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Michael Bonner

Poverty and Economics in the Qur'an The Qur'an provides a blueprint for a new order in society, in which the poor will be treated more fairly than before. The questions that usually arise regarding this new order of society concern its historical context. Who were the poor mentioned in the Book, and who were their benefactors? What became of them? However, the answers to these apparently simple questions have proved elusive. Few written records survive from seventh-century Arabia, the Qur'an being the greatest exception. Our main sources for the life of Muhammad and the original Muslim community are narrative texts that date no earlier than the eighth century, and are open to challenge in matters of detail, not least of all when they deal with poverty and the poor. These sources often say more about the piety and the polemics of, say, ninth-century Baghdad, than about seventh-century Mecca and Medina. This overlapping is important and interesting in itself, but scholars have only begun to sort it out.

Although no agreement on a framework for understanding the historical context of poverty in early Islam is yet in place, providing a sketch of one is worthwhile, even if it never becomes widely accepted. Since Islam in the seventh century took over much of the physical space previously occupied by the Roman Empire, it must have become heir to at least some of the late antique notions and practices regarding poverty and the poor discussed by Patlagean, Brown, and others. In other words, the treatment of the poor in early Islam is best understood in relation to what came before it, both in Arabia and in the urban Near East, as well as in relation to what occurred around it, in several of the environments and religious traditions discussed elsewhere in this

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issue. Poverty was clearly of considerable, even central, importance for early Islam itself.

But what about the Qur'an? What did so many people find convincing about it, specifically in relation to poverty and the poor? Not only did the Qur'an provide guidance for dealing with the poor; it also dominated much of the thought and behavior concerned with economic activity. Indeed, poverty and economic activity were closely tied in early Islam. A kind of "economy of poverty" prevailed in Islamic theory and practice, even after the discovery in the early tenth century of Aristotelian teachings on "economics," at least until the Syrian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), the Andalusian-North African Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), and the Egyptian al-Maqrizi (d. 1442) charted new, broader maps of this economic sphere.¹

A distinct and recognizable "Qur'anic economics" provided the basis for this "economy of poverty." At its heart was a notion of property circulated and purified, in part, through charity. Thus did donors imitate God, who made a gift of his surplus (*fadl*) and sustenance (*rizq*), without ever expecting it to be returned. Donors were to provide for the needy freely and unstintingly. These Qur'anic notions of the "purification" and "circulation" of property illustrate a distinctively Islamic way of conceptualizing charity, generosity, and poverty markedly different from "the Christian notion of perennial reciprocity between rich and poor and the ideal of charity as an expression of community love."²

The usual approach to poverty in the Qur'an is not the one outlined above. Modern scholarship mainly uses the Qur'an as a source of information about the earliest Muslim community in Arabia. Some maintain that the poor had a role in that history, and some take the poor for granted, as background for more visible

1 See Bonner, "The *Kitab al-kasb* Attributed to al-Shaybani: Poverty, Surplus, and the Circulation of Wealth," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, CXXI (2001), 410–427. The idea of "economy of poverty" has been articulated for medieval Western Europe by Giacomo Todeschini, "Quantum valet? Alle origini di un'economia della povertà," *Bullettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medioevo*, XCVIII (1992), 173–234. See also *idem*, *Il prezzo della salvezza. Lessici medievali del pensiero economico* (Rome, 1994). Translations from the Qur'an in this chapter are its author's, based on several English versions, as well as the German version of Rudi Paret, *Der Koran* (Stuttgart, 1979). The *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis) consulted derives from texts in the CD-ROM *Maktabat al-tafsir wa-'ulum al-Qur'an* (al-Turath, 1999).

2 Natalie Zemon Davis, "Conclusion," in Bonner, Mine Ener, and Amy Singer (eds.), *Poverty and Charity in Middle Eastern Contexts* (Albany, 2003), 316–317. For circulation as "return of wealth," see Bonner, "Poverty and Charity in the Rise of Islam," *ibid.*, 13–15.

developments. Those with a philological orientation often stress links with earlier religious traditions regarding care for the poor. Generally speaking, the Qur'an has been quarried for evidence of a tribal and nomadic society moving toward urban and settled conditions. Within this broad context of transition, some researchers have assigned an explanatory role to the existence, rise, or discovery of poverty and the poor.³

Behind this scholarship lies the aforementioned problem of narrative context. Though a historical document of great importance, the Qur'an is a prescriptive text that does not provide a continuous narrative. Passages of the Qur'an that speak of the community of believers and its founder Muhammad tend to resist arrangement in a narrative structure. Other narrative materials must be brought to bear on the Qur'anic text, such as the early Arabic Islamic genres of *sira*, biography of the Prophet Muhammad, and *maghazi* ("raids"), the life (and wars) of Muhammad and the early community. Narrative context was also furnished in scriptural exegesis, or *tafsir*, culminating eventually in the subgenre of *asbab al-nuzul*, "circumstances of revelation," and of *hadith*, meaning, roughly oral and written accounts, of Muhammad's authoritative words and deeds, as well as those of important figures around him.⁴

There is a disparity, however, between the Qur'an and those narratives. Whereas the poor—however defined—are the objects of urgent and repeated concern in the Qur'an, in the narratives, especially the books of *sira* and *maghazi*, they mostly are not, with a few exceptions. This difference in outlook on the poor is not merely an accident. As Hawting has recently argued regarding pre-Islamic Arabian idolatry, the concerns of the Qur'an often genuinely diverge from those of the enormous body of narrative and exegetical materials that surround it. If so, the concrete details of the Qur'an's historical context—at least in the case at hand—are largely beyond recovery. This concession does not mean that the Qur'anic teachings on poverty are without historical meaning. On

3 Bonner, "Poverty and Charity," 15–18.

4 On the *sira* and *maghazi* literature, see Martin Hinds, "'Maghazi' and 'Sira' in Early Islamic Scholarship," in *La vie du prophète Mahomet: colloque de Strasbourg, octobre 1980* (Paris, 1983), 57–66; repr. in Jere Bacharach, Lawrence I. Conrad, and Patricia Crone (eds.), *Studies in Early Islamic History* (Princeton, 1996), 188–198. See also Hinds' article "Maghazi" in Thomas H. Weir and Aaron Zysow (eds.), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden, 1960–2002) (hereinafter *EI*²), V, 1161–1164; Wim Raven, "Sira," *EI*², IX, 660–663.

the contrary, they are crucial to an understanding of early Islamic economy in every sense. However, the way to extract them is not through further unraveling of the story of Muhammad, Mecca, Quraysh, and the early Muslim community but rather through intensive analysis of the Qur'anic text wherever it relates to the poor, supplemented only sparingly by the narratives.⁵

As a prelude to the Qur'an, a brief survey of poverty and the poor as they appear in the *sira* and *maghazi* literature is useful. Muhammad was an orphan who knew deprivation in childhood and youth. Years later, when he began to receive revelations, the community that gathered around him in Mecca included people of varied tribal and social backgrounds, some of them in straitened circumstances. His revelations at this time—known as the early Meccan *suras*, or “chapters” of the Qur'an—emphasize generosity and almsgiving, probably more than any other kind of activity. The narratives of *sira* and *maghazi* supply some, though not a lot of context for these revelations.

The poor also loom large in the narratives toward the end of Muhammad's life. In Muhammad's final military campaigns, especially the expedition against Tabuk in 630 C.E., many members of the community could not afford the necessary riding animals, weapons, and supplies. Various people contributed arms, mounts and supplies to them. The *sira* and *maghazi* narratives supply context for those verses in the Qur'an, especially in the eighth and ninth *suras*, that stress the themes of participation in war and helping others to fight.⁶

The final reference to the poor in the *sira* and *maghazi* narratives concerns the institutional or involuntary alms, *zakat*, that became imposed on the community, soon after the *Hijra*, or emigration of Muhammad and his fledgling community from Mecca to Medina in 622 C.E. However, the narratives do not devote much attention to this alms-tax until seven or eight years later when they speak of administrators sent to various groups in Arabia that have just entered the larger community of Islam, to levy the *zakat* on them. Upon the death of Muhammad in 632, the *zakat*

5 Gerald R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge, 1999).

6 The most accessible English version of these Arabic narratives is Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Oxford, 1955). For the poor among the earliest community and the Tabuk episode, see *ibid.*, 143–145, 602–614.

caused (or provided a pretext for) a revolt, the war of the *ridda* or “apostasy,” throughout the Arabian peninsula, most of which had only recently entered into Islam. The fledgling Islamic state survived the revolt, and the zakat became a basic religious duty for every Muslim.⁷

If the zakat was important enough to trigger a war, why does the *sira* and *maghazi* literature have so little to say about it, until shortly before the *ridda* itself? Modern scholars have tended to look for answers in the text of the Qur'an, with only additional support from Qur'anic exegesis and the hadith. Much the same approach has applied to the welfare and fiscal regime in Medina, from the Hijra until Muhammad's death (622–632 C.E.): Modern treatments have relied less on narrative than on scripture, less on *sira* and *maghazi* than on Qur'an.

SADAQA/ZAKAT According to the scholarly and general consensus, the “raw material” of the Qur'an, the revelations of Muhammad, ended with his death in 632 C.E. They were collected—through a process that has always been an object of contention—by most accounts no later than the end of the reign of the caliph 'Uthman (656 C.E.). By this time, charitable practices were already becoming demarcated along a binary division between voluntary almsgiving, called *sadaqa*, and involuntary almsgiving, called zakat. *Sadaqa* and zakat provided the basic framework for the theory and practice of charity, including such later developments as the *waqf*, or pious endowment. In modern, mainly philological scholarship, investigation of these two concepts and of the differences between them has been the primary approach to the study of poverty and the poor in the Qur'an.⁸

The division between *sadaqa*/voluntary benefaction and zakat/involuntary alms tax is far less clear in the Qur'an than in later Islamic law and practice. One passage (9:60, Tawba) calls the alms tax *sadaqât* (in the plural). Another associates zakat with voluntary giving (3:39, Al 'Imran). Other instances seem ambiguous, for example, 2:271, Baqara: “If you make acts of charity (*sadaqat*)

7 Elias Shoufani, *Al-Riddah and the Muslim Conquest of Arabia* (Toronto, 1973); William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford, 1956), 250–260.

8 See Suleiman Bashear, “On the Origins and Development of the Meaning of Zakat in Early Islam,” *Arabica*, XL (1993), 84–113; Aaron Zysow, “Sadaka,” *EI*², VIII, 708–716; *idem*, “Zakat,” *EI*², XI, 407–408.

openly, it is well, but if you conceal them and give them to the poor (*wa-tu'tuha l-fuqara'*), it is better for you." The use of one word or the other is not so important in itself. The point is that the Qur'an emphasizes the voluntary nature of the believers' contributions and the conditions under which they make them. An involuntary contribution by a believer is nearly a contradiction in terms: "Those who slander such of the believers as give themselves freely to (deeds of) charity, together with those who find nothing to give save their own efforts, and who ridicule them: God will return their ridicule upon them, and theirs is a grievous punishment" (9:79, Tawba). If the Qur'an's view of almsgiving is not governed by the opposition of voluntary and involuntary, sadaqa and zakat, in the theory and practice of mature Islam, the idea of property itself, especially the notions of "purification" and "return," may be more fundamental.

PURIFICATION In what are conventionally called the Meccan or early suras, feeding the poor is an identifying trait of the "Companions of the Right Hand" (90:13–20, Balad). Those who deny the Day of Judgment are like those who reject the orphan and do not urge feeding the poor (107:3, Ma'un). Damnation is in store for whoever does not believe in God "and does not urge the feeding of the poor" (69:34, Haqqa). Refusal to feed the poor goes hand in hand with inordinate love of wealth: "Nay, it is you who do not honor the orphans, and do not encourage the feeding of the poor, and who devour inheritance avidly, and who love wealth inordinately" (89:17–20, Fajr). The righteous are those who "give food, though it be dear to them (*'ala hubbihi*), to the poor (*miskinan*), the orphan and the prisoner" (76:8, Dahr).⁹

Purification is mentioned explicitly when feeding the poor is named as one of the ways to expiate a sin. Whoever deliberately hunts game while in a state of consecration (*ihram*) and/or in the sacred territory must atone by bringing to the Ka'ba the offering of a domestic animal, feeding an unspecified number of poor, or performing the equivalent in fasting (5:95, Ma'ida). The expiation for breaking an oath is feeding ten poor, calculated according to what the offender feeds to his own family. Alternatively, the penitent can clothe these poor, liberate a slave, or, if these options are be-

9 On *'ala hubbihi*, see also 2: 177, Baqara. At 76: 8, Dahr, several authoritative exegetes, including Tabari, agree that the term means "even when they desire it" or "despite their love for the food." Several modern scholars translate it erroneously as "out of their love for God."

yond his means, fast for three days (5:89, Ma'ida). A man who has made an oath of repudiation of his wife (*zihar*) and who then wishes to retract it has the option of feeding sixty poor (58:4, Mujadila). In all these expiations, the poor—who are clearly present in large numbers—are identified as *masakin* (singular, *misikin*).

Another context for purification involves alms: “Take alms (*sadaqa*) from their possessions so as to cleanse and purify them with [the alms], and pray on their behalf” (9:103, Tawba). Classical Arabic lexicography derived *zakat* from the the root *zky*, which has to do with purifying: *Zakat* is that which purifies wealth. Modern philologists have likewise found that this word was borrowed from other semitic languages in which it means “purity” or “merit.” Keeping property intact requires destroying a piece of it.¹⁰

CIRCULATION The Qur'anic injunction to make goods circulate is even more distinctive. One well-known passage concerns *riba*, “increase,” which in mature Islamic law means “usury” or something like it. In the Qur'an, *riba* occurs several times, hovering between the economies of commerce and gift: “The *riba* that you give, so that it may increase in the wealth of the people, does not increase with God. But the *zakat* that you give out of a desire for the countenance of God: Those are the ones whose [wealth] is doubled” (30:39, Rum). This verse contrasts some kind of bad circulation (*riba*) with some kind of good circulation (*zakat*). The medieval exegetes were largely agreed that *riba* in this context means a gift from one man to another, in the hope that he will receive a greater gift in return. Some identified it, no doubt correctly, with Arabian custom before Islam. The Andalusian exegete al-Qurtubi (d. 1272) noted the ambiguity in Rum between the vocabularies of sale and gift (*lafz al-bay' wa-lafz al-hiba*).¹¹

Another important instance of circulation occurs in 59:7,

10 See Georges Bataille, *La part maudite* (Paris, 1967). On *zakat*, *sadaqa*, and their semitic cognates, see Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* (Baroda, 1938), 153; Zysow, “Sadaka” and “Zakat,” *ET*²; Bashear, “On the Origins.”

11 Ibrahim al-Nakha'i (d. 715) is cited in Tabari's *Bayan*, no. 21317 (referring to Qur'an 30:39), as saying “This used to happen in the *jahiliyya* [pre-Islamic Arabia], when one of them would give property to one of his kinsmen, to make his wealth increase in him.” Other early exegetes give different definitions of *riba*: Sa'id b. Jubayr (*Bayan*, no. 21308) calls it a gift given to reward someone for something; Mujahid (*Bayan*, no. 21309) explains it as referring to gifts in general (*hadaya*). Closer to the more familiar sense of “usury” is Mujahid's rendering of *riba* as “when a man gives his money (*mal*) desiring to obtain more of it” (*Bayan*, no. 21310). Most of the commentators, however, define *riba* as a gift given in the hope of a greater gift in return.

Hashr: “That which God has bestowed on His Messenger (*ma afa’a llahu*) from the people of the towns is for God and His Messenger, and for him who is close [generally understood, to the Messenger], for the orphans, for the poor (*al-masakin*) and for the traveler (*ibn al-sabil*), lest it become something that circulates among the rich among you (*kay la yakuna dulatan bayna l-aghniya’i minkum*).” This is probably the clearest statement in the Qur’an relating to the proper circulation of goods. The identification of bad circulation as that between the rich is reinforced by numerous hadiths to the same effect. *Ma afa’a llahu*, “that which God has bestowed,” means literally “that which God has caused to return.” The characteristics of good circulation, beyond some sense of “return” is not easy to determine.¹²

The exegetical tradition provided three explanations of this verse. First, the verse might be referring to the Prophet alone. This interpretation is based on a narrative: Muhammad came into possession of goods that had formerly belonged to the Jewish clans of Qurayza and Qaynuqa’, and the verse instructed him about how to dispose of those goods. The second interpretation holds, plausibly, that the passage dictates how the spoils of war are to be divided among the named categories (God, Messenger, relatives, orphans, poor people, and travelers). The third interpretation is that the verse refers to the revenue accruing to the Islamic state from taxes paid by non-Muslim protected peoples (*ahl al-dhimma*) living under the rule of Islam. It reflects the evolution of juridical thought regarding the land regime and, in particular, the fiscal principle based on this passage of the Qur’an that became known as *fay’*. Note in any case that no one maintains that this verse was about alms.¹³

RECIPIENTS In numerous parts of the Qur’an, the poor appear, among other categories, on “lists” as the recipients of distributions. One such well-known list is 8:41, Anfal: “And know that regarding whatever you take as spoils, a fifth of it is for God, for the Mes-

12 For hadith on the “return of wealth,” see Bonner, “Definitions of Poverty and the Rise of the Muslim Urban Poor,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, VI (1996), 339–341; *idem*, “Poverty and Charity,” 13–15. *Ma afa’a* and *fay’* are identified as “return” throughout the exegetical and legal literature. Tabari defines it in this passage as “that which God has returned to his Messenger.”

13 See Frede Løkkegaard, “Fay’,” *EI*², II, 869–870; Werner Schmucker, *Untersuchungen zu einigen wichtigen bodenrechtlichen Konsequenzen der islamischen Eroberungsbewegung* (Bonn, 1973).

senger, for him who is close [to the Messenger], for the orphans, for the poor (*al-masakin*) and for the traveler (*ibn al-sabil*).” These recipients are the same as those in 59:7, Hashr, above, although this verse is clearly about the division of spoils, corresponding to the second exegetical interpretation. Some of the exegetes who argued for this interpretation maintained that the passage in Anfal abrogated the one in Hashr—in other words, that the Anfal passage superseded the Hashr one because it was revealed to Muhammad at a later time. The new and definitive ruling was that those who had participated in the fight were entitled to four-fifths of the spoils, whereas those in the named categories had to split the remaining one-fifth among themselves.

Another well-known list, in 9:60, Tawba, identifies the recipients of alms: “Alms (*al-sadaqat*) are for the destitute and the poor (*lil-fuqara’ wal-masakin*), for those who have responsibility for administering them (*al-‘amilin ‘alayha*), for those whose hearts [are to be] reconciled (*al-mu’allafa qulubuhum*), for slaves, for debtors, and for [fighting for] the sake of God, and for the traveler (*ibn al-sabil*): an injunction from God, and God is knowing and just.” This list leaves out God and the Messenger. It has two categories in common with the previous two lists (the poor and travelers), but is more complex. The exegetes and jurists exerted considerable effort on the difference between “destitute” and “poor,” *fuqara’* and *masakin*. One popular view is that *fuqara’* means the passive poor, those who ask for nothing, whereas *masakin* refers to those who beg. Another view is that the *fuqara’* signifies those who are chronically ill or weak, whereas *masakin* denotes the sound of body. It is also a possibility that the two words refer to one object, as a hendiadys. This list also names an administrator or collector, clear evidence for an organized system, on the order of a zakat. “Those whose hearts are to be reconciled” is a familiar category from the narratives. Even with the narratives bracketed, however, the category makes sense in a general way. The exegetical literature identified slaves as *mukatab* when buying their own freedom. Debtors may seem a fairly transparent category. “For the sake of God” is generally understood to mean for those fighting in the war.¹⁴

14 The phrase, “those whose hearts are reconciled [won over],” *al-mu’allafa qulubuhum*, is applied in the narratives (not directly in the Qur’an itself) to former opponents of Muhammad who were won over to the cause of Islam by presents made out of the spoils from the

The poor also appear in the context of dividing an inheritance: “But if, at the time of division [of the inheritance], the kinfolk (*ulu l-qurba*), the orphans and the poor (*al-masakin*) are present, then make them a present (or feed them, *fa-rzuquhum*) from it [the property] and speak kindly to them” (4:86, Nisa’). Notwithstanding the appearance of “relatives” rather than “relatives of the Messenger,” the three categories of recipients are the same as in the first two lists.

The poor also appear in calls for generosity, piety, and other virtues in four passages: (1) “Worship God and associate nothing with Him. And [show] kindness to your parents (*wa-bil-walidayni ihsanan*) and to your kinsman (*wa-bi-dhil-qurba*), to the orphans, to the poor (*al-masakin*), to the sojourner who is related to you and the sojourner who is not (*wal-jari dhi l-qurba wal-jari l-junubi*), to the companion by your side (*wal-sahibi bil-janbi*), to the traveler, and to that which your right hand possesses [universally interpreted as your slaves]; God does not love the arrogant and boastful” (4:36, Nisa’). (2) “Piety (*al-birr*) does not consist in turning your faces toward East and West. It consists rather in a person’s believing in God, the Last Day, the Angels, the Book and the Prophets; and in his giving his property/money, despite his love for it, to his relatives (*dhawi l-qurba*), the orphans, the poor, the traveler, the beggars (*al-sa’ilin*), and to the slaves, and in his performing the prayer and in giving zakat” (2:177, Baqara). (3) “When they ask you what they should expend, say: Whatever you expend in charity (*ma anfaqtum min khayr*) should be for your parents, your kinfolk (*al-aqrabin*), the orphans, the poor (*al-masakin*) and the traveler. God is all-knowing regarding what you give in charity” (2:215, Baqara). (4) “Let not those of you who enjoy surplus and ease (*ulu l-fadli minikum wal-sa’a*) make an oath not to give to their kinfolk (*uli l-qurba*), to the poor (*al-masakin*) and to those who have emigrated for the sake of God. Let them pardon and forgive (*wal-ya’fu wal-yasfahu*). Do you not want for God to pardon you? God is forgiving and merciful” (24:22, Nur).

These lists, of which more could be cited, name recipients for

battle of Hunayn: See Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 594–595; Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, 73–75, 348–353; *idem*, “al-Mu’allafa Kulubuhum,” *EI*², VII, 254. On the *mukatab* slave, see Robert Brunschvig, “Abd,” *EI*², I, 30. On debtors, see Irene Schneider, *Kinderverkauf und Schuld knechtschaft. Untersuchungen zur frühen Phase des islamischen Rechts* (Stuttgart, 1999).

several kinds of distribution and benefaction, not only almsgiving (*sadaqa* and *zakat*). Some of the recipients appear only once, and others—such as orphans, parents, and beggars—reappear constantly. Most common is the triad of kinsfolk, poor, and travelers, which deserves a closer look.

The clear consensus among the exegetes is that *dhu l-qurba* means “kinsman” or “relative.” In those few passages that name the Messenger (the Prophet) as a recipient, the *dhu l-qurba* comes right after him. All of the interpreters agree that the kinsman means specifically “the kinsman of the Prophet,” exerting much effort to determine precisely which kinsman was intended. Note, however, that only the *tafsir*, the exegesis, makes this identification. The exegetical literature defines *ibn al-sabil*, literally “son of the road,” as someone encountered by chance who is in need. Some exegetes define him as the guest, entitled to three days’ hospitality—after which his entertainment becomes *sadaqa*, voluntary alms. One way or another, he is someone unknown, as opposed to the kinsman. Both kinsman and wayfarer are classes of the poor. Who, then, is the *miskin*? Perhaps his place in the middle of the triad defines him; it is not clear whether he is known.

The ambiguity attached to the *miskin* applies much less to the other common term for “poor” in the Qur’an, *faqir* and its plural *fuqara’*. Sometimes this term appears simply in contrast to the notion of “rich,” “not wanting.” For the most part, however, the *fuqara’* in the Qur’an are well imbedded in context. One of these contexts is the human condition in general. At 35: 15, Fatir, God addresses humanity, “Oh people! You are the ones in need of God; but God is the one who is free of want, worthy of praise.” The gist of 47: 38, Muhammad, seems similar, “and God is the one free of want, while you are the needy.” However, in this passage God is berating stingy members who fail to spend their substance in the path of God.

A further narrowing of context is located in a passage already mentioned, 59: 8, Hashr, in which those who receive “that which God has bestowed on his Messenger” are further defined as “the emigrant poor (*al-fuqara’ al-muhajirun*) who were expelled from their homes and their property, desiring bounty (*fadlan*) and favor (*ridan*) from their Lord.” Even without the well-known narrative context supplied by the books of *sira* and *maghazi*, this passage of Qur’an reveals that this group is central to the community, if

not identical to it. At 2: 271, 273, Baqara, the fuqara' are meritorious, "shamefaced" poor who deserve charitable expenditure (*ma tunfiquna min khayr*) for their very modesty. When the pilgrims make their sacrifice, they are enjoined to "eat of it and feed the poor distressed" (22:28, Hajj).

Décobert described the fuqara' of the Qur'an as the "inner" poor and the masakin as the "outer" poor. The difference between them may be better described as the poor whom we know and who in some way belong (fuqara') and the unsettling, ambiguous poor whom we may or may not know (masakin). The uncertainty surrounding the masakin has a profound effect on what this article terms "Qur'anic economics."¹⁵

SURPLUS AND RECIPROCITY Bravmann noted a theme in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, as well as in the prose narratives that supply context on it (much in the way that maghazi and sira narratives supplement the Qur'an), that those who have a surplus (*'afw* or *fadl*) ought to give all or part of it away. Bravmann also pointed to a similar admonition. In certain parts of the Qur'an, *fadl*, usually translated as "divine grace," retains a more concrete sense of "surplus wealth" (for example, 24: 22, Nur; 62: 9–10, Jumu'a; and 59: 8, Hujurat). As 9: 28, Tawba, says, "God will make you wealthy/will give you surplus out of his fadl."¹⁶

Where *fadl* occurs in the Qur'an with this ambiguity, meaning divine surplus, divine grace, or both, an exhortation to the believers to reciprocate through their own generosity, and thereby to receive more of God's bounty, usually also occurs: "Remember God abundantly, so you may prosper" (62: 10, Jumu'a). Just as God distributes his surplus as a gift that cannot be reciprocated (sometimes in the Qur'an called *rizq*, sustenance), so should the believer bestow his gifts. The one passage in the Qur'an that refers to an individual as poor concerns God speaking to the Messenger: "Did he not find you in need, and give you wealth/make you independent? . . . Therefore, do not treat the orphan harshly, do not

15 Christian Décobert, *Le mendiant et le combattant. L'institution de l'islam* (Paris, 1991). On the unknown miskin, see also the Qur'anic parable of the garden (68: 24), where the unjust owners mutter, "let no miskin enter it [the garden] today" (referring to the right of the poor to glean the harvest).

16 M. Bravmann, "The Surplus of Property: An Early Arab Social Concept," in *The Spiritual Background of Early Islam* (Leiden, 1972), 229–253.

rebuff the beggar, and proclaim the bounty of your Lord” (93:8–11, Duha). Nowhere does the Qur’an appear to make allowance for a “core” of wealth preserved from charity. The hadith and legal literature introduced the ideas of “threshold of wealth” and “poverty line,” while keeping the Qur’anic injunctions constantly in mind.¹⁷

RIGHT/CLAIM/DUTY Another important element of Qur’anic economics regards the *haqq* (plural, *huquq*)—“claim,” “right,” “duty,” or all three senses. Persons in the Qur’an have *huquq*, as does God. Oddly, so far as donations and contributions are concerned, the *haqq* sometimes inheres in the object itself. Thus does the community of the saved consist of “those upon whose wealth there is a recognized right for the beggar and the deprived” (70: 24–25, Ma’arij; 51: 19, Waqi’a).

Pre-Islamic Arabia had a similar notion. The Arabs thought that property (*mal*) included a surplus that must be given away and that this surplus wealth carried a *haqq* within itself. When a man gave a part of his surplus to someone else, the recipient began or continued a relationship with him, as a protected alien (*jar*), client (*mawla*), or ally (*halif*)—in each case, an unequal relationship. The movement of *huquq* formed a kind of great cycle, but often an unhappy one—not only for the humiliated recipients but also for the donors who lamented the returning cycles of claims and duties, in other words, the constant, crushing burden of generosity.¹⁸

The Qur’an’s idea of return, perhaps even a circle, is easier and more bearable. The Qur’anic idea of economic circulation as a return of goods and obligations may well be easier for everyone who takes part in it because it leaves room for an anonymous recipient, the *miskin*. Whether donors and recipients know each other or not, goods move, and society does what it is supposed to do.

Whatever its relation may be to pre-Islamic Arabian conceptions of claim and right, the Qur’an includes a distinctive set of economic prescriptions and norms. The *haqq* inhering in the object is at once an element of purification and an incentive for the

17 Bonner, “Definitions of Poverty,” 341–343.

18 Bravmann, “Surplus of Property”; M. J. Kister, “‘God Will Never Disgrace Thee’ (the Interpretation of an Early Hadith),” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1965), 27–32; repr. in *idem*, *Studies in Jahiliyya and Early Islam* (Aldershot, 1980).

circulation of goods in society. All these elements come together in the verse, “Give to your kinsman his due, and to the needy and the wayfarer” (30: 38, Rum). This injunction is preceded by mention of God’s *fadd*, his unreciprocated generosity. The verse then names the basic triad of recipients: the kinsman, the wayfarer or the passing stranger, and, between them, the undifferentiated *miskin*, whose presence looms large.

The Qur’an’s distinctive set of economic and social arrangements, in which poverty and the poor have important roles, show signs of newness, not so much in its vocabulary as in its sets of relations. One of them involves *du‘afa*, the weak (singular, *da‘if*), who appear in several passages of the Qur’an, as when they are excused from military duty, together with the sick and other categories (9: 61, Tawba). Certain passages set them against the boastful and arrogant rather than against the rich. For instance, at 14: 21, Ibrahim, the weak say to the arrogant on Judgment Day: “We were only following you, can’t you get us out of this?” The arrogant respond, “If we had only received guidance from God, we would have guided you; but now we are all in this mess together and there is nothing we can do.” A similar exchange takes place at 40: 47–50, Mu‘min, with everyone in hellfire already. In both conversations, all parties clearly know each other only too well. The point is not that divine guidance is necessary to become a worthy poor person, a *faqir*, but rather that guidance comes to a community that regulates its flow of money and goods in the right direction (from top down), that practices generosity as reciprocity for God’s bounty, that observes the *haqq* inhering in the good things of this world, that purifies and maintains its wealth by giving up a portion of it in alms, and that takes ample account of the kinsman as well as the disturbing, unknown, poor stranger.

This study has deliberately avoided the well-known narrative of Muhammad, his tribe the Quraysh, the community of believers that gathered around him, his native Mecca, and his adopted Medina. In a broad sense, the narrative underlying the Qur’an is that of a tribal society becoming urbanized. On the other hand, the opposite narrative might also work, that of an urban society becoming partially tribalized—something along the lines of what happened afterward in the great cities of the Islamic Near East. Either way, the kinsman and the stranger pose difficulties and dangers that nothing can alleviate so well as the Qur’anic system of

generosity and exchange, purity and circulation, all constructed around care for the poor.

When the Muslims, still Arabs in their great majority, first established themselves in their newly conquered lands—beginning with Arabia and then across much of the Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa—they imposed a fiscal and military system that was based on the gift, at least in its vocabulary. The basic fiscal principle is *fay'*, literally “return” (taken from Qur'an 59: 7). The Muslim fighter receives a stipend that is called '*ata*', literally “gift.” Furthermore, the fighter is not, in principle, recompensed for his service; to be a fighter, a beneficiary of '*ata*', means to belong. This system is based on the principles of gratuity and solidarity, both in the conduct of war and in exchanges overall. These principles remained present in the behavior and minds of Muslims long after the the old fiscal and military system based on *fay'* and *ata*' had fallen into disuse.¹⁹

Many scholars have characterized both Qur'an and Islam as highly favorable to commerce and to the highly mobile type of society that emerged in the medieval Near East. Torrey long ago noted the commercial-theological vocabulary of the Qur'an. However, this commercial emphasis and style in the Qur'an do not at all contradict the “economy of poverty,” both within the Book and beyond it. To take one example, Muslim tradition (both hadith and historiography) maintains that Muhammad did not permit the construction of any buildings in the market of Medina other than mere tents; nor did he permit any tax (*kharaj*) or rent (*kira'*) to be taken there.²⁰

This tradition does not seem to have any Qur'anic back-

19 This point does not necessarily imply that the figure of the fighter is the same as that of the poor man, as Décobert said in *Le mendiant*. See the polemics on this point in Abdallah Cheikh-Moussa and Didier Gazaguadou, “Comment on écrit l'histoire . . . de l'Islam!” *Arabica*, XL (1993), 217–220. On the *fay'*, see Løkkegaard, “Fay’”; Schmucker, *Untersuchungen*. On different currents within early Islamic economic thought, see Bonner, “*Kitab al-Kasb*” and the other references in n. 1.

20 Charles C. Torrey, *The Commercial-Theological Terms in the Koran* (Leiden, 1892). See the discussion by Andrew Rippin, “The Commerce of Eschatology,” in Stefan Wild (ed.), *The Qur'an as Text* (New York, 1996), 125–135. On the historical compatibility of commerce and early Islam, see especially Maxime Rodinson, *Islam et capitalisme* (Paris, 1966; trans. as *Islam and Capitalism* [New York, 1973]); *idem*, “Conditions religieuses islamiques,” in Bertold Spuler (ed.), *Wirtschaftsgeschichte des vorderen Orients in islamischer Zeit* (Leiden, 1977), 18–30. On the market of Medina, see al-Samhudi, *Wafa' al-wafa' bi-akhbar dar al-Mustafa* (Cairo, 1953), II, 747–756.

ground or context. Behind it seems to be a critique of the role of the central power, especially during the Umayyad dynasty (661–750). The first Umayyad caliph Mu‘awiya (r. 661–680) had two houses built next to Medina’s market. Toward the end of the Umayyad dynasty, the caliph Hisham (r. 724–743) ordered the construction there of a great complex of walls, shops, warehouses, and other buildings. When Hisham died, however, the residents of the city lost no time in razing it to the ground. In the context of these events, the virtuous and pious ‘Umar II (r. 717–720) is said to have stated, “The market is [an instance of] spontaneous alms” (*al-suq sadaqa*). To modern observers, his intention was to make the market a kind of *waqf* or pious foundation, but such was not the case. At that time, the institution of *waqf* existed only in its barest infancy, if at all. Either ‘Umar, the reformer of the fiscal system, wished to reverse his predecessors’ policies regarding the market of Medina (and likely of the other markets under his control as well), or else those who favored such a policy invoked ‘Umar’s name and attributed this position to him. Regardless of who was ultimately responsible, this expression of a “free market”—involving the circulation of goods within a single space without payment of fees, taxes, or rent, without the construction of permanent buildings, and without any profiting on the part of the caliphal authority (indeed, of the Caliph himself)—was rooted in the term *sadaqa*, “voluntary alms.” *Sadaqa* could also signify something like economic surplus. According to some, whenever a person benefited from the work of another, it was a form of *sadaqa*.²¹

This coherent and highly appealing view of the economic universe had much to do with Islam’s early and lasting success. Since the poor were at the heart of this economic universe, the teachings of the Qur’an on poverty had a considerable, even a transforming effect in Arabia, the Near East, and beyond.

21 On *sadaqa* and work, see Bonner, “The *Kitab al-kasb*,” 417.