

Book Review

Lyall Armstrong, *The Quṣṣās of Early Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2017),
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This book focuses on the (often neglected) *quṣṣās* (pl., sg. *qāṣṣ*) of early Islam. Its main argument is that, despite their later image as unreliable storytellers, popular preachers, and innovators, the *quṣṣās* of early Islam

were, for the most part, reliable, reputable, and conformist religious scholars. Armstrong's book joins a significant body of modern scholarship on early and later medieval Islamic preaching¹ with the aim of re-defining the category of the

1. Some of the main works that have dealt with early Islamic preaching are: Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, tr. C. R. Barber and S. M. Stern (London, 1971), II, 150-9; Johannes Pedersen, "The Islamic Preacher, *wā'iz, mudhakkir, qāṣṣ*" in *Ignace Goldziher Memorial Volume* (Part 1), ed. S. Lowinger and J. Somogyi, Budapest, 1948, 226-51; Idem, "The Criticism of the Islamic Preacher," *Die Welt des Islam* II (1953), 215-31; Charles Pellat, "Ḳāṣṣ" *Et2*, C. E. Bosworth, *The Mediaeval Underworld* (Leiden, 1976), 23-9; al-Najm Wadī'a Ṭāhā, *al-Qasas, wa-'l-quṣṣās fi al-adab al-islāmī* (Kuwait, 1972); Q. al-Sāmarrā'i "Kitāb al-quṣṣās wa-'l mudhakkirin, *Majallat majma' al-lughā al-'arabiyya bi-Dimashq*, 4 (50) 1975, 849-88; Jamāl Jūda, "al-Qaṣaṣ wa-l-quṣṣās fi ṣadr al-Islām: bayna al-wāqi' al-tārikhī wa-'l-naẓra al-fiqhiyya," *Dirāsāt tārikhiyya* 33/34 (Damascus, 1989), 105-141; Khalil 'Athamina: *Al-Qasas: Its Emergence, Religious Origin and Its Socio-Political Impact on Early Society*," *Studia Islamica* 76 (1992), 53-74; Maxim G. Romanov, "Computational

Reading of Arabic Biographical Collections with Special Reference to Preaching in the Sunnī World (661-1300CE)" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2013). The most recent works that have focused more on later medieval Islamic preaching are: Jonathan Berkey, *Popular preaching and religious authority in the medieval Islamic Near East* (Seattle, 2001); Linda G. Jones, *The Power of Oratory in the Medieval Muslim World* (Cambridge, 2012); Vanessa De Gifis, *Shaping a Qur'anic Worldview: Scriptural Hermeneutics and the Rhetoric of Moral Reform in the Caliphate of al-Ma'mun* (London, 2014); Jens Scheiner, "Teachers and Ḥadīth Transmitters: The Quṣṣās in Ibn Ḥanbal's *Musnad*," in *The Place to Go: Contexts of Learning in Baghdad, 750-1000 CE*, eds J. Scheiner and D. Janos (Princeton, 2014), 183-236. On the stories of the prophets in the Qur'an—material often connected with the *quṣṣās*—see Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature* (Hoboken, 2013), especially chapter 5, 86-96. On Ibn A'tham, a historian-*qāṣṣ*, see Lawrence

quṣṣāṣ and to re-assess their role in early Islamic society. For this reason the author keeps the term untranslated throughout the book, though he considers the most fitting label for them to be ‘preachers’ (p. 9). The difficulty in defining the *quṣṣāṣ* lies in the untidy landscape of early Islamic preaching, which the *quṣṣāṣ* shared with other figures such as the *wu‘āz* (admonishers), *mudhakkirūn* (reminders),² or the *khuṭabā’* (orators). The sources do not draw clear boundaries between these categories and at times use some of these terms interchangeably.

However, Armstrong is concerned only with the *quṣṣāṣ* and sets out to nuance our understanding of them by addressing what he has identified as two main flaws in the treatment by modern scholarship of the *quṣṣāṣ*. First, the association of the *quṣṣāṣ* with storytelling (based on the lexical meaning of *qaṣṣa* “to tell

stories”³), is too limiting. Indeed, the *quṣṣāṣ* related material beyond narratives, such as verses of poetry, legal rulings, and short *ḥadīths* as he shows mainly in Chapter 1. Second, the broad definitions of the *quṣṣāṣ* as Islamic religious teachers, stemming from the sources’ treatment of preachers, render the term *qāṣṣ* void of any meaning of its own. To remedy this terminological imprecision, the author has opted for establishing a clear criterion of selection: an explicit association with the root *q-ṣ-ṣ*. So, while previous scholars in their discussions of the *quṣṣāṣ* mainly relied on what medieval compilations, the most influential among them being Ibn al-Jawzī’s (d.597/1200) *Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ wa-al-mudhakkirīn*, have said about them, Armstrong has also collected his own pool of *qaṣṣa* material. Drawing on a wide range of later narrative sources, such as chronicles, *ḥadīth* compilations, biographical dictionaries, literary works, and works on Sufism and asceticism, and setting an end date of 750, he has assembled all the instances in which a *qāṣṣ* is mentioned, in which the sources designate a certain statement as *qaṣṣa*, or

I. Conrad, “Ibn A‘tham al-Kūfī,” in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, eds. J. S. Meisami and P. Starkey (London, 1998), 1:314; Ibid. “The Conquest of Arwād: A Source-Critical Study in the Historiography of the Early Medieval Near East,” in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East: Problems in the Literary Source Material*, ed. A. Cameron L. I. Conrad (Princeton, 1992), 317-99; and *ibid.*, “Ibn A‘tham and His History,” *Al-‘Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā: The Journal of Middle East Medievalists* 23 (2015), 87-125. On the more formal genre of oratory (*khaṭāba*) see Tahera Qutbuddin, “Khuṭba” in *Classical Arabic humanities in their own terms festschrift for Wolfhart Heinrichs on his 65th birthday*, eds. Wolfhart Heinrichs and Michael Cooperson (Leiden, 2008), 176-273; *A treasury of virtues: sayings, sermons and teachings of ‘Alī al-Qāḍī al-Quḍā’ī: with the one hundred proverbs attributed to al-Jāhīz* (New York, 2013).

2. A more precise translation would be something along the lines of “Those who call others to be cognizant of God,” as Armstrong refers to them on p.135.

3. The accepted meaning of *qaṣṣa* is indeed “to tell stories” as Armstrong notes (p.6); however, it seems that the term itself is wider than that. Etymologically, it means “to follow after the footsteps of, to trace someone.” Lane’s examples and translation of *iqṭaṣṣa al-ḥadītha* hint at the logical connections between the two meanings: “he related the tradition, or story, in its proper manner [...] as though he followed its traces, in pursuit, and related it accordingly.” In this way, *qaṣṣa* delivers a connotation of a more serious “storytelling,” which strives for precision and details and is not necessarily based on narrative. The etymological meaning of the term may perhaps serve in support of Armstrong’s thesis that the early *quṣṣāṣ* were not primarily narrators of entertaining and spurious stories.

in which they introduce it by a cognate phrase, such as *kāna yaquṣṣu fa-qāla* (p.7). To compare, Armstrong created a list of 109 *quṣṣās* while Ibn al-Jawzī listed only 45 *quṣṣās* and the two lists overlap only partially (see table on p.12).

This collection of the vast body of material directly associated with *qaṣaṣ* that Armstrong has collected to support his argument, along with the clear presentation of this material with many quotations in Arabic with English translations, and the biographical sketches of the 109 *quṣṣās* in the appendix, are among the main strengths of the book.

Chapter One (“*Qaṣaṣ*: Textual Evidence”) presents his collection of *qaṣaṣ* statements. These comprise 43 *qaṣaṣ* texts, which he divides into three main thematic groups of religious (34), martial (8), and religio-political *qaṣaṣ* (1). They display a wide array of themes, as they deal with the questions of divine will and human responsibility, death and afterlife, narrate exemplars from prophets’ lives, or instruct soldiers in military tactics and incite them to fight. Some *qaṣaṣ* statements also include verses of poetry, prophetic *ḥadīth*, and legal rulings. This wide range of themes and forms show that *qaṣaṣ* is not limited to the stories of prophets (*qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*), which in turn should not be seen as originating with the *quṣṣās* (p. 38). This constitutes an important aspect of Armstrong’s effort to rid the *quṣṣās* of the label “storytellers,” though it would be unjust to say that all earlier scholars have considered the *quṣṣās* as such.⁴ But this chapter’s discussion of

4. Armstrong claims that many scholars have considered the *quṣṣās* to be popular preachers and storytellers, and this is undoubtedly true. However, taking the example of the two scholars who have

the *qaṣaṣ* statements offers more than that. Especially the author’s presentation of *qaṣaṣ* in the martial context brings to light interesting material. Al-Ṭabarī’s and al-Azdī’s use of the term *qaṣaṣa* for Byzantine bishops, monks, priests, and deacons who exhorted the Byzantines to fight, or al-Ṭabarī’s report in which he recorded the Khārijite rebel Shabīb’s call for the *quṣṣās* and “he who recites the poetry of ‘Antara” (p. 69) before a battle, show the firm place that these oral ways of incitement and exhortation had in the turbulent environment of early Islam. Based on the diversity of themes among the 43 *qaṣaṣ* texts discussed in Chapter One, Armstrong reasons that the content was not the only thing that defined the *qaṣaṣ* but that its unifying factor was “the aim of eliciting a fervent response from the listener” (p. 74).

Chapter Two explores the *quṣṣās*’ associations with Qurʾān reciters (*qurrāʾ*), Qurʾān commentators (*mufasssīrūn*), *Ḥadīth* transmitters (*muḥaddithūn*), jurists (*fuqahāʾ*), judges (*quḍāt*), orators

dealt with the issue and whom he includes among those holding such view (on p. 5, n. 17 and p. 151) Berkey and ‘Athamina, we can note that both views are much more nuanced than that. Berkey for his part and precisely on the point of the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* notes that these should not be associated specifically with the *quṣṣās* because the major collections of them were compiled by exegetes like al-Thaʿlabī. Jonathan Berkey, *Popular preaching and religious authority in the medieval Islamic Near East* (Seattle, 2001), 40. And though Armstrong attributes to ‘Athamina the view that the *quṣṣās* were “popular religious teachers targeting the simple masses,” ‘Athamina also acknowledges the “broad spectrum of functions fulfilled by the *qāṣṣ* and the high erudition he must have possessed. See Khalil ‘Athamina, “Al-Qasas: Its Emergence, Religious Origin, and its Socio-Political Impact on Early Muslim Society,” *Studia Islamica* 76 (1992), 54.

(*khuṭabāʾ*), admonishers (*wuʿāz*), reminders (*mudhakkirūn*), and ascetics (*zuhhād*, *nussāk*) to prove that the *quṣṣāṣ* were engaged in most religiously-oriented activities of the day. He acknowledges that some of these categories were rather fluid and is interested in the *quṣṣāṣ*' interaction with them, based once again, on linguistic parameters. (In other words, he considers a *qāṣṣ* to be associated with *waʿz* only if the sources identified him also as a *wāʾiz* or having given a *mawʿiza*, p. 75.) This chapter thus represents, to my knowledge, the first attempt to categorize the *quṣṣāṣ* based on their affiliations with other disciplines. Armstrong shows that almost one third of the *quṣṣāṣ* were known also as Qurʾān reciters (*qurrāʾ*) and one quarter as Qurʾān commentators (*mufassirūn*). He addresses the accusation that the *quṣṣāṣ* introduced Jewish and Christian elements to Islam in the form of the *qīṣaṣ al-anbyāʾ/isrāʾīliyyāt*. Armstrong shows that relatively few *quṣṣāṣ* were known for their knowledge of this pre-Islamic material and that the main alleged culprit among them, Muqātil b. Sulaymān, is not very sympathetic to the Jews and Christians nor has he adopted more material than others. Having discussed the associations of the *quṣṣāṣ* with the rest of the above-mentioned disciplines, Armstrong concludes that the *quṣṣāṣ* included some of the most respected religious authorities of the time and that out of the 108 (109?) *quṣṣāṣ* he collected, 74 were considered reliable *ḥadīth* transmitters (p. 151). From this perspective he thus sees the *qāṣṣ* mainly as a respected scholar.⁵

5. L. I. Conrad considers Ibn Aʿtham an example of a *qāṣṣ* who successfully entered the field of historical studies in the early Abbasid times. L. I. Conrad, "Ibn Aʿtham al-Kūfi," 314.

Chapter Three, most interestingly, brings together reports and debates about the *quṣṣāṣ*' performances: skills of effective *quṣṣāṣ* and their conduct and postures during the *qaṣaṣ*-giving and where and what time of the day it took place. It also discusses what he sees as 'malpractices' which harmed the *quṣṣāṣ*' reputation, such as mixing of genders, loudness, raising hands, or fainting during the sessions. This chapter is especially valuable because it gives readers an insight into the variety of the *qaṣaṣ* performances and the discussions that surrounded them. And the *qaṣaṣ* performance was indeed varied: The *quṣṣāṣ* might stand on the pulpit, sit in a corner of the mosque or hold sessions outside of the mosque—in public places and in their homes; they might preach twice a day or twice a week. Raising hands, for example, seemed to have been a controversial issue, which was not limited to *qaṣaṣ*. It was also recorded during funeral processions, during an eclipse of sun, and upon seeing the Kaʿba during the *ḥajj* (p.181-182). And in terms of *qaṣaṣ*, it was not necessarily only the *qāṣṣ* who would raise his hands, Armstrong mentions two instances in which the audience would join him in this practice (p. 182). It would be extremely interesting to further investigate into a deeper meaning of such a practice.

Chapter Four and Chapter Five follow the *quṣṣāṣ* chronologically through the Rāshidūn era (Chapter Four) and through the Umayyad period (Chapter Five). Chapter Four engages with the reports that reject *qaṣaṣ* as innovation (*bidʿa*) that had no precedent in the time of the Prophet and thus represents a dangerous deviation from his *sunna*. Some of the most interesting attacks represent the reports that connect the emergence of

qaṣaṣ with the Apocalypse (p. 225-229). The author counters the anti-*quṣṣāṣ* material by arguing that a body of traditions suggest that that *qaṣaṣ* existed already in the time of the Prophet and with more positive representations of the *quṣṣāṣ* who lived under the first four caliphs.

Chapter Five follows the *quṣṣāṣ* and their increasing involvement in political affairs during the Umayyad period. The *quṣṣāṣ* were especially active in the caliphates of Mu‘āwiya, ‘Abd al-Malik and ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, both for and against the Umayyads. Yet, the author cautions against considering them all as political figures, for some, including Bilāl b. Sa‘d, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. al-Qāsim, or Mūsā b. Sayyār, remained politically disengaged, and dedicated themselves only to religious education.

To Armstrong, all the material he collected proves that the early Islamic *quṣṣāṣ* were not exclusively or primarily storytellers but rather reputable religious scholars, who were part of the orthodox religious establishment, often praised for their contribution to a number of Islamic religious disciplines.⁶ Their bad reputation originated only during the Umayyad period as a result of some of their ‘malpractices’, political affiliations, and negative effects on the public. They were not popular preachers, because their audiences were not only the masses but in some instances also the students of *ḥadīth*; they were

6. In this regard, we may think of Steven Judd’s recent book *Religious Scholars and the Umayyads: Piety-Minded Supporters of the Marwānid Caliphate* (Abingdon, 2014) in which he argues that while pious scholars have been considered to have been opposed to the Umayyads, a sizeable number of them in fact supported the regime through their scholarly activities and public performance of piety.

public speakers or simply “preachers,” and different elements set them apart from other public performers: *qaṣaṣ* was less formal than *khaṭāba* and wider in content and objective than *wa‘z* and *dhikr*, as its use in martial contexts suggests. Armstrong concludes: “Indeed, the feature that seems to distinguish *qaṣaṣ* from other public pronouncements and that connected all of its varied expressions, be they religious, martial or religio-political, was exhortation. The objective of the early Islamic *qāṣṣ* was not simply to educate, it was to motivate.” (p. 282).

Armstrong’s methodology and treatment of the sources raises various questions. These are related to either of two issues: (1) a conflation of *qaṣaṣ* and *quṣṣāṣ* and (2) authenticity. First, he includes in his discussion of the *quṣṣāṣ* all those who at some point gave *qaṣaṣ*, *qīṣṣa* or *qaṣṣū*, yet it ought to be asked whether everyone who tells a *qīṣṣa* or engages in *qaṣaṣ* is a *qāṣṣ*. One could say that not everyone who writes is a writer. Armstrong’s criteria throw together disparate characters of early Islamic society: the Prophet Muḥammad, prominent Rāshidūn-era political figures like Abū Bakr and ‘Amr b. al-‘Ās and semi-legendary figures of early Islam like Tamīm al-Dārī and, Umayyad scholars, and what seem to have been semi-professional martial and partisan Umayyad *quṣṣāṣ*. Based on these criteria, God Himself could have made it to Armstrong’s list.⁷ Armstrong’s criteria thus make for a too-large and too varied body of individuals to be discussed as a distinct sociological group, something that seems

7. The Qur’ān says “We do relate unto thee the most beautiful of stories” *naḥnu naquṣṣu ‘alayka aḥsana al-qaṣaṣi* Q 12:3.

to be Armstrong's main concern here as he tries to redeem the *quṣṣāṣ* as reputable and conformist scholars.

Second, the later nature of sources is something that cannot be avoided, as we have no contemporary accounts of the *quṣṣāṣ*. Yet, the author discards the question of authenticity all too easily. He mentions the general problem in passing during his discussion of the *qaṣaṣ* statements (Chapter One): "For my part, I have accepted the attribution of the statement as a *qiṣṣa* recognizing that this, in itself, reveals the viewpoint of what constitutes a *qiṣṣa* in the mind of the author of the specific source text, if not of the Islamic community in general at the time of the compilation of the source, preserving an earlier view of the features of *qaṣaṣ* (p.15). Yet Armstrong does speak mainly about the *quṣṣāṣ* of early Islam, as the title clearly states, and not about their later perception. He also refers the reader to Aziz Al-Azmeh's excellent essay that criticizes the overly critical approach to Arabic sources that has become characteristic of Western scholarship.⁸ But while Al-Azmeh is correct in his assessment of Western scholarship's obsession with the issue of authenticity, this does not mean that we can stop being cautious about what the sources tell us or that we need to follow their argumentative lines. For example, Armstrong makes an effort to represent the *quṣṣāṣ* as "conformists," rather than innovators, as they have been cast by some later sources. That's why it is important for him to prove that *quṣṣāṣ* and *qaṣaṣ* existed in the time of the Prophet,

something about which scholarship has been either divided or agnostic, and he concludes that rather than later back-projections "it seems more likely [...] that this miscellany [of perceptions and reports about *quṣṣāṣ* and *qaṣaṣ*] signifies that we have an authentic corpus of reports preserving the complex and evolving religious milieu of the early period." (p. 206). I do not follow the author's argument here: Why cannot the existence of diverse views on pre-Umayyad *quṣṣāṣ* reflect later attempts to legitimize or de-legitimize the practice of preaching, which was clearly a significant feature of Islamic society and a powerful tool of propaganda? Nor do I see the need to portray them as conformists. This contention stems from the author's following too closely the later sources that engage in such debates. However, we cannot be sure that the discussion about the *quṣṣāṣ* as innovators took place during the early period of Islam (until 750). These debates might be of later origins and their application to the historical early *quṣṣāṣ* may thus be anachronistic.

These two issues—conflating *qaṣaṣ* and *qāṣṣ* and downplaying the problem of authenticity—raise further questions about Armstrong's book. As far as the definition of *qaṣaṣ* is concerned, it may be asked whether all the instances in which the later sources preserved statements containing the verb *qaṣṣa* used it deliberately to refer to the practice of *qaṣaṣ*, and did not replace, for instance, *akhbara* at an earlier stage of transmission. And even if the term's usage were constant, we may ask whether *qaṣṣa* meant the same thing in different time periods. Furthermore, if one of the author's main goals is precisely to define

8. Aziz Al-Azmeh, *The Arabs and Islam in Late Antiquity: A Critique of Approaches to Arabic Sources* (Berlin, 2014).

qaṣaṣ, his conclusion (see above or p. 282) seems rather unsatisfying. “Exhortation” and “to motivate” are indeed objectives of most public speakers throughout human history; Aristotle considered rhetoric to be the art of persuasion (*Rhet.* I.2). If one of the main flaws of modern scholarly treatment of *qaṣaṣ* is too a broad definition, as he claims, he has not satisfactorily solved the problem. In any case, the main purpose of this book lies in correcting the other misconception that he sets to refute: the view of the *quṣṣāṣ* as storytellers. This is what leads us to the second point: Armstrong’s treatment of the material and his arguments turn his list of *quṣṣāṣ* into a homogeneous group, as it were. But as we have seen, the *quṣṣāṣ* were rather amorphous. Jonathan Berkey, talking about later medieval Islamic preachers, notes that using terms such as *qāṣṣ* and *wā‘iz* “is in a way misleading, because the *quṣṣāṣ* and *wu‘āz* did not necessarily form a discrete social or occupational category”; rather, their performances should be seen rather as “activities or even different aspects of the same activity.”⁹ Such understanding of *qaṣaṣ* is even more plausible in early Islam before many occupations became professionalized. It is

therefore warranted to ask whether the *quṣṣāṣ* existed as a separate social group. The third point would be that Armstrong, as we saw with his discussion of innovators and conformers, is perhaps too eager to pass value judgments. To give a more concrete example, he discusses the various forms of *qaṣaṣ* performance, such as hand raising or fainting, as ‘malpractices’ that harmed the reputation of the *quṣṣāṣ* rather than as extremely interesting evidence of the ritual and performative dimension of their work. And since his main focus lies in redeeming the reputation of the *quṣṣāṣ*, he casts, to this end, secular (storytelling) against religious, reputable against popular, and unorthodox against orthodox, creating dichotomies that did not necessarily exist.

Even readers unpersuaded by all aspects of Armstrong’s methodology will be grateful to him for collecting a comprehensive body of *qaṣaṣ*, *qīṣṣa*, and *qāṣṣ* material and for its clear presentation. It contains many excerpts in Arabic and in English translation and a helpful appendix of early Islamic figures engaged in *qaṣaṣ* activities. It is an indispensable work for any Islamicist or historian interested in early Islamic and medieval preaching.

9. Jonathan Berkey, *Popular preaching and religious authority in the medieval Islamic Near East* (Seattle, 2001), 14.