

Heroisms in the Qur'an

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1. Introduction

Heroisms in Qur'an have so far been studied only marginally, although several aspects lend themselves to closer examination. On the one hand, the Qur'an contains references to the literary [genre](#) of *qaṣīda*, which served [heroizations](#) in pre- and extra-Qur'anic Arabic literature; on the other hand, the Qur'an discusses and processes pre-Islamic mythological themes from ancient Arabic, Greek, Jewish and Christian literature. Also – and perhaps in contrast to these seemingly unambiguous heroic references – the exhortative character of the Qur'anic message overall, which interprets heroic behaviour as exemplary for the early community of Muḥammad's followers, can be explored. This reference to the community of Muḥammad's followers also establishes a connection with non-narrative segments of the Qur'an, in which, for example, the Qur'an reflects on the fight against adversaries, gives instructions on how to behave and promises rewards for compliance. It is precisely this [exhortative aspect](#) that raises the question whether it makes sense to refer to [heroisms](#) at all whenever the Qur'an addresses exemplary and expected behaviour. This area of tension runs throughout any examination of aspects of the heroic in the Qur'an.[1]

2. Narration and heroization

Although the Qur'an explicitly rejects accusations of being a piece poetry which was authored by Muḥammad[2], the structure of many suras, especially from the Middle and Late Meccan period (ca. 615–622), shows clear parallels to the literary genre of *qaṣīda*, the common form of pre-Islamic poetry. This extremely formalised genre is characterised by a tripartite structure, the first part of which mourns the loss of the beloved, while the second part describes a journey, a mode of traveling or even the narrator's mount before then recalling his [heroic deeds](#). The last part consists of a eulogy that emphasises the [heroic qualities](#) of the narrator or his tribe and belittles their opponents.[3] Contrary to what might have seemed obvious, this structure – in the Qur'anic suras that follow it – is

not employed in order to focus on Muhammad as the recipient and herald of the Qur'anic revelation. Rather, the middle section of these suras takes up the motif of the journey as well as the memory of the achievements of a protagonist, which include taking advantage of the right moment to bring about a decisive turn of events.[4] This protagonist is typically a prophetic figure; heroes of pre-Islamic Arabic literature, on the other hand, do not appear. The story of the prophetic figure often takes the form of a 'punishment legend' (*straflegende*), which is a type of Qur'anic narrative that describes how a prophetic figure proclaims the message of God, the Last Day and life after death to an unbelieving community. When this community then refuses to accept this message, accuses the prophet of lying, threatens or mocks him, they are met with divine punishment. (Cf. Source 1 – Qur'an 11:61-68.) Stories following this pattern appear repeatedly in the Qur'an, often even in a sequential fashion.[5] They refer both to biblical figures such as Noah, Abraham and Moses as well as to the pre-Islamic Arab figures Hūd, Ṣāliḥ and Shu'ayb. The parallels to the situation of Muḥammad and his followers in Mecca are obvious.

Source 1: Qur'an 11:61–68

وَأَلَىٰ تَمُودَ أَهْلَهُمْ صَالِحًا قَالَ يَا قَوْمِ اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ مَا لَكُمْ مِنْ إِلَهٍ غَيْرُهُ هُوَ أَنشَأَكُمْ مِنَ الْأَرْضِ وَاسْتَعْمَرَكُمْ فِيهَا فَاسْتَعِفَرُوهُ ثُمَّ نُوبُوا إِلَيْهِ إِنَّ رَبِّي قَرِيبٌ مُّجِيبٌ ٦١ قَالُوا يَا صَالِحُ قَدْ كُنْتَ فِينَا مَرْجُوًّا قَبْلَ هَذَا أَتَنْهَانَا أَنْ نَعْبُدَ مَا يَعْبُدُ آبَاؤُنَا وَإِنَّ لَنَا لَفِي شَكٍّ مِّمَّا تَدْعُونَا إِلَيْهِ مُرِيبٌ ٦٢ قَالَ يَا قَوْمِ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِنْ كُنْتُ عَلَىٰ بَيِّنَةٍ مِّنْ رَبِّي وَآتَانِي مِنْهُ رَحْمَةً فَمَنْ يَنْصُرُنِي مِنَ اللَّهِ إِنْ عَصَيْتُهُ فَمَا تَزِيدُونَنِي غَيْرَ تَخْسِيرٍ ٦٣ وَيَا قَوْمِ هَذِهِ نَاقَةُ اللَّهِ لَكُمْ آيَةٌ فَذَرُوهَا تَأْكُلْ فِي أَرْضِ اللَّهِ وَلَا تَمَسُّوهَا بِسُوءٍ فَيَأْخُذَكُمْ عَذَابٌ قَرِيبٌ ٦٤ فَعَقَرُوهَا فَقَالَ تَمَتَّعُوا فِي دَارِكُمْ ثَلَاثَةَ أَيَّامٍ ذَلِكَ وَعْدُ غَيْرٍ مَّكَدُوبٍ ٦٥ فَلَمَّا جَاءَ أَمْرُنَا نَجَّيْنَا صَالِحًا وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مَعَهُ بِرَحْمَةٍ مِنَّا وَمِنْ خِزْيِ يَوْمِئِذٍ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ الْقَوِيُّ الْعَزِيزُ ٦٦ وَأَحَدَ الذِّبْنَ طَلَّمُوا الصَّيْحَةَ فَأَصْبَحُوا فِي دِيَارِهِمْ جَائِعِينَ ٦٧ كَأَن لَّمْ يَعْنُوا فِيهَا آلَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ كَفَرُوا رَبَّهُمْ أَلَا بُعْدًا لِّتَمُودَ ٦٨

61 To the Thamūd, We sent their brother, Ṣāliḥ. He said, 'My people, worship God. You have no god other than Him. It was He who brought you into being from the earth and made you inhabit it, so ask forgiveness from Him, and turn back to Him: my Lord is near, and ready to answer.' 62 They said, 'Ṣāliḥ, We used to have such great hope in you. Will you forbid us to worship what our fathers worshipped? We are in grave doubt about what you are asking us to do.' 63 He said, 'My people, just think: if I did have clear proof from my Lord, and if He had given me mercy of His own, who could protect me from God if I disobeyed Him? You would only make my loss greater. 64 My people, this camel belongs to God, a sign for you, so leave it to pasture on God's earth and do not harm it, or you will soon be punished.' 65 But they hamstrung it, so he said, 'Enjoy life for another three days: 66 this warning will not prove false.' And so, when Our command was fulfilled, by Our mercy We saved Ṣāliḥ and his fellow believers from the disgrace of that day. [Prophet], it is your Lord who is the Strong, the Mighty One. 67 The blast struck the evildoers and they lay dead in their homes, 68 as though they had never lived and flourished there. Yes, the Thamūd denied their Lord – so away with the Thamūd!

Source: Qur'an 11:61–68; english translation: M. A. S. Abdel Haleem. Oxford / New York 2004: Oxford University Press, 140f. (Transcription of proper names adjusted)

Explanation: The narrative of Ṣāliḥ appears in the 11th sura as the third in a series of six punishment legends which, in addition to Ṣāliḥ, also deal with two other pre-Islamic Arab prophets, Hūd and Shu'ayb, as well as Noah, Abraham and Moses, and have an

identical structure; the concluding sentence in particular is repeated. While stories of the destruction of the tribe of Thamūd seem to have been known to pre-Islamic Arabs, neither the figure of Ṣāliḥ nor the motif of the camel cow are clearly documented in pre-Islamic sources. This narrative originates from the Qur'an and is constructed as a parallel to the stories of other prophets. Thamūd's refusal to obey God's commandments is made particularly vivid by the mistreatment of the female camel against Ṣāliḥ's explicit warning. The parallel to Muḥammad is tangible throughout: Ṣāliḥ jeopardises his secure status with his people by proclaiming the divine message, but remains steadfast. His people, in turn, invoke the practice of the "fathers". Not only does Ṣāliḥ escape divine punishment, but with him a community of believers is also spared, having apparently dissociated themselves from the decision of the dominant part of the community. Underlining their steadfastness is part of the story's exhortative function, but the focus lies on the warning of divine punishment.

In terms of content, these narratives have many characteristics that lend themselves to a heroization of the prophetic figures: An individual, specially chosen, opposes a people who are hostile to him and who appear as a vastly superior opponent. The portrayal is characterised by a binary opposition between good and evil, faith and unbelief, sincerity and tyranny.[6] The protagonist remains steadfast despite all adversity and retains the upper hand in the end. In most cases, however, the Qur'an does not take the opportunity to heroize the prophetic figures. This starts with the fact that it fails to attribute any extraordinary characteristics to the prophets. The portrayal is often brief and stereotypical, naming neither the motives nor the feelings of the central figure. Furthermore, the Qur'an does not describe any reactions to the prophet's actions or characteristics on the part of others in his social environment.[7] Due to the episodic nature of the narrative, no arc of suspense is built up and no character development is discernible. Only in few cases – Abraham, Joseph, Moses – does a figure gain a certain heroic dimension.[8]

The shift in focus away from the heroic is evident even when the central figure is taken from a [heroic narrative](#), as in the case of Alexander the Great. Qur'an 18:83-98 as part of a Middle Meccan sura, according to Nöldeke's chronology[9], which has several long narrative passages tells the story of "the one with the two horns" (*dhū l-qarnayn*). (Cf. Source 2 – Qur'an 18:83-98.) The story reproduces common themes from late antique narratives about Alexander the Great. It credits its protagonist Dhū l-Qarnayn with having reached both the land of sunrise and sunset and, at the request of an apparently distant people, with having built a huge dam between two mountains to protect them from Gog and Magog. Gog and Magog, who "are ruining this land" (Q 18:94), are mentioned in the Bible (Rev 20:8) and references to them are also found in late antique and mediaeval versions of the Alexander romance.[10]

وَسَأَلُوكَ عَنِ الْقَرْيَيْنِ فُلْ سَأَلُو عَلَيْكُمْ مِنْهُ ذِكْرًا ۘ ۸۳ إِنَّا مَكَّنَّا لَهُ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَآتَيْنَاهُ مِنْ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ سَبَبًا ۚ ۸۴ فَأَتَىٰ سَبَبًا ۚ ۸۵ حَتَّىٰ إِذَا بَلَغَ مَغْرِبَ الشَّمْسِ وَجَدَهَا تَغْرُبُ فِي عَيْنٍ حَمِئَةٍ ۖ وَوَجَدَ عِنْدَهَا قَوْمًا قُلْنَا يَا ذَا الْقَرْيَيْنِ إِنَّمَا أَنْتَ تُعَدِّبُ وَإِنَّمَا أَنْتَ تُتَّخَذُ فِيهِمْ حُسْنًا ۚ ۸۶ قَالَ أَمَا مَنْ طَلَّمَ قَسِوْفَ نَعْدَتِهِ ثُمَّ يُرَدُّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِ فَيُعَذِّبُهُ عَذَابًا نُكْرًا ۚ ۸۷ وَأَمَا مَنْ آمَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلَهُ جَزَاءُ الْحُسْنَىٰ وَسَنَقُولُ لَهُ مِنْ أَمْرِنَا يُسْرًا ۚ ۸۸ ثُمَّ أَتَىٰ سَبَبًا ۚ ۸۹ حَتَّىٰ إِذَا بَلَغَ مَطْلِعَ الشَّمْسِ وَجَدَهَا تَطْلُعُ عَلَىٰ قَوْمٍ لَمْ نَجْعَلْ لَهُمْ مِنْ دُونِهَا سِتْرًا ۚ ۹۰ كَذَلِكَ وَقَدْ أَحَطْنَا بِمَا لَدَيْهِ خُبْرًا ۚ ۹۱ ثُمَّ أَتَىٰ سَبَبًا ۚ ۹۲ حَتَّىٰ إِذَا بَلَغَ بَيْنَ السَّدَّيْنِ وَجَدَ مِنْ دُونِهِمَا قَوْمًا لَا يَكَادُونَ يَفْقَهُونَ قَوْلًا ۚ ۹۳ قَالُوا يَا ذَا الْقَرْيَيْنِ إِنَّا يَا جُوجَ وَمَا جُوجَ مُفْسِدُونَ فِي الْأَرْضِ فَهَلْ نَجْعَلُ لَكَ خَرْجًا عَلَىٰ أَنْ تَجْعَلَ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَهُمْ سَدًّا ۚ ۹۴ قَالَ مَا مَكَّنِّي فِيهِ رَبِّي خَيْرٌ فَأَعِينُونِي بِقُوَّةٍ أَجْعَلْ بَيْنَكُمْ وَبَيْنَهُمْ رَدْمًا ۚ ۹۵ أَتُونِي زُرًّا الْحَدِيدَ حَتَّىٰ إِذَا سَاوَىٰ بَيْنَ الصَّدْقَيْنِ قَالَ انقُحُوا حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَعَلَهُ تَارًا قَالَ أَتُونِي أُفْرِغْ عَلَيْهِ قِطْرًا ۚ ۹۶ فَمَا اسطَاعُوا أَنْ يَظْهَرُوهُ وَمَا اسطَاعُوا لَهُ نَقْبًا ۚ ۹۷ قَالَ هَذَا رَحْمَةٌ مِنْ رَبِّي فَإِذَا جَاءَ وَعْدُ رَبِّي جَعَلَهُ دَكَّاءَ وَكَانَ وَعْدُ رَبِّي حَقًّا ۚ ۹۸

83 [Prophet], they ask you about Dhū 'l-Qarnayn. Say, 'I will tell you something about him.' 84 We established his power in the land, and gave him the means to achieve everything. 85 He travelled on a certain road; 86 then, when he came to the setting of the sun, he found it [seemed to be] setting into a muddy spring. Nearby he found some people and We said, 'Dhū 'l-Qarnayn, you may choose [which of them] to punish or show kindness to.' 87 He answered, 'We shall punish those who have done evil, and when they are returned to their Lord He will punish them [even more] severely, 88 while those who believed and did good deeds will have the best of rewards: we shall command them to do what is easy for them.' 89 He travelled on; 90 then, when he came to the rising of the sun, he found it rising on a people for whom We had provided no shelter from it. 91 And so it was: We knew all about him. 92 He travelled on; 93 then, when he reached a place between two mountain barriers, he found beside them a people who could barely understand him. 94 They said, 'Dhū 'l-Qarnayn, Gog and Magog are ruining this land. Will you build a barrier between them and us if we pay you a tribute?' 95 He answered, 'The power my Lord has given me is better than any tribute, but if you lend me your strength, I will put up a fortification between you and them: 96 bring me lumps of iron!' and then, when he had filled the gap between the two mountainsides [he said], 'Work your bellows!' and then, when he had made it glow like fire, he said, 'Bring me molten metal to pour over it!' 97 Their enemies could not scale the barrier, nor could they pierce it, 98 and he said, 'This is a mercy from my Lord. But when my Lord's promise is fulfilled, He will raze this barrier to the ground: my Lord's promise always comes true.'

Source: Qur'an 18:83-98; english translation: M. A. S. Abdel Haleem. Oxford / New York 2004: Oxford University Press, 188f. (Transcription of proper names adjusted)

The Qur'an does not say anything about the identity of Gog and Magog, but it is clear from the use of the plural that they must be tribes or peoples. In the Qur'anic account, the actions of Dhū l-Qarnayn appear to be quite extraordinary, or at least such that the people seeking protection from Gog and Magog could not have carried them out themselves. Dhū l-Qarnayn is also ascribed the power to punish or show leniency. However, none of this is associated with any heroic quality; rather, Dhū l-Qarnayn invokes the power given to him by his Lord (Qur'an 18:95) and describes the protective wall against Gog and Magog as an outflow of God's mercy (Qur'an 18:98). Dhū l-qarnayn's concluding

promise of the Day of Judgement leads to a passage dedicated to a general warning of the Last Judgement. According to the Qur'an, this is a core element of the disagreement between Muḥammad and the majority of the Meccans. Dhū l-Qarnayn thus appears less as an individual hero and more as the agent of divine omnipotence and the proclaimer of divine truth. However, the allusive nature of the Qur'anic narratives indicates that their first listeners must have been familiar with the underlying stories. Even without explicit attribution, it is therefore conceivable that there was a prior understanding of the heroic nature of certain Qur'anic figures. The Qur'an does not undermine this, but it draws no attention to the agonistic qualities of the protagonists and instead focuses on their trust in God, their truthfulness and steadfastness, which result in God deciding the confrontation with their opponents in their favour. The stories of the prophets in the Qur'an are therefore not primarily designed to heroize their central figures or to (indirectly) heroize Muḥammad as an individual. Rather, they reflect the position of Muḥammad and his followers in Mecca so clearly that an exhortative function can be assumed on several levels. Firstly, and quite obviously, they threaten the noble and high-ranking leaders (*al-mala'*, cf. Qur'an 7:66, 75, 88) of the Meccans who refuse to accept Muḥammad's message and who accuse him of lying with the same fate that, according to the punishment legends, befell earlier peoples, due to the omnipotence of God. This last aspect also explains the relatively unheroic portrayal of Alexander; characterising this figure as extraordinary would have had less didactic value in the context of the Qur'anic message than the reference to the divine origin of his superhuman deeds, which underlines the omnipotence of God.

However, many of the prophets' stories reveal yet another aspect: Within a given community, it is often only the most noble or high-ranking members who are hostile to the prophet. This group is opposed by "those who are oppressed" (*al-ladhina 'studifū*, Qur'an 7:75). The latter not only accept the Prophet's message but also remain steadfast despite hostility. For example, the Pharaoh's magicians, with whom Moses enters into a contest that he wins, prostrate themselves in worship before him. When the Pharaoh then threatens to mutilate and execute them, they respond by praying to the monotheistic God to grant them steadfastness and let them die in devotion to Him (see Source 3 – Qur'an 7:120-126; and Qur'an 26:46-51). Steadfastness and truthfulness are the qualities most likely to be framed as heroic, and this is not only true for prophets. Their followers – the "oppressed" – share these qualities and thus serve as role models for the entire early Muslim community, with the Qur'an focussing less on their exceptionalism and more on the imitability of their behaviour.

وَأَلْفَيْ السَّحَرَةَ سَاجِدِينَ ۚ ۱۲۰ قَالُوا آمَنَّا بِرَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ۱۲۱ رَبِّ مُوسَىٰ وَهَارُونَ ۱۲۲ قَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ آمَنْتُمْ بِهِ قَبْلَ أَنْ
 آدَنَ لَكُمْ إِنَّ هَذَا لَمَكْرٌ مَّكْرُومُهُ فِي الْمَدِينَةِ لِيُخْرِجُوا مِنْهَا أَهْلَهَا فَسَوْفَ تَعْلَمُونَ ۱۲۳ لَأَقْطَعَنَّ أَيْدِيَكُمْ وَأَرْجُلَكُمْ مِنْ
 خِلَافٍ ثُمَّ لَأُصَلِّبَنَّكُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ۱۲۴ قَالُوا إِنَّا إِلَىٰ رَبِّنَا مُنْقَلِبُونَ ۱۲۵ وَمَا نَتَّقِمُ مِمَّا إِلَّا أَنْ آمَنَّا بِآيَاتِ رَبِّنَا لَمَّا جَاءَتْنا رَبَّنَا
 أَفْرِغْ عَلَيْنَا صَبْرًا وَتَوَقَّنا مُسْلِمِينَ ۱۲۶

120 The sorcerers fell to their knees 121 and said, 'We believe in the Lord of the Worlds, 122 the Lord of Moses and Aaron!' 123 but Pharaoh said, 'How dare you believe in Him before I have given you permission? This is a plot you have hatched to drive the people out of this city! Soon you will see: 124 I will cut off your alternate hands and feet and then crucify you all!' 125 They said, 'And so we shall return to our Lord – 126 Your only grievance against us is that we believed in the signs of our Lord when they came to us. Our Lord, pour steadfastness upon us and let us die in devotion to You.'

Source: Qur'an 7:120–126; english translation: M. A. S. Abdel Haleem. Oxford / New York 2004: Oxford University Press, 102.

3. Battle and Martyrdom

In the Medinan period (622–632), narrative passages become less frequent. Instead, the Qur'an increasingly deals with the military conflicts between Muḥammad and the Meccans; it contains calls to battle, rebukes for those who did not take part in campaigns and rules for waging war. However, the absence of semantic fields describing valour, bravery and chivalry in the Qur'anic vocabulary is striking. This seems to be related to an increasing distance from the values and ideas of honour of Arab tribal society. Fear of God (*taqwā*), steadfastness (*ṣabr*) and the – sometimes militant – struggle on the path of God (*al-jihād fī sabīli 'llāh*) are virtues of believers that are strongly emphasised.^[11] This also implies the willingness to accept **martyrdom**. The topic of martyrdom is addressed many times in the Qur'an, not so much in the places where the term *shahīd* ("witness", also "martyr") is used, but mainly with reference to those who fight for the cause of God and die in the process. They are promised immediate entry into paradise. However, further elaborations of the martyrs' special status are reserved for the hadiths and exegetical literature.^[12]

References in the Qur'an to the martyrs' reward are almost always found in the context of passages that censure those who did not participate in the battle and who, when confronted with the **deaths** of fighters, said that these fighters' lives would not have had to end, had they avoided the battle. (See Source 4 – Qur'an 3:166-171.) In this context, the Qur'anic reference to the reward of martyrs serves to invalidate such arguments: by making the ultimate fate of martyrs appear preferable to a longer life in this world, any reason to avoid combat is invalidated. Once again, this is less about praising individual heroic action and more about an appeal to the entire community. Overall, the Qur'an presents the act of fighting in the path of God, including the willingness to die in this fight (cf. e.g. Qur'an 9:111), as meritorious, but also as an obligation of all able believers. It is thus neither framed as exceptional nor as something that exceeds the limits of expected behaviour.^[13] The Qur'an does not mention individual fighters by name or specify their achievements; this is likewise reserved for

the hadiths, the exegetical and historiographical literature.

Source 4: Qur'an 3:166–171

وَمَا أَصَابَكُمْ يَوْمَ التَّقَى الْجَمْعَانِ فَبِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ وَلِيَعْلَمَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ۝ ١٦٦ وَلِيَعْلَمَ الَّذِينَ تَافَقُوا وَقِيلَ لَهُمْ تَعَالَوْا قَاتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ أَوْ ادْعُوا قَالُوا لَوْ تَعْلَمُ لَأَتَّبَعْنَاكَ هُمْ لِلْكَفْرِ يَوْمِيذٍ أَقْرَبُ مِنْهُمْ لِلْإِيمَانِ يَقُولُونَ يَا أُفَوَاهِهِمْ مَا لَيْسَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ وَاللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا يَكْتُمُونَ ۝ ١٦٧ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا لِإِخْوَانِهِمْ وَقَعَدُوا لَوْ أَطَاعُوا مَا قَاتَلُوا قُلْ قَادِرُوا عَلَىٰ أَنْفُسِكُمْ الْمَوْتِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ۝ ١٦٨ وَلَا تَحْسَبَنَّ الَّذِينَ قَاتَلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ أَمْوَاتًا بَلْ أَحْيَاءُ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ يُرَزَقُونَ ۝ ١٦٩ رَجِيصَ بِمَا آتَاهُمُ اللَّهُ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ وَيَسْتَبْشِرُونَ بِالَّذِينَ لَمْ يَلْحَقُوا بِهِمْ مِنْ خَلْفِهِمْ أَلَّا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ ۝ ١٧٠ يَسْتَبْشِرُونَ بِنِعْمَةٍ مِنَ اللَّهِ وَفَضْلٍ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُضِيعُ أَجْرَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ۝ ١٧١

166 what befell you on the day the two armies met in battle happened with God's permission and in order for Him to see who were the true believers and who were the hypocrites who, 167 when it was said to them, 'Come, fight for God's cause, or at least defend yourselves,' answered, 'We would follow you if we knew there was going to be fighting.' On that day they were closer to disbelief than belief. They say with their tongues what is not in their hearts: God knows exactly what they conceal. 168 As for those who stayed behind, and said of their brothers, 'If only they had listened to us, they would not have been killed,' tell them [Prophet], 'Ward off death from yourselves, if what you say is true.' 169 [Prophet], do not think of those who have been killed in God's way as dead. They are alive with their Lord, well provided for, 170 happy with what God has given them of His favour; rejoicing that for those they have left behind who have yet to join them there is no fear, nor will they grieve; 171 [rejoicing] in God's blessing and favour, and that God will not let the reward of the believers be lost.

Source: Qur'an 3:166–171; english translation: M. A. S. Abdel Haleem. Oxford / New York 2004: Oxford University Press, 47.

Explanation: The context of this passage can be clearly identified: It was proclaimed after the battle of Uḥud, in which the Muslims who had emigrated to Medina three years prior had been defeated by the Meccans. The Muslims are said to have lost 70 fighters. The Qur'an strongly criticises the "hypocrites" who had evaded the battle. The discussion of the martyrs' reward serves to prevent a loss of morale with regard to future battles and to avoid confirming the "hypocrites" in the correctness of their decision not to participate in the battle.

4. Research perspectives

A comprehensive study of the relationship between the Qur'an and Arabic poetry beyond the structure of the suras has yet to be carried out. In particular, rhetorical strategies and semantic references should be investigated. A look at Muslim exegetical literature on the Qur'an and the genre of the stories of the prophets (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*), which embellishes and completes the cursory and episodic narratives of the Qur'an, is likely to produce a completely different picture than an examination of the Qur'an itself. Here, too, the question of heroization strategies and the function of heroic narratives has not yet been a focus of research.

5. References

- 1 This article is adapted from the 2018 German article [Heroismen im Koran](#) in *Compendium heroicum*.
- 2 Cf. especially Qur'an 36:69; 69:41.
- 3 Cf. Jacoby, Renate: *Studien zur Poetik der altarabischen Qaṣīde*. Wiesbaden 1971: Steiner.
- 4 Cf. Neuwirth, Angelika: "Rhetoric and the Qur'ān". In: McAuliffe, Jane Dammen (Ed.): *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*. Vol. 4. Leiden 2004: Brill, 472-474.
- 5 Cf. Qur'an 7:59-137; 11:25-99; 26:10-191.
- 6 Cf. Gilliot, Claude: "Narratives". In: McAuliffe, Jane Dammen (Ed.): *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*. Vol. 3. Leiden 2003: Brill, 516-528.
- 7 See, for example, Paret, Rudi: "Der Koran als Geschichtsquelle". In: *Der Islam* 37 (1961), 36: "...overall, the individualities of the individual messengers of God fade away..." (in the original: "...aufs Ganze gesehen verblassen die Individualitäten der einzelnen Gottesgesandten...").
- 8 Cf. Neuwirth, Angelika: "Myths and Legends in the Qur'ān". In: McAuliffe, Jane Dammen (Ed.): *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*. Vol. 3. Leiden 2003: Brill, 477-497.
- 9 Cf. Nöldeke, Theodor: *History of the Qorāns*. Vol. 1. Leipzig 1909: Dieterich, 59-74.
- 10 Cf. Nagel, Tilman: *Alexander der Große in der frühislamischen Volksliteratur*. Walldorf 1978: Verl. für Orientkunde.
- 11 Cf. Izutsu, Toshihiko: *Die Struktur der ethischen Begriffe im Qur'ān*. Tokyo 1959: Keio Inst. of Philological Studies, Kap. VI; Knysh.
- 12 Cf. Raven, Wim: "Martyrs". In: McAuliffe, Jane Dammen (Ed.): *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*. Vol. 3. Leiden 2003: Brill, 281-287.
- 13 Cf. Crone, Patricia: "War". In: McAuliffe, Jane Dammen (Ed.): *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*. Vol. 5. Leiden 2006: Brill 455-459.

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