

‘On the Empire of Money’: The Representation of Money in Arab-Islamic Culture¹

Oladosu Ayinde Afis

Professor, Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies
University of Ibadan, Nigeria

Abass Umar Mohammed

Lecturer, Department of Modern Languages (Arabic Section),
University of Ghana, Legon

Abstract

This paper is premised on the assumption that scholarly studies on *al-Māl* (money) and its role in human-lives have largely been seen to be the exclusive preserve of social science scholars. This has consequently led to the elision of other perspectives, particularly the cultural, on the category. This paper therefore attempts to fill that gap. It begins with a review of the literal meanings of *al-Māl* in Muslim and non-Muslim cultures, the jurisprudential construction of the concept and insightful perspectives from, among others, C. Turner, W. Muhammad and M. Plessner. Using works of Abī Tayyib al-Mutannabī and Aḥmad Shawqī as cultural sites, the paper subsequently anchors its discussion of humanity’s notions of money on three axes: money as a necessity, money as a sociological referent and money as the essence of existence.

Keywords: *al-Māl*, *Bayt al-Māl*, Qur’ān, Arab-Islamic culture, literature

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The poor person is (usually) considered to be more deceitful than the lightning of the mirage...; he is shunned on arrival, and nobody asks of him if he is absent; (in fact) his presence is detested...; if he gets angry he is scoffed at; shaking him by the hand vitiates ablution; his recitation (of the Qur'ān) invalidates prayers.

AbdulRahīm, Muhammad (2000, p.10)

“When there is money in your hand and not in your heart, it will not harm you even if it is a lot, (but) when money is in your heart, it will harm you even if there is none in your hands.”

Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (p.5)

Studies on money and monetary transactions, particularly as they relate to Islam or the Qur'ān, are circumscribed, in the main, by two approaches: the jurisprudential and the economic. In the first, contemporary scholars in Islam usually approach the Qur'ān in search of verses which talk about money, notably in relation to marriage, inheritance, divorce and other matters pertaining to human social intercourse where money operates as intervening decimal. It is customary for such scholars to make use of arguments and analyses of early scholars in the field, particularly the four popular schools of Islamic jurisprudence, namely Imām Abū Hanīfah, Imām Mālik, Imām Shāfi'ī and Imām Hanbalī schools of jurisprudence. The second approach to money among contemporary Muslims scholars is largely that of the Muslim economists who are usually interested in the Qur'ānic perspective on wealth, poverty reduction and public finance, among others. It is axiomatic therefore, that these studies have paid little attention, if any at all, to the cultural construction, depiction and representation of money in Arab-Islamic tradition. This paper attempts to fill that gap.

It privileges a reading of money which excludes the grammar of the economists and the 'mathematics' of the financial analyst in order to show how Arab-Muslims have thought and written about money as a locus of the lived and the experienced. Using the Qur'ānic framework as its point of departure, the paper engages the following questions: what exactly does the word *al-*

Māl signify and what implications does it have in Arab-Islamic culture? How might the works of two Arab poets, namely Abu Tāyib al-Mutannabī (d. 965 C.E) and Aḥmad Shawqī (d.1932) as well as the insightful commentaries of early Arab-Muslim poet-sages and thinkers function in elaborating and expounding upon our understanding of the category of money in the contemporary world? These questions are formulated based on our conviction that money is not and cannot just be viewed as an ordinary symbol of commercial or financial transaction. Rather, it is an item or measurement of value which is encoded with strong cultural significations. Our study of representative samples of al-Mutannabī's and al-Shawqī's works is therefore meant to provide insights into some of the extremely rich perspectives on the description of money in Arab-Islamic culture.

Linguistic and Jurisprudential Definitions of *al-Māl* (Money)

Any attempt to trace the origin of money in Euro-American cultural tradition could be extremely challenging for the inquirer. The word is said to have originated from the temple of Hera, at Olympia in Ancient Greece (Meikle, 1994, p.26). Unlike the case in Arab-Islamic tradition, the definition of the word 'money' in Western culture hardly excites the imagination. Money is money and money becomes money simply because everybody refers to it as such; it is accepted as a unit of measurement, a medium of exchange, a storehouse of wealth and is declared a legal tender by a constituted authority (Meikle, p.26). The 'empire of money' in the form of coins or notes is said to have begun when the world got tired of using barter. Aristotle says 'when the inhabitants of one country became more dependent on those of another, and they imported what they needed and exported what they had too much of, money necessarily came into use' (Aristotle, *Politics*)².

² For more on Aristotle's *Politics*, see: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.1.one.html>

However, in Arab-Islamic tradition, reference to the word ‘money’ usually calls attention to a number of signifiers with extremely rich significations. Money, in Arab-Islamic culture, is known as *al-Māl*, *al-Nuqūd*, *al-Fulūs*, *al-‘Umlah*, *Dirham* and *Dinār* (Ibn Manzūr, 1955, p. 635) among others. Each of these designations, unlike the case in Western culture, refers to money as wealth, coin, currencies and as property respectively. In this paper, the word *Māl* shall be our operative point of reference simply because it is the word mostly used in the Qur’ān. But what is the etymology of the word in Arab-Islamic culture? Contrary to Pressner's suggestion that the word ‘Māl’ comprises two Arabic letters (Plessner, 1936, p. 205; cited in Turner, 2006, pp. 58-83), the word is actually derived from a collocation of three Arabic alphabets: mim (م) + alif (ا) lam (ل) = *Māl*, which means anything that belongs to anyone. Arab grammarians and linguists are not, however, unlike in other instances, completely in agreement over the origin of the word. It has been suggested that the word derives from the root *mawwala*, one of whose meanings is ‘to finance’ (Ba‘alabaki, 1977, p. 1143). For his part, Ibn Manzūr (p. 635) states the the word *Māl* refers to that which is commonly known and which can be owned. His suggestion resonates with that of Ibn al-Athīr (n.d., 70) who contends that the word refers to anything that one owns. Constant references to ‘that which is owned’ are meant to call attention to the fact that in the pre-Islamic era, the Arabs used the term *Māl* to refer only to gold and silver. Its scale of reference was later expanded to include things owned physically, particularly camels (p. 70).

While linguistic definitions and approaches to the word *Māl* are eclectic, those of the jurisprudential are no less engaging. All the traditional *fiqh* scholars and revered legists have different perspectives on the word. Whereas the Hanafīs say *Māl* must be something which exists physically and is desirable (Muhammad, 1999, p. 361), Ibn ‘Abidīn affirms it as whatever human instinct

is inclined to and whatever is also capable of being stored for future use (Al-Suyūṭī, 1983, p. 327). For the Mālikis, as represented here by al-Shātibī, *Māl* is anything over which ownership is exercised and which the owner is free to enjoy (Al-Shātibī, n.d, p. 17). The Shāfi‘ī school defines *Māl* as that which gives benefit; al-Suyūṭī (1983, p. 363) asserts that the word refers to anything that is both valuable and exchangeable, and whose owner is entitled to compensation in the event of its destruction (p.383). For their part, the Hanbalis define *Māl* as things from which benefit accrues and which are capable of being used in any circumstances (p.328). No matter the tenor and texture of their opinions, it is clear that all the above definitions are reactive to the extremely engaging reference to *Māl* in the Qur’ān. In other words, if jurisprudential definitions of and references to the word *Māl* are as diverse as is evident here, it is actually an extension of its multifarious richness in its portrayal in the Qur’ān

***al-Māl* in the Qur’ān and During the Prophetic Era**

Hardly is there a divine book in which *Māl* enjoys a huge patronage as the last testament, the glorious Qur’ān. In the latter, reference to money, whether in the singular (*al-Māl*), the plural (*al-Amwāl*, as definite and indefinite articles (*m’arifah* and *nakrah*) or in appositive cases (*mudāf*) occurs in no less than eighty six (86) times (Turner, 2006, p. 58). Nonetheless, we must situate our discussion, even if briefly, in an historical context. In other words, the dialectics we read about in the Qur’ānic descriptions of money are largely due to the important role the latter played in the Arabian Peninsula during the 7th century. During the period, the city of Makkah was headed by the Qurayshi clan, an aristocracy which installed itself as the sole authority over the economic, political and religious affairs of the people of the era and the peninsula. Central to the formation and the preservation of the Makkan aristocratic hegemony during the period was the acquisition of material wealth. The longer the caravan of camels, horses and donkeys which departed the precincts of Makkah with hides, raisings and silver bars and

returned with large number of slaves and big quantities of perfumes, oils and other manufactured products from distant cities such as Damascus and Cairo, the higher the status of their owners in aristocratic circles (Ibn Kathīr, n.d, p. 170). Thus, one of the earliest references to money in the Qur'ān is dedicated to the portrayal of this trend among the Arabs. In chapters 102 and 107 of the Qur'ān which are appropriately titled *al-Takkāthur* and *al-Mā'ūn*, the pursuit of wealth in utter disregard of the essence of human existence is deprecated. The first reference to money in the Qur'ān is that whose pursuit for personal and selfish reasons, not for the provision of comfort for the less-privileged in the society, is described as the anti-thesis of its divinely sanctioned purpose in creation (Quran 107, 3-7).

The migration of the Prophet to Madīnah in 622 C.E later functioned in increasing the Quranic patronage of the category of money. Whereas during its Makkan phase, reference to money could be described as admonitory or reprobatory in that the Qur'ān only calls attention to the evils inherent in the excessive pursuit of wealth and the neglect of the poor and orphans, the Madinite experience, however, is more engaging. Here, the Qur'ān goes into more detail in establishing what more may be described as the philosophy of money in Islam. In addition to the establishment of principles and regulations that would thenceforth guide the acquisition of money in Muslim societies, the Qur'ān goes further to set ethical standards for its usage. The perceptive reader of the Qur'ān would equally discover that the Qur'ān does not just set the standard and establish the principles, it equally interlaces what may be described as the legal with the ethical; it tells stories of peoples and nations which failed to follow divine instructions on account of 'the evil' of money and consequently suffered perdition and destruction. Such is the story of Qārūn (Q.29, 79); such are the lessons in the story of people in whose culture, just like the Makkans, the authority of money predominates.

For example, when a leader was appointed for such people they chorused in complete disapproval:

Their Prophet said to them: ‘God hath appointed Talut as king over you.’ They said: ‘How can he exercise authority over us when we are better fitted than he to exercise authority, and he is not even gifted, with wealth (Māl) in abundance?’ He said: ‘God hath chosen him above you, and hath gifted him abundantly with knowledge and bodily prowess: God granteth His authority to whom He pleaseth. God careth for all, and He knoweth all things.’ (Q. 2, 247)

Evident in the above is the valorisation of wealth as the prerequisite for political leadership and earthly authority in such communities. Thus Talūt is deemed not qualified for the position because of his lowly material status; he is considered not suitable enough as a candidate for the kingdom simply because he lacks wealth in abundance. Thus, for such people, the most important criterion for leadership is not the possession of leadership skills but the possession of conspicuous wealth. In other words, human societies across the world and throughout the ages usually arrogate authority to those who have more wealth than others. It is usual for the wealthy to consider themselves to be sovereign. To be wealthy, in traditional aristocratic societies, is to see the poor as an estate; to be endowed more than others in monetary matters is to see oneself as the Lord of the Manor. Thorstein Veblein, one of the earliest thinkers on the role of money in human lives asserts:

Man has not only lost his volition in the field of economic arrangement, he has permitted money to mould his modes of thought, his sense of values, even his manner of expression... Instead of being a machine for doing quickly and commodiously what would be done, though less quickly and commodiously, without it, the use of money exerts a distinct and independent influence of its own upon our wants as consumers, upon our skill as planners, upon our methods as producers and upon our ideals as citizens... In any society in which success is measured in terms of money our native propensity towards emulation takes on a pecuniary twist. We cultivate the manners of the rich. We

indulge in social frivolities and keep pace with the changing styles. (cited in Ahmad, 1970, p.217)

It then becomes pertinent in the divine scheme as embodied by the Qur'ān that the excessive pursuit of money is reprobated in the most potent manner. In order to achieve this, and in order to redirect human life towards a nobler path, the Almighty provides copious prescriptions for humanity on *Māl*. Thus man is admonished:

Money and all other earthly possessions are tests from the Almighty to His creation: know ye that your possessions and your progeny are but a trial: and that it is Allah with whom lies your highest reward. (Q8, 28)

The new epistemology of money, if it may be described as such, instituted by the Qur'ān, consequent upon the establishment of the Islamic state in Madīnah, witnessed the introduction of Zakāt (alms giving) as an important pillar of faith (Q9, 60). This led to the emergence of new structures and systems which are dedicated to its administration. Thus, for the first time in its annals and indeed in the history of humanity, was established a 'house of money', *Bayt al-Māl* (Imamuddin, 1997, p. 129). Building upon the pillars established by Prophet Muhammad and the first Khalīfah, Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq, the second Caliph, 'Umar ibn Al-Khaṭāb (d. 644 AD) established the *Bayt al-Māl* (BM) to serve as a storehouse or clearing house for state revenues and the distribution of stipends that were accruable to the Muslim troops who were then engaged in a number of expeditions in defence of the Muslim state (Hitti, 1970, p. 139). Up till the end of the reign of the fourth Caliph, 'Ali ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 661 AD), it can be argued that there was large-scale compliance with the Quranic legislations on the acquisition and usage of personal and public wealth. The 'empire of money' remained within the control of the Muslim Ummah; it was 'in their hands not in their hearts.'

***al-Māl* in the Caliphate Era and Beyond**

Without prejudice to the credence lent to the reign of the third Caliph in Islam, ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān (644-656 AD) to its emergence, it has been established that it was Mu‘awiyah ibn ‘Abī Sufyān who actually founded the Umayyad suzerainty consequent upon the civil war witnessed by the early Muslims in 661 CE. He it was, who made Damascus, the capital of the new Muslim caliphate. It was Mu‘āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān who started the monarchical system of government in Islam. He is the one who ‘took’ Muslim history from its austere and extremely Spartan phase to the luxurious and opulence life of the city (Hitti, 1970, p. 189).

During his reign and that of his successors, money began to play similar roles hitherto condemned by the Qur’ān. The BM became a private property which the ruler of the caliphate and his household could appropriate without recourse to the law. Curiously, however, it was equally during the reign of the Umayyad rulers that the first coin was printed in the history of Islam. The most exemplary of the Umayyad rulers and one whose administration of public wealth remains incomparable, however, is ‘Umar ibn ‘Abdul Azīz (d. 720 CE). As soon as he ascended to power, ‘Abdul Azīz restructured the BM and introduced new fiscal policies the centre-point of which was the promotion of the welfare of the masses. Historians and biographers of this noble ruler have detailed instances during which citizens of the caliphate became so prosperous that no use was found to ask for money from the BM. This is because there was nobody anymore to receive aid from the government. When the news was brought to him, he was said to have instructed the viceroy of Iraq, ‘Abdul-Hamid ibn ‘Abdul-Rahman, thus: ‘Search for whoever borrowed money for other than foolishness and extravagance purpose, and pay off their debt.’ The report the caliph received at the end of it all was that: ‘I have helped every person I found to marry, but there is still money in the Bayt al-Mal’ (Ibn ‘Asākir, 1995, p. 170).

In line with the Umayyad experience, the Abbasid rulers' approach to money and public treasury was largely not in

compliance with the standards set in the early period of Islam. Some of them, including Abu Ja‘afar al-Mansūr, operated an extremely strict financial regime which put the masses in dire conditions (Hitti, p.189). Other rulers, such as al-Mahdy and Hārūn al-Rāshīd (Hitti, p.297), brought the prosperity witnessed by the Islamic empire down to the doorsteps of the citizens of the state. The wide experience the Muslim world had acquired in the administration of money either, as a public or private property during these eras, had prepared them for the establishment of conventional banks during the modern period.

Thus in 1907, the Egyptian industrialist, Muhammad Talaat Harb Pasha, published a book in which he demanded the establishment of what he termed a national bank that would be financed solely by Egyptians. Pasha probably had the classical history of money in Islam in mind. But he was certain of one thing though: the necessity for Egyptians to retrieve their economic history from the stranglehold of the British colonialists (Pasha, 1921, p. 295). His tenacity and doggedness in the pursuit of that noble aim eventually came into fruition in 1920 when *Bank Misr*, probably the first of its kind in the Arab world, was inaugurated. On that occasion, the whole Arab world, particularly the Egyptians, celebrated the event with pomp and pageantry (Tignor, 1977, p. 161). It was a landmark in their annals. The Shakespeare of the Arab world and the Leader of modern Egyptian cultural stream, Aḥmad Shawqī (1868-1932), composed the following poem titled ‘Wait at the counties and ponder the empire of money’ to mark the occasion. It reads in part as follows:

وَإِذْكَرُ رِجَالاً أَدَالُوهَا بِإِجْمَالِ	قِفْ بِالْمَمَالِكِ وَانظُرْ دَوْلَةَ الْمَالِ
لَا فِي جَوَانِبِ رَسْمِ الْمَنْزِلِ الْبَالِي	وَإِنْقَلْ رُكَّابَ الْقَوَافِي فِي جَوَانِبِهَا
وَالنَّاسُ مَذْ خُلِقُوا عُبَادُ تِمْنَالِ	وَالْمَالُ مَذْ كَانَ تِمْنَالٌ يُطَافُ بِهِ
خُذْهَا مِنَ الْعِلْمِ أَوْ خُذْهَا مِنَ الْمَالِ	يَا طَالِباً لِمَعَالِي الْمَلِكِ مُجْتَهِداً
لَمْ يُبَيِّنْ مُلْكٌ عَلَى جَهْلٍ وَإِقْلَالِ	بِالْعِلْمِ وَالْمَالِ يَبْنِي النَّاسُ مُلْكَهُمْ
رَأْيَا لِرَأْيِي وَمِثْقَالاً لِمِثْقَالِ	هَاتُوا الرِّجَالَ وَهَاتُوا الْمَالَ وَاحْتَشِدُوا
فَابْنُوا بِنَاءَ فَرِيشِ بَيْتِهَا الْعَالِي	هَذَا هُوَ الْحَجَرُ الدَّرِيُّ بَيْنَكُمْ
أَوْدَعْتُمْ الْحَبَّ أَرْضاً ذَاتَ إِغْلَالِ	دَارٌ إِذَا نَزَلَتْ فِيهَا وَدَائِعُكُمْ

أَمَالُ مِصْرَ إِلَيْهَا طَأْمَأَمَتْ هَلْ تَبْخَلُونَ عَلَى مِصْرَ بِأَمَالِ
فَأَبْنُوا عَلَى بَرَكَاتِ اللَّهِ وَاعْتَنِمُوا مَا هَيَّا اللَّهُ مِنْ حَظٍّ وَاقْبَالِ

Pause by the kingdoms and behold the empire of money
Remember men who have all took turns to administer it.

Let the composers of poetry congregate by its side
Not around the design of the imagined houses.

Money, since its existence, is like a statue
Human beings, since their creation, have been worshippers of
statues.

O! Ye who earnestly seek the lofty office of the king
You can either reach it through knowledge or money.

It is with knowledge and wealth that people build their kingdom
No kingdom is ever built on ignorance or poverty.

Bring forward the men and money and gather together
Ideas with ideas, weight against weight.

This is the shining stone among you
Build (a house) the same way the Quraysh built its lofty house.

A house in which were your treasures to be kept
(It would be as if) you had planted a seed on a fertile land.

(In it lies) the long-standing hopes of Egypt
Would you be stingy on Egypt with your hope?
Build (this nation) therefore by the blessings of Allah and seize (the
opportunities)
That Allah has provided of fortunes and favours.
(Shawqī, 1998, p. 55)

By composing a poem on the establishment of *Bank Misr*
and in eulogizing the role of money in human existence, Shawqī
awakens the interred bones of poets whose imagination was

sharpened against the fissures and disjuncture which money, known as *Māl*, usually occasioned; he forces a recapitulation of the Arab's cultural trajectory in which money serves as a fountain for literary productivity. The poem titled 'Wait at the counties and ponder the empire of money', sends us back to that extremely engaging cultural terrain where we must ponder the meaning and, indeed the 'meaning of the meaning' (Al-Jurjānī. 1959, p. 31) of money in Arab-Islamic culture. Here, aside from other possibilities, at least three readings of money are implicated in Arabs' cultural history. These include its construction as an existential necessity, as a sociological referent, and perhaps the uncanny of all, its description as the essence of human existence.

Money as an Existential Necessity

When money, in Arab-Islamic culture, is seen as an existential necessity, its acquisition becomes a noble act, particularly for Muslims. In fact, the Almighty Allah alludes to this in many portions of the Qur'ān. For example, money is considered one of the earthly treasures the acquisition of which is permissible for believers (Q18, 46). But in the same breadth, they are reminded that their wealth is a test from the Almighty for which they shall be called to account on the day of resurrection (Q8, 28). Consequently, humanity is encouraged to spend wealth ceaselessly in pursuit of divine redemption (Q2, 177). The rich are admonished to spend their wealth on kith and kin, for the promotion of the welfare of the Ummah. Prophet Muhammad exemplifies this further when he says:

لا خير فيمن لا يحب المال ليصل به رحمه، ويؤدي به أمانته،
ويستغنى به عن خلق ربه

There is no goodness in he who detests money with which he can keep his kin together, take care of his trust and be free from (asking) the creatures of His lord.

He is also reported to have said:

إنك إن تذر ورثتك أغنياء خير من أن تذرهم عالة يتكفون
الناس

‘Should you leave your heirs in wealth is better than
to leave them poor and as burden on the people’
(Ibn Asākīr, 1995, p. 103)

Thus in Arab-Islamic tradition, money is ordinarily deemed to be a means towards an end; a facilitator of the good life and one of the means by which human life on terrestrial earth can be led in consonance with the divine will. In effect, the possession of moderate wealth, in Islamic *weltanschauung*, is seemingly the norm while poverty is the exception. It can be said that the ‘empire of money’ has a long history; it is one in which companions of the Prophet, such as ‘Abdul-Rahmān bn. ‘Awf (Ibn Sa‘ad, 2013, p.97), stood out as an example.

Further, a reader of Arabs’ cultural history would be fascinated by the copious references to money as a necessity of life right from the early Islamic period. Apart from exhibiting great industry and excellent business acumen such that millionaires emerged from amongst their midst, those who lived and worked with the Prophet of Islam equally composed poems in praise of money. Such is the case with the fourth caliph, ‘Alī bn Abī Ṭālīb (d. 661) who is said to have composed the following lines:

بلوت صروف الدهر ستين حجة
وجرّبت حاله من العسر واليسر
فلم أر بعد الدين خيرا من الغنى
ولم أر بعد الكفر شرا من الفقر

I have encountered the vicissitudes of life for sixty years And
I have experienced its two stations (i.e., adversity and
prosperity)

In all I have not seen anything better than wealth after religion
Nor did I see anything worse than poverty after unbelief.
(‘AbdulRahīm, 2000, p. 65)

The above lines possibly capture the position of the majority of the companions of the Prophet in relation to the acquisition of wealth by men and the purpose to which riches should be put. It may also be assumed that when Shawqi stated in the first line of the poem: ‘Pause by the kingdoms and behold the empire of money/Remember men who have all took turn to manage it’, he was probably referring to that golden era which produced the first generation of Muslims. It was an era which witnessed the emergence of men whose management of the wealth in their possession was tempered by a keen consciousness of God.

Money as a Sociological Referent

With regard to money as a sociological referent, this finds ample illustration in Shiabudin al-Ibshīhī’s compendium entitled *al-Mustatraf fi kulli Fannin Mustadhraf*. According to him, it is possible to classify humanity in terms of how it views or relates to money into five groups. (Al-Ibshīhī, 1942, p. 49). Four of the classifications include *al-Mutmi’ūn* (the covetous), *al-Mubriti’ūn* (the devious), *al-Muhtarifūn* (those desirous of belonging to the class of the wealthy) and *al-Muntasimīn* (the hypocrites) (p. 49). The first category, i.e. that of the covetous, is very relevant to this discussion. According to Al- Ibshīhī, these are men and women who usually patronise the wealthy and meet the latter with broad smiles and excessive praise. Their goal is usually that of currying favours; their main desire is to partake of the wealth in the hands of the wealthy. It is probably these people that al, ‘Abbas, son of ‘Abdul-Mutallib, had in mind when he is reported to have said:

النَّاسُ لِصَاحِبِ الْمَالِ أَلْزَمُ مِنَ الشَّعَاعِ لِلشَّمْسِ، وَهُوَ عِنْدَهُمْ أَعَزُّ مِنَ
الْمَاءِ، وَأَرْفَعُ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ، وَأَحْلَى مِنَ الشَّهْدِ، وَأَزْكَى مِنَ الْوَرْدِ، خَطْوُهُ
صَوَابٌ، وَسَيَّاتُهُ حَسَنَاتٌ، وَقَوْلُهُ مَقْبُولٌ، يَرْفَعُ مَجْلِسَهُ وَلَا يَمَلُّ حَدِيثَهُ...

People are more attracted to the wealthy person than the ray to the Sun; (to them) he is more satiating than water, loftier than the heavens, sweeter than the honey, purer than the rose; his errors are (deemed) to be right, his evils are considered to be goodness, his speech is usually accepted; his sitting is usually elevated; no one gets tired of speech. (ʿAbdulahīm, p. 7)

Perhaps in no other era does Al-ʿAbbās' exemplification of the character of *al-Mutmi'ūn* more pertinent than that of the ʿAbbasid. It is the latter that produced two major characters who have each bequeathed such uncanny and unrivalled legacies to the world with particular reference to money. The first of these characters is Sayf al-Dawlah (d. 967), the king, and the second is his court poet, Abī Tayyib al-Mutannabī. The former established, as it were, an 'empire of money', while the latter bequeathed a literary heritage to the world which was hinged solely on the patronage of wealthy. Thus, money and poetry became 'bedfellows'; on the one hand the king spent money lavishly on the court poets in order to earn their praise and on the other, poets such as al-Mutannabī composed beautiful poems in praise of the kings for his accomplishments and as a way of enjoying more patronage of the wealthy and the powerful. In one of his panegyrics on Sayf Dawlah, al-Mutannabī says:

فلا ينحل في المجد مالك كله
فينحل مجد كان بالمال عقده
ودبره تدبير الذي المجد كفه
إذا حارب الأعداء والمال زنده
فلا مجد في الدنيا لمن قلّ ماله
ولا مال في الدنيا لمن قلّ مجده
وفي الناس من يرضى بميسور عيشه
ومركوبه رجلاه والتّوب جلده

Honour cannot be diminished by the (vastness) of your wealth

Such that that honour which is held together by wealth now
waned

He managed it (his wealth) like the one in whose hands lies
honour
Even when he fought the enemy money (became) his
hammer

Indeed there is no honour in the world for a man with little
wealth
And there is no wealth in the world for he who has no
honour

Some people are contented with little provisions of life
Their rides are their legs while their clothes are their skin
(al-Mutannabī, 1983, p.65).

In this poem, al-Mutannabī, following the footsteps set by his forebears such as Abul-'Alā al-Ma'arī and Abū Nuwās, engages in doubling and coupling; he uses the opportunity afforded him by his patron, Sayfu al-Dawlah, to sing the praise of the king in order to stress the importance of money in human life. He equally pictures how Sayfu al-Dawlah deploys money as a weapon to confront his enemies on the battlefield. This prefigures Aḥmad Shawqī's perspective that it is with 'knowledge and wealth that people build their kingdom' and that 'no kingdom is ever built on ignorance or adversity'. A wise man once counseled his son as follows:

بني عليك بطلب العلم وجمع المال، فإن الناس طانفتان: خاصة وعمامة،
فالخاصة تكرمك لأجل العلم والعمامة تكرمك لأجل المال

My son, it is incumbent on you to acquire knowledge and gather wealth; this is because people of two categories: the elite and the masses. The elite would honour you because of your knowledge while the masses would honour you because of the wealth (in your possession). (Shawqi, 1998, p. 8)

While the above may be true that knowledge and wealth constitute foundations for the establishment of earthly empires, in al-Mutannabī's world, however, it is wealth and honour that are pre-eminent. For him, wealth and honour are elements of equal weight such that to possess one is to possess the other; or rather, the possession of one is useless in the absence of the other. Perhaps this explains why those in authority in the medieval Muslim world, after having come into possession of wealth, spent part of that wealth on poets through whose panegyrics they desired to gain honour.

Again in the characteristic Mutannabīan world, the deployment of money as a weapon with which one could gain wealth and honour in the society can only become tentative once it enters into that mythical realm where imagination interplays with reality. In a work titled 'Hot Conversations with al-Mutannabī', we read of the following exchanges between him and his 'interlocutor':

The Questioner: What did Sayf al-Dawlah give you and what did you give him in return?"

Al-Mutannabī: 'I gave him history; he gave me honour'

(Al-Hamud, 2006)³

Thus in al-Mutannabī's world, while money is important and essential it is actually a means towards other ends. It is presumed to be the key with which doors are opened in human societies. In another poem, Aḥmad Shawqī alludes to this when he says:

المال حل كل غير محلل
حتي زواج الشيب بالابكار

³ See www.shathaaya.com/vb/archive/index.php/t-9773.html

ما زوجت تلك الفتاه و انما
بيع الصبا والحسن بالدينار

Money has somehow legitimized every unlawful act
Including the marriage of the elderly to the young ones
You actually did not get married to that young girl
Actually it is youthfulness and beauty that have been sold for
money (Shawqī, 1998, p. 252)

Here, Aḥmad Shawqī touches on a feature of a traditional Arab-Islamic society as a whole, i.e., the marriage of young girls to men who are as old as their fathers, a practice considered a redemptive strategy for men's masculine powers. In such societies, the more women a man has in his harem, the more his status is elevated in the society. But Shawqī appears to argue for the contrary: that in instances where such marriages take place, parents of the bride are usually interested in the money that the groom would offer them in order to get their consent. Thus we find the line which reads 'You actually did not get married to that young girl' highly instructive. The poet in Shawqī creates the persona of the groom in order to engage him in a dialogue. He addresses the character of an imaginary groom and confronts him with the evil of what he considers unwarranted commoditization of young girls in the Egyptian society of the mid-20th century. Though Shawqī's addressee is the elderly bride-groom, the latter is actually a metaphor for all men across cultures and civilisations who engage in similar acts. As far as he is concerned, all marriages between young girls and men who are old enough to be their fathers are nothing but the heinous commoditisation of beauty and youthfulness.

Money as the Essence of Existence

It is now time to go back to the third spectrum in this widening geography of the 'empire of money'. This relates to the notion among a section of humankind that the possession of wealth or money is in itself not the means but the end; that money

is actually the essence of creation and existence. It is probably this reading of money in human existence which Aḥmad Shawqī suggests when he says that ‘money, since its existence, is like a statue circumambulated/and mankind, since its creation, have been worshippers of statues’ (p. 287). Here, Shawqī’s comparison of money to statues is very instructive. But even more instructive is his suggestion that humanity, since primordial times has always worshipped statues. In other words, whenever money becomes an end in itself but not a means to nobler ends, it becomes an idol. Shawqī’s reference to money as a statue becomes all the more engaging when he says that humanity has been known since ages to circumambulate around such statues. The circumambulation referenced here should not be seen literally but rather as a metaphor for the lofty position money occupies in humanity’s scale of reference; it is an allegory for the way humanity now uses money as measurement for its values. Ahmad alludes to this when he says:

Our sense of beauty already carries the dollar mark. The costlier a thing is the handsomer it looks. And this is not confined to things only. Anyone earning Rs. 1,500/- per month is inferior to the one earning Rs. 2,000/ per month just as he in turn is measurably inferior to another one making Rs. 2,500/- per month. Personal and creative values are entirely secondary in significance, and, in fact, even these are put in the money scale to measure their worth. If we wish to applaud the emotional qualities of a man, we say he has a heart of gold and when we wish to praise the smile of a graceful woman we call it a million-dollar smile. However true it may be, it is very difficult for us to agree that all the dollars that there are anywhere cannot measure the value of a sunny smile on even the least gifted of human faces. (Ahmad, 1970, p.217)

Ahmad proceeds to refer to humanity’s obsession with money as occultic. He says: ‘the cult of mammon, to which we find ourselves attached, has already so distorted our values, and

entangled our vision, that a peculiar impoverishment of the spirit reigns supreme over our arts, our literature, our poetry, our architecture' (Ahmad, p. 222). 'Were it not for piety', al-Ḥarīrī posits, 'I would say its (money) power is inimitable' (Al-Shirshī, 1952, p. 70).

It is interesting to note that al-Ḥarīrī's thesis on the 'inimitable' power of money resonates with that of non-Muslim thinkers such as Karl Marx who said, way back in 1844:

Money is the supreme good, therefore its possessor is good ... It is the visible divinity - the transformation of all human and natural properties into their contraries, the universal confounding and distorting of things: impossibilities are soldered together by it. It is the common whore, the common procurer of people and nations ... It transforms fidelity into infidelity, love into hate, hate into love, virtue into vice, vice into virtue, servant into master, master into servant, idiocy into intelligence, and intelligence into idiocy (Cribbs, 2009, p. 461).

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to shed some light on the constructions of money in Arab-Islamic culture. The paper uses the glorious Quran, which could be described as the *locus classicus* of Arabic literary heritage, as its main point of reference. It is evident from its analyses of the Quranic and jurisprudential descriptions that references to money in the Quranic framework are meant for specific purposes. These include the provision of guidance and legislations on its acquisition and appropriation. The paper proceeded thereafter to trace the trajectories in Muslims' experience of money across histories. It is evident from the excursus that right from the Makkan era up till the onset of modern period, the possession of money (wealth), across cultures and civilisations, has always been seen as an existential necessity, a means by which men's social placement can be enhanced in the society and as, in extreme cases, the essence of existence. This explains why it has been invested with such powers that are far

beyond the imagination of specialists in economics or numismatics. Given this reading, money could be described as an enigma. Or like the knife in one's hand, it is innocent of the end to which it is put.

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