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DAVID AND BATHSHEBA

A Case Study in the Exegesis of Qur'anic Story-telling

A.H. Johns

Station Uriah in the thick of the fight: 2 Samuel 11:15

One of the great strengths of Muḥammad's appeal to his contemporaries was the conviction he inspired that he was the final exemplar of a tradition of prophecy as old as time; that he was presenting in a final, imperishable form, the same message as that preached by Adam, the father of mankind, and the first prophet. Episodes which establish this succession of prophets to which Muḥammad belonged, are an integral part of the mosaic of the Qur'ān. Yet only in rare cases is information about individual prophets presented in the framework of a fully fledged narrative.¹ Rather, particular scenes in their lives are shown with a sharply defined, sometimes brilliant focus. Others, not relevant to Muḥammad's message on the particular occasion of revelation, remain in darkness.

The brilliance of the presentation of such prophetic episodes, particularly those with a direct or indirect reference to the Judaic tradition, created among the first generation of Muslims, an eagerness to learn more about these heroes of salvation history who were Muḥammad's brothers in the vocation of prophecy, a need met by Jewish converts to Islam such as Ka'b b. Aḥbār and Wahb b. Munabbih² who supplied a great deal of information in story form. Some of this information gained general acceptance among scholars, and was woven into Qur'anic exegesis in such a way as to supply the wider context within which such episodes were set, and determined the way

in which they were understood. In fact they played a role analogous to that of the *Asbāb al-Nuẓūl*: the *Asbāb al-nuẓūl* contextualising the revelation of individual pericopes to Muḥammad, the *Qisās* contributing further information about individuals within the Qur'ān itself. Much of this became a regular component of religious instruction. Other material, and derivations from it took on a life of its own as it was worked and reworked on the tongues of popular story-tellers, whose concern was more entertainment than responsible religious instruction. Nevertheless a reasonable corpus of material was common to both groups and was included in authoritative collections of *Qisās al-Anbiyā'*. As stories, they are excellently told and were accepted by scholars as belonging to a literary genre that was part of the heritage of the Muslim community. By enhancing and complementing information presented in the Qur'ān, they show the prophets as models for imitation and inspiration in the spiritual formation of continuing generations of Muslims.

The importance of such stories is often overlooked. They are a literary genre in their own right; their content furnishes clusters of themes and motifs that are part of the imaginative heritage and perception of salvation history across all social levels of the Muslim community. As such they yield a variety of levels of meaning in the highest of which religious poets and mystics have discovered symbols with a universalistic resonance. At the very lowest however they are still an ideal means of religious instruction, since they set up the whole edifice of Islamic ideas of creation, human history and God's dealings with man, a role they served with special effect in South and Southeast Asia. Equally important however, the way in which they were handled by succeeding generations of exegetes, reflects shifts and developments in theological thinking, and at the same time serves to mediate such developments to the wider Muslim community.

It is against the background of such ideas that this essay considers a Qur'anic episode relating to David given in sura 38 (Ṣād): 17-26, as seen through the eyes of Ṭabarī (d.922), Tha'labī (d.1030), Zamakhsharī (1075-1144) and Rāzī (1149-1209).

The Qur'ān refers to David on at least seven occasions. It presents him as prophet, king, warrior and sage, and attributes to him the invention of armour. In 17 (al-Isrā'):55 it says that God gave him (as his book) al-Zabūr (The Psalms); in 21 (al-Anbiyā'):78 he is referred to as a judge together with Solomon in a case between a cultivator and a herdsman; in 2 (Baqara): 247-251 is an account of the battle between the Israelites and the Philistines, ending with his killing Goliath; in 34 (Saba'):10 it is told that iron was

malleable in his hands, and that he was the first to make armour. In 5 (al-Mā'ida):78 occurs the enigmatic statement "Those of the children of Israel who did not believe, were cursed by the tongue of David and of Jesus, the son of Mary."

Of such passages, the episode occurring in sura 38 is the longest and the one attracting most interest among story tellers. Although commonly known as Ṣād, it is also referred to as sūra Dāwūd, perhaps because of the importance of this episode.³

It opens with an account of some of the insults hurled at Muḥammad by those who reject him: "He is a sorcerer and a liar" (v.4); "Does he claim to make of all our gods one God?" (v.5). And to the threat of a coming day of Judgement, they respond with the cutting sneer: "O Lord of ours, bring us our requital now, before the day of Judgement" (v.16).

This final insult introduces the David episode which may be rendered and set out as follows:

i

Words addressed to Muḥammad in praise of David.

17 Endure what they say, and remember our servant David, endued with strength, indeed he was constantly turning to God.

18 Indeed, we made obedient the hills, they praised (God) along with him at night and in the morning,

19 (and made obedient) the birds, gathered together, all constantly were turned to him.

20 We strengthened his authority and gave him wisdom, and decisiveness in speech.

ii

The Disputation

21 Have you heard the story of the disputation, of when disputants climbed the walls of the sanctuary,

22 of how they came into David, and he was frightened by them. They said to him: "Do not be afraid! We are two disputants. One of us has wronged

the other, so judge between us with justice. Do not act unjustly, but guide us to the right path.

23 This is my brother. He had ninety-nine sheep, and I had one sheep, yet he said, "Put it in my charge", and whelmed me in speech.

24 David replied; "He wronged you by asking for your sheep to be put with his sheep. Indeed, there are many dealers in livestock who wrong one another — except those who believe and do good deeds, and how few these are!" David thought that we had put him to the test, so he asked pardon of his Lord. He collapsed in prayer and repented".

25 So we pardoned him that [fault]. Indeed he is close beside us and has a beautiful dwelling-place.

iii

David is made Vicegerent

26 "David! Indeed we have made you a Vicegerent upon the earth, so judge between men with justice, and do not follow caprice, for it leads you astray from the path of God. Those who stray from the path of God face a terrible punishment for having forgotten the Day of Reckoning.

The episode is introduced by biting insults — in which one can recognize *ipsissimis verbis* the scorn of his enemies — in the face of which Muḥammad is told, "Endure what they say, and remember our servant David". This is followed by the Disputation Scene, and the episode concludes with David made Vicegerent.

Central to this essay is the interpretation the Disputation Scene. The early commentators from Muqātil b. Sulaymān on, have understood it in the context supplied by the parable told by Nathan to reprove David in 2 Samuel 12:1-4:

"In the same town were two men one rich and the other poor.

The rich man had flocks and herds in great abundance. The poor man had nothing but a ewe lamb — only a single one which he had bought. He fostered it and it grew up with him and his children., eating his bread, drinking from his cup. Sleeping in his arms, it was like a daughter to him. When a traveller came to stay, the rich man would not take anything from his

own flock or herd, to provide for the wayfarer who had come to him. Instead he stole the poor man's lamb and prepared that for his guest.

[On hearing this] David's anger flared up against the man. "As Yahweh lives," he said to Nathan, "The man who did this deserves to die! He must make fourfold restitution for the lamb, for doing such a thing and showing no compassion. Then Nathan said to David:

"You are the man!"⁴

I

If the passage is approached with prior knowledge of the biblical story, a relationship between the two appears self-evident. As on other occasions, the Qur'ān presents in a dramatic form what in the Bible appears as narrative.⁵ Ṭabarī accepts this relationship, and on the basis of the reports of recognised authorities supported by *isnād*, establishes the context in which it is to be understood as that supplied by the Judaic tradition. The information that he gives may be taken as a summation of the way in which the majority of his predecessors understood it. He introduces the episode by commenting on the words "Endure what they say, and remember our servant David, endued with strength" (v.17):

"The Almighty is saying to his prophet: Endure patiently, Muḥammad, the hateful things that the unbelievers among your people are saying to you for we are putting you to the test as we put to the test other prophets before you. But later we will exalt you, and give you victory over those who treat you as a liar and cause you pain. This was our wont with the messengers we sent to our servants before you. Among them were our servants Job, and David the son of Jesse, so remember then David, endued with strength, (*dhā' l-ayd*), words which mean endowed with might and awesome power in the things of God, and perseverance in obedience to him".⁶

In this brief excursus, Ṭabarī points out that David and Muḥammad were both prophets, and both were put to the test by events that caused them sufferings of the same kind as had been endured by all the prophets. He follows this paragraph with a word by word gloss of these four verses. His interpretations are set out in summary form below to serve as the basis for comparison with the treatment of the episode by later exegetes. to highlight development in ideas, shifts in emphasis and changes in interpretation.

1. (v.17) *dhā'l-ayd*, (endued with strength) — endowed with strength for obedience to God, in the performance of religious duties, and in the understanding of Islām.

2. (v.17) *innahu awwāb*, (truly he was constantly turning to God) — turning from what God disapproves of to what brings His good pleasure; turning back (repenting) from sin; obedient to God, abundant in prayer; uttering praise.

3.(v.18) *innā sakhkharnā'l-jibāl ma'ahu yusabbihna bi'l-ashīy wa'l-ishrāq*, (indeed, we made obedient the hills, they praised God along with him at night, and in the morning) — They praised (God) along with David when he offered his praise at night and in the morning; *bi'l-ashīy* meaning from mid-afternoon until night; *al-ishrāq* meaning when the sun rises and the morning is bright. [An excursus based on a further group of authorities indicates that this verse was used as a proof text to establish the canonical status of the (mid-) morning prayer.]

4.(v.19) *wa'l-ṭayra mahshūratan*, (and the birds gathered together) — we made the birds gather together, sing praise with him; when he praised (God) the mountains answered him, and the birds gathered around him and sang praise with him.

5.(v.19) *kullun lahu awwāb*, (all constantly were turning to him) — all were obedient to him; all turned back in obedience to him and his command; or: all uttered praise to God. By “all”, is meant all the birds.

6.(v.20) *wa shadadnā mulkahu*, (We strengthened his authority) — His authority was strengthened either by the size of the army that guarded him and his kingdom; or by a judgement he gave by divine inspiration. [An excursus tells how a man came before David to claim that another had robbed him, but without evidential proof. God revealed to David that the accused had murdered the father of his accuser, and instructed him to kill him.]

7.(v.20). *wa ataynāhu'l-ḥikma*, (and gave him wisdom) — (The gift of Prophecy, or the understanding of traditional law.

8.(v.20) *wa faṣṭa'l-khiṭāb*, (and decisiveness in speech) — knowledge and

understanding of the making of judicial decisions, or knowledge of how to take evidence from a complainant, and an oath from a defendant; or that David was the first to use the expression *ammā baʿd*. [Ṭabarī notes that this Qurʾanic phrase is general in character, and may be understood in all these senses.⁷]

Ṭabarī then presents verses 21-22 of the Disputation Scene, verses which describe the entry of the two disputants to David's sanctuary, and why they came.

His treatment of these verses is not important for our purpose, apart from his explanation of the word *khaṣm* in his introduction to the word by word gloss: Have you heard, Muḥammad, the story of the Disputation. It is said that by *khaṣm* here, *khaṣm* being a *maṣdar*, is meant two angels.⁸

His presentation of verse 23, however, which tells what the dispute was about, raises issues central to this study. He summarizes his understanding of it as follows:

“This is a *mathal* parable propounded by disputants who climbed up to David in his sanctuary. What it has to tell is that David had ninety nine wives, and the man he sent to death in battle had only one wife. After his death, David married the widow. That is why one of the disputants said to him: “This is my brother.”⁹

The following items of the continuing word by word gloss are relevant to Ṭabarī's understanding of the scene as a parable:

1. (v.23) *inna hādhā akhī*, (this is my brother) — my brother in religion.¹⁰ [By this explanation Ṭabarī establishes the relationship between David and Uriah. Both were Jews, and Uriah was fighting in David's army to protect the kingdom against an enemy.]

2. (v.23) *lahu tisʿun wa tisʿūna naʿjatan wa lī naʿjatun wāḥida*, (He had ninety nine sheep and I had one sheep).

Ṭabarī gives no gloss on these words, but devotes a brief excursus to a variant recitation attributed to ʿAbd Allāh *naʿjatan unthā* — female ewes. He explains that the Arabs use such gender words for emphasis with nouns of which the gender resides in their meaning, giving as an example *rajul dhakar* — a male man. He adds that the addition of the word *unthā* may mean beautiful.¹¹ This foreshadows a point he is to make explicit later, that *naʿja* here is used metaphorically to mean wife or woman.

3. (v. 23) *fa qāla akfiḥnībā*, (Then he said, “Put it in my charge) — He said to me: “Divorce her in my favour, put her in my charge; give her to me, grant her a divorce for me, I will marry her; put her in my charge”. “This cluster of meanings proves that Ṭabarī regards *naʿja* as meaning woman.

4.(v.23) *wa ʿazʿanī fiʾl-khiṭāb*, (whelmed me in speech) — David said only “Divorce her in my favour”; if I demanded something and he demanded it, his demand was the more insistent; If I had recourse to violence and he did, he was stronger than I;if he spoke he was clearer than I, and if he had recourse to violence he was stronger than I.¹²

All these meanings make it clear that Ṭabarī sees the phrase as meaning “He took my wife by force.”

Verse 24 presents the judgement David gave “He wronged you by asking that your sheep be put with his.” The word by word exegesis requires little remark except to draw attention to Ṭabarī’s statement that *naʿja* is used metaphorically to mean woman. He supports this by a line of Arabic poetry, indicating that the point of the metaphor is to avoid drawing direct attention to a man’s wife. He then states the meaning of David’s judgement: He wronged you by his demand that your one wife be taken from you and added to his ninety nine wives.

The following items of the word by word gloss of the second half of the verse, are relevant to Ṭabarī’s understanding of the scene as having to do with David’s sin and repentance.

1. *wa ʿanna Dāwūdu annamā fatannāhu* (David thought that we had put him to the test) — David realised (*ʿalima*), supposed (*ʿanna*) that by this means, he had been put to the test.

2. *Faʾstaghfara rabbahu*, (so he asked pardon of his Lord), — David asked his Lord forgiveness for his sin.

3. *wa kbarra rākiʿan* (he collapsed in prayer) — he fell down in prostration.

4. *wa anāba* (and repented) — he returned to his Lord’s good pleasure, repenting of his sin.¹³

There is no ambiguity in Ṭabarī’s understanding of the passage. The precise meaning of *ʿanna* in this context is a matter of concern, as we shall see

later, both for Zamakhsharī and Rāzī. *ẓanna*, which includes the senses of presume, suppose, think, and other words to that effect, in theological language refers to the use of human reason in a way that does not yield certain knowledge; the acquisition of certain knowledge is indicated by the verb *yaqīna*. In Ṭabarī's understanding of the scene, which involves a truth communicated by angels, one would expect a stronger word than *ẓanna*. This appears to be Ṭabarī's view, and his explanation shows a certain hesitancy. However, since for him no theological principle is involved he gives from his sources *ʿalīma*, as a synonym for *ẓanna*, and concludes his remarks with the observation: The Arabs frequently use this word to speak of a knowledge not derived from personal experience.¹⁴

There is no doubt then that Ṭabarī sees the Disputation Scene as a parable. He states clearly the correlatives of each metaphorical statement: That two angels in the guise of disputants came unexpectedly before David, one taking the part of Uriah, the other that of David. The word *naʿja* (sheep) means wife. Thus the single sheep is Uriah's one wife. The ninety nine sheep are David's ninety nine wives. Both were brothers in religion, yet David used his rank to exploit Uriah by forcing him to surrender to him his wife. When the meaning of the parable was brought home to David, he realised the wrong that he had done, and repenting of his sin, wept bitterly.

Ṭabarī then takes up the word *fatannāhu* — We put him to the test, and considers why David should have been put to the test. He proposes two reasons, each supported by *isnād*: One is that David wished to be praised by posterity as were Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. To be worthy of this praise, he agreed to be put to the test as they had been, to receive the reward they received if he proved steadfast. The other is that he wanted to be put to the test to prove that without God's help, he could pass an entire day without sin.¹⁵

As to the test itself, what it was, the occasion of David's facing it, and what were its consequences, these details he gives in five narrations, all of which include some of the following elements:

1. A golden bird comes to him in his sanctuary. He tries to catch it, and it leads him to a window.
2. Through the window he sees a woman bathing, and discovers her husband is absent.
3. He sends her husband to his death in battle.
4. He marries the woman.
5. Two disputants appear before him unexpectedly.

6. They set out their case before him.
7. David gives judgement that the complainant has been wronged.
8. They then indicate to David that by his judgement he has condemned himself, and reveal that they are angels.
9. David weeps bitterly in repentance until God pardons him.
10. He is not satisfied until assured that God will meet Uriah's claim for blood-wit against him.¹⁶

The fourth narration, that transmitted by Wahb b. Munabbih is the most developed and explicit.

It lists the gifts God gave to David: the revelation of the psalms, skill in metalwork by making iron soft for him, ordering the mountains and the birds to utter praises with him, and a matchless voice, so that when he sang, the savage beasts became tame to him, and drew near to him. He was prophet and ruler, so that he was at his apogee, when, as all the narrations agree, he was "exposed to the test of that woman". It may be noted that the words used to describe how Uriah was sent to his death — according to the claim of the people of the book —: "David ordered the commander of his army to position her husband in the forefront of the battle until he was killed" — are a close rendering of II Samuel, 14:15.¹⁷ In this narration, moreover, the angel in the role of the complainant is explicitly identified as speaking in the part of Uriah: *malaku'l-ladhī yatakallamu ʿan Uriyah, zawji'l-mar'ati* — the angel speaking in the part of Uriah, husband of the woman.¹⁸

All these narratives derive ultimately from the story of Nathan's reproof of David. They show David as put to the test and falling into sin — whether a major or minor sin is not an issue for Ṭabarī. The test was to catch sight of a beautiful woman, Bathsheba, and his sin was to send her husband to his death in battle, so that he could marry her. (Unlike the presentation of the episode in II Samuel, there is no suggestion that he committed adultery with her).

From the lines of transmission that Ṭabarī gives for his narrations, it is clear that this understanding of the Disputation Scene was generally accepted, and that such stories of David were popular in the Muslim community, both as stories, and for the sake of the devotional lessons that they presented.

II

A scholarly example of this genre is the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*¹⁹ of Thaʿlabī (d.1036), an accomplished story-teller. In such works the focus of interest is

the story — not *tafsīr* — but the justification of the story is the religious teaching that it presents. Thaʿlabī gives a vivid account of the Disputation Scene. His telling of it includes elements of the narrations given in Ṭabarī, although Thaʿlabī attributes them not to Ṭabarī, but to the elders (*ashyākh*) of the community, such as al-Suddī, al-Kalbī and Muqātil whom he describes as experts on *tafsīr* with special reference to the story of David — names regularly occurring in Ṭabarī's *isnād*. He begins his telling of the Disputation Scene with reasons why David was put to the test. To the two reasons offered by Ṭabarī: David's desire for praise, and his conviction that he could remain free of sin, he adds a third, attributed to al-Warrāq: that David was confident he could bear the burden of his religious devotions without God's help. God set him the test of doing so for a single hour. During that hour, the devil, in the form of a golden dove, came to try to distract him. The events which unfold are those which occur in Ṭabarī's narrations.²⁰

He too, sees the story as a parable. He highlights certain of the points relevant to this noted by Ṭabarī. For example he remarks on the excellence of the rhetorical device of alluding to women indirectly, explaining that this is a widespread practise among the Arabs who often use words such as sheep, gazelle or cow to refer to a woman.²¹

As a story-teller, his purpose is not simply to explain the Qur'anic text, but to tell a story that can stand as a story in its own right and make clear the moral. Thus he makes explicit the denouement in a way that goes beyond the information given in Ṭabarī's narrations. For example, when David, has heard the complaint put to him by the first disputant and, declares that the offender should be struck between the eyes, the angel playing the part of the defendant declares: "David, you are more deserving of being beaten than I, for you have ninety nine wives and Uriah had only one. So why did you send him into battle to be killed, and then marry his wife?"²²

Thaʿlabī however is not simply a story-teller. He regularly introduces excursuses in which he makes value judgements, offers alternative theological views, and gives variant tellings of the story after he has presented his own version of it, not all of which are relevant to this essay. He has the mind and concerns of a theologian and a jurist alongside his other skills. He identifies what was, and what was not the wrong that David did: not, as some say, that he passed judgement on one of the two disputants before hearing what the other had to say, but that he sent Uriah into battle to be slain.²³

He tells of the test to which David was put, catching sight of Bathsheba, in the same terms as Ṭabarī's narrations. But he goes further in explaining why

he failed it: after catching sight of her, he turned towards her again for a second look, that is why she caused him to sin. He highlights the moral by quoting the *ḥadīth*: “Let not a second glance follow the first, for if the first is for you, the second will be against you.”²⁴

Then instead of continuing with the story, Thaʿlabī introduces in an excursus some parenthetical remarks relevant to our purpose:

He recounts a saying attributed to ʿAlī that he would have flogged anyone repeating the story of David’s sin as told by the story-tellers, believing it to be true.

He refers to the understanding of the scene among those who believe in the prophetic immunity from sin (*tanẓīh al-anbiyāʾ*). These, (Thaʿlabī does not identify them) reject the view that David was guilty of a sin. He did indeed lust after Uriah’s wife but wanted her to be his in a licit manner. This is what his heart said to him. Now by chance there was an enemy attack on their kingdom. David sent Uriah with an army to resist the invaders, and placed him in the forefront of the battle. There he died a martyr’s death. When the news reached him, David did not mourn him or feel grief for him as he did for others of his army who had perished. Uriah’s death suited his purpose, and he married his widow. This is why God reproached him (by means of this parable), for even if the sins of the prophets are minor, they are great in the sight of God.²⁵

David’s short-coming in this view, was not anything he had done, but his failure to react to the news of Uriah’s death with the proper emotional response. This would have been hardly a pécadillo for an ordinary individual, but a serious failing on the part of a prophet.

He presents an alternative view of David’s sin. It was that he proposed marriage to a woman already betrothed to Uriah while Uriah was absent in battle. She was attracted by his high rank, and accepted him. Uriah was angry and God reproached David for what he had done: notwithstanding he had ninety nine wives, he took in marriage a woman betrothed to another man. This is why the prophet says: “Let no one of you make an offer to buy what his brother has bought, nor let him ask in marriage one whom his brother has already asked in marriage.”²⁶

Both of these interpretations, it may be noted, are based on an understanding of the scene as a parable, and the disputants as angels, an understanding accepted even by believers in the prophetic *ʿiṣma*. From the way in which he sets out these views, there is little doubt that Thaʿlabī regards the doctrine of prophetic impeccability as of only peripheral interest. Indeed he includes in

his account the assurance David receives, not only that God has forgiven him, but that God himself will pay Uriah's bloodwit against him.²⁷

In conclusion Tha'labī presents a supplementary ending to the scene: when David had passed judgement, they reverted to their angelic form, and ascended to heaven, saying: "The man has passed judgement on himself." David thereupon realised that We had put him to the test, and he fell prostrate for forty days, not raising his head, uttering a litany of grief and penitence.²⁸

There is a real devotional beauty in this litany that Tha'labī puts into David's mouth as he begs his Lord for forgiveness:

"Exalted be the mighty king who puts His creatures to the test in any way He wishes.

Exalted be the Creator of Light

Exalted be He who moves between a man and his heart.²⁹

My Lord, you left a space between me and Satan my enemy, and I did not pay attention to his guile when my foot slipped.

Exalted be the Creator of Light!

My Lord, a bereaved woman weeps for the child she lost, and David weeps on account of his sin.

Exalted be the Creator of Light

A garment is washed, and its dirt and stain are removed, but sin adheres to me, and does not depart from me.

Exalted be the Creator of Light.

My Lord, I did not take warning from the warning you gave others.

Exalted be the Creator of Light.

My Lord, you commanded me to be like a loving father to the orphan, and to the widow like an affectionate husband, and then I forgot your covenant.³⁰

Exalted be the Creator of Light.

My Lord, You created me, and in Your foreknowledge was what was to become of me.

Exalted be the Creator of Light!

My Lord, woe is David when the veil covering him is removed, and then people say "This is David the sinner!"³¹

III

Zamakhsharī [1075-1144] tacitly accepts the narrations recorded by Ṭabarī, and at times indeed seems to be following Tha'labī's presentation of the David story verbatim. However he brings theological considerations to bear on the interpretation of the text, and establishes his points by rational

argument in a way that goes beyond the methodology of the two earlier authors who are concerned more to record the views transmitted within the Muslim tradition, than to use theology as a criterion of truth, let alone to argue at length the rightness of one view as opposed to another. He is as concerned to establish the meanings of words as Ṭabarī. But although discarding the apparatus of *isnād*, he goes far beyond him in the detail of his grammatical analyses and copious use of citations from poetry to justify the meanings he gives. In addition he makes use of sometimes lengthy excursuses to establish points relevant to his ideas.

He goes into greater detail than Ṭabarī to explain why Muḥammad was instructed “Remember our servant David’ (v.17). He offers two alternative reasons. One is that the order is tantamount to the Almighty saying to his prophet: Endure what they say, and let them see how serious a matter is disobedience to God by telling them the story of David. He was a prophet, one whom God had honoured with the gift of prophecy and a kingdom, and brought close to him. Then David was guilty of a lapse (*ḡalla*, — a term that does not occur in Ṭabarī’s account of the episode), and God sent to him angels, to reprove him for it by means of a parable alluding to it. David realised what he had done and asked pardon for it. He wept constantly, and his crime was written in the palm of his hand, so that he should always see it, and his regret for it be continually renewed - so what should be thought of you, (people of Mecca), with your disbelief and disobedience.³²

The other is: Endure what they say, and watch over yourself and take care not to lapse in the duty laid upon you to endure their insults with forbearance, despite the pain they cause you. Remember your brother David, and how God honoured him, and how, when he was guilty of a lapse (*ḡalla*), God reproved him.³³

After this introduction, Zamakhsharī takes up a conventional word by word gloss of the passage. His work is of a very different character to that of Ṭabarī, in particular with its omission of *isnād*, its great concern with grammar and etymology, and its infusion with muʿtazilite theology. In many cases, however, his work glosses, though given without *isnād*, are identical with those of the earlier author. Apart from a greater concern with grammatical explanations, the omission of *isnād*, and slight variations in the units of word grouping, there is little of substance to distinguish his treatment from that of Ṭabarī.

It may be noted that he deals with the concluding phrase of verse 20 *faṣl al-khiṭāb*, (Decisiveness in speech) at length and includes among its possible

meanings that David was the first to make use the formulaic phrase *ammā baʿd* (Now to our topic).³⁴

He then introduces an excursus relevant to the interpretation of the Disputation Scene as a parable in which he gives two accounts of the circumstances of David's marriage to Bathsheba.

1. It was a custom at the time of David, and also among the *anṣār* in the time of Mu*ammad that if a man found the wife of another pleasing, he would ask her husband to divorce her in his favour. Such a request was generally agreed to as a token of friendship. Thus when David caught sight of Bathsheba and fell in love with her, he asked Uriah to divorce her in his favour. Uriah was embarrassed to refuse his request and divorced her. David then married her and she became the mother of Solomon. This is why he was reproached (by means of the Disputation Scene) through which it was said to him: You, with your great rank and the abundance of your wives should not have asked a man with only one wife to divorce her in your favour. Rather you should have controlled your passions, and endured with patience the test to which you were put.

2. Uriah asked Bathsheba in marriage and was accepted. Then David asked for her hand. Her family preferred him, and he married her.³⁵

Both explanations are minor variants of the story as told by Thaʿlabī, but these variants are important. Zamakhsharī uses them to introduce a modification of what sin it was that David was alleged to have committed. He had not been guilty of murder as a result of catching sight of Bathsheba and falling in love with her. The only wrong he had done was in asking for her in marriage when she was already betrothed or married to Uriah. This was not intrinsically sinful, for such was acceptable practise in his day. He was however guilty of a lapse, for he already had ninety nine wives, and Uriah had only one. This was why God reproved him by sending two angels to act out a parable before him.

He then presents the story in its traditional form, beginning with David's request to be put to the test, much as it is told by Thaʿlabī. He includes such details as how David had Uriah sent into battle to fight before the ark no less than three times before he was slain, and how, once he was slain, instead of mourning him as a martyr should be mourned, married his wife. He omits however, the episode in which David, assured of God's forgiveness, begs for the assurance that Uriah too will forgive him, and on Judgement Day surrender his right to bloodwit which God Himself will pay.³⁶

He goes on to make clear his own rejection of such stories, remarking that

it is abhorrent that such things should be said of any virtuous Muslim, let alone the prophets. He then cites two authorities in support of this rejection:

One is a saying attributed to ʿAlī, on the authority of Saʿīd b. al-Musayyib and Harīth al-Aʿwar: “I will whip with a hundred lashes, anyone who tells you the story of David as it comes on the lips of the story-tellers this being the statutory (*hadd*) punishment for the defamation of a prophet.

Another is in the form of an anecdote told of ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (717-720). ʿUmar mentioned this story (of David’s sin) while a man of the people of truth (*abl al-ḥaqq*) was with him. This man declared that the transmitter of the story was a liar, and went on to say: Given (the form in which) the story is told in the Qurʾān, one should not ask for anything different, let alone wish that it had been told differently. If the case is as some say, and God has cast a veil over it to shield his prophet, then this veil should not be removed. On hearing this ʿUmar said: “For me, these words are dearer than anything upon which the sun has risen.”³⁷

It is clear how closely Zamakhsharī has followed Thaʿlabī, accepting and quoting the same mosaic of authorities, but weighting them differently, and putting them together in such a way that, although still understanding the Disputation Scene as a parable of reproach to David, effectively downgrades the offense of which he was perceived to be guilty from a major sin to a lapse.

He then explains why the reproof was given in the form of a parable. The explanation is important because it shows the ideas of education and psychology Zamakhsharī brings to the Qurʾanic text. It may be abridged as follows:

“If you ask why the reproof was given allusively in the form of a parable, I reply because this is a more effective than a direct statement. This is because when after reflection, the person who has done wrong realizes what the parable has to convey, the impact on him, and the feeling of embarrassment it awakes in him, is far greater than that which would be produced by a direct statement (which might well provoke resentment and denial).

This is the way wise teachers correct a boy who has done something wrong. They bring the matter to his attention indirectly by telling him a story in which there is an allusion to what he has done. When he reflects on the story, and the wrong act done by the character in the story, he feels disgust at it. This brings him to realize the wrong he has done, and to feel disgust at it also.

This has a greater impact on him than a direct statement, because it leads him to identify himself with the person doing wrong, and by this means feel

disgust for his own wickedness, thanks to its being brought to his attention indirectly.”

Zamakhsharī then poses the question: Why in the parable is David given the role of arbitrator. To which he replies: So that he might be condemned out of his own mouth and thus be brought to confess to his own guilt when he said to the disputant representing Uriah: “He did wrong by demanding that your sheep be put with his sheep.”³⁸

He resumes his word by word gloss with verse 21 *hal atāka naba’u’l-khaṣm*, (Have you heard the story of the Disputation?) and continues to the end of that verse *tasawwarū’l mihrāb*, (climbed the walls of the sanctuary) without any substantial additions to what is given in Ṭabarī, apart from those of the type already referred to. He then gives another excursus:

“It is related that God sent to him two angels in human form. They asked to be admitted to his presence but discovered that it was the day he set aside for his devotions, and the guards did not admit them. So they climbed the wall to his sanctuary and without his realising it, there they were seated before him.”³⁹

He resumes the word by word gloss with the phrase *fa faẓi’a minhum*, (And he was frightened of them) in verse 22, and includes parenthetical information about the way in which David divided up his working days, again not significantly different in content to Ṭabarī. There are however two items in the word by word treatment of verse 23 relevant to Zamakhsharī’s point of view in his understanding of this scene as a parable that deserve comment:

1. (v.23) *Inna hādhā akhbī*, (This is my brother) — It may mean brotherhood of religion, of friendship and affection, or brotherhood of trade and business association. Any one of these brotherly relationships is an argument against enmity and wrong-doing. Zamakhsharī, clearly, is emphasizing that the relationship between the two disputants in the scene mirrors the closeness and trust that should have existed between David and Uriah.

2. (v.23) *wa ‘azzani fi’l-khiṭāb*, (And whelmed me in speech) — Having given the more obvious meaning “argued against me”, he offers the alternative: “I asked for the woman in marriage, and so did he, but he got the better of me in putting his proposal. That is to say, he defeated me and married her in place of me.”⁴⁰

This leads to another excursus, taking as its point of departure the question, what is the significance of mentioning sheep (*ni‘āḥ*)? His answer in brief is as follows: They put what they had to say in the form of a parable (for three reasons): because a parable is a very effective means of reproof; because

the matter for reproof was something they were embarrassed to state openly; and because they wanted to cast a veil over David's sin, and so preserve his good name.

Zamakhsharī explains that the disputants made the parable by presenting the events that passed between Uriah, Bathsheba and David as the story of a dealer in live-stock who had a single sheep, and a fellow dealer who had ninety nine. The latter wanted to make his sheep up to a hundred, and so coveted the single sheep belonging to the former and forced him to hand it over to him. He supports this view by referring to the Qur'anic words "There are indeed many dealers in livestock (who wrong one another)" (v.24). The Almighty, he says, made the story appropriate to the symbolic meaning he wished it to have simply by the use of this word "sheep".

He defends his understanding of the scene as a parable by answering two objections: One is that this interpretation is correct if the word *khiṭab* is understood in sense of *jidāl* (dispute), but not if it is understood as having the sense of a *muṣa'āla* form derived from *khiṭba*, (meaning proposing marriage).

Zamakhsharī answers this by saying that he regards the word for sheep, (*na'ja*) as a metaphor for wife, because its synonym *shat* is used in this sense in Arabic poetry.

The other objection is that the angels were behaving in a way contrary to their nature, for angels do not deal in livestock.

His answer is that they were simply acting out the scene while in human form, just as one might say to illustrate a problem: now suppose Zayd has forty sheep and 'Umar has forty sheep, although they do not have a single sheep between them.

The final point he makes in this excursus is based on a *qirā'a* attributed to Ibn Mas'ūd, *wa lī na'jatun unthā* (And I had a female ewe) — a variant form which Ṭabarī attributes to 'Abd Allāh. He explains it, as does Ṭabarī, by showing that the expression *imra'atun unthā* may be used to indicate a lady of great beauty. This is consistent with his understanding of *na'ja* as a metaphor for woman.⁴¹

Zamakhsharī returns to his word by word gloss with David's judgement given in verse 24: "He wronged you by demanding that your sheep be put with his."

His explanation includes an answer to the question as to why David immediately believed one of the two disputants before hearing what the other had to say. It is that David did not give judgement until the other had

admitted his guilt. This is not mentioned in the Qur'ān because it was common knowledge. Zamakhsharī follows this with a variant of the dialogue. It is that the one who had done wrong said: "I wanted his sheep to make the number of my sheep up to a hundred". To which David responded: "Because you coveted that single sheep, we will strike such and such from you", pointing to the tip of his nose and his forehead. One of the disputants then revealed himself as an angel and said: "David, you are the one more deserving that such and such be struck from you, for you have done such and such." David looked, and saw no-one, and realised what had happened to him.⁴²

Certain of his remarks on the following words in verse 24 are of interest:

1. (v.24) *al-khulata'* (dealers), — usually in livestockwhy did he refer to dealers in livestock at this stage? To attract people to the conduct of those righteous dealers whom he describes as few, and make repugnant to them the wrongdoing and enmity in which most of them persist and to present to them those righteous few as models.

2.(v.24) *wa zanna* (He thought) — when a supposition is strong and approximates knowledge, this word may be used metaphorically for *ilm*, thus it means here: David realised and was certain (*wa 'alima Dāwūd wa ayqana*).

3.(v.24) *annamā fatannāhu* (That we had put him to the test) — that we had tested him, doubtless with the wife of Uriah, to find out whether he would stand firm, or be guilty of a lapse (*zalla*) [It may be noted that he passes over *fa'staghfara rabbahu* without comment.]

4.(v.24) *rākī'an*, (in prayer) — by *rākī'* is meant prostrating himself, because he bent over as though preparing to make a prostration According to Ḥasan it means this because (in the ritual prayer) one does not make a prostration until after the deep bow (*rukū'*). It is also possible that he asked God's pardon by entering "the consecrated state" to perform two *rak'at* of asking forgiveness and pardon. Thus the the words mean that he bowed then sank to the ground to make a prostration , i.e. he performed the ritual prayer, because *rukū'* is an expression that may be used to refer to the ritual prayer.

wa anāba (He repented), He returned to God by repentance and disavowal of his sin.

He follows this with an excursus that gives an eloquent account of David's grief for his sin very similar to that of Tha'labī: It is related that David remained prostrate for forty days and forty nights, not raising his head except to perform the ritual prayer, or for some unavoidable reason. His tears flowed

until the grass watered by them grew up to the level of his head. He drank no water without a third of it being his tears. He devoted himself totally to prayer, yearning for God to pardon him until he almost died.... He continued this until a son, Absalom (Ishā?) revolted against him but when God had pardoned him he made war on the rebel son and defeated him. It is also narrated that the story of his sin was etched into the palm of his hand so that he would never forget it.

After this final excursus devoted to the Disputation Scene, Zamakhsharī records another interpretation of it, without comment: the two disputants were human, and the quarrel between them was real. Either they were two dealers in livestock or (a rich man and a poor man). The rich one lived in easy circumstances. He had many women, both concubines and and high-born ladies. The poor man had only one wife, and the rich one asked him to divorce her in his favour. David was frightened only because they came into his presence unexpectedly when it was not the time for him to be asked to give judgement. His sin was that he believed the complainant and regarded the other as an evil-doer before questioning him.”⁴³

Zamakhshar* then resumes his word by word gloss with verse 26 — “David, we have made you a Vicegerent upon the earth.” The following should be noted:

1.(v.26) *ḵhalīfatan fī l-ard* (A Vicegerent upon the earth) — we have made you Vicegerent of the kingdom upon the earth, just as one whom a ruler of a country appoints his deputy, and gives him authority over it. Hence the expression “Vicegerents of God upon his earth”. Or, we have made you a successor of those prophets before you who established the truth. In these words (i.e. Indeed we made you a Vicegerent upon the earth) is proof that after David’s repentance his status was restored to what it had been before his sin.

2.(v.26) *fa’ḥkum bayna’l-nāsi bi’l-ḥaqq* (So judge between men with justice) — i.e. by the law of God, since you are his Vicegerent.

3.(v.26) *wa lā tattabīr* (and do not follow) self-will (*hawā’l-nafs*) in your judgements or anything else you have to deal with in matters of this world or of religion.

4.(v.26) *fa yuḍillaka*, (For it leads you astray) — passion, for it is the cause of your falling into error.

4.(v.26) *ʿan sabīli'llāh* (From the path of God), — from the teachings (guidance) which he planted in our minds, and the laws which he has prescribed and revealed.

5.(v.26) *yawma'l-ḥisāb* (The Day of Reckoning), — pertaining to what they have forgotten, i.e. by their forgetting the Day of Reckoning, or pertaining to his words to them *lahum ʿadhāb*, i.e. Theirs is the punishment of the Day of Resurrection by reason of their forgetfulness, this being the cause of their straying from the path of God. It is related that one of the Caliphs of the House of Marwān said to ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz or to Zuhrī, “Did you hear what we have heard?” He replied “What?”. He said: “That the Pen does not record anything against the Caliph, and his acts of disobedience are not written down”. ʿUmar replied: “Commander of the Faithful, who are the greater, the Caliphs or the Prophets?”⁴⁴

Zamakhsharī, clearly does not regard this verse as an integral part of the Disputation Scene, let alone of the first part of the episode in which Muḥammad is told: “Remember our servant David”(v.17). He points out that after repenting of his lapse (*ḡalla*) David was restored to his former dignity. It confirms his view of the scene as a sin and repentance story. His reading of it differs from that of Ṭabarī only in reducing the scale of the sin to a lapse (*ḡalla*). The injunction to judge with justice is a general warning against the dangers of following self-will. This is neatly supported by the anecdote relating to ʿUmar, perhaps with the hint of a reference back to the Disputation Scene: If the lapse of a prophet is recorded, how much the more the evil deeds of a ruler.⁴⁵

IV

It is by comparison with this corpus of exegetic material that the distinctiveness of Rāzī's treatment of the episode becomes apparent. He rejects certain of their exegetical assumptions and procedures together with much of the extra-qur'anic material in the light of which the earlier authors understand the Qur'anic text, and so presents an interpretation of the scene far removed from theirs.

His achievement is to offer an understanding of the Disputation Scene derived exclusively from its Qur'anic setting, without drawing on those elements of the Judaic tradition which the earlier authors regarded as

authentic. At the same time he rejects a spirituality that could be moved by and find edification in the story of David's repentance from sin.

He establishes his position by the context in which he sets the Disputation Scene:

A group of David's enemies planned to kill him. They seized their opportunity on a day on which he stayed alone, devoting himself to the service of his Lord. They climbed the walls of his sanctuary but when they reached him, they found with him a group of men ready to defend him from them. They became afraid, and told a lie (in an attempt to explain why they were there). They said: "We are two disputants, one of us has wronged the other — until the end of verse 25.⁴⁶

In devising this context, while conceding that David was put to the test, Rāzī either modifies, or outright rejects a number of the points, central to the interpretation of his predecessors: He denies that the test had anything to do with a woman, or that David was guilty of a sin. He insists that the scene is to be taken literally, not understood as a parable: the disputants were not angels, they were human beings. In brief he regards the stories accepted by his predecessors as providing the background against which the scene is to be understood as involving a slander against David made up by a group he refers to as the *hashwī*.⁴⁷

Rāzī sets out his reasons for this view in a number of excursuses strategically placed within the convention of word by word exegesis.

Certain features of his argument deserve attention. Essentially, he interpretes the Qur'ān by the Qur'ān, but to put the matter this way is an oversimplification. Central to his methodology is his conviction that the Qur'ān is an integral whole. Therefore in establishing his point of view he seeks to discover as many reasons as possible to justify why the Qur'ān is ordered as it is. In the light of concepts such as *naẓm* and *tartīb*, he explains and justifies the relation of the words, phrases and episodes of the Qur'ān to each other, and uses the coherences he discovers to establish and clarify the meanings he wishes to justify. Alongside this dimension of his technique, one should draw attention to the striking way in which he makes a direct appeal to the reader, with a view to having him to draw on his own knowledge and experience to invite him to agree with his, Rāzā's views. Further he responds to the personalities he encounters within the pages of the Qur'ān, whether prophets or unbelievers and their situations, as to a direct experience. When for example in this sura, (verse 4) he gives an account of the insults the Qur'ān tells us were directed at Muḥammad by the unbelievers, that he was a

sāhir, a *kadhbāb*, he writes as though he feels vicariously the pain that such insults caused Muḥammad.⁴⁸

This concern with coherence is evident in Rāzī's explanation why Muḥammad, when the Meccans insult him, should be directed "Remember our servant David", (v.17). Among the reasons he proposes are the following: that even if the Meccans are against him, the greatest of the prophets are on his side. Had David as some say, committed a sin, then Muḥammad's grief at rejection by the Meccans, would have been nothing compared to the grief David suffered at a sense of guilt. Muḥammad then should find consolation in the fact that he had a lesser grief to bear than his fellow prophet David. Had David not committed a sin, and this is Rāzī's view — and the two disputants who appeared before him were not angels, but two men intent on killing him, then David's decision not to punish them was an example in patience and restraint to be followed by Muḥammad.

But this does not exhaust Rāzī's ingenuity: concerned to find ore in every vein, he suggests that there were spiritual lessons Muḥammad might learn by further reflecting on David. The Meccans despised Muḥammad because he was an orphan. David, although a great king, also had troubles to endure. Thus Muḥammad could learn that no-one in this world is free from care. But beyond this Rāzī sees the words "Remember our servant David" as instructing him not only to imitate David, but by implication, the other prophets mentioned in the sura, principal among them Solomon, Job, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. From reflecting on them, Muḥammad would learn that each had a special burden to bear, and that to endure such burdens is the only way to high-standing in God's eyes.⁴⁹

This explanation is far richer than that offered by Zamakhshar*, let alone Ṭabarī. But there is a further point integral to Rāzī's thought that needs noting: In stating that Muḥammad was to learn from the example of all the prophets mentioned in the sura, Rāzī is drawing attention to the notion of prophets as a community, — a brotherhood of specially chosen men with endowments far above those of ordinary mortals. Muḥammad was the last and greatest of them, but they, his brothers, nevertheless served him as role-models.

It is characteristic of Rāzī to add such dimensions to the interpretation of a verse in order to enrich its paradigm of significances. This feature of his style is evident too in his explanation of the Quranic words and phrases in verses 17-20 also singled out by Ṭabarī and Zamakhsharī, words and phrases telling of David's qualities, that he was *dhā'l-ayd* - endued with strength, *awwāb* —

ever turned to God, and so on. But whereas for his predecessors these words and phrases add up to little more than a list derived from the procedure of word by word gloss, Rāzī, while providing the same core information as his predecessors, adds perspectives of his own, and in addition sees them as cumulative, all contributing to a whole of greater significance than its individual parts, a whole that serves to establish a stage in an argument central to his understanding of the Disputation Scene.

Rāzī sees in these verses, ten qualities for which David was worthy of praise. Comparison with Ṭabarī's list (see pp. 6-7) shows how close was the starting point of both authors, and also how Rāzī's treatment enhances David's stature and presents him as a greater figure than he appears in Ṭabarī's work. This enhancement almost certainly derives from Rāzī's understanding of Prophets and Prophecy.

The ten qualities, and the points at which Rāzī goes beyond Ṭabarī (and Zamakhsharī) may be set out as follows:

1. No greater honour could be given to David than that Muḥammad the most perfect of creation should be ordered to take him as a role model — a notion absent from Ṭabarī and Zamakhsharī.

2.(v.17) "*ʿabdanā* (Our servant), — This word is not glossed in Ṭabarī or Zamakhsharī. Rāzī points out that it is also used to refer to Muḥammad in sura 17 (al-Isrā'): 1. '*Subḥāna'l-ladhī asrā bi ʿabdihi laylan* — "Praise be to Him who took his servant by night." Rāzī sees in the use of the word *ʿabd* as a referent for both prophets a mark of distinction for David, who in this respect then is given equal honour with Muḥammad. Such an association is Rāzī's way of alluding to the community of brotherhood among prophets.

3.(v.17) *dhāʾl-ayd* (endued with strength), — Rāzī first repeats the explanation given by Ṭabarī and Zamakhsharī, that David has the strength (*quwwa*) necessary to perform what is commanded and to refrain from what is prohibited. But he sees in it a further dimension. The strength (*quwwa*) with which David was endowed is the same strength as that given to John (Yahya), when he was given his prophetic book with the words: *yā Yahya, khudh al-kitāba bi quwwatin* — "John, take hold of the book with strength", in Qur. 19 (Maryam):12. Again there is an allusion to the prophetic brotherhood to which David belongs.

4.(v.17) *awwāb* (Constantly turning to God), — a term of praise because it means that he always turned back to God after the completion of every act that required his attention. It should be noted that Rāzī omits the sense

“Turning away from sin”, which both Ṭabarī and Zamakhsharī include in their explanations of this word since on a prioristic grounds — as we shall see — he regards it as not applicable to prophets.

5.(v.18) *Innā saḥḥbarnā'l-jibāla ma'ahu yusabbiḥna bi'l-ashy wa'l-isbrāq* (Indeed we made obedient the hills, they praised (God) along with him at night and in the morning), — David's greatness and the beauty of his voice were such that when he sang the mountains sang with him. To this Rāzī adds an Ash'arite explanation, popular in *kalām* circles, as to how it happened: whenever David sang, God created in the mountains the life, intelligence, power and speech, necessary for the capacity to sing with him in praise of God. Further he describes the beauty of David's voice: so beautiful that whenever he recited the psalms, the wild animals became tame, and came so close to him that he could stroke their necks.

6.(v.19) *wa 'l-ṭayra maḥshūratan* (and the birds gathered together), — After repeating Ṭabarī's explanations, Rāzī adds however an Ash'arite understanding of David's greatness and closeness to God explaining how birds, creatures with no intellect could praise Him. That whenever David sang, God created intellect in them so that they could recognize God and praise Him. This indeed is David's *mu'jiza*, a proof of his status as a prophet.

7.(v.19) *Kullun labu awwāb* (All constantly were turned to him), — Rāzī understands these words in the same sense as did his predecessors. However he contributes a new perspective of David's greatness by adding: the power to bring this about was constantly within him, thus whenever he sang, both mountains and birds turned back to him and sang yet again. This power was innate in him as a prophet.

8.(v.20) *Wa shadadnā mulkabu* (We strengthened his authority), — Rāzī explains these words in the same way as did Ṭabarī and Zamakhsharī, but adds what he calls the religious reasons for this strength: endurance, total recollection, and complete impartiality.

9.(v.20) *Wa ataynāhu'l-ḥikma* (And gave him wisdom), — To the explanations of his predecessors Rāzī adds his own understanding of the wisdom David was given: the capacity to make correct judgements and to perform correct actions based on these judgements true and sound convictions are the fullness of wisdom. They are not liable to abrogation or contradiction. Nor are the good deeds that derive from them. This is the wisdom that David personified.

10.(v.20) *Wa faṣl al-khiṭāb* (And decisiveness in speech), — Rāzī stresses the nexus between this and the preceding phrase *wa ataynābu'l-ḥikma*. He develops his explanation accordingly. David has been given wisdom, and together with it a perfect mastery of utterance, formulation and expression, (*naṭq, lafẓ* and *ʿibāra*), the means by which what is in the mind can be expressed. This *faṣl al-khiṭāb* with which David is endowed is possessed in its fullness only by the prophets who stand at the summit of the entire hierarchy of corporeal existents, from the inanimate to man and the angels, David, as a prophet possesses the very essence of the rational soul (*jawhar al-naṣf al-naṭqiya*), thus this quality of *faṣl al-khiṭāb* indicates his ability to express everything that is in his mind or present in his imagination with such clarity that no one thing is confused with any other, and every level is distinct from every other. It should be noted that Rāzī treats with bitter scorn the view that *faṣl al-khiṭāb* — a view that Zamakhsharī (as Ṭabarī) regards as one of several legitimate significances of the phrase — means that he was the first person to use the formula *ammā baʿd*. Commentators who utter such opinions, he says, should not be allowed to speak on the Qurʾān.⁵⁰

Later Rāzī finds cause to repeat his listing of these ten qualities. But whereas his first presentation of them is designed to show David's greatness, this repetition uses them as reasons why David could not have been guilty of the sins attributed to him by the *quṣṣās*. In fact this second listing only goes to a count of eight, a discrepancy for which the manuscript or an editor may be responsible. With minor abridgements, this second listing is as follows:

1. How could the most just of judges have ordered Muḥammad to take David as a model of virtue, had David been guilty of grave sins?
2. How could God have described David as a perfect servant (*ʿabd*) had David in fact been obedient to caprice and passion?
3. If God described him as "Endued with strength", this must have been a spiritual strength, so how could he have been unable to restrain himself from killing a fellow Muslim and coveting his wife.
4. He could not have been *awwāb*, "Constantly turning to God", had his heart been occupied with lust and murder.
5. Did God make the mountains obedient to him, simply for him to be guilty of murder and adultery.
6. The birds were gathered round him, — and the hunting of any bird was forbidden him — so how could birds be safe from him, but not a Muslim man and his wife?

7. How could God have strengthened his authority in spiritual and temporal matters if he himself did not restrain himself from murder and adultery?

8. How could God say “We gave him wisdom and decisiveness in speech” — wisdom consisting in the combination of good understanding with good action — if he could restrain himself from satanic wickedness.⁵¹

Having thus argued how these verses prove that David could not have been guilty of adultery and murder, Rāzī, applying his concept of *naẓm*, claims that God could not, in the light of this praise, have intended that the Disputation scene should present David in a bad light, rather the reverse. He adds two further arguments why this should be the case. One is the introductory phrase: *wa hal atāka naba' u'l-khaṣm* (v. 21) — Have you heard the story of the Disputation? This Rāzī sees as a counterpart to the phrase in sura 20 (Ta Ha):9 *hal atāka ḥadīthu Mūsā*, (Have you heard the story of Moses?) — which introduces the story of the prophetic call of Moses when God spoke with him out of the burning bush. The function of the interrogative *hal*, says Rāzī, is to draw attention to the splendour of the story to which the question is directed, in order to attract people to listen to it and reflect upon it. This is a further example of Rāzī's sense of the brotherhood of the prophets, for he has associated David with Moses at one of the great moments in the latter's career.

The other is a direct appeal to the judgement of his readers: Were such a story to be told of the most evil of men — that he had brought about the death of a brother in order to be able to marry his wife — he would recoil from it. Indeed, were it said of the person telling the story, that he had behaved in this way, he would go to all lengths to clear his name, and curse the person who said it of him.

Coming at the matter from a different angle, he points out that the story attributes to David two crimes: killing a fellow Muslim without cause, and coveting his wife — both of which are condemned in *ḥadīth*. It is therefore unthinkable that David committed them.⁵²

Further to support his argument that the story must have a meaning to David's credit, Rāzī claims that verses 25 & 26, which follow the Disputation Scene, are proof-texts for a further ten arguments that David could not have been guilty of any sin. He sets them out as follows:

1. (v. 25) *wa inna labu 'indanā la ẓulfā wa ḥusnā ma'āb*, (There is indeed for him with us a place of closeness and a beautiful dwelling-place) — could not have been said of David had he been guilty of murder and adultery.

2. (v. 26) *innā jaʿalnāka khalīfatan fī l-ard*, (We have made you a Vicegerent upon the earth) — addressed to David would have been totally inappropriate had David been guilty of such sins. Rāzī supports this by two arguments. One is that no king would appoint as his deputy any officer of his realm who had done evil, lest it appear this was a reward for the wrong he had done. The other invokes a principle of *fiqh* which Rāzī uses to justify his view on the grounds of coherence (*naẓm*) in the Qurʾān: a judgement made on a case must be justified by the facts of that case. Thus had God intended the Disputation scene to tell of evil David had done, he would not have followed it by words indicating that David had been given a reward. Therefore it must contain something to David's credit, something deserving reward. It will be seen at once how far this goes beyond Zamakhsharī's interpretation of the verse, referred to earlier, that David was restored to the status he enjoyed before his lapse.

3. An argument not based on any single word or phrase, but on the necessity of internal coherence of the three parts of the episode viewed as a whole: the first, verses 17-20, having set out ten outstanding qualities of David, and the third, verses 25-26 likewise, the middle one, the Disputation scene therefore, cannot convict David of wrong-doing. If it did it would be tantamount to God praising him for evil he had done — a view no intelligent person could accept.

4. An argument not based on any Qurʾānic word or phrase. Rāzī steps aside from the Qurʾān and refers to the story that David asked to be put to the test as had his predecessors, in order to be worthy of the rank they enjoyed. Were this indeed the case, it could not have become an occasion for him to fall into sin. This argument suggests that as far as prophets are concerned, what God does, must be for their good — a hint, perhaps, of a Muʿtazilite tendency.

5. An argument not based on the verses that Rāzī claims to be addressing, but on one occurring in the Disputation scene: *inna kathīran min al-khulafāʾ la yabghī baʿḍuhum ʿalā baʿḍin illāʾ l-ladhīna āmanū* — There are many dealers in livestock who wrong one another except those who believe' (v.24) Those who believe, Rāzī says, are excluded from the generalisation that dealers in livestock wrong one another. Had David been a rival of Uriah for Bathsheba, he would have wronged him, and thus be included in the generalisation, and so an unbeliever — which is impossible.

6. Rāzī again steps aside from the Qurʾān to give an account of a debate he had with a ruler (whether real, or a literary device) who accepted the story of David's sin. He reduced the king to silence by two arguments: one, the

Qur'anic text "God knows best where he puts his message" (Qur. 6 al-An'ām v.124); the second that were the story true, to speak of it would bring no reward. Were it false, it would entail a terrible punishment.

7. Another argument from without the Qur'ān. It is simply a statement that to attribute evil deeds to prophets is forbidden, as much in the case of David as in that of Joseph. Rāzī's association of David with Joseph is another allusion to the community of prophets.

8. A further argument not based on this text. It is a statement that had David been guilty of murder, he would have been under an eternal curse. This is warning given by both the Qur'ān and Tradition to any individual guilty of such a crime. How then could a prophet such as David possibly have done what is alleged.

9. An argument, as that given under 3, based on *fiqh*, unrelated to the two verses Rāzī claims to be discussing. It combines two points: One, 'Alī's saying that he would apply the statutory (*ḥadd*) punishment of 160 lashes for the defamation of a prophet to anyone who repeated the story of David as told by the story tellers. The other is 'Umar's reaction when three witnesses testified that Mughīra b. Sha'b had committed adultery, but the fourth denied it. He had the three of them flogged with 80 lashes for false testimony.⁵³ Rāzī's point is, by how much the less then does the Disputation Scene provide sufficient evidence to support the charges of adultery and murder against David.

10. This final argument is likewise based on the Disputation Scene. It is as follows: Even assuming that David did commit such crimes, and assuming that the scene in fact alludes to this, but does not state it explicitly, it must be because God wished to conceal the fact. Were this so, it would be wrong for anyone to remove the veil of secrecy that He had placed over it.⁵⁴

It is apparent that Rāzī has not derived from verses 25-26 ten Qur'anic counterparts to the ten he took from the first part of the episode. Only the first two are based on these verses. The others are derived from principles of *fiqh*, the concept of coherence in the Qur'ān, the Disputation Scene, and Rāzī's account of a discussion with a ruler.

Thus although an important part of his argument that the Disputation Scene is in praise of David, is the coherence he claims exists in his tri-partite division of the episode, he has not justified it by the Qur'anic data he has presented from the third part. On the other hand, one must concede his statement that there is no explicit indication in the scene itself, that David had been guilty of adultery and murder.

Having thus argued David's innocence of these crimes, Rāzī goes on to consider the Qur'anic logia occurring in the second half of verse 24 that might be interpreted as indicating David's admission of guilt for some offence or other. He sets them out as follows:

1. *wa zanna Dāwūd annamā fatannāhu* — David thought we had put him to the test.
2. *fa'staghfara rabbahu* — so he asked pardon of his Lord
3. *wa kbarra rāki'an* — collapsed prostrate in prayer
4. *wa anāba* — and repented.

all of which at first sight appear to attribute to David thoughts and acts indicating repentance from sin.

Rāzī excludes such an interpretation, suggesting reference points for them in the setting that he has constructed for the Disputation Scene. He suggests four possible scenarios, all based on the premise that the intruders were human beings, not angels, within which these words could have significances that do not involve David in sin.

1. When the two of them entered his sanctuary they intended to kill him. David was angry, and his first reaction to punish them. Then, seeking God's good pleasure he decided to be merciful to them, thinking: This is the test to which I was to be put. So he regretted this momentary feeling of anger and desire for retribution and asked his Lord to forgive him in as far as he had been guilty of it, and God pardoned him.

2. On their entry, he immediately thought they had come to kill him. He then regretted this hasty opinion, and said to himself: Why did you not look for evidence to establish that this was the case? Despite the little you knew of them, you came to this evil opinion. This is the meaning of the Almighty's words *wa zanna annamā fatannāhu* — he thought that we were testing him, so God pardoned him that.

In both of these alternatives, all of the logia are accounted for. David "concludes" or "opines" (*zanna*) after the Disputation Scene that he has been put to the test. In the course of this test either he had felt an impulse, to which he did not yield, to exact retribution on the intruders, or he had for a moment involuntarily thought evil of them by indulging the view that they had come to kill him. It was for this minor lapse that he asked forgiveness, collapsing in grief for it as though he had been guilty of a serious sin, because, as Rāzī often remarks: "The good deeds of the pious may be the sins of the elect."

The third scenario shows David in an even better light:

3. That their entry intending to kill him was a test to which David was put to see how he would react. His response was to ask God to pardon them for this evil intention on *their* part. Set in this context, the Almighty's words: *fa ghabarnā labu dhālika* mean "So we pardoned him that", i.e. for the sake of David, the sin they were bent on, in order to honour and exalt David.

The fourth is best regarded as a fall-back position:

4. Even if it is conceded that David was guilty of a lapse (*ḡalla*), and repented of it, we do not concede that this lapse was due to a woman. Is it not possible that it occurred because he made a judgement for one of the two disputants before hearing what the other had to say, an act which might simply be regarded as not doing what was best.⁵⁵

In a related passage he summarises the reasons why the scenarios that he proposes, and the interpretation of the scene they support is to be preferred to the views of his predecessors:

One is that the mark of the authenticity of any Muslim is that he avoid what is forbidden — how much the more then the prophets, as did David in the first three interpretations of the Disputation Scene.

A second is that he be impartial in his judgements.

A third is that at the beginning of the episode, Muḥammad was instructed: "Endure Muḥammad their insolence, be forbearing and calm, do not show anger and remember our servant David". These words would only have been appropriate were David himself to have endured such insolence and exercised restraint in such a way that he was a worthy role-model for Muḥammad, and therefore the scene must show David as forgiving or praying for the forgiveness of intruders who intended to kill him. David did not, could not, have sinned, sin being incompatible with the vocation of a prophet. Rather he was a model of self-restraint and forgiveness.⁵⁶

Rāzī then deals with the premises on which his opponents views were based. Central to their position is that the two disputants were angels. He sets out their arguments that this was the case as follows:

1. The majority of exegetes agree on it.
2. The wall of his sanctuary was too high to be climbed by anyone of his subjects, the two disputants therefore must have been angels.
3. The words they uttered *lā takhaf* — "Do not be afraid", are in themselves proof that they were angels because none of his subjects would have dared to address him in this way.

4. Their words to him *wa lā tushtit* — “Do not be unjust”, are likewise a proof of this, for none of his subjects would have dared to say to him: “Do not act the tyrant, and do not disregard the truth.”

Rāzī summarily dismisses these arguments with the words: They are so obviously weak that there is no need to reply to them.⁵⁷

Reply to the issue however he does, but addresses himself not to these arguments but to issues related to the nature of angels, to the principles of Qur’anic interpretation, and to the meaning of Arabic words.

As to the first, angels do not quarrel. Thus if they said there was a dispute between them, they were lying. But angels do not lie. For this reason, it makes better sense if the disputants are recognised as human beings. This interpretation both avoids the need to attribute lies to angels, and to attribute evil deeds to a prophet.

The second considers the possibility that the scene is a parable: the two angelic disputants representing David and Uriah respectively, the ninety-nine sheep, David’s ninety-nine wives, and the single sheep, Uriah’s only wife. In this case it would not be necessary to regard the angels as lying. This however Rāzī rejects as an unjustified departure from the literal sense of the Qur’anic words.⁵⁸

The third hinges on the meaning of the word *ḡanna* in the phrase *wa ḡanna Dāwūd annamā fatannāhu*. Had the disputants been angels, and had they communicated a message to David as angels, then *ḡanna* would need to be understood as having the sense of *yaqīna*, which would be an unjustified departure from the literal sense of *ḡanna*. If, however, they were human beings, then the literal sense of *ḡanna* would be correct, for David would have been using human reason in making up his mind about a human situation.⁵⁹

In presenting these arguments, Rāzī does not identify any particular opponent by name. However, in view of Zamakhshar*’s elaborate justification of his interpretation of the scene as a parable, and his major excursus on the outstanding merits of the parable as an educational device (Ṭabarī, it will be recalled, simply describes the scene as a *mathal*) it seems likely that Rāzī is directing his remarks at Zamakhsharī. This view is strengthened by two other considerations. One is that he quotes copiously from Zamakhsharī in his treatment of the scene, more often with out than with acknowledgement;⁶⁰ the other is that Zamakhsharī, as has been shown (p. 22), attempts in a brief gloss to justify the understanding of *ḡanna* in the sense of *yaqīna*.⁶¹

Throughout his writings, Rāzī regularly attacks the Muʿtazila on three grounds: their view that the Qur’ān is created, that man is the creator of his

acts, and that God is bound to act in the best interests of his creatures. Here he is attacking them in the person of Zamakhsharī on the grounds of his understanding of the nature of prophethood, his readiness to depart from the literal meaning of the text — in reading the Disputation Scene as an allegory, — and his apparent acceptance of the view that the meaning of a word is not restricted to its literal sense.

It may be asked whether Rāzī drew on any specific sources for the view that the two intruders were human beings, not angels, and the scene was not a parable. Ṭabarī does not mention either possibility, neither does Thaʿlabī, although he does record the view that David's failing was only in the mind — a failure to feel an appropriate emotion. Zamakhsharī however mentions briefly at the end of his discussion of the Disputation Scene that the intruders were human beings, not angels.⁶²

One might also put the same question concerning Rāzī's readiness to tolerate, if not accept the view that if indeed David was guilty of any imperfection, it was not by any word or deed, but by a momentary lapse in the total control of his thoughts and feelings. Hence in the scenarios he constructs, he allows the possibility that David might have given a momentary, involuntary assent to a feeling of anger against the two intruders, or for a moment, without evidence, entertained the thought that they intended to kill him. This likewise is not mentioned in Ṭabarī, but both Thaʿlabī and Zamakhsharī refer to the view that his lapse resided in his failure to feel the grief that should be felt for a martyr who fell in battle. In other words, an involuntary, internal state of mind, not an act. The ideas then are not original. Rāzī has selected opinions already established in the canon of options — even if not highly regarded, or widely approved — not created *ex nihilo* a view of his own. Having taken them up, he has put them centre stage, and argued vigorously that they are correct, and other views are false. For Zamakhsharī, it is sufficient to put a view to which he attaches little importance, at the end of an excursus. Thaʿlabī notes alternative views, and occasionally attributes them to particular schools. Ṭabarī, on the whole, is more concerned to report than to evaluate conflicting views. Rāzī, on the other hand, is determined to establish his position and defend it against all others, generating an incredible galaxy of arguments to support his interpretations, and without any inhibitions, to challenge views central to the dominant exegetical tradition of his time.

The reason for this lies partly in his personality. But it also resides in a passionate commitment to a particular view of prophethood and prophecy, one that sees the prophets as a specially chosen community, of higher intellectual and spiritual gifts than ordinary human beings, and granted, by divine election an immunity (*ʿiṣma*) from sin and error. It is to this commitment that Rāzī dedicates his extraordinary gifts.

It is this conviction, in fact which distinguishes Rāzī from his predecessors, and which lies behind the radical individuality if not of his interpretation of the scene, for in itself the view that the disputants were human was not original, but in the force, originality and ingenuity that he brings to his arguments for this position. It dominates Rāzī's thinking on the matter, and it is this which leads him to reject that dimension of David's spiritual legacy that sees him as a penitent. Attention has already been drawn to Thaʿlabī's passing reference to "those who believe in the immunity of the prophets" (p. 13) Zamakhsharī does not refer to such a group. Rāzī however deals with the issue at length. He recognizes that the issue of the prophetic liability to sin and error was variously understood among different schools and tendencies within the Muslim community. In the course of a lengthy discussion of the topic, he refers to the views of four groups.

1. The Ḥashwī who believe that a prophet may be guilty of grave sin.
2. The Muʿtazila who deny the possibility of a prophet committing a grave sin, but allow that he may be guilty of a minor one.
3. The Rāfidī who hold that from the time of birth, a prophet cannot be guilty of grave or minor sins whether deliberately, by inadvertance, by allegorical interpretation or by error. This view is the most radical, for it implies that this immunity exists from birth.
4. His own view, that the prophets are immune from both major and minor sins once they have assumed the mantle of prophecy.⁶³

For Rāzī, then, David could not have sinned. Rather he, as all the prophets, was an exemplar of virtue, spiritual insight and intelligence of a different order to that possessed by other human beings. This is why in his view the Disputation Scene must be intended to show David as a person of the very highest qualities. Ultimately then, it is this theory of *ʿiṣma* which in his writings represents the crystallisation of a new principle in Islamic theology that leads him to an understanding of the story different to that of his predecessors.

It is in the light of this discussion that he presents three views of the scene: that it shows David as guilty of a major sin, that it shows him guilty of a

minor sin; and that so far from his being guilty of a major or even a minor sin, it shows him in a light deserving only the highest praise. The first of these views is that of the Ḥashwī the second that of the Muṭazilites, and the third his own, as he puts it *al-mukbtār ʿindanā* — the view of our choice.⁶⁴

According to these criteria, Ṭabarī, would have to be classed as a Ḥashwī. He recounts the story of David and Bathsheba, unaware of any incompatibility between David's vocation and status as a prophet and his dispatch of Uriah to be killed in battle so that he can marry Bathsheba. For Ṭabarī, the Disputation Scene is about sin and repentance.

Zamakhsharī is a Muṭazilite both by profession and, according to Rāzī's criterion — which is correct —, his view of prophethood: he accepts that a prophet may be guilty of a lapse. He states that David was put to the test by catching sight of Bathsheba, and his lapse was that he asked Uriah to divorce her in his favour. In short, he accepts without criticism Ṭabarī's version of the background against which the Disputation Scene is to be understood, but fine-tunes certain of its details in keeping with his own theological views so that it shows David guilty only of a lapse.

For Rāzī, that David should be guilty of a lapse, especially a lapse occasioned by a woman, is almost as repugnant as that he should be guilty of a major sin. The basic premise of his approach to the scene is that the prophets are immune from grave and minor sins alike, and his interpretation of the episode is designed to illustrate and support this premise. But in fact he goes further than even his own explicitly formulated doctrine. He is concerned to demonstrate that the scene shows David not simply as guiltless of any sin, but as deserving of the highest praise, that it shows him asking God to forgive his would-be murderers. This is why the Qur'ān presents him as a fitting model for Muḥammad himself, by saying to him: "Remember our servant David," (v.17).⁶⁵

In practise then, Rāzī appears to be influenced by what he calls the Rafidite view of prophethood: that the prophet is a special category of human being: in his access to knowledge, in intelligence and virtues. In the hierarchy of rational creatures he is superior to the angels. So far from being simply immune from sin, every act he performs must be exemplary. It is not a far remove from the Shi'ite concept of the Imam. It is in fact possible that he was sympathetic to certain aspects of Shi'ism. He quotes works on Shi'ite cosmology, and adds the formula *ʿalayhi salām* to the names of Shi'ite Imams.⁶⁶

This dedication to the prophetic *‘isma*, perhaps consciously, perhaps unconsciously, perhaps directly, perhaps indirectly, leads to two major developments in the principles that he brings to his *tafsīr*. One is that it leads him to exclude from Qur’anic interpretation stories of Jewish provenance — often referred to as haggadic — that attribute sins or imperfections to prophets and angels, stories that time and again he describes as *hashwiyya*, although it appears that his rejection of them is not because of their Judaic origin, but because he found them detrimental to the status and authority of the prophets. In this he displays a mentality and exegetical taste quite different to that of Zamakhsharī — who has no compunction in drawing on stories of the prophets such as those compiled by Tha‘labī to fill out and enhance the reader’s understanding of Qur’anic narrative. Rāzī’s example was followed by Ibn Kathīr who referred to such material by the term *Isrā’īliyyāt*,⁶⁷ and was one of the first, if not the first exegete to use the word in this sense.

Alongside the rejection of *hashwiyya* or haggadic type stories as a legitimate device for the interpretation of the Qur’ān, is his addition of a new dimension to the principle of interpreting the Qur’ān by the Qur’ān. In one sense this had long been a principle of Qur’ān interpretation, and was a feature of Mu‘tazilite exegesis. Rāzī however, in excluding from the Disputation Scene any reference to the Judaic tradition, has produced an understanding of it based on the Qur’ān alone, and which justifies and is justified by the literal and “proper” sense of every Arabic word of the Qur’anic text, without reference to any external source. His treatment of it is in fact a telling case study of his conviction that the Qur’ān is not simply a collection of the logia revealed to Muḥammad, but an integral unit. He rejects as false the view that the *textus receptus* of the Qur’ān is the work of ‘Uthmān⁶⁸ and his committee, rather it too has the status of revelation. It is in the light of this conviction that he uncovers extraordinary ranges of meaning by seeking out every possible perspective of coherence in the sequence (*tartīb*) of words, phrases and episodes in a book that is its own validation.

This is illustrated in his conclusion to the David episode as a whole, when he sets out to demonstrate an organic relation among what might superficially be regarded as four unrelated pericopes: the mockery of the unbelievers at the threat of a day of resurrection and requital (v.16); the David episode (v.17-26); the affirmation that God did not create the heavens and the earth to no purpose (v.27) and the description of the Qur’ān as “A blessed book, We revealed it to you that they may learn from its wonders”(v.29).

Rāzī sees these pericopes as but parts of an integral whole, joined together by an underlying technique of argument that he first describes, then then shows how it is exemplified in the Qur'anic verses:

If one is arguing unsuccessfully with an obstinate adversary who refuses to accept a basic principle, it is wise to change the subject, and introduce a new topic for discussion, because to continue to press the point will only make the adversary more determined in his views. This new topic will draw the adversary's attention away from the original point of difference. Once this has happened, and the man is absorbed in the new topic, one can unobtrusively introduce the principle on which the original point at issue was based, in such a way that the adversary unwittingly concedes it. He is thus forced to concede the principle that he had rejected at the beginning of the argument.

He then shows how this technique explains the coherence of the four pericopes: The unbelievers obstinately refuse to accept that a day of judgement will overwhelm them. Accordingly, the David episode is revealed to Muḥammad, an episode which has nothing to do with the day of Resurrection and Requital, and draws the listeners attention away from this topic. At the end of this episode however, in verse 26, when David is appointed Vicegerent, he is instructed to "Judge with justice". The listener must surely concur: "How wise that a ruler should be told to judge with justice". He has unwittingly conceded the principle at stake.

Then in verse 27 God says that He too judges with justice, because He did not create heaven and earth to no purpose. This too must evoke the listeners' immediate concurrence. Then one may say: If you accept this, then you must accept that the teaching of a coming day of resurrection and requital is true, because otherwise the unbeliever may well have a better life than the believer and this would be neither true nor just. It is because the Qur'ān put forward this irrefutable of argument, Rāzī says, that God declares it is "A blessed book, We revealed it to you that they may learn from its wonders (v.29). Thus the four pericopes are shown to be integrally related and the Qur'ān which superficially might appear to be put together in an arbitrary manner, exemplifies a marvellous internal coherence.⁶⁹

Rāzī did not invent the doctrine of the immunity of prophets from sin. His role in defining it and arguing it was to have an important influence on the future development of Muslim thought, and the perception by Muslims of their identity. It has already been remarked how by his interpretation of the Qur'ān by the Qur'ān he began a movement to render Qur'anic exegesis

independent of what later exegetes were to call *Isra'iliyyat* — the haggadic type of stories of Judaic origin supplied by such converts to Islam as Ka'b al-Aḥbar and Wahb al-Munnabih.

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This case-study, in focussing on the Disputation Scene *Ṣād* (38):21-24 has attempted to highlight some aspects of the individuality and greatness of Rāzī as an exegete. His distinctiveness derives from two key notions that he applies with a rigorous consistency: the immunity of the prophets from sin or error, and the total coherence of the *Qur'ān* as an integral whole. Neither of these ideas is original, but his consistent application of them, the range of his learning and the sharpness of his intelligence, coupled with an exuberant virtuosity in argument give him a role in the history of religious thought that in Islam that is still not widely appreciated. His role in arguing and defining the notion of prophetic *ʿiṣma* was to have an important influence on the future development of Muslim thought, and the perception by Muslims of their identity and their understanding of the *Qur'**n.

Alongside this use of *ʿiṣma* as a criterion of truth and falsehood when confronting haggadic type material he has no hesitation in using the logical implications of his principles to disallow traditional views, and indeed tacitly — if not in a cavalier manner — to reject the extensive apparatus of *isnad* by which Ṭabarī supports his narrations and interpretations of words. He applies the principle that whenever there is a contradiction between decisive rational proofs, and single reports transmitted from a single individual, the results of such rational proofs are to be preferred.⁷⁰

Rāzī's treatment of the Disputation Scene is an example of his extraordinary skill in debate, and the inexhaustible reserves of ingenuity at his disposal. The use of dialectic is brilliant and convincing. He has made the scene fully intelligible without any reference to the Judaic tradition; he has removed from the figure of David that dimension which both the Judaic tradition and Rāzī's predecessors regarded as such an essential feature of his greatness: His admission of the wrong he had done and the depth of his remorse, and he has argued effectively that the scene is an integral part of the structure of the sura in which it occurs.

But the measure of his achievement is greater than this: if one came to the Disputation Scene with no prior knowledge of the Judaic background, or of

the sources used by Ṭabarī to support his understanding of it, one would accept Rāzī's interpretation of it without question.⁷¹ Rāzī's views were not universally accepted, but established a firm position in the Muslim tradition. Shīrbīnī, for example, in dealing with this scene, quotes Rāzī at length. Khāzin gives in considerable detail the background provided by the story-tellers, but gives almost equal space to Rāzī's objections to their narratives.⁷²

Ibn Kathīr was perhaps the first to introduce the term *Isra'iliyyat* to summate material of this kind, but the rejection of *Isra'iliyyāt* did not become a major concern of Qur'anic exegesis until the Reformist movement of Muḥammad 'Abduh. This, of course, was the result of source-critical awareness and other motivations, stimulated by intellectual contacts with Europe, and a concern with educational reform. Even so the rationalism that is so much the hall-mark of Rāzī's *tafsīr* in many ways prepared the ground for, and in some respects even anticipated the rationalism of the reformists. It is of interest that Muḥammad 'Alī al-Ṣābūnī, a professor of the Umm al Qur'a University in Mecca, in *Ṣafwatū'l-Tafsīr*, a work published in 1981, in writing on the Disputation Scene, (using Rāzī's arguments) denies that it is a sin and repentance story and refers to the *Tafsīr al-Kabīr* as having the most comprehensive and successful refutation of this view.⁷³

It should be stressed that this essay has only touched the surface of Rāzī's thought over a limited area of a great ocean. Beneath the surface are complex surges and currents. One indication of this complexity is his concern with the states of David's mind and feelings when he sets up the scenarios within which the Disputation Scene is to be understood, scenarios that allow the possibility of David momentarily lapsing from perfection due to lack of a total control of his states of mind: in this we are close to the detailed psychological self-scrutiny of the mystics.

There is no doubt about Rāzī's achievement, but in his method, there is a danger. What starts as theology may end in a welter of apriorisms. Thus his extraordinary dialectical skill may indeed contain the seeds of weakness. On the one hand the imposition of a particular type of rationalism to justify and explain the *naẓm* of Qur'anic passages is not far removed from imposing on God a certain type of rationalism. On the other the manipulation of the Qur'anic text to make it support views reached on the basis of a priori reasoning — in this case the reasons that he gives as to why a prophet must be immune from sin and error, may well render the facts of history and of historical context irrelevant. Attention has already been drawn to the occasion on which he omits the meaning "repent from sin" that Ṭabarī attributes to

*awwāb*⁷⁴ simply because it goes against his conviction of David's sinlessness. With such a methodology history too may be seen as subject to the exigencies of ideology.

1. Notably sura 12 (Yūsuf), and some of the episodes relating to Moses, e.g. in 20 (Ta Ha): 9-99.
2. For general background and bibliographic information see EI², s.v. Kaʿb al-Aḥbar, Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ, and Isrāʾīliyyāt. See also W.M. Thackston, Jr. (trs) *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisāʾi*, Boston 1978. The introduction & notes are a particularly useful introduction to this genre of Islamic literature.
3. al-Khāzin *Lubāb al-taʾwīl fī maʿānī al-Tanzīl* Beirut n.d. IV p. 30.
4. *The New Jerusalem Bible* London 1985 p. 409. (Hereafter JB)
5. See for example A.H. Johns "Joseph in the Qurʾān: Dramatic Dialogue, Human Emotion, and Prophet Wisdom", *Islamochristiana* Vol. 7 Rome 1981 pp. 29-55.
6. Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān ʿan taʾwīl āyīʾl-Qurʾān* al-Ḥalābi, Cairo 1954/1373 Vol. 10, fascicule 23 p. 136.
7. JB X:23 pp. 136-140.
8. JB X:23 p. 141.
9. JB X:23 p. 143.
10. JB X: 23 p. 143.
11. JB X:23 p. 143.
12. JB X:23 p. 144.
13. JB X:23 p. 144.
14. JB X:23 p. 146.
15. JB X:23 pp. 146 & 148 respectively.
16. JB X:23 pp. 146-151.
17. JB X:23 p. 149. In *The New Jerusalem Bible*, "Put Uriah out in front where the fighting is fiercest and then fall back, so that he gets wounded and killed" p. 408.
18. JB X:23 p. 149.
19. Abū Ishāq Aḥmad b. Mhd b. Ibrāhīm al-Thaʿlabī *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ al-musammā al-arāʾis* Al Ḥalabi Cairo A.H. 1347. (Hereafter QA)
20. QA. pp. 194 & 195 respectively.
21. QA p. 195.
22. QA p. 196.
25. QA p. 196.
26. QA p. 196.
27. QA p. 197.
28. QA p. 197. This litany with minor differences is also given in al-Khāzin *Lubāb* p. 37.
29. An echo of the Qurʾān 8 (al- Anfāl):24 *waʿlamu annaʾllāhu yaḥūlu baynaʾl-marʾi wa qalbihi* — Know that God moves between a man and his heart.
30. A close equivalent to Ecclesiasticus 4:10 "Be like a father to the fatherless, and as good as a husband to widows" JB p. 1083 (following note a).
31. QA p. 197.

32. Muḥammad b. ʿUmar al-Zamakhsharī *al-Kashshāf ʿan ḥaqāʾiq al-tanzīl wa ʿuyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūb al-taʾwīl* Dār al-Fikr, Beirut, n.d. III p. 363. (Hereafter K III)
33. KIII p. 363.
34. KIII p. 365.
35. KIII pp. 365-6.
36. KIII p. 366.
37. KIII p. 366. For information on ʿUmar, see Philip Hitti *A History of the Arabs* Macmillan (Papermac) London 1970 pp 219-222.
38. KIII p. 366.
39. KIII p. 368.
40. KIII pp. 368-9.
41. KIII p. 369. It may be noted that Ṭabarī (p. 143) attributes his version of this *qirāʾa* to ʿAbd Allāh — *labu tisʿun wa tisʿūna naʿjatan unthā*, and that Zamakhsharī attributes a variant form of it to Ibn Masʿūd — *wa lī naʿjaton unthā*.
42. KIII p. 370.
43. KIII p. 371.
44. KIII pp. 371-2.
45. KIII 372.
46. al-Fakhr al-Rāzī *al Tafsīr al Kabīr* Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, Tehran, n.d. XXVI p. 193. (Hereafter TK XXVI)
47. TK XXVI p. 189.
48. TK XXVI p. 183.
49. TK XXVI pp. 183-4.
50. TK XXVI p. 184-188.
51. TK XXVI pp. 189-190. The treatment here is referential rather than expository. Number 7 in the first listing — *kullun labu anwāb* — is omitted, and 9 & 10 in the first listing, are run together under the rubric of number 8 in the second.
52. TK XXVI p. 189.
53. This is a well-known story. It is mentioned in al-Baladhūrī *Futuḥ al-Buldān*, Faḥ Kuwar Dijlah pp. 480-481.
54. TK XXVI pp. 190-192.
55. TKXXVI p. 193.
56. TKXXVI pp. 193-4.
57. TKXXVI p. 194.
58. TKXXVI p. 195.
59. TKXXVI p. 195.
60. TKXXVI pp. 197-8.
59. This is an issue which may need examination in more depth over a wider range of Rāzī's writings, particularly in view of his remark in TK III p. 14: Prophets are not capable of *ijtihād*, because *ijtihād* proceeds on the basis of *ẓann*, which is the procedure of a person who cannot acquire certain knowledge. But the prophets *can* acquire certain knowledge, so they cannot make use of *ijtihād* — for to be satisfied with *ẓann* when possessing the capacity for *yaqīn* is not possible, either intellectually or legally.
60. Almost one half of Zamakhsharī's treatment of the Disputation Scene is included in Rāzī. It is moreover striking that it is at a point — *ad akfīlnihā wa ʿaẓẓanī fī'l-khiṭāb* (v. 23) — where Zamakhsharī expatiates on the merit of the parable as a teaching device, explains the correspondences and defends his view that it is a parable against objections, that Rāzī remarks that those who say that the disputants were two angels assert that the mention of sheep is intended as a parable (TK 26:196) Compare with KIII p. 369.

61. KIII p. 371
62. KIII p. 371
63. TK III p. 7. ad Qur'ān 2(Baqara):36
64. TK III p. 8
65. TK XXVI pp. 194.
66. TK XIX p. 179
67. Isma'īl ibn Kathīr *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-ʿaẓīm* al-Ḥalabī Cairo n.d. IV p. 31
68. TK II p. 117 & VII p. 133
69. TK XXVI p. 202-3
70. TK XXVI p. 192
71. I am indebted to Professor Cantwell Smith for this observation in the course of a seminar in the Centre for Religious Studies at the university of Toronto.
72. Al-Shirbinī *al-Sirāj al-munīr fī l-i-āna ʿalā maʿārif baʿd maʿānī kalām rabbīnāʾl-ḥakīm al-khabīr* Cairo 1893 III pp. 403-410. *Lubāb IV* pp. 32-38.
73. Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Ṣabūnī (Professor in the Faculty of Sharīʿa and Islamic Studies University of Umm al-Qurā, Mecca. *Ṣafwatul-Tafsīr Dār al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, Beirut 1981 Pt.14 p. 33
74. JB X:23 p. 136.