

QURANIC TEXTURE:
A REVIEW OF VERNON ROBBINS'S *THE TAPESTRY OF EARLY
CHRISTIAN DISCOURSE* AND *EXPLORING THE TEXTURE OF TEXTS**

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Vernon Robbins, in his *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology*,¹ invites scholars in fields of study other than early Christianity to use socio-rhetorical interpretation. We are 'to understand the approach as an "interpretive analytics", an approach that attempts to find multiple kinds of data in texts and to use multiple

* I am pleased and honored to have been invited to be a panelist to discuss Vernon Robbins's two new books that represent the maturation of his program to develop coherent and integrated strategies that contextualize the literary and rhetorical features of Early Christian texts in the larger Mediterranean society at the end of antiquity. I come to this panel and these books as a relative outsider. I am not a New Testament scholar and have not been trained in the arguments and conditioned responses that distinguish and set most of the panelists off as a distinct set among academics interested in sacred texts. I am, as can be seen from my remarks, trained in Islamic and early Rabbinic Jewish studies, and, from that perspective, I am more interested in the applicability of Robbins's method to areas outside of early Christian studies. Insofar as the field of early Christianity and mine have something in common, I am interested in his moves toward producing a method that can integrate the disparate approaches in his field; a disparity exhibited clearly by a glance through the paper titles on Christianity in the AAR/SBL program book. I should say up front that I find the socio-rhetorical method or program of interpretation compatible with what I have been trying to do, piecemeal, in my field of early Islamic and late-rabbinic studies. Robbins's method has helped me name and focus a number of approaches I have been using, and, for that reason, I feel at home in this discussion.

1. (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 23.

modes of discourse to interpret them'.² At its core, this seems to be as clear a statement of Robbins's method as any. He sees texts, particularly texts associated with a sacred tradition, as complex, interconnected with society, and capable of being explicated from as many multiple strategic perspectives as one could use to analyze the rest of society. His view of the imbeddedness of texts in the social matrix and their power to represent as well as transform society fits well with many theories of literary criticism, social psychology and history, to name only a few categories. Most of us in the humanities/social science end of the academic enterprise analyze texts, so, on the face of it, Robbins's method should be applicable, even when he exhibits his usual modesty that his method will 'never be all things to all people', a rhetorical move toward hegemony if I ever heard one.³

In this brief review, I intend to present some preliminary indications of how one might apply the program of socio-rhetorical interpretation to the Quran and show what that might yield. I will then indicate where I feel that Robbins's method comes up against some difficult problems as it moves outside of the areas of early Christianity. I have chosen to apply the method to the Quran to make my analysis as commensurable as possible to the other reviews that rely on applying the method to the sacred text of Christianity, the New Testament. Later, I will discuss the use of the method on some extra-Quranic material.

One of the commonplace statements about the Quran is that its chapters are not very coherent compilations of the pieces of revelation that came to Muhammad over his lifetime and were stitched together after his death by a committee headed by his personal secretary. This is both a Muslim and a Western story, in slightly differing parts, and, within the Islamic tradition, the Quranic verses are usually disengaged from one another and recombined with verses from other chapters for most all purposes except liturgical recitation, where the custom is to recite the whole of the Quran in order. In *Sûrah* (Chapter) 10, titled Jonah, the stories of Noah and Moses are often understood against the portions of those stories and allusions to them elsewhere in the Quran rather than firmly fixing them within the narrative context of this chapter.

At a basic level, we can begin to re-read the Quranic material in a way that helps explicate the text by using some of the approaches in Vernon Robbins's program. If we take, for example, one of the five

2. *Tapestry*, p. 243.

3. *Tapestry*, p. 244.

categories mentioned in his *Exploring the Texture of Texts*, the 'Inner Texture', and apply one of Robbins's exercises of making a list of 'repetitive' ideas in this chapter of the Quran, we see the following:⁴

*Signs and Warnings of Punishment and Promises of Reward (Surah 10)*⁵

Verse	Warning/Sign	Reward/Promise
3	warning	good tidings
4	Creation as reminder	
5	boiling drink, painful doom	promise, reward with equity
7	portents	
9	home of Fire	
10		rivers and gardens of delight
14	prior generations destroyed had been given clear proofs	
16	retribution for disobedience	
18	guilty unsuccessful	
19	no gain for false worship	
22	God's swift retribution	
23	[anticipation of Story of Jonah]	
24	all return to God	
26		abode of peace
27		best reward and more for doers of good
28	punishment for evil deeds home of Fire	
35	Creation as reminder	
38	Quran as a sign	
40	scriptural history of wrong a warning	
45	humans wrong themselves	
46	death, Day of Judgment	
47	Muhammad and God as Witnesses	
48	prophets as warners	
49	promise from God	
50	appointed time (for judgment)	
51	doom	
52	belief only after doom befalls	
53	eternal torment	

4. *Exploring*, pp. 8-9.

5. The phrases used in this list come from Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall's translation, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (New York: Mentor Books, n.d.).

Verse	Warning/Sign	Reward/Promise
54	no escape	
55	doom	
56	God's promise	
57	death, return to God	
58		balm, mercy from God
59		Mercy
61	Day of Resurrection	Bounty
68	night and day as signs	
69	[They say, 'God has taken a son'—an unwarranted negative sign]	
70	no success	
71	doom	
72-75	[Noah story of punishment of evil doers]	
76-94	[Exodus story of punishment of Pharaoh and Egyptians, reward of Children of Israel]	
99	[Allusion to story of Jonah]	
102	warning no help for those who disbelieve	
103	expect punishment	
104		believers saved
105	death	
107	wrong-doers	
108	hurt	good
109	those who err are guided for error	those who do good are guided for good

Result:

110 GOD IS THE BEST OF JUDGES

From the above list, we can see both the coherence of *Sûrah* 10 and its dominant theme: judgment and punishment. A secondary theme is reward for correct worship. If we were to do a similar list, but this time with temporal terms, we would see that v. 4 starts us in the past with creation, v. 5 takes us to the future with a return to God at the eschaton, vv. 6-7 return to creation, and vv. 8-10 take us again to the eschaton. Indeed, the whole chapter juxtaposes past and future to intensify the decisions we make in the present between good and evil. Verse 4 starts us at creation, and the last verse, 110, ends with God's judgment.

A fuller Quranic analysis could continue with the use of the 'Oral-Scribal' sub-category of 'intertexture' to show that the invocation of Creation, the Throne and the story of Noah can be found in *Sûrah* 11 of

the Quran as examples of what Robbins terms 'recitation' and 'recontextualization'. In *Sûrah* 10, the stories of Noah and Moses constitute the 'Reference or Allusion' sub-category of 'cultural intertexture', while the reference in v. 23 to God's making one travel on the sea and become overwhelmed by the waves is an 'echo' of the biblical Jonah story, anticipating the 'Allusion' to Jonah in v. 99. I adduce these examples not to take us through a full socio-rhetorical interpretation of the Quran, or even to begin to exhaust the category of 'inner texture' in Robbins's method, but to show that it is not only possible to apply his systematic method to texts outside of the New Testament circle, but one can do so with good effect.

In 1994, R. Marston Speight published an article in *Semeia* under the editorship of Vernon Robbins, titled 'Rhetorical Argumentation in the Hadith Literature of Islam', in which he compared the argumentation in traditional sayings about Muhammad to epideictic, deliberative and judicial rhetorical forms described by Greek theoreticians of rhetoric.⁶ This article grew out of the second phase of the SBL Pronouncement Story Work Group, which studied the nature of the rhetorical chreia, defined as a 'form of speech and/or action attributed to a specific person'. For Speight,

The reference to Hellenistic rhetoric in the case of Hadith is appropriate for two reasons: first, without distorting the analysis we are able to bring the Islamic material into a continuum of an ongoing comparative study being carried on by scholars in Hellenistic, biblical and rabbinic literature. Second, although Arabic rhetoric and literary theory owe nothing fundamental to the Greeks, the extensive cross-cultural exchanges during the flowering of the Islamic Empire resulted in the borrowing from Hellenism of a number of literary motifs, conventions and definitions. So the use of Greek terminology in describing Islamic texts is not as foreign as it might seem.⁷

Speight then appeals to the work of George A. Kennedy, who says, 'Though rhetoric is colored by the traditions and conventions of the society in which it is applied, it is also a universal phenomenon which is conditioned by basic workings of the human mind and heart and by the nature of all human society'.⁸

6. R. Marston Speight, 'Rhetorical Argumentation in the Hadith Literature of Islam', *Semeia* 64 (1993), pp. 73-94.

7. Speight, 'Rhetorical Argumentation', p. 76.

8. Speight, 'Rhetorical Argumentation', p. 76 quoting George A. Kennedy,

Speight's analysis of the rhetorical character of the Hadith that he chose is convincing on the face of it and reflects at least part of what appears to be operating rhetorically in that body of material. But his frame for analyzing the Islamic material in Hellenistic terms raises some problems and some benefits associated with using Robbins's method outside of its home world of Hellenistic Early Christianity. First, the problems. Speight, while acknowledging that Arabic rhetoric owes nothing to Greek, nevertheless states that 'the extensive cross-cultural exchanges during the flowering of the Islamic Empire resulted in the borrowing from Hellenism of a number of literary motifs, conventions, and definitions'.⁹ Speight is only partially right. Hellenistic rhetorical terminology began to have common currency in Islamic intellectual circles approximately a century and a half to two and a half centuries after the redaction of the bulk of the Hadith material. For the period that we would call the late Middle Ages, Greek categories were often, although not exclusively, used by writers on Arabic rhetoric, but they were primarily interested in an analysis of poetics. The sort of rhetoric described and analyzed by Aelius Theon of Alexandria does not have a social or terminological equivalence in early Islamic society, and the rhetorical character of the Hadith owe more to pre-Islamic Arabian literary forms. At most, the 'borrowing' that Speight identifies is an adaptive reconfiguration (to use one of Robbins's categories) seen from a later period, when Hellenism was the intellectual hot-topic for Islamic academics in search of new and exciting theories.

This leads to another difficulty translating Robbins's method to the field of Islamic studies: the field is simply not as advanced as New Testament studies in terms of the texts available for study. It has been estimated that less than 10 per cent of the known manuscripts in Arabic have been published in critical editions, and certain fields have received far less attention than others. One of the great Hadith collections, Ibn Hanbal's *Sunan*, exists only in an imperfect form, not based on the majority of known manuscripts, and even the Quran does not exist in a critical edition, even though some scribal variations are known to exist. The field of rhetoric has been generally neglected, particularly for the early centuries of the Islamic period. Robbins acknowledges the problem of translating his method to another field when he says that

New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. 10.

9. Speight, 'Rhetorical Argumentation', p. 76.

'interpreters may need to find more localized resources to open the social and cultural nature of their discourse in their texts'.¹⁰ The field of Arabic literature and Islamic studies has not yet sorted out the indigenous terminology for various rhetorical devices. The use of the Hellenistic categories, particularly when they are given in their Greek form, like the word 'chreia', is convenient for the moment but carries with it cultural assumptions that belong to a Hellenized world that does not affect Islamic society until, as mentioned above, after the period of the Hadith.

Lest I seem too pessimistic about the utility of applying the socio-rhetorical interpretive method to another field, in this case, the field of Islamic studies, let me close with an indication of where I think the method is strongest, both for analysis of one tradition and across multiple traditions. The method is non-reductive. Unlike most other analytic methods, if one follows this program, one is compelled to examine the range of details of a text from an amazingly varied number of perspectives. This makes the method daunting, by the way, for use on the whole corpus of the Hadith, which is a body of material twenty to thirty times larger than the New Testament for each of the four or five major collections! And, in the end, one is asked to remain aware of all the threads, textures, colors and so forth of the tapestry of the text. The categories outlined in Robbins's two books remain categories for the organization of large bodies of information rather than subsuming them under less detailed abstractions.

As a hermeneutic of reading, following the socio-rhetorical method will acquaint one thoroughly with the text one analyzes. It is at this level of detail that the most interesting comparative analysis can also be done. At this level, it is possible to set a text from one tradition against another in a relationship that can best be described as a dynamic interactive reading. The tension between the two texts allows one to ask questions of the other that reveal both the differences and the similarities. In posing the question, 'How do Hadith arguments fit against the pattern of the chreia?', Speight sets up a tension between the Hellenistic categories and the Arabo-Islamic ones. On one level the Hadith fit, but only in a simple way and less elaborated than either the Greek forms or rabbinic Hebrew forms analyzed by Alan Avery-Peck in the same

10. *Tapestry*, p. 243.

project.¹¹ One might assume from this observation that the Arabic material is not as sophisticated, as some scholars in the past have done,¹² or ask the question about how the Hadith material might fit into a larger rhetorical pattern. While in fact we can see that the individual Hadith are building blocks for larger legal/rhetorical arguments, the yield from Speight's analysis shows us that each of the building blocks contains within it an incipient logical argument. An interesting study could examine the relationship between the logic of the building blocks and the construction of the larger legal arguments that formed the basis for Islamic religious law.

There is much to be done, as I have indicated, to locate socio-rhetorical interpretation in the field of Islamic studies, but it is work that will help us analyze the interrelationship of important texts within the tradition and allow us to speak to our colleagues in other traditions with some clarity and parity. Implied in all of this, is, of course, an underlying view of the commensurability of all religious texts, if not their equivalence, and in thanking Vernon Robbins for his two helpful and stimulating books, I would like to suggest by way of an invitation to him and the rest of us interested in the comparative enterprise that we speculate on the relationship between this method and its role as a propaedeutic to a new theology of comparative sacred texts.

11. Alan J. Avery-Peck, 'Rhetorical Argumentation in Early Rabbinic Pronouncement Stories', *Semeia* 64 (1993), pp. 49-72.

12. See, for example, Gustave E. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam* (Chicago: Phoenix Press, 1966), p. 3 *et passim*.