



Qur'ānic Rules of Purity and the Covenantal Community

The Biblical Example

“Defilement is never an isolated event,” writes Mary Douglas in her classic study of the concept of pollution; consequently, “the only way in which pollution ideas make sense is in reference to a total structure of thought.”¹ Despite reservations about the details of Douglas’s argumentation, most scholars have embraced the central insight of her work: that purity practices must be understood to emerge from, and in turn to constitute, symbolic systems. Thus, rather than pursuing the origins and significance of individual purity practices as did earlier generations of scholars, it is necessary to elicit the underlying coherence of entire systems of purity.

At an even broader level, however, it is also necessary to address the place of ritual purity per se within the larger world-view of which it forms a part. Such an inquiry would ask, for instance, not merely how the prohibition of pigs fits into a complex of ideas about purity, but how the idea of purity fits into broader ideas about society and the self. Mary Douglas herself did so when she asked, among other things, why some groups had stringent rules of purity and others relatively few. Specifically, when addressing the nature of ritual purity in the nascent Islamic community, we will want to define the role of the motif of ritual purity within the symbolic system constituted by the Qur’ān as a whole. Systems of ritual purity are frequently treated as self-contained entities to be interpreted in relative isolation from other religious practices and beliefs. My assumption here will be that the inclusion of rules of purity in the Qur’ānic text is neither arbitrary nor gra-

tuitous, and that there must be discernible linkages between the passages relating to ritual purity and the overall thematic structure of the text. To paraphrase Douglas, concepts of defilement and purification should not be regarded as isolated events.

In this chapter, I will examine the degree to which it is possible to elicit the symbolic context of the Qur'ānic rules of purity from cues within the Qur'ānic text. I do so against the background of an extensive dialogue about the relationship between the purity laws of the Hebrew Bible (most importantly, its extensive list of food prohibitions) and the other symbolic structures of the biblical text. This dialogue is significant for the interpretation of the Qur'ānic text as well, both because the hypotheses advanced on the basis of the biblical example are of general theoretical significance and because, as will emerge in the course of the discussion, the Qur'ānic treatment of the theme of ritual purity extensively and self-consciously invokes themes and concepts drawn from the biblical tradition.

The most recent phase of the debate over the interpretation of the biblical food prohibitions was, like so many other facets of the scholarly dialogue on ritual purity, initiated by Mary Douglas.² In her discussion of the “abominations of Leviticus” in her landmark work *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas interprets the list of unclean animals in terms of the central theological axiom presented within the text itself, the reiterated command that the Israelites “be holy, as I am holy.” “Since each of the injunctions is prefaced by the command to be holy,” she reasons, “so they must be explained by that command.”³ Beginning with the etymology defining the root meaning of the Hebrew word *qadōsh* (“holy”) as “set apart,” Douglas ultimately equates “holiness” with wholeness or completion. Any living creature or human activity with blurred boundaries, physical or conceptual, violates this ideal of bodily and taxonomic integrity, thus becoming unholy or impure.

In a later study, Douglas elaborates this theory to emphasize the isomorphism between the biblical text's classification of the animal kingdom and its classification of human society: “A category which divides some humans from others, also divides their animals from others.” Thus, for instance, both firstborn animals and firstborn sons are consecrated to the temple; both blemished animals and blemished human beings are excluded from the temple cult. This isomorphism is generated by the relationship to God that structures both human society and the animal world; both the Israelites and their flocks are “under the Covenant.”⁴

Douglas's latter line of thought has been pursued by Jacob Milgrom, who proposes an even more direct relationship between the Priestly source's purity categories and its parallel structuring of the human and animal kingdoms. The food prohibitions of Leviticus, Milgrom argues, divide the animal kingdom into categories that can be represented as a series of concentric

circles, each one of them successively smaller and associated with a higher degree of holiness. The largest, and least holy, circle comprises the animal kingdom as a whole. The middle circle includes those animals permitted to the Israelites as food. The third, smallest, and holiest of the circles comprises the limited set of animals appropriate for ritual sacrifice. These three circles correspond in their decreasing size and increasing degree of holiness to the most important categories in the division of human society, the outer circle including all of humanity, the middle circle all Israelites, and the inner circle the priests. Significantly, Milgrom argues that each of these divisions corresponds to a covenant described in the biblical text.⁵ Milgrom adopts Douglas's terminology, speaking of the proscribed animals as "anomalies," while rejecting her understanding of the taxonomic principles involved. The rationale behind the criteria for clean and unclean animals emerges simply as the need to define a category of animals, similar to yet less restricted than the short roster of animals appropriate to sacrifice, corresponding to the middle grade of holiness—the grade corresponding to the Israelite people as a whole, between the profane level of "the nations" and the exalted level of the Temple cult.⁶

As discussed in the introduction, Douglas's equation of pollution with the violation of conceptual boundaries is highly problematic when generalized to a cross-cultural axiom. It is now clear that we cannot expect to reduce all purity taboos to cases of taxonomic ambiguity. It is questionable whether the schemata traced by Douglas can even be identified with the Hebrew Bible as a whole; the themes of categorization and separation fundamental to her thesis are typical of a specific strand within the text of Genesis, traditionally known as the "Priestly source."⁷ (In fact, Douglas seems to be peripherally aware of this problem; she herself notes that "source criticism attributes Leviticus to the Priestly source, the dominant concern of whose authors was for order."⁸) More recently, Edwin Firmage has argued that the biblical food prohibitions reflect a priestly world-view assimilating the dietary practices of the individual Israelite to the sacrificial cult of the Temple. The underlying coherence of the system, he argues, lies not in a schematic categorization of the animal kingdom as a whole but in a single criterion: a given animal's resemblance, or lack thereof, to the animals recognized as appropriate for sacrifice. Firmage argues that the postdiluvian license to eat meat represents not (as commonly believed) a concession to human frailty, but an enhancement of the status of human beings; this exaltation reaches its logical conclusion with the introduction of food prohibitions specifically. The dietary law obliges Israelites to "be concerned that the animals they raise for food and those that they hunt be like those that God 'eats' (in the form of sacrifices)," thus distinguishing them from their non-Israelite neighbors and allowing them to "enjoy unprecedented proximity" to God.⁹

Despite the differences of opinion relating to the biblical data, some common themes emerge. Douglas, Eilberg-Schwartz, and Firmage all agree that the significance of the purity strictures that the Bible applies to the diet of Israelites is to be sought in a concept repetitively invoked by the biblical text itself, the concept of holiness. The idea of holiness is in turn grounded in another fundamental theological and sociological concept, that of the covenant.

The close relationship perceived by scholars between the purity scriptures of the Hebrew Bible and the concept of the covenant supports another axiom of Douglas's theory of ritual purity, the precept that there is a correspondence between ritual concern with the preservation of boundaries and sociopolitical concern with the the preservation of the boundaries of the group. Her interpretation of the food prohibitions of Leviticus focuses on the preservation of taxonomic boundaries, a position which (as we have seen) has been disputed by a number of other scholars. However, another form of boundary is indisputably involved: the boundary of the human body. As Douglas herself emphasizes, food prohibitions are fundamentally concerned with the regulation of the ingress of matter into the body. This concern with the integrity of bodily margins is also reflected in the association of concepts of pollution with bodily secretions and elimination, which violate the boundaries of the body in the opposite direction. As Douglas writes of the Israelite case, "The threatened boundaries of their body politic would be well mirrored in their care for the integrity, unity, and purity of the physical body."¹⁰ The concept of the covenant is, of course, the primary theological concept delineating the boundaries of the Israelite community.

As we will see, the concept of covenant and the theme of community boundaries are highly relevant to the Qur'ānic treatment of ritual purity as well.¹¹

The Qur'ānic Material: Sūrat al-Mā'ida

The core of the Qur'ānic teaching on ritual purity is the description of the canonical ablutions and the situations in which they must be performed, which appears in its fullest form in verse 5:6:

O believers! When you arise to pray, wash your faces and your hands up to the elbows; wipe your heads and [wash?] your feet up to the ankles. If you are sexually polluted, purify yourselves. If you are sick or traveling, or one of you has relieved himself [lit: "come from the privy"], or you have touched women, and you cannot find water, go to clean sand/dust and wipe your faces and hands with it. God does not desire to burden you, but He

wishes to purify you and to complete his favor to you, that you may be grateful.¹²

This verse is a compact exposition of the rudiments of the Islamic law of ritual purity. It establishes that the believer must enter a special state of purity in order to perform his¹³ prayers and describes the process of purification; it lists bodily functions that will cause him to enter a state of impurity and prescribes an alternate procedure for situations in which the normal ablutions cannot be performed.

Despite the fact that the verse leaves much unspecified in detail, it is remarkably comprehensive; it lays out the structure of causes of pollution and ritual remedies that is elaborated in the law of ritual purity as a whole. For this reason, it is reasonable to regard this verse as the founding Qur'ānic statement of the system of ritual purity as a whole. This is not to assert that this verse necessarily has chronological priority over all other verses that mention practices or concepts related to ritual purity, but that it is this verse that most centrally mandates and describes ritual purity within the Qur'ānic text. While it is natural to assume that purity strictures of some kind were observed before the promulgation of this passage (an assumption shared by most Islamic scholars), within the context of the Qur'ān it is this verse which allows such practices to be placed within a unified schema of ritual purity. Thus, understanding the significance of this verse is pivotal for our understanding of the Qur'ānic law of ritual purity overall.

While verse 5:6 is very informative with respect to the substance of the Qur'ānic law of ritual purity, it is much more reticent on the subject of its significance. In enjoining purity and identifying sources of impurity, it is remarkably neutral in language; although it states that they both entail ablutions, for instance, nothing in the verse explicitly suggests that there is anything particularly negative, perilous, or repulsive about either elimination or sexual intercourse. Only the final words of the verse seem to address the rationale of this set of injunctions: “God does not desire to burden you, but He wishes to purify you and to complete his blessing/favor upon you (*li-yutimma ni'matahu 'alaykum*), that you may be grateful.”

At first reading, this formulation seems quite generic in the context of the Qur'ān. The statement that “God does not wish to burden you” is a commonplace in the Qur'ān, particularly in the context of special dispensations from general rules (compare verses 9:91, 22:78, 24:61, 33:37, 48:17); it can be assumed to refer to the simplicity of the rules in general and to the special provision for ablutions with dust in particular. The injunction to “be grateful” seems similarly general; gratitude is the constant stance of the believer, the opposite of the ingratitude (*kuf'r*) of the nonbeliever.¹⁴ The statement that God “wishes to purify you and complete his favor (*ni'ma*) to you,”

however, has more distinctive associations. What is the “favor” that God will fulfill in connection with these observances?

A number of indices point to the conclusion that it is to be interpreted as God’s covenant with the Muslims. This association is made explicitly in the following verse, which enjoins the believers to “Remember God’s favor to you and the covenant (*mīthāq*) with which He bound you when you said: ‘We hear and obey.’” Comparison with other passages of the Qur’ān suggests that the coordinating conjunction between *ni‘ma* and *mīthāq* does not serve to link two heterogeneous or even completely distinct items; God’s *ni‘ma*, in these contexts, is specifically the beneficence He displays towards the people of His covenant (*mīthāq*). The Qur’ān certainly contains numerous references to God’s *ni‘ma* in the generic sense of any divine favor or benefaction, including all the wonders of creation as they conduce to the comfort and well-being of humanity; however, there are enough uses of the word in a specifically covenantal context to establish a distinct pattern, particularly within Sūrat al-Mā’ida (chapter 5) and in one of the chapters most closely associated with it both lexically and thematically, Sūrat al-Baqara (chapter 2).¹⁵

God’s original *ni‘ma* upon the Children of Israel is the Abrahamic covenant. Thus, verse 2:122–24 enjoins:

O Children of Israel, remember the favor (*ni‘ma*) that I have bestowed upon you, and that I have preferred you over all humankind. Beware of a day when no soul can benefit another, when no compensation will be accepted and no intercession will be of use, neither will anyone be aided. [Remember] when [*idh*] Abraham’s Lord tested him with words, and he fulfilled (*atamma*) them, He said, “I will, indeed, make you a leader of humankind.” [Abraham] said, “And my descendants?” [God] said, “My covenant (*‘ahdī*) does not include evildoers.”

Here, God’s injunction to remember his favor (*ni‘ma*) is followed by an account of the covenant of Abraham, an agreement that is sealed by the imposition of certain commandments.

The word *ni‘ma* is also closely associated with the story of Moses and the events of the Exodus. Verses 2:47–48 open an extended sequence on this subject with the injunction,

O Children of Israel! Remember the blessing/favor (*ni‘ma*) that I have bestowed upon you, and that I have preferred you over all humankind. Beware of a day when no soul can benefit another, when no intercession will be accepted and no compensation will

be received, neither will anyone be aided. [Remember] when [*idh*]
We delivered you from Pharaoh's people,

This sequence, which is thematically cohesive up to about verse 70, culminates with the covenant at Sinai and its violation by the Israelites. The same linkage occurs in verses 5:20–21, which enjoin the People of the Book to

[Remember] when Moses said to his people, “O people, remember how God blessed/favored you (*udhkurū ni'mat Allāh 'alaykum*) by making prophets among you, making you kings, and giving you what none other among humankind have been given. O people, enter the Holy Land which God has assigned to you; do not turn back and return in ignominy.”¹⁶

God's *ni'ma* is thus associated with both of the major covenantal events of Hebrew salvation history, the initial promise to Abraham (which is here clearly disengaged from his physical lineage and made conditional on obedience to God) and the communal affirmation at Mount Sinai. The association between the story of Moses and the concept of *ni'ma* is close enough to prompt wordplay on the motif; it is surely not accidental when, in response to a plea for gratitude for his upbringing as an orphan in the royal household, Moses sarcastically asks Pharaoh in verse 26:22, “Is this a favor you are bestowing on me (*tilka ni'ma tamunnuhā 'alayya*), enslaving the Children of Israel?”¹⁷ As we will see, this is a very significant context for the opening passage of Sūrat al-Mā'ida in general and verse 6 (the rules relating to ablution) in particular.

The linkage between *ni'ma* and covenant is particularly constant in combination with other elements appearing with it in our passage: the preposition *'alā* (to, upon); the imperative of the verb *dhakara*, to remember; the verb *atamma*, to complete; and the idea of fear of God, expressed through any of a set of synonymous roots (*w-q-y*, *kh-w-f*, *r-h-b*). This complex finds almost complete expression in chapter 2 (al-Baqara), verse 40, which admonishes, “Children of Israel, remember the favor I have bestowed upon you (*udhkurū ni'matī llatī an'amtū 'alaykum*). Be true to your covenant with Me, and I will be true to Mine to you (*awfū bi-'ahdī ūfī bi-'ahdikum*). Dread My power (*irhabūni*, rhyming with *ittaqūni* in the following verse).”

With respect to the verb “*atamma*,” it may be appropriate in this context to translate it as “to fulfill” rather than “to perfect” or “to complete.” This reading is supported by verse 2:124, which states that “his Lord put Abraham to the proof by enjoining on him certain commandments and Abraham fulfilled

(*atamma*) them.” The link between *ni‘ma* as covenant and the verb “*atamma*” is reinforced by verse 12:6, where Jacob says to Joseph: “ ‘Your Lord will choose you; He will teach you to interpret sayings, and will perfect His favor to you and to the house of Jacob, as he perfected it to your forefathers Abraham and Isaac before you.” I would argue that this statement could just as well be read “He will fulfill His covenant with you and with the house of Jacob, as He fulfilled [His covenant] with your fathers Abraham and Isaac before you.”¹⁸

The connection between the theme of memory (“*udhkurū*”) and that of covenant is an obvious one: just as the Israelites sealed their covenant with “your God who brought you out of Egypt,” the Muslim community’s sense of its covenantal relationship with God is based on the remembrance of God’s salvific acts on its behalf. The links among *mīthāq*, *ni‘ma*, and divine aid are articulated by verses 33:7–9:

[Remember] when (*idh*) We took a covenant from the the prophets, from you, and from Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus the son of Mary; We took a strict covenant from them, that [God] may ask the truthful about their truth—[God] has prepared a painful punishment for unbelievers! O believers, remember God’s blessing/favor upon you (*udhkurū ni‘mat Allāh ‘alaykum*) when troops approached you and We sent a wind against them, and troops that you did not see. God has insight into all that you do.

Like the Israelites, who were delivered from the superior forces of Pharaoh by God’s special favor, the Muslim community has enjoyed divine intervention in its conflict with the pagan Meccans. This close connection between the concept of the covenant and that of divine aid in battle with a superior foe creates the occasion for the final motif in this set, the admonition “Do not fear them; fear Me.” The general idea is that one should not be deterred from fulfilling one’s (covenantal) obligation to obey God’s commandments by the fear of merely human opposition. The paradigmatic failure to observe this principle is that of the children of Israel, who refused to enter the Promised Land for fear of the race of giants that inhabited it (see verses 5:20–24). The Muslim community should not repeat this mistake in their conflict with the Meccans.



The linkage between the verse instituting the law of ritual purity and the idea of the covenantal community is reinforced by the context of the verse in *Sūrat al-Mā’ida*. Since the concept of context in the *Qur’ān* is a somewhat problematic one, it is appropriate to make a few remarks about it here. As is well known, the *Qur’ān* is not traditionally understood to have been revealed

consecutively, nor is it believed to have always come down in long continuous sections. The order of the *sūras* (chapters), insofar as it reflects the traditional chronology of revelation at all, is very roughly reverse chronological.¹⁹ Within this schema, each individual chapter may or may not represent a single moment in the process of revelation. Frequently, the traditional data about the chronology of revelation state that various verses within a single chapter were revealed at different times, often some in Mecca and the others in Medina.²⁰ Whatever value we attribute to these data, which may well have been shaped by an effort to establish the early date of verses considered by later jurisprudence to be abrogated by other legislation,²¹ the form of the text of the Qur'ān in itself strongly suggests discontinuity. The innumerable places where the text is at least superficially disjointed, the many abrupt shifts in subject matter or mode of address, recommend caution in the deployment of any concept of context.²²

However, I would argue that in this case it is quite possible to detect an extended thematic context for the verses prescribing ablutions before prayer, one which allows us to reach some conclusions about the meaning of ablution (and, by extension, of ritual purity in general) within the Qur'ānic worldview. More specifically, I would argue that the beginning of *Sūrat al-Mā'ida* displays a degree of thematic unity that suggests that it is in some sense a cohesive whole.²³ In view of this overarching thematic unity, I will suggest, thematic context is a meaningful interpretive concept. Having made this case for *Sūrat al-Mā'ida*, I hope to demonstrate that a similar thematic coloring characterizes the other chapters and passages where references to rules of ritual purity occur.

The text of the opening passage of *Sūrat al-Mā'ida* runs as follows:

[1] O believers, be true to your covenants. Permitted (*uḥillat*) to you are all domestic beasts, except those that are enumerated to you. Do not deem it permissible (*ghayr muḥillī*) to hunt when you are in a state of taboo/interdiction as pilgrims (*ḥurum*); indeed, God decrees as He wills. [2] O believers, do not profane (*tuḥillū*) God's prescribed rites, not the sacred month (*al-shahr al-ḥarām*), nor beasts that have been brought and garlanded for sacrifice, nor people who come to the Sacred House (*al-bayt al-ḥarām*) seeking the favor and satisfaction of their Lord. When you are freed of the taboos of pilgrimage (*idhā ḥalaltum*), you may hunt. Do not allow your anger against a group of people who have blocked you from access to the Sacred Mosque (*al-masjid al-ḥarām*) tempt you to transgress. Aid one another in right-doing and piety; do not aid one another in sin and transgression. Fear God; indeed, God's punishment is severe. [3] Forbidden to you (*ḥurrimat*

'*alaykum*) are carrion, blood, the meat of pigs, and that which has been dedicated to [a deity] other than God; animals that have been strangled, bludgeoned to death, fallen from cliffs, or been gored to death; or those that have been [partially] eaten by wild beasts, unless you are able to slaughter them before they expire; and that which is slaughtered on pagan altars. [It is also forbidden for you] to distribute the meat by arrow divination; that is a corrupt practice (*fīsq*). Today, the unbelievers have despaired of [overcoming] your religion; do not fear them, fear Me. Today I have perfected your religion for you and completed My blessing/favor upon you; I have chosen islām for your religion. [As for] anyone who is compelled [to eat forbidden meat] by hunger, without any inclination to sin, God is forgiving and merciful. [4] They ask you what is permitted (*uḥilla*) to them. Say: Permitted (*uḥilla*) to you are all pure foods, and that which you have taught birds of prey and dogs to hunt, teaching them as God has taught you; eat what they catch for you, and mention God's name over it. Be aware of God; indeed, God's requital is swift. [5] Today all pure foods have been made permissible (*uḥilla*) to you; the food of the People of the Book is permitted (*hill*) to you, and your food is permissible (*hill*) to them; [also permitted] are chaste believing women and chaste women from among those who were given the Book before you, if you pay them their due in marriage, not in wantonness, and without taking illicit partners. Whoever denies faith, his works are in vain and he will be among the losers in the next world. [6] O believers! When you arise to pray, wash your faces and your hands up to the elbows; wipe your heads and [wash?] your feet up to the ankles. If you are sexually polluted, purify yourselves. If you are sick or traveling, or one of you has relieved himself [lit: "come from the privy"], or you have touched women, and you do not find water, go to clean sand/dust and wipe your faces and hands with it. God does not desire to burden you, but He wishes to purify you and to complete his favor upon you, that you may be grateful. [7] Remember God's favor to you and His covenant by which He bound you when you said, "We hear and we obey." Fear God; indeed, God is aware of what is within your breasts. [8] O you who believe, be steadfast towards God and stand in witness for equity. Do not let anger against a group of people tempt you not to act justly; act justly, for it is closer to piety, and be aware of God. Indeed, God, is informed of what you do. [9] God has promised those who believe and do good works forgiveness and a great reward. [10] Those who dis-

believe and scoff at Our signs, they are the denizens of Hell. [11] O believers, remember God's favor to you when a group of people stretched out their hands against you and He prevented them from harming you. Be aware of God; upon God may the believers rely. [12] God took a covenant from the Children of Israel and sent forth twelve headmen from among them. God said, "I am with you. If you establish prayer, give the prescribed alms, believe in My messengers and support them, and give a goodly loan to God, I will forgive your sins and bring you into gardens beneath which rivers flow. Whoever of you disbelieves after that has strayed from the straight path." [13] Because they violated their covenant, We cursed them and hardened their hearts. They twist words, and have forgotten part of that of which they were reminded. You will always find treachery from them, except for a few of them. [Yet,] pardon them and forgive them; God loves those who do good. [14] From those who call themselves Nazarenes We [also] took a covenant, and they have [also] forgotten part of that of which they were reminded. So We incited enmity and dissension among them until the Day of Resurrection; God will inform them of what they used to do.

At first glance, the opening verses of *Sūrat al-Mā'ida* seem to present a scattering of loosely linked ritual prescriptions relating to the pilgrimage and dietary restrictions. Careful reading, however, suggests that this passage displays a fairly striking degree of lexical and thematic unity. Far from being a motley set of individual injunctions, it is revealed as a compact and multifaceted exploration of the concepts of the licit and the proscribed, the permitted and the forbidden, giving substance to the initial demand that believers fulfill their obligations.²⁴ This unity is thrown into relief when we examine the underlying patterns pervading the individual statements in the passage, rather than focusing on the degree of direct logical linkage between each pair of consecutive verses.

The two opening verses, both of which are fairly lengthy, are unified by a repetitive and multifaceted use of the complementary pair "permitted/forbidden" (*h-l/h-r-m*) that establishes a pattern extending throughout the opening passage. Although these two roots admittedly relate to a basic theme of the Qur'ān as a whole, the density and—if the word may be permitted—playfulness of their deployment in this passage points to its distinctive qualities. This special character can be defined even on the level of a straightforward word count: *Sūrat al-Mā'ida* contains five of the Qur'ān's nine uses of the word "*uḥilla*" (including the feminine form, "*uḥillat*") and both of the two incidences of "*ḥill*." Verse one informs the believers that certain livestock

(the precise meaning of “*bahīmat al-an‘ām*” is disputed by the Arabic exegetes) are permitted to them as food, “*uḥillat lakum*,” but warns them that they should not consider it permissible to hunt while on the pilgrimage: *ghayra muḥillī aṣ-ṣayd*, the same (fourth) form of the verb now appearing as an active participle referring to the believers themselves. The reference to the pilgrimage is achieved by specifying that the believers should not hunt when they are “*ḥurum*,” interdicted or taboo; technically, the word refers to the exceptional state of ritual purity assumed during the pilgrimage rites, but lexically it is the converse of “*ḥill*,” the status of the livestock.

Verse 2 begins by reiterating verse 1’s use of the fourth form of *ḥ-l-l* with the believers as subject, with a slight but significant shift in meaning: instead of forbidding the believers to *declare lawful* the game which God has forbidden them to hunt during the pilgrimage, verse 2 forbids them to *violate* God’s holy institutions. This carries us one step further from the root meaning of the verb, but it is firmly tied into the web of associations by the pattern already established. The pattern is continued by two uses of the word *ḥarām* (literally, “forbidden”) to mean *holy*, in the two phrases “holy month” and “holy house.” The verse proceeds to state that hunting is permitted after the pilgrimage rites have been completed and the pilgrim has reentered his ordinary state; you may hunt “*idhā ḥalaltum*,” literally, “when you become *ḥill*, permissible,” that is, no longer *ḥarām/muḥrim*, taboo. Verse 3, listing forbidden foodstuffs, begins with the verb “*ḥurrimat*”; this passive feminine singular perfect verb directly mirrors the “*uḥillat*” of verse 1. In a punning use of a root aurally similar to “*uḥilla*,” one of the interdicted items is described as “*mā uḥilla li-ghayr allāh bihi*,” that which has been dedicated to someone/thing other than God. This pattern is sustained, although with a lower density and lesser complexity, in verses 4 and 5. Verse 4 once again deals with the permissibility of certain classes of foodstuffs (in this case, game hunted with the aid of dogs), while verse 5 moves from permissible foodstuffs (the foods of the People of the Book) to permissible marriage partners.

An apparent rupture of this thematic continuity occurs in the middle of verse 3, beginning with the word “today” (*al-yawm*). For those who are willing to contemplate the possibility of disruption in the Qur’ānic text, it is possible to hypothesize that the middle of this verse represents an interruption of the original context. If the unusual length and stylistic and thematic unevenness of the verse did not suffice, the close connection between the beginning and end of the verse would be enough to suggest an intrusion. The list of forbidden foods at the beginning of the verse and the closing statement that the believer may consume them under duress clearly belong together; this tight logical nexus contrasts with the apparently loose thematic connection between either statement and the intervening statement about the establishment of the religion of Islam.

However, while its precise placement is perhaps puzzling, the middle of verse 3 is not an extraneous interruption in the context of the passage as a whole; on the contrary, it is thematically very consistent. One element of unity is, of course, the statement that God has “completed My favor (*ni'matī*) to you.” The close association between this statement and the following verses is signalled by recurrent references to God’s “favor” (*ni'ma*) later in the passage. The use of this term in verse 6 has already been discussed. Similarly, verses 7 and 11 both enjoin the believers to “remember God’s favor (*ni'ma*) to you.” As has been argued above, this favor is to be interpreted specifically as God’s bestowal of His covenant on the community of believers. The injunction to “have no fear of them; fear Me” similarly reflects a recurring element of the complex of motifs associated with the concept of the covenant, as already discussed.

The web of associations surrounding the concept of *ni'ma* is not the only indicator that the opening passage of Sūrat al-Mā'ida should be read in the light of the covenantal motif. In the verses following the description of the *wuḍū'* ablutions (verse 6), the density of covenantal language reaches a peak. The next eight verses contain no less than four uses of the word *mīthāq*, covenant (out of a total of twenty-five in the Qur'ān as a whole, three of which refer to pacts between tribes). Verses 6 through 11 comprise a general exhortation of the believers to fulfill their obligations to God, combining references to God’s *ni'ma* (verses 6, 7, 11), His *mīthāq* (verse 7), and, in verse 10, His promise (*wa'd*): “God has promised those who have faith and do good works forgiveness and a rich reward.” This sequence is followed by a narrative treatment of the theme, a terse summary of God’s successive covenants and their repudiation by their recipients, starting with the Israelites (verses 12–13) and moving through the Christians (verses 14–15).

Another highly significant instance of covenantal language in these verses is the formula “*sami'nā wa aṭa'nā*,” “we hear and obey” (verse 7), which specifically evokes the covenant at Sinai. This formula closely approximates the Hebrew words attributed to the Children of Israel in Deuteronomy 5:27 when, sending Moses up to the mountain to relay God’s bidding, they aver that “we will hear and do” (*ve-shama'nū ve-asīnū*). The Qur'ān never attributes these precise words to the Children of Israel; however, in a polemical pun clearly evoking the Hebrew wording of the Bible, it twice alludes to the original context of the formula. In verse 2:92–93, God instructs the Prophet to remind the Jews of their ill-treatment of Moses and recounts: “When We made a covenant with you and raised the Mount above you, saying: ‘Take what We have given you with willing hearts and hear Our commandments,’ you replied: ‘We hear but disobey (*sami'nā wa-aṣaynā*).’” The phonological similarity between the Arabic *aṣaynā*, “we disobey,” and the Hebrew *asīnū*, “we will do,” of the biblical formula allows the Qur'ānic

text simultaneously to allude to the original covenantal undertaking of the Children of Israel and to evoke their recalcitrance in the very words of their commitment.

Judging from the evidence of the Qur'ān, this formula would seem to have been unusually significant for the early Muslim community as well as for the community which saw its origins in the events at Sinai. On the one hand, as an expression of unquestioning obedience to a commander, it is represented as a practical statement of submission to the authority of the Prophet in his capacity as legal arbiter and military leader. Thus, verse 24:50 notes that “when true believers are called to God and His apostle that he may pass judgement upon them, their only reply is: ‘We hear and obey.’” However, the words also seem to have the force of a confession of faith; in the same passage (24:48), this compliant attitude on the part of the believers is contrasted with that of individuals who “declare: ‘We believe in God and the Apostle and obey.’ But no sooner do they utter these words than some among them turn their backs. Surely these are no believers.” The promise of obedience is linked with the statement of faith, which is invalidated by disobedience. The credal context of the formula is best reflected in the final sequence of Sūrat al-Baqara (verses 285–86), which almost certainly represents a fragment of early liturgy. After listing the main articles of faith (believers “all believe in God and His angels, His scriptures, and His apostles: We discriminate against none of His apostles”), it states that the believers

say: ‘We hear and obey. Grant us Your forgiveness, Lord; to You we shall all return. God does not charge a soul with more than it can bear. It shall be requited for whatever good and whatever evil it has done. Lord, do not be angry with us if we forget or lapse into error. Lord, do not lay on us the burden You laid on those before us. Lord, do not charge us with more than we can endure. Pardon us, forgive us our sins, and have mercy upon us. You alone are our Protector. Give us victory over the unbelievers.’

Recognizing the centrality of the motif of the covenant in verses 6 through 15 of Sūrat al-Mā'ida reveals a deeper link with the opening verses of the chapter than the stylistic factors mentioned above. It has already been argued that the opening verses are not an arbitrary collection of relatively trivial rules, but a set of variations on the theme of injunction and prohibition, an exploration of the basic categories of *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām*. In essence, they are less about specific rules than about the existence of rules imposed by God and the obligation to adhere to them. This thematic ground makes them unusually appropriate for a covenantal context. It is the acceptance of the covenant that makes divine injunctions binding; conversely, it is the imposi-

tion of divinely-bestowed rules that seals the covenant. Thus, in the context of the Hebrew Bible Gerhard van Rad has argued that “there can be no doubt that it is the proclamation of the Decalogue over her which puts Israel’s election into effect”; in general, “according to antiquity’s understanding, entry into a special relationship with a god was inconceivable without the acceptance and binding recognition of specific ordinances.”²⁵



The passage at the beginning of Sūrat al-Mā’ida containing the Qur’ānic description of the *wuḍū’* ablutions displays one peculiarity that makes it practically unique among Qur’ānic passages. This is its usage, twice repeated (verses 3, 5), of the word “*al-yawm*” in the adverbial accusative to mean “today.” What is unique is not simply the appearance of the word in this meaning, as there are a number of passages in which it occurs, but the fact that in this case it apparently refers to the occasion of the passage’s own original promulgation. Unlike most other passages in the Qur’ān, this sequence evokes a specific point of time at which it was made public; whether this is to be taken as the residue of a specific historical present or as a rhetorical device, of course, remains to be determined. The unusual character of the passage comes into relief when we compare it with the other Qur’ānic usages of the word “*al-yawm*” to mean “today.” In almost all other cases, the word refers to the Day of Judgment. Here there are two variations in usage: either it occurs within the speech of a participant in the drama of judgment, or it appears within a description of the terrors of that day so intense as to make its events imaginatively present.

As it is implausible that our passage, which deals with an extremely this-worldly catalog of behavioral imperatives, similarly fits into an eschatological scenario, only a few options remain. One argument would suggest that this passage represents the text of a speech. This might be a speech that was actually delivered on a historical occasion by the figure implied (the Prophet Muḥammad, inspired by God), or an example of pseudepigraphy or *Nachdichtung*. The first of these options, of course, may be either extremely orthodox or extremely revisionist in its tendency, depending on whether one wishes to ascribe priority to the text as historical document or to the text as Qur’ān. To suggest that God revealed a text which was then delivered as an address by Muḥammad is to follow a highly traditional paradigm (although, in the case of this passage, without specific traditional warrant);²⁶ to suggest that it was first delivered as an address and subsequently incorporated into the Qur’ānic canon is quite unorthodox. The notion of *Nachdichtung*, of course, is unavoidably revisionist.

All of these options are interesting and knotty ones, with serious implications for one’s attitude towards the text of the Qur’ān as a whole. However,

they are not immediately relevant to our main concern, which is to establish the thematic context for the promulgation of the rules governing *wuḍūʿ*. For the traditionalist and the revisionist alike, this thematic context may well be assumed to include an implied link with some juncture in the life of the Prophet Muḥammad. The traditional position holds that the various passages of the Qurʾān were revealed at specific points in a historically known prophetic biography, while the revisionist sees an equally intimate association between Qurʾānic text and prophetic biography arising not from the progress of revelation within the career of the Prophet but from their common origin in a process of community formation and canonization.²⁷ In either case, we can expect a close linkage between Qurʾān and *Sīra* (the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad).

There are two junctures in the biography of the Prophet which suit the subject matter of our passage. The most obvious of these, and the one which occurred to many of the earliest commentators on the Qurʾān, is the Farewell Pilgrimage of the year ten of the Hijra (632 C.E.).²⁸ The part of the passage that suggested this context to the exegetes was the center portion of verse 3; its reference to the “perfection” of the religion and the “completion” of God’s favor upon the Muslim community inevitably suggested a culminating incident close to the end of the Prophet’s life. Although it was the tendency of the exegetes to interpret the Qurʾānic text verse by verse (or even phrase by phrase), this hypothesis might well be extended to the rest of the passage in question. Certainly the opening of the passage fits this context admirably; nothing could be more appropriate to the occasion of the Prophet’s final pilgrimage than a discussion of the rites of the *ḥajj*. However, the oldest sources for the biography of the Prophet also preserve the text of the address that the Prophet is supposed to have delivered on the occasion;²⁹ aside from the repetitive use of the phrase “O people!” which parallels the “O believers!” of our passage and reinforces the idea that it—and other, similar passages of the Qurʾān—might plausibly be regarded as a piece of oratory,³⁰ it bears no resemblance whatsoever to the opening section of Sūrat al-Māʾida.

Despite the fact that the opening of Sūrat al-Māʾida does not seem to be the text of the “Farewell Sermon,” another appropriate setting for the text does suggest itself. This is the incident known as the Truce of Ḥudaybiya. In A.H. 6 (628 C.E.), the Prophet is supposed to have set out with his followers to perform the Lesser Pilgrimage. Although the party’s exceptional ritual state and the presence of sacrificial victims were intended to signal their peaceful intentions, the Meccans treated the expedition as a potential raid and turned out in full war regalia. After a tense exchange of emissaries, it seemed that hostilities were inevitable. The apostle took oaths of allegiance from all present, the famous “*bayʿat al-riḍwān*.”³¹ In the end, the two sides negotiated a truce requiring that the Muslims withdraw for the present year; in the following year, the Meccans

would vacate the holy places so that the Muslims could perform the rites of the pilgrimage. This oath of allegiance to the Prophet by the Muslims was retrospectively regarded as one of several important foundational moments in the history of the community. This setting is appropriate to our passage because it combines its two most obvious preoccupations: the ritual requirements of the pilgrimage and the covenantal relationship between the Muslims and God. The hypothetical association between the opening portion of Sūrat al-Mā'ida and the Truce of Ḥudaybīya is greatly strengthened by the fact that the passage specifically counsels the Muslims to restrain their anger at people who have debarred them from performing the pilgrimage: “Do not allow your anger against a group of people who have blocked you from access to the Sacred Mosque (*al-masjid al-ḥarām*) tempt you to transgress” (5:2). What could be a more appropriate plea in a situation where some believers apparently felt impatient with a prudent truce?

Passages from both Qur'ān and *Sīra* suggest that this incident, in addition to being the occasion for one of the most important historical covenants binding the early Islamic community, was a focus for exploration of the motif of the covenant. The chapter traditionally understood to deal with these events, “al-Faḥ” (chapter 48),³² displays some of the same covenantal themes we have seen in the opening passage of Sūrat al-Mā'ida. The first two verses state that “We [that is, God] have given you a glorious victory so that God may forgive you your past and future sins and *perfect His goodness to you* (*yutimma ni'matahu 'alayka*), that He may guide you to a straight path and bestow on you His mighty help” (emphasis mine). Verse 10 asserts that “Those that swear fealty to you [Muḥammad], swear fealty to God Himself. The hand of God is above their hands. He that breaks his oath breaks it at his own peril, but he that keeps his pledge to God shall be richly rewarded by Him” (see also v. 48:18).

The biographical tradition similarly surrounds this incident with covenantal motifs; in this case, however, the traditions evoke the story of Moses and the events at Sinai. The *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq relates that when Muḥammad was warned of the approach of the Meccan warriors, he requested a guide who would lead the Muslims towards Mecca by another route where they would not be intercepted by the Meccans:

[A man of the tribe of Aslam] led them led them by a rough and craggy route between passes. When they emerged from it—it having been very hard on the Muslims—and came into gentle terrain at the valley's end, the Prophet said to the people, “Say, ‘We seek forgiveness from God and repent to Him.’ ” They said that, and he said, “By God, that is the *ḥiṭṭa* that was offered to the Children of Israel, and they did not say it.’ ”

After a short incident involving the Prophet's camel,

Then [the Prophet] said to the people, "Dismount!" Someone replied, "O Prophet of God, there is no water in the valley by which we could stop." [The Prophet] took an arrow from his quiver and gave it to one of his companions, who took it down into one of the [dry] waterholes and planted it within it. Water gushed forth until the people drank their fill from it.³³

These two motifs, *ḥiṭṭa* and spring, recall the story of Moses and the Children of Israel wandering in the wilderness. The word "*ḥiṭṭa*" appears only twice in the Qur'ān; although it is unclear precisely what the word itself might mean, it is associated with an incident closely associated the miracle of the springs in the story of the Children of Israel.³⁴ Verses 2:58–60 recount,

[Remember] when We said, "Enter this town and eat your fill wherever you like. Enter the door bowing down and say '*ḥiṭṭa*'; We will forgive you your sins and give bounteously to the righteous." The wrongdoers distorted what they were told; we sent down upon the wrongdoers a scourge from the sky because of their corruption. [Remember also] when Moses sought water for his people and We said, "Strike the stone with your staff"; twelve springs burst forth from it, and all the people knew their drinking places. Eat and drink of God's bounty, and do not sow corruption in the earth.³⁵

It is probably impossible to conclude with certainty whether the Farewell Pilgrimage or the Truce of Ḥudaybiya is the "original" or "true" narrative home of the opening of Sūrat al-Mā'ida within the story of the life of the Prophet. Both possibilities have found supporters among Muslim exegetes.³⁶ In either case, however, we can conclude that the implied setting is a formative moment in the crystallization of the Muslim community and the affirmation of its loyalties. The Qur'ān's fullest elaboration of its purity strictures is associated with an advanced, or even culminating, stage in the definition of the covenantal community.³⁷

Patterns within the Qur'ān

Thus far, I have argued that the immediate context of the rules relating to ablutions links them (through the concepts *ni'ma* and *mīthāq*) to the motif of the covenantal community; that the same theme dominates the larger pas-

sage in which this verse is situated; and that the most probable setting for this passage in the life of the Prophet is an episode which has served as a focus for covenantal imagery and language. Does this pattern hold for the other rules of ritual purity found in the Qur'ān? In addition to verse 5:6, the Qur'ān contains a very small number of other verses that institute practical rules of ritual purity to be observed by the Muslim community.³⁸

The second half of verse 5:6 is paralleled by another verse, 4:43:

O you who believe, do not approach your prayers when you are drunk, but wait until you can grasp the meaning of your words; nor when you are polluted—unless you are travelling the road—until you have washed yourselves; or, if you have relieved yourself or had intercourse with women and you can find no water, take some clean sand and rub your faces and your hands with it. Gracious is God and forgiving.

The general context of this verse is an extended discussion of marriage and familial relations, a theme indicated by the traditional title of the chapter, “al-Nisā” (“Women”). Its more immediate context, however, echoes the covenantal themes that we have identified in the opening passage of Sūrat al-Mā'ida. The verse is directly followed by a series of references to the infidelity of previous recipients of revelation, particularly the Jews:

[44] Consider those to whom a portion of the Scriptures was given. They purchase error for themselves and wish to see you go astray. [45] But God best knows your enemies. Sufficient is God as a protector, and sufficient is God as a helper. [46] Some Jews take words out of their context and say: ‘We hear and disobey. Hear, [but] as one bereft of hearing. Rā'īnā!’³⁹—thus distorting the phrase with their tongues and reviling the true faith. But if they said: ‘We hear and obey: hear, and look upon us,’ it would be better and more proper for them. God has cursed them in their unbelief. They have no faith, except for a few of them.

Although the immediate context of verse 4:43 is not as clearly cohesive as that of verse 5:6, there are discernible commonalities between the two, the most notable being the invocation of the covenantal formula “we hear and obey.” Here, as in the opening passage of Sūrat al-Mā'ida, it is adherence to the commands of God and His Prophet that is in question and membership in the rightly-guided covenantal community that is at stake.

One must also consider verse 9:28:

O believers, the polytheists are unclean; let them not approach the Sacred Mosque after this year. If you fear impoverishment, God will enrich you from His bounty if He so wills; God is all-knowing and wise.

This verse, unlike the previous three, has usually not been interpreted by Sunnī jurisprudence as a legal statement about ritual purity. While nonbelievers were to be barred from the Meccan sanctuary, this was not because they were impure in the technical sense but because they were morally sullied. Only Shīʿite jurists, adhering to what would seem to be the literal meaning of the text, held nonbelievers to be technically impure and drew all of the consequences dictated by the elaboration of the legal concept of *najāsa*. It would be very difficult to determine whether the Qurʾānic text “intends” this statement as a value judgment or as a technical classification, largely because this distinction is itself foreign to the Qurʾān. However, I include this verse in the set of rules relevant to ritual purity for two reasons. The first is that the traditional metaphorical interpretation seems to vitiate the sense of the verse; to state that the infidel is “unclean” in the moral sense is otiose in the context of the Qurʾān, scarcely startling enough to motivate a revolutionary change like the exclusion of a lucrative class of pilgrims from the holy places. The second, and stronger, argument is that there is no internal criterion to distinguish this statement from one like 2:222. In both cases, the text declares something to be unclean (in the case of 2:222, by implication: menstruating women must “become pure,” therefore they are unclean), then draws a behavioral consequence: unbelievers must not approach (*lā yaqrabū*) the Sacred Mosque, and men should not have contact with (*iʿtazilū; lā taqrabū*) menstruating women.

The immediate context of the verse is as follows:

[25] God has helped you on many battlefields, as on the day of Hunayn, when you were elated by your numbers, yet they were of no avail to you. Wide as the land was, it could not hold you; then you turned and fled. [26] Then God sent down His tranquility upon His Prophet and upon the believers, and sent down troops that you did not see and chastized the disbelievers; that is the recompense of disbelievers! [27] Yet, after that, God will forgive whom He will; God is forgiving and merciful. [28] O believers, the polytheists are unclean; let them not approach the Sacred Mosque after this year. If you fear impoverishment, God will enrich you from His bounty if He so wills; God is all-knowing and wise. [29] Combat such of those who were given the Book as do not believe in God and the Last Day and do not