

## BOOK REVIEW

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### *A Place Between Two Places: the Qur'ānic Barzakh*

By GEORGE ARCHER (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2017. *Islamic History and Thought*, 1), xi + 458 pp. Price HB \$204.00. EAN 978–1463206123.

*'Subject to us every sea that is on the earth and in the heavens; the dominion and the kingdom; the sea of the lower world and the sea of the Hereafter.'*

These lines from the *Ḥizb al-baḥr* (Litany of the Sea) by the Moroccan Sufi Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī (d. 656/1258) provide a point of departure for discussion of George Archer's monograph *A Place Between Two Places*. Central to Archer's thesis is that the Qur'ānic *barzakh*, a word steeped in symbolism, represents a mountainous barrier between the two seas of the present life and the next. By utilizing three burgeoning approaches within contemporary Qur'ānic studies: Late Antique contextual parallels, orality, and ring-structural analysis, Archer unveils his reading of a distinctive implicit Qur'ānic intermediate state and traces its transformation into the more famous *barzakh* of the medieval Muslim scholarly genres.

*A Place Between Two Places* is a substantial book of more than 450 pages, split into six chapters, the first and last doubling up as introduction and conclusion. The first begins with a five-fold typology of the intermediate state experienced by the human being awaiting resurrection within Muslim, Christian and Jewish thought: ambiguity, pilgrimage, purgation, soul-death, and soul-sleep. Archer briefly pegs these to various periods of intellectual history, before problematizing the term *barzakh*, which appears three times in the Qur'ān, but only once in the obvious context of the intermediate state. The chapter then moves to a lengthy summary of the cosmologies of prior and contemporary Near Eastern societies regarding what lies after death, drawing on a broad range of secondary literature and regular reference to primary sources. The second chapter addresses theory and methodology, arguing for the significance of the orality of the Qur'ān in its *bricolage* of prior world views, religious impulses and communal memory to forge a powerful new artefact. Archer introduces the method of ring-structural analysis, drawing in part on figures such as Mary Douglas and Michel Cuypers, and justifies its use here. The third and fourth chapters represent applications of this method, the former a detailed study of *Sūrat al-Kahf*, which he sees as a key to unlock the symbolism of the *barzakh*, while the latter gives summarized structural analyses of fifteen sūras in rough chronological order with specific focus on pericopes of importance for the theme. The fifth chapter is a different sort of beast, an attempt to trace the intellectual development of the medieval conception of the *barzakh* through the Umayyad era—mainly represented through the design of the Dome of the Rock in

Jerusalem—and emerging ‘Abbasid genres of scholarship, such as *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth*, *sīra*, and *kalām*. The final chapter summarizes the preceding argument, before putting forward some interesting proposals for the use of ring-structural approaches in understanding the history of Qur’ānic composition.

Archer has both a keen mind and a pleasing writing style. In *A Place Between Two Places*, he succeeds in communicating his original ideas on the subject of the intermediate state in the Qur’ān and Muslim thought with prose that in places sings. However, it is noticeable that the monograph is extremely similar in structure to his 2015 Georgetown doctoral dissertation. The dissertation style is especially prominent in the overly long introduction, which includes close to fifty pages of context on Near Eastern intermediate states. This has a deleterious effect on the pace of the book. The discussion could have been placed in its own chapter, keeping the introduction more focused. As this is a typical issue that arises in converting dissertations into monographs, it perhaps reflects a learning curve for the Gorgias Press.

In this work, Archer has set himself a difficult balancing act. He seeks to explicate a theme that is dispersed throughout the Qur’ān by analysing the composition of its individual sūras. It is thus a testament to his scholarship that he is able to present coherently a reading that has something new to say about the *barzakh* through the use of ring-structural analysis. Archer builds on the approach of Angelika Neuwirth who has consistently called for consideration of a wider Late Antique context to the Qur’ān whilst highlighting its oral nature and structural aspects. He shows how research on the Qur’ān’s cosmological environment and response to the previous biblical tradition can be brought into fruitful dialogue with insights on the composition of oral literature and ring structures. In ch. 2, he presents a first-rate synthesis of these bodies of scholarship and puts forward an explanation of the Qur’ān’s non-linear structure in terms of the way that the oral expectations of its first audience differ from the literate minds of the ‘Abbasid period. This is later extended in ch. 6 with some very intriguing suggestions for future research on how ring-structural features could have operated diachronically in Qur’ānic composition.

Arguably, however, Archer veers too far in the direction of comparative parallels at the expense of the resources afforded by the early Muslim tradition. In *A Place Between Two Places*, there is an insistence that the original context of the Qur’ān cannot be known with any reliability and therefore that morphological comparisons from other prior or contemporary societies should take the place of the Arabic contextual materials typically used for this purpose. This means that non-Qur’ānic reports are saved for the fifth chapter and are analysed and dated according to their apparent variation from a posited Qur’ānic archetype. Though hardly uncommon in Western academic scholarship on the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth* literature, Archer relies too much for this key plank of his argument on preconceptions that ignore recent nuances of the historiographical debate. This is demonstrated by his citation on page 12 of Joseph Schacht’s *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*—mis-referenced as *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence*—a work nearly seventy years old, for an overview of critical scholarship (the other authors mentioned are Jonathan Brown and Uri

Rubin). Recent work by Harald Motzki (omitted from the bibliography), Gregor Schoeler, and others has done a lot to show that the gap in the historical record envisaged by figures such as Joseph Schacht and John Wansbrough has been overstated and that much of contextual value for the earliest period can be found within the stock of traditional reports. At the very least, a better justification should have been provided for ignoring what this body of material has to offer. Furthermore, Archer's scepticism about traditionary materials also extends to the meanings of words in the Qur'ān: he overwhelmingly chooses to define terms by Qur'ānic parallels or a shared root in another language. While there is certainly value in both procedures, they can only operate meaningfully against the background of an Arabic lexicon that relies on the inherited Muslim tradition. The ability to translate Qur'ānic passages at all owes a certain debt to that tradition which should not be dismissed lightly.

The above tendency also leads to a curious irony in Archer's method. While writing eloquently about the oral mind and the implications of Qur'ānic orality for its structure and meaning, he ignores the orality and semi-orality of non-Qur'ānic materials from the same period and the immediate centuries that followed. When, in ch. 5, he eventually comes to genres such as *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth* and *sīra*, he focuses on the earliest written works by figures such as Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795) and Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767), but not the generations from which they drew. The foregrounding of these written compositions is at odds with his focus on orality and is a missed opportunity to engage with the contextual relevance of materials that, though recorded for posterity in later written compilations, report the oral understanding of early generations of Muslims. Given Archer's broader comparative focus, study of the so-called *isrā'īliyyāt* literature beyond what is recorded by his select early literate works may have added an interesting layer to his analysis. This methodological choice also has an impact on his conclusions about the process of historical development for the *barzakh*.

Archer is to be applauded for his stance that academic scholarship on the Qur'ān should be sensitive to those for whom the scripture is sacred. He critiques in a frank and open way the presumption, often lurking beneath the surface in Western Islamic studies, that non-confessional scholars attain a superior critical distance vis-à-vis the source materials. At the same time, Archer argues forcefully for the validity of non-Muslim readings of the Qur'ān, pointing out that, after all, the scripture does not only address itself to Muslims. His balanced approach to this thorny issue and his intellectual humility are to his credit, as is his recognition that ultimately the confessional and non-confessional stances that can be taken on the Qur'ān vary in their conclusions due to differing assumptions. On the other hand, despite noble intentions Archer to a large extent misses the opportunity to engage with contemporary Muslim-authored scholarship, especially in Arabic, and to thereby enter into the wider global conversation for which he makes theoretical space. He mentions in passing only one contemporary Arabic source, Muḥammad 'Ādil al-Qalqīlī, who reached the same conclusion as him about the pivot of the ring structure of *Sūrat al-Kahf* (p. 108, n. 1). Arabic scholarship on the structural analysis of sūras has been

fairly extensive in the modern period and the book would have benefited from reference to some of the prevailing approaches, not least because Archer seeks to add his own distinct contributions to this area.

Like Cuypers, Archer argues that ring-structural analysis of *sūras* can serve to highlight verses of particular interpretive significance. Though he broadly agrees with Cuypers that the central pivots within ring structures are important, he also puts considerable emphasis on complementary pericopes, whether mirrored, or paralleled, in revealing relationships of meaning that would otherwise remain hidden. His focus on the oral composition of the Qurʾān makes him less dogmatic than Cuypers about the existence of a particular set of rules that a given Qurʾānic *sūra* must follow in its structure. Instead, he turns to the wider Late Antique symbolism on the intermediate state as the principal hermeneutic with which to segment the text into its compositional parts. In fact, though Archer does not use the term, his reading could be put under the heading of contemporary allegorical exegesis, or *tafsīr ishārī*. For instance, in *Sūrat al-Kahf*, the story of the Sleepers in Q. 18:9–26 mirrors that of the Two-Horned One in Q. 18:83–101 through the shared symbolism of the mountain as a liminal space associated with the boundary between life and death. Notably there is no explicit mention of a mountain in the Qurʾānic story of the Sleepers, but he argues this can be inferred from the Middle Persian word for mountain, *kōf*, and the Syriac version of the story (pp. 138–9).

Archer's method leads him to the fascinating conclusion that the Qurʾānic *barzakh* refers to a barrier between life and death in the form of a rim of mountains surrounding the world. In prevailing cosmologies of the Near East, these mountains were believed to hold back an otherworldly freshwater sea from the worldly ocean and were associated with the transition from this world to the next. The Qurʾān, he avers, uses this symbolism within its discourse of *tawhīd* to show that the dead are unaware and powerless in their graves and cannot be called upon. This acts to refute the Christian saint cults that were prominent within its milieu. Archer summarises this as follows:

As a timespan, the Qurʾānic *barzakh* stands between the present and final Judgement. The mountains mark the countdown between now and the Resurrection when the high places will fall. As a location the *barzakh* is a barrier. It stops the dead and the forces of the apocalypse from entering into the world of the living. This keeps the world safe, and prevents the meddling of supernatural powers: would-be idols. Vice versa, the mountains stop the living from accessing the unseen. Idolatry is prevented by obfuscating human knowledge of and contact with the supernatural and the dead. As a liminal zone the *barzakh* allows passage by the leave of God alone (p. 292).

Archer consistently seeks the symbolism within narratives and eschatological events that much of the exegetical literature assumes as literal. For instance, the Sleepers' dog is understood as a hellish guardian, 'something of a Qurʾānic Cerberus' (p. 141), while the journey of the Two-Horned One is taken as a passage through the underworld (p. 153). Given this tendency, it is a little puzzling that the word *barzakh* itself is apparently understood by Archer as a literal mountain range. Also, as the mutually supporting intra-Qurʾānic and

contextual levels of symbolism build up during chs. 3 and 4, it is easy for the reader to get lost in the various possible meanings, or to suspect in places that the Qur'ānic data as a whole do not support the proposed readings. A few examples follow.

Archer quotes Q. 25:53, 'He (it is) who has let loose the two seas, this one sweet and fresh, and this (other) one salty (and) bitter, and placed between them a *barzakh* and a restricted obstruction (*hijran mahjūran*)' (p. 236), and on p. 238 interprets this as mountains that keep the seas of this world and the heavens apart. However, Q. 35:12 reads, 'The two bodies of water are not alike—one is palatable, sweet, and pleasant to drink, the other salty and bitter—yet from each you eat fresh fish and extract ornaments to wear, and in each you see the ships ploughing their course so that you may seek God's bounty and be grateful'. It is hard not to conclude that the point of these verses is to highlight God's creation of familiar worldly freshwater and seawater, each one with benefits for humanity.

On page 163, there is a discussion of Q. 18:28–9 in which people who seek God's face are contrasted with those who follow their desires, and a scene of Hell is envisaged in which people who call for help have their faces scalded with water like molten metal. Archer reads this as saying that those who ask both to see God's face and for worldly goods such as water will receive an ironic punishment. The specific desire for water is not mentioned in Q. 18:28, nor does the Qur'ān elsewhere have a problem with individuals seeking worldly prosperity as well as God (see Q. 2:201 and Q. 28:77). Even if the context of 18:29 is taken to be calling for help in the form of water, verses such as Q. 7:50 indicate that this relates to people who are already in Hell. Archer connects this section of the sūra to Isaiah 5:11–12, but those Biblical verses seem to criticize those who seek wine, not water. Without the connection to water, the proposed mirroring with Q. 18:63–4 and the story of Moses and his young companion breaks down (p. 179).

There is also a repeated reading of the Qur'ānic question on the Day of Judgement, 'How long did you remain in the earth?' and its variants as referring to time spent in the graves (for example, see pp. 226–7, 245–6). According to Archer's reading, which also appears as an opinion in the exegetical tradition, the answer given of a day, or part of a day, is to make the point that the dead have no awareness about the passage of time in the intermediate state. The overall Qur'ānic message, however, would seem better served by the usual interpretation that this refers to the fleeting nature of life, a point which seems particularly obvious in verses such as Q. 79:46.

The common methodological pattern to these examples is that sometimes the focus on finding a coherent story to tell about the *barzakh* through ring structures leads to missing relevant information from other places in the Qur'ān, or to ignoring alternative readings that do not fit the theme. On the other hand, there are many instances in which Archer draws out meaningful relationships between the elements of Qur'ānic sūra structures relating to his chosen theme and contextual materials. Any book engaging in a comparable level of interpretation will leave itself open to some such critiques.

The historical part of Archer's argument, as articulated in ch. 5, is that the soul-sleep of the Qur'ānic *barzakh* is increasingly replaced by ideas of purgation and pilgrimage within the medieval period. He argues that concepts are introduced that are not to be found in the Qur'ān, such as the notion of a soul that can be separated from the body and interaction upon death with angels. These new ideas lead to a vivid conception of the *barzakh* as a life in the grave with its distinctive pleasures and torments. Except for the insightful analysis of the symbolism found within the spatial arrangement of the various Qur'ānic inscriptions inside the Dome of the Rock, this chapter runs into a number of problems when reading the Qur'ān and post-Qur'ānic history.

Archer maintains that interaction with angels in a liminal state, including their meting out punishment and talking with the recently deceased, is a post-Qur'ānic development, as is the separation of the soul from the body. Yet in Q. 8:50 angels are presented as beating the faces and backs of disbelievers at death, while in Q. 6:93 they stretch out their hands to extract the souls (*anfus*), and arguably speak to the dead at the beginning of their intermediate state. Moreover, Archer's historiographical methodology leads to an assumption that non-Qur'ānic traditions about the *barzakh* must be later historical developments. A single prominent exception is the *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet instructed his followers in the solar eclipse prayer and how to seek refuge from the punishment of the grave. Archer argues that due to its ring structure and link to a dateable eclipse, this may be a genuine memory of the earliest period, but if so, shows the teaching was introduced at the very end of the Prophet's life (see pp. 357–9). Apart from this tradition, it seems the plausible scenario that the Qur'ānic vision of the intermediate state was initially supplemented with additional prophetic details of purgation is dismissed out of hand, rather than through careful argument. A final gripe about ch. 5 is the interpretation of a *ḥadīth* in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* that says the punishment of the grave will come to the unbeliever or hypocrite who is unable to correctly answer a question about the prophecy of Muḥammad. Archer avers that the *ḥadīth* draws on a secondary intrareligious distinction between 'good' Muslims and others, rather than between Muslims and non-Muslims (pp. 366–7). This goes manifestly against the meaning of unbeliever and hypocrite, neither category of whom would be considered a Muslim in the sphere of eschatology.

*A Place Between Two Places* is a thought-provoking work that asks its readers to look again at the Qur'ānic idea of the *barzakh* and the way that the structure of the scripture may be read to infer meaning. Though questions can be asked about aspects of the methodology and post-Qur'ānic conclusions, Archer should be congratulated for his contribution to the growing literature on the Qur'ān's orality, ring-structural composition, and relationship to the cosmology of Late Antiquity.

Ramon Harvey

Ebrahim College

E-mail: i.harvey@ebrahimcollege.org.uk

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