The urge to provide an inventory of the types of speech included in the Qurʾān is an old one. As Karim Samji points out, in one passage of his famous Qurʾān commentary Jāmiʿ al-bayān ‘an taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān, Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) interprets the seven “letters” (aḥruf) in which the Qurʾān was revealed as seven types of speech contained in the sacred text: command (amr), rebuke (zajr), exhortation (targhīb), admonition (tarḥīb), debate (jadal), narrative (qaṣaṣ), and parable (mathal) (270). However, this urge has not been met with sustained interest and methodical investigation on the part of modern scholars in Qurʾānic Studies. Karim Samji’s The Qurʾān: A Form-Critical History is therefore an important contribution to Qurʾānic Studies, the first attempt to apply biblical form criticism to the Qurʾān in a sustained manner to provide an overview of the main genres contained in Islam’s sacred text.
It is a useful and stimulating addition to qur’ānic scholarship, both because it explains to a Qur’ānic Studies audience a great deal about form criticism of which they may not be aware and because it sheds light, especially from a comparative Biblical Studies perspective, on facets of the Qur’ān. The work evinces deep familiarity with the history of scholarship on form criticism in Biblical Studies, as well as awareness of most of the relevant work in Qur’ānic Studies, including several studies which may not be known to investigators in Qur’ānic Studies, even those who have been paying attention to scholarship related to form criticism in this field.

The book attempts to provide a nearly comprehensive survey of qur’ānic forms. Drawing on form-critical studies of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, Samji identifies and discusses five overarching genres in the text of the Qur’ān, each of which he treats in a separate chapter of his work. These chapters—Chapter 2, “Prayer”; Chapter 3, “Liturgy”; Chapter 4, “Wisdom”; Chapter 5, “Narrative”; Chapter 6, “Proclamation”—are framed by an introduction and conclusion, in Chapters 1 and 7.

In the introduction, Samji provides a useful account of the history of biblical form criticism and also an account of the use of form criticism in Islamic and Qur’ānic Studies. Surveys of the history of form criticism are available, including the masterful work of Martin J. Buss, *Biblical Form Criticism in Its Context*, of which Samji makes good use, but my impression is that most scholars in Qur’ānic Studies are only vaguely acquainted with this history, which is as complex as it is interesting and relevant to investigation of the Qur’ān. The second section of the introduction situates form criticism among other critical approaches adopted in Qur’ānic Studies, including reception criticism, literary criticism, canon criticism, and genre
criticism. The third section of the introduction provides a short overview of the attention given to genre to date in Qur'anic Studies.

The five main chapters of the work, each of which treats a particular genre, adopt the same format of being divided into five subsections. The first section provides a brief introduction to the genre in question. The second section presents formulas, particularly introductory formulas, that are associated with the genre. The third section discusses the “setting” of the genre, referring to one of the major terms of art used by the biblical form critics, the *Sitz im Leben* (“situation in life”), that is, the general social situation or the everyday context in which texts of the genre in question were usually performed. The fourth section discusses the “forms” associated with the genre, generally subcategories of the larger genre. The fifth section is a summary of the chapter.

So, for example, Chapter 2, on prayer, begins with Samji’s presentation of an overview of the genre in question, drawing on key works in biblical form criticism but also recognizing the work that has been done in Qur'anic Studies on specific topics. He provides a survey of introductory prayer formulas, the vocatives *rabbanā*, “our Lord,” *rabbi* (for *rabbī*) “my Lord,” and *allāhumma* “O God,” providing examples of the use of each. The third section of the chapter treats the setting of prayer, distinguishing between individual prayer, domestic prayer, and communal prayer. The fourth section of the chapter focuses on prayer forms, distinguishing among the categories of conversational prayer, petitionary prayer, penitential prayer, complaint prayer, imprecatory prayer, praise prayer, and rhetorical prayer. Samji draws on studies of biblical prayer such as Jack W. Corvin’s “Stylistic and Functional Study of the Prose Prayers in the Historical Narratives of the Old Testament,” Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1972; Moshe Greenburg’s *Biblical Prose Prayer as a Window to the Popular Religion of Ancient Israel* (1983);

Overall, then, this book is an important contribution to Qur’ānic Studies, providing an excellent overview of qur’ānic forms, an insightful application of the results of biblical form criticism to qur’ānic material, and a useful gathering together of the scattered relevant scholarship in Qur’ānic Studies on individual forms. Given the nature of the topic and the material, there is of course much additional work to do, and other scholars interested in pursuing investigations in this area of scholarship may wish to adopt somewhat different approaches.

Samji closely follows many of the methods and conventions of biblical form-critical scholarship, and many of the reviewer’s reactions to the work are less a critique of Samji’s execution of this project and more a critique of certain trends within biblical form criticism that I would not choose to adopt myself. To be fair, one must note that it is clear that Samji has not adopted these conventions blindly but has done so after deliberation, with an awareness of alternative critical approaches which he is careful to distinguish from his own. As in a great deal of form-critical scholarship in Biblical Studies, Samji uses the term “genre” in this work to refer to a very broad category, so that the total number of genres, as we have seen above, is quite small, only five. This follows a common usage in Biblical form criticism. I would in most
cases not call these overarching categories genres, but perhaps supra-generic modes. So, for example “wisdom” is often termed a genre, when, in my view, it is a broader category that includes many different and distinct genres, such as proverbs, aphorisms, parables, and testaments. Form critics term “law” a genre, when a compendium of law differs from a legal responsum or a judge’s verdict or an individual decree. To my mind, “wisdom” is not a genre, but rather a mode or super-category of writing that might be represented in a number of genres. One sees a similar use of the term “genre” to describe very broad categories in Aristotelian poetics, where “poetry” is a genre, or in the works of the twentieth-century Canadian literary critic and theorist Northrop Frye and others writing on English literature, in which “narrative fiction” and “drama” are genres. Some form-critical studies adopt the term “form” to refer to the specific formal subcategories of the larger “genres,” and Samji follows this convention. He also shows an awareness that his work attempts to capture only the major genres found in the Qurʾān and does not attempt to capture all of the minor genres. In the of the reviewer, however, “form” as a technical term and “genre” should be essentially synonymous, for form in this mode of interpretation does not refer merely to structure but rather to types of speech or literature that have recognizable conventions, and they both ought to refer to specific, smaller genres, such as the curse, the parable, or the fable, what André Jolles termed einfache Formen (“simple forms”) in his 1930 work of the same title.

In his focus on introductory formulas, Samji is also following Biblical form critics closely. They were particularly concerned about introductory and concluding formulas, because identifying them would allow the form critics to lift or separate out the text under consideration from its surroundings. Identifying such formulas is undoubtedly an important step for the analysis of Qurʾānic forms. However, introductory formulas constitute only a small
part of the conventional rules that constitute a genre; Samji in many cases could have said more about the formal features, themes, and rhetoric involved in particular genres.

From the perspective of form-critical studies in a similar mode on the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, two broad categories appear to be missing from Samji’s list of five, and these are law and apocalyptic. He is certainly aware that legal and apocalyptic texts exist in the Qurʾān, but he generally presents these as belonging to the category of proclamation.

The focus on a small number of genres or supra-generic categories inevitably leads to the omission of focused analysis of a great number of distinct smaller genres like those that André Jolles terms “simple forms”: riddles, sayings, fables, etc. If they do appear at all in Samji’s discussion, they appear as a subcategory under a larger “genre,” and the success of their treatment is mixed here. Thus, for example, Samji astutely observes that the Arabic term *mathal* does not refer to one form, but rather to several forms, encompassing similitudes, parables, paradigms, and exempla. In contrast, the commonly found genre of “greetings” does not find any place in Samji’s taxonomy, though in my assessment these phrases play an important role in the qurʾānic text. Punishment stories, one of the qurʾānic genres that has received a decent amount of attention, appears under the broader category of “narrative,” when I would argue that they are so fundamental to qurʾānic rhetoric that they require separate, prominent treatment. Samji’s work has no broad category of “oracular statements” although I would argue that this is a fundamental category in the Qurʾān. Within that category, oracles preceded by a series of oracular oaths merit special attention as a distinct genre. Samji is of course aware of this form, because he describes the writings of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) on “oaths”—and here he could also have mentioned Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah’s (d. 751/1350) *al-Tibyān fī aqsām al-Qurʾān*—as well as modern studies by Lamya Kandil and Angelika
Neuwirth. Samji treats Sūrat Abī Lahab (Q 111; also termed Sūrat al-Masad) under the “genre” of prayer, and labels it as belonging to the subcategory of “imprecatory prayer,” when I would argue that it could be better described as a curse retort, drawing on a stable category in common Arabic speech.

In my view, in the appropriate reactions to the advances this book has made, three broad categories of work remain to be done. The first task is to integrate further the analysis of forms that Samji has provided with the analysis of various forms carried out to date in Qur’ānic Studies scholarship. Some relevant works have escaped Samji’s notice, and some studies of particular genres have analyzed conventional features that are not addressed in Samji’s descriptions. Regarding the genre of the parable (mathal), Samji cites a number of secondary studies: Hartwig Hirschfeld, New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qoran (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1902), 83–101; Frants Buhl, “Über Vergleichungen und Gleichnisse im Qurān,” Acta Orientalia 2 (1924): 1–11; Moses Sister, “Metaphern und Vergleiche im Koran,” Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen zu Berlin 34 (1931): 104–154; Theodor Lohman, “Die Gleichnisreden Mohammeds im Koran,” Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientforschung 12 (1966): 75–118, 241–287; and Heinrich Speyer, Die Biblische Erzählungen im Quran (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, [late 1930s]), 426–438. These studies are important, and the evidence reveals an important feature of Samji’s work overall, his assiduous use of older Qur’ānic Studies scholarship in German. Nevertheless, several significant studies that do not appear are the following: Otto Pautz, Mohammedi Lehre von der Offenbarung (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1898), 62–68; Mathias Zahniser, “Parable,” EQ 4 (2004): 9–12; and Hans Zirker, “‘Gleichnis’,
‘Vergleich’ und ‘Beispiel’ im Koran.” Moreover, Samji’s work engages only with the work of Hirschfeld directly and in detail. Similarly, Samji draws on important works in the tradition of Qur’ānic Studies on the punishment stories, such as Horovitz’ Koranische Untersuchungen (1926), Heinrich Speyer’s Die biblischen Erzählungen im Quran (1930s), David Marshall’s God, Muhammad and the Unbelievers (1999), but does not address Michael Zwettler’s “A Mantic Manifesto: The Sūra of ‘the Poets’ and the Qurānic Foundations of Prophetic Authority,” in James L. Kugel (ed.), Poetry and Prophecy: the Beginnings of a Literary Tradition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 75–119, 205–231. In general, because the work covers a large body of texts in many disparate genres, and because some of these types of text have been the subject of study in secondary studies written at widely different periods in many different nations and published in various types of publications, it is inevitable that it will have missed certain publications. In addition, thorough engagement with extant secondary literature may allow scholars to build on and refine Samji’s description of the various Qur’ānic genres.

The second broad task is to describe the forms associated with the categories of law and apocalyptic. Some work has been done in this regard, again in older German scholarship, such as Josef Joel Rivlin’s Das Gesetz im Qoran: Kultus und Ritus (Jerusalem: Bamberger und Wehrmann, 1934), and in more recent studies such as Joseph Lowry’s “When Less is More: Law and Commandment in Sūrat al-An‘ām,” Journal of Qur’ānic Studies 9 (2007): 22–42 and Holger Zellentin’s The Qur‘ān’s Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolotum as a Point of Departure (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013). Notable works that touch on apocalyptic forms in the Qur‘ān are Paul Casanova, Mohammed et la fin du monde: étude critique sur l’Islam primitive (2 vols.; Paris: P.


The third broad task is to describe in greater detail the smaller forms that fit under Samji’s broad categories, identifying many of their other conventions besides introductory and closing formulas. Given the current explosion of interest in Qur’ānic Studies, one hopes that Samji’s work will inspire many other scholars to undertake studies in the form-critical mode.

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