings, expressed in the words: 'Do you give me good tidings although old age has touched me? Of what do you give me good tidings?'

He focuses his attention on the second component of the question 'Of what do you give me good tidings?, in which he discusses two issues: Did he find it unlikely that God had the power to create him a son in his old age—which would have been tantamount to disbelief. And since Abraham had already been given the good tidings, what was the point of the question? Al-Rāzī attributes the best explanation to ʿAbd al-Jabbār. According to him, Abraham asked the question because he wished to know whether he would have a son while in old age, or whether he would be restored to his youth, for the recognized that it is the law of nature that one does not beget (or bear) a child in advanced old age.

He them discusses the question: 'Why then did the angels say "We give you good tidings in truth, so do not be one of those who despair"' (TK 19: 197). His explanation is that the words mean that he will have this son while in old age, and adds that the words 'Do not be one of those who despair' (15:55) certainly do not indicate that he had ever despaired.

He adds two further explanations. One is that Abraham uttered the words in bewilderment. For when a man has a strong yearning for something, and the time during which he believes that he can achieve it is past, and unexpectedly he is informed that after all, he is to have it, his joy and happiness is immense; and this mighty joy becomes for him like something bewildering, something which suspends his power of understanding and discrimination. Thus he may well utter confused words as a result of that joy on such an occasion.

The other is that Abraham found the words pleasing. For when a man finds news pleasing, he may well repeat the question in order to hear the good tidings once, twice or even more times, desiring to experience again the pleasure of hearing these good tidings, and an increase in confidence and assurance (that they are to take place), just as Abraham had asked (2:260) 'That my heart by at rest.'

A final explanation is that the question means, 'Is it by God's command that you bring me these good tidings or is it on your own initiative'?

He discusses in detail Abraham's question, 'What is your important business, O messengers?' (15:57). In his treatment of it, he raises several issues (TK 19:198).

He raises the question 'How could he ask them this when he had already been given good tidings of a son filled with knowledge?'

In answer, he puts forward several possibilities. The first, attributed to al-ʿĀṣim, is that he is asking what further information is to be brought to him in addition to these good tidings.

A second, attributed to ʿAbd al-Jabbār, is that Abraham realised that if the message had simply been one of good tidings, a single angel would have been sufficient to bring it. Since there were several angels, he realised there was still another purpose, and therefore asked them, 'What is your important business?' (15:57).

A third, unattributed, derives from the fact that when the angels saw Abraham was afraid, they said to him, 'Do not be afraid, we give you good tidings of a son filled with knowledge' (15:35). If they had come simply to give him good tidings, they would have done so as soon as they entered. Since they had not, Abraham realized that they had another purpose, and so asked them the question, and received the answer, 'We, indeed we, are sent to destroy an evil people' (i.e. the people of Lot) (15:53).

The episode in al-Ḥijr is briefer than that given in either Hūd or al-Dhāriyāt, and al-Rāzī refers to both these suras to supplement the information given here. It is clear that he takes Hūd as the normative and most complete account of the episode.

Al-Rāzī's treatment, likewise is not extensive. He has little to say that is of direct relevance to God's dealings with Abraham, although the appropriateness of the visitors being referred to as guests simply because Abraham thought that was what they were, may be regarded as a divine gesture of kindness and consideration to Abraham. In al-Dhāriyāt he is to discover a deeper significance in the answer to this question.

Since the episode here only involves Abraham with his visitors, there is little scope for personal relationships. The story is compressed, and moves directly to Abraham's fear, without mentioning his response to their greeting. Here al-Rāzī has little new to add about Abraham's fear apart from another possible reason for it: that they had entered his house without leave and at the wrong time.

In this sura however, as mentioned earlier, the expression of surprise at the good tidings is transferred from Sarah to Abraham, and it is striking that the expression of surprise, both in the Qurʾanic text and in al-Rāzī's treatment of it, is in character, and there is a clear distinction between the male and female response.

Sarah's reaction is one of emotion. That of Abraham is curiosity, at least this is the explanation of ʿAbd al-Jabbār that al-Rāzī endorses. Abraham was curious to know whether he would remain in old age, or be restored to youth for this to happen. It is almost as though Abraham is taking a detached, philosophical view of the matter, and is concerned simply with the manner in which the law of nature, *ʿāda* is to be broken.

As for the question as to whether Abraham's words could have been due to despair at having a child in his old age, as well he might have—for the angels forbade him to despair (v. 55). Al-Rāzī emphasizes that he did not, and states in the manner of a lecturer driving a point home, 'We have mentioned many times that to forbid a person to do something does not mean that the person so forbidden is doing what he is forbidden to do' (TK 19:197). The emphatic denial, however, does at least indicate interest in the possibility of despair at having a child, even though the possibility would be a priori excluded by the prophetic *ʿiṣma*.

This apart, there are two other psychologically shrewd explanations for Abraham's question, 'Of what do you give me good tidings?' One is that he was so overwhelmed with joy at hearing these good tidings, he did not know what he was saying. The other is that the words pleased him so much, he wanted to hear them repeated.

There is a marvellous perception of human response in each of these possibilities. They show al-Rāzī's interest in the way individuals respond to extraordinary events, and to demonstrate that they need not involve unbelief. Thus he acknowledged that Abraham as a man, though a prophet, could be confused.

But there is another point. In interpreting this question, al-Rāzī shows himself perceptive to the rhythms of the spoken word in the Qur'an. The two different possibilities that he puts forward could each be suggested by a difference in the intonation and phrasing of the words *fa bimā tubashshirūna* (v. 54). It is as though he is watching the scene, listening to the words as they are uttered, and exploring the emotional states and motivations of the personality behind the utterance.

It is the same sensitivity that he brings to the words, 'What is your important business?' Each of the three aspects that he discovers in it could be cued by a different intonation in the putting of the question. But, each, especially the second and the third, reveal in Abraham, a diplomatic finesse in interpreting both the protocol of the angels' approach to him, and the delicacy and tact with which they break the news to him of the coming destruction of Sodom. If the first

possibility is simply a blunt request for further information, the second—that put forward by ʿAbd al-Jabbār—shows Abraham as able to deduce from the number of messengers sent to him that the message is not yet complete. The third, which may be that of al-Rāzī himself, is more subtle. Abraham perceives that if the angels had come simply to give him good tidings of a son, they would have announced this to him as soon as they had entered his courtyard. Abraham's fear (no cause of fear is mentioned in this sura) and the command not to be afraid implies that the news of something fearful is to follow the good tidings—and hence Abraham's question.

Al-Rāzī's treatment of this presentation of this episode reflects something of his intellectual concerns and method. He does not shrink from difficult, fundamental issues. What indeed is the point of Abraham's questions such as, 'Of what do you give me good tidings?', and 'What is your important business?'. He recognizes the difficulties that the former involves (TK 19:196). He shows again his deep concern with the problem of the natural law, and the circumstances in which it may be suspended for the sake of the prophets. His thought is still nevertheless structured by the doctrine of the impeccability of the prophets and in his discussion of their psychological responses, he is concerned that they should not sin.

It is worth remarking that some of the questions raised here might have been put forward by students flexing their muscles, questions such as: why does *ḍayf* have a singular form, but a plural meaning? Why are the visitors referred to as guests, whereas they do not behave as guests should—by accepting hospitality (TK 19: p. 196) and eating.

III – al-Dhāriyāt

This presentation of the episode, like that in Hūd, may conveniently be divided into four scenes. The elements may be set out as follows:

I

24. Muḥammad is asked if the story of Abraham's honoured guests has come to him.

25. They enter his compound.
They say, 'Peace' (*salāman*).
He replies, 'Peace' (*salām*).
He thinks: an unknown people (*qawm munkarūn*).

2

26. He turns aside to his family and returns with a plump calf.
He brings it to them.
He queries their not eating.

28. He is afraid of them.
They tell him not to fear and
give him tidings of a boy filled with knowledge.

3

29. His wife approaches with loud cries striking her face.
She exclaims: A barren old woman!

30. They tell her that the words came from her Lord,
that her Lord is wise and filled with knowledge.

4

31. Abraham asks them what is their business.

32. They reply that they are sent to an evil people.

33. To hurl upon them stone[3] of clay.

34. Each destined by his Lord for evil-doers.

Al-Rāzī (TK 28:210) summarizes the reasons for the presentation of the episode in this sura. It is he says intended to console Muḥammad for the pains his vocation as prophet brought him; as an admonition to his people as to how they should receive guests; and as a warning of the stones to be cast on evil-doers.

The first question he discusses is: if the episode has to do with consolation and warning, what does hospitality have to do with it? The answer is that it shows (the contrast between) the joy that comes to the prophets (in receiving visitors who bring good tidings) and the disaster that falls without warning upon evil-doers.

The second is why they were called guests when in fact they were not. Al-Rāzī replies: 'Because Abraham thought they were guests, God, out of respect for him, did not contradict him. He then quotes a saying of the mystics: *al-ṣādiq yaqūlu mā yakūn wa'l-ṣiddīq yaqūnu mā yaqūl* — A truthful person speaks truly of what is. What a *ṣiddīq*, says comes to be.

In the third question (TK 28:210), after explaining that *ḍayf*, though singular in form may have a plural meaning, he discusses the significance of the word *mukramūn*—honoured. He explains that it may mean either that they were, in a general sense, honoured servants of God, or in a particular sense, that Abraham honoured them. He then tells how Abraham honoured them: in the first place, (by welcoming them) with a smiling face; in the second, by seating them in the best and most comfortable positions; and in the third, by swiftly bringing them hospitality, then after performing these courtesies due to guests, by sitting and eating with them.

In the fourth question, in his treatment of the angels' words: 'We, indeed we, are sent to a community of evil-doers' (51:32), he discusses why the messengers were sent to Abraham whereas the evil-doers belonged to the community of Lot.

In this, says al-Rāzī, is a profound wisdom. It may be explained from two aspects. One is that Abraham was *shaikh al-mursalīn* (the elder of the messengers TK 28:210), and Lot was one of his family. And part of the respect of a king belongs to those in his charge and under his authority is that if a messenger is sent to someone other than he (i.e. to one of his subjects), the messenger is instructed: Go to King so and so, and tell him of your message, and take his opinion in the matter.

The other is that when God had decided (TK 28:211) to destroy a large community — and this is what was to grieve Abraham,—having compassion on him. He said to the messengers: Give him good tidings of a boy that is to issue from his loins to replace those that are slain, and that from this boy's loins will issue prophets.

Al-Rāzī then treats in detail reasons for the difference in form between the angels greeting *salāman,* and Abraham's response to them *salām* (v. 25).

Al-Rāzī explores the different nuances of meaning indicated by the use of the word *salām* in the nominative and accusative forms. Out of this discussion he extracts significances that go beyond those normally expressed in a conventional exchange of greetings (TK 28:211). For example the angels greet Abraham with peace, but do not say from whom they bring this greeting until Abraham asks them. This is because the Wise (*al-Ḥakīm*), only communicates an important matter by degrees. For if the angel had told him immediately that the (greeting of) peace was from God, Abraham would have been terrified.

As for Abraham's response, *salām* (TK 28:212) it means 'Your words are words of peace, but you are an unknown people, so I am not sure how to respond

to you.' By so doing, al-Rāzī continues, Abraham ensures two things, reverence for God, and care for the feelings of His creatures. (He had replied to the greeting) but had he made the formal response *'salām ᶜalaykum'* without knowing for sure that his visitors were righteous servants of God, the possibility existed that they were not. In that case, as a Messenger, he would have given them security from God without the right to do so, and thus he said: 'You have said *salām* to me, but I reserve my position. There is no relationship established between us until the matter is clarified (TK 28:212).

He discusses the two verses 'He went aside to his family, and returned with a plump calf (v. 26), and brought it to them. He said, 'Aren't you eating?' (v. 27). He remarks that the account of the episode in Hūd is more extensive than that given in this sura, pointing out that here there is no reference to 'good tidings,' and no mention by name of either Isaac or Lot. He then turns to the etiquette of hospitality implicit in the text.

Host and guest, he says, honour each other in various ways. The host meets his guest in proper manner, he goes out to him, and makes preparations for him. The guest utters the word of greeting *salām* in a proper manner, using the accusative form *salāman* as did Abraham's visitors, either as a means of emphasis, or to indicate that he comes on behalf of one greater than himself. The host responds in a proper manner that is indicated by his use of the nominative form *salām*, and refraining from any word in which there is not sincerity. Thus Abraham did not reply *salām ᶜalaykum* (which would commit him to a relationship with unknown visitors) but answered with an expression that means 'I am peaceable,' or 'Your utterance is *salām*, but it is not yet acknowledged. This avoids a breach of faith if the guest is not from God, for friendship with the enemies of God is not appropriate to the prophets.

Al-Rāzī then moves on to other points of etiquette. Food should be served swiftly—Abraham 'swiftly came with a plump calf.' When the host leaves to fetch something he should do so unobserved by the guest, so that the guest will not attempt to dissuade him from going. He does not say (to the guest) 'Come along' (TK 28:213). This absence from the guest is commendable so that the guest may relax, and the host may bring what the guest requires, and prevent him from feeling embarrassment at it.

A host should choose the best for his guest. Abraham brings his visitors a *plump* calf. He brings the food to the guests, he does not take them to the food, for Abraham brought the plump calf to them. This is because when food is brought

to people who are already seated, there can be no argument about seating, whereas if the host invites the guests to where the food is, disagreements may arise, and those low in rank disturb those higher in rank.

Guests are invited, not ordered to eat. Abraham said to his visitors, 'Aren't you eating?' He did not say 'Eat!'.

A good host should be pleased when his guests eat. He does not take pleasure, as do some reluctant misers, at food left uneaten, misers who serve an abundance of food, yet whose eyes and those of their household remain on it, in the hope that their guests will eat sparingly.

As for the guest, he should respect the position of the host—Abraham was afraid when his guests did not eat. He must apologize if he doest not eat—Abraham's guests said to him 'Do not fear' when they did not eat. He should apologize all the more graciously, because as a guest he has a protected status, and food has been served to him.

In this are two matters. One is that the food may disagree with him, and be harmful to him. The other is that he may be too weak to digest that food. In such a case the guest should not say the food is tough, and not good for him, but rather 'I have difficulty in eating: even at home I don't eat anything'—Abraham's guests made him understand that they were not beings who ate, by giving him good tidings of a boy. They did not say: 'Eating and drinking are not good for us.'

Al-Rāzī also finds in this passage an etiquette for giving good news: A man should not be told something that delights him all at once. This may cause illness—it was only when the angels were seated, and Abraham was relaxed with them that they said, 'We bring you good tidings of a child.' Then they mentioned the child would be of the nobler of the two sexes, that is the male. For a son is superior to a daughter, even if a daughter is perfect of disposition and of good character, and the boy is the opposite. Then they passed over all other qualities such as goodness, beauty, strength and well-being and chose simply knowledge to describe him, indicating that Knowledge is the head of attributes and the chief of qualities. Al-Rāzī sees this etiquette also exemplified in the announcement to Abraham of good tidings of a son made to precede the news that people of Lot would be destroyed, and a better people put in their place (TK 28:214).

He discusses the verse 'Then his wife came screaming and slapping her face' (v. 29). He understands it as meaning 'Came towards her family.' She had been serving the visitors, and when they spoke with her husband about her giving birth, she was embarrassed, and turned away from them. He observes that

women regularly scream in the case of embarrassment or surprise (TK 28-214), and suggests that this screaming accompanied her words 'Woe is me' in Hūd (v. 71). He adds that slapping of the face is common among women. He offers an explanation for Sarah's behaviour. She had found their words difficult to believe for two reasons. One, because she was very old, the other she had been barren. Thus she must have thought that these words of the angels were as those of a guest uttering a prayer for his host, as, for example 'May God grant you wealth, and bless you with a son!' The meaning of her reaction then was 'Would that you had prayed for something that could be fulfilled!' That is why they replied 'Thus says your Lord' as though to say 'This is not a prayer, it is the word of God. Finally they removed her uncertainty with the words *'innahu huwa'l-ḥakīmu l-'alīm*—He, indeed he, is the Wise, the Knowing.

Al-Rāzī then examines this rhyming conclusion to verse 31 and queries why at the corresponding point in the narrative in Hūd, verse 73, the rhyming words are *ḥamīd majīd*. He shows how each is appropriate to the context in the respective suras, and draws attention to an internal relationship between the two: That in the former, *ḥamīd* has to do with act and *majīd* with utterance; and that in the latter *al-ḥakīm* has to do with the manner in which an act is performed, and *al-'alīm* is to be understood as referring to God who is deserving of praise (*ḥamd*) by virtue of his glory (*majd*).

In verse 31, 'What is your important business, O Messengers?' (TK 28:215), he finds a major issue and puts the question: Since Abraham now knew what their business was, why was he not satisfied with the good tidings they had brought him, since it is possible that their visit was simply for this purpose?

Al-Rāzī sees in this verse yet another example of Abraham behaving as the etiquette of hospitality requires he should. His guests are about to depart. In this situation any good host would say 'What is all this haste? What important business of yours is it that deprives us of the honour of your company?' He is not silent when they are about to leave for fear that this silence be misunderstood as dislike of them. And so Abraham siad to them, 'What is your important business?'

His guests respond in turn to his words as etiquette requires they should. After all a friend does not conceal anything from a friend, all the more when to reveal it is by leave of God. Thus they told him of the coming destruction of the people of Lot, having comforted him beforehand with good tidings of the best compensation he could receive, that is he was to be the father of the prophet Isaac (TK 28:215).

In al-Rāzī's treatment of this presentation of the episode, he again highlights the kindness of God to his creatures, in particular to his prophets. One of the reasons why it is presented in the sura is to console Muḥammad for the pains that he as a messenger suffered. For just as Muḥammad suffered, so did Abraham, the chief of the messengers. Abraham too received such kindness. Because he thought that the messengers sent to give him good tidings were guests, that they were. God did not shame him. Al-Rāzī attributes to him the title of *ṣiddīq*. It is an epithet applied to Abraham (e.g. 19:44 et passim) and indeed others of the prophets in the Qurʾan. In the Qurʾan the term means 'one totally truthful.' Here, however, al-Rāzī, in quoting this sufi aphorism has added to it the mystical dimension developed in the tradition of Ibn ʿArabī. It means that Abraham has had conferred upon him the spiritual power of the *walī*, and what he says comes to pass. That the angels came to Abraham before taking their message to Lot is an example of what can only be described as the exquisite courtesy of God to his creatures: Abraham as the Shaikh of the prophets is to be informed and consulted before the people of Lot are destroyed. There is a diplomatic finesse in the matter.

Further, when important news is to be communicated to human beings, it is God's decree that it should be done so little by little, lest the shock be harmful.

Abraham is tender of heart. The destruction of a human community grieves him, and so God takes pity on him, and gives him good tidings of descendants of his who are to replace the slain. A little later al-Rāzī is to recall that God makes the good news of a son precede the announcement that a wicked people is to be destroyed.

Al-Rāzī here however lays most stress upon relationships between human creatures.

He takes up the exchange of greetings, and discovers in this exchange a remarkable delicacy in human dealings with each other. Abraham has the responsibility to reply to a greeting, but he does not have the right to accord to those uttering that greeting the privilege of acceptance that the response *salām ʿalaykum* implies until he is sure who they are and from whom they have come. Al-Rāzī in deducing this wealth of meaning from an exchange of two words that differ only in case ending, in fact attributes to Abraham the skill of a diplomat. That he does so is no doubt due to his ear for the spoken word, and an uncanny ability to deduce meaning from intonation as in his mind he *hears* the way *salām* is uttered.

In fact his whole treatment of the episode as a midrashic type model for

proper relationships between host and guests indicates a deep sense of the need for delicacy and mutual respect in personal relationships. There is no room for irritating delay, or loud giving of orders; possible causes for embarrassment and situations in which rivalry and argument might arise are to be avoided—by bringing food to the guests where they are already seated. Even the invitation to eat should be delicate and indirect. The duty for such courtesy lies equally upon host and guest. If the guest for any reason does not eat, he must explain this in a way that ensures that the host could not possibly feel that he has been at fault. This care to avoid hurt feelings informs the whole section. When the angels came to give Abraham their message, they first wait until he is at ease, and only then tell him of a child, that the child will be male, and finally that it will have the crown of all qualities, knowledge (v. 28), thus giving the good news little by little to avoid violence to his emotions. This extraction of a wealth of meaning simply from the word order in the text is characteristic of his style, and shows his response to the condensed highly charged language of this sura.

This concern with care in human relationships extends to the parting of host and guests. This is illustrated in al-Rāzī's reading of the words "What is your important business?' (v. 31). For a host should not allow a guest to leave without urging him to stay longer, otherwise the guest may feel he is unwanted. But when urged to stay longer, the guest responds with a matching generosity, personal confidence and affection.[10] Here too it will be noted how alive al-Rāzī is to the intonation of the spoken word, and how, as it were, he hears the phrase uttered in varying intonations in everyday situations.

He gives a penetrating analysis of Sarah's reaction to the news that she is to have a child by screaming and slapping her face (v. 29). His interpretation of her reaction is based on his observation of the facts of behaviour he has seen. Women in his society do behave in this way. It indicates embarrassment. In interpreting the words from personal experience, he humanises the events in the story told in the Qur'an. But his inclination to reconstruct a total situation, and his psychological insight take him a stage further. He sees Sarah as misunderstanding the import of the angels' words, and taking them for a conventional pious wish on behalf of the mistress of the house. Thus al-Rāzī finds in her response a passionate expression of longing for a child as a raw nerve is touched, which he puts into the words 'Would that you had prayed for something that could be fulfilled!' How appropriate then for him to suggest that this slapping and screaming occurred together with her words 'Woe is me!' in Hūd (v. 71 TK 28:214–5).

Despite the richness of the treatment of human relationships in the commentary on this sura, there is little directly related to philosophical issues. As for student response however, it may be observed that the question 'What has hospitality to do with a warning about the destruction of Sodom?' (TK 28:210) has the sound of an irreverent student.

– Part IV –

The elements of the episode as related in al-ʿAnkabūt are as follows:

31. God's messengers come to Abraham with good tidings.
They say they are to destroy the people of the city because they are evil-doers.

32. Abraham replies that Lot is in the city.
The messengers say to him that they know this;
that they will save Lot and
his family except for his wife.

The commentator (TK 25:59) first draws attention to the linking of the two elements: good tidings, and the warning of punishment. In this linkage he elucidates two subtleties. One is that since good tidings are a sign of God's mercy, and the warning of destruction, a sign of His wrath, the Qurʾanic phrase illustrates and confirms the saying 'His mercy preceded his wrath.'

The other is that when they announced the good tidings, they gave no reason why they had done so, as for example because Abraham was a messenger, a faithful believer, or a just man. They did however explain why they were going to destroy the people of Sodom: because they were evil-doers (TK 25:60). This is because one who is gracious, does not give his favours in return for good done to him, but one who is just, only punishes for a crime.

In this he perceives two issues. One is the question: what is the connection between the good tidings and the warning? The answer is that when God had decided to destroy a people—and this meant emptying the earth of its inhabitants—before doing so he first informed Abraham that he would refill the earth with a righteous people so that Abraham would not grieve at the destruction of a community of his (the human) species.

The other is a grammatical analysis of the phrase *'inna ahlaha kānū ẓālimīna*—its inhabitants were indeed evil-doers (v. 31).' This analysis in itself is not directly relevant to our purposes, but the conclusion drawn from it is: That

the angels said what was necessary to explain that God's command to destroy the city was good. They said 'We are to destroy its inhabitants because God has commanded us, and the circumstance of his ordering us to do so is that they are evil-doers. We do not give more information than it is necessary for us to give, since for angels to speak without His leave, is a breach of etiquette' (TK 25:60).

The commentator then analyses Abraham's reaction to the news that Sodom was to be destroyed. He said in amazement 'Lot is in it,' so how could they destroy it? It was to this that the angels replied, 'We know better than you who is in it' i.e. we know that Lot is among its inhabitants, and we will save him and his family, and destroy the remainder.

In this brief dialogue, the commentator detects an exquisite subtelty. The whole group, i.e. both Abraham, and the angels were good, and each added to the good that was in the other. On the one hand when Abraham heard the angels' words 'We are about to destroy the inhabitants of this city' he was filled with compassion. He forgot himself and the good tidings they had given him, and instead of rejoicing at those good tidings said simply, 'Lot is in that city.' The angels, on the other hand, when they saw him react in this way, replied, 'You only said Lot. We will save him, and not only him, but his family (except his wife).

The commentary on these two verses again stresses the kindness of God to His creatures. This is shown in one way by the good tidings coming before the warning, which the commentator sees as a prallelism that explains and illustrates the aphorism popular in Sufi circles, and based on the *ḥadīth qudsī* 'My mercy precedes my wrath.' More significantly there is God's compassion for Abraham, and desire to comfort him for the destruction of a community of human beings, by the promise of a new generation. This point, it will be recalled, was mentioned in the discussion on al-Ḥijr.

There is still a concern for personal relationships. The angels perform their duty in bringing news to Abraham according to etiquette. They say to him what they have leave to say, no more, no less. Abraham tells them that Lot is in the doomed city. They respond with more good than he has asked for.

There is likewise a psychological insight into Abraham. He is bewildered at the angels' announcement that Sodom is to be destroyed because he knows that Lot is there. He is concerned for his nephew's safety. The commentator develops this insight further with his suggestion that Abraham, being compassionate by nature, is so concerned for Lot's safety that everything else is pushed out of his

mind, and he forgets even to enquire about the good tidings to be announced to him.

★ ★

In this survey of al-Rāzī's treatment of the episode of Abraham and his guests, special attention has been given to al-Rāzī's concern with God's kindness to his creatures, the relations of His creatures with each other, and the realisation and interpretation of human personalities and their emotions in the encounters it portrays.

The presentation in al-ʿAnkabūt has been set apart from the others because of the arguments advanced by Jomier that al-Rāzī did not write it.[11] It is striking however how much in common there is between the treatment in al-ʿAnkabūt, and that in the other three suras. The highlighting of the good tidings preceding the warning is elaborated in al-Rāzī's treatment of al-Dhāriyāt. The concern that Abraham be comforted for the destruction of his people has a counterpart in al-Rāzī's treatment of al-Ḥijr. The reference to the etiquette which forbids angels to say more than is necessary is reminiscent of the concern shown with etiquette in al-Dhāriyāt, and in his treatment of sura Maryam. Indeed in Maryam he sees courtesy and a concern for etiquette as applying in relations between different categories of rational beings. Thus among the possible reasons he puts forward for Zakariya's question, 'How shall I have a child?' (Maryam 19:8), is the following (TK 21:187): In giving the good tidings of a son, the angels did not say explicitly whose it was to be. Zakariya then, not being certain that they were referring to him, instead of asking bluntly whether it was he who was to be the father, raised the matter indirectly. This he did by remarking that according to the natural law (*ʿāda*) he would not be able to beget a child. The psychological acuteness that is brought to Abraham's reaction to the news that Sodom (with Lot in it) is to be destroyed—that he is confused and completely forgets the good tidings he has received—is of an equivalent level to that illustrated in Hūd and al-Dhāriyāt.

To this may be added that the intellectual justification of why no explanation is given for good news, but that a just man needs to give a reason for punishment, and the felt need to demonstrate that God's command is good, are characteristic concerns of al-Rāzī. In addition the question, 'What have good tidings to do with a warning?' is suggestive of the same type of student question raised in al-Dhāriyāt, 'What has hospitality got to do with warning?'

If to these points are added the bravura of the grammatical analysis, the comparison and contrast of the warning of Noah to his people and that of Lot, and the handling of the apparatus of *masʾala* and *wajh*, we find the same series of

concerns, emphases and skills brought into use in the other Abrahamic passages we have discussed.

There is then no immediate evidence that this admittedly brief passage is not as al-Rāzī might have written it. However, if there are not sufficient grounds to weaken Jomier's arguments that the commentary on suras 28–36 were not written by al-Rāzī, it is nevertheless possible to suggest a broader framework for discussion: that the text of the commentary on these suras is a patchwork from diverse traditions and manuscript families; that the sources available to Khuwayyi, if indeed he it was who compiled this part of the *mafātīh*, may have included authentic fragments of al-Rāzī's work, possibly from a student who heard them at first hand. Such may have been the case with this part of the commentary on al-*ʿAnkabūt*. Others however may have been summarized, rephrased, pieced together or otherwise reconstructed. Nevertheless it may be remarked that the greater part of Jomier's internal arguments against al-Rāzī's authorship are based on early suras, and the possibility of a development and change in al-Rāzī's approach needs to be taken into account. The issue is too complex for further discussion here, and in any case no easy or definitive answers are to be expected.

The question of the degree of authenticity of the commentary on al-*ʿAnkabūt* apart, a comparison of these four presentations of the episode through *al-Rāzī's* eyes is illuminating from various standpoints.

The possibility of a significance in their relationship for the history of the Qur'an has already been mentioned. To recapitulate briefly: the version in al-Dhāriyāt, although set in a sura which appears early, is structurally very close to that presented in Hūd, falling into four parallel scenes, distinguished by the greater detail given in Hūd, and the different events that are highlighted: Sarah's laughter in Hūd, and her slapping of her face and screaming in al-Dhāriyāt. In al-Ḥijr, the four scenes are telescoped into a dialogue between Abraham and the visitors: the expression of surprise is transferred to Abraham and a greater prominence given to the messengers' subsequent meeting with Lot to warn him of the imminent destruction of Sodom, and the attack on Lot's house by the predatory sodomites. In al-ʿAnkabūt, the reference to the good tidings is tangential, as though the episode is well-known, and a brief allusion is all that is necessary for attention to be drawn to the message it contains.

A comparative study of these passages also provides a basis both for a more general study of the relation between repeated episodes in the Qur'an, and Qur'anic techniques of story-telling—making use of narrative, dialogue and

dramatic forms. We have already referred to the possibility of the presentation of the episode in al-Dhāriyāt developed with two different emphases in al-Ḥijr and Hūd. There is material here for a comparative study using the methodology pioneered by Wansbrough.[12]

Al-Rāzī of course has a quite different point of departure. He sees the Qurʾan as a totally integrated whole. This is exquisitely illustrated in his treatment of this episode. From his regular cross references to the various presentations, it is clear that he regards each of them as partial accounts of different stages of completness, each adding its own emphases, and thereby contributing to a picture of the episode as a whole. When each is super-imposed upon the other minor variations can be reconciled, and the result is a stereoscopic depth that heightens the impact of the scene. It will be recalled how al-Rāzī regards the screaming and slapping of the face in al-Dhāriyāt (v. 29) as complementing the exclamation of *yā waylatā* in Hūd (v. 72). Indeed, as he writes on one version, it is as if he is writting about it as a part of a larger whole.

An example, already referred to, is his treatment of the rhyming pair of words closing verse 30 of al-Dhāriyāt, *al-ḥakīm alʿalīm*, not simply as a decorative ending to the verse, but as an integral part of the argument to convince Sarah that she is to have a child. Having done this he refers back to the corresponding point in the narrative in Hūd, where the corresponding verse (37) ends *ḥamīd majīd*. Having traversed a further forty suras, and several years, by the time he comes to al-Dhāriyāt, he discovers an added wealth of meaning in the phrase *ḥamīd majīd* that he made no mention of in Hūd, and elaborates a paradigmatic relationship between *ḥamīd majīd* and *al-ḥakīm alʿalīm*.

It has been remarked that al-Rāzī's style develops as the *Mafātīḥ* proceeds. At the beginning, in al-Baqara for example, he is content to quote authorities, and rarely, if ever, expresses an individual view. As he proceeds, his treatment is more relaxed, more wide-ranging. One can see him both warming to his task, and establishing a relationship with his students. His successive treatments of this episode are simply an example of the way his insight became enriched and deepened.

The treatment of the kindness of God to his creatures is developed in each of the four sections. Yet it is in al-Ḥijr that the idea appears that one of the reasons for the good tidings brought to Abraham is to comfort him for the sight of the destruction of so many of his fellow men, a concern that is repeated in al-ʿAnkabūt—leaving aside the question as to whether or not the form in which it now exists comes directly from the hand of al-Rāzī.

There is certainly a growth in subtlety in the perception of the personalities of Abraham and Sarah—in Abraham from Hūd through al-Dhāriyāt, and in Sarah between Hūd and al-Dhāriyāt. Abraham's quality of compassion is of course already established in Hūd. But in the succeeding suras he emerges as a negotiator, as a diplomat, a man with a great sensitivity as a host to the presonalities and requirements of his guests. In his treatment of Sarah, it is striking that whereas in Hūd, al-Rāzī draws on the views of a number of authorities to explain her laughter, in al-Dhāriyāt he looks at life to explain her slapping of her face and screaming, and his suggestion that her behaviour is expressive of pain and frustration in reaction to what she takes to be a ridiculous prayer on the part of her guest—a prayer that touches an exposed nerve.

There is a remarkable development in his treatment of human relationships. It is sufficient to draw attention to one example. In Hūd the exchange of greetings between Abraham and his guests is treated simply as a grammatical exercise. In al-Dhāriyāt the same exchange of greetings is used to establish a complex etiquette to regulate the relations between host and guest from the first moment of meeting.

There are various other points that might be discussed which are outside the scope of this study. There is the intellectual formation that he brings to his task, his rationsalism, and the mu'tazilite inclinations which appear to give shape to some of his judgements: the various occasions on which out of several views, he expresses a preference for that of 'Abd al-Jabbār, his interest in the question of the disruption of the *'āda*, law of nature on behalf of the prophets, and his projection of that interest on Abraham as we have seen, and also on Zakariya in Maryam 19:7 (TK 21:187–8) when each learns that in his old age he is to have a son. We have also noted his concern with justice as requiring a reason for punishment, and the need (in al-'Ankabūt) for the visitors to say enough to ensure it is understood that God's command is good. To this may be added his fondness for interpreting the Qur'an by the Qur'an.

In this discussion, however, the emphasis is not on his philosophical ideas, and even less his mastery of the traditional techniques of exegesis—which is total. Rather it is the human dimension that he adds to a positive theology when he comes face to face with the stories presented in the Qur'an, and perceives the characters that act them out as human beings in human situations. In such cases he is concerned to interpret and present them in a way such that other human beings too can identify with them. In the passages we have examined, we have seen how great an interest he has in what may be called primal emotions: fear, surprise,

grief, mirth, compassion, uncertainty, confusion and curiosity. Provided such responses do not involve despair or disbelief in God's power (one may be bewildered at the disruption of the *ʿāda*, without doubting God's power to do as He wills) such responses are sound. Emotions indeed are entities which make man man, and are the justification of human existence. Indeed in his *Kitāb al-nafs wa'l-rūḥ* al-Rāzī points out that men can feel emotions that angels cannot.[13] In his treatment of human beings in the Qur'an then, al-Rāzī is concerned to show that they share in these emotions which are common to the whole human family.

It is a characteristic of Qur'anic style that its stories are told with an extraordinary economy of language. Yet within these stories are phrases and expressions which combine simplicity with extraordinary force compact with meaning, as for example Sarah's words (51:29) *ʿajūz ʿaqīm*. Indeed, in all the retellings of this episode we have drawn attention to al-Rāzī's ability to respond to the dialogues as if he were hearing the spoken word. And not only this: to respond to the sopken word as though he heard it uttered with not one, but several alternative intonations, each one suggesting a different nuance of meaning. Through these different intonations he interprets the text, and in this way enters into and explores the emotions of the speakers. This is illustrated to great effect in his treatment of al-Dhāriyāt.

To fill out the stories he frequently has recourse to the work of al-Suddī and Muqātil b. Sulaymān and makes use of material that occurs in various of the Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā', including that of al-Thaʿlabī. By temperament he may not have been inclined to such haggadic type material, but time and again in the *Mafātīh* he retells stories with a consummate skill. He clearly realised the value of such stories both as teaching aids, providing frameworks within which both a wide range of human emotions might be displayed, and the values of a positive theology be illustrated.

Al-Rāzī was a great preacher who could reduce congregations to tears, and he may well have developed his technique of handling this kind of material through his realisation of the need to communicate with these congregations.

One might even say that this sensitivity to the motivations and instinctive reactions of individuals, and a control over the perception of character reveals him as a proto-novelist, and led him to develop a *sitz im leben* method of Qur'anic exegesis.

It hardly needs saying, that whatever his philosophical ideas, al-Rāzī revels in the text of the Qur'an which he sees as a vibrant, glowing kaleidoscopic universe of meanings. Thus it prompts him to raise an immense variety of issues, and to

handle them by a loosely structured but effective technique that allows for the discussion of issues that to some might appear only remotely connected to the text on which he is commenting.

His style is deceptive. Superficially there is nothing remarkable about it. It is relaxed, patient and unhurried. Then gradually, almost without realising it, the reader falls under the spell of a remarkable personality as al-Rāzī's thought ranges over a vast number of topics and in doing so involves the reader in his human as well as his philosophical concerns.

The material on which this discussion has been based is a very small part of the Qur'an and equally a very small proportion of the *Mafātīḥ*. It is sufficient however both to show something of the stature of al-Rāzī as a man and to enhance our understanding of the Qur'anic passages selected, by demonstrating how he gives his exegesis of them a human face.

It has been sufficient to demonstrate that al-Rāzī is a man who throughout his life, continued to develop. This development is to be seen throughout the 32 volumes of the *Mafātīh*, as his methodology and manner gradually moves from the severely technical, to the human and relaxed, and gradually reveals a profound and even mystical spirituality. One can envisage him gradually establishing a relationship with a group of students—there is evidence that he attracted students from far and wide—and it was this relationship with students that both generated a methodology useful for his time, and succeeded in opening up so many issues and presented so many points of view, that made his work a starting point and inspiration for many reformers later in Islamic history.

In the course of it he exposes himself: his naivety, as only a great man can be naive, his *bêtes noires* such as *taqlīd* and literalism in Qur'anic interpretation, his personal grief. His rationalism is engaging—clearly he had absorbed certain mu'tazilite tendencies. On some points he is fundamentalist, on others he is astonishingly liberal. At times the informality of expression is disarming. He has humour and wit. He reveals himself and his prejudices in a way which is surprisingly modern.

There are a great many issues not yet touched on in this discussion. The whole structure of al-Rāzī's thought is an amazing edifice. All his intellectual and spiritual concerns and experience is poured into the *Mafātīḥ*. His treatment of this episode shows rich elaboration of ideas and shifts of emphasis. It also shows that in the last decade of his life at least, he had become a great humanist.[14]

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NOTES

1. Noeldeke-Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorans*, i, 1909, ii, 1919. For a critical review of theories of the internal history of the Qurʾan, see Welch's survey in *EI*^{2} s.v. Kurʾan

2. Regis Blachère, *Le Coran*, Paris, 1947 (3 vols.).

3. For a survey of the work of al-Rāzī both as a philosopher theologian and Qurʾanic exegete, see Roger Arnaldez, «L'œuvre de Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzī, commentateur du Coran et philosophe», *Cahiers de Civilisation Mediévale*, III, Université de Poitiers, 1960, pp. 307-323.

4. Blachère, Coran, II, p. 430.

5. J. Jomier, «Qui a commenté l'ensemble des sourates al-ʿAnkabūt à Yāsīn (29–36) dans 'Le Tafsīr al-Kabīr' de l'Imām Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī?» *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, II, Cambridge University Press, (1980).

6. The edition of *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* referred to in this paper is a photo-mechanical reprint of the 1932 Cairo edition made in Teheran by Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, second impression, no date. References are to TK volume: page.

7. It may be observed that in Genesis (18:12) Sarah laughs, *after* she hears that she is to have a child, and that in Hebrew the name Isaac is a play on the word for laughter.

8. Ibn ʿArabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, ed. A. A. Affifi, Cairo, 1946, p. 205.

9. An invaluable background to the understanding of the concept of *ʿāda* and of 'Abd al-Jabbār's thought in general is given in JRTM Peters, *God's Created Speech A Study in the Speculative Theology of the Muʿtazilī Qādiʾl-Quda Abūʾl-Hassan ʿAbd al-Jabbār by Ahmad al-Hamadanī*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1976. On this point see p. 98.

10. Al-Rāzī is here drawing on the traditions of courtesy elaborated by writers on various fields of *ādāb*, some of which were taken over by Sufi writers. A convenient reference is Menahem Milson, *A Sufi Rule for Novices—Kitāb ādāb al-Muridīn of Abu al-Najīb al-Suhrawardi*, Harvard University Press, 1975. Abūʾl Najib 490/1097–563/1168 was a near contemporary of al-Rāzī. Consider the following: 'The guest should be served whatever food is available without formality (*takalluf*). Nice manners with guests are: to begin with a greeting, then to express respect, then to give food, and after that, conversation. (Abraham is presented as a model of proper hospitality; Qurʾan 11:69 is quoted.)' Milson p. 54. See also pp. 57 'The Sufi's... should not feed each other nor should anyone of them say to the other "Eat!"' (para 123) & 59, para 130.

11. Jomier, *al-ʿAnkabūt*, p. 476.

12. J. Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies. Sources and methods of scriptural interpretation*, London, Oriental Series, Volume 31. Oxford University Press, 1977. See in particular pp. 20-25 in which he analyses three Qurʾanic retellings of the prophetic commission of Shuʿayb: 7:85; 11:84 and 26:178.

13. This at any rate appears to be the point of his treatment of the human capacity for *shawq* (yearning) in *kitāb al-nafs waʾl-Rūḥ*, ed. Maʿṣūmī, Islamabad, no date, p. 6. The authenticity of this work has however been questioned.

14. After this paper was completed, Fr. Jomier in a personal communication, drew my attention to the fact that among the MSS families he had examined in Istanbul, he found a single indication that suras 47–56 in the *Mafātīh* had been completed by another hand. This raises some doubt as to whether the passage in al-dhāriyāt upon which the idea of development in al-Razi's thought is based, is in fact directly from his hand: In further studies, this possibility needs to be taken into account.