

# Play in the Qur'an

The combination of the antithetical terms *al-jidd wa'l-hazl*, Earnest and Jest, is a standard *topos* in Arabic *belles-lettres*, occurring in exordia of literary works, in numerous thematically ordered anthologies, in collections of proverbs, and even in the compilations of the *hadīth* scholars.<sup>1</sup> *Jidd*, in one of its primary meanings, suggests labour, toil, striving, and thus, work, also evoking the opposition Work and Play.

The great ninth-century littérateur Jāḥīz attempted to relieve the boredom of his readers by punctuating his otherwise serious prose with light asides. Not content with simple juxtaposition, Jāḥīz, unlike most other writers, sought to create an interaction between the serious and the comic in numerous works. But the pairing of Earnest and Jest is not an invention of Jāḥīz. That it has an early and illustrious antecedent is attested in the exhortation of the Prophet Muḥammad: 'Let none of you take the property of his brother in play [*lā'ibān*] and in earnest [*jāddan*].' The taker is playing in that he does not mean to steal, and he is earnest in that he does mean to annoy.<sup>2</sup>

Although the Prophet uses the pair, its origin is not Qur'anic. The word *jidd* does not appear in the Qur'an, and though the word *hazl* does appear once, in Q. 86:13–14, it is not with the same implications:

It [the Qur'an] is words of discernment. And not a thing of amusement  
[*hazl*].

The notions of Play and Jest are, however, quite prominent in Qur'anic discourse and form a significant part of the Qur'anic message.

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Play as an activity is mentioned explicitly in several Qur'anic episodes and assumed in at least one other. In the story of Joseph, his brothers plead with their father, the Prophet Jacob, to (Q. 12:12):

Let him go out with us tomorrow that he may sport [*yarta'*] and play  
[*yal'ab*]

According to the commentators, it is while they are racing that the brothers do their mischief. The root *r-t-*<sup>c</sup> which signals the sporting nature of the play occurs only here. In the story of Moses' teacher-companion Khidr in Q. 18:60–83, the latter takes the life of a young boy (who, we later learn, would have brought hardship to his parents) while he is, according to the commentators, playing with other youths.<sup>3</sup> It is clear from the Khidr incident that play can be idle and can lead astray, that it stands in opposition to proper conduct.

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The idea that the faithless are more interested in play than in heeding the Lord is frequently expressed, as in Q. 7:98:

Or did [the people of the towns] feel secure in the face of [Our wrath] coming in the broad daylight as they engaged in fun [*wa hum yal<sup>c</sup>abūn*]?

That this is an Islamically unacceptable attitude has been observed by Pellat who writes that: ‘although the Koran does not explicitly prescribe either serious behaviour or the avoidance of jocularity, Islam … at least invites Believers seriously to consider the divine promises and threats …’.<sup>4</sup>

Consider:

Never does a reminder come to them from their Lord but they listen to it and make fun [*wa hum yal<sup>c</sup>abūn*] (Q. 21:2)

Yet they are lost in doubt and fun [*bal hum fī shakkin yal<sup>c</sup>abūn*] (Q. 44:9)

The Qur'anic *la<sup>c</sup>ib* (properly the Qur'anic root *l-<sup>c</sup>-b*, suggesting ‘play’, ‘jest’, ‘trifle’, ‘fun’) occurs 20 times. In almost every case, the dismissal or denial of God or faith is the focus of its use. In its first two occurrences, *la<sup>c</sup>ib* is paired with *huzu<sup>o</sup>*, mockery, in fairly transparent terms:

O believers, do not make friends with those who treat your faith as mockery [*huzuwan*] and fun [*la<sup>c</sup>iban*] (Q. 5:57, also 58)

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If *huzu<sup>o</sup>* is a synonym, another implicit and fundamental synonym of Play in the Koran is Falsehood, demonstrated not only in the pairing (five times) of *la<sup>c</sup>ib* and *khawd*, jest, false and vain discourse – for example:

But if you ask them, they will say, ‘We were only jesting [*nakhūdu*] and having fun [*nal<sup>c</sup>ab*.]’ You ask them, ‘Was it God and His Signs, and His Messengers that you were mocking [*yastahzi’ūn*]?’ (Q. 9:65)

So leave them to their jesting/false discourse [*yakhūdū*] and their fun [*yal<sup>c</sup>abū*] till they meet their promised day (Q. 43:83; cf. Q. 70:42).

– but made explicit in Q. 52:11–12 (cf. Q. 6:91), where the antonymy of Truth and Play is underscored, if obliquely:

And woe that Day to those who indulge in falsehood, who make fun and jest [*fī khawdīn yal<sup>c</sup>abūn*]

This suggests that the real opposition is between Truth and Play:

We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that lies between them for fun [*lā'ibīn*]. If We had wanted to make an amusement [*lahw*], We could have done so Ourselves, had We wished to. In fact, We strike the Truth [*al-haqq*] against the False [*al-bātil*] ... (Q. 21:16–18)

The palpable opposition of Truth and Play is brought home 37 verses later when the Chaldeans ask Abraham:

Are you speaking truthfully [*bi'l-haqq*] or only jesting [*min al-lā'ibīn*]? (Q. 21:55)

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*Lahw*, used in the earlier passage, is a diversion, a pastime, an amusement, especially a vain or frivolous one. It has ‘a more general application than *la'ib*: for example, the hearing of a musical instrument or the like is *lahw*, but not *la'ib*.<sup>5</sup> By pairing the two, a significant *topos* in the Qur'an, the frivolity of this world, is demonstrated. In the following exchange, the worldly sport and frivolity of the unbelievers turns against them:

The Fire-dwellers will call to the Garden-dwellers, ‘Pour a little water over us, or give us a little of what God has given you.’ They will answer, ‘God has forbidden these to the unbelievers, who took their religion to be a mere amusement [*lahwan*] and fun [*la'iban*] and who were lured by the life of the world.’ (Q. 7:50–1)

*La'ib* (fun) and *lahw* (amusement) have already been paired in Q. 6:32:

What is the life of this world but (having) fun and (distracting) amusement [*la'ibun wa lahw*]? (cf. Q. 29:64 and Q. 47:36)

But all is not, and cannot be, mere frivolity. In Q. 57:20, we read the following spectacular explanation of the worldly as mere Play and of the ephemeral character of an enjoyment that cannot endure:

Know that the life of this world is mere fun [*la'ib*] and amusement [*lahw*], pomp and mutual boasting, a lust for multiplying wealth and children. Like rain which pleases the tillers (whose plant thrives) then begins to wither; you see it turn to yellow and crumble away. There is severe punishment in the Hereafter, but also forgiveness from God, and Pleasure. As for the life of this world, it is nothing more than merchandise of vanity.

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Several pairings – play and sport, fun and doubt, fun and mockery, play and falsehood, fun and amusement – and several oppositions – discernment versus frivolity, play versus truth, belief versus distraction, vain worldly pursuits versus God's pleasure – are articulated in the Qur'an.

The Qur'an does not prescribe sober meditation and proscribe ecstatic glorification, but it makes a characteristically subtle distinction between that which distracts, whether in earnest or in jest, and that which focuses. In the final analysis, it is notions of earnest and jest, in their very largest significations, that are at stake.

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#### NOTES

- 1 C. Pellat, 'al-Djidd wa'l-Hazl' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1957), Vol. 2, pp. 536–7; G.J.H. van Gelder, 'Mixtures of Jest and Earnest in Classical Arabic Literature', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 23 (1992), pp. 83–108, pp. 169–90.
- 2 E.W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, Reprint (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1984), Vol. 2, p. 2662; cf. Abū Dawūd, *The Sunan*, trans. A. Ḥasan (Lahore: Sh. Muḥammad Ashraf, 1984) Vol. 3, p. 1392, for a slightly different version.
- 3 I. Goldziher, *Methods of Islamic Quranic Exegesis* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1920), p. 28.
- 4 Pellat, 'al-Djidd wa'l-Hazl', p. 536: cf. Ghazālī, *Iḥyā 'ulūm al-dīn*, Book 24.
- 5 Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, p. 3014. See also F. Rosenthal, 'La'ib' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982), Vol. 5, pp. 615–16.