




The Logic of Birds: A Comparative Study of the Qur'ānic Narrative of Solomon and the Ant in Surah An-Naml and the Global Folktale Type of Talking Animals

Abolfazl Horri^{1*} 

English Department, Faculty of Letters and Languages, Arak University, Arak, Iran

* Corresponding author: horri2004tr@gmail.com

 <https://doi.org/10.22081/ttaais.2025.72103.1061>

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 9 May 2024

Revised: 26 June 2024

Accepted: 22 July 2024

Keywords:

Alan Dundes,
Folktale type,
Language of birds in the
Qur'ān,
Qur'ānic narratives,
Solomon and the ant.

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the similarities and differences between the story of Prophet Solomon (AS) and the ant in Surah An-Naml and the global folktale type known as *The Language of Animals* (Type 670 in the Aarne–Thompson classification). The findings suggest that, although the Qur'ānic account shares certain surface features with folkloric animal tales, it exhibits distinct characteristics that set it apart. These include its use as a vehicle for theological instruction rather than entertainment; its seamless integration into the surrounding verses of Surah An-Naml; its alignment with the prophetic biography and the socio-historical context of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH); the blending of revelatory and literary language; and its unique structural design, which supports the thematic objectives of the Surah. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the Qur'ān's narrative features and may help address doubts regarding its authenticity and reliability.

How to cite this article: Horri, A. (2024). The Logic of Birds: A Comparative Study of the Qur'ānic Narrative of Solomon and the Ant in Surah An-Naml and the Global Folktale Type of Talking Animals. *International Journal of Textual and Translation Analysis in Islamic Studies*, 2(4), 406-420. doi: 10.22081/ttaais.2025.72103.1061

© 2024 The Authors. Published by Ākhūnd-e Khorāsāni Center for Graduate Studies affiliated with Baqir al-Olum University of Qom.

This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).



1. Introduction

In his book *Fables of the Ancients: Folklore in the Qur'ān* (2003), Alan Dundes argues that the story of the ant who speaks and causes Prophet Sulayman (peace be upon him) to smile resembles global folktales. He also identifies two other Qur'ānic narratives that, in his view, correspond to international tale types: the story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus in Surah Al-Kahf aligns with Type 766, and the account of Mūsā's encounter with the Righteous Servant parallels Type 759 in the Aarne–Thompson index. These claims have been examined and analyzed by the present author in two separate articles. Dundes appears to imply that the Qur'ān, in presenting such stories, may have drawn upon external sources, particularly from Jewish and Christian traditions. However, it is important to note that his intent is not to undermine the Qur'ān's authority. On the contrary, he acknowledges that God may employ such examples—or, in modern terms, folktales—for the purpose of instructing and enlightening humanity. As he writes, “Surely the fables of the ancients have been divinely included in the Qur'ān to be filled with moral teachings for future generations” (p. 203).

Nonetheless, the manner in which Dundes presents his claims may raise certain concerns, particularly given his effort to trace parallels not only within Judeo-Christian traditions but also across global mythologies and the folktales of various cultures. While such comparisons may appear straightforward, they carry potentially significant implications for both Qur'ānic studies and folklore scholarship. The Qur'ān itself affirms its use of parables—even those based on seemingly insignificant elements, such as “a gnat or something even smaller” (al-Baqara 2:26)—to illustrate its teachings. Parables (*amthāl*) and narratives (*qasas*) are among the Qur'ān's primary rhetorical and pedagogical strategies. Although the Qur'ānic language is divine and revelatory, its intended audience is human; thus, it naturally employs familiar storytelling techniques—including established narrative structures and genres—to convey its message effectively.

As Mir (1988) observes, the language of Qur'ānic revelation often overlaps with literary language, and literary devices such as narration and parable function as vehicles for transmitting divine discourse. Moreover, unlike the Hebrew Bible or other sacred texts that may present more continuous narrative arcs, the Qur'ān is not a storybook in the conventional sense. Rather, it uses stories as theological instruments, aimed at conveying moral and spiritual truths. These narratives are not isolated or incidental but are deeply embedded within the thematic and rhetorical architecture of each *surah*, contributing to the organic coherence of the surrounding verses. More importantly, they are integrally linked to the Prophetic mission and the socio-historical context of the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) time.

Thus, even when Qur'ānic narratives exhibit similarities to stories found in other religious or folkloric traditions, their adaptation within the Qur'ānic framework is both distinctive and theologically intentional. The Qur'ān employs storytelling not for entertainment, but as a means to convey core religious principles, spiritual insights, and prophetic ethics—each aligned with the thematic goals of the respective *surah* and the overarching prophetic mission. This study critically examines Juan Eduardo Dundes's claim regarding the Qur'ānic account of Solomon and the speaking ant, with the aim of exploring the uniqueness of this narrative within the Qur'ānic discourse. Adopting a qualitative and explanatory approach, the research relies on textual and library-based sources for data collection and analysis.

The study begins with a literature review, followed by a close reading of the story of Solomon and the ant (Qur'ān 27:18–19). It then compares this narrative with analogous motifs found in global folklore traditions. The primary focus, however, is on identifying and elucidating the specific narrative strategies and theological functions of this story within the Qur'ānic framework. The significance of this research lies in its effort to respond to prevailing critiques by highlighting the structural, thematic, and doctrinal depth of Qur'ānic storytelling. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how this particular narrative functions within the Qur'ān's revelatory logic.

2. Literature Review

The existing scholarship on Qur'ānic narratives may be broadly categorized under four main approaches: traditional exegetical readings, Western Orientalist perspectives, Muslim scholarly interpretations, and comparative and interdisciplinary methodologies.

2.1 Traditional Exegetical Approaches

Since the revelation of the Qur'ān, its narratives (qaṣaṣ) have received sustained attention from classical Muslim exegetes. Early exegeses primarily sought to interpret these stories within the broader framework of Islamic theology, ethics, and moral instruction. Over time, the exegetical tradition expanded to incorporate *Isrā'īliyyāt*, narratives of Jewish and Christian origin, leading to increased comparative engagement with parallels found in the Hebrew Bible and other Judeo-Christian sources.

2.2 Western Orientalist Approaches

Beginning in the 19th century, Western scholars such as Theodor Nöldeke (1860) and Hartwig Hirschfeld (1902) began examining Qur'ānic narratives through the lenses of philology, historical criticism, and biblical studies. Nöldeke sought to contextualize Qur'ānic stories within the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), linking them to specific historical and biographical events. Hirschfeld, on the other hand, emphasized their resemblance to Jewish and Christian traditions, suggesting shared narrative motifs. In the 20th century, this line of inquiry was continued by scholars such as Richard Bell (1937) and W. Montgomery Watt (1970). Bell argued that certain Qur'ānic narratives may have been adapted from earlier Judeo-Christian sources but were reconfigured within a distinctively Qur'ānic framework. Watt, while acknowledging these influences, highlighted the moral and spiritual purposes of these narratives within the Qur'ānic message.

2.3 Muslim Scholarly Approaches

Among Muslim scholars, Amīn al-Khūlī (d. 1966) was a pioneer in analyzing Qur'ānic narratives from a literary and aesthetic perspective. He proposed a typology of narratives—such as historical, allegorical, and others—which laid the groundwork for subsequent literary and narratological explorations. Over time, this initial interest developed into more nuanced and methodologically sophisticated narrative-analytical approaches within contemporary Muslim scholarship.

2.4 Comparative and Interdisciplinary Approaches

In recent decades, the study of Qur'ānic narratives has increasingly incorporated insights from literary theory and narratology. Scholars such as Hari (2009) have examined specific

features of Qur'ānic storytelling through a narratological framework, highlighting its structural and rhetorical complexity. In the field of comparative folklore, Alan Dundes (2003), in his book *Folklore in the Qur'ān*, argued that certain Qur'ānic narratives resemble global folktale types. His claims generated significant responses from both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. Hari (2020) reviewed many of these critiques, offering an assessment of their validity. In more recent work, Hari (forthcoming) has further analyzed Dundes's arguments, particularly with regard to the stories of the Sleepers of the Cave and Moses's encounter with the Righteous Servant. Additionally, Penchansky (2021) examined various Qur'ānic narratives, including the story of Solomon and the ant, with particular attention to the significance of Solomon's laughter.

Despite the extensive scholarship on Qur'ānic narratives, a comprehensive and critical analysis of Dundes's claim regarding the resemblance between the Qur'ānic account of Solomon and the ant and the global folktale motif of "talking animals" remains lacking. This study aims to fill that gap by closely examining the Qur'ānic narrative in relation to Dundes's folkloristic hypothesis, with particular emphasis on the cause and significance of Solomon's laughter. In doing so, the paper seeks both to evaluate Dundes's thesis and to illuminate the unique features of Qur'ānic narrative structure and theological purpose. To the best of our knowledge, no previous study has offered a focused, in-depth analysis of this specific narrative comparison. Storytelling holds a central position in the Qur'ān, functioning as one of its primary means for conveying divine messages. One of the most illustrative examples of this narrative distinctiveness is the story of Solomon (Sulaiman) and the ant, which introduces the Qur'ānic concept of *manṭiq al-ṭayr*: the language of the birds. This concept not only highlights Solomon's extraordinary ability to communicate with the natural world but also embodies the Qur'ānic worldview, in which all elements of creation participate in the transmission of divine truths.

In parallel, the Aarne–Thompson classification system (1961), a widely recognized framework in folklore studies, provides a useful tool for comparing global folktales. It offers a valuable lens through which to evaluate claims such as those made by Alan Dundes, who argued that certain Qur'ānic narratives resemble typological patterns found in world folklore. Nevertheless, even when superficial similarities are apparent, the Qur'ānic rendition of these stories remains distinct, shaped by theological purpose and the prophetic context of its revelation. This narrative distinctiveness underscores the importance of close, context-sensitive readings of each story within the Qur'ānic corpus, with careful attention to its placement within the surah and its alignment with the overarching mission of the Prophet.

3. Analysis and Discussion

Since ancient times, the interaction and relationship between humans and animals have been central to the cultures of various civilizations. Animals have played significant roles in human life, and people have long sought to reflect animal behavior, characteristics, and temperaments in both oral and written narratives. Through these stories, they symbolically convey ethical, social, historical, and political concepts. One of the most prominent expressions of this is found in the genre known as the beast fable.

Additionally, many cultures contain accounts of mythological, religious, and historical figures who communicate with animals. The earliest references to such interactions are noted by James Frazer (1888), who cites certain historical sources. Frazer mentions the ancient belief that animals—and even plants—could communicate among themselves and,

more broadly, with humans (p. 93). This belief, once common due to the close bond between humans and nature, gradually declined as humans began to distinguish themselves from the natural world, viewing themselves as superior and thus distancing themselves from it (Frazer, 1888). Frazer argues that the primary difference between human and animal language lies in structure: human language is governed by rules, whereas animal communication lacks such formal organization (p. 94). Just as speakers of one language may not understand another, humans cannot comprehend the language of animals (p. 93). Nevertheless, Frazer maintains that animals and birds possess their own distinct forms of communication, and in some cases, different species have unique systems of linguistic exchange (Frazer, 1888). He also claims that certain peoples and ethnic groups have particular abilities to communicate with animals. For instance, he notes that Arabs are especially attuned to ravens, and the Etruscans, who lived in the Italian Peninsula 700 years before Christ, were believed to communicate with eagles (Frazer, 1888).

Frazer goes on to recount several folktales and legends from different cultures concerning the language of animals. For instance, he cites a Syrian legend involving the ability to understand the speech of lions and bears. In Swabian folktales, a man is said to comprehend the language of geese (p. 95). Frazer also references various mythical and historical figures reputed to have communicated with animals and birds. One example is a 5th-century French prose legend about Alexander the Great, who was allegedly born in a glass case carried by eight giraffes, accompanied by a magician capable of speaking the language of animals (p. 95). He further refers to the Qur'ānic account of Solomon and the ant, as well as an Arabic legend claiming Solomon could converse with all animals. Quoting Gustav Weil (1845), Frazer notes the Islamic belief that “all birds and many (if not all) animals communicate in their own language” (p. 96). However, he points out that such beliefs are not unique to Islamic tradition, as many other cultures have held similar views. Frazer continues by recounting numerous stories from diverse traditions, including tales from *The Parrot Book* (*Tuti-nama*) and *The Thousand and One Nights*, that explore the idea of animals possessing their own form of language.

Róheim (1953) analyzes several cross-cultural tales of animals—particularly snakes—communicating with humans, interpreting them through a psychoanalytic lens. In many of these stories, a person gains the ability to understand the speech of animals but is bound by the condition that they must not reveal this secret. Notably, upon acquiring this ability, the individual often begins to laugh—an involuntary reaction that signals to those nearby that something unusual has occurred. This laughter typically prompts others, especially the person's spouse, to demand an explanation. The individual warns that revealing the secret would result in their death. Interestingly, a similar motif appears in both the Bible and the Qur'ān: when Solomon understands the words of the ant, he also bursts into laughter. Mustansir Mir (1991) cites Solomon's encounter with the ant in Surah An-Naml as an instance of Qur'ānic subtlety (*laṭā'if*). Folklorist Alan Dundes links the motif of laughter in Solomon's story to Type 456 in the Aarne-Thompson classification system of folk narratives.

Dundes identifies what he considers the earliest recorded version of the animal language tale in a 3rd-century Buddhist narrative. In this story, a king is granted the ability to understand the language of animals after saving the king of dragons—on the strict condition that he never reveal this secret. Later, the king overhears two butterflies discussing food and laughs aloud. When the queen questions the cause of his laughter, it leads to a crisis (p. 102). Dundes also cites an Indian variant of the tale, in which a king earns the gift of animal speech

after rescuing the king of serpents. While eating honey, a drop falls, and an observing ant calls to its fellows, proclaiming that the king's honey jar has broken and they should come feast. The king laughs at the ants' conversation, prompting the queen to demand an explanation (p. 193). In another version, a snake bestows the gift of animal speech on a man, who later laughs after overhearing ants discussing how to hide from him. When his wife insists on knowing the reason and he refuses to tell her, she dies of heartbreak (cited in Frazer, 1888, pp. 171–172). Frazer also records two Jewish versions of the tale, including one in which a man is granted the ability to speak with animals by the Prophet Solomon (p. 456).

The Thousand and One Nights includes a tale about a peasant who understands the language of animals, with his knowledge of their conversations driving the plot forward. In *The Parrot Book*—originally the Indian *Suka Saptati* (“Seventy Tales”), a parrot recounts the story of a lady and a laughing fish. In this tale, a prince offers grilled fish to his wife, who refuses to touch or even look at the foreign fish. Suddenly, the fish laughs so loudly that the entire city hears it. The prince then sets out to uncover the reason behind the laughter, and the narrative unfolds in a story-within-a-story structure, a hallmark of *Tuti-nama* and similar works (Al-e Ahmad and Daneshvar, 1994, p. 23). Zia al-Nakhshabī (8th century AH) includes this tale in a chapter titled “The Lustful Woman and the Laughing Fish” (p. 203). In the 37th story of his collection, a prince becomes the servant of a snake and, in return, gains immense wealth. In the 43rd tale, a man cuts off the tail of a female snake. The male snake initially seeks revenge but, upon learning that the female was at fault, rewards the man by teaching him the language of animals. Frazer also references this narrative, as preserved in the Turkish translation of the *Tuti-nama* (p. 449). Tale 45 recounts the story of “The Benevolent Prince and the Black Snake.” A similar motif appears in Lorimer’s collection of Kermani and Bakhtiari folktales, in a story titled *The Black Snake and the White Snake*.

As Dundes observes, the Aarne–Thompson Tale Type Index categorizes “The Language of Animals” under Type 670 (p. 233). In this tale type, a man acquires the ability to understand animal speech, and his wife becomes determined to discover his secret. A rooster eventually offers the man advice on how to handle the situation (*ibid*). The Aarne–Thompson system also identifies thematic parallels between this tale and other types, notably Type 517 (“The Boy Who Learned Many Things”) (p. 186) and Type 671 (“Learning Three Languages”) (p. 234). In Type 517, the protagonist is a boy who learns, among other things, the language of birds, who then foretell his future wealth and even the subservience of his parents.

3.1. *The Qur’ān’s Account of the Story of Solomon and the Ant in Surah An-Naml*

Surah An-Naml is the 27th chapter of the Qur’ān in the canonical order of the mushaf, situated between Surah al-Shu‘ara and Surah al-Qasas. Chronologically, it is considered the 48th surah revealed and is classified as Meccan. The surah opens with an affirmation of the Qur’ān’s divine origin, describing it as a revelation from the All-Knowing, All-Wise. Its central theme revolves around the retelling of stories concerning earlier prophets, including Moses, the people of Thamud, and Lot. A recurring narrative pattern connects these accounts: God sends a prophet to guide a community; the people, however, reject the prophet’s message due to arrogance and injustice. Despite growing opposition, the prophet gathers a small group of believers. Eventually, the prophet prays for divine intervention. A punishment is then inflicted upon the disbelievers, who are destroyed, while the faithful are saved.

In Surah An-Naml, the prophetic narratives are recounted in a condensed form, likely because they are addressed in greater detail elsewhere in the Qur'ān. These accounts may be characterized as "punishment stories," where the central theme is divine retribution. What sets this surah apart, however, is the inclusion—for the first time—of a narrative not centered on punishment: the story of Solomon and the ants. In this account, Solomon overhears an ant warning its companions to take cover lest they be trampled by his army. Hearing this, Solomon smiles in amusement and gratitude. The narrative begins in verse 14, following a reference to Moses and Pharaoh. This earlier passage reiterates the familiar pattern: the disbelievers reject the truth out of arrogance and injustice and ultimately suffer the consequences of their corruption. Yet, after this warning, the surah shifts in tone and presents an image of divine favor and joy: the special knowledge and insight granted to David and Solomon:

“Indeed, We gave knowledge to David and Solomon, and they said, ‘Praise be to Allah, who has favored us over many of His believing servants.’” (27:15)

“Until, when they came upon the Valley of the Ants, an ant said, ‘O ants! Enter your dwellings, lest Solomon and his soldiers crush you while they do not perceive.’” (27:18)

“So [Solomon] smiled, laughing at her words, and said, ‘My Lord! Inspire me to be grateful for Your favor which You have bestowed upon me and my parents, and to do righteousness that You approve, and admit me by Your mercy among Your righteous servants.’” (27:19)

The story continues with the episode of the hoopoe (hudhud), who brings Solomon news of the Queen of Sheba (verses 20–22). This leads to a diplomatic exchange and culminates in the Queen's arrival at Solomon's court and her eventual submission to the One God (verses 29–44). Following this account of wisdom, diplomacy, and divine guidance, the surah shifts once again—this time returning to the theme of prophetic rejection. It recounts how the people of Thamud plotted to kill the prophet Ṣāliḥ (verses 45–53), followed by the story of the people of Lot, who conspired to expel him from their town (verses 54–58). The surah then turns to address the Prophet Muhammad directly, encouraging him not to be disheartened by the deniers. It concludes with a reflection on the Day of Resurrection, reminders of divine judgment, and an exhortation to worship God and recite the Qur'ān.

Exegetical sources have offered extensive commentary on the various dimensions of Solomon's encounter with the ants. In *Tafsir Nemuneh*, Makarem Shirazi (1992, vol. 15, p. 431) notes that some commentators interpret Solomon's smile as an expression of joy upon realizing that the ants recognized the justice and piety of his army. Others suggest that his smile was one of amazement at his God-given ability to hear even the faintest voices, such as that of an ant despite the grandeur and commotion of his military procession (p. 434). Makarem himself highlights the remarkable nature of the ant's behavior: that it not only spoke but also issued a warning to its companions with foresight and concern. It is this sense of wonder, he argues, that most likely elicited Solomon's smile (p. 433).

In *Tafsir Noor*, Qara'ati (2009, vol. 6, pp. 402–407) presents a series of moral and ethical lessons drawn from the story of Solomon and the ants. He highlights Solomon's response as exemplary leadership—reacting with patience and good humor upon hearing the ant's warning that the army might unknowingly trample them. Qara'ati emphasizes that God humbles Solomon, despite his immense power, through the voice of a tiny ant, thereby preserving his spiritual equilibrium. He suggests that one should find joy when even the

smallest creatures recognize and appreciate one's justice. Additionally, Qara'ati notes that the laughter of prophets is marked by calm smiles (tabassum) rather than loud laughter or mockery (p. 406). Similarly, in al-Mizan, Allameh Tabataba'i (1995, vol. 15, p. 503) refers to Ruh al-Ma'ani (vol. 19, p. 179) to distinguish between tabassum (a gentle smile) and dhahik (ordinary laughter). He affirms that Solomon's gift of understanding the language of birds naturally extended to that of ants, highlighting the consistency of this extraordinary knowledge (p. 502).

Most exegetical works focus primarily on the immediate verses of this story, often overlooking the broader narrative structure of the surah—particularly the relationship between this episode and other punishment-based narratives involving Moses, Salih, and Lot. This oversight prompts several critical questions:

- What is the connection between the story of Solomon and the ant—and the subsequent episode involving the Queen of Sheba—and the larger narrative framework of Surah An-Naml, especially in relation to the prophetic model it presents?
- How does this story differ from the types of folktales categorized by Dundes?
- What distinguishes the Qur'ānic retelling from other versions or parallels?
- If the motif of laughter serves as a point of similarity between this story and the aforementioned folktales, how might this laughter be interpreted within Qur'ānic or Islamic theological discourse?
- How does the inclusion of this non-punitive story within a surah otherwise dominated by punishment narratives affect the overall thematic coherence of the chapter?
- Regarding inter-sural relationships, what narrative or thematic connections exist between Surah An-Naml and its immediate neighbors, Surah al-Shu'ara and Surah al-Qasas?

3.2. *The Qur'ānic Logic of Birds and the Language of Animals in Non-Qur'ānic Narratives*

The Qur'ānic concept of *mantiq al-tayr* (the language or logic of birds) both parallels and diverges from non-Qur'ānic traditions that explore the theme of animal communication. As noted by Frazer and others—and clearly evident in the international tale types classified by Aarne, Thompson and later by Marzolph, a common motif features a human protagonist—often a young man, a Brahmin prince, a nameless wanderer, or someone of humble origin—who earns the ability to understand the language of animals as a reward for an act of kindness toward a creature, typically a snake, dragon, or king of snakes. However, this gift usually comes with a condition: the protagonist must not reveal this secret, often to his wife, or he will die. Upon understanding the speech of animals, he frequently bursts into laughter after uncovering a hidden mystery. His wife persistently demands to know the cause of his laughter. At first, he resists but eventually concedes—only to withhold the secret at the final moment, thereby preserving his life. Interestingly, these tales never explain how the protagonist acquires the ability to understand animal speech; the knowledge simply appears, granted by the grateful creature.

Because humans are generally incapable of understanding animal speech, this knowledge bestows upon the protagonist an extraordinary, often magical power. In many of these

stories, the protagonist responds with laughter or a loud guffaw upon overhearing the animals. In some versions, particularly Indian variants like the *Tutinama* (Tales of a Parrot)—it is the animals themselves, such as a fried fish, who laugh at an inappropriate reaction from a woman upon seeing a man, with the sound heard by all. By contrast, the Qur'ānic account of *mantiq al-tayr* is of a different nature. The Qur'ān first mentions a special kind of knowledge granted to David and Solomon, then refers to Solomon as David's heir, who proclaims:

“Solomon inherited David, and he said: ‘O people, we have been taught the language of the birds, and we have been given everything. Indeed, this is a clear favor.’” (Qur'ān 27:16)

Solomon regards his knowledge of the language of birds as a divine favor. As Allameh Tabataba'i explains—while engaging with other interpretations—there is no contradiction between Solomon's understanding of bird speech and his comprehension of the ants' speech in the same narrative; in fact, the surrounding verses support this view (al-Mīzān, p. 503). Unlike human folklore, where the protagonist earns the ability to understand animal speech through an act of kindness, the Qur'ān presents Solomon as receiving this knowledge—along with dominion over the winds and jinn—because he is a devout servant, penitent and in constant worship of God. Furthermore, Solomon asks for forgiveness, and in response, God grants him a vast kingdom.

In human tales, this knowledge often leads to personal wealth and success. In the Qur'ān, however, Solomon uses his God-given powers to invite others, such as the Queen of Sheba to accept the truth. Thus, divine gifts are directed toward theological and ethical purposes. In the same surah, the story of Moses and his confrontation with Pharaoh is also recounted. Pharaoh, despite his wealth and power, ultimately gains nothing because he exploits others, especially the Children of Israel. Similarly, in the story of Salih, his opponents seek to expel him and accuse his followers of bringing misfortune. They plot to kill him, but God counters their schemes with a greater plan and destroys them all. Likewise, the people of Lot are annihilated for their wickedness.

At first glance, the three stories of punishment—Pharaoh, the people of Salih, and the people of Lot—may seem unrelated to the story of Solomon, which is often seen as one of divine mercy. Yet, by juxtaposing these narratives, the Qur'ān accomplishes a dual purpose: warning disbelievers, particularly the Prophet's contemporaries, while offering hope and glad tidings to believers. The story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba exemplifies divine mercy and success, whereas the accounts of Pharaoh and the others convey divine retribution. Notably, the phrase *la yash'urūn* (“they perceive not”) appears both in the story of Solomon and the ants and in the story of Lot's people, though in different contexts: the ants warn each other that Solomon's army might unknowingly crush them, while the disbelievers among Lot's people remain unaware of God's impending judgment. This subtle repetition underscores the Qur'ān's rhetorical cohesion.

Ultimately, what makes the Qur'ānic account both original and distinctive is the organic interconnection between Solomon's story and the broader themes of the surah, including the Prophetic mission. The narrative of Solomon and the ants, situated between accounts of destruction and salvation, functions both as a lesson in mercy and as a subtle reminder of the fate awaiting those who either heed or disregard divine guidance.

3.3) Solomon's Laughter

Another element that has led Dundes to associate the story of Solomon and the ant with global folktale motifs is the motif of laughter: in both traditions, the protagonist laughs at the speech of an animal. Meir (1991) refers to Solomon's laughter as an example of Qur'ānic subtlety, while Tamer (2009) considers it a manifestation of mutual wit and humor:

The ant, having grasped the gravity of the threat, utters a humorous line, implying that Solomon and his army might trample over the ants unintentionally and without realizing it. This brief utterance unveils a dignified form of humor, which arises from the hidden contrast between the grandeur of Solomon's army and the minuteness of the ants. The humor is further intensified by the fact that it occurs in an essentially serious context. On the other hand, Solomon, who perceives the ant's ironic tone mixed with caution, responds in kind with laughter. He smiles and laughs at the ant's words and, through his subsequent prayer, demonstrates his full awareness of God's grandeur and omnipotence. Thus, the story reveals two distinct types of humor: humor that arises within serious situations, and humor derived from a voluntary relinquishing of power by a figure {Solomon} whose authority, in this context, is absolute (p. 14).

Scholars have long discussed the causes and functions of laughter and humor under three major theories: *Relief Theory*, *Superiority Theory*, and *Incongruity Theory*. Relief theory, one of the most prevalent psychological and physiological explanations for laughter, is associated with Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud. According to this view, laughter serves as the release of accumulated psychic energy resulting from daily stress, anxiety, inner conflict, and frustration. Through laughter, this pent-up energy is discharged, bringing about a sense of ease and emotional relief. This theory posits that the physical jolt experienced during laughter, and the intensity of loud or uncontrollable laughter, are direct expressions of the quantity of released energy. Therefore, laughter is primarily a mechanism for alleviating anxiety and internal tension, aimed more at the receiver of humor (the laugher).

The superiority theory, attributed to Plato and Aristotle, holds that laughter arises when an individual feels superior to another person or situation. In contrast, incongruity theory shifts the focus from emotional to cognitive dimensions of humor. Here, laughter is seen as a rational reaction to unexpected or illogical situations or juxtapositions. It emerges when two elements, ideas, situations, or perceptions, that are usually incompatible suddenly appear to be connected. Interestingly, both Superiority and Incongruity theories agree that laughter stems from a form of contrast or duality. However, in Superiority Theory, this duality is comparative and often involves the laugher's assessment of themselves in relation to others or their former self. In incongruity theory, while superiority may not be entirely absent, the contrast does not necessarily require such comparison.

So how might Solomon's laughter be interpreted within this theoretical framework? Without delving into excessive detail, it becomes evident that neither Solomon's laughter, nor the laughter seen in folk tales, fits well with the Relief Theory. The characters in such stories, including Solomon, do not laugh as a means of releasing internal stress or conflict. That said, Solomon's smile may reflect a moment of tension reduction: upon hearing the ant's concern and taking steps to avoid harm, he may have felt a sense of comfort and relief that prompted a gentle smile.

Nevertheless, the primary causes of his laughter are arguably better explained through Superiority Theory and, more convincingly, Incongruity Theory. According to the former,

laughter occurs when the individual perceives themselves in a dominant or superior position. In the latter, it arises from the contradiction between the laugher's situation and that of the humorous object. In practice, these two theories are often intertwined, and their functions overlap to the extent that a sharp boundary between them is difficult to maintain. In folktales, the laugher's superiority is usually marked by the acquisition of magical knowledge or power that sets them apart from others. For example, when a character gains the ability to understand the speech of non-human creatures, this knowledge places them in an elevated position and may elicit a smile or laughter that signals this newfound superiority. Yet, the underlying cause of laughter is not just this sense of superiority but the comic incongruity created by the contrast between the magical character and the mundane world around them.

In the story of Solomon and the ant, Solomon's dominion over all creatures and natural forces, granted to him by God, makes him a uniquely powerful figure. When he enters the Valley of the Ants, flanked by his immense army of humans, jinn, and birds, he is fully aware of the power he wields. Still, as a prophet, Solomon never flaunts this might arrogantly. On the contrary, the Qur'ān depicts him as humble, devout, and repentant—an appreciative servant of divine grace who possesses wisdom and can understand the language of animals.

Thus, his laughter might stem not from boastfulness, but from a profound awareness of his role in the cosmos and his responsibility over creation. The core of Solomon's laughter likely lies in the stark incongruity between two opposing situations: the grandeur of his massive army and the concern of a tiny ant worried about her fellow ants. The idea that a single, minuscule ant would fear being crushed by such a formidable force—one that she assumes may not even notice her existence—creates a humorous paradox.

The first layer of incongruity lies in the sheer disproportion between the size of Solomon's army and that of the ant colony. The second lies in the contrast between the commander of the army—Solomon, likely mounted on horseback and commanding legions—and the “commander” of the ants, herself tiny but astute, efficiently leading her colony. Like Solomon, the ant leader seems aware of every individual under her care. The fact that Solomon later in the story inquires about the absence of the hoopoe (hud-hud), showing his detailed oversight of his forces, parallels the ant's concern for her own.

These multilayered incongruities, of scale, speech, command, and cognition, collectively contribute to the subtle humor of the episode. They transform what is initially a serious and potentially perilous encounter into a moment of reflection, humility, and gentle amusement, captured in Solomon's smile. (Table 1).

However, some scholars, including Penchansky (2019), offer a divergent view. Based on Solomon's interrogation of the hoopoe bird and his treatment of the people and queen of Sheba, Penchansky argues that Solomon's laughter is an expression of anger and wrath. He even claims that Solomon's troops trample the ants as they march on. It is worth exploring why Penchansky makes such a claim. First, Penchansky sees parallels between the Qur'ānic Solomon and the Solomon of the Book of Kings in the Hebrew Bible (p. 113). According to him, in both sources, Solomon is a majestic and glorious king. Secondly, he finds a stronger resemblance between the Qur'ānic Solomon and the Solomon of the Song of Songs: a powerful king who commands all. Penchansky argues that this overwhelming power links the Biblical Solomon with the one depicted in Surah An-Naml (Penchansky, 2019).

Table 1. Contrasts and Incongruities Between the Army of Solomon and the Army of Ants

Aspect	Solomon's Army	Army of Ants	Contrast and Incongruity
Size and Magnitude	A mighty army marching with military order, dominating both earth and sky.	A vast yet small and orderly army of ants, each minding its own task.	The grandeur of Solomon's army contrasts with the minuteness of the ants; the great must be mindful of the small.
Power and Authority	Solomon, the supreme commander, leads the army with boundless strength and power.	The ant commander, though tiny in size, effectively leads the ant army.	The giant figure of Solomon versus the tiny ant queen; both exercise efficient leadership.
Command and Awareness	Solomon is fully aware of his army's presence and absence—even noticing the missing hoopoe.	The ant leader addresses the entire army, instructing them to return to their nests.	Solomon's command over a vast army mirrors the ant leader's control over a small one; both demonstrate comprehensive awareness.
Leadership Capacity	Commands an enormous army of humans and jinn.	Rules over a highly structured ant army.	Leadership in both large and small realms; both exhibit organization, discipline, and authority.
Ant's Perception vs. Reality	The ant says: "Lest Solomon and his troops crush you unknowingly" (lā yash'urūn).	Solomon hears this and ensures his troops are careful not to harm the ants.	The ant imagines Solomon is unaware, while the reality is that he is fully conscious and considerate.
Overall Situational Contrast	A grand and majestic army moving with splendor.	A minuscule yet disciplined and efficient force.	The juxtaposition of the immense and the minute generates wonder and ultimately makes Solomon smile.

Referring to the various portrayals of Solomon in texts such as the Book of Wisdom and the Proverbs, Penchansky argues that Surah An-Naml introduces new dimensions to Solomon's character, depicting him as a king commanding vast supernatural army. He observes that Muslims and the Islamic exegetical tradition generally present Solomon as a just ruler. Accordingly, Solomon instructs his troops to be mindful of the ants and avoid trampling them (p. 115). However, Penchansky contends that, given Solomon's treatment of the hoopoe and the Queen of Sheba, it is unlikely that he and his armies would have passed by the ants without crushing some. Nonetheless, he considers such behavior natural and expected of a powerful commander, who, by definition, must exercise firm authority over subordinates (p. 122).

However, in light of Solomon's prayer to God—overflowing with love, gratitude, and thankfulness—it seems unlikely that his laughter was anything but joyful. He rejoices at seeing how a tiny ant warns its fellow ants of Solomon's approaching army and guides them back to their nest. More importantly, from an intertextual perspective, this story stands in contrast to the punishment-centered narratives in the surrounding surahs—such as those of

Moses, Lot, Salih, Hud, Abraham, Noah, and Shu‘ayb in Surahs al-Shu‘ara’ and al-Qasas. In contrast, the narrative in Surah An-Naml is mercy-centered, offering believers glad tidings of God’s mercy and forgiveness—especially for those who, like the Queen of Sheba, despite her power and wealth, ultimately submit to God and embrace faith.

In this light, it is not far-fetched to interpret this mercy-centered story, placed amidst so many punishment-centered ones, as a form of *comic relief*—a story that lifts the reader’s spirits with a moment of joy and hope in the midst of tales of destruction and rebellion. Therefore, in concluding reflections on Solomon’s laughter in Surah An-Naml, one may argue that this moment contains layers of meaning that deepen our understanding of this Qur’ānic episode. These can be summarized as follows:

- **Wonder at the Ant’s Intelligence:** As a prophet endowed by God with immense wisdom and the ability to understand the language of animals, Solomon’s laughter may reflect astonishment at the insight of a tiny ant—able to perceive danger and warn her peers to avoid harm.
- **Gratitude to God:** Solomon’s laughter may also signify his thankfulness to God for granting him the extraordinary ability to comprehend the speech of animals. This divine gift enables him to be aware of the ants’ condition and prevent them from being harmed, making his laughter a joyful expression of gratitude.
- **Divine Power and Majesty:** The laughter might also represent Solomon’s contemplation of God’s greatness—how He has empowered even the smallest of creatures, like the ant, with the capacity to communicate and recognize threats. It reflects the divine wisdom and order of the universe, in which every creature has a role and purpose.
- **Calm and Assurance:** Solomon’s laughter could reflect a sense of calm and confidence. He is pleased that he can use his gift to prevent harm to even the smallest beings, revealing his prophetic compassion toward all creatures. It follows that if a prophet shows such sensitivity toward tiny beings, he would be even more attentive to the well-being of human beings, the most honored of God’s creation, striving for their welfare in both this world and the next.
- **Moral Instruction:** This laughter offers moral insight to the Qur’ānic audience across all times. Though Solomon is a powerful king and prophet, he pays close attention to the words of a small creature and treats it with respect. Readers, too, are taught to value all of God’s creation regardless of size or strength. Just as Solomon offers thanks to God, readers are invited to always express gratitude for divine blessings. It is noteworthy that gratitude is one of the main themes of Surah An-Naml, emphasized as a quality of those who are rightly guided—those who establish prayer, give zakat, and are certain of the Hereafter (v. 2). The Qur’ān, as a clear Book, offers glad tidings for such guided souls.

4. Conclusion

The story of Solomon and the ant, as narrated in Surah An-Naml, appears for the first time in the Qur’ān and, unlike many other Qur’ānic narratives that may share parallels with earlier religious texts, this episode has no known equivalent in other sacred scriptures. Therefore, the claim made by Alan Dundes—namely, that this story resembles the global tale-type of “The Language of Animals”—is inaccurate, if by this he intends to suggest a direct influence on the Qur’ān. However, as Dundes himself clarifies, his aim is not to argue

for Qur'ānic dependence but rather to highlight certain thematic similarities. Nonetheless, given the antiquity and stature of the Qur'ān, if any influence is to be proposed, it would be more plausible to suggest that global tale-types may have drawn motifs and themes from sacred texts, including the Qur'ān rather than the other way around. Even if similar motifs appeared in pre-Islamic stories from other cultures, such as Indian folklore, the mere existence of one or two examples cannot justify the claim of Qur'ānic borrowing. It is also notable that, despite the extensive treatment of David and Solomon in the Hebrew Bible and other Jewish texts, no mention is made of an episode involving Solomon and an ant.

The Qur'ān does not employ such narratives for entertainment or mere storytelling. Rather, the clear intention is to use these stories as vehicles for conveying theological, ethical, and didactic messages. Often, these stories are intricately connected to the context of the Prophet's own life and mission. Therefore, even if some thematic similarities between the Qur'ānic story of Solomon and the ant and certain folkloric traditions from other cultures can be traced—as Dundes suggests—what truly distinguishes the Qur'ānic narrative is its deep intertextual coherence. Specifically, this story is interwoven with the larger narrative structure of Surah An-Naml and is also connected to the stories in adjacent chapters such as Surah al-Shu'ara and Surah al-Qasas. These interconnections reveal a broader design in which Qur'ānic stories are not isolated fragments but are part of a cohesive, organically structured narrative system.

In summary, this study arrives at several key conclusions. While the Qur'ānic story of Solomon and the ants shares some superficial similarities with global tale types, it exhibits significant differences that reflect the unique features of Qur'ānic storytelling. The Qur'ān does not recount stories merely for entertainment; rather, it uses them as vehicles to convey profound religious and moral principles. The internal coherence of the narrative, along with its close connection to the surrounding verses, highlights its special role within the structure of Surah An-Naml. Moreover, the story gains additional significance when considered in light of the Prophet's biography and the socio-historical context of the revelation. Importantly, the narrative's rhetorical structure and literary formulation are not borrowed from folklore but arise from the Qur'ān's own theological and literary logic. This is further emphasized by the use of literary devices such as metaphor, symbolism, and elevated language, which reveal the sophisticated artistry embedded in the Qur'ānic discourse and underscore the depth of its revelatory message.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that future research approach other Qur'ānic narratives with a similarly comprehensive methodology—one that takes into account intertextual patterns, prophetic context, and the historical setting of revelation—to deepen our understanding of the unique character of Qur'ānic storytelling.

References

- Al-e Ahmad, J., & Daneshvar, S. (1994). *Forty parrots*. Mitra Publishing.
- Bell, R. (1937). *The Qur'ān: Translated, with a critical re-arrangement of the Surahs*. T. & T. Clark.
- Dundes, A. (2003). *Fables of the ancients? Folklore in the Qur'ān*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

- Dundes, A. (2017). *Ancient myths: Folklore in the Qur'ān* (M. Hossein Golzar, Trans.). Falah. (Original work published 2003)
- Frazer, J. G. (1888). The language of animals. *The Archaeological Review*, 1, 81–91, 161–181.
- Hirschfeld, H. (1902). *New researches into the composition and exegesis of the Qoran*. Royal Asiatic Society.
- Khalafallah, M. A. (2023). *The art of storytelling in the Holy Qur'ān* (M. Armin, Trans.). Ney Publishing.
- Mir, M. (1991). Humor in the Qur'ān. *The Muslim World*, 81(3–4), 179–193.
- Nöldeke, T. (2013). *Geschichte des Qorans [The history of the Qur'ān]* (W. H. Behn, Ed. & Trans.). Brill Academic Publishers. (Original work published 1860)
- Penchanski, D. (2021). *Solomon and the ant: Qur'ān in conversation with the Bible*. Cascade Books.
- Roheim, G. (1953). The language of birds. *American Imago*, 10, 3–14.
- Tamer, G. (2009). The Qur'ān and humor. In G. Tamer (Ed.), *Humor in Arabic culture* (pp. 3–28). Walter de Gruyter.
- Watt, W. M. (1970). *Bell's introduction to the Qur'ān*. Edinburgh University Press.