

# The Qur'ān in Context

Historical and Literary Investigations  
into the Qur'ānic Milieu



EDITED BY

ANGELIKA NEUWIRTH, NICOLAI SINAI,  
AND MICHAEL MARX

BRILL

# The Qur'ān in Context

# Texts and Studies on the Qur'ān

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VOLUME 6

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## INTRODUCTION

Nicolai Sinai and Angelika Neuwirth

The academic discipline of Qur'anic studies today is most strikingly characterized, not by any impressive scholarly achievements of the field itself, which has been appropriately diagnosed by Fred Donner as being "in a state of disarray,"<sup>1</sup> but by the large-scale interest of the media that the Qur'an's origin and interpretation have solicited during the last decade or so.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the lacunae of the field—impossible to overlook when confronted with the impressive list of what has been achieved in biblical or classical studies—have developed into a veritable litany: There is no critical edition of the text, no free access to all of the relevant manuscript evidence, no clear conception of the cultural and linguistic profile of the milieu within which it has emerged, no consensus on basic issues of methodology, a significant amount of mutual distrust among scholars, and—what is perhaps the single most important obstacle to scholarly progress—no adequate training of future students of the Qur'an in the non-Arabic languages and literatures and cultural traditions that have undoubtedly shaped its historical context.

Yet the general public's interest in Qur'anic studies, oddly opposed as it may seem to the sorry state of the discipline itself, may not be an altogether negative thing; it holds out a vague promise of exciting discoveries that may attract younger scholars and inspire more senior

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<sup>1</sup> Donner, "Recent scholarship," 29.

<sup>2</sup> The take-off point for this rather unprecedented rise in the attention given to the Qur'an in Western media can be dated to January 1999, when Toby Lester published his article "What is the Koran?" (*The Atlantic Monthly* 283: 43–56). Media attention to the Qur'an was subsequently stoked by the near-coincidence between the publication of Christoph Luxenberg's *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran* in 2000 and the new public interest in all things Islamic that followed the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001; a perfect illustration of the extent to which public awareness of Luxenberg's book has been shaped by the specter of Islamic terrorism is provided, for example, by Ibn Warraq's piece "Virgins? What Virgins?" published in *The Guardian*, January 12, 2002. Most recently, the Qur'an has made it onto the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* with Andrew Higgin's article "The Lost Archive" (January 12, 2008).

researchers. Indeed, what the field of Qur'anic studies has lacked for too long is precisely the injection of such a healthy dose of excitement. Publications from before the 1970's, when existing narratives about the Qur'an's origin were for the first time subjected to radical doubt, all too often convey a sense that there is, firstly, not much left to be known about the Qur'an, and, secondly, that the object of all this supposedly stable mass of knowledge, the Qur'an itself, is not all that interesting—in fact, that it is an epigonal text not worthy of the same kind of methodological sophistication that biblical and classical literature have generally been accorded.<sup>3</sup> In 1961, two years before the publication of the first installments of his highly respected German translation of the Qur'an, Rudi Paret could state “that the picture of Muhammad that has so far been worked out by European Orientalists is well-founded and can be modified and rounded out merely in matters of detail. A new and systematic interpretation of the Qur'an hardly leads to new and exciting discoveries.”<sup>4</sup> In Qur'anic studies, it seemed, the gate of *ijtihad* had been closed, and the discipline could from now on devote itself to administrating the accumulated knowledge of earlier pioneers. Or, to put it more bluntly, Qur'anic studies had become a subject that was bound to bore itself to death.

Excitement was to come to Qur'anic studies in the guise of skepticism. There appears to be a general sense among many scholars that the publication in 1977 of John Wansbrough's *Qur'anic Studies* and of *Hagarism* by Michael Cook and Patricia Crone marks a decisive break in the history of the discipline, which hitherto had largely accepted the general historical framework within which Islamic tradition locates the promulgation of the Qur'an. Frequently the earlier work of Günter Lüling (*Über den Ur-Qur'an: Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenglieder im Qur'an*, 1974) and Christoph Luxenberg's recent *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran* (2000) are grouped together with the above-mentioned scholars under the loose term “revisionism,” although those familiar with these books are usually quick to point out the very different methods and assumptions on which they are based.<sup>5</sup> The full import of the heterogeneity of “revisionism,” however, will perhaps not be fully internalized until the history of modern Qur'anic studies ceases to be told according

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<sup>3</sup> For the rather pejorative views of Orientalists on the Qur'an's literary value, see Wild, “Schauerliche Öde.”

<sup>4</sup> Paret, “Der Koran als Geschichtsquelle,” 140 (translation by N. Sinai).

<sup>5</sup> For a survey, cf. Reynolds, “Introduction,” 8–19.

to the criterion of how much of the traditional Islamic foundation narrative a certain scholar accepts or rejects, that is, along the traditionalist-revisionist divide. For example, to reduce John Wansbrough's complex and multi-faceted work on early Islam to his (tentative) claim that the Qur'an did not see the light of history until the Abbasids would be to caricature it.<sup>6</sup> Rather more appropriately, the unique contribution of *Qur'anic Studies*, only about a sixth of which is devoted to the analysis of Qur'anic data, may be discerned in Wansbrough's attempt to conceive of traditional *tafsir* and *sira* works—which so far had been viewed primarily as “sources” to be cannibalized for tidbits of historical information—as *literature*, and to apply to them the appropriate methods of form-critical analysis. Classifying a given scholar's work according to his rejection (or acceptance) of the traditional explanatory framework for the emergence of the Qur'an is thus patently reductive.

Another prominent feature of *Qur'anic Studies* is of course its sustained emphasis (an emphasis shared, albeit with more youthful exuberance, by *Hagarism*) on the Qur'an's Late Antique environment, apparent not only in the numerous Hebrew characters that dot the book's pages but also in the occasional use of German terminology drawn from biblical studies. The Qur'an's Late Antique context, however, did not have to await the revisionist turn of 1977 to be discovered. Already Abraham Geiger's groundbreaking *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* (published in 1833) constitutes an ambitious attempt at identifying the biblical and rabbinic traditions with which the Qur'an can be seen as being in conversation. Geiger's study arguably represents the starting point of modern historical research on the Qur'an in general,<sup>7</sup> to be followed by the works of Gustav Weil (*Mohammed der Prophet, sein Leben und seine Lehre*, 1843; *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in den Koran*, 1844), Aloys Sprenger (*Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammed*, 1861) and, most importantly, Theodor Nöldeke (*Geschichte des Qorâns*, 1860). Yet Geiger can also be viewed more particularly as the initiator of a strand of Qur'anic research connected with the “Wissenschaft des Judentums” (the “science of Judaism”) which, through a profound awareness of

<sup>6</sup> This point is eloquently made by Rippin, “Foreword,” xiv.

<sup>7</sup> On Geiger and Qur'anic studies cf. Hartwig et al. (eds.), “*Im vollen Licht der Geschichte*,” and especially the contributions by Friedrich Niewöhner and Nicolai Sinai and the introduction by Angelika Neuwirth.



the Qur'an's links with biblical and post-biblical traditions, extended the text's frame of reference beyond the narrow confines of an exclusively pagan "age of ignorance" (*jāhiliyya*). Important representatives of this line of research are Hartwig Hirschfeld (*Beiträge zur Erklärung des Qorân*, 1886; *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qoran*, 1902), Josef Horovitz (*Koranische Untersuchungen*, 1926),<sup>8</sup> and Heinrich Speyer, author of a comprehensive conspectus of the elements of rabbinic lore familiar to the Qur'an (*Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, 1931).

To a contemporary audience, research of the kind undertaken by Speyer easily appears as obsessed with the notion that to understand a text is equivalent to unearthing its "sources." While such an approach is already frowned upon when applied, for example, to the Bible or to ancient Greek and Latin literature, with regard to the Qur'an it is often suspected of serving an underlying political agenda as well, namely, of aiming to demonstrate that the Qur'an is nothing but a rehash of earlier traditions in order to discredit the Islamic faith and assert Western cultural superiority.<sup>9</sup> And it is true that the title of Geiger's study—"What did Muhammad borrow from Judaism?"—does seem to bear out such misgivings: Muhammad, it is implied, "borrowed" existing religious concepts and motives—or, worse, he borrowed and misunderstood them—and passed them on to his followers. An obvious suspicion about the line of research initiated by Geiger would thus be that in his eagerness to demonstrate the Jewish origin of many Qur'anic conceptions, he is prone to overlook the substantial modifications these have undergone on the way, or to dismiss such modifications as mere "misunderstandings" rather than functionally meaningful transformations.

It is precisely this line of thought that is expressed in Johann Fück's 1936 lecture "Die Originalität des arabischen Propheten" ("On the Originality of the Arabian Prophet"). Fück attacks the kind of research initiated by Geiger—who is explicitly singled out as an ancestral

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<sup>8</sup> On Horovitz, see Jäger, "Josef Horovitz."

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Manzoor, "Method against Truth," 33: "The Orientalist enterprise of Qur'anic studies, whatever its other merits and services, was a project born of spite, bred in frustration and nourished by vengeance: the spite of the powerful for the powerless, the frustration of the 'rational' towards the 'superstitious' and the vengeance of the 'orthodox' against the 'non-conformist.' At the greatest hour of his worldly-triumph, the Western man, coordinating the powers of the State, Church and Academia, launched his most determined assault on the citadel of Muslim faith."

figure—by stating that “the more an inquiry into questions of dependence came to the fore, the more this kind of research lacked any kind of grand vision and finally contented itself with ever new attempts to locate some kind of source for everything in the Qur’an, whether it be a religious idea, a saying, a principle of law, a narrative, a motive, or even a single word—as if it were possible to dismantle the character of the Prophet into a thousand details.”<sup>10</sup> Although Fück’s intervention may at first sight appear to be eminently sensible, it did have the fatal effect of discouraging interdisciplinary research of the kind practiced by scholars like Geiger and Horovitz, and of narrowing down the wide array of literature with which they worked to traditional Arabic sources. Hence, against Fück’s weariness of all that source mongering, it is important to emphasize the achievements of the Geiger project. Perhaps for the first time, the Qur’anic texts are reintegrated into their original cultural context and seen for what they were before they were canonized into the foundational document of a new religion—namely, answers to pressing contemporary questions and problems, answers that engaged, modified, adapted, and re-interpreted narratives and motives with which their audience must already to some degree have been familiar. For Geiger, Horovitz, and Speyer, the Qur’an presented itself not merely as the starting point of Islamic history but rather as a transitional text that needed to be relocated within a complex, religiously and linguistically pluralistic milieu of origin.

Ultimately, however, the approach laid out in Fück’s lecture was to prove more successful and to exert a stifling influence on the whole discipline. This was in part due to external political factors. When the National Socialists consolidated their control over Germany after having won parliamentary elections in 1932, they soon proceeded to exclude all Jews from German public life, an ominous sign of still worse things to come. Research in the vein of Geiger, Horovitz, and Speyer was thus severely disrupted, with the result that the study of the Qur’an became more narrowly a domain of scholars whose training had been primarily in Arabic literature, and not, for example, in Rabbis. To be sure, intertextual readings of the Qur’an in the light of the religious traditions circulating in its historical environment had not been the exclusive prerogative of Jewish scholars; important

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<sup>10</sup> Fück, “Originalität,” 168 (translation N. Sinai).

contributions were made by Tor Andrae,<sup>11</sup> Karl Ahrens,<sup>12</sup> and, indirectly, by Julius Wellhausen's comparative study of ancient Arabian religion.<sup>13</sup> Yet the Second World War did mark a noticeable change in approach. The person of Muhammad now became the primary focal point of interest, a development clearly reflected in the works of Rudi Paret<sup>14</sup> and W. Montgomery Watt,<sup>15</sup> and the Qur'an appeared above all as a mirror image of the psychological development of the individual Muhammad. This change in outlook entailed a much more extensive, and sometimes gullible, reliance on Islamic *sira* traditions than can be observed, for example, in Horowitz and Geiger; Qur'anic scholarship, to put it in a mildly provocative form, turned into "life of Muhammad" scholarship. The ensuing loss of interest in the Qur'an as an object of study in and of itself is evident, for example, in the fact that Paret's commentary on the Qur'an, regarded as authoritative almost from the moment of its publication, pays scant attention to issues of chronology, which had so captivated earlier scholars like Nöldeke, Hirschfeld, and Bell. The cross-references to parallel Qur'anic passages provided by Paret never signal whether the text referred to may be significantly earlier or later than the verse at hand; issues of genuinely textual, rather than biographical, development thus recede into the background. This is particularly problematic since it blurs the considerable evidence that the genesis of the Qur'anic *text* was in fact intertwined with the emergence of a Qur'anic *community* defined by its allegiance towards, and liturgical use of, the open-ended series of divine communications promulgated by Muhammad.<sup>16</sup> If the Qur'anic corpus is treated in a basically synchronic fashion, without due consideration to the thematic and formal evolution of the original textual units of which it is composed, then our most important witness for sounding out the gradual crystallization of the pre-conquest Islamic *Urgemeinde* is left unexplored.

It is of course true that studying the Qur'an as a source for the life and thought of Muhammad had been deeply ingrained into Western Qur'an scholarship since the time of Geiger—in fact, when traditional

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<sup>11</sup> Andrae, *Ursprung des Islams*.

<sup>12</sup> Ahrens, *Muhammad als Religionsstifter*.

<sup>13</sup> Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums*.

<sup>14</sup> Paret, *Mohammed und der Koran*.

<sup>15</sup> Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, and id., *Muhammad at Medina*.

<sup>16</sup> For a survey of the textual evidence indicating a liturgical, and thus communal, function of Qur'anic surahs, see Neuwirth, "Vom Rezitationstext über die Liturgie zum Kanon."

Christian polemics against the Qur'an gradually gave way to philology in the nineteenth century, this shift was intimately linked to the question of how Muhammad was to be evaluated as a person: If he was not the religious impostor that medieval polemics had made him out to be, then the Qur'an could be seen as the genuine reflection of a particular manifestation of human religiosity, and could thus be deemed worthy of disengaged study.<sup>17</sup> Yet in the works of Geiger, Speyer, Andrae, or Wellhausen, the biographical perspective on the Qur'an was offset by their thorough knowledge of pre-Islamic Jewish and Christian literature that enabled them to view the Qur'anic text as one voice among others partaking in an overarching, albeit frequently antagonistic, Late Antique religious debate. It is this depth of field that was lost in the second half of the twentieth century, to be reclaimed by the rebels of 1977 and those inspired by their work.<sup>18</sup>

The emphasis that *Qur'anic Studies* places on viewing the Qur'an as part and parcel of the wide expanse of monotheistic literature can be seen as a corrective shift that was long overdue. At the same time, however, the fact that this shift was coupled with a wholesale dismissal of even the basic framework of the traditional scenario of the Qur'an's genesis entailed its own specific set of apories. In the light of the reverberations of biblical traditions that Wansbrough finds in the Qur'an, he dismisses its traditional Arabian milieu of origin as a later mythical construction and drops a number of opaque hints that the Qur'an instead must have emerged from the compilation of divergent monotheistic traditions by an anonymous circle of redactors active in eighth century Mesopotamia.<sup>19</sup> This is highly problematic for several reasons. For one thing, Wansbrough implies that early Islamic history has been so thoroughly transformed, or perhaps distorted, into "salvation history," that any attempt to reconstruct "what really happened" must seem naive: What might be called the "pre-canonical" Qur'an, the text as preceding its canonization and exegetical and hagiographic framing by the post-conquest Islamic community, becomes virtually inaccessible to the scholar.<sup>20</sup> Wansbrough's work

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Sinai, "Orientalism."

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Hawting, *Idolatry*.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, 50; Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 40, 45.

<sup>20</sup> Rippin sums up this feature of Wansbrough's approach in "Foreword," xvii: "The fundamental argument is that we cannot meaningfully talk about the Qur'an as we know it today until that point of authority, acceptance, and stability has been

here intersects with the categorical rejection of the very notion of “original meaning” that has acquired great popularity in the wake of postmodernist literary theory.<sup>21</sup> Yet Wansbrough himself, like Patricia Crone, argues not from general hermeneutic theory but from the given character of the available Islamic sources, finding them so riddled with contradictions and implausibilities that he refuses to take them for anything else but “salvation history.”<sup>22</sup> By now, however, a

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achieved.” Rippin does then go on to admit that “the text *must* have a prehistory for such a process to take place, a prehistory that brings strands of the earlier biblical and Arabian traditions together through the person of Muhammad.” What is of crucial importance, however, is that Wansbrough’s speculations about a later, non-Arabian composition of the text were widely viewed, not as calling for a more sustained effort at reconstructing this prehistory, but rather as laying bare the inevitable futility of any such reconstruction (cf. also Rippin, “Literary Analysis,” 356: “The actual ‘history’ in the sense of ‘what really happened’ has become totally subsumed within later interpretation is virtually, if not totally, inextricable from it.”). While the authors of *Hagarism* shared Wansbrough’s pessimistic appraisal of the Islamic sources, they did believe (at the time of the book’s publication) that on the basis of non-Arabic sources a reasonably accurate history of the emergence of Islam could after all be written. Wansbrough, in his review of *Hagarism* in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 41 (1978): 155–156, very clearly expressed his skepticism towards even this project: “Can a vocabulary of motives be freely extrapolated from a discrete collection of literary stereotypes composed by alien and mostly hostile observers and thereupon employed to describe, even interpret, not merely the overt behavior but also the intellectual and spiritual development of helpless and almost innocent actors?”

<sup>21</sup> Among the scholars inspired by Wansbrough, Andrew Rippin has most vigorously, and very influentially, advocated the need for a departure from “the desire to produce positive historical results—to satisfy that internal yearning to assert ‘what really happened’” (Rippin, “Literary Analysis,” 356). His introduction to *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur’ān* implies that hermeneutically enlightened Qur’an scholars ought to abandon the traditional attempts “towards re-establishing the ‘original meaning’ of the text or the ‘author’s intention’ or the ‘meaning of the text to the first hearers’” (Rippin, “Introduction,” 2) and switch to a reader-reception oriented approach instead, i. e., to *tafsīr* studies: “To re-create a history of the reaction to the Qur’ān in terms of what people have actually thought it means, through an analysis of exegetical texts, appears to be a most appropriate, intellectually convincing, and rewarding task for the modern scholar of the Qur’ān” (Rippin, “Introduction,” 4). Daniel Madigan, however, has convincingly pointed out that general hermeneutic skepticism as to the very idea of a text’s “original meaning” “would fall prey to the same objections which Rippin has raised to the study of the Qur’ān text itself: the issues of historical context and ‘original meaning’ apply no less to the *tafsīr* texts than to the Qur’ān text itself [...]. Thus we become trapped in an infinite regress: if it is fruitless to pursue meaning and coherence in the Qur’ān, then it would also be futile when dealing with a *tafsīr*, since it too is a text, often of uncertain provenance, and from a culture far-removed from us” (Madigan, “Reflections,” 351).

<sup>22</sup> As Crone puts it in a memorable passage: “For over a century the landscape of the Muslim past was thus exposed to a weathering so violent that its shapes were

number of rejoinders to Wansbrough from historians of early Islam have made it clear that this perception of the irredeemably contradictory character of the traditional Arabic sources is open to serious doubt and may in fact be significantly exaggerated.<sup>23</sup>

In view of the great admiration that Wansbrough expresses for the methodological sophistication of biblical studies, it is particularly ironic that his assumption of the composite character of the Qur'an is never properly demonstrated and is arguably based on a flagrant breach of the sequence of methodical steps that is *de rigueur* in biblical analysis: Wansbrough never subjects the Qur'an to what biblical scholars refer to as "literary criticism" in order to examine in a methodically principled way whether it really does constitute a secondary compilation of divergent sources (the profile and provenance of which would have to be spelled out in considerable detail), or whether its literary make-up is more plausibly to be explained by the traditional assumption that it constitutes the literary fallout from a linear process of growth and development.<sup>24</sup> Hence, without providing much of an argument beyond references to the "formulaic" character of Qur'anic language and the existence of "parallel versions" of various narratives, Wansbrough simply assumes that the Qur'an is a textual corpus whose genesis *postdates*, rather than *parallels*, the formation of a nuclear Islamic community. For him, the Qur'anic corpus does not in any philologically accessible way reflect the religious debates that resulted in the crystallization of this community; the latter is rather presupposed as a *fait accompli* unretrievably hidden in the mists of history. As a scholarly hypothesis, such a possibility can of course not be dismissed from the outset. Yet it does seem that Wansbrough's scenario does not begin to do justice to the dramatic

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reduced to dust and rubble and deposited in secondary patterns, mixed with foreign debris and shifting with the wind" (Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, 6).

<sup>23</sup> The most detailed array of arguments against skepticism is assembled in Donner, *Origins*.

<sup>24</sup> At first sight it might appear that Wansbrough's juxtaposition of the different Qur'anic renderings of the Shu'ayb story (*Quranic Studies*, 21–25) does provide such an argument. In fact, however, Wansbrough presumes from the outset that these renderings constitute "variant traditions" (*Quranic Studies*, 21) rather than chronologically consecutive renditions that might adapt and modify one and the same story in the light of changing historical circumstances and on the basis of an ever-growing textual nucleus of past prophetic promulgations. For the latter perspective, see Neuwirth, "Erzählen," and id., "Crisis and Memory." The interpretive function of such later retellings is emphasized and illustrated in detail in Sinai, *Fortschreibung und Auslegung*.

character of the Qur'anic text, a feature that is rather more satisfactorily explained by situating the text in the very midst, rather than in the wake, of a polemically charged process of community building. For even on a superficial reading, the Qur'an is not a systematic, gospel-type codification of the essential message of a religious movement that has already established itself on the historical scene, but rather a live transcript of this very act of entering the scene. Wansbrough's counter-history of early Islam thus does not imply a mere temporal displacement of events, but also a methodological reorientation of far-reaching consequences. In a paradoxical fashion, the outcome of this is similar to Watt's and Paret's "life of Muhammad"—approach, which also resulted in a disregard of the Qur'an's vital linkage to the community materializing around it.

It is remarkable that none of the later adherents of Wansbrough's approach made any attempt to back up his *a priori* verdict with more detailed textual analyses. Surprising as this may seem, it is perhaps only a logical consequence of his general approach: for if the Qur'an is pried loose from any specific historical milieu and turned into a free-floating textual phenomenon that could be located *ad libitum* anywhere in the Near East between 600 and 900 CE, how is one to make sense of so elusive a piece of literature? The sad answer that the history of research was to give is that not many people after Wansbrough did try to make sense of it. Wansbrough's defeatism about finding out how the Qur'an had emerged and what it signified to its earliest audience—questions that appear rather natural to ask and which the mainstream of New Testament scholarship, for example, has never discounted as inveterately naive—caught on to a degree that, apart from very few exceptions, the English-speaking academia simply appears to have dropped out of Qur'anic studies. The flourishing of *tafsir* studies that was a result of this development is certainly a welcome consequence, but hardly a proper substitute for the study of the Qur'an in and of itself. Thus, while 1977 could have been a reinvigorating moment for a contextualist perception of the Qur'an, in the end it led to a significant paralysis in research—which, to be sure, must not be laid at the feet of Wansbrough, Crone, or Cook themselves but rather emerged from a general academic climate that took a stimulating experiment in exploring alternatives to existing scholarship for demonstrated and unquestionable truth.

The controversy generated by *Quranic Studies* and *Hagarism* has consequently tended to play itself out almost exclusively on the battle-



field of Islamic historiography, hagiography, and exegesis,<sup>25</sup> while the question of whether a close literary analysis of the Qur'anic text itself might have any implications for determining its original historical place and milieu has been sidelined. The Qur'an, although seemingly at the center of the debate, has in reality been conspicuously absent from the actual exchange of arguments, becoming something of an unreadable text in the eyes of many scholars. One of the convictions that this volume hopes to promote is that, on the basis of proper source criticism, and a literary sensibility that by now has a long history in the study of biblical literature, Qur'anic studies (which is not the same as the study of Qur'anic exegesis, or the study of early Islamic historiography) is not an impossible subject. Taken in combination, the essays collected here adopt a determinedly promiscuous approach in their use of classical Islamic sources, non-Arabic Christian and Jewish writings, as well as the Greek and Latin classics. Unfortunately, as a result of the drifting apart of Qur'anic studies from Rabbinics and Patristics after the Second World War, a development exacerbated by the increase of specialization within these neighboring disciplines themselves, the philological literacy required to read the Qur'an as a polyphonic document of Late Antiquity is no longer unified in individual scholars of the caliber of Horowitz or Andrae.<sup>26</sup> Any attempt at reconnecting with their exegetical project will thus of necessity have to take the form of a collaborative enterprise. It was in order to stimulate such an interdisciplinary conversation on the Qur'an that the conference from which many of this volume's articles have proceeded, was held in January 2004 under the title "Historische Sondierungen und methodische Reflexionen zur Korangeneses—Wege zur Rekonstruktion des vorkanonischen Koran." The conference was motivated by a belief in the necessity of returning to a broadly contextualist approach to the Qur'an, and more particularly by the challenge to determine to what extent Luxenberg's *Syro-aramäische Lesart* constituted a methodologically sound contribution to such an endeavor.<sup>27</sup> It is important to note that such a reappraisal of the historical context of the Qur'an that would finally put to rest the

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<sup>25</sup> For a helpful survey of the debate on the reliability of reports ascribed to Muhammad and early Islamic authorities from the time of Goldziher on, see Berg, *Development*.

<sup>26</sup> Neuwirth, "Bemerkungen."

<sup>27</sup> For an appraisal of Luxenberg, cf. also many of the contributions to Reynolds (ed.), *Historical Context*.



dogmatically motivated notion of the *jāhiliyya* is not only of scholarly relevance. As a matter of fact, in relocating the Qur'an in Late Antiquity we follow the plea for a revision of historical thinking that has been voiced by Near Eastern intellectuals such as the Lebanese historian Samir Kassir, who claims that in current Near Eastern perceptions of history, a self-exclusion from pre-Islamic culture is at work: There is no recognition of a historical continuity in the Arabic Near East, Arabic history being perceived as commencing in a meaningful sense only with the advent of Islam. The myth of origin that identifies the beginning of significant history with the ministry of Muhammad, however, unduly reduces the previous history to an era of almost exclusively nomadic culture: "This chaotic image cannot however be upheld once archaeological, epigraphic, and numismatic evidence is considered. Cities in Northern Ḥijāz and Greater Syria were widely Romanized, even to a degree that several Roman emperors originated from them." Kassir even claims: "One can hardly overestimate the turn in worldview that would occur once the real Golden Age that preceded the Golden Age would be recognized."<sup>28</sup> Kassir's demand for an intellectual self-liberation from the teleological constraint generated by the Islamic myth of origin is however only one half of the revision that is required. The Near Eastern self-exclusion from European history that Kassir has identified is matched by an equally determined Western exclusion of the Near East from European history, encapsulated in the highly political notion that the Qur'an is a text fundamentally alien to European culture, while other writings from the same geographical area and standing, and in the same line of tradition—most prominently biblical literature—are assimilated as founding documents of European identity.<sup>29</sup>

The title of the present volume, *The Qur'an in Context*, was chosen as a conscious echoing of an earlier volume edited by Stefan Wild, *The Qur'an as Text*. As signaled by this volume's subtitle, "Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'anic Milieu," the sense the editors wish to convey by this allusion is one of complementarity: A truly contextual reading of *the Qur'an* (as opposed to a mere reading

<sup>28</sup> Kassir, *Unglück*, 38 (translation by A. Neuwirth).

<sup>29</sup> This would also call for a thorough rethinking on the same level of sophistication as Kassir's work. Such a rethinking is one of the aims of the research program "Europe in the Middle East—the Middle East in Europe" at the Wissenschaftskolleg Berlin, funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation. See <http://www.eume-berlin.de>.

of the Qur'an's context) must not content itself with dissolving the Qur'an into its Christian, Jewish, and other "sources," but at least allow for the possibility that the Qur'an may turn out to be a text of its own, i.e., a discourse—or, rather, a series of diachronically contiguous discourses—possessed of its own peculiar theological agenda and literary logic. This is underscored by Sydney Griffith, himself intimately familiar with pre-Qur'anic Syriac literature:

Hermeneutically speaking, one should approach the Qur'an as an integral discourse in its own right; it proclaims, judges, praises, blames from its own narrative center. It addresses an audience which is already familiar with oral versions in Arabic of earlier scriptures and folklores. The Qur'an does not borrow from, or often even quote from these earlier texts. Rather, it alludes to and evokes their stories, even sometimes their wording, for its own rhetorical purpose. The Arabic Qur'an, from a literary perspective, is something new. It uses the idiom, and sometimes the forms and structures, of earlier narratives in the composition of its own distinctive discourse. It cannot be reduced to any presumed sources. Earlier discourses appear in it not only in a new setting, but shaped, trimmed and re-formulated for an essentially new narrative.<sup>30</sup>

It follows that it simply will not do to garner a few arbitrary Qur'anic verses with a Christian or Jewish ring to them and then deduce from such a haphazard collection of snippets that the most significant thing to be said about the Qur'an is to that it is an epigonal product of Christian or Jewish influence.<sup>31</sup> Certainly, it is a prerequisite for historical Qur'an scholarship to have the most exhaustive possible awareness of Late Antique traditions intersecting with a given Qur'anic passage; and in this regard, Fück's indifference to such points of intersection is definitely a retrograde step that needs to be reversed. However, to assemble the textual background material that may shed light on a given Qur'anic passage is not identical with the interpretation of that passage itself; it is an indispensable preparatory step, yet by no means a sufficient one. Indeed, intratextual contextualization of this kind does not provide the only relevant background to a Qur'anic passage; it is perhaps just as important to situate a given text at a particular position within the diachronically extended sequence of Qur'anic discourses, which frequently also generate their specific literary formats. As for the charge of epigonality that inter-

<sup>30</sup> Griffith, "Christian lore," 116.

<sup>31</sup> A textbook example of this procedure is Samir, "Christian influence." A similar tendency underlies Ohlig and Puin (eds.), *Die dunklen Anfänge*.

textual studies often implicitly or explicitly level at the Qur'an, its murky ancestry in antique and medieval interfaith polemics should be obvious to any hermeneutically self-conscious scholar. Thus, if a historical contextualization of the Qur'an is to be pursued with any methodological and intellectual credibility today, it must make a determined effort to detect and describe the ways in which the Qur'an's theology and literary format could be deemed by the community of its adherents to outclass and outbid previous competitors on the scene of religious scriptures in such a decisive way that it became the foundational text of a new monotheistic religion, Islam.

This is also why the popular assumption that a contextualist reading of the Qur'an is necessarily inimical to Islamic belief is mistaken. Much of the current media buzz surrounding the Qur'an in fact appears to be predicated on the assumption that the hypotheses and reconstructions of philologists have the power to profoundly unsettle, or even conclusively disprove, a religious belief system. Yet at least in academic Christian theology, which is after all faced with a similar problem, it has become something of a commonplace that historical-critical scholarship does not as such preclude a subsequent "committed" reading of the Bible. Historical analysis, it is usually held, constitutes a preparatory stage delimiting the borders of any truly responsible interpretation of the canon; it delineates the ground upon which any attempt to derive contemporary guidance from the canon must operate (rather than eroding this very ground, as some would object).<sup>32</sup> There is no reason, we believe, to assume that this model is not applicable to the Qur'an; in fact, scholars as diverse as Amīn al-Khūlī, Fazlur Rahman, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zaid, Mehmet Paçacı, or Ömer Özsoy have all argued that a contextualist hermeneutics of the Qur'an is not only theologically unproblematic, but can also be seen as an extension of important aspects of traditional Islamic *tafsīr*.<sup>33</sup> Abū Zaid, for example, distinguishes the universal Qur'anic message from the historically contingent "code" in which it is expressed. He then insists that in order to make himself understood to an audience within a particular historical context (namely, seventh-century Arabia), God had to make use of his addressees' "cultural and linguistic semantic system": since human beings are inevitably situated

<sup>32</sup> On the problem of the compatibility or incompatibility of historical-critical method and religious commitment, see Sinai, "Spinoza and Beyond."

<sup>33</sup> On Rahman, see Saeed, "Framework"; on Paçacı and Özsoy, see Körner, *Revisionist Koran Hermeneutics*.

at a particular time and place, they simply will not be able to understand a revelation that is not geared to their cultural and religious horizon.<sup>34</sup> Thus, what contextual readings of the Qur'an aim at is not to unmask the Qur'an as a mere blueprint of earlier Christian and Jewish "sources," but rather to reconstruct, as fully as possible, the cultural lexicon of the Qur'an's audience, i.e., the linguistic and cultural "code" employed by the text—whoever its author may be—in order to make itself understood.

### *A Survey of the Contributions to this Volume*

As the preceding remarks have argued, contemporary scholarship on the Qur'an is greatly hampered by the fact that a view of the Qur'an as part and parcel of the biblical tradition, more particularly in its Late Antique formations, is seldom accompanied by the kind of microstructural literary analysis that is routinely applied to biblical literature. Historians and literary scholars still work in isolation from each other. While literary studies often focus on a textual problem without considering its social-political, let alone theological, framework, thus taking the text as a *fait accompli* distinct from a concrete situation in the Qur'anic communication process, historical researchers tend to exclude the Qur'anic text from their source material altogether, or to substitute mere generalizations for a careful examination of the Qur'anic text itself. The reason for this infelicitous separation may lie in the Qur'an's complicated literary structure, reflecting as it does a canonization process that is still not fully investigated. The present volume seeks to redress this attitude of mutual indifference between literary and historical studies, an aim that finds expression in the volume's bipartite structure.

The contributions assembled in the first part address various general aspects of the Qur'an's political, economic, linguistic, and cultural context that are vital for any close textual reading of the Qur'an itself. Norbert Nebes' outline of the political history of South Arabia in the early sixth century demonstrates the encroachment of two major political powers of the time (Axum and Sasanian Iran) on the Arabian Peninsula and the important function that religion played as a medium of expression for political allegiances. The highly questionable notion

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<sup>34</sup> For a concise presentation see Abū Zayd, *Maḥmūd an-naṣṣ*, 55–57.

that the Arabian Peninsula was a backwards and culturally isolated place, a notion encapsulated in the Islamic concept of *jāhiliyya*, is the target of Barbara Finster's contribution, which discusses the archaeological evidence for the religious and secular architecture of early seventh-century Arabia. Mikhail D. Bukharin approaches the problem from an economic angle by revisiting the issue of Meccan trade, arguing on the basis of a wide selection of sources for the existence of significant trading connections integrating the peninsula with South Arabia, Syria, and Mesopotamia.

The next two contributions, by Harald Suermann and Stefan Heidemann, respectively, investigate the implications that two important corpora of early Islamic data yield for the dating and localization of the Qur'an. Suermann sketches the theological and historical outlook of some of the non-Arabic sources on the rise of Islam, emphasizing the apocalyptic orientation that governed the Christian and Jewish perception of the Arab invaders, while Heidemann provides a thorough study of early Islamic coinage and takes issue with Volker Popp's construal of these coins as supporting a Wansbroughian deconstruction of the historicity of Muhammad.

The remaining articles of the first part then focus on the Qur'an's linguistic and literary context. Ernst Axel Knauf traces the interaction and respective functions of Arabic, Greek, and Aramaic up until the emergence of the Qur'an and suggests a reconstruction of the emergence of Early Standard Arabic. The question to what extent one can assume a significant spread of literacy in pre-Islamic Arabia is addressed by Peter Stein, who adduces a wide selection of epigraphic evidence particularly from South Arabia that is usually ignored by Qur'anic scholars. Jan Retsö presents evidence for a controversial and highly stimulating reinterpretation of the nature and function of the language of the Qur'an, the 'Arabiyya.<sup>35</sup> Tilman Seidensticker's examination of the literary sources for ancient Arabian religion attempts to pave the way towards a critical utilization—rather than either a wholesale dismissal or an uncritical acceptance—of this significant body of literature for the reconstruction of the Qur'anic milieu.

Both Isabel Toral-Niehoff and Kirill Dmitriev then go on to address a question that is of particular importance for any attempt to integrate the Qur'an within the wider Late Antique world, namely, the identification of possible transmission belts through which Greek and Syriac

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. also the discussion of his work in Wild, "Arabic Recitation."

learning may have percolated into the Ḥijāz. While Toral-Niehoff provides a general picture of the highly complex social and cultural situation prevailing in pre-Islamic Ḥīra, Dmitriev undertakes a close reading of one particular example of the poetic produce of Ḥīra, ‘Adī b. Zayd’s poem about the creation of the world and the fall of man, a theological issue that is amply reflected in the Qur’anic text, albeit with different connotations. Poetry, albeit of a slightly later date, is also the topic of Agnes Imhof’s paper dealing with two poems by Muhammad’s panegyrist Ka’b b. Mālīk, which constitute, as it were, rare examples of contemporary “para-texts” of the Qur’an that are otherwise not transmitted.

The second part of the volume focuses more specifically on the Qur’an itself and on its transmission history. It starts out with the issue of chronology, a topic of obvious importance for any evolutionary, and hence historical, study of the Qur’an. Yet so far, there has been little methodological reflection on how to approach this issue, and in particular on how to avoid the charges of circularity or arbitrariness that are sometimes leveled at chronological reconstruction. Nicolai Sinai undertakes a critical reappraisal and defense of the dating criteria employed by Theodor Nöldeke, whose path-breaking work from 1860 is usually either tacitly accepted or summarily dismissed, in both cases without much argumentative ado. Sinai then attempts to go beyond Nöldeke’s division of the Qur’anic corpus into early, middle, and late Meccan and Medinan texts and work out an internal chronology of the early Meccan surahs. New approaches to dating are also proposed by Nora Katharina Schmid and Islam Dayeh: Schmid explores the value that methods of quantitative text analysis may possess for Qur’anic studies and carries out a statistical screening of some of Nöldeke’s dating parameters. Dayeh, on the other hand, undertakes a detailed analysis of the seven surahs that begin with the disconnected letters *ḥā mīm* and provides a detailed catalogue of formulaic and thematic parallels that makes it likely that these surahs constitute a chronologically related text cluster.

The following articles concentrate on the aspect of intertextuality. Angelika Neuwirth’s essay on “the House of Abraham and the House of Amram” examines the hermeneutical and Christological subtexts of Q 3 and attempts to reconstruct the change of perception of the two older scriptural traditions that is reflected in a Medinan re-reading of an earlier Meccan text. Although such a procedure may appear

self-evident, the Qur'anic re-interpretation of these traditions that is highlighted here, evolving as it does from an early Meccan hagiographic to a Medinan religio-political reading, has hitherto not received its due share of attention. Closely related to Neuwirth's contribution is Michael Marx's examination of traces of ecclesiastical Christology and Mariology in the Qur'an. Marx proceeds on the assumption that, in order to fully appreciate the theological connotations that Qur'anic references to Jesus and Mary must have evoked for the first listeners of the Qur'an, these references must be contextualized not only with New Testament (and apocryphal) texts, but also with Syriac liturgical poetry. Hartmut Bobzin's article is an in-depth analysis of the developing Qur'anic understanding of prophecy, situating it in the light of a number of relevant rabbinic intertexts, while at the same time also drawing important conclusions relevant to the diachronic dimension of Qur'anic discourse. The two following articles by Gabriel S. Reynolds and Reimund Leicht suggest new juxtapositions of Qur'anic texts with pre-Qur'anic Christian and Jewish sources. Gabriel S. Reynolds highlights what he calls the "homiletic qualities" of the Qur'anic text by drawing attention to the connection between the Abraham pericopes in Q 11 and Q 51 and a number of Christian intertexts. Jewish traditions are discussed by Reimund Leicht, who explores the perspectives of a comparison between Qur'anic and rabbinic law, a subject much harder to approach, and consequently much less studied, than a comparison between Qur'anic and rabbinic *narrative*.

The next three contributions again widen the focus to address various aspects of the general linguistic and cultural profile of the Qur'anic milieu and include a number of methodological reflections. François de Blois, on the basis of earlier research, makes a case for situating the Qur'an in a Jewish-Christian milieu that he proposes as the referent for the Qur'anic term *naṣāra*. Stefan Wild's article is a detailed critique of some of the patterns of argument used in Luxenberg's *Syro-aramäische Lesart*, and in particular of Luxenberg's highly publicized re-reading of the virgins of Paradise as "white grapes." The same topic is also taken up by Walid Saleh in the course of a general assessment of the state of Qur'anic studies and its underlying hermeneutical assumptions. Saleh also proposes a broader frame of reference to understanding the Qur'anic utopia of paradise, inviting classical imaginations of the divine into the discussion. According to Saleh, it



is “oxen-eyed” Hera rather than a bunch of grapes that has been the shaping force behind the houri image.

A literary reading of the Qur’anic texts, which after all are highly poetic, requires consideration of the artistic peculiarities developed in pre-Qur’anic Arabic literature, constituting as it does the indigenous literary canon with which the Qur’an’s original audience was in all likelihood intimately familiar. This aspect is dealt with in Thomas Bauer’s article, which makes a vigorous case for the relevance of ancient Arabic poetry for Qur’anic studies by theoretically developing and illustrating the notion of “negative intertextuality.” The exclusive focus on non-Arabic sources that is arguably a constant temptation for Western students of the Qur’an thus turns out to be dangerously lopsided. Angelika Neuwirth’s second contribution studies Qur’anic re-readings of the Psalms, the only biblical corpus that has exerted a formative impact not only on the Qur’an’s theological fabric but also, and primarily, on its literary shape. Paying as it does close attention to the Qur’an’s linguistic medium, Neuwirth’s contribution provides an example for the negotiation of Arabic as well as non-Arabic literary, and more precisely poetical, forms in the Qur’an.

Finally, the transmission history of the Qur’an is at the center of both Gregor Schoeler’s and Omar Hamdan’s contributions. Schoeler confronts the hypotheses of John Burton and John Wansbrough with his own reconstruction of the modalities of early Islamic textual transmission, while Hamdan provides an extensive synopsis of the Islamic sources describing the orthographic reform of the Qur’anic *rasm* carried out under al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf, thus highlighting the formative phase of the canonization of the Qur’anic text as part of the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik’s “imperial project.”<sup>36</sup>

### *A Few Words of Thanks*

The conference of which this volume is a belated outcome—convened in January 2004 under the title “Historische Sondierungen und methodische Reflexionen zur Korangeneese: Wege zur Rekonstruktion des vorkanonischen Koran”<sup>37</sup>—would not have been possible without generous funding from the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, nor without

<sup>36</sup> Cf. also Hamdan’s extensive study *Studien zur Kanonisierung des Korantextes*.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. the German conference reports by Michael Marx in *INAMO* 37 (2004), and by Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx at <http://192.55.244.191/index.php?id=242>.



the adroit administrative and organizational support of Georges Khalil, then in charge of the “Working Group Modernity and Islam” at the Wissenschaftskolleg Berlin. Editorial work on the volume and a number of translations were subsequently facilitated by another grant from the Fritz Thyssen Foundation. A summer academy on “Literary and Historical Approaches to the Qur’an and the Bible,” hosted in 2007 by the research programme “Europe in the Middle East—The Middle East in Europe,” provided important intellectual stimuli for the final draft of the introduction and some of the contributions. Many of the laborious tasks of editing were taken on by a number of scholars and research assistants associated with the Institute for Arabic Studies of the Free University Berlin: Islam Dayeh, Dirk Hartwig, Hannelies Koloska, Ghassan el-Masri, Claudia Päßgen, Veronika Roth, and Nora Katharina Schmid. Finally, we would like to thank Brill and the series editors Jane McAuliffe and Gerhard Böwering for their almost inexhaustible patience in awaiting this volume’s final draft.

### *A Note on Style*

Everyone who has ever taken on responsibility for the edition of so large a collection of articles knows what a considerable challenge it is to impose at least some measure of stylistic uniformity on contributions from so wide a variety of disciplines. In general, the recommendations of the *Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th edition, have been adhered to, while the orthography follows American usage. It has not been attempted to obliterate all differences in citation format and bibliographical style among the various contributors, an aspiration that would have been neither feasible nor desirable. Transliterations from the Arabic are based on a slightly modified version of the *IJMES* system, while in more technical linguistic contexts (such as in the articles by Knauf and Stein), the transliteration system of the *Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft* has been retained. Authors have generally been allowed to use non-Latin scripts rather than transcriptions where they saw fit to do so. In the case of foreign expressions that have a well-established Anglicized orthography (such as “Qur’an,” “Mecca,” “Medina,” “Abbasids,” “Shi’ites,” and “Muhammad,” when reference is to the Islamic Prophet), this simplified spelling has been preferred; as regards less well-known Near Eastern geographical

designations, such as excavations sites, we have in many cases deferred to the orthographical choices made by the author, at least when these were current in the secondary literature. In transcriptions from Syriac, spirantization of the Begadkepat letters has not been marked. The mode of transliterating Hebrew, too, has in general been left to the discretion of the authors, with most contributions employing a simplified general-purpose style.

Unless noted otherwise, translations of Qur'anic citations are based on Majid Fakhry's *An Interpretation of the Qur'an*, with minor modifications, such as substitution of "God" for "Allah," use of "you" instead of "thou" etc., and lowercasing of all pronouns and expressions that are not proper nouns (in accordance with the "down" style recommended by the *Chicago Manual of Style*). Further minor modifications have occasionally been deemed necessary by the individual authors.

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PART ONE  
THE QUR'AN'S HISTORICAL  
CONTEXT



# THE MARTYRS OF NAJRĀN AND THE END OF THE HIMYAR: ON THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF SOUTH ARABIA IN THE EARLY SIXTH CENTURY\*

Norbert Nebes

## *Introduction*

In the spring of the year 519, or perhaps even as early as the preceding autumn,<sup>1</sup> an Alexandrian spice trader named Cosmas<sup>2</sup> traveling to Taprobane (known today as Sri Lanka) arrived at the ancient port city of Adulis on the African side of the Red Sea, where he made a short stay.<sup>3</sup> In Cosmas' day, Adulis controlled the Bāb al-Mandab and maintained close ties with the commercial centers along the South Arabian coast; it attracted merchants from Alexandria and Ailat, and it was from them that Cosmas hoped to obtain valuable information for his journey onward to India. Yet at this point in his account of the journey, Cosmas makes no mention of spices or other commodities. His attention is focused on matters of classical philology.

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\* The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the political history of the events which took place in the period under discussion. It makes no claim to be a complete review of all the sources available or to consider the current discussion exhaustively. For such a synopsis, see the recent contribution by Beaucamp et al., "Persécution," which emphasizes the chronology of events, and which I shall follow in placing the start of the Himyarite era in the year 110 BCE. Müller, "Himyar," gives a thorough evaluation of the source material then available and remains a fundamental work.—The sigla of inscriptions cited follow Stein, *Untersuchungen*, 274–290. For a first draft of this paper, see Nebes, "Märtyrer" who gives more detailed annotations and also lists the sigla not used in Stein, *Untersuchungen*. The new edition of the *Martyrium Sancti Arethae* by M. Detorakis (Paris 2007), which in the most recent secondary literature is cited e. g. by Bausi "Review," 265–266, was not available to the author.

<sup>1</sup> For this date, see Beaucamp et al., "Persécution," 71. Cosmas' stay in Adulis is usually dated to the year 525 (cf. for instance Müller, "Himyar," 316); see n. 9.

<sup>2</sup> For the most recent contribution, cf. Sima, "Cosmas"; for information concerning Cosmas' life and work, see Schneider, "Cosmas," with further references.

<sup>3</sup> Adulis, which is located 40 km to the south of Massawa and ca. 4 km inland from the coast, was the main port of Aksum through which Byzantine—and, in an earlier period, Roman—trade with India was conducted; see Fattovich, "Adulis."



At the request of the governor of Adulis he made copies of two Greek inscriptions which have since become known as the *Monumentum Adulitanum*. The two inscriptions are found on a marble throne with an attached “stela”<sup>4</sup> situated at the town’s western entrance on the caravan road leading to the Ethiopian plateau and Aksum. The first of these inscriptions, located on the stela,<sup>5</sup> is the report of a campaign by Ptolemaios III Euergetes (246–222 BCE) that sheds light on the Ptolemies’ maritime undertakings on the African side of the Red Sea during the second half of the third century BCE.<sup>6</sup> The other text, also in Greek, can be found on the marble throne itself and dates from a later, post-Christian period.<sup>7</sup> It contains an account of the deeds of an unnamed Aksumite ruler and remains to this day the only written evidence we have for the rise of Aksum and her territorial ambitions before the time of ‘Ezana, i.e., the middle of the fourth century.<sup>8</sup>

Both of the copies Cosmas made for the governor of Adulis were intended for Ellatzbáas (Ἐλλατζβάας) whose residence was nearby in Aksum and who, as we are told in passing, was just preparing for war with the Homerites.<sup>9</sup> This directs our attention to the other side

<sup>4</sup> Cosmas, *Christian Topography* 2.54–55; Wolska-Conus translates εἰκὼν as “stela”, which obviously is part of the throne, see Phillipson, *Monuments of Aksum*, 123–154. For the significance these thrones had for Aksumite rule, see Munro-Hay, *Aksum*, 110, and Brakmann, “Axomis,” 748.

<sup>5</sup> RIE I, no. 276 (with bibliographic notes) and RIE III.A 26–32 (translation).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. in general Hölbl, *Geschichte*, 56–57.

<sup>7</sup> RIE I, no. 277 (with the relevant bibliographic notes); translated in Munro-Hay, *Aksum*, 222–223 and RIE III.A 32–45; the most recent review is given by Fiaccadori, “Monumentum Adulitanum,” 1010–1012.

<sup>8</sup> See the discussion in Brakmann, “Axomis,” 726–727. Since the *Adulitanana secunda* mentions the Sabaeans and not the Ḥimyar, Robin (“Première intervention,” 155) has conjectured that the author may have been the Abessinian king Gadūrat mentioned in C 308 (or one of his immediate predecessors), with whom the Sabeian king ‘Alhān Nahfān concluded an alliance around the year 190 CE. An alternative king has recently been suggested by Fiaccadori “Monumentum Adulitanum,” 1012.

<sup>9</sup> Cosmas, *Christian Topography*, 2, 56: μέλλων ἐξιέναι εἰς πόλεμον πρὸς τοὺς Ὀμηρίτας τοὺς πέραν, “because he intended to campaign against the neighbouring Homerites.” If we follow Simeon of Bēth Arsham’s two Syriac letters and assume a date of 523 for the events in Najrān and the death of Arethas (see below), which were followed by the great Ethiopian counteroffensive of the year 525, while Cosmas claims to have witnessed the Ethiopian king’s mobilization in Adulis “at the beginning (of the rule) of Emperor Justin,” which took place in 518, then he cannot have been an eyewitness of the great (second) invasion but only of the first one. The latter is also mentioned in the *Book of the Himyarites* (see below), and its command was entrusted by Ella Aṣbeḥa to one Ḥayyān, whose official function is not specified; see RIE I, no.

of the Bāb al-Mandab, to South Arabia. Although Cosmas mentions them in the margin, Ellatzbāas' preparations for war mark the beginning of a chain of events which was to change the political landscape of Southwest Arabia fundamentally and in very short time. They were to see Yemen subjugated by Kaleb Ella Aṣbeḥa,<sup>10</sup> his adversary, the South Arabian King Yūsuf defeated and killed, and Aksumite rule established over large parts of Southwest Arabia. Thus, the power of the Homerites, the Ḥimyar of the Ancient South Arabian inscriptions, who had ruled Yemen and dominated large parts of central Arabia for two and a half centuries, was finally brought to an end. It is true that in the person of Abraha there would arise an Ethiopian king in Yemen who would keep up the traditional Ḥimyarite royal titles, compose his political self-depictions in Sabeian, and distance himself quite clearly from the Negus in Aksum.<sup>11</sup> Yet the days of South Arabian independence were over for good. The native tribal elites were no longer able to shake off Abraha's rule. For the next fifty years, Yemen was to remain under Christian rule, and in the following decades was to be subject to the hegemony of Sasanian Persia. Finally, in the year 632, the troops of the first caliph Abū Bakr put an end to the Yemeni tribes' revived attempts to achieve independence.<sup>12</sup> Yemen became part of the Islamic world and joined in the young Islamic community's campaigns of conquest issuing from Medina.

### *A Survey of the Available Sources*

For no other period of the pre-Islamic history of the Arabian Peninsula do we have so extensive and diverse a range of literary and epigraphic source texts composed so soon after events as we do for the 520s, when the conflict between Ḥimyar and Aksum reached its culmination.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the information given by Procopios<sup>14</sup> and a short

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191/34–35, as against de Blois, "Date," 126, n. 55, according to whom this first invasion took place in the time of Ella Aṣbeḥa's predecessor.

<sup>10</sup> That is the reading of Ellatzbāas' full name, according to the Aksumite Source, RIE I, no. 191/7f.: *klb l' (8) l l' ṣbh*.

<sup>11</sup> For the historical figure, see Sima, "Abraha," 42. A further inscription by Abraha has recently been uncovered on the northern sluice of the great dam of Mārib; see Nebes, "New 'Abraha Inscription."

<sup>12</sup> Al-Mad'aj, *Yemen*, 53–55.

<sup>13</sup> For a systematic overview of the Syriac, Greek, and Ethiopian sources, see Beaucamp et al., "Persécution," 19–41.

<sup>14</sup> Procopios, *Wars* 1.20.

remark by Cosmas Indicopleustes, the principal documents are texts of varying genre composed in Syriac, Sabean, and ancient Ethiopic. Above all, mention must be made of the account of the “Martyrs of Najrān” that has been transmitted in three different Syriac versions, namely, the first and second letters of Simeon of Bēth Arsham and the *Book of the Himyarites*, the first of which was the source for the Greek hagiographic text *Martyrium Sancti Arethae et sociorum in civitate Negrān*.<sup>15</sup> Located in the southwest of modern Saudi Arabia, at the junction of the former frankincense roads to northwestern and eastern Arabia, Najrān was home to the largest Ḥimyarite Christian community. Najrān was also the Abyssinians’ bridgehead in northern Yemen<sup>16</sup>—as it had been at the time of the first Aksumite intervention in South Arabia<sup>17</sup>—and it was against Najrān that the Ḥimyarite king Yūsuf and the Yazʿanid tribal leaders allied with him directed their most decisive blow.

Yet, the conflicts in Najrān are reflected not only in texts belonging to the acts of the martyrs genre. The authenticity of the hagiographic account is supported by the epigraphic texts of the opposite side, more specifically in the form of several prominently situated Sabean rock inscriptions that high-ranking officers of the king caused to be made during the blockade of Najrān by Ḥimyarite troops.<sup>18</sup> Even if one were to consider only the most important of these sources, the messages are completely heterogeneous—they were composed by differing parties, point to a variety of interests and refer to different scenarios—yet they reflect the fundamentally new dimension of the struggle taking place in southwestern Arabia during the first third of the sixth century. While the conflicts of the warring kingdoms of the second and third centuries had been at regional level—between Sabaʾ, Ḥimyar, and Ḥaḍramawt as the main protagonists but also involving the Abyssinians, who dominated the western lowlands and the western

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<sup>15</sup> Several centuries later the *Martyrium Sancti Arethae* was translated into Arabic, with the Arabic version in turn serving as the basis for a Geʿez translation. Both texts have recently been edited by Bausi and Gori, *Tradizioni Orientali*.

<sup>16</sup> As early as the first quarter of the third century, Najrān and the Abyssinian forces stationed there were the target of a campaign by the Sabean king Shāʾirum Awtar; see J 635/23f.

<sup>17</sup> The first Abyssinian intervention in South Arabia has to be distinguished from that which took place during the period we are concerned with here; it lasted for less than a century and is believed to have taken place between 190 and 280 CE; for details, see Robin, “Première intervention.”

<sup>18</sup> As to the inscriptions of Biʾr Ḥimā and Kawkab, see below.

edges of the highlands of central Yemen—the political situation two centuries later was far more straightforward, being marked by a confrontation between two main adversaries, the Ethiopians of Aksum and the Ḥimyar of Zafār. Whereas the regional wars of the mid-Sabean period would appear to have reflected purely regional interests,<sup>19</sup> the conflict between Ḥimyar and Aksum had a new, global dimension. The struggle was quite evidently also one which directly involved the interests of the great powers of the time, Persia and the Byzantine Empire. The close ties between Aksum and the Eastern Roman Empire are well known: the first recorded contacts took place in the time of Diocletian, and it may be assumed that relations began well before then;<sup>20</sup> ‘Ezana’s conversion to Christianity in the second half of the 340s hence was to place the relationship on a new footing.<sup>21</sup>

Numerous features of Aksumite coinage clearly show that Roman influence was present already several decades earlier.<sup>22</sup> It is also known that the Byzantine Emperor Justin I (518–527) gave more than ideological assistance to the Aksumite king Ella Aṣbeḥa’s plans for invasion.<sup>23</sup> It may be assumed that it was with Justin’s permission that the Ethiopians requisitioned the Byzantine trading vessels anchored in the Red Sea ports,<sup>24</sup> which the Ethiopian force of the second invasion in 525, then under the personal leadership of Ella Aṣbeḥa, used to transfer to the Arab mainland.

<sup>19</sup> The three dozen or so campaign accounts of the Sabean kings and their officers that were found at the great Awām temple in Mārib provide a good impression of the military situation of the times; they have been compiled and translated in Beeston, *Warfare*; selected translations are given in Nebes, “Herrscherinschriften.”

<sup>20</sup> See Munro-Hay, *Aksum*, 56.

<sup>21</sup> Thus Hahn, “Symbols,” 437; Brakmann, “Religionsgeschichte Aksums,” 412, is more cautious (“Alles spricht freilich dafür, daß ‘Ēzānā unter dem Pontifikat des Frumentios getauft wurde, vermutlich um die Mitte des 4. Jh., bald nach Frumentios’ Ordination in Alexandria und seiner zweiten Ankunft in Aksum”); for the problem of dates, see id., “Axomis,” 751, and, more recently, Hahn, “Ezana,” 479. What does appear to have been established with relative certainty is that the letter which Constantius II sent to ‘Ezana and his brother no later than 358 must have been preceded by their conversion to Christianity.

<sup>22</sup> Hahn, *Münzen*, 4–5; cf. also Brakmann, “Axomis,” 724–725, on the coinage of the Aksumite kings since 290.

<sup>23</sup> For instance in the shape of a letter in which Justin calls on the Ethiopian king to intervene on behalf of the threatened Christians of South Arabia; see *Martyrium Sancti Arethae*, par. 27.

<sup>24</sup> *Martyrium Sancti Arethae*, par. 29, gives a figure of sixty ships originating from various, mainly Red Sea, ports that the Ethiopian king had assembled in Gabaz/Adu-lis.

The picture we have of Sasanian influence at the Ḥimyarite court in Ṣafār is far sketchier. We know that diplomatic ties between the Sasanians and the Ḥimyar began relatively early on, soon after the Ḥimyar had expanded and consolidated their rule over all of South Arabia. From a dedication at the great Awām temple in the Mārīb oasis (Sh 31) we know that around the beginning of the fourth century, a Ḥimyarite delegation returned from a successful diplomatic mission to the royal cities on the Tigris, Seleucia, and Ctesiphon.<sup>25</sup> Sasanian influence in Ṣafār would appear to have extended to the field of art as well.<sup>26</sup>

We do not know how intensive and long-lasting political contact may have been; in particular for the period here dealt with, the sources remain silent. The fact that the Sasanians had a considerable interest in the Arabian coast and the entrance to the Red Sea is, however, beyond doubt. This is confirmed by the actual course of events, when, in the last quarter of the sixth century, they assumed control over Yemen from the sons of Abraha.<sup>27</sup>

### *The Ḥimyar's Accession to Supremacy*

Before turning our attention to what the sources have to say concerning the most important stages of the conflict, let us examine the history of events preceding them. Around the year 275, the Ḥimyar of the southern highlands, who were centered around their capital Ṣafār,

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<sup>25</sup> Müller, "Gesandtschaft," has dealt with this inscription in detail and reports that the delegation also visited the Azd in Oman and the Tanūkh on the lower Euphrates, two tribal groups which at the time were allies of the Sasanians. In a recent contribution, Potts, "Sasanian relationship," returns to the question of the motive underlying this delegation. He has suggested that it may have been connected to the birth of Shapur II, and that it took place around 310/311, being "a direct response of the South Arabian monarch's having received word of this important event in Sasanian history" (id. 203).—The epigraphic sources currently available allow us to trace relations between Persia and South Arabia back to the Arsacids. On a bronze plaque from the Wadd temple in Qaryat al-Faw, depicted on a poster of the King Saud University Press from the year 1407 AH, Minean merchants from Qarnāw report having traveled up the Tigris as far as Seleucia (the third from last line: *k-nhr / 'd / slky*).

<sup>26</sup> Verbal information, P. Yule; see now Antonini, "Un manufatto ḥimyarita."

<sup>27</sup> The majority of the sources reporting on the Sasanian occupation of Yemen are works by Yemenite Arabic authors and medieval Arabic historians and which exhibit certain retrospective distortions and legendary elements. The beginning of Sasanian rule in Yemen has been placed between 570 and 585; see the details given in Potts, "Sasanian relationship," 206–211.

began to assert themselves against the northern highland tribes, from amongst whom had been the successors to the kings of Saba' from the second century CE on.<sup>28</sup> Slightly more than twenty years later, the Ḥimyarites had also gained control over the great Wadi Ḥaḍramawt and the South Arabian coast.<sup>29</sup> Towards the beginning of the fourth century, Shammar Yuhar'ish was the sole ruler of Yemen, as expressed in the titles used by him. The kings of the Ḥimyar no longer styled themselves just as the kings of Saba' and of Raydān (meaning their royal palace in Ṣafār) but also of the newly conquered territories.<sup>30</sup> The period of warring kingdoms had been brought to an end, and South Arabia had been reunited.<sup>31</sup>

The beginnings of the Ḥimyar are still obscure and go back to the second century BCE. At that time, the fertile plateaus in the south of the central Yemenite Highlands right down to the coast at the Bāb al-Mandab were part of the area held by the Qatabanian kings, ruling from their capital Timna' in the Wādī Bayḥān; this is also confirmed by the third-century BCE Alexandrine librarian Eratosthenes.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Information on the relevant sources and further secondary literature concerning the following may be found in the outline given by Robin, "Sheba," 1130–1140.

<sup>29</sup> The kingdom of Ḥaḍramawt had been considerably weakened by the Sabeen king Shā'irum Awtar, who plundered and destroyed the capital city, Shabwa, around the year 230 before it eventually succumbed to Ḥimyarite domination under Shammar Yuhar'ish. On the other hand, the Ḥimyarites engaged in a number of campaigns into the Wadi Ḥaḍramawt even after their realm had been united, namely, during the joint reign of the kings Dhamar'alī Yuhabirr and his son Tha'rān Yuhar'im (cf. Nebes, "Kriegszug" and recently Robin, "Ḥimyar au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle," 136–145.). Similarly, the great rock inscription from the Wadi 'Abadān—which dates to 360 CE and contains an account of the acts of three generations of Yaz'anid tribal leaders who explicitly recognized the suzerainty of the Ḥimyar of Ṣafār—mentions that Ḥaḍramawt had burned down their city of 'Abadān ('Abadān 1/32). It would thus appear that individual cities of the Wadi Ḥaḍramawt were able to maintain their independence from the Ḥimyar of Ṣafār until at least the first half of the fourth century.

<sup>30</sup> For instance YMN 13/11–13: *šmr / yhr'š / mlk / sb' / w-ḡ-rydn / w-ḡḍrmwt / w-ymnt*, "Shammar Yuhar'ish, the king of Saba' and dhū Raydān and Ḥaḍramawt and Yamnat," where Yamnat probably refers to the southwestern corner of the Arabian Peninsula and the southern coastline between Aden and Ḥaḍramawt; see Robin, "Sheba," 1140.

<sup>31</sup> Throughout the 1400 years of its pre-Islamic history documented by written sources, this had only once been the case, at the beginning of the seventh century BCE, when the Sabeen ruler of Mārib, Mukarrib Karib'il Watar, had succeeded in subjecting all of Yemen; see Nebes, "Tatenbericht," and id., "Ita'amar."

<sup>32</sup> Reported by Strabo, *Geography* 16.4.2; this external account can now be confirmed by indigenous epigraphic sources, see Nebes, "Feldzugsbericht," 282–283, and Nebes "Märtyrer," 14 n. 35.

Towards the end of the second century BCE, the southern highland tribes began to shake off control by the Qatabanian motherland, coming together to form the Ḥimyarite confederation which, from the middle of the first century CE, was to become an important factor in the ever-shifting struggle for power in South Arabia. The only written evidence of them we have are stone inscriptions, not in the Qatabanian dialect, as one might expect, but in slightly modified Sabean.<sup>33</sup> These inscriptions reveal an important innovation, which is of great assistance for reconstructing the chronology of the following period. Unlike those inscriptions written in other South Arabian dialects, above all the Sabean ones, the years mentioned by the Ḥimyarite epigraphs are always stated in absolute terms. The Syriac accounts of the martyrs of Najrān (to which we shall return later) play a decisive part in dating these years in terms of the Christian calendar.

The capital Ṣafār appears for the first time in Pliny's *Natural History*,<sup>34</sup> and it is also mentioned by the anonymous author of the *Periplus maris Erythraei*, a maritime handbook from the middle of the first century CE, as being a metropolis lying at a distance of a nine-day journey from the city of Sawā' in Ma'āfir (in today's al-Ḥujariya).<sup>35</sup> From the main road today leading south towards Aden, one turns off eastwards after Yarīm, reaching the fertile Ṣafār plateau after just a few kilometers to find the city itself, built on three volcanic outcrops and at an altitude of 2830 m. Despite the fact that it was in Ṣafār that European travelers first recorded ancient South Arabian inscriptions,<sup>36</sup> archeological research there has only recently begun. Since 1998, nine seasons of excavations directed by the archeologist Paul Yule have so far concentrated on establishing the topography of the 110 hectare urban area<sup>37</sup> and on excavating a monumental stone building.<sup>38</sup>

Yet even from the evidence of surface finds one can say that Ṣafār shows markedly fewer inscriptions than Mārib, and that future excavations are likely to bear this out. On closer examination, this

<sup>33</sup> For more details see Nebes, „Märtyrer“, 14 n. 37.

<sup>34</sup> Pliny, *Natural History* 6.104.

<sup>35</sup> *Periplus*, par. 23.

<sup>36</sup> Ulrich Jasper Seetzen briefly visited Ṣafār in July 1810 and made drawings of a fragmentary Ḥimyarite building inscription in the village of Mankath at the foot of the mountain, as well as of the monograms of the Ḥimyarite kings incorporated into the local mosque. For more on this see Nebes, „Ulrich Jasper Seetzen.“

<sup>37</sup> These dimensions are similar to those of the city of Mārib.

<sup>38</sup> See the provisional excavation reports in Yule, „Mapping,” and id. et al., „Ṣafār.”



circumstance allows us to draw some significant conclusions. The known inscriptions from Ṣafār are mostly building inscriptions and date from the post-Christian period. They describe the construction of defenses and houses as well as the erection of royal buildings. In addition to the palace of Raydān, first mentioned in a dedication by Yāsīrum Yuhan'im and his son Shammar Yuhar'ish,<sup>39</sup> we know of three similar inscriptions from the palaces named Shawḥaṭān, Kallānum, and Hargab, all built in the years 383 and 462 by the Ḥimyarite kings Malkikarib Yuha'min and his sons,<sup>40</sup> and by Shuraḥbi'il Ya'fur.<sup>41</sup>

What is significant about these findings is the almost total absence in Ṣafār of any dedicatory inscriptions of the kind found in such abundance elsewhere in South Arabia. We know that even after Shammar Yuhar'ish unified the kingdom, the Ḥimyarite kings continued to record their political self-portrayals not only in building inscriptions but also in the form of dedications. In Ṣafār, however, they would appear to have done so only to the extent of honoring the locally venerated gods, such as Wagal, and Simyada' and others. In Mārib, on the other hand, they continued the practice of placing their dedications in the central shrine of the main Sabean god Almaqah, to whom they were also addressed.

The explanation for this is quite simply that Mārib had lost nothing of its significance as a political center symbolizing the centuries of Sabean rule. By placing their dedications at the Awām temple in Mārib, the Ḥimyarite kings were seeking to place themselves within this tradition and thereby to endow their rule with the necessary legitimacy.

### *Ḥimyarite Monotheism*

The Awām temple contains Ḥimyarite dedications from a period of several decades. Then, in the 380s, the form of worship appears to have undergone a fundamental change, observable not only in Mārib and Ṣafār but also throughout South Arabia. Within a relatively short

<sup>39</sup> E 14, par. 1, relates that the two kings set out for Mārib (*hgrn / myrb*) from their palace of Raydān (*bytn / rydn*) in Ṣafār.

<sup>40</sup> R 3383/3 (Shawḥaṭān) and Gar Bayt al-Ashwal 2/1f. (Kall[ān]um; this addition was suggested by A. Sima at the *Orient-Symposium* held at Bamberg in 2002).

<sup>41</sup> Gar ŠYa/A3=ZM 1/3 (Hargab).



period of time, the rich pantheon of South Arabian gods disappeared; dedications to its gods appear to have ceased, and their shrines, including the huge Awām temple, to have been abandoned. The inscriptions were no longer addressed to the ancient astral gods such as Almaqah, ʿAthtar, or Shams, but to a single deity, called the “Lord of Heaven” or the “Lord of Heaven and Earth,” who is also called *Rahmānān*.<sup>42</sup>

Debate amongst scholars continues as to whether this Ḥimyarite monotheism was, at least in the initial decades, influenced more by Christianity or by Judaism, or whether it may have rested on an independent political and even theological foundation in the form of some kind of Ḥimyarite *Rahmānism*.<sup>43</sup> The fact that a Christian background has been assumed for at least the first years after the Ḥimyarite kings’ conversion to monotheism is due largely to an account given in Philostorgios’ church history, according to which Theophilos the Indian<sup>44</sup> was sent by Constantius II (337–361) to the Ḥimyarite court at Ṣafār, where he spent some time at the beginning of the 340s, succeeding not only in achieving the king’s conversion but also in gaining his permission to build churches in three separate locations in Yemen.<sup>45</sup> The account does not, however, identify the Ḥimyarite king, nor do we have any monotheistic inscriptions from this early period which could provide some form of evidence for the king’s conversion to Christianity.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Other descriptions are “God, the Lord of Heaven” as well as *Rahmānān* with the attributes given above. See also the tables given by Gajda, “Débuts,” 625–628, and Robin, “Judaïsme,” 170–173.—The first of the royal inscriptions containing a monotheistic credo are the two building inscriptions of Malkikarib Yuhaʿmin and his sons, dated to the year 383; see Müller, “Religion und Kult,” 190–191. The first monotheistic inscription (YM 1950) was presented by Gajda, “Débuts,” 612, and has been translated and commented upon in id., “Inscription.” It dates to the year [37]3 or [36]3 and was made by tribal leaders from Sumʿay, who refer to Thaʿrān Yuhanʿim and his sons as their lords.—Recently, Robin “Ḥimyar et Israël”, 837 n. 35, has reported on a recently discovered inscription containing a monotheistic credo that has to be dated before the year of 355, see Nebes, “Märtyrer”, 17 n. 45.

<sup>43</sup> See for example Müller, “Religion und Kult,” 191, and Gajda, “Débuts,” 620–621. For a synopsis with detailed interpretation of the sources, see Robin, “Judaïsme,” 170–172.

<sup>44</sup> Müller, “Theophilos,” 1473.

<sup>45</sup> Philostorgios, *Church History* 3.4–5.

<sup>46</sup> The findings from the Awām temple in Mārib show that Dhamarʿalī Yuhabirr and Thaʿrān Yuhanʿim, the kings ruling at the time, still placed their dedications to Almaqah there, and even several years after Theophilos’ visit to the Ḥimyarite court dedications to Almaqah continued to be placed there, as the (unpublished) inscription MQ Maḥram Bilqis 1 shows, which is dated to 351 (461 of the Ḥimyarite era). It may

Contrastingly, a number of factors do exist which support the view that Ḥimyarite monotheism was oriented towards Judaism from the outset. The first indication can be found in the name Raḥmānān itself. Although *raḥmānā* means “merciful” both in (Christian) Syro-Aramaic and in Judeo-Aramaic, it is only in the latter that it is commonly used as a divine epithet,<sup>47</sup> so that it is not unreasonable to assume that the Ḥimyar adopted Raḥmānān and the conceptual theological background associated with him from Jewish Aramaic and not from Christian Syriac.<sup>48</sup> It is true that in South Arabian usage, the name Raḥmānān was also used to refer to the Christian God. All of the conclusive evidence for this, however, comes from the time after the Ethiopian invasion and the defeat of the Ḥimyarite king Yūsuf. Thus we find the inscriptions of the Ethiopian king in Yemen, Abraha, beginning with the formula, “with the help of Raḥmānān and his Christ,” which is sometimes extended to a trinity: “with the help of Raḥmānān and his Christ and the Holy Spirit.”<sup>49</sup> The fact that Raḥmānān was used to refer to the Christian God at the time of

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very well be that the conversion of the Ḥimyar king described by Philostorgios, probably Tha'rān Yuhan'im, was of short duration and, if it extended to others at all, only included the king's immediate entourage.

<sup>47</sup> Rightly pointed out by Gajda, “Débuts,” 613, with n. 7, where she refers to Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*, 522; further examples for Babylonian Jewish-Aramaic may be found in Levy, *Neuhebräisches und chaldäisches Wörterbuch*, vol. 4, 440, and more recently in Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, 1069–1070.

<sup>48</sup> According to Geiger, “Jüdische Begriffe,” 488–489, Syriac does not use *raḥmānā* as a synonym for the trinitarian god except in the writings of Afrem—an observation which is borne out not only by the (few) entries in Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, vol. 2, 3883, and Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum*, 724a, but is also confirmed by the Syriac New Testament, in which the term *raḥmānā* is used not even once. Instead, Syriac employs the term *mraḥḥmānā* to describe the merciful god, cf. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, vol. 2, 3884, and Rom 9:16 (*alāhā mraḥḥmānā*). Further examples can be found in Kiraz, *Concordance*, vol. 4, 2716, and in the second letter of Simeon of Bēth Arsham, in which Christian women are described as replying to Yūsuf's demand that they abjure Christ and convert to Judaism: (*da-mšīhā alāhaw wa-breḥū da-mraḥḥmānā*, “Christ is God and the Son of the Merciful” (Shahid, *Martyrs*, XVII, 20). The occurrences of *raḥmānā* in the Aramaic Bible in Ex 34:6, Ps 111:4, and 2 Chr 30:9 (see Levy, *Chaldäisches Wörterbuch über die Targumim*, vol. 2, 417b), where it is used in place of the Hebrew *raḥūm*, correspond to the use of *mraḥḥmānā*, *mraḥḥmān* and *raḥmṭān* in the Pshittā.

<sup>49</sup> See Ry 506/1, DAI GDN 2002–20/2–3, or C 541/1–3, and, just as clearly Christian, the inscriptions Ist 7608bis and Wellcome A 103664b, which were composed a few years earlier, after the Ethiopian victory over Yūsuf.

Abraha does make it probable, though, that the name was familiar to South Arabian Christians already before the Ethiopian invasion.<sup>50</sup>

Now, upon a systematic examination of the monotheistic credos found in inscriptions of the fourth and fifth centuries, two main groups of texts can be distinguished. The first group includes all those inscriptions that cannot be clearly identified with either one of the two great religions and contain no specifically Jewish or Christian connotations other than the name Raḥmānān and/or terms such as “Lord of Heaven (and Earth).” It is noticeable that all the proclamations by Ḥimyarite kings stemming from the period under discussion fall into this category.<sup>51</sup> The second group, which is considerably smaller, includes those inscriptions that were made by South Arabians professing the Jewish faith. Thus an inscription from Zafār, dating from the last quarter of the fourth century, describes how a “private citizen” named Yehūdā Yakkaf had built his house with the help of the Lord of Heaven and Earth. It is not just the name of the founder which shows that this expression can only refer to the Jewish God but also the fact that the invocation includes the people of Israel.<sup>52</sup>

As the above example demonstrates, Sabeian texts with an unambiguously Jewish background can be shown to have existed from a relatively early date, whereas evidence of texts exhibiting a clearly Christian diction is lacking. Thus, at the end of the fourth century, South Arabia became home to Jewish communities<sup>53</sup> and South

<sup>50</sup> To date this has not been proven by inscriptions from Christian circles in the Tihāma and Najrān. One possible clue is given by the building inscription of an Ethiopian delegation in Zafār made at the time of Marthad'ilān Yanūf (Gar AY 9d), whose introductory formula calls upon Raḥmānān, Lord of Heaven. Robin's assumption that *raḥmānā*, as used in the first epistle of Simeon of Bēth Arsham (Guidi, “Lettera di Simeone,” 3, 13) and in the *Book of the Himyarites* (Moberg, *Book of the Himyarites*, 13a, 23), also refers to the Christian God (see Robin, “Judaïsme,” 114–115) cannot be upheld because the passages mentioned refer to Yusuf's words stating that the Christians believed Jesus to be the “son of the Merciful.” As shown by the passage from Simeon's second epistle quoted in n. 48, Christian Syriac expresses the merciful God with the term *mraḥmānā*.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Gar Bayt al-Ashwal 2, R 3383, C 540. In this context, Robin, “Judaïsme,” 105 and 153–154, speaks of a monotheism “sans parti pris explicite,” which was only declared to be part of Judaism under the reign of Yūsuf.

<sup>52</sup> Gar Bayt al-Ashwal 1/3: *w-b-šlt š'bhaw / ysr'l*, “and with the prayers of his tribe of Israel”; see also Müller, “Religion und Kult,” 190 and Robin, “Ḥimyar et Israël,” 848, for more details. Further inscriptions containing credos that are unambiguously Jewish or exhibit a Jewish background are mentioned in Gajda, “Débuts,” 619, nn. 18 and 19 and Robin, “Ḥimyar et Israël,” 843–844 and 882–890.

<sup>53</sup> Ahroni, *Yemenite Jewry*, 47–48, claims that the strong influence which Judaism had on the Ḥimyarites' conversion is evidence that the Yemenite Jews of the time were

Arabian clans professing Judaism.<sup>54</sup> If we go by the testimony of Philostorgios' church history, Judaism had become established even at an earlier date.<sup>55</sup> On the basis of these findings, then, it seems very likely (and this is the currently prevailing view) that the Ḥimyarite monotheism evidenced by the rulers' inscriptions was in the beginning influenced by Judaism rather than by Christianity.<sup>56</sup>

This supposition is supported by a number of political factors that can be located on the opposite side of the Bāb al-Mandab, in Africa. King 'Ezana of Aksum, whose titles bear witness to his claim to the South Arabian territories of Saba' and Ḥimyar, converted to Christianity in the late 340s. He did so quite openly, as may be seen from his epigraphic and numismatic self-portrayals. One of his post-conversion inscriptions describes him as a "servant of Christ,"<sup>57</sup> and his coins display Christian symbols.<sup>58</sup> It is thus quite understandable to find the Ḥimyar joining the other form of monotheism a short time later, if only as an ideological countermeasure against their

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not "judaized Arabs" but rather members of "those Jewish communities in Yemen that had been populated by the descendants of Jewish exiles" (ibid.).

<sup>54</sup> In the context of a recently published bilingual Hebrew/Aramaic-Sabean funerary inscription from Israel, Sima has stressed that Ḥimyarite Judaism was in no way an isolated phenomenon, but one which formed an integral part of the Jewish world; see Nebe/Sima, "Grabinschrift," esp. the reference to the better known Greek funerary inscription from Beth She'arim on p. 80–81 (details are given in Ahroni, *Yemenite Jewry*, 40–41), and the Aramaic funerary inscription from Zoar, both of which document the burial in Palestine of Jewish Ḥimyarites, which has recently been extensively discussed by Robin, "Ḥimyar et Israël," 836–841 and 890–892.

<sup>55</sup> According to Philostorgius, *Church History* 3.4, "amongst them [i.e., those known in former times as Sabaeans, but now known as Homerites] there was a substantial number of Jews." For information concerning the tradition according to which Jewish communities had immigrated to South Arabia before the destruction of the Temple in 587 BCE, see Ahroni, *Yemenite Jewry*, 25–27.

<sup>56</sup> This raises the question of why Jewish tradition, and especially the Mishnah and the Talmud, makes no mention of Ḥimyarite kings who had converted to Judaism or of Yūsuf, who clearly professed the Jewish faith. Two possible answers have been proposed by Robin, "Judaïsme," 152–153, and Robin "Ḥimyar et Israël," 855. For the "new" religious political concept resulting from the king's conversion to Judaism that has been ascribed to the Ḥimyarite kings by Robin, "Ḥimyar et Israël," 861 and *passim*, see the comments given by Nebes, "Märtyrer," 20 n. 60.

<sup>57</sup> RIE I, no. 271/10; for details on 'Ezana's pagan and Christian inscriptions, see Brakmann, "Axomis," 747–751.

<sup>58</sup> Thus 'Ezana replaced the pagan crescent moon with the Christian cross on his gold coinage, while apparently being more conservative when it came to the silver coinage used domestically. For details see Brakmann, "Axomis," 750–751, with further references.

traditional Aksumite rivals and in order to stem the growing influence of the Byzantine Empire in the region.

We only have indirect information about another event belonging in this context, from a source composed in Old Ethiopic and displaying profound familiarity with the situation in South Arabia, which implies that it derives from local South Arabian tradition.<sup>59</sup> According to this source, at the time of the Ḥimyarite king Shuraḥbi'il Yakkaf (mentioned in a building inscription in Ṣafār dated to 472<sup>60</sup>) a Christian priest called Azqir attempted to proselytize in Najrān, upon which he was seized by the local Ḥimyarite nobility and sent to the royal court for sentencing. In Ṣafār he is said to have engaged in debate with Jewish scholars as well as with the king, who subsequently had him sent back to Najrān to be executed.

The Ḥimyarite king's actions can hardly be regarded as exhibiting any particular sympathy towards Christians. It would be wrong, however, to speak of a full-scale persecution of Christians taking place at this time. Without a doubt, the conflicts twenty years later, in the 520s, were of a quite different order: Yūsuf systematically repressed the Christians and their Ethiopian supporters in Ṣafār, Najrān, Mārib, the Tihāma, the western lowlands, and in Ḥaḍramawt. Nevertheless, the conflict cannot be explained merely in terms of the rivalry between South Arabian Jews and Christians. One must also consider that the internal political situation at the beginning of the sixth century had changed fundamentally since the reign of Shuraḥbi'il Yakkaf.

### *Ma'dikarib's Pro-Byzantine Orientation*

Although the information provided by the sources is far from detailed, their message, when seen in the context of later developments, is relatively clear and points to a rapprochement between the Ḥimyar of Ṣafār on the one hand, and Aksum and their Byzantine protectors on the other, a development that must have taken place at the beginning of the sixth century. The policies of Ma'dikarib Ya'fur, Yūsuf's immediate predecessor on the Ḥimyarite throne,<sup>61</sup> in particular were

<sup>59</sup> Müller, "Ḥimyar," 311, and id., "Religion und Kult," 191–192. The Ethiopian text has been published by Conti Rossini ("Documento," 728–738). More literature is given by Fiacadori, "Homerites," 58 n. 69.

<sup>60</sup> C 537 + R 4719.

<sup>61</sup> Ca. 519–522; see Beaucamp et al., "Persécution," 75.

quite noticeably pro-Byzantine. Authentic evidence of this comes from a rock inscription found well over one thousand kilometers to the north of Ṣafār in central Arabia, which states that Ma'dikarib Ya'fur fought a campaign against rebellious Bedouin tribes.<sup>62</sup> In itself this information is not especially surprising, given that such campaigns had been part of Ḥimyarite policy since the beginning of the fifth century.<sup>63</sup> What is of particular interest for our context, however, is the fact that the Ḥimyarite king is said to have fought against the Lakhmid ruler, Mundhir III, a Persian ally, and to have been supported by Bedouin auxiliaries who were usually found siding with the Byzantine empire.

A short passage from the Syriac acts of the martyrs is relevant to this point. The second epistle of Simeon of Bēth Arsham, which describes the persecution and martyrdom of the Christians of Najrān a few years later, makes mention of a Christian woman from one of Najrān's foremost families called Ruhm; she is said to have lent Ma'dikarib Ya'fur, Yūsuf's predecessor, the sum of 12,000 dinars when he was in difficulties, and to have cancelled the debt when he was later unable to repay her.<sup>64</sup>

Such a clearly pro-Byzantine attitude on the part of the last Ḥimyarite king before Yūsuf cannot be coincidental.<sup>65</sup> The sources

<sup>62</sup> The inscription at hand is Ry 510 at Ma'sal al-Jumh, which is 240 km to the west of Riyadh; see Beaucamp et al., "Persécution," 75.

<sup>63</sup> Thus the rock inscription that Abūkarib As'ad had made one hundred years before at the same place (Ry 509) tells of the Ḥimyarites' first great campaign in central Arabia against the Ma'add, through which the Kinda monarchs of the house Ākil al-murār were set up as client kings; for details on this, see Robin, "Royaume ḥujride." Islamic tradition has it that in the course of his campaigns, Abūkarib As'ad also besieged Yathrib and was converted to Judaism by the rabbis of the local Jewish tribes; see Müller, "Ḥimyar," 308, and Newby, *History*, 38.

<sup>64</sup> Shahid, *Martyrs*, XXVII, 6–10. The Syriac text misspells the Ḥimyarite king's name as *m'dwkrm*. The episode can also be found in the *Book of the Ḥimyarites*; this is the report referred to by Müller, "Ḥimyar," 312. For the name Ruhm, see Müller, *Review*, 184.

<sup>65</sup> Indications of a rapprochement can be found as early as the time of Marthad'ilān Yanūf, who probably reigned between 500 and 518 (see Beaucamp et al., "Persécution," 73–75). If we are to follow Robin, "Royaume ḥujride," 696, in identifying the Arethas mentioned by Photios with the Kindite Ḥārith b. 'Amr b. Ḥujr, with whom the Byzantine Empire concluded a peace treaty in 502, then we may suppose this treaty to have been concluded, if not at the instigation, then at least with the express agreement of the Ḥimyar and their king, Marthad'ilān Yanūf, during whose reign we know there to have been an Ethiopian presence in Ṣafār. There exists a building inscription dating from 509 (Gar AY 9d) made by an Ethiopian delegation which erected a house in Ṣafār that names this king as their lord.

provide only indirect information as to the degree to which it may have been fostered by Byzantium and its Aksumite protégé and the means they may have used. It may be supposed that Byzantine interest in the Ḥimyar was at that time centered less upon the South Arabian ports than on the tribes of Central Arabia under their protection, whom the Byzantine Empire sought to win over so as to counter the central and northeast Arabian tribes fighting on the Persian side. However, whether Byzantine influence extended so far as to mean that the king before Yūsuf, Ma'dikarib Ya'fur, was installed on the throne by them at the time of the first Ethiopian invasion—which took place probably around the year 519—can not be determined on the basis of the sources currently available.<sup>66</sup>

We can, however, be fairly certain that it was around this time that the first Ethiopian intervention in South Arabia took place,<sup>67</sup> and that it was this intervention which was to lead Ma'dikarib Ya'fur to pursue a decidedly pro-Byzantine political course. We also know that this pro-Byzantine policy of the Ḥimyarite court in Ṣafār went much too far for a number of the powerful tribal federations in South Arabia, and indeed provoked a massive counter-reaction on their part. It is important to note that this counter-movement was supported not by factions at the Ḥimyarite court in Ṣafār nor by the tribes from the central Yemeni highlands but rather by the Yaz'anids, a tribe located far to the southeast of the Ḥimyarite heartland,<sup>68</sup> whose territorial sway extended from the central highlands in the west to the western fringes of the Ḥaḍramawt plateau and the coast, including the ancient port city of Qana'. The Yaz'anids were supported by the Banū Gadanīm of Mārib and the Ghaymān from the region east of Sanaa, in other

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<sup>66</sup> This is maintained by Beaucamp et al., "Persécution," 75–76. Details of the first invasion are still unknown. If indeed there was a rapprochement between the Ḥimyar and Ethiopia and the Byzantine Empire during the reign of Marthad'ilān Yanūf (see the previous footnote), the latter can hardly have been the object of an Ethiopian invasion.

<sup>67</sup> This has already been clearly shown by de Blois, "Date," 118, with references to the *Book of the Ḥimyarites* (Moberg, *Book of the Ḥimyarites*, 3b, 19), which reads *mētīthōn qadmāytā*, "their [i.e., Ḥaywānā's and the Ethiopians'] first coming."

<sup>68</sup> The three large inscriptions summarizing Yūsuf's military endeavors—Ry 507, Ry 508, and J 1028—show that Yūsuf was supported by the Yaz'an tribal federation and that Yaz'anid tribal leaders were heavily involved in his campaigns. The *Book of the Ḥimyarites*, too, identifies one of Yūsuf's commanders (*ḥad men rabbay ḥaylawwāteḥ*) as *dwyzn*, a clear reference to the clan name dhū Yaz'an; see Moberg, *Book of the Ḥimyarites*, 25b, 28, and the glossary thereof, LXXXVIII.



words, by formerly powerful Sabeian clans and tribal federations who had long ceased to play an important role under Ḥimyarite rule.<sup>69</sup>

*Yūsuf dhū Nuwās and the Anti-Christian Backlash*

The central figure in this conflict who was to lead the Yazʿanid counter-movement was King Yūsuf, known in Arabic tradition as Dhū Nuwās.<sup>70</sup> With regard to Yūsuf as a person, the literary sources tell us little of historical value. The Syriac and Greek acts of the martyrs understandably present him in a far from positive light.<sup>71</sup> Later Arabic writers portray Yūsuf much more favorably. Since it was he who organized local resistance against the Ethiopian occupiers, his personality assumes a markedly national component that makes him acceptable to Arabic tradition.<sup>72</sup> Genuine information about Yūsuf as an historical figure may be found in the three large rock inscriptions

<sup>69</sup> The Yazʿanides pursued a successful policy of alliances throughout the fifth century, establishing links with a number of formerly influential clans. The Yazʿanid inscriptions may still be found some hundred kilometers northeast of Sanaa in the upper part of the Jawf (MAFRAY Abū Thawr 4).

<sup>70</sup> The name is probably a clan name (see below), which popular Arab tradition later transmuted to a cognomen meaning “the one with the curls” (cf. Nashwān b. Saʿīd al-Ḥimyarī, *Shams al-ʿulūm*, vol. 10, 6797). According to Hishām b. Muḥammad al-Kalbī, the true (South Arabian) name was Zurʿa b. Ḥassān (see Caskel, *Ġamharat an-nasab*, vol. 2, 612). The name Zurʿa appears in a fragmentary Sabeian building inscription from Ḍaff (Ist 7608bis/12: *zrʿt / d-mrḥbm*) which must have been made very shortly after Ella Aṣbeḥa’s victory, since it names both the Ethiopian king and the client king he installed, Simyafaʿ Ashwaʿ (see below), together with introductory and concluding Christian formulae. This Zurʿa must, however, have been a completely different person.

<sup>71</sup> Both versions avoid the biblical name, Yōsēp. In the *Martyrium Sancti Arethae*, par. 1, Yūsuf is called by his clan name Δουναῶς (see below), while in both of Simeon of Bēth Arsham’s epistles he is addressed neutrally as *malkā* and *malkā ḍa-Ḥmīrāyē* (see, for example, Guidi, “Lettera di Simeone,” 7, 12 of the Syriac text) or pejoratively as *raššiʿā Yūdāyā* (Shahid, *Martyrs*, III, 5, among others). The *Book of the Himyarites* gives his name as Masrūq, although with the orthographic peculiarity that it is written upside down (see Moberg, *Book of the Himyarites*, pl. 5, XIXr, l. 4, XXr, –2), which may be indicative of a later emendation. Masrūq is also the form given in the introductory passage of the Syriac translation of a hymn by Johannes Psaltes in praise of the Ḥimyarite martyrs (Schröter, “Trostschriften,” 403, l. 3 of the Syriac text) and by the eleventh-century *Chronicle of Séert* (Scher, “Histoire Nestorienne,” 331, 4). The name is definitely not Syriac and was presumably translated into Arabic; for a possible interpretation, see Shahid, *Martyrs*, 263. Further names may be found in Müller, “Himyar,” 313.

<sup>72</sup> Thus already Nöldeke, *Geschichte*, 175 (continuation of n. 3).



mentioned above,<sup>73</sup> which one of his commanders had made during the blockade of Najrān.

Already Yūsuf's name and titles express a political agenda: "King Yūsuf As'ar Yath'ar, king of all the tribes."<sup>74</sup> His name is given without a patronymic, which is unusual, but includes two Sabean cognomens presumably meaning "he who takes vengeance" and "he who remains." Both terms evidently refer to earlier events, most probably the conflicts that took place between Yūsuf and his followers and the Ethiopians during their first invasion.<sup>75</sup> The name Yūsuf itself has similarly clear connotations; it was uncommon in ancient South Arabia<sup>76</sup> and must have been borrowed from the Hebrew;<sup>77</sup> it therefore amounted to a definite political signal in support of a Jewish type of monotheism.<sup>78</sup> The royal titles by which the inscriptions refer to Yūsuf

<sup>73</sup> See n. 68 above.

<sup>74</sup> Thus J 1028/1: *mlkn / ywsf / 's'r / yṯ'r / mlk / kl / 'š'bn*. See also Ry 507/1 which contains the spelling *yṯf*, and Ry 508/2 which shortens the title by omitting *yṯ'r / mlk / kl / 'š'bn*.

<sup>75</sup> This may be what is referred to in the second epistle of Simeon of Bēth Arsham (Shahid, *Martyrs*, XXI, 3–6) by the words ascribed to Māhiya, one of the maids of Arethas/Hārith b. Ka'b, shortly before her execution, according to which the Ethiopians vanquished the Himyar or their (rebellious) tribal allies while Yūsuf managed to avoid certain death through the help of a merchant from Ḥīra (see also *Martyrium Sancti Arethae*, par. 2).

<sup>76</sup> With respect to *yṯf* used as a name of buildings, Sima in Nebe/Sima, "Grabinschrift," 83, n. 52, argues for a Sabean derivation of the name from the root *wṯf*. The morphology alone is against this argument, since among the frequent occurrences of the imperfect *yṯfn-*, we find no examples in which the *w* survives in writing; this makes it likely that one must assume a two-radical basis for this root in 0<sub>1</sub>, which is difficult to reconcile with *ywsf* as a basis. As regards the prefix conjugation of I w in Sabean, which is formed just as in Arabic, see Stein, *Untersuchungen*, 189–190.

<sup>77</sup> The Hebrew Yōsēf was either taken over into Sabean as Yōsif, or it remained in its original Hebrew form (cf. de Blois, "Date," 123, n. 2). The versions of the name used here follow the traditional Arabic reading.

<sup>78</sup> The general consensus to date is that Yūsuf came from the clan of the Yaz'an (see, for instance, Müller, "Himyar," 313, and Fiacadori, "Homerites," 61–62 n. 85), yet no clear epigraphic evidence for this exists, nor does Arab, and in particular Yeminite tradition ascribe such a provenance to him. I am indebted to Dr Muḥammad 'Alī as-Salāmī (Sanaa) for first drawing my attention to the possibility that the cognomen dhū Nuwās could possibly derive from the Sabean clan name *d-n'sm*. This clan, mentioned in the mid-Sabean period as having been associated with the Ghaymān (see, for instance, J 626/2, NNAG 17/5', C 68/1), with whom it seems to have concluded an alliance, came from the region of today's Ghaymān, about fifteen kilometers east of Sanaa. This interpretation would shed light on the (accusative!) form Δουνααν found in the *Martyrium Sancti Arethae* (e.g., in par. 1) which would thus not be a misreading of the Syriac *dwyzn* (as suggested by Müller, "Himyar," 313) but rather a clan name like Na's.

also depart from traditional nomenclature. In place of the lengthy title used by the Ḥimyarite kings since the days of Abūkarib Asʿad, “king of Saba’ and dhū Raydān, of Ḥaḍramawt and Yamnat, and of the Arabs of the highlands and lowlands,” Yūsuf’s title is given simply as “king of all the tribes.”<sup>79</sup> On account of this it has been suggested, probably not without some justification, that his accession to the throne was not legitimate. Whether Arab tradition is correct in maintaining that he used violence to remove his predecessor, Maʿdīkarib,<sup>80</sup> is a question that cannot be answered with certainty given the available source material.<sup>81</sup>

Yūsuf’s first campaigns were directed against the Ethiopians in Zafār, where he burned down the church and killed the priests and presumably the military guarding them as well. He then turned his attention to the western coastal lowlands of the Tihāma, engaging the Ethiopian units stationed there and the Christian tribes allied with them. He burned down the church of the coastal town of al-Mukhā’ (Sab. *mḥwn*), and continued to move along the coast as far as Maddabān (*mdbn*), the fortress which was to give the straits the name by which they are known today, the Bāb al-Mandab. There, he blocked the entrance to the harbor with chains so as to thwart the Ethiopians’ imminent landing. While he himself stayed in Maddabān to await the invasion fleet under Kaleb Ella Aṣbeḥa, he dispatched one of his generals, Sharaḥ’il Yaqbul, to Najrān, where he was to blockade the caravan route to the northeast of the town leading to Qaryat al-Faw and to eastern Arabia, so as to put economic pressure on the city. These hostilities took place between the years 522 and 523 and lasted some thirteen months. All this information is given by the three dated inscriptions which Sharaḥ’il Yaqbul placed at a prominent spot on the caravan route to eastern Arabia, some 90 to 130 km northeast of Najrān.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>79</sup> From the end of line 1 of Ist 7608bis we can deduce that Simyafa’ Ashwa’, the client king installed by Ella Aṣbeḥa, revived the use of the traditional titles.

<sup>80</sup> See the extract from aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh ar-rusul*, vol. 1, 918–920. (in Nöldeke, *Geschichte*, 174–176).

<sup>81</sup> Beaucamp et al., “Persécution,” 76.

<sup>82</sup> Their contents are summarized in Beaucamp et al., “Persécution,” 34–36.

*The Events in Najrān*

These are the last Ḥimyarite epigraphic sources we have for several years, so that we are forced to rely on Christian sources for information concerning the events subsequently taking place in and around Najrān. Besides the Greek version of the *Martyrium Sancti Arethae* and the surviving fragments of the Syriac *Book of the Himyarites*,<sup>83</sup> the most important of these are the two Syriac letters of Simeon of Bēth Arsham, a Monophysite bishop from Mesopotamia.<sup>84</sup> Both these letters are of the utmost significance, not least because the accounts they contain were evidently written close to the time the events in Najrān took place.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, both letters are dated, allowing us to determine absolute dates for the time-span involved and thus to establish a chronology of the events in Najrān as well as those preceding them.<sup>86</sup> The persecution and killing of the Christians in Najrān

<sup>83</sup> This title was first introduced by Moberg, although a title along the lines of “The Book of the Ḥimyarite Martyrs” would be more in keeping with the work’s contents.

<sup>84</sup> Died in Constantinople in 548 (see Bruns, “Simeon,” 641–642).

<sup>85</sup> At the time of the writing of his first letter, Simeon was a member of a Byzantine delegation staying at the camp of the Lakhmid ruler Mundhir at Ramla near Hira when a messenger arrived with a letter from Yūsuf describing the persecution of Christians in Najrān and more or less advising Mundhir to deal with the Christians under his rule in a similar fashion. The second letter, which is also ascribed to Simeon, was composed in the Ghassanid residence at Gbītā on the Yarmuk. It was written just a few months later (for the date, see the following note) and contains new information from Najrān as well as that known from the first letter. As Ryckmans’ thorough analysis has shown, Simeon’s first epistle has to be regarded as the most important document, from which are derived not only major episodes contained in his second letter but also the first part of the Greek *Martyrium Sancti Arethae* (Ryckmans, “Confrontation”).

<sup>86</sup> The beginning of the first epistle (Guidi, “Lettera di Simeone,” 1–2 of the Syriac text) states that Simeon and his companions left Hira on January 20 of the Seleucid year 835, which corresponds to January/February 524, and that they reached Mundhir’s camp at Ramla some ten days later. There Simeon was present when Yūsuf’s letter describing his actions against the Christians in Najrān was read out. This information agrees with the date the Greek Acts of the Martyrs give for Arethas’ execution in Najrān several months earlier, in October 523; it also corresponds to the information in Simeon’s second letter (Shahid, *Martyrs*, XVIII, 10f.), according to which a number of women were martyred in Najrān in November 523. For the details of the argument, see de Blois, “Date,” 111–114. The date given in the text of the second letter, the Seleucid year 830 (Shahid, *Martyrs*, XXXI, 24), differs from this information and has supported the debate as to whether the persecution of the Christian women in Najrān should be dated to 523 or 518 and thus also whether the Ḥimyarite period should be seen as having begun in 110 BCE or in 115 BCE. As de Blois, “Date,” 114, has convincingly shown, the date in the text of the letter can be put down to a simple

took place in the autumn of 523, and, as we know from the dates given in the rock inscriptions, the blockade of the caravan routes to the northeast began a few months earlier, in June and July.<sup>87</sup>

As far as events taking place in Najrān are concerned, we learn from the second letter that the king himself eventually arrived after a protracted siege and offered to guarantee that the Christians would not be harmed if they surrendered the city to him; a particularly significant detail in this description is that the king made his oath in the presence of rabbis from Tiberias, swearing on the Torah, the Tables of the Law and the Ark of the Covenant. The citizens of Najrān surrendered to him, but Yūsuf failed to keep his oath. After overpowering some three hundred leading Christians, he ordered the bones of the bishops who were buried in Najrān to be exhumed and collected in the church, where he had them burned together with the laity and clerics.<sup>88</sup> The letter goes on to describe a number of individual and collective martyrdoms of prominent believers from all classes and of all ages, among whom we find a noticeably high proportion of women. Although, given the literary genre, one has to critically examine the report's historical accuracy, it does show an astonishing degree of familiarity with the situation, topography, and onomastics of South Arabia,<sup>89</sup> so that its authenticity cannot be ruled out in advance.

The description of the aged Arethas, or Ḥārith ibn Ka'b in Arabic, being led before Yūsuf and boasting of having always stood his ground like a man and of having killed one of Yūsuf's relatives in single combat is hardly that of a pious Christian eagerly awaiting martyrdom and asking God to forgive his persecutors. The same Ḥārith then continues in this vein, saying that he would have preferred to face the Ḥimyar king together with his followers and with a sword in his hand, but that his fellow Christians had barred the gates and not let him out; the picture reveals an attitude more in keeping with an ancient Arabian tribal sheikh whose ideal of honor in such situations was to die in battle.

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oversight on the part of the scribe who must have failed to notice the last digit in the number of the year and wrote *tlātmā wa-tlātīn* instead of *tlātmā wa-tlātīn w-ḥammeš* (Shahid, *Martyrs*, *ibid.*).

<sup>87</sup> Ry 508 from Kawkab is dated to the month of dhū Qiyāzān (June) 633 of the Ḥimyarite period; Ry 507 and Ja 1028 from Bi'r Ḥimā are dated to the month of dhū Madhra'ān (July) 633 of the Ḥimyarite period.

<sup>88</sup> Shahid, *Martyrs*, V, 6ff./45–47.

<sup>89</sup> Müller, *Review*, 182–185, gives a number of examples.

Hārith's words, which we have summarized from the account given in the second Syriac letter of Simeon,<sup>90</sup> allow us attempt a few cautious conclusions concerning the internal politics of Najrān and the situation of the Christians there. It would appear that Najrān was not entirely or even pre-dominantly Christian, but rather was home to merely a substantial Christian community. This is indicated by the number of martyrs, which Simeon gives as two thousand;<sup>91</sup> even if Simeon's figures are exaggerated, they amount only to part of the probable population of the city and the oasis at the time. An additional consideration is the fact that blockading the caravan routes to eastern Arabia, at a distance of some ninety kilometers or more, would have made no sense if the intention had really been to deal a death-blow to the oasis. A more likely explanation is that what was intended was a drastic demonstration to the leading citizens, both Christian and non-Christian, that they could be hit hard in economic terms at any time, simply by cutting the trade routes. The rationale behind the embargo might thus have been an attempt to stir up Najrān's non-Christian inhabitants against the Christians.

If, in conclusion, we turn to the hold Christianity had established in Najrān, we find that it had a far shorter history than might be expected from the special place Najrān had always enjoyed amongst South Arabian oasis towns. There had been, so Simeon's letter tells us, just two bishops in Najrān. Mār Pawlos, the first bishop, had lost his life in an earlier wave of persecution in Ṣafār and was buried in Najrān; the second bishop, of the same name, was already dead when Najrān surrendered.<sup>92</sup> One revealing marginal detail is that both bishops had been consecrated by Philoxenos of Mabbūg, a leading figure of the Syrian Orthodox Church,<sup>93</sup> which makes it likely that Christianity in Najrān was of a markedly anti-Chalcedonian bent.<sup>94</sup>

The persecution and martyrdom of the Christians of South Arabia aroused strong feelings throughout Eastern Christianity—and not just there. We find an echo of the events of the time in the Qur'an, where Q 85:4 mentions the *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*, i.e., the "companions of the

<sup>90</sup> Shahid, *Martyrs*, XII, 11ff./50–51.

<sup>91</sup> Shahid, *Martyrs*, VII, 11/47; XXXII, 15/64; other figures are given in Müller, "Himyar," 314, and Fiaccadori, "Homerites," 78.

<sup>92</sup> Shahid, *Martyrs*, VI, 17ff./46.

<sup>93</sup> Bruns, "Philoxenus," 577–578.

<sup>94</sup> For further information about Christianity in Najrān, see Müller, "Himyar," 310–312.

pit.” Commentators of the Qur’an have frequently seen this as being a reference to the Christian martyrs of Najrān burned alive by Dhū Nuwās.<sup>95</sup>

### *The Second Aksumite Invasion*

Not the least significant effect of the persecution of the South Arabian Christians was that it provided the Aksumite king, Kaleb Ella Aṣbeḥa, with the justification he needed to mount a large-scale offensive, supported logistically by the Byzantine Empire. This attack began in the year 525 and ended (as all the sources agree) with the overthrow and death of Yūsuf and the subsequent occupation of much of Yemen by Ethiopian troops. According to the “Life of Gregentius”,<sup>96</sup> who was sent as bishop to Zafār immediately after the Ethiopian conquest, the Ethiopian king set about reorganizing both the political and the ecclesiastical state of affairs, beginning with the restoration of the damaged churches and the foundation of others; three new churches each were established in Najrān and Zafār alone.<sup>97</sup> The South Arabian sources can also be supplemented with information given by Procopios. In accordance with the custom of Aksumite rulers, Ella Aṣbeḥa instated a local client king, called Esimiphaïos (Εσιμιφαίος).<sup>98</sup> We hear of him by the name of Simyafa’ Ashwa’ in the fragmentary building inscription mentioned above, which also contains both the Christian formula of the Trinity and the name of king Ella Aṣbeḥa.<sup>99</sup> The inscription erected at Mārib, composed in vocalized Ancient Ethiopic and of which only three fragments are preserved, probably originates from Ella Aṣbeḥa himself;<sup>100</sup> from it we learn that he had burned down Mārib’s old royal palace, known as Salḥīn.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Paret, “Aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd,” and, for instance, aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh ar-rusul*, vol. 1, 920,1.

<sup>96</sup> Pollmann, “Gregentius,” 289, and Fiaccadori, “Gregentius,” 889–891; See the new edition and translation given by Berger, *Saint Gregentios*, 187–410.

<sup>97</sup> Shahid, “Byzantium,” 38 and 43, Fiaccadori, “Homerites,” 51, and Berger, *Saint Gregentios*, 394–395 = Bios 9.146–155.

<sup>98</sup> Procopios, *Wars* 1.20.

<sup>99</sup> Ist 7608bis (see n. 79 above).

<sup>100</sup> Müller, “Bruchstücke.” As emphasized in Müller, “Himyar,” 316, these fragments are of particular significance for literary history, since they contain a number of quotations from the psalms which confirm the great antiquity of the Ethiopic translation of the Bible.

<sup>101</sup> DJE 1 + 2/18.

Towards the end of this turbulent decade, we find a text which was not composed by the victorious Christian side but by the losing side in this conflict. It is an epigraph that has been known since the beginnings of Sabean studies, located on the rock of Ḥuṣn al-Ghurāb, the “castle of the ravens,” many hundreds of kilometers away from Zafār on the shores of the Indian Ocean.<sup>102</sup> The castle rock dominates the ancient port city of Qanaʾ, which once played a pivotal role in trading with India and in the incense trade of South Arabia.<sup>103</sup> The inscription itself dates from 530, i.e., five years after the great Ethiopian invasion. It describes the restoration of the castle, detailing the reconstruction of the wall, gate, cisterns, and approach route. What is most revealing, however, is the context within which this work is said to have taken place. The improvements are said to have been performed after the persons who had commissioned the inscription—as I understand the text—had returned from Tihāma [= the territory of Ḥabashat, i.e., of the Abyssinians]<sup>104</sup> and the Ethiopians had occupied the country, at

<sup>102</sup> C 621: (1) *smṣf* / 'šw' / w-bnyhw / šrhb'l / ykml / w-m'dkrb / y'fr / bny / lhy't (2) *yrhm* / 'lht / kl'n / w-d-yz'n / w-gdnm ... (6) ... *štrw* / dn / mśndn / b-' (7) *rn* / mwyt / k-ṭwbhw / gn'thw / w-ḥlfhw / w-m'glthw / w-mnqlthw (8) *k-stšn'w* / bhw / k-gb'w / bn / 'rd / ḥbšt / w-syw / 'ḥbšn / zrf (9) *tn* / b-'rd / ḥmyrm / k-hrgw / mlk / ḥmyrm / w-'qwlhw / 'ḥmrn / w-'rhbn (10) *wrhhw* / d-ḥltn / d-l-'rb'y / w-st / m'tm / ḥrftm. “(1) Simyafa' Ashwa' and his sons Shuraḥbi'il Yakmul and Ma'dikarib Ya'fur, [all of them] sons of Luḥayy'att (2) Yurkhim, of [the clans] Kal'an, Yaz'an, Gadanum [here follow the names of thirty more clans and tribes] (6) have made this inscription (7) at the mountain castle of Māwiyat, when they restored it, [in particular,] its wall, its gate, its cisterns, and its approach route, (8) when they barricaded themselves there after having returned from the territory of [or, of the] Ḥabashat, and had met multitudes of Abyssinians (9) in the land of the Ḥimyar, after they [i.e., the Abyssinians] had killed the king of the Ḥimyar and his tribal leaders from Ḥimyar and Raḥbatān [the region north of Sanaa]. (10) Its [i.e., the inscription's] date of writing is [the month of] dhū Ḥillatān of the year 640.”

<sup>103</sup> For information on the archeology of Qanaʾ, see Sedov, “Qana.”

<sup>104</sup> Admittedly, any historical understanding of this inscription will depend significantly on how the expression 'rd / ḥbšt is understood. The generally accepted opinion today is that 'rd / ḥbšt refers to Ethiopia (see, most recently, Beaucamp et al., “Persécution,” 37, and Müller, “Habašāt,” 949). Beeston (“Ḥabashat,” 6) and, before him, v. Wissmann (*Geschichte und Landeskunde*, 66–67) have suggested that 'rd / ḥbšt (the “territory of / of the Ḥabashat”) does not necessarily refer to the Ethiopian heartland on the opposite side of the Bāb al-Mandab but might equally well refer to the western coast of South Arabia (or at least parts thereof), which the Ethiopians had occupied (the evidence adduced by v. Wissmann does not, however, corroborate his thesis). Müller (“Abessinier,” 159) mentions the problem but does not pursue it any further. E 19/7 clearly shows that ḥbšt does not mean the Ethiopian heartland in geographical terms, but has to be understood as a political ethnic entity, referring to the Abyssinian troops in the Tihāma. This inscription contains an account of a campaign fought under 'lsharaḥ Yaḥḍib around the middle of the third century “against



the time when they had killed the king of the Ḥimyar and his tribal leaders.

Questions as to why this inscription was to be found where it was and, above all, why it was made when it was made have been the subject of much speculation. Even though it is generally agreed today that Simyafa' Ashwa', mentioned as one of the founders of the inscription, is not identical with the client king of the same name instated by the Ethiopians, the text still raises a number of issues, not least because it neither ascribes any function to the persons it names nor does it contain any form of monotheistic formula, whether Christian or Jewish. A solution may, I believe, be reached if one examines more closely the clans named as having been involved in restoring the castle. In addition to the local Yaz'an, they include the Gadanum of Mārib, various tribes from the southern highlands around Zafār and from the Tihāma, as well as numerous families from various parts of Ḥaḍramawt. In short, the majority of the thirty-three names of tribes and clans contained in the inscription gives the impression of a who's who of the tribes and clans which had rallied round Yūsuf in his bid to overthrow the Ethiopians and their local Christian allies. This observation sheds some light on the historical context within which the text ought to be placed. After the Ethiopian king's victory, Yūsuf's vanquished supporters withdrew at least from the western part of the country and sought refuge in the Yaz'anid core territory, the hinterlands around Qana'.<sup>105</sup> The work on the fortifications was undertaken because the Yaz'anids and their remaining supporters must have expected that the Ethiopians would at some point mount an attack from the sea, making a fully functional defensive stronghold protecting the harbor a necessity. As we know from the sources, the attack

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the Ḥabashat, the 'Akkum and the inhabitants of Sāhiratum" (*b'ly / ḥbšt / w-'km / w-ḡ-shrtm*).

<sup>105</sup> The obvious assumption is that the founders and his sons were followers of Yūsuf who were waiting with him at the Bāb al-Mandab for the arrival of the Ethiopians and who may also have fortified other places in the Tihāma. In prosopographic terms, the Simyafa' Ashwa' mentioned in C 621 could therefore have been the person of the same name (and the same patronymic) who, as his brother Sharaḥ'il Yaqbul reports in the three rock inscriptions around Najrān (Ry 508/9, 1028/2 [instead of *šrh'l / 'šw'*, according to A. Jamme, *šrh'l / yqbl* is to be read, see Nebes "Herrscherinschriften," 357 n. 176], Ry 507/10), was among those who accompanied the king to the fortress of Maddabān in the Tihāma. The circumstance that these events had happened seven years previously need not rule this out; the great rock inscription at 'Abadān, for example—which was made some 170 years earlier by Yaz'anid tribal leaders as well—records the acts of three generations.



never took place. On the contrary, thirteen years later, the Yaz'an and several other influential clans from Mārib were to return to the political stage, when they joined the Kinda, led by Yazīd b. Kabshat, in their rebellion against the Ethiopian occupiers.<sup>106</sup> These events, however, postdate the age of the Ḥimyar and belong to the days of Abraha, under whom Yemen was to witness fifty years of Christian domination.

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<sup>106</sup> C 541/14–17. See also the translation in Müller, "Stele," 268, and Nebes "Herrscherinschriften," 362–367. It is obvious, that Ma'dikarib bin Simyafa', who, according to C 541/17, supports the Kinda-revolt of Yazīd bin Kabshat against Abraha, is the same person as in C 621/1.

*Appendix 1. Timeline of the Late Sabean Period*

About 280	Shammar Yuhar'ish residing at his capital Ṣafār unites Yemen under his rule.
About 340	Constantius II sends Theophilus the Indian to the Ḥimyarite court.
About 345	The Ethiopian king 'Ezana converts to Christianity.
383	The Ḥimyarite king Malkikarib Yuha'min and his sons embrace monotheism.
472	According to a Ge'ez tradition, Azqir suffers martyrdom in the town of Najrān during the reign of Shuraḥbi'il Yakkaf.
519	First intervention of the Ethiopians in South Arabia, arrival of Cosmas in Adulis.
521	Ma'dikarib Ya'fur campaigns against Arab auxiliaries of the Persians in central Arabia.
522	Yūsuf As'ar Yath'ar (dhū Nuwās) acts against the Christians and their Ethiopian allies in Ṣafār. He conducts a campaign to the Tihāma and blocks the harbor of Maddabān on the west coast by means of a chain.
523	Siege and surrender of Najrān, martyrdom of Arethas.
525	The Ethiopian king Kaleb Ella Aṣbeḥa conquers large parts of Yemen.
After 525	Kaleb Ella Aṣbeḥa enthrones Simyafa' Ashwa' as king of South Arabia.
530	Inscription of Ḥuṣn al-Ghurāb.
535–575	Rule of Abraha and his sons.
575	South Arabia becomes a Persian province.
632	Islamic conquest of Yemen.



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## ARABIA IN LATE ANTIQUITY: AN OUTLINE OF THE CULTURAL SITUATION IN THE PENINSULA AT THE TIME OF MUHAMMAD\*

Barbara Finster

The new pocket edition of K. A. C. Creswell's "A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture" revised by J. Allan in 1989, states in the

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\* *Note by the editors:* This article is a translation, undertaken by Laurent Faasch-Ibrahim, of Barbara Finster, "Arabien in der Spätantike. Ein Überblick über die kulturelle Situation der Halbinsel in der Zeit von Muhammad," *Archäologischer Anzeiger* (1996): 287–319. Although it was not possible to revise the article in order to update it to the current state of scholarship, it is included in this book because it provides a unique synthesis of research up until 1996 and therefore still remains a valuable guide to students and scholars looking for an authoritative survey of the field. In addition to the literature referred to in what follows, the following publications should now be consulted: G. R. D. King et al., "A report on the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey (1993–1994)," in *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 25 (1995), 63–74; J. Elders, "The lost churches of the Arabian Gulf: recent discoveries on the islands of Sir Bani Yas and Marawah, Abu Dhabi Emirate, United Arab Emirates," in *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 31 (2001), 47–57; S. A. al-Rashid, "The development of archaeology in Saudi-Arabia," in *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 35 (2005), 207–214; G. Brands, "Maria im Yemen? Anmerkungen zu einer spätantiken Statuette in San'a'," in *Beiträge zur Vorderasiatischen Archäologie*, edited by J.-W. Meyer et al., Frankfurt 2001, 26ff.; Brands, G., "Ein spätantikes Bronzegewicht im Yemen," *Archäologischer Anzeiger* 1998, 483 ff.—All figures were originally published in the German version of the article. All possible efforts have been made to contact the copyright holders and secure their permission to reproduce the illustrations. Please advise us of any errors or omissions so that they can be corrected. The figures have originally been published in: W. C. Brice (ed.), *An Historical Atlas of Islam*, fig. 14 and 15 (fig. 1 and 2 below); J.-F. Dalles (ed.), *L'Arabie et ses Mers Bordières*, vol. 1, 138 (fig. 3 below); J. S. Trimmingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*, 269 and 121 (fig. 4 and 5); D. T. Potts (ed.), *Dilmun: New Studies in the Archaeology and Early History of Bahrain*, fig. 1 (fig. 6a); D. T. Potts, *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 5.1 (1994), fig. 1 (fig. 6b); *Atlāl* 7 (1983), fig. 17 (fig. 7 and 8); *Archäologische Berichte aus dem Jemen* 1 (1986), fig. 66 (fig. 14); J. A. Langfeldt, *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 3 (1992), fig. 2, 4, 8, 9, and 5 (fig. 15–18); V. Bernard and J. F. Salles, *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 21 (1991), fig. 1 and 2 (fig. 20 and 21); R. Ghirshman, *The Island of Kharg*, fig. 12 (fig. 22); *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 8 (1976), fig. 6 and 10 (fig. 23 and 24); D. T. Potts, *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 5.1 (1994), fig. 3 and 6 (fig. 25); D. T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, vol. 2, fig. 1 and 24 (fig. 31 and 33); A. Grohmann, *Arabien*, fig. 14 (fig. 32). Photographs were taken by J. Schmidt (fig. 9–12 and 28), D. Rietz (fig. 13), B. Grunewald (fig. 19), J. Cramer (fig. 30), and the author (fig. 29). Fig. 26 and 27 are courtesy of the Mathaf al-Waṭānī.

introduction, as did the complete edition of 1932–1940 and the pocket edition of 1969, “Arabia, at the rise of Islam, does not appear to have possessed anything worthy of the name of architecture.”<sup>1</sup> Although Allan does point out in a footnote that this statement was amended in a review of the pocket edition published in the *Journal Kunst des Orients* 9 (1973/74), it is only in G. King’s paper, “Creswell’s Appreciation of Arabian Architecture” in the journal *Muqarnas* 8, 1991, that we find a more thorough discussion of this chapter. Primarily, he refutes Creswell’s theory that only mud huts existed in Arabia and lists the various building materials and techniques.<sup>2</sup> The influence of Creswell’s teaching is, however, so far-reaching and still shapes opinions to such a degree that it will be some time before the significance of the Arabian Peninsula as a cultural zone in pre-Islamic and Islamic times will be appreciated. We find this theory repeated in other areas of research, too, that it was only with the coming of Islam and “new” contacts to neighboring advanced civilizations that culture began to take hold in the Arabian Peninsula. According to this understanding, the Prophet Muhammad is seen as the bringer of culture, whose advent brought with it civilization and the new calendar. And that is how Arabic historiography would have us regard him.

In his work “Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity,” P. Brown describes Muhammad as a typical example of the “holy man” in Late Antique society who presents himself as intermediary, as organizer and bearer of the divine,<sup>3</sup> replacing the institution of the temple and thus introducing a new era in the history of religion. In this way Brown links the figure of Muhammad with the general history of Late Antiquity, thereby addressing the central task of leading the world of Muhammad out of its isolation.<sup>4</sup> This applies to all aspects of its culture and society, language, literature, architecture, and fine and applied arts, to name but a few examples. The aim of this paper is to present a brief outline of the Arabian Peninsula as a cultural zone in the sixth and seventh century CE.

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<sup>1</sup> Creswell, *Short Account*, 11.

<sup>2</sup> King, “Creswell’s Appreciation,” 94ff. Cf. Finster, “Neuauflage.”

<sup>3</sup> Brown, *Society and the Holy*, 103–104, 148ff.

<sup>4</sup> New approaches may be found in Noth, “Früher Islam”; Shahid, “Pre-Islamic Arabia”; id., *Fourth Century*; id., *Fifth Century*. Cf. also the works of Uri Rubin, M. J. Kister, and Y. D. Nevo.

About fifteen years of research have led to a genuine revolution, primarily in the fields of prehistory and classical history. In particular, mention should be made of the excavations in the Gulf States, Bahrain, and Oman, which are described by D. T. Potts in his two books summarizing the history of the "Arabian Gulf in Antiquity."<sup>5</sup> Excavations and surveys in Yemen over the past fifteen years have revealed the country's early history for the first time and allow us to guess something of the splendor of the temples in Marib, Shabwa, etc. Supplementing these, there are the monumental "comprehensive surveys" of Saudi Arabia, partially published in the periodical *Aṭlāl*, and the journal *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*. Taken as a whole, however, we are but at the beginnings of archeological research.

We know that prehistory can be traced back in some cases to about 30,000 BCE, we are aware of the Ubaid culture on the eastern coast and can see that highly advanced civilizations existed in Yemen around 700 BCE, the last of which must have had a far longer history possibly extending back as far as the third millennium BCE.<sup>6</sup> During the Hellenistic period, centers of municipal life arose in Thāj on the eastern coast of the peninsula, in Gerrha in the northwest, in Dēdān (al-'Ulā), in al-Ḥijr (Madā'in Ṣāliḥ) as well as in many other port cities. The third century BCE map of Ptolemy (cf. fig. 2) shows that the Arabian Peninsula was filled with towns and cities, each connected to one another by trade routes.<sup>7</sup> That both the north and south were

<sup>5</sup> Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, with a comprehensive bibliography.

<sup>6</sup> Still more ancient dates (such as 150,000 BCE) have been given, above all for the fringes of the Nafūd desert at Yabrīn, Najd, Ḥā'il und Wādī s-Sirḥān, see 'Abdallāh H. Maṣri, in *Aṭlāl* 1 (1977): 10–11; McClure, *Arabian Peninsula*; id., "Radiocarbon chronology," 755–756; id., in Potts (ed.), *Araby the Blest*, 9ff.; most recently (although caution is advised) Nayeem, *Prehistory*; N. M. Whalen, W. P. Davis, and D. W. Pease, "Early migrations," 59ff.; Parr in Potts (ed.), *Araby the Blest*, 73ff.; Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, 11ff., 93ff., 151ff.; Toplyn et al., *Wadi al-Jubah*; de Maigret, *Sabean Archaeological Complex*; id., "Bronze Age Culture"; Wagner, "Bodenkundliche Untersuchungen." — Note by the editors: In order not to overburden the bibliography, a number of articles have not been included in the bibliography and are referred to only in concise fashion, i.e., by adducing the journal title and issue.

<sup>7</sup> Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 197ff., 85ff., fig. 14; id., "Thaj," 86ff.; N. St. J. Groom, "Gerrha," 97ff.; Potts, "History and Archaeology"; Parr in al-Ansary, *Studies*, vol. 1, 142ff.; P. J. Parr and Muhammad Gazdar in *Aṭlāl* 4 (1980): 110: "a preliminary comparison of the Zubayda pottery with that from other areas investigated ... indicate many points of contacts"; Brice in Al-Ansary, *Studies*, vol. 2, 177–178; Schmitt-Korte, *ibid.*; Naboodah, "Commercial Activity."

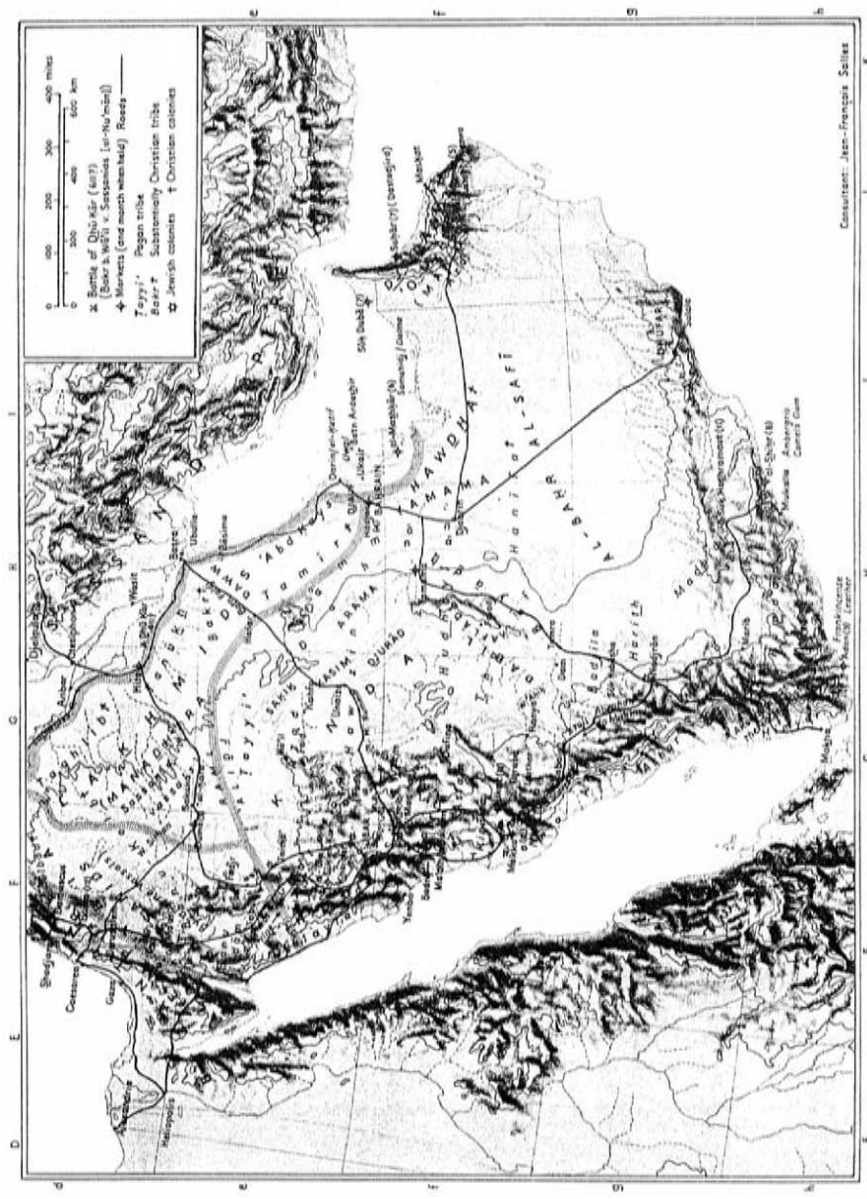


Fig. 1. Arabia in the sixth century CE.

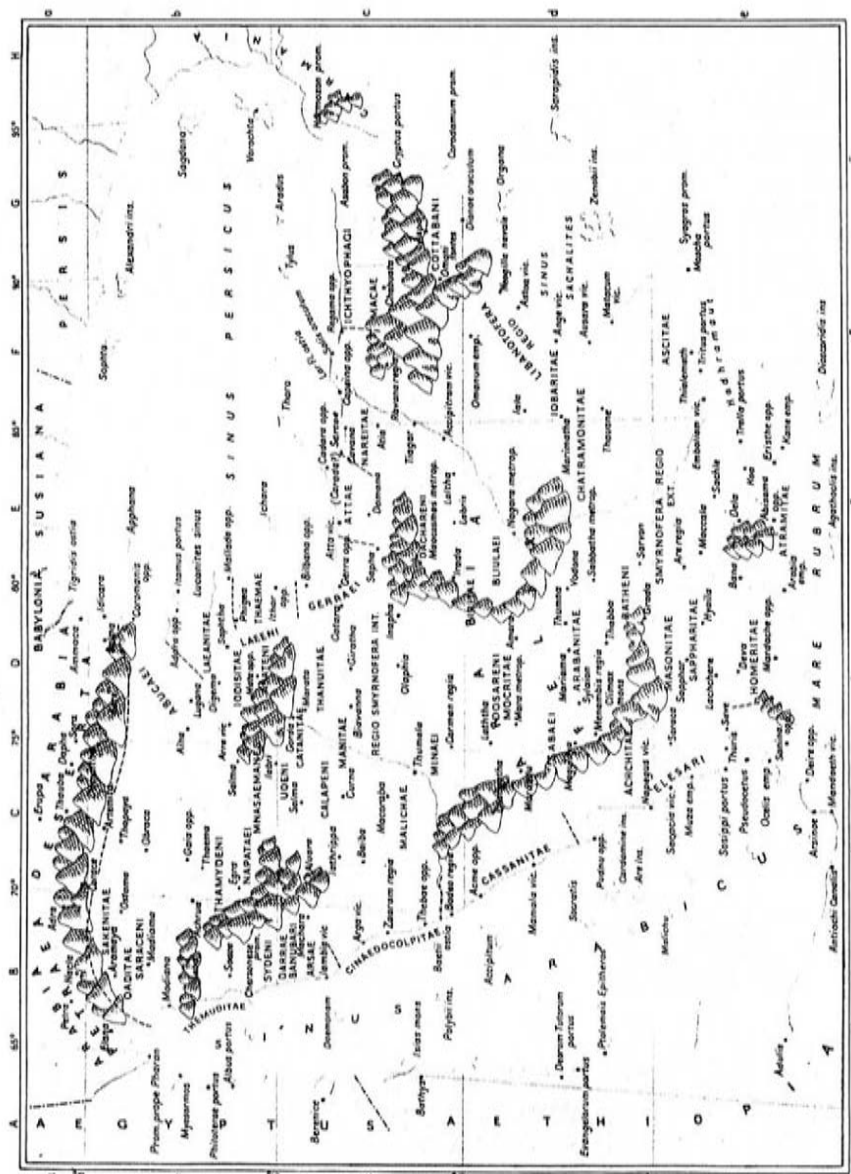


Fig. 2. Arabia according to Ptolemy.



rich in precious metals is too well known to require mention,<sup>8</sup> any more than the export of incense or the trade in goods imported from India which took place there.<sup>9</sup> If only as a result of this trade, the peninsula always maintained connections with the known world and was well supplied with luxury goods (fig. 3).<sup>10</sup> If we follow the literature, we can see civilization flourishing in various places throughout the peninsula and usually attested up to about the third to fourth century CE. At this point a gap appears, and with it the question of whether the cause is to be sought in a break in civilization or a void in research.

In the introduction to the first volume of the periodical *al-Aṭlāl* (1397/1977), the editor, ʿAbdallāh al-Maṣri, explains the cultural impoverishment of the Arabian Peninsula as having been caused by conflicts between the two great powers of Byzantium and the Sasanian Empire—or, more generally, by climate change.<sup>11</sup> Unquestionably, a transformation can also be seen in the Mediterranean and Syria, yet there it was precisely the urban centers that gained importance.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> J. Haster et al., "Ancient mining survey," 115ff.; de Jesus et al., "Preliminary Report"; Sprenger, *Alte Geographie*; Conrad et al., *Antikes Kupfer*; Weisgerber, "Oman"; Hauptmann, *5000 Jahre*; Robin, "Bergwerk," 129ff.

<sup>9</sup> Goods from India were traded mainly in Gerrha (see Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 85ff.) and in Dabā, where there was also a trade in Chinese goods (Potts, *ibid.*, 339; cf. Potts et al., "Comprehensive Archeological Survey"). Müller identifies Gerrha with Hagarā, see v. Wissmann, *Geschichte von Saba*, vol. 2, 29; see Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 89; Whitehouse and Williamson, "Sasanian Maritime Trade," 30; M. Speece in al-Ansary, *Studies*, vol. 2, 167, with an extensive bibliography; Brice, *ibid.*, 177ff., map 180, 181; Casson in Fahd, *L'Arabie Préislamique*, 187ff.; Sidebotham, *ibid.*, 195ff.; Müller, "Weihrauch."

<sup>10</sup> Naboodah, "Commercial Activity," 86ff. Qaryat al-Faw provides a good example of luxury and wealth as found in everyday life, see the very limited publication of the excavations in Ansary (ed.), *Qaryat al-Faw*. The various artifacts from the Nabatean and Parthian regions (ceramics, glass, jewelry, paintings and sculpture) are neither classified nor dated, see K. Parlasca in Fahd, *L'Arabie Préislamique*, 286; see also J.-F. Breton, *Fouilles*; as regards the excavations at Dūr see Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 288: "The wide range of imported goods attests to the maintenance of commercial ties with other regions of the ancient world, such as the Indian subcontinent, Parthian Iran, southern Arabia, and the Roman West." Nabatean ceramics were exported to al-Hijr, Ḥā'il, Dūma, Qaryat al-Faw (see K. H. Schmitt-Korte in Al-Ansary, *Studies*, vol. 2, 11) and Marib. There is a Byzantine weight in the Ṣan'ā' museum with a depiction of the cross (I am indebted to G. Brands for the identification).

<sup>11</sup> Maṣri, *Aṭlāl* 1 (1977): 16; see Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 228, for a discussion of the theories concerning the decline of Gerrha and the eastern coast after the Parthian occupation. Graf sees the cause of decline as lying in late Roman colonial policy, see Fahd (ed.), *L'Arabie Préislamique*, 341ff.

<sup>12</sup> Claude, *Byzantinische Stadt*.

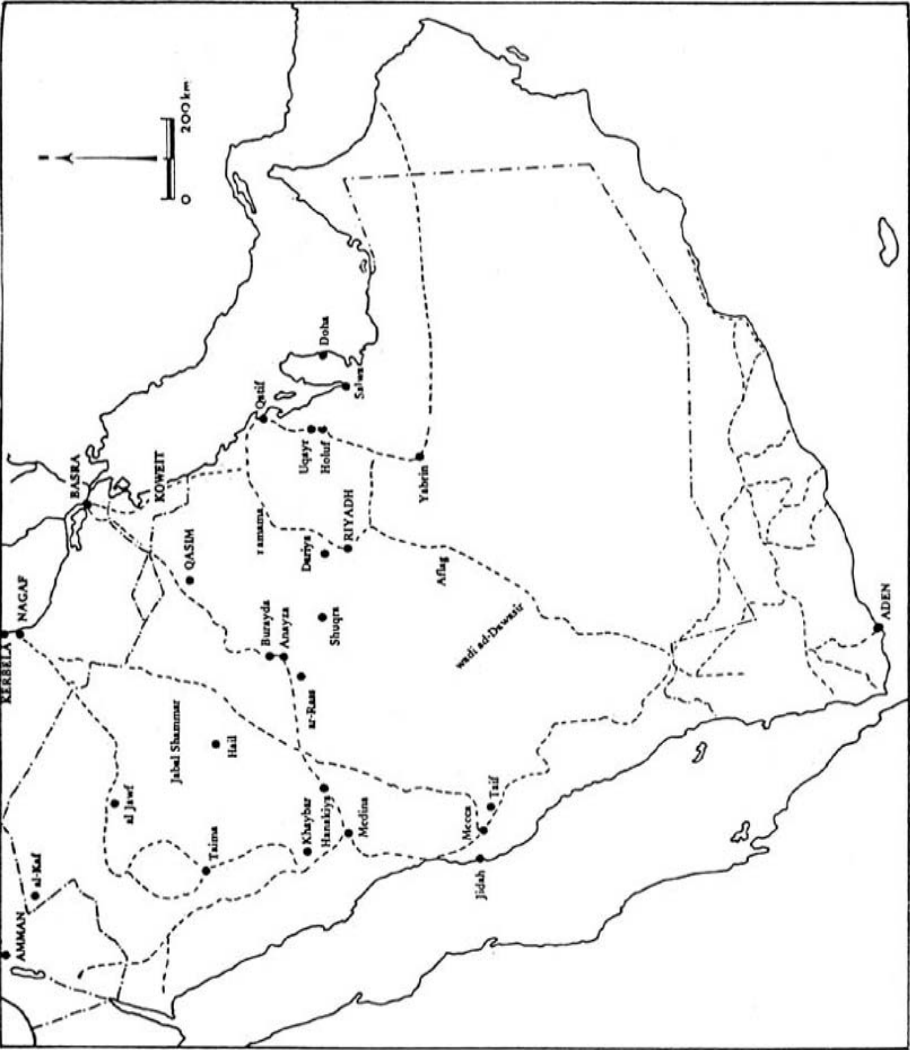


Fig. 3. Trade routes on the Arabian Peninsula.



*Religious Architecture*

What is certain is that traditional temple worship largely disappeared. The ascendant monotheistic religions sought no place in the old buildings. The middle cella of the Wadd temple in the Jabal Qaṭūṭa near Marib, for example, came to be used as a goat pen, and the courtyard of the Baʿrān Temple near Marib was converted for agricultural use.<sup>13</sup> In Qaryat al-Faw, too, temple worship would appear to have ended in the fourth century.<sup>14</sup> Did all culture come to an end at the same time? Archeological research has not yet allowed us to give any clear answer. In many places life went on, as for example in Marib where, despite the fact that the town walls were buried by sediments in the fifth and sixth century, the irrigation systems continued to function and a large new canal from Jufaina was constructed.<sup>15</sup> Mābiyāt near al-ʿUlā and Taimāʾ would also appear to have flourished further, as did port towns such as Qanaʾ and probably also ash-Shiḥr.<sup>16</sup> Sūqs are

<sup>13</sup> The most recent votive offerings found in the Wadd temple in the Jabal Qaṭūṭa are baskets containing incense. According to information given verbally by Wagner, the court of the Baʿrān temple in Marib was flooded regularly during the late period, i.e. it must have been put to agricultural use. The cella proper must, however, have been sited on higher ground than the field and may therefore have continued to be in use. See also Müller in Al-Ansary, *Studies*, vol. 2, 26: "The multitude of the celestial deities was replaced by raḥmanān, the lord of heaven and earth, and the old temples became desolated since the rulers confessed monotheism." The question is whether a new type of temple came into prominence at this time, a cubic, enclosed temple, such as is reported to have existed in Maʿin, Yehā, and the Ḥaḍramawt, see footnote 45 below. The temples in the Ḥaḍramawt, built on the uppermost layers of sediment can hardly be as ancient as has been asserted by the Russian archeologists, see Breton, "Religious Architecture," 5ff.; Breton et al., "Wādī Ḥaḍramawt," 20ff.; Sedov /Baṭāyi, "Temples," 183ff.

<sup>14</sup> Qaryat al-Faw: Ansary, *Qaryat al-Faw*, 42–43; apparently the objects all date from the fourth century (with some exceptions?); see Zarins et al., "Najran/Ukhudud Survey," 32.

<sup>15</sup> Wagner, "Oasenablagerungen," 42–43; see W. W. Müller (in Al-Ansary, *Studies*, vol. 2, 129): "The last building inscription from the fifth century, dated in the year 614 H. E. = 499 A. D. reports on the erection of a stately house in Maʿrib showing thus that the prosperity of the town had not yet passed away." Marib must have prospered during the sixth century, as the Ethiopian governor Abraha ordered the dam there to be restored (as attested by the famous inscription). It would appear likely that the as yet unexamined site at Dār as-Saudāʾ dates from the sixth century, as well as a similar building at the southern oasis; see J. Schmidt in *Archäologische Berichte aus dem Yemen* 3, 60ff.

<sup>16</sup> "Taymā remained a large and prosperous town during Byzantine and Early Islamic period," Bawden et al., "Tayma," 73 and 92; cf. Gilmore et al., "Excavations at al-Mabiyat," 109ff.; Talhi et al., "Second Season," 58ff. Rabaḍa is also said to have been a flourishing town.

known to have existed in Dūmat al-Jandal, Mushaqqar, and Ṣuhār. In Dabā in the southeast of the Arabian Peninsula, people from Sind, India, and China met with traders from the Western world. Sharja and Athār in the Tihama were apparently only founded in about 500 CE. Hajar was one of eight towns newly established in the Gulf region by Ardashīr in the third century CE.<sup>17</sup> Najrān experienced a revival as a center of pilgrimage and the town expanded to the outside, mainly northeastwards (fig. 7, 8).<sup>18</sup> Evidence from the areas in the Yamāma around Kharg, Wādī Dawāsir, Laila, and al-Aflāj shows that settlement was continuous from 200 to 600 CE;<sup>19</sup> the same is true of Midyān (Maghā'ir Shu'aib) according to P. J. Parr, and according to G. King of Rabaḍa (to the east of Medina), too, as well as various sites on the Red Sea, such as al-Jar, al-Khuraiba/Ainūna, and al-Haura'.<sup>20</sup> In Oman, the so-called Ṣamad culture can be shown to have existed since 630 CE,<sup>21</sup> whilst we have no information about other places (such as Thāj or Gerrha).<sup>22</sup> By contrast, the problem has received hardly any attention in Saudi Arabia, where we find only isolated indications of cultural continuity. Why is this?

In this case the answer is presumably, that neither a Jewish Christian culture nor a monotheistic era in the broadest sense is seen as being a suitable subject for research. Old divinities were certainly worshipped in the Hījāz, the goddess Allāt in Ṭā'if for example. But was her cult not already dying and vanishing? Does the description of the

<sup>17</sup> According to Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī, Ardashīr founded eleven towns, some of which were re-foundations of existing towns, and eight of which lay on the Gulf or in Khūzistān (Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 339; cf. D. Whitehouse/Williamson, "Sasanian Maritime Trade," 32; Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 233; J. Zarins and Hamad al-Badr, "Southern Tihama Plain," 69; cf. id., "Southern Tihama Plain II," 54f.; cf. Dheifullah Talhi et al., "Second Season," 67.

<sup>18</sup> See Zarins et al., "Southwestern Province," 27; Zarins et al., "Najran/Ukhdud Survey," 25 and 32; Shahid, "Byzantium"; id., "Najrān"; Ryckmans, "Al-Ukhdūd," 69ff. Ṣafār and Qana' appear to have experienced a revival, too.

<sup>19</sup> According to Zarins et al., "Central Province," 27 and 33, important towns can be shown to have existed here until the fourth century, but also during the Islamic period; "... the ceramic association in the Aflāj Basin provide a broad date range of perhaps the first century BC to the sixth century AD."

<sup>20</sup> P. J. Parr in al-Ansary, *Studies*, vol. 1, 43; King, "Creswell's Appreciation," n. 34.

<sup>21</sup> Yule et al., "Samad in Oman," 70ff.

<sup>22</sup> Potts in Boucharlat and Salles (eds.), *Arabie Orientale*, 102–103. It remains an open question whether Thāj was in fact abandoned in the fourth century. For Rashīd ibn Qais ibn Shihāb al-Yashkurī writing in the sixth century stated: "I have built in Thaj a castle of stone ... built in it are some of the blocks quarried for it by Iram" (Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 34; see note 73 below).

destruction of her temple and image not best fit the facts, especially if it is reported that just a single priest or cult functionary was there to defend them?<sup>23</sup>

Various forms of Christianity ranging from Monophysitism and Nestorianism to Orthodoxy can be shown to have spread throughout the Arabian Peninsula in the years following the Council of Chalcedon.<sup>24</sup> Thus we find the Southwest of the peninsula with the offshore islands to have been dominated first by Judaism and then by Christianity. The Tihāma and its adjacent massifs (e.g. Waṣāb) were Christian, raising the question of whether the place names containing “DAIR,” found to the north of Hudaida, cannot be understood as indicating monastic foundations? According to the history of the church compiled by Theodoros Lector before 550, Christians were to be found all along the coast as well as on the Farāsān Islands (fig. 4). Their church must have had a corresponding organization, in other words there must have been an archpriest, an archdeacon, archsubdeacon, and the laity.<sup>25</sup>

Amongst the Christian tribes were the Ash‘ār and the residents of Mukhā belonging to the Farāsān, a branch of the Taghlib. Nestorians were mainly to be found on the East coast and the Persian Gulf. Numerous tribes adhered to some form of Christianity, including the Banū As‘ad ibn ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā, a clan of the Quraish, the Kalb, Ṭayy, Tamīm and ‘Ibād, the Banū ‘Udhra (fig. 5), and the ‘Ijl in the Yamāma and the area between Ḥīra and Baṣra,<sup>26</sup> as well as members of the

<sup>23</sup> Fahd, *Panthéon*, 119ff., 163ff., 173–174; it may be assumed that before converting to Christianity the inhabitants of Najrān worshipped al-‘Uzzā in a palm-tree (Fahd, *ibid.*, 32). Reading the reports, it may be concluded that some of the forms of worship described were no longer relevant at the time of Muḥammad. See Atallah, *Idoles*, 19–20, for an account of the destruction of the shrine of ‘Uzzā by Khālid ibn al-Walid. However, according to Toufic Fahd, these accounts follow the pattern of Christian hagiographies. If it had been the case that an entire tribe had identified with an existing cult, then it would not have been possible to destroy the shrine.

<sup>24</sup> Ryckmans, “Christianisme en Arabie”; *id.*, *Persécution*; cf. his contribution to al-Ansary, *Studies*, vol. 1, 57; Müller “Himyar”; Shahid, *Fourth Century*, above all chapters IX and XI; *id.*, *Fifth Century*, 521ff.; Trimingham, *Christianity*, who expresses doubts about Christianity in the Hijāz, as does Beeston concerning Christianity in pre-Islamic Yemen (in Chelhod, *Arabie du Sud*, vol. 1, 259); Robin, “Judaïsme et Christianisme,” 85ff.

<sup>25</sup> Shahid, “Byzantium,” 40. For the monasteries in the southwestern Arabian Peninsula see *id.*, *Fifth Century*, 294ff., 357ff., 529; *id.*, *Martyrs of Najran*, 38–39; Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 246; Robin, “Arabie Antique,” 147ff.; al-Ḥubaishī, *Tārīkh*, 88.

<sup>26</sup> Trimingham, *Christianity*, 120, 259, 267ff., 276, 278–279, 280, 283; Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 226, 243, 245; Shahid, *Fifth Century*, 359, 519ff., 524ff., 530.

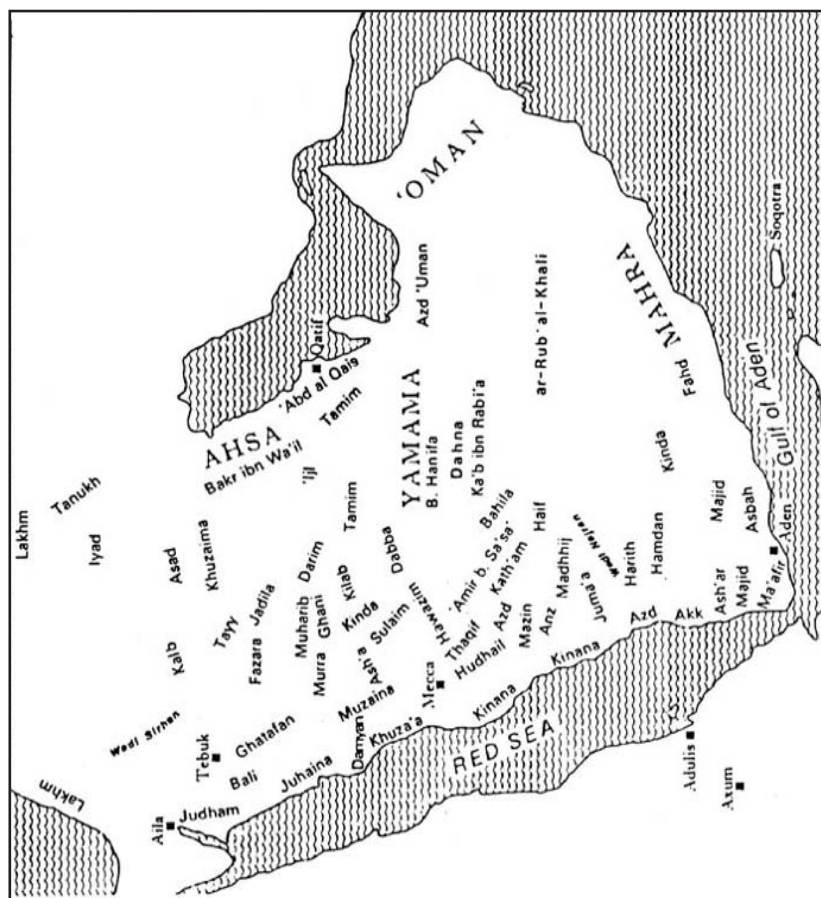


Fig. 4. Tribes on the Arabian Peninsula in the sixth and seventh century CE.

Kinda and Taghlib (fig. 4). There were also Christians amongst the Banū Shaibān in al-Hajar.<sup>27</sup> The Banū Judham's Christian faith is attested by the graffiti crosses around Kilwa in the northwestern peninsula. According to Irfan Shahid, monks could be found near Medina in the Wādī l-Qurā.<sup>28</sup> This means that the northwest and northeast of the Arabian Peninsula as well as the center were inhabited by Christian tribes. The issue is not how orthodox or pious these Christians were. We ought not to forget that so-called paganism was still very much alive in rural and even urban Greece and Spain around the same time.<sup>29</sup> Judaism also featured strongly, in particular in the northwest. According to S. Trimingham, there existed a corridor of Jewish culture extending from Midyān via Wādī l-Qurā as far as Yathrib, with centers in Fadak, Taimā', Khaibar, and Yathrib (cf. fig. 1).<sup>30</sup>

Oman in the southeastern corner also had a metropolitan see at al-Mazūn with a corresponding Christian community (from 424–676) (fig. 6).<sup>31</sup> The 'Abd al-Qais in the oases of eastern Arabia and along the Bahrain and Qaṭīf coast were Christians, as were the Bakr ibn Wā'il in the Yamāma and on the island of Bahrain, and the Ḥanifa ibn Lujaim in the Yamāma, close to Hajar, Dārīn, and Mashmāhij. Ṭālūn, al-Ḥaṭṭa, and Hajar were said to have been Nestorian bishoprics.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Trimingham, *Christianity*, 283; Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 243. It is probable that Christianity spread from al-Ḥira; McCullough, *Short History*, 179.

<sup>28</sup> Gilmore et al., "Northern Regions Survey," 19, pl. 19; also Shahid, *Fifth Century*, 526, 529; For the monasteries in the Wādī l-Qurā close to Medina, Dair Hisma, Dair Damdam, and Dair Sa'd see Shahid, *Fifth Century*, 526, 529; Trimingham, *Christianity*, 259; Qaṣr ar-Raḍum in Taimā' is described by Euting as Qaṣr ad-Dair, see Abu Duruk, *Introduction*, 27.

<sup>29</sup> McCullough, *Short History*, 56; M. Whitby in Salamon, *Later Roman Empire*, 111ff. The same question arises with regard to the Moslems; how orthodox are they? See Langfeldt in *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* (5): 59, n. 44; Nevo and Koren, "Muslim Descriptions," 39–40. Generally, speaking Christianity, too, was more widespread in towns than in rural areas, although this was not true for Egypt.

<sup>30</sup> Trimingham, *Christianity*, 283; concerning Christianity there see *ibid.*, 248ff.; for an opposing view see Shahid, *Fifth Century*, 294–295.

<sup>31</sup> Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 203; see *ibid.*, 253, 296, 333, 338; Trimingham, *Christianity*, 282.

<sup>32</sup> Trimingham, *Christianity*, 282–283; for Bēth Qaṭrāyē (Qaṭar) cf. Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 242–243, 346; in the fifth and sixth centuries, the Nestorian bishops of the Gulf were dependent on the church center in Fars, see Frye in Potts (ed.), *Dilmun*, 169; Beaucamp and Robin, *ibid.*, 171ff.; Fiey, *Communautés*, 209ff.

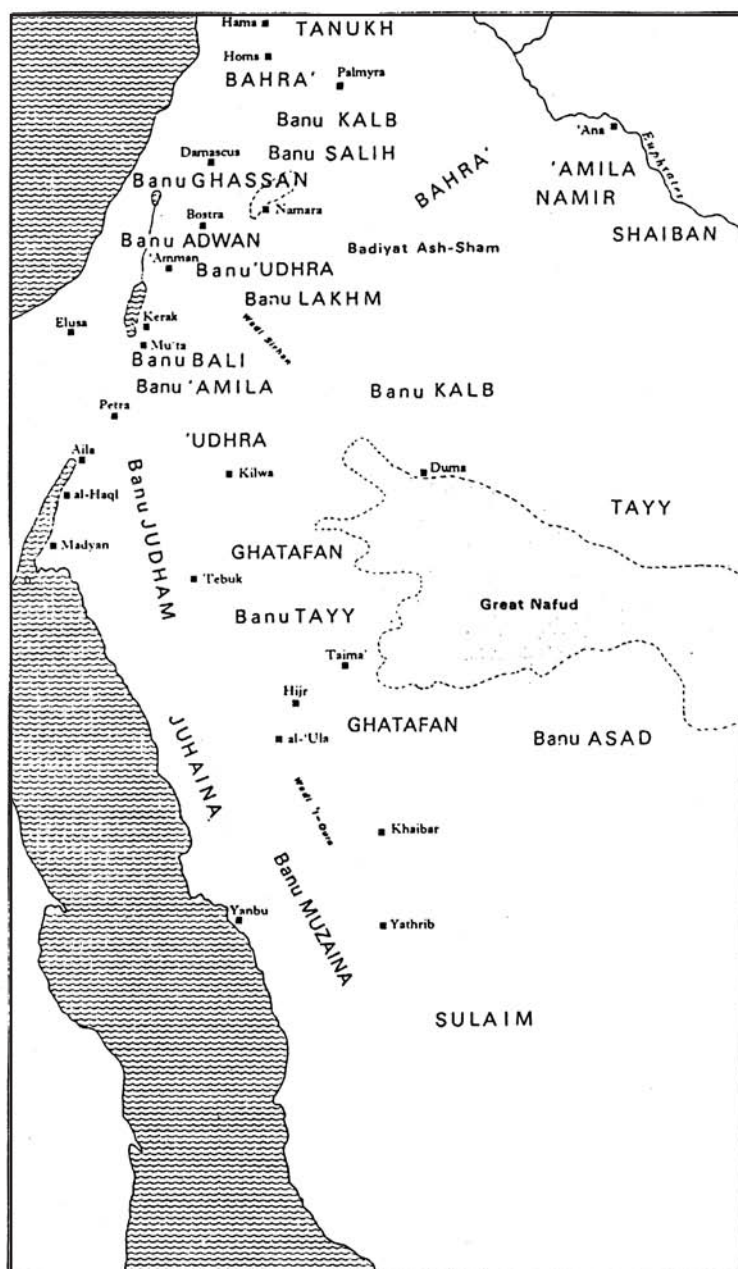


Fig. 5. Arabic tribes in northwestern Arabia.

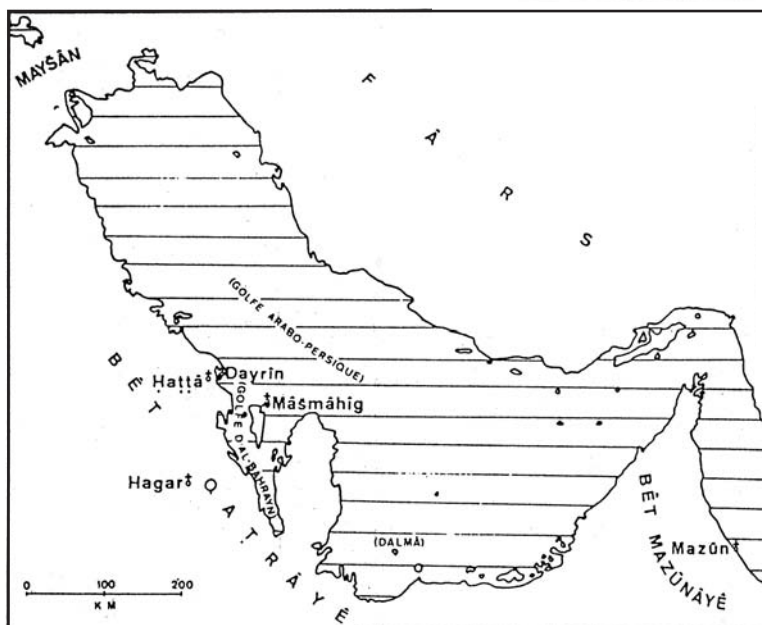
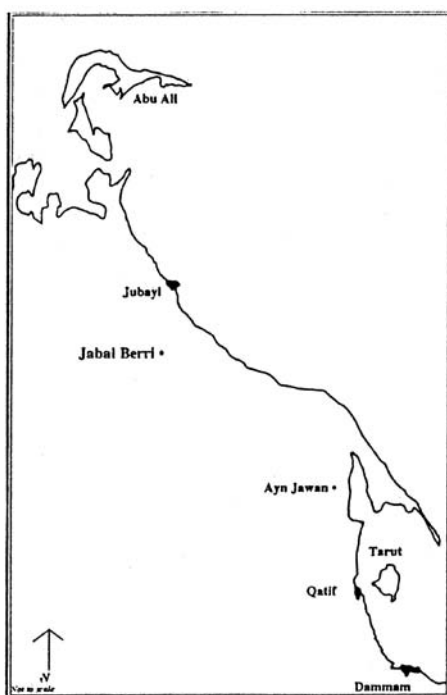


Fig. 6a and b. Bishop's sees in the Persian Gulf.



It is not intended to discuss the various branches of Christianity here. What is important is that organized Christianity, or indeed Judaism, impresses itself on a civilization to produce a culture encompassing all areas of artistic life: architecture, fine arts, i.e. pictorial and sculptural art, book and manuscript arts, and applied arts.<sup>33</sup> The church building and its furnishings were, however, in part determined by the Christian sect a community belonged to.

Our knowledge of church architecture in southwestern Arabia, i.e. in the Yemen, is derived solely from literature. The churches of Najrān and of Ṣafār, and the church of Abraha in Ṣanʿāʾ all gained fame, having either been built or restored in the first and second quarter of the sixth century.<sup>34</sup> According to the *Vita Gregentii*, there were three churches in Najrān—the Church of the Ascension of Christ, the Church of the Holy Martyrs and the Glorious Arethas, and a Church of the Holy Mother of God.<sup>35</sup> Apart from these, there were one or more monasteries whose duty it was to give board and lodging to pilgrims.<sup>36</sup> At the center of the pilgrimages was the famous Kaʿba of Najrān, built by the Ḥārith ibn Kaʿb clan and which may possibly have been identical with the Martyry of Arethas, which must have been constructed around 520.<sup>37</sup> This appears probable, given that the worship of saints was associated with ancestor cults, which seem to have been the basis of most sacred places. As such, not only tombs but churches, too, offered the right of sanctuary.<sup>38</sup> Yāqūt writes that the Kaʿba was a *qubba*, or domed building, close by the river Nuhaīrdān.<sup>39</sup> The house and garden of Arethas may possibly have been there.<sup>40</sup> According to Yāqūt, feasts were celebrated outside the

<sup>33</sup> For monasteries as centers of book and manuscript arts see McCullough, *Short History*, 75; see also Khoury in Fahd (ed.), *Arabie Préislamique*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> Müller, "Himyar," 317; for earlier church foundations in Ṣafār and ʿAden, see *ibid.*, 307; Shahid, *Byzantium*, 35ff.; Robin, "Arabie Antique," 148–149.

<sup>35</sup> Müller, "Himyar," 317; Shahid, "Byzantium," 38, 40.

<sup>36</sup> Shahid, "Byzantium," 74–75.

<sup>37</sup> Shahid, "Byzantium," 70.

<sup>38</sup> Yāqūt, Najrān: Shahid, "Byzantium," 74; the right of asylum or sanctuary was always associated with shrines and important churches, as for example in the case of the cathedral in Aksum, see Wenger, "Asylrecht"; Littmann et al., *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition*, 45.

<sup>39</sup> According to al-Isfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, XII, 7; cf. Shahid, "Byzantium," 72; Shahid, *Martyrs of Najrān*, 60.

<sup>40</sup> "It was built near Arethas' house in a place which had earlier been a most marvelous garden or orchard." On the other hand, Maḥyā was done to death beneath a tamarisk tree opposite the residence of Arethas near the North Gate of Najrān, see Shahid, "Byzantium," 41, 72.



walls of the monasteries with singing, flowers, and much drinking. According to the description given by Bakrī, the Ka'ba of Najrān was rectangular and accessible via a staircase.<sup>41</sup> Ibn al-Kalbī reports that the Ka'ba was surmounted by a dome made of hides, whose construction could be explained with reference to the example of the dome at Debra Damo in Ethiopia.<sup>42</sup> The dome there is painted with figures of saints gazing down from the "heavens." The walls are said to have been covered with mosaics and the ceiling with gold, which would rather seem to indicate a gilded coffered ceiling.<sup>43</sup> The altar would have been covered with precious cloth. Al-'Umarī wrote that "they made their gods out of gold and silver," by which he was presumably referring to the figures of the saints to be seen on the mosaics (?) on the walls.<sup>44</sup> It cannot be said whether the cubic building was three-aisled and correspondingly flat-roofed (similar for instance to the temple at Yehā/Ethiopia later converted to a church) or whether it was a domed building on a square plan. The word *ka'ba* refers to a cubic architectural body.<sup>45</sup> The church's facade is said to have been clad with marble panels, or with marble incrustations such as those of the famous Ghumdān palace in Ṣan'ā'. This type of architectural ornamentation had a long tradition in Yemen.

The original church burned down by Dhū Nuwās probably lay within the walls of the town. According to the descriptions given by Christian sources, it was regarded as the most beautiful of the churches there.<sup>46</sup> Irfan Shahid believes that it is identical with the bishop's church. J. Ryckmans is probably correct in identifying it with the four-sided building near the east-west axis (fig. 7).<sup>47</sup> There may have been a monastery here, too, and there certainly must have been a baptistery in Najrān as well as a residence for the bishop and living quarters for the priests. The church of the Holy Mother of God is said to have been situated in the area of the stadium, that is to say, outside the walled town.<sup>48</sup> It is possible that the term stadium is a reference to a hippodrome, as it could be found in all important towns

<sup>41</sup> al-Bakrī, *Mu'jam*, 603–604; Shahid, "Byzantium," 70–71.

<sup>42</sup> B. Finster and J. Schmidt in Nebes (ed.), *Arabia Felix*, 67ff.

<sup>43</sup> al-'Umarī, *Masālik*, 358; Ryckmans, "Al-Ukhdūd," 58; see Zarins, "Najran/Ukhdūd Survey," 26–27.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.; it is unlikely that sculpture was to be found in this place at that time.

<sup>45</sup> Finster, "Cubical Yemeni mosques."

<sup>46</sup> Shahid, *Byzantium*, 41, 69; Zarins et al., "Najran/Ukhdūd Survey," 26–27.

<sup>47</sup> Ryckmans, "Al-Ukhdūd," 48.

<sup>48</sup> Shahid, *Byzantium*, 40.

in the Mediterranean world. The mosque of 'Abdallāh presumably also indicates a former Christian place of worship.<sup>49</sup>

Ẓafār had three churches, too, one of which is reported as having been dedicated to the Trinity.<sup>50</sup> One church, which is said to have existed at the west gate, is possibly identical with the massive ruined wall still visible there today. There must also have been a very large church on one of the hills to the east, described by residents today as *ma'bad*.

The Church of Abraha in Ṣan'ā', al-Qalīs, is evidently a special case. Its appearance according to tradition is described by al-Azraqī.<sup>51</sup> Its architecture must have been amongst the most monumental to be found throughout the Arabian Peninsula. With a ground plan based on a rectangle about 160 by 40 ells, a domed choir, transept, and a nave which was presumably divided into three aisles by arcade walls, its dimensions bear comparison with Hagios Demetrios in Saloniki or the Justinian Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.<sup>52</sup> The furnishings were equally splendid and included marble incrustations, mosaics, wood inlays, vessels, and lamps of silver, barrier panels covered in silver plate, and a *minbar* inlaid with ebony. The church was also influenced by Ethiopian architecture apparently, although craftsmen from the Byzantine area assisted in its construction, for instance with the marble cladding and mosaics. Even the measurements repeat those of the Aksum Cathedral; Ethiopian elements are reflected in the construction of the walls and ceilings etc.<sup>53</sup> The church was built on a raised platform in a courtyard enclosed by walls and lay in a district dedicated especially to churches and pilgrimage traffic in what was then the south of Ṣan'ā'. In addition to this monumental structure there seem to have been other churches in Ṣan'ā', the remains of some still visible in the tenth century.<sup>54</sup> Spoils from these churches can be found in the Great Mosque in Ṣan'ā' today: a door in the *qibla*-wall similar in design to the pattern of Syrian-Christian doors; capitals

<sup>49</sup> Claude, *Byzantinische Stadt*, 77; the shrine of 'Abdallāh ibn Thamir, "whom the tradition considers one of the first Christian converts in Najrān," Ryckmans, op. cit., 56.

<sup>50</sup> Müller, "Himyar," 317; Shahid, *Byzantium*, 43ff.

<sup>51</sup> B. Finster and J. Schmidt in Nebes (ed.), *Arabia Felix*, 67ff.; Serjeant and Lewcock, *Ṣan'ā'*, 67ff.

<sup>52</sup> B. Finster and J. Schmidt in Nebes (ed.), *Arabia Felix*, 77.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>54</sup> ar-Rāzī, *Tārīkh*, 32; a church by the southern city-gate in Ṣan'ā' which may not be identical with the church of Abraha, ibid., 79; Serjeant/ Lewcock, *Ṣan'ā'*, 44.

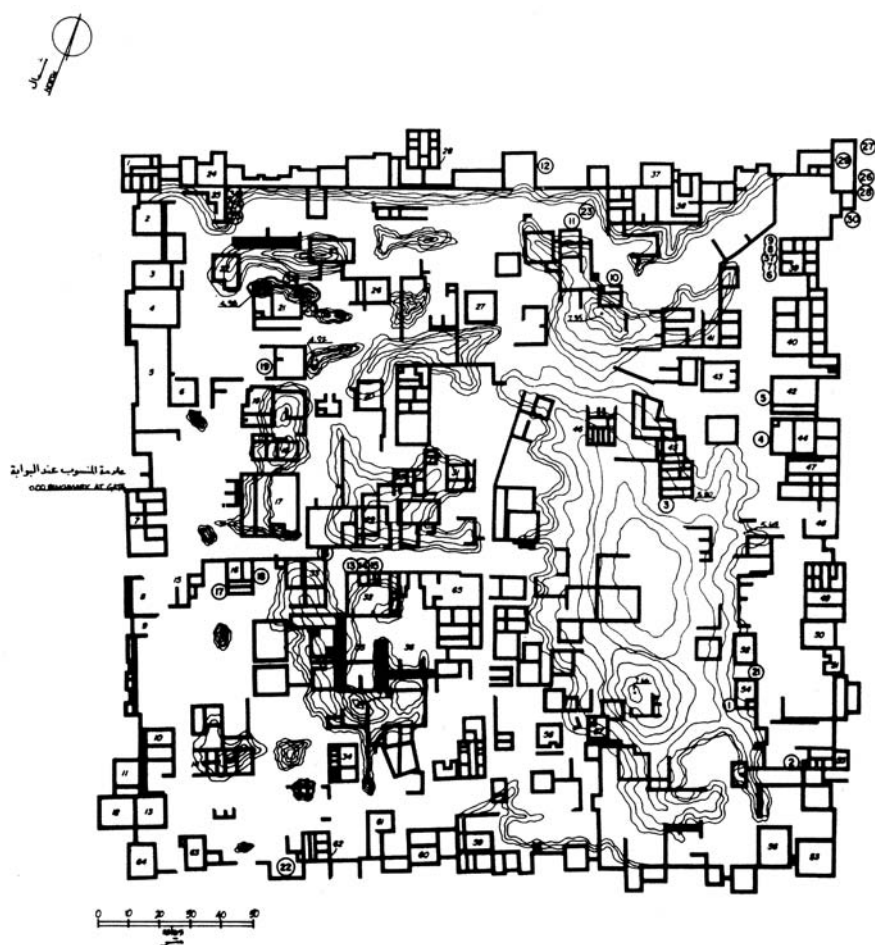


Fig. 7. Najrān.

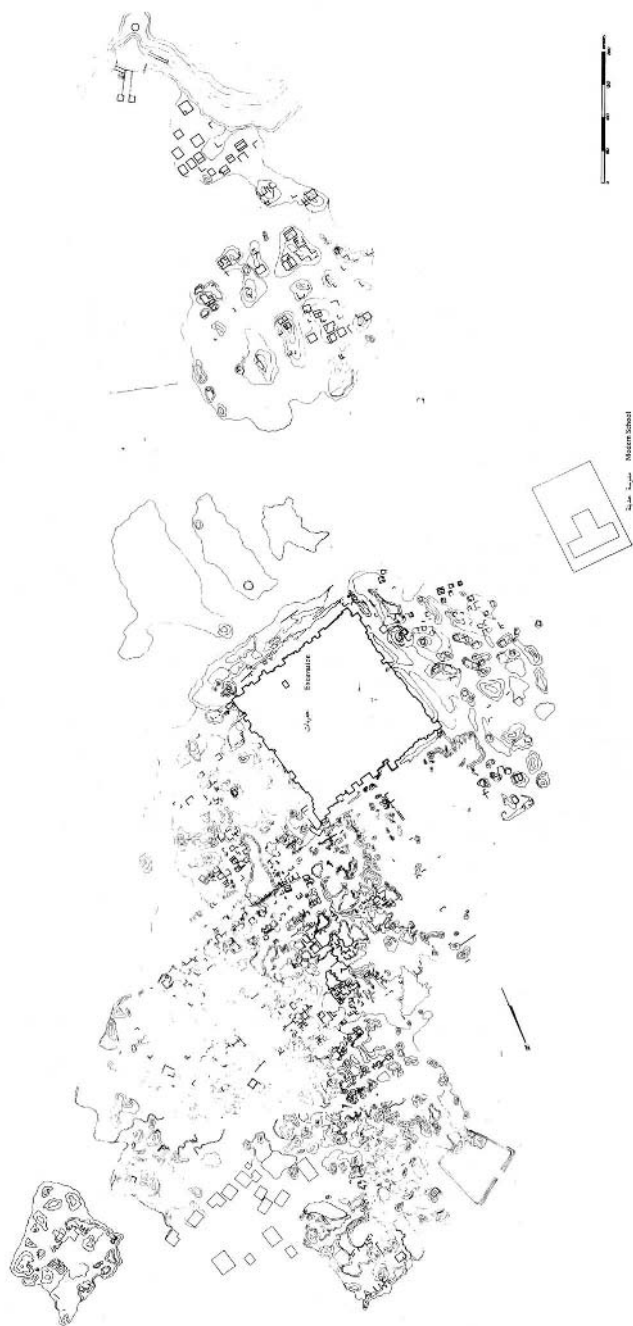


Fig. 8. Najran.



Fig. 9 and 10. Şan'ā', Great Mosque, capitals.



Fig. 11 and 12. Şan'ā', Great Mosque, capitals.

that clearly reflect Byzantine style, i.e., foliate capitals that have their counterparts in the Cathedral of Aksum; round columns covered with climbing vines that obviously also participate in the Aksumite cultural sphere (fig. 9–12).<sup>55</sup>

According to the literature, there were three churches in Qanaʾ as well, today's Ḥuṣṇ al-Ghurāb on the south coast of the peninsula—a Church of the Ascension of the Savior, a Church of John the Baptist and a Church of the Apostle Thomas.<sup>56</sup> Churches are also said to have stood at no longer (or not yet) identifiable sites in Ataphe and Legmia.<sup>57</sup> Further churches are attested for the Yemen, one close to Ibb or Ba'dān, one in Mukhā, on the Farāsān Islands as well as one in Marib. The ancient foundations of the fourth century included churches in Zafār, Hormuzd, and 'Aden.<sup>58</sup> We do not know the ground plans of these buildings, and influences from Syrian church architecture cannot be ruled out.<sup>59</sup> It is also possible that some late sixth century churches followed the ground plan of the church in Ṣan'ā'.

The mosque of Gargīs and Sargīs in Tarīm in the Ḥaḍramawt can probably also be identified with a former church; tradition at least has it that this was once a Christian place of worship.<sup>60</sup>

A list of provinces given in the Pseudo-Moses of Khorene, written around 737, describes not only al-Mazūn as having been a church province (Oman)—as mentioned above—but also Hajar, Piṭ Ardashīr (Ḥaṭṭa or al-Qaṭīf), Dēr (Dairīn), and Mashmāhij (Bahrain). A letter from the patriarch Iṣhō'yahb from the middle of the seventh century

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., fig. 18, 34, 20, 27–29; cf. *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 9 (1978), pl. 76b; 58–62, 63b, 65–68. A similar arrangement can be seen on an eight-paneled stone door, which is certain to have been fashioned to represent a wooden door (clad with bronze plates?). The lowest panels exhibit double blind arcades, the others mostly rosettes or cross symbols, see Petsopoulos, *East Christian Art*; cf. also n. 99 below.

<sup>56</sup> Müller, "Himyar"; Shahid, "Byzantium," 47ff. It is possible that a Christian chapel has been discovered, see Sedov, "New archaeological material," 112; Drewes, "ESA dictionary project," 27ff.

<sup>57</sup> Müller, "Himyar"; Shahid, *Byzantium*.

<sup>58</sup> Müller, "Himyar"; the sculptural relief of Mary with the child Christ referred to here is from near Ibb, see note 97 below.

<sup>59</sup> Müller, "Himyar," 307–308, who assumes that Christianization proceeded from Syria.

<sup>60</sup> Serjeant in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 19 (1957): 574–575; see Shahid, "Byzantium," 84, n. 186: "Hadramaut was the most important Christian center in South Arabia."





Fig. 13. Wahsh/Waşab, mosque, ceiling.

tells us that there were monasteries in Tālūn and Oman, in addition to the diocesan buildings.<sup>61</sup>

Besides the magnificent large buildings there were also smaller churches in the rural areas, such as northeastern Zabid in Waṣāb province. The Tārīkh Waṣāb, compiled in the fourteenth century, describes the region and its capital ʿArkaba in pre-Islamic times as having been Christian, although just as many Jews must have lived in the area.<sup>62</sup> The latter only emigrated twenty years ago.

All the mosques in Waṣāb belong to the type of closed cubic buildings with flat roofs. Some show a deviant orientation, interpreted by local residents as being “in the direction of Jerusalem.”<sup>63</sup> It may be assumed that these simple buildings, whose type had already been employed in temple architecture, once also served as churches or synagogues. Support for this theory comes from the tradition of ceiling decoration still alive in Waṣābi mosques today. Here we find patterns showing the cross inside a nimbus or a wreath (fig. 13); various star patterns used in early Christian art as symbols of the cross; and platted ribbon patterns of the type used extensively in Coptic church ornamentation together with rosettes and which have survived in Nubian and Ethiopian churches.<sup>64</sup> Although sadly subject to recent heavy restoration, the mosque in al-ʿĀsida is unusual in having a broad space (10.45 x 5.85 m) divided into three aisles by two rows of four columns each. The *miḥrāb* niche has the appearance of having been built onto the north wall.

As has been mentioned elsewhere, the Kaʿba of Mecca, regarded as *Bait Allāh* both in Muhammad’s time and today, may be seen as part of this series of buildings.<sup>65</sup> Evidently the Kaʿba was to a certain extent a requisite element in Christian worship. Evidence of this comes from the image once on the southeastern pier showing Mary with the Child on her lap and surrounded by angels. This type of

<sup>61</sup> Fiey, *Communautés*, 209ff.; Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 256, 338; Beaucamp and Robin in Potts (ed.), *Dilmun*, 171ff.

<sup>62</sup> See note 25 above; see Klein-Franke, “Juden im Jemen,” 256ff.

<sup>63</sup> For example in Waḥsh.

<sup>64</sup> Compare with the Church of Mary in Dabra Ṣeyon (Gerster, *Kirchen im Fels*, fig. 46) where the decoration combines all the traditional motifs. The church is said to date from “after the seventh century”; cf. P. O. Scholz in Scholz and Stempel (ed.), *Nubia*.

<sup>65</sup> Finster, “Cubical Yemeni mosques”; Gardet, “Allāh,” 406ff.: “Christians as well may have venerated the Kaʿba, towards which some reportedly used to pray”; Rubin, “*Ḥanifiyya*,” 109 with n. 111.



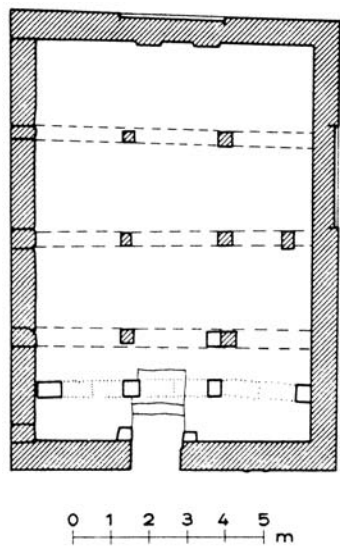


Fig. 14. Tamur, mosque.

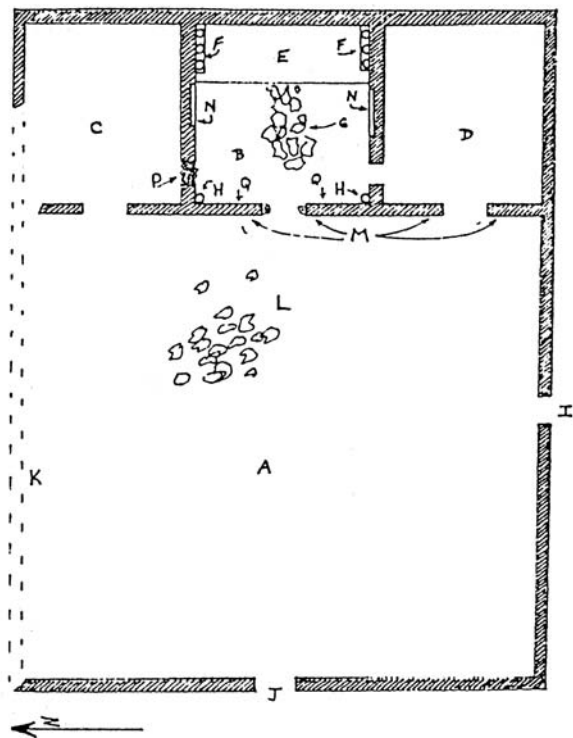


Fig. 15. Jubail, church.



Fig. 16 and 17. Jubail, church.

image was widespread in the sixth century and can be found in paintings, frescoes, weaving, and ivories throughout the Christian Mediterranean.<sup>66</sup>

Apart from this image, there was also a depiction of Abraham, shown conflated with Hubal and carrying oracular arrows in one hand. There is no obvious iconographic prototype for this form of representation.<sup>67</sup> Hubal is also to be found in the Nabatean pantheon and is described by Toufic Fahd as having been one-armed.<sup>68</sup> In a

<sup>66</sup> Fahd, *Panthéon*, 203ff.; al-Azraqī, *Akhhbār*, 110ff.; Ibn Hishām, *Sira*, vol. 2, 822; al-Wāqidi, *Maghāzī*, 834; al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, vol. 4, 126; Weitzmann, *Age*, no. 476–478; it is noteworthy that there was evidently no cross depicted in the Ka'ba.

<sup>67</sup> Hubal next to Allāt, al-'Uzzā in Madā'in Sāliḥ: cf. J. Healey in *Aṭlāl* 2 (1986), 115.

<sup>68</sup> Fahd, *Panthéon*, 95ff., 98, 101; id., “Hubal.” Evidently the portrayal of Hubal in the Ka'ba had different features; otherwise he could not have been confused with Abraham. It may be that the image was similar to that of a holy man bearing a scroll in his hand and that this was interpreted as representing oracular arrows such as can be seen for example in the fifth/sixth century Egyptian portrait of a holy man in Weitzmann, *Age*, fig. 496; see Rubin, “*Ḥanīfiyya*,” 103: “The Pre-Islamic deity of the Ka'ba was Hubal. He was the one and only statue situated inside the Ka'ba. The rituals



Fig. 18. Jubail, church.

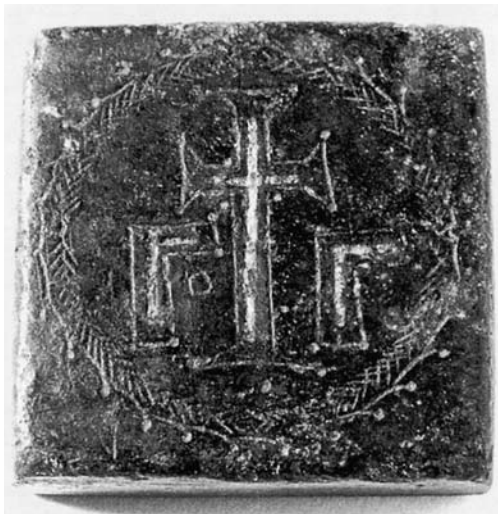


Fig. 19. Şan'a', al-Mathaf al-Waṭanī, weight.

manuscript painting Abraham is shown as a figure in antique drapery.<sup>69</sup> This amalgamation of different figures is typical for the syncretistic nature of a religion which has yet to gain acceptance.

The temples described as *bait* may all have resembled the Ka'ba, those declared explicitly to have been a *ka'ba* (such as the shrines of Dhū l-Khalāṣa in Tabāla and al-Buṣṣ) certainly did.<sup>70</sup>

Another cube-shaped mosque, existing today in Tamur in the Ba'dān area of Yemen, appears to have been built as a place of worship in the sixth/seventh century (fig. 14).<sup>71</sup> The roof of stone joists and slabs is archaic and the frieze on the north and south walls has an archaic appearance, too. Strangely, the eastern side of the structure was left open, apparently only being enclosed when the building was remodeled as a mosque in the eleventh century. The extremely primi-

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performed in front of this statue contained typical Abrahamic elements, circumcision in particular."

<sup>69</sup> Weitzmann, *Studies*, fig. 3; Abraham sacrifices Isaac, seventh century fresco in the monastery of St. Catherine on the Sinai Peninsular, Forsyth and Weitzmann, *Sinai*, fig. 169.

<sup>70</sup> Fahd, *Panthéon*, 203ff, 62–63, 165; as regards the concept of *bait*, *ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Cf., Finster, "Moschee von Tamūr," 213ff.

tive capitals can really only be seen as rudimentary and indicate a date in the sixth or seventh century.<sup>72</sup>

As has been mentioned, the east coast of the peninsula was Christianized by Nestorians and belonged to the Sasanian sphere of influence, both in terms of church history and art. The church buildings accordingly ought to be seen within the context of Mesopotamian architecture. Unfortunately, the results of the excavation of a church at Jubail done by Arab archeologists in the 1980s have not yet been published and presumably never will be. It is only thanks to employees of the ARAMCO oil company that we have a report and pictures (fig. 15).<sup>73</sup> According to the description given by J. A. Langfeldt, the church had a rectangular ground plan with an eastern termination he describes as having been divided into three chambers. Each of the three chambers measured approximately 4–5 m<sup>2</sup>. Before these lay a “court” of close to 15–20 m<sup>2</sup> which must be understood as having been the nave proper. Whether the space was subdivided into three aisles by piers or columns cannot be determined. The adobe walls were covered with gypsum plaster. From the west and the south entrances led to the interior. The sanctuary contained a slightly raised podium which the author construes as having been a bema (approximately 1.50 m in width and about 15 cm from today’s ground level) (fig. 16). Three smooth round columns or shafts which must have supported an arch were set on each side against the north and south walls. The eastern termination proper was probably a domed apse on a rectangular ground plan, like the one in the church at Northern Quṣair in Iraq.<sup>74</sup> The haunch at the base of the arch was decorated with a frieze of scrolling vines with smooth S-shaped stalks, its loops filled with simple leaf and flower shapes (fig. 17). The only furnishings to be found in the church were four crosses (ca. 28–30 cm in height) on the western wall facing the court (fig. 18).<sup>75</sup> In the absence of an excavation report no accurate date can be given. J. A. Langfeldt tentatively dates it to the fifth/ sixth century.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., pl. 82.

<sup>73</sup> Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 333–334; cf. J. A. Langfeldt, “Early Christian monuments,” 32ff.

<sup>74</sup> *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 8 (1976), fig. 6–9; the church at Jubail can best be compared to Church V at al-Ḥira, whereby the appearance of their respective vaulting remains an open question, see de Villard, *Chiese della Mesopotamia*, fig. 32; Rice, “Excavations,” fig. 5.

<sup>75</sup> Langfeldt, “Early Christian monuments,” fig. 5–9; Robin, “Arabie Antique,” fig. 41.

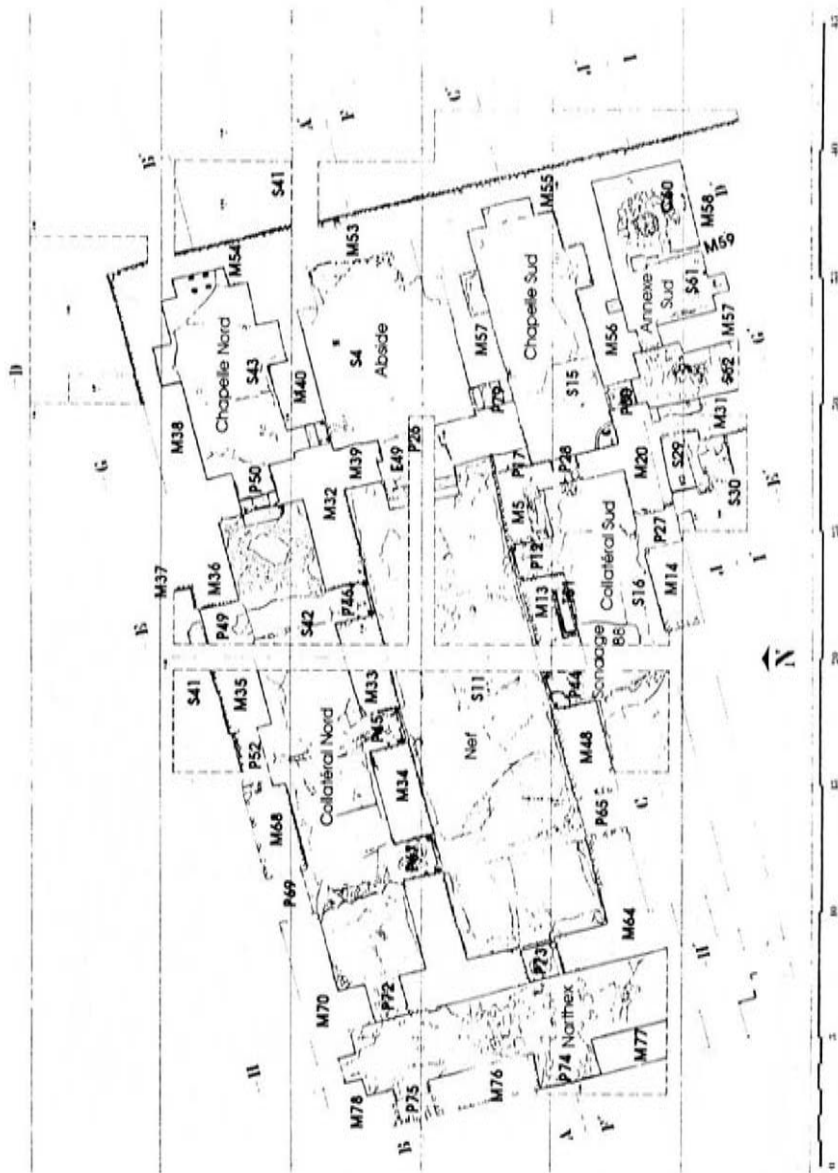


Fig. 20. Quşür, church.

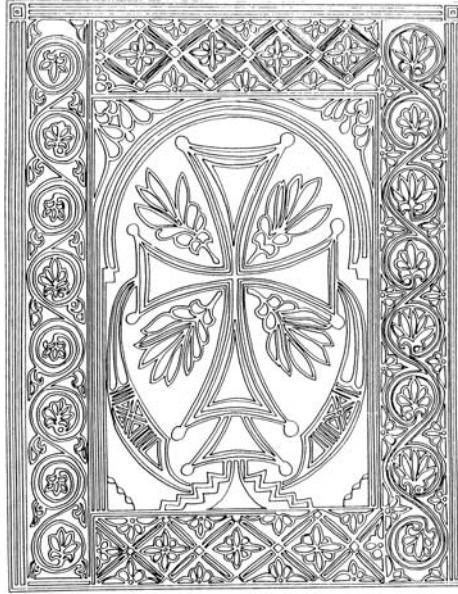


Fig. 21. Quşūr, church.

The arrangement of the smooth columns supporting the arch is reminiscent of similar constructions in the early Umayyad palace at Kharāna and in Sarvistān, recently recognized as likewise being an Umayyad building.<sup>76</sup> A date in the sixth century could nevertheless be quite possible.<sup>77</sup> Funerary stelae found surrounding the church at Jubail bear witness of a Christian community.<sup>78</sup> A second church has evidently been found near Thāj as well as a large Christian cemetery at al-Ḥinna.<sup>79</sup> J. A. Langfeldt rightly draws the conclusion that the city of Thāj cannot have been completely deserted during that period.

The possible appearance of Christian religious buildings in this region may be seen from the churches at Failaka/Bahrain at al-Quşūr,

<sup>76</sup> Langfeldt, "Early Christian monuments," fig. 4, 7; Urice, *Qaṣr Kharāna*, fig. 81. At Qaṣr Kharāna, the importance of space is shown by the apsidal vaulting on a rectangular ground plan, see Bier, *Sarvistān*.

<sup>77</sup> The scrollwork is comparable to similar representations from al-Ḥīra and may also indicate a later date, Rice, "Arabie Antique," fig. 5.

<sup>78</sup> Langfeldt, "Early Christian monuments," fig. 4, 7.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, fig. 4.9.



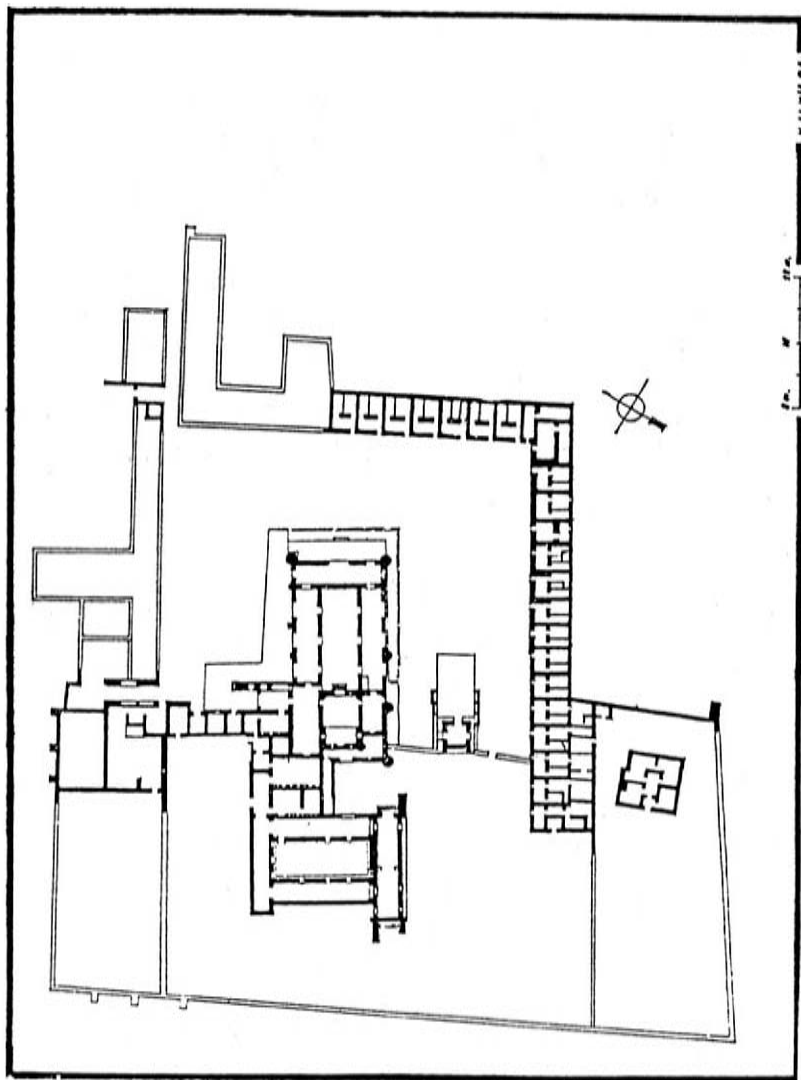


Fig. 22. Quşur, monastery on the island Kharij.

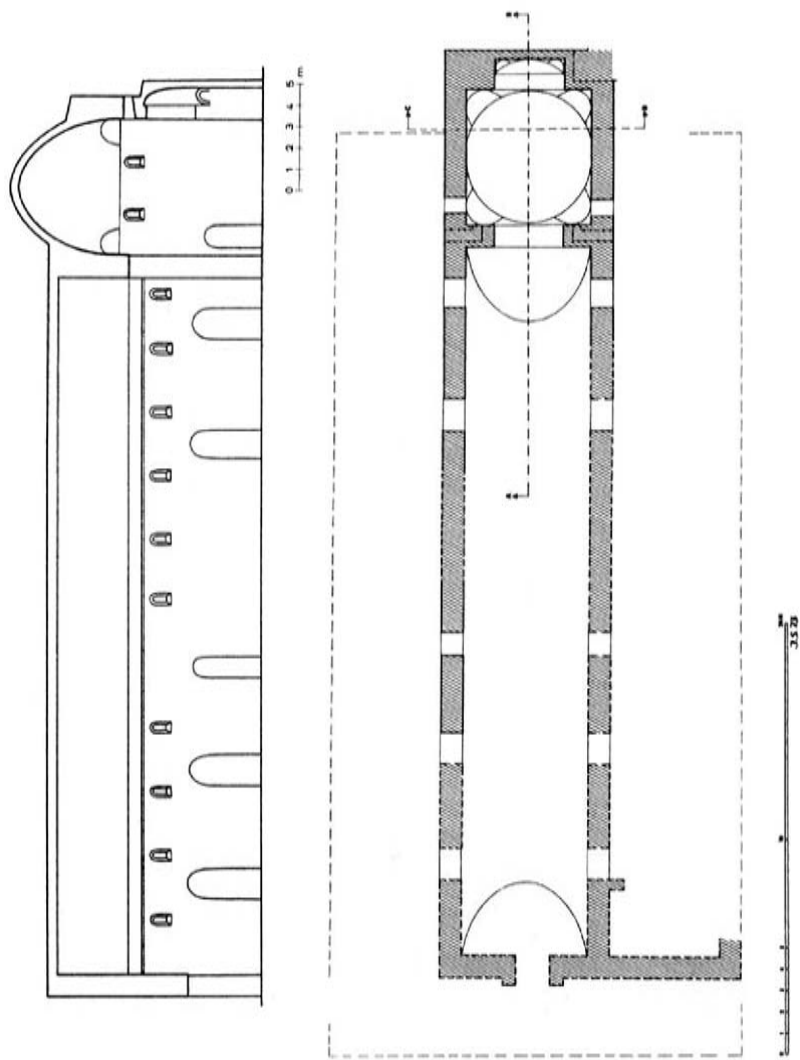


Fig. 23a and b. Qusūr, church.



or the monastery on the island of Kharj from the fifth to the sixth century. The church at al-Quşūr (fig. 20) was an elaborate complex measuring 35 m by 19 m and situated to the east of a large square or courtyard (?).<sup>80</sup> The stone walls have survived up to a height of 4 m. The building consists of a preceding narthex, the three aisled nave measuring 19 m by 5.60 m, and the choir, which is led up to by three steps. Three portals at the west end afford access to the narthex, one to the north and one to the south. Three doors lead from the narthex into the church interior, the middle of which is wider than the other two and could be locked. Access from the central nave to the north aisle is provided by three doorways, whilst two doorways open onto the south aisle. The aisles are thus completely separated from the nave. Three alcoves at the eastern end of each aisle are arranged so that they appear to form the shape of a cross on the ground plan. The relics of a saint were found beneath the walls of an adjacent south chapel. Remains of stucco and a cross at the northeast corner of the south chapel indicate the presence of a martyr.<sup>81</sup> Two lockable doors in the choir lead to the so-called pastophoria, smaller rooms used for the storage of the sacraments. The eastern part of the choir has been partially destroyed.

The only decorations or furnishings found were two stucco crosses (60 cm and 80 cm in height), one of which is shown mounted on a stepped pedestal and surrounded by ornamentation (fig. 18).<sup>82</sup> The ground plan can be compared with that of the monastery church on Kharj Island (fig. 22)<sup>83</sup> and with those of the churches at Northern Quşair near 'Ain at-Tamr in Iraq (fig. 23a and b).<sup>84</sup> This church can probably be identified as the monastery at Gamre founded by Mar 'Abda the Younger, or as Nuqaira.<sup>85</sup> The eastern termination of these churches is straight, the vaulting of the apse being concealed from the outside. The square-based dome is followed by an emphatically long nave, flanked by narrow aisles. Both structure and proportions are evidently characteristic for the Nestorian (?) form of worship. The

<sup>80</sup> V. Bernard et al., "L' église d' al-Qousur," 145–146; Bernard and Salles, "Discovery," 7ff.

<sup>81</sup> Bernard et al., "L' église d' al-Qousur," 155.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., fig. 15, 17.

<sup>83</sup> Ghirshman, *Arts Asiatiques* 6, 107ff.; id., *Island of Kharg*, 21–22, fig. 12–14.

<sup>84</sup> *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 8 (1976), fig. 7.

<sup>85</sup> Trimmingham, *Christianity*, 177.

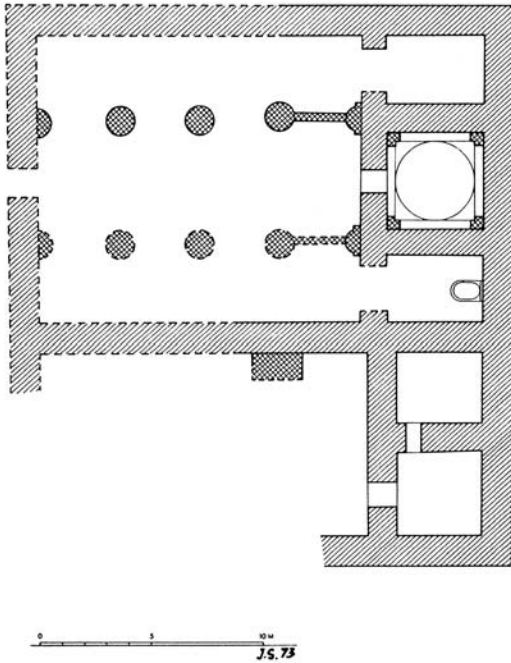


Fig. 24. Raḥaliya, church.

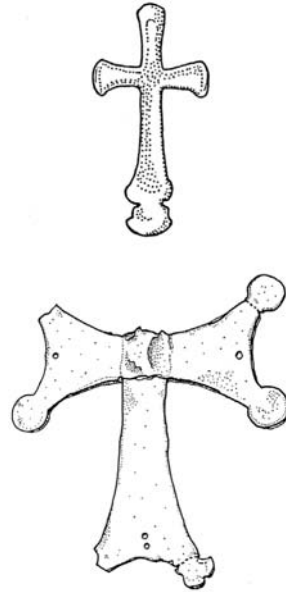


Fig. 25a and b. Jabal Berri, crosses.

buildings exhibit no further decoration.<sup>86</sup> The ground plan of the church in Raḥaliya (fig. 24) shows it to have had a domed choir, a three-aisled nave, and an adjacent chapel with southern termination.<sup>87</sup> It was built of mud bricks and faced with gypsum plaster; no traces of ornamentation could be discovered here either.

The common characteristic of these buildings is their sole decoration, the cross on a stepped pedestal. We know this type of cross from the pre-Islamic Muqātil palace near Kerbela, where it appears engraved on a stucco panel.<sup>88</sup> The second panel, which was later destroyed by Muslim residents, still shows the remains of a trefoil assembly, surmounted by a circle containing a cross.<sup>89</sup> Further, metal and

<sup>86</sup> For the church at Hakh, see de Villard, *Chiese della Mesopotamia*, fig. 40; according to Potts it can be ascribed to Nestorians or those close to them, see n. 90 below.

<sup>87</sup> *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 8 (1976), fig. 13, 14.

<sup>88</sup> Unpublished excavation of 1974.

<sup>89</sup> *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 8 (1976), fig. 35, pl. 47.

mother-of-pearl crosses have been found at Jabal Berri on the east coast of the Arabian Peninsula (fig. 25a and b).<sup>90</sup>

Judging by its furnishings of marble incrustations, mosaics, inlaid wood, silverwork, and other works of toreutic art,<sup>91</sup> the Church of Abraha in Ṣan'ā' would appear to have belonged to the tradition of urban Byzantine art. It was characterized by mosaics with golden backgrounds showing the Cross of Constantine (?) flanked by two other crosses and surrounded by scrolling vines and stars.<sup>92</sup> We do not know whether the Ka'ba in Mecca was already clad with marble panels at that time. The first reports we have are of the furnishings ordered by Ibn az-Zubair.<sup>93</sup>

An important part of the church furnishings was probably provided by stone panels with relief carvings depicting scrolled vines, peacocks, and canthari; the last of which represented the fountain of life and (together with scrolled vines and peacocks) was predominant in the iconography of sixth century Christian art in the Mediterranean region.<sup>94</sup> This is indicated by a fragment from Marib, now in the Ṣan'ā' museum (fig. 26). The front of this limestone block shows a framed image field containing two stylized peacocks facing one another and flanking a large bunch of grapes in the center; the block may once have been part of an ambo or a bema. At the corners of the same block, long rectangular *acroteria* bearing stylized canthari extend up from the image field.<sup>95</sup> These images are also surrounded by frames. The *acroteria* at the corners are connected by a simple tooth-patterned band running above the lower image field. Canthari can also be found on the sides of the *acroteria*, whereas the sides of the lower part of the block are smooth, having originally been internal to the masonry. Similarly stylized peacocks can be seen on an eighth-century sar-

<sup>90</sup> Potts, "Nestorian Crosses," 61ff. fig. 2-7; for depictions of the cross in the Hagia Sophia see Weitzmann, *Studies*, fig. 9; for depictions of the cross in a framed image field to be found on the walls of the church of the monastery of St. Catherine, see Forsyth/Weitzmann, *Sinai*, fig. 10; see also for the crosses at Khaur, Ṣīr Banī Yās, King et al., "Abu Dhabi Islands," 69-70, fig. 3. 4.

<sup>91</sup> Finster and Schmidt in Nebes (ed.), *Arabia Felix*, 72-73.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.; Serjeant and Lewcock, Ṣan'ā', 45; King et al., "Abu Dhabi Islands," 37ff.

<sup>93</sup> al-Azraqī, *Akhbār*, 110ff.; ibid., 141, 202ff., 144; Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, vol. 2, 822; al-Wāqidi, *Maghāzī*, 834; al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, vol. 5, 192; see Finster, "Neuauflage," 94-95.

<sup>94</sup> Costa, *Pre-Islamic Antiquities*, cat. 76; Radt, *Katalog*, pl. 15, 43b; Tindel, "Zafar Museum," 111, with bibliography.

<sup>95</sup> *Corpus des Inscriptions et Antiquités Sud-Arabs: A compilation of stylised forms of cantharus*, vol. 1, *Al-mathāf al-waṭanī Ṣan'ā'* (Louvain, 1977), 147.



Fig. 26. Şan'ā', al-Mathaf al-Waṭanī, relief.

cophagus from Istria, where the birds are evidently pecking at the berries, whilst the sixth-century chair of Maximian in Ravenna displays the same motif at the height of its development.<sup>96</sup> Accordingly a date in the sixth century can be established for the Marib block, which is possibly from the church there.

The only sculpture which has survived is the figure now in the museum in Şan'ā', of a woman holding a child, presumably Mary with the infant Jesus (fig. 27). The highly stylized parallel folds of the woman's cloak and her elongated, oval face are reminiscent of Nubian or perhaps Ethiopian art. Comparison shows, however, that this is an original interpretation of Mary with the infant Jesus without stylistic or iconographic parallels in either country. Both sculptures and relief carving had been highly esteemed in Yemen since very early times, e. g. in funerary art, so that it seems likely that this artistically very simple figure is of local provenance.<sup>97</sup> Although art from the

<sup>96</sup> See Effenberger / Severin, *Museum*, fig. 37. The motif of peacocks pecking at a grape is found on a sarcophagus from Istria (eighth century), *ibid.*, no. 116; for an ambo in the Tris Ekklesias church on Paros (seventh century), where however the peacocks are grouped around a cross, see Jakobs, *Ambone*, pl. 71; further sixth- and seventh-century examples at pp. 131–132.

<sup>97</sup> al-Mathaf al-Waṭanī Şan'ā', no. 1803, width 10 cm, height 24 cm, from Dār al-Gaz near Ibb, limestone coated with plaster. The figure is portrayed in a strictly frontal sitting position, the simply indicated features of her oval face peering out from the palla's mass of highly stylized folds: almond-shaped eyes, the lower eyelid just indicated; a long straight sloping nose with broad sides; a wide, closed mouth. Either the forehead is enclosed by a cloth in parallel folds as a maphorion, or else the hair can



Fig. 27. Ṣan'ā', al-Maṭḥaf al-Waṭānī, woman (Mary?) with child.

be seen looking out from under a cloak pulled over the head. Since the folds of the maphorion in other representations are also usually shown stylized, a headscarf seems probable here as well. The woman is holding the child half on her lap, supporting his back with her left hand whilst her right hand (now missing) once clasped his legs. As it emerges from the cloak, her lower right arm can be seen to be clad in thin material (see Mary on an ivory panel of the Adoration of the Magi, Weitzmann, *Age*, fig. 476). The child's face is turned towards the viewer, whilst his hands are both stretching towards his mother's right breast. Both head and upper torso apparently lay on a cloth. The child's facial features are no longer recognizable. The woman's statuesque breadth is striking, and further emphasized by her wide cloak. Her oval face and broad neck, adorned with a necklace, rise from the folds of an undergarment, probably a chiton with arms. The drapery folds form a semi-circle above her feet, which can be seen peeping out and clad in pointed shoes. The rear view shows the drapery of her cloak falling in parallel folds, similar to those familiar from earlier Yemenite funerary sculpture. Although simple even to the point of being primitive, it cannot be denied that the figure displays a certain majesty.—The debt owed to the archetypal Isis lactans and Maria lactans is evident. The figure has no direct prototype, however, for unlike Isis lactans the figure is shown fully clothed and is not offering the child the breast. All that remains from the standard representation is the posture of the child, which is comparable with that of the child found with the figure of a woman said to have originated in Palestine (fourth/fifth century, see Weitzmann, *Age*, fig. 69). There the woman is shown sitting upright with exposed torso; with her right hand she is offering the child her breast, whilst supporting the half-sitting infant with her left hand. The child's face is turned to face the observer full on and his left arm is raised towards his mother's breast. Most representations of Mary show her with her head



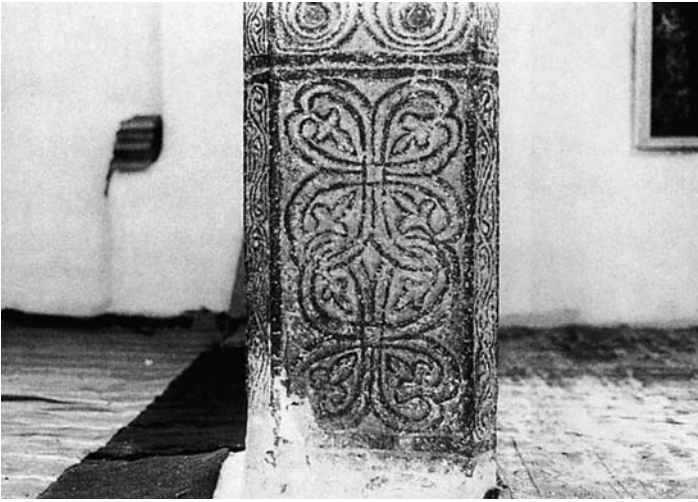


Fig. 28. Shibām/Kawkabān, Great Mosque.

transitional period has in fact been preserved in Yemen, it has unfortunately not been studied yet. Items are to be found not only in Ẓafār but also in Ḥuṣṣn al-‘Urr, Ṣirḥa, Dhamār, and elsewhere.<sup>98</sup>

In addition to the round columns densely ornamented with scrolling vines in Ṣan‘ā’s Great Mosque, examples of sixth-century Yemeni art can be seen in the pilasters in the mosque of Shibām Kawkabān and in the Ṣan‘ā’ Museum (fig. 28). The stylized acanthus capitals of the round columns are in the Ethiopian or Aksumite style, allowing

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slightly inclined, whereas the emphasis here is on the frontality of the enthroned woman. On the other hand, typical representations of Mary enthroned usually show her holding a seated child on her lap and in an equally front facing position.—It would be unusual for a figure of Mary to display a string of pearls such as this one, with triangular elements hanging down. One can, however, find examples showing Mary wearing a garment with a decorative border at her neck, which might in this case have been reinterpreted as a necklace; compare with the stela showing Maria lactans, whose face might be compared with that of Mary on the relief in the Ṣan‘ā’ Museum, Zaloscer, *Kunst*, fig. 62; for a necklace with pendant triangles see the statuette of a woman from Ḍalā’ in the *Corpus des Inscriptions*, vol. 2, 306. Both the type and the representation of the Ṣan‘ā’ Museum relief indicate a date in the fifth/sixth century. This figure of a woman is far removed from its classical and Late Antique precedents, unlike similar representations, which are, however, usually painted or, like the “young woman” formerly known as Isis lactans in the Bode-Museum Berlin, engraved on limestone.—The question of whether this figure can be recognized as being that of Mary with the Infant Jesus, has to be answered in the affirmative. No other such portrayal of a woman is known to exist in the iconography of the Yemen, including that of funerary sculpture.

<sup>98</sup> See n. 129 below.

them to be dated to the period of Ethiopian rule.<sup>99</sup> Whether these columns should be regarded as belonging to religious art remains open, but it appears very probable given the existence of acanthus capitals in the Great Mosque bearing the sign of the cross (fig. 9).

One of the artistic highlights of this tradition of scrolling vine decoration is a square limestone panel in the Zafār museum, possibly originating from one of the town's churches (fig. 29). The framed image field is filled with scrolling vines, whose branches form a symmetrical central composition. Rather than following a realistic pattern of growth, the ornamentation makes use of vegetational elements to represent a shape, showing its proximity to early Islamic art. It was probably created in the sixth/seventh century. The capitals in the Great Mosque of Šan'a' on the other hand appear to show the influence of Justinian architectural sculpture, shown most clearly by the capitals with stylized palmette motifs (cf. fig. 11 and 12).<sup>100</sup>

The columns now supporting the north arcades and ceiling of the Masjid Sunbul in Dhamār (built in the year 1632 according to an inscription) represent a strange conglomeration of different elements (fig. 30). The fluted shafts of the columns consist of two sections, connected to one another in the middle by a flat band surrounded by a torus; they are surmounted by round, stepped capitals decorated

<sup>99</sup> Costa, *Pre-Islamic Antiquities*, pl. 2–4; Radt, *Katalog*, pl. 130–132. For the relationship between the patterns of scrolling vines with those found in Ethiopian art see the church at Dabra Šeyon, Gerster, *Kirchen im Fels.*, fig. 46. 47. For the capitals with cross symbols and their Ethiopian precedents see Finster, "Spolien," 492ff.

<sup>100</sup> The limestone panel measures 65 x 70 cm. The composition is axis-symmetrical. Two vines form the shape of a horizontal, oval vessel whose interior is filled with hanging branches bearing grapes and vine leaves. The two vines running towards one another are bound together at the top and the bottom with small loops, which in themselves in turn emerge into widely spread out leaves. Similar leaves branch off from the large vines, as do fan-shaped vine leaves, lancet shaped pointed leaves, and spiraling scrolls. The corners are covered with vine leaves with grapes hanging from side branches. The apparent naturalism of the carefully executed vine leaves with their drilled eyes and trailing tendrils is countered by the composition, which brings the individual sections of vine together to form a shape. The hanging bunches of grapes are countered by others growing upwards, so that in the end, the direction becomes meaningless. The combination of fan-shaped and lanceolate leaves, the meticulous composition which does not reproduce that of an actually growing plant all show principles of composition found in early Islamic art.—The capitals can be compared to framed capitals from San Vitale in Ravenna (sixth century), if not in detail then at least in terms of structure (Rice, *Byzantinische Kunst*, fig. 30), with capitals to be found in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo or with a capital in the antechamber of the Mosque of Murad I in Çekirge (Kautzsch, *Kapitellstudien*, pl. 38, 630, 632, 43, 728–732).



Fig. 29. Ẓafār, museum, relief.



Fig. 30. Dhamār, Masjid Sunbul, capital.

with alternating bands of tooth patterns and rosettes. The upper stepped capitals in turn bear a capital framed by large, finely grooved acanthus fronds. The cloverleaf shaped flowers and elongated diagonal petals of the delicate rosette friezes encircling the stepped capitals remind one of rosettes found in Sasanian toreutics, although there the diagonal petals are still fitted into the curve of the flowers.<sup>101</sup> Flower shapes with diagonally longer petals can be found in Syrian and Nubian church decoration, on portals there dating to the sixth century. Ornamentation using this shape of flower has a long history going back to the third century BCE. The flowers can be seen in a very crude form on the bases of fluted columns from Shibām and Marib;<sup>102</sup> and as an individual motif adorning decorative panels found in Ẓafār. Whether this particular shape of flower had a specifically Christian meaning during the late period must remain unanswered, however, in the light of the Christian context it is probable.

<sup>101</sup> For doors, see n. 55 above; the cup of Khusrau in the Bibliothèque Nationale (sixth century), Pope, *Survey*, pl. 203; for rosettes with elongated diagonal petals above the entrance to the baptistery of the “Rivergate-Church” in Faras, see Godlewski, *Faras*, fig. 34; see also the cross panel from the church at Quṣūr/Failaka (fig. 12).

<sup>102</sup> See Grohmann, *Arabien*, fig. 97, 82.



As has been demonstrated, the decorative elements of the stucco ornamentation in the churches of eastern Arabia were dependent on, or rather part of the Sasanian artistic tradition.<sup>103</sup> The bronze door-fittings found on the gates of the north portal of the Great Mosque in Ṣanʿāʾ are relics of the religious art of the sixth century.<sup>104</sup> The depiction of double arcades in which crosses, rosettes, or stars could be placed is typical and can be seen in Syria on similar doors made of stone in imitation of bronze-clad doors.<sup>105</sup>

### *Secular Architecture*

According to a tradition, the town of Mecca was originally not a town at all; it was only later that the original round houses were rebuilt as houses on a rectangular plan.<sup>106</sup> The tradition also has it that it was only in the second half of the seventh century that Muʿāwiya ibn abī Sufyān transformed Mecca into a proper town by causing large architectural complexes to be built throughout—much to the disapproval of the companions of the Prophet.<sup>107</sup> K. A. C. Creswell has reinforced this view with his opinion on the Arabs' lack of competence at that time. By way of contrast, it was the same Arabs around Muhammad who just seven years after his death founded a planned city in Mesopotamia with a traditional ritual, the city of Kufa.<sup>108</sup> At the center lay the mosque with the *dār al-imāra*, around which the various tribes were settled. Broad streets led towards the center (at right angles?), and second and third order roads followed the main arteries (or crossed them?). The *sūqs* were established on the broader streets. The

<sup>103</sup> The flat ring-like capitals of the small columns or shafts bearing the architrave and the haunch of the arch are worthy of remark. The architrave is covered by a scrolling vine whose smooth, ribbon-like stem forms a series of perfect circles. Inside these are six-leaved and four-leaved rosettes, stylized lotus blossoms, and bunches of three or four lanceolate, veined leaves. Seen altogether, the scrolling vine resembles that in the church at al-Ḥira, see n. 77 above; see also Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, pl. 12b,c.

<sup>104</sup> Serjeant and Lewcock, *Ṣanʿāʾ*, fig. 18, 34.

<sup>105</sup> Ruprechtsberger, *Syrien*, fig. 34; see n. 55 above.

<sup>106</sup> Kister, "Some Reports," 86ff.; the houses were meant to be open to all and not be rented out.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, vol. 1, 22ff.; cf. in detail Djait, *Al-Kufa*, 91ff.

entire complex reminds one of a Late Antique town.<sup>109</sup> How can this be explained?

The South Arabian civilizations were, as it is well known, urban civilizations, examples being the early urban civilizations of the South-West, Marib, Yathill, Qarnawū, and Shabwa.<sup>110</sup> It is not known when the first cities were founded. What is known is that Marib already had a city wall at the time the first monumental irrigation works were built, possibly in the middle of the third millennium BCE.<sup>111</sup>

Large towns could be found in areas outside South Arabia as well, for instance on the coast which flourished during the Seleucid era, such as Gerrha which was regarded as a trading center for aromatic and Indian goods, or Leuke Kome.<sup>112</sup> The city of Thāj, on the route between Hufūf and Basra, had massive city walls 4.5 m thick, enclosing the city in an oblong of 725 m N, 685 m S, 535 m E, and 590 m W. Corner towers and intermediate towers secured the stone wall (fig. 31).<sup>113</sup> The entire coast presumably formed a continuous chain of urban settlements. The same is true of other coastal cities, such as Qanā in the south.<sup>114</sup> Urban life could be found flourishing in the oases, too, as in ‘Ain as-Subāghawī, ‘Ain Dār, etc.<sup>115</sup> The northwestern cities of Dēdān (Khuraibat al-‘Ulā) and Taimā’ were of some importance, perhaps also Dūmat al-Jandal, al-Ḥijr (Madā’in Ṣāliḥ), and further south, Qaryat al-Faw.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 118; Claude, *Byzantinische Stadt*, 43ff. on questions of town planning in Late Antique period.

<sup>110</sup> Doe, *Südarabien*, 66ff.; id., *Monuments*, 115ff.; in Shabwa the individual tribes evidently occupied separate districts of the town, similarly to what can still be observed in twentieth century Ṣan‘ā’, Breton, “Fouilles,” 80.

<sup>111</sup> Finster, “Stadtmauer von Marib,” 75; recently confirmed by C 14 dating of samples, giving a date of  $\pm 2358$  BCE for the mud-brick wall near Wādī Ḍana.

<sup>112</sup> For the Greek colonies on the eastern coast see Potts in Boucharlat and Salles (ed.), *Arabie Orientale*, 105; Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 1, 85ff.; Casson (ed.), *Periplus*, 143–144; Kirwan in al-Ansary, *Studies*, vol. 2, 58, identifies the port with today’s ‘Ainūna, near the Gulf of ‘Aqaba.

<sup>113</sup> Potts in Boucharlat and Salles (eds.), *Arabie Orientale*, 105; Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 44ff., 107ff.; Gazdar et al., “Excavations at Thaj,” 67ff., 83; Mohammed et al. in *Aṭlāl* 9, 41ff.; Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 48.

<sup>114</sup> Doe, *Südarabien*, 184ff.; see ad-Dūr, Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 288; E. Haer-inck, *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 3.3, 190ff.

<sup>115</sup> Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 49.

<sup>116</sup> The first walled towns in northwestern Arabia are said to have arisen about 1300 BCE, see Parr in al-Ansary, *Studies*, vol. 2, 47; al-Ansary, *Qaryat al-Faw; Āthār al-Mamlaka al-‘Arabiyya as-Sa‘ūdiyya*, 38; see Healey, “The Nabataeans,” 108ff.; for al-Ḥijr, see Daifullah al-Talhi and Mohammed al-Ibrahim, *Aṭlāl* 12, 21ff.; see Parr in



As mentioned above, Najrān played an important role as a center of pilgrimage from the sixth century on, as did Mecca (fig. 7 and 8).<sup>117</sup> Mecca evidently had a completely different character, however, not being the center of a martyr cult but possibly that of an ancestor cult, through the connection with Ismāʿīl and Hagar. The town presumably began its existence not as a town but as a shrine, a center of veneration with facilities for accommodation, such can be seen today at Qabr al-Hūd in the Ḥaḍramawt.<sup>118</sup> The architectural design of the shrine of Macoraba in the classical and Late Antique periods is not known to us. The shrine need not, however, be identical with the shrine *sine tectu* we know to have been the early Kaʿba. At the time of Muhammad, the Kaʿba conformed to a tradition of temple architecture that, as we have seen, was widespread above all in the post-Christian era.<sup>119</sup> At the time of Muhammad, the family clans were located all around the shrine. The important men of the town met in an architecturally impressive government building to the west—as in a *buleuterion*. We know of the existence of baths, various *sūqs*, a hospital, and cemeteries outside the town—facilities not only restricted to larger towns or cities.<sup>120</sup> Yathrib appears to have been somewhat more urban than Mecca. The town's skyline (*uṭm*, *āṭām*) was characterized by high-rise buildings presumably but not necessarily dependent on south Arabian architecture. High-rises were after all widespread throughout the ancient world, as shown by houses in Fustāṭ, Alexandria, and Sīrāf (of the eleventh century), although they could differ in building material.<sup>121</sup> The various tribes resided in their own districts. Markets and religious buildings must have been assigned to each quarter. Given the presence of such a large Jewish community,

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Al-Ansary, *Studies*, vol. 2, 47; Jamaluddin S. and S. Ali in *Aṭlāl* 12, 21ff.; for the wall at Taimā', see al-Talhi and al-Ibrahim, "Second Season," 77.

<sup>117</sup> For the topography of Najrān see Shahid, *Martyrs*, 26ff.; see n. 18 above; for the ceramics see Dayton, "Pottery," 31ff.

<sup>118</sup> Rubin, "From Jāhiliyya," 97ff.; Rusafa also was more of a pilgrimage center than a town during the Byzantine period, see Trimingham, *Christianity*, 237; Ulbert, "Resafa-Sergiopolis"; Finster, "Cubical Yemeni mosques," 49ff.

<sup>119</sup> Trimingham, *Christianity* 260; Shahid, *Fifth Century*, 510f.; Finster, "Neuauflage," 92; de Villard, "Introduzione," 98.

<sup>120</sup> For Dār an-Nadwa see Fahd, *Panthéon*, 60; Trimingham, *Christianity*, 260; King, "Creswell's Appreciation," 98–99; including a Christian graveyard at Dhū Ṭuwā; Kister, "Some Reports," 150.

<sup>121</sup> Schwarz, *Iran im Mittelalter*, 60; Finster, "Neuauflage," 91f.; King, "Creswell's Appreciation," 99; Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. 4, 70ff.; Wiet, *Cairo*, 18–19, 36.

there must also have been synagogues.<sup>122</sup> All precious items were imported by caravans to and from Syria, Ethiopia, and Mesopotamia. Mecca and Yathrib had no surrounding walls, but Madā'in Šālīḥ had a wall dating from the sixth century BCE (?), as did Taimā' and al-Ḥinna.<sup>123</sup> To what extent these were still in working order in the sixth century CE must remain unanswered. Yathrib had no walls either, which says much for the political situation of the times or for the cities' policy of alliances, only Ṭā'if was surrounded by a wall.<sup>124</sup>

Najrān for example, gives the appearance of having been enclosed by rectangular walls. In reality its boundaries were delimited by house facades, like those found at Shibām in the Ḥaḍramawt, and the sixth century saw it spread rapidly north-eastwards (fig. 8).<sup>125</sup> An east-west axis can be observed within the enclosed city, a feature also found at Shibām.<sup>126</sup>

Besides the urban culture of the sixth and seventh centuries (which may perhaps have been at a lower level than that of the third century) there was a huge number of castles and palaces (*quṣūr*) all throughout the western half of the peninsula according to al-Ḥamdānī. Unfortunately, none of these castles has been investigated or surveyed in any depth. We have a sketch of Ḥuṣn al-'Urr and an aerial photograph of the castle in Qana'.<sup>127</sup> Investigations have not yet been carried out and other pre-Islamic sites are rarely recognizable on the ground. How richly these palaces and castles were furnished can be guessed at from al-Ḥamdānī's descriptions.<sup>128</sup> Capitals showing animal fights, and beautiful relief carvings of scrolling vines from Ḥuṣn al-'Urr (fig.

<sup>122</sup> Lecker, "Jāhiliyya"; cf. al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vol. 22, 105.

<sup>123</sup> For the town walls of Dūmat al-Jandal, see *Āthār al-Mamlaka al-'Arabiyya as-Sa'ūdiyya*, 82, 97 (Qurayya); for the town walls of Taimā', which Parr dates to the time of Nabonid around 550 BCE, *ibid.*, 77, 79; Abu Duruk, *Introduction*, pl. 5; for the town walls of al-Ḥinna, *ibid.*, 134; for the town walls of Ṭhāj, *ibid.*, 137, 139; al-Dayel and al-Shadukhi, "Dumat Al-Jandal," 64ff.

<sup>124</sup> King, "Creswell's Appreciation," 99.

<sup>125</sup> Ryckmans, "Al-Ukhdūd," 55ff.; Serjeant, "Ukhdūd," 572f.; Zarins et al., "Najran/Ukhdud Survey," 22ff.; this type of enclosing wall, "systèmes défensifs faits d'édifices contigus," can be seen to have existed in Yemen at a much earlier date, see Breton, "Fortifications," 142ff.

<sup>126</sup> An east-west axis can also be seen in the layout of Shabwa, leading from the west gate with its adjacent palace to the temple in the east (see Breton, *ibid.*, 71) or in Barāqish/Yathill; street axes running at right angles, above all colonnaded streets, are also characteristic of Late Antique towns, see Claude, *Byzantinische Stadt*, 60.

<sup>127</sup> Grohmann, *Arabien*, fig. 99; v. Wissmann and Höfner, *Beiträge*, pl. 9, 10, fig. 16, 17; Doe, *Südarabien*, pl. 3-6; *id.*, Ḥuṣn al-Ghurāb," 191ff., fig. on p. 196.

<sup>128</sup> Müller, "Ancient Castles," 139ff.

32) and Ẓafār (probably sixth century) bear witness to the fittings of these buildings.<sup>129</sup>

Quṣūr also existed on the eastern side of the Arabian Peninsula, as we know from the scarcely published excavations at Jumaira in Dubai (fig. 33).<sup>130</sup> At first glance the complex appears to belong to the classic Umayyad period. According to Baramki, its excavator, however, the ceramics indicate a Sasanian occupation—something which does not of course exclude later usage.<sup>131</sup> What we have here is the typical ground plan of a square or rectangular palace complex characterized by a semi-circular corner and intermediate towers. Unfortunately, the inner rooms cannot be distinguished. What is clear, however, is that this architecture forms part of the same Sasanian artistic tradition as well as the palaces or quṣūr in Mesopotamia and in Iran. We know of similar buildings from Qaṣr Muqātil near ‘Ain at-Tamr, from Sirāf, from Bahrain, from Persis, etc.<sup>132</sup>

<sup>129</sup> For ornaments from the palace at Shabwa see Breton, “Fouilles de Shabwa II,” fig. 1a–16; or from the Raidān palace in Ẓafār, Museum Ẓafār, see Tindel, “Zafar Museum,” 111; Müller “Ancient Castles”; Grohmann, *Arabien*, fig. 99; v. Wissmann and Höfner, *Beiträge*; Doe, *Südarabien*, plate 2, 3–6. The vigorous scrolling vines on the pilasters from Ḥuṣn al-‘Urr emerge from two chalice-shaped acanthus plants, rising upwards in oval loops and terminating in two spread-out vine leaves or an artful composition. Despite the seemingly more naturalistic approach showing the plants with rounded grapes, spiraling tendrils, two types of leaf shape, overlapping stems, and in part dense composition, the conclusive, organized composition in plate 18b can be compared to the scrolling vine relief in Ẓafār (Doe, *Südarabien*, pl. 16). Despite the differences in material and quality, the similarity to the vines on Maximian’s Chair (547) in Ravenna is tangible. Here too, relief carving and frame are on the same level, the vines lie flat against the background, see Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art*, fig. 172–174. A similar motif, but executed with more vigorous forms, may be seen in the scrolling vines on a pilaster from Bāwit, again from the sixth century, see also Effenberger, *Koptische Kunst*, fig. 62; Keall, “Forerunners of Umayyad Art,” 11ff.; id., “Second Attempt.” A remarkable relief carving from Ḥuṣn al-‘Urr now in the Mukalla Museum must once have belonged to a fountain or basin. The long, narrow panel shows fishes swimming in the waves, a motif later found on installations in Islamic palaces.

<sup>130</sup> Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 298 fig. 24.

<sup>131</sup> Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 300; according to the opinion of Boucharlat the ceramics found at Jumaira are Islamic, too, in: Boucharlat/ Salles, “Arabie Orientale,” 196.

<sup>132</sup> *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 9 (1976), pl. 74, 75, fig. 16; Whitehouse and Williamson in, “Sasanian Maritime Trade,” fig. 3; Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, vol. 2, 111ff. fig. 6; Van den Berghe, “Decouverte”; see also the mud-brick fort at Mleiha (first/second century CE), Boucharlat/Mouton, “Mleiha,” 13ff.; a similar *qaṣr* can be found at Qaryat al-Faw enclosing the town’s sūq, see al-Ansary, *Qaryat al-Faw*, 34. The peninsula’s tradition of such buildings goes some way towards explaining the Umayyad palaces.





Fig. 32. Mukalla, museum, reliefs.

The picture that our present state of knowledge gives of the Arabian Peninsula in the sixth/seventh centuries is very incomplete, but it does emerge from an overall view of the literary tradition (which by necessity could barely find mention here), considered together with the individual instances of archeological remains that have been discovered, that the Arabian Peninsula was a part of the contemporary civilized world. Influences from the northwest and the northeast (i.e. from the Sasanian and Byzantine regions) characterized the culture found in northern and eastern Arabia much as had been the case in pre-Christian times. An independent and original culture had developed in Yemen during the pre-Christian era, whose artistic repertoire came to be influenced by Late Antique patterns from the Mediterranean

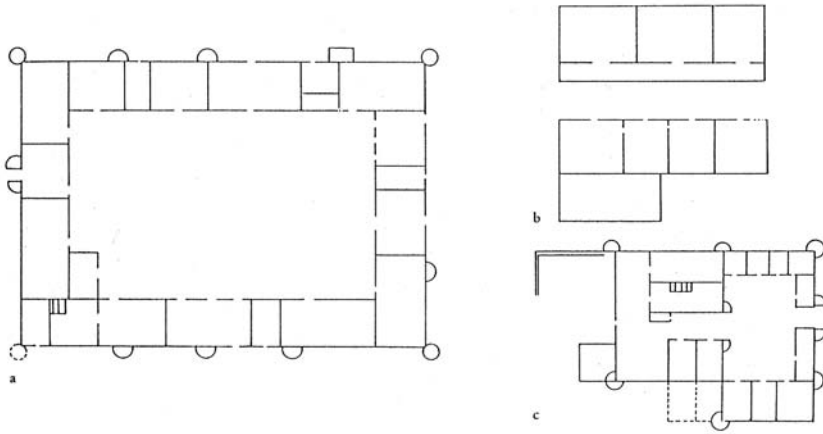


Fig. 33. Jumaira.

world. Urban architecture and religious buildings remained true to their existing traditions, that is to say, that evidently the whole culture remained independent and was merely influenced in certain forms by exchanges of ideas and by imports.

The picture of the Arabian Peninsula traditionally drawn by Orientalist history can be seen to require re-examination in many respects. In order to understand Islam, however, it is necessary to be acquainted with its place of origin and to grasp its history. The Prophet's native town, Mecca, lay in a country that was part of the culture and history of the Middle East.



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## MECCA ON THE CARAVAN ROUTES IN PRE-ISLAMIC ANTIQUITY

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### *Introduction*

One of the principal questions in the history of pre-Islamic Mecca is whether Mecca did maintain close trading connections with South and North Arabia and Mesopotamia and participated in the Trans-arabian caravan trade, or whether it was an isolated enclave whose rise had nothing to do with commercial activity. An important contribution to the study of pre-Islamic Meccan trade has been made by Patricia Crone in her *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, which has once again raised the question of Mecca's position in Arabian trade as a whole, and on the Incense Road in particular. Above all, Crone objects to the idea of Meccan commercial supremacy, especially in spices.<sup>1</sup>

According to Crone, transportation of perfumes by sea had become the norm already in the first century BCE, and the overland routes could have survived the competition for long.<sup>2</sup> Crone therefore concludes: "It is not clear why some scholars believe the overland route to have continued into the fourth century CE, or even later or why Islamicists generally assume it to have retained its importance until the time of Mecca's rise to commercial prominence, or to have recovered it by then."<sup>3</sup>

Though Meccan traders were active in areas as far away from Mecca as Syria and Najrān,<sup>4</sup> Crone intends to show that they did not trade there in any kind of perfumes or spices.<sup>5</sup> The main commodities of the Meccans were leather and other merchandise of local importance,

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<sup>1</sup> Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 50.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>4</sup> The sources even affirm commercial relations with the Yemen, yet according to Crone they appear to apply this term to "the area between Mecca and Najrān rather than the southernmost corner of the peninsula" (ibid., 132).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 51–83.

which had never been scarce anywhere else.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the predominance of the sea routes, Crone adduces other reasons why Mecca could not have participated in the incense trade: Mecca lay far away from the Incense Road,<sup>7</sup> and Arabian frankincense and related products had ceased to be of economic importance in the Greco-Roman world, since by the third century CE the Roman market for perfumes had begun to collapse and was never to recover.<sup>8</sup>

Crone's work has been subjected to a careful analysis by R. B. Serjeant, who has concentrated primarily on the Arabic sources. Serjeant's starting-point is the fact that the valley of Mecca had been settled by Quṣayy in spite of its lack of natural resources, and that the Meccans consequently had been forced to import their foodstuffs, i.e., to engage in long distance caravan trade. They therefore had to have some kind of income, and pilgrimage to the Meccan sanctuary must have involved trading.<sup>9</sup> Serjeant points out that Yemen and Syria were the most important suppliers of Mecca with grain.<sup>10</sup> In his re-reading of the Arabic sources, he shows that the Qurashī merchants did trade in Yemenite luxury cloth, perfumes, and spices, that they could buy them in Aden, where their presence is attested fairly well, that the leather goods of the Meccans could have been of high importance to remote markets such as Dhofar and Syria, and that the Meccans did really trade in those kinds of wares, either producing them themselves or buying them from elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

Serjeant points out that the sources which Crone calls into question do not suggest that the Meccans dominated the exchange of goods between northern Arabia and southern Syria.<sup>12</sup> That the Quraysh did engage in trading, however, is much less unlikely than Crone makes it out to appear. Even though she denies that Q 106:1–4 mention the Quraysh's winter and summer caravans, Serjeant convincingly defends the notion that the passage does refer to the Meccans' trading journeys to Yemen and Syria, which were based on security pacts with the neighboring tribes.<sup>13</sup> Of crucial importance for a proper understanding of the role of Mecca in trans-Arabian commerce, are the special

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 107–108.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 134–136.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>9</sup> Serjeant, "Meccan Trade," 473.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 474.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 474–476, 482.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 475.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 478–479.

status enjoyed by the Quraysh in virtue of their belonging to the Banū Kināna, and the protection granted by them to any merchant asking for it on Meccan territory.<sup>14</sup>

Serjeant's analysis of the Arabic sources can be considered exhaustive. The present article proposes to offer a number of supplementary observations based on classical and South Arabian sources which are likely to throw more light on the problem of Mecca's position in the trans-Arabian caravan trade. The data to be reviewed below strongly suggests that the caravan trade routes functioned throughout the entire pre-Islamic period, that they passed through the territory around today's Mecca, and that the inhabitants of Southern Ḥijāz did trade with South Arabia and East Africa in perfumes and spices.

*Sources Bearing on the Caravan Trade between the First and  
Seventh Centuries CE: A Short Review*

According to Crone, the state of our knowledge about Meccan trade is so vague, and the information given by the sources so contradictory, that any attempt at reconstruction is futile.<sup>15</sup> A mere enumeration of the sources mentioning the importance of the caravan trade through Arabia to the Mediterranean would suffice to show that Crone's position is formulated too categorically.

1) One of the most interesting documents in this respect is the inscription of an unknown Axumite king copied in Axum by Cosmas Indicopleustes (2.60–63), which has become known as Monumentum Adulitanum II (MA II = OGIS 199 = RIE 277). The Axumite king here states that the goal of his campaign in West and South Arabia—ranging from Leuke Kome (al-Wajh) to the Sabean frontiers—was the restoration of peace on the land and sea routes. This implies that the caravan trade along the West Arabian coast of the Red Sea in the first centuries CE was state-supported at least by Axum.

The date of this inscription is highly controversial. Yet a number of considerations, which can be presented only schematically within the scope of this article, suggest that it must have been composed at the end of the second century CE. According to the inscription CIH 308, the Sabeans, ruled by 'Alhān Nahfān, had concluded a treaty

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 484.

<sup>15</sup> Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 166.

with the Axumite Negus Gadūrat against Ḥimyar.<sup>16</sup> From MA II it can be inferred that the Axumites did not invade Saba', since on its way back the Axumite army crossed the Red Sea after just having reached Sabean territory, which would hardly have been possible without friendly relations between the two states.

As we know from the inscription Ja 631/21–22, the Axumite army under the command of Baygat, bearing the title of “son of the Negus” (*bygt / wld / ngshyn*), invaded Ḥimyar and occupied its capital Ṣafār. According to his name, this Axumite “prince” appears to have been of Began descent. Since the subjugation of the Bega took place during the reign of an unknown Axumite king, more specifically, the author of MA II, the latter probably ought to be dated earlier than Ja 631. The latest possible dating for the Axumite invasion described in Ja 631 is the second quarter of the third century CE, while the period between 210 and 230 CE is also possible.<sup>17</sup> Yet the text of MA II does not indicate any kind of Axumite presence in South Arabia. This might suggest that MA II (OGIS 199) goes back to the first years of the reign of 'Alhān Nahfān, i.e., the end of the second century CE.

2) The graffito RES 1850 mentions a caravan belonging to a certain Ḥaḍramī trader and protected by a military detachment.<sup>18</sup> Although an absolute dating of RES 1850 is hardly possible, it stems at the earliest from the first or second centuries CE.

3) One of the most important and interesting Sabean inscriptions of the third century CE, Ja 577/10–13, mentions the presence of 'qb / *ngshyn*—the military commander of the Axumite Negus—in Najrān, which constituted the hub of the trade routes running from South Arabia to the north and northeast. The commander's stay in Najrān can only have been motivated by a need to defend the commercial activity of the Axumite merchants and their associates. As regards the latter, they can only have been Roman and, possibly, Ḥaḍramī traders.

4) An inscription by a Jewish trader, Kosmas, dating to the fourth century CE was found in the South Arabian port Qana', which was one of the most important trading stations between India and the Mediterranean.<sup>19</sup> The inscription records Kosmas' prayer for the welfare of his ships and caravan.

<sup>16</sup> Robin, *Sheba*, 1137.

<sup>17</sup> Robin, “Première intervention,” 150.

<sup>18</sup> See the recent analysis by Robin, “Caravane yéménite.”

<sup>19</sup> See Bowersock, “New Greek Inscription.”

5) A number of inscriptions from northwestern Arabia appear to confirm the continuing use of the caravan routes and of the building activities along them.<sup>20</sup> Regarding the sixth century CE, we are in possession of direct information about Byzantine caravans trading between Axum and the Mediterranean.<sup>21</sup>

### *Why were the Caravans Needed?*

As we know from the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, South Arabian incense was transported simultaneously by land and by sea, at least since the Greeks and Romans had established trade contacts with South Arabian ports under the last Ptolemies (27.9. 8; 28.9.19). It appears that the information given by the *Periplus* on the naval transport of frankincense concerns its exportation to the port of Omana (36.12.8) and to India (39.13.8). As we know from the text, the maritime traders had to reach Qana' in July or August (28.9.20–21). At that time, the southwest monsoon makes the way back to the Red Sea impossible. The only way forward seems to have been via Omana in the Persian Gulf and to the Indian coast.

If it is true that the caravans from South Arabia to the Mediterranean Sea had been in use throughout the entire pre-Islamic period, why were they not substituted by Roman ships? After all, this way of transport would have been easier, safer, and cheaper for the traders. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* in fact gives one of the answers to this question: When the ships reached the South Arabian shore, they were already fully loaded with Indian goods such as pepper, which was the most important export article, and malabathrum<sup>22</sup> (56.19.16–17). Of course, if the traders had really been interested in taking aboard South Arabian spices and incense, they could have left some space on their ships. Yet apparently they were not doing it. Let us try to establish the reason.

According to the timetable for the departure of trading ships from Roman ports on the Red Sea, given in the *Periplus*, those who were going to the ports of East Africa and South Arabia had to start in

<sup>20</sup> See Zayadine, "Espace urbain."

<sup>21</sup> Theophanes, *Chronicle*, 223; John Malala, *Chronographia*, 433, which pertains to the events of the mid-fourth century CE (Glaser, *Abessinier*, 179).

<sup>22</sup> Malabathrum is a spice of Indian origin; the name comes from the Sanskrit *tamālaparta*, "tamāla-leaf." See Dioscorides, *De materia medica* 1.12.1; Pliny, *Natural History* 12.129.

September or a little earlier (6.3.6–7; 24.8.12; 28.9.20–21). Traders heading for India, who had to cross the Arabian Sea, had to plan differently and start in July (56.18.16). In order to reach Qana', an important point of departure for India and a port from which the exportation of frankincense on the way back was possible, one had to cross the Gulf of Aden. There the southwest monsoon (*Africus indicus*, blowing from the southwest to the northeast) exploited for reaching India on the open sea was already quite strong. Since it is active from April to September,<sup>23</sup> the author of the *Periplus* recommends that one start to India before September.

The northeast monsoon (*Boreas indicus*, blowing from the northeast to the southwest) sets in October and lasts until March. The traders had to start from India as early as possible, since those who reached the South Arabian coast too late had to spend the winter in Moskha Limen (Dhofar) (32.11.1–3). The best time for departure from India and reaching the Red Sea ports was thus late autumn. Yet in Dhofar the first harvest of frankincense is reaped between April and June, while in the eastern Najd the top quality gum is harvested from mid-June to mid-September.<sup>24</sup> In both cases, harvest thus took place too early for the Roman sea traders. Although the second crop of Dhofarī frankincense could be harvested at the beginning of November, it was of lower quality and it was not reaped annually.<sup>25</sup> Those who spent the winter in Moskha Limen—which, according to the *Periplus*, was the exception—could thus export only the second harvest.

Due to both climatic and economic conditions, therefore, Roman naval traders were neither interested in, nor capable of taking aboard incense from Qana'. This conclusion is confirmed archeologically: Only a limited amount of Indian merchandise has been discovered at Qana', since the ships stopped there on their way to India, but hardly used it on the way back.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Böcker, "Monsunschiffahrt."

<sup>24</sup> Morris, "Harvesting of Frankincense," 234, 243–247.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

<sup>26</sup> Sedov, "Qana' (Yemen)," 25; Sedov, "Sea-Trade," 372.

*The Position of Southern Ḥijāz on the Incense Road*

Mecca's position on the Incense Road is determined above all by the geological relief of the southern Ḥijāz. In order to establish this, it is necessary to review in some detail Alessandro de Maigret's recent study of the subject, which argues that the itinerary from Bisha to Medina went neither through aṭ-Ṭā'if nor through Mecca.

According to de Maigret, the way to Medina had to pass through al-ʿUlaba via the lava fields of Ḥarrat al-Buqūm and Wādī Karā, where a number of water sources were supposedly located, and then via ʿUkāz.<sup>27</sup> As possible stops along the way, the following points are marked out: 1) Wādī Ranya; 2) the outskirts of Jarab, after which the road led through the lava fields of Ḥarrat al-Buqūm; 3) Wādī Karā; and 4) the mouth of the *ḥarra* at an oasis in Wādī Turba near today's al-ʿUlaba (al-ʿIlaba).<sup>28</sup> De Maigret suggests that from ʿUkāz the caravan road went in the direction of Wādī Sawāmīd, which is the first tributary of Wādī al-ʿAqīq. There the caravan would be 15 km away from the modern town of al-ʿUshayra and at the mouth of Sahl Rukba. The latter is a large corridor, limited from the west by the extensive lava fields of Ḥarrat Rahāt and from the east by Ḥarrat Ḥaḍan and Ḥarrat al-Kishb.<sup>29</sup>

However, it is highly unlikely that caravans heading for the Mediterranean actually used this itinerary. Recent archeological investigations have revealed no water supply in Ḥarrat al-Buqūm,<sup>30</sup> and the only source to the north of Wādī Karā would be that of ʿAynīn. W. Thesiger's expedition to Ethiopia in 1934 has demonstrated the difficulty of moving through lava fields such as these: in twelve days, twelve of his eighteen camels died.<sup>31</sup> In any case, a caravan would have had to travel via Wādī Rīḥān to Jabal Sak and Jabal ʿĀn to the west and make at least two extra stops in Bī'r ʿĀn and Bī'r Shurayla, after which it could have joined the main path of the Incense Road in ʿUshayra. Yet taking this route would have entailed a considerable waste of time, especially if one wanted to continue to northwest Arabia.

<sup>27</sup> De Maigret, "Frankincense Road," 319.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

<sup>30</sup> Whitcomb, *Review of Archaeological Study*, 59.

<sup>31</sup> Thesiger, *Brunnen der Wüste*, 27.



It would have made far more sense for traders coming from Bisha to go not to 'Ukāz but to aṭ-Ṭā'if, where they could take part in important fairs and the religious ceremonies that would usually accompany these. After aṭ-Ṭā'if the road split into two branches, one to Mecca and one leading directly to Medina.

According to Crone, Mecca was not known to classical writers.<sup>32</sup> This in fact provides her with one of the arguments for maintaining that Mecca lay far away from the Incense Road, and that any stopover there would have been pointless.<sup>33</sup> As is shown above, the course of the Incense Road could lead neither to the north nor to the northeast of Bisha. Geologically and topographically, therefore, Mecca had to lie on the Incense Road. Crone questions the identification of Μακοράβα as mentioned by Ptolemy (Geography 213; 6.7.32, located at 73°20' and 22°00'), with Mecca.<sup>34</sup> Yet Ptolemy's Macoraba does not, as is often suggested, reflect Epigraphic South Arabian (henceforth abbreviated as ESA) *mkrb* ("a Jewish synagogue"), since Greek \*k (κ) very rarely corresponds to sem. \*k.<sup>35</sup> It seems much more probable to derive the Greek name from Arabic *maghrib* ("West"). Taking into consideration that the map of Arabia that was drafted by Ptolemy was based on the net of trade routes, one may suppose that the southwestern Ḥijāz, and especially the region around today's Mecca, was known to the Greeks and Romans in the mid-second century CE as "the West."

### *The Earliest References to the Trade Activity of the Arabs in Classical Sources*

Agatharchides of Cnidus (mid-second century CE) mentions the exportation of an East African spice "which is called *larimna* in Arabic" from East Africa to Arabia.<sup>36</sup> *Larimna* corresponds to the name of the god *rmn* (*rummān* / *rimmān* / *rammān* / *rīmān*) in ESA,

<sup>32</sup> Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 137.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 109, 149.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 134–136. Cf. von Wissmann and Höfner, *Beiträge*, 12.

<sup>35</sup> See possible examples, taken from the map of Arabia by Ptolemy and from Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*: Κιναιδοκολπίται (19; 6.7.5) < Kinda + Kalb (?); Κρυπτός λιμήν (85; 6.7.12) < Khawr Kalba (?); Ἀσκίται (170; 6.7.26) < Ḥasik; Ὀβράκα (178; 6.7.28) < Mabrak an-Nāqa; Διοσκορίδους (288; 6.7.45) < ASA \*D-ŠKRD; *Capeus* (Plin. NH. 6.147) < Kuwait; *Canon* (Plin. NH. 6.158) < ASA KNN; *cancamum* (1.12; 12.98–99) < ASA *kmkm*.

<sup>36</sup> Agatharchides, *Erythraean Sea*, 101.

which is known from the inscriptions CIH 140 and CIH 209. The supposition that *rmn* is a loanword in ESA can be ruled out.<sup>37</sup> However, Agatharchides does not give the ESA form of the name, but the Classical Arabic one, which is clearly indicated by his use of the definite article *al-*, inverted to *la-* in the Greek rendering, since the resulting combination of the consonants (λρμ) is hardly possible in Greek even with Semitic loanwords. The original form behind the Greek *larimna* is thus *ar-rummān*. Its basic meaning both in Classical Arabic and in ESA is “pomegranate” or a “fragrant fruit of a tree.”<sup>38</sup> Most probably, *larimna* / *ar-rummān* corresponds to *roman* (*Punica granatum*), of which eight species are known in Ethiopia.<sup>39</sup>

The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (ca. 40–70 CE) mentions a people called Κανραῖται inhabiting the regions adjacent to the southern frontier of Nabataea (20.7. 11). Against those Κανραῖται the princes and tyrants of Arabia waged wars. So far, no satisfactory explanation of the origin of this name has been put forward. There cannot be any connection between the Κανραῖται and Qarnaw, the capital of Maʿīn, as it is sometimes supposed,<sup>40</sup> since the latter lies much more to the south than the region of the Κανραῖται described in the *Periplus*. As pointed out above, Greek \*k (κ) often corresponds to Sem. \*ḡ on the map of the Western Arabia of Ptolemy: Κάσσανιτῶν χώρα (28; 6. 7. 6) ESA ḠSN (cf. also Κάσανδρεῖς<sup>41</sup> and *Casani*<sup>42</sup>). The name of Κανραῖται can be derived from the name of Ghamr (dhī Kinda)—a place ca. 90 km to the northeast of today’s Mecca. The vicinity of Κανραῖται and Μακόραβα also confirms the location of Μακόραβα in the region of Mecca, which was doubted by Crone.<sup>43</sup>

According to the *Periplus*, these Kanraitai were the inland neighbors of another people living on the coast, called the Ichtyophagoi (*Periplus* 20.7.6–7). Pliny the Elder provides further details: *Ex confinio casiae cinnamique et cancamum ac tarum invehitur, sed per*

<sup>37</sup> Müller, “CIH 140,” 415–416.

<sup>38</sup> Dozy, *Supplément*, s.v. *rummān*; Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, s.v. *rummān*.

<sup>39</sup> Strelcyn, *Médecine*, 211, no. 205. Cf. Geʿez *romān*, Hebr. *rimmūn*, Syr.-Aram. *rummānā*, Ug. *lrmn-t*, Akk. *numrū*, *lurmū*, “pomegranate”; cf. also *rāmnon* “kind of tree, called *dog* in Amharic” (Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary*, 471).

<sup>40</sup> Glaser, *Skizze*, 165–166; recently reiterated with the reference to Glaser by Lionell Casson in the commentary to his edition and translation of the *Periplus* (*Periplus*, 146).

<sup>41</sup> Agatharchides, *Erythraean Sea*, 96.

<sup>42</sup> Pliny, *Natural History* 6. 150.

<sup>43</sup> Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 134–136.

*Nabataeos Trogodytas, qui consedere ex Nabataeis ...* (Natural History 12.98). This fragment refers to the exportation of perfumes and spices from South Arabia: the South Arabian origin of *casia* is clearly attested to by Theophrastus (*Enquiry into Plants* 9.7.2). Pliny then goes on to say that the “Arabs” also used the products brought into their territory from South Arabia: *Eo comportatur et serichatum et gabalium, quae intra se consumunt Arabes, nostro orbi tantum nominibus cognita, sed cum cinnamo casiaque nascentia* (12.99). According to Pliny, this merchandise was transported through the territory of the *Nabataei Trogodytae*. By *Trogodytae*, classical ethnographers always mean the inhabitants of the East African coast living in far-away places between Axum and the southern frontier of Egypt. The *Nabataei Trogodytae* mentioned by Pliny must therefore be interpreted as referring to the inhabitants of the Hījāzī coast, who were under the control of the Nabataeans yet lived outside their historical core territory. The expression thus means the Hījāzī Arabs, living on the coast of the Red Sea: it was through their territory that the caravan trade in perfumes and spices was conducted.

The region around today’s Mecca was thus well known to the naval traders of the first century CE. It suffices to mention some of the place-names on the coast of Western Arabia on the map of Ptolemy:

– Κόπαρ (20; 6. 7. 5) is modern al-Jār. The \*g was obviously pronounced in Hījāzī Arabic as \*q, and we may thus reconstruct the following evolution: Jār < \*Jawar > \*Qawar > Κόπαρ. For the rendering of Semitic \*w in Greek and Latin as \*p see also: Θαπαύα (Ptolemy, *Geography* 173; 6.7.27) < Tawba; ῥΑΣΠΑ (Ptolemy, *Geography*, 224; 6.7.34) < Nazwa; *Capeus* (Pliny, *Natural History* 6.147) < Kuwayt; *Param(alacum)* < W’RM (Pliny, *Natural History* 6.157); *Pallon* (Pliny, *Natural History* 6.159) < ASA W’LN.

– Ζαβράμ (22; 6. 7. 5) is modern Mastūra, located at 23°06’27”N (23.1076), 38°50’00”E (38.8334). All the other classical sources read Ζαδράμ. The Greek ζα- here reflects the prefix *dhū*, which is *ma-* in the name of Mastūra.

– Κέντος (23; 6.7.5) is modern Judda (in the local dialect: Jidda) (21°32’47”N (21.5464); 39°09’50”E (39.164)). Here, as in the case of Κόπαρ, \*g was obviously pronounced as \*q, while *dd* dissimilated into \**nd* (ντ): Κέντος < \*qnd < √JDD > Judda.

– Θήβαι (24; 6. 7. 5) is modern Dhahbān (21°56’48”N (21.9467); 39°04’55”E (39.082)).

The *Periplus* also mentions the import of East African perfumes to Arabia (8.3.29–32), and describes the Arabs as experienced traders and seamen active in the South Arabian port of Muza (21.7.21–23), where perfumes and spices were the main commodity (Pliny, *Natural History* 6.104). The Arabs from Muza also maintained trade connections with Nabataea (*Periplus* 19.6.28–31).

Classical geographers and the *Periplus* never refer to the southwest of the Arabian Peninsula as “Arabia,” a fact already noted by Theodor Mommsen.<sup>44</sup> Instead, they speak of Arabia Felix, the Kingdom of the Sabeans, Saba’, or Omiritia.<sup>45</sup> The *Periplus* calls this region Mafaritis and reports it to have been ruled by the king of two peoples, namely, the Sabeans and the Homerites (23.7.28–29). By contrast, the coast from Leuke Kome (al-Wajh) (20.7.3) to Mafaritis (22.7.25), which included the port Muza, is designated by the *Periplus* as “Arabian.” Thus, in the *Periplus*, “Arabia” means the territory of southern Ḥijāz and ‘Athīr.

All of this confirms that already between the second century BCE and the first century CE, the nomadic Arab population of the southern Ḥijāz participated in the sea and overland trade in perfumes and spices between East Africa and the Mediterranean.

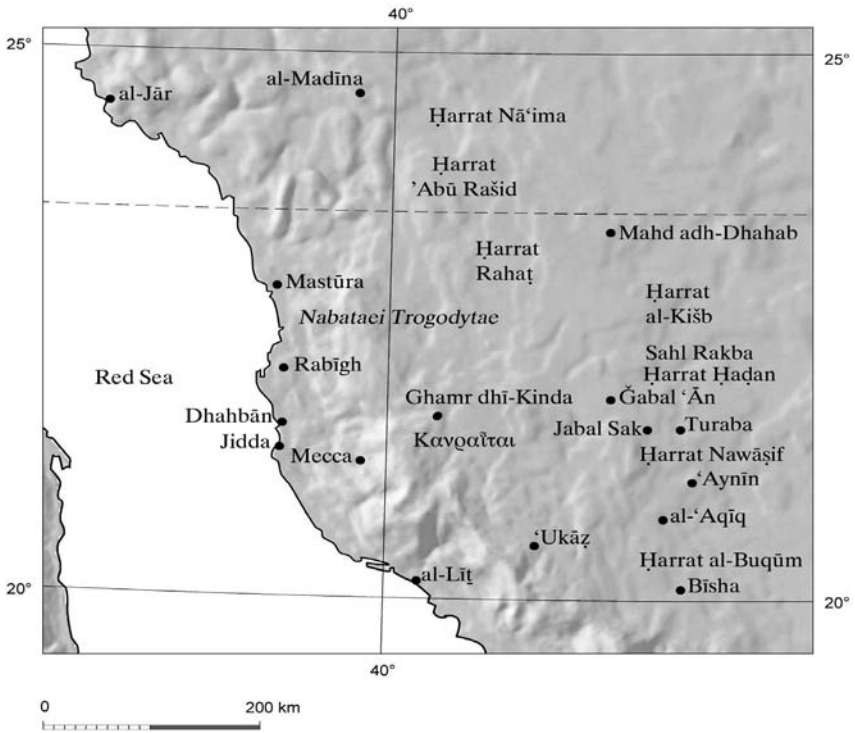
### *East Africa and the Ḥijāz in the First and Second Centuries CE*

The Ḥijāzī Arabs traded with East Africa via the sea routes. Some sources seem to indicate the presence of an Axumite population in the Ḥijāz in the first and second centuries CE, and maybe even earlier. The Axumites used other trade routes, primarily those that went through Africa to the port of Berenice, from where they crossed the Red Sea to Leuke Kome (al-Wajh).

It is universally accepted that the *Periplus* describes two trading itineraries: one along the African coast and ending at Rhapta, and the other along the Arabian coast and leading on to East India. Yet there is also a third route, albeit a less important one, which is usually disregarded: the port of Berenice is described as the starting point of

<sup>44</sup> Mommsen, *Römische Geschichte*, 604.

<sup>45</sup> Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants* 9.4.2; Agatharchides, *Erythraean Sea*, 99–100; Strabo, *Geography* 16.4.19; Diodorus Siculus, *History* 3.47.6; Pliny, *Natural History* 12.59.



Map 1. Mecca on the Incense Road.

the route to Leuke Kome (19.6.26–31). This route was used neither by Greeks and Romans nor by Arabian traders: the presence of the former in Leuke Kome is not attested anywhere, while the latter used the route along the Arabian coast of the Red Sea. We consequently have to assume that it was utilized by the Axumites, who first traveled to the Upper Nile and then went north to the latitude of Berenice.

This supposition is confirmed by the itinerary of the army of the “unknown” Axumite king (supposedly Gadūrat), the probable author of the inscription *Monumentum Adulitanum II* (Cosmas Indicopleustes 2.60–63): the army reached the southern frontier of Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, and then went on to the northern frontier of Saba’, whence they returned to Adulis.

During this campaign the Axumites encountered a people referred to as the Κιναιδοκολίται. Although a sound identification of this

name has not been yet worked out,<sup>46</sup> the location of their capital, which had to be captured by the Axumites and, consequently, lay on their way, is important for the reconstruction of the trade routes in West Arabia: Ζαδράμη, βασιλείον τῶν Κιναιδοκολπιτῶν.<sup>47</sup> Thus, in their attempt to establish peace on the ancient West Arabian caravan route, the Axumites had to pass through the coastline of southern Ḥijāz, whence their way led southwards to Najrān. Most probably, this way went through modern Mecca.

### *Directions of the Meccan Caravan Trade*

The Qurʾān states that the Quraysh used to send out two caravans annually, one in the winter and one in the summer (Q 106:1–4). According to Ibn al-Kalbī, the former was headed for Yemen, while the latter was bound for Syria.<sup>48</sup> As Serjeant has shown, these caravans carried food for the Quraysh.<sup>49</sup>

The sources available to us do not say that the Meccan caravans bore food from the south. Al-Muqaddasī mentions *sanā makkati*, i.e., Meccan cassia, also known as *sanā hijāziyya*.<sup>50</sup> Here, reference clearly is to merchandise intended for sale, not just to something merely present in Mecca, as Crone thinks. Even if the only kind of cassia existing in Arabia (*Casia angustifolia*) were meant,<sup>51</sup> it would still have to be brought to the Meccan market. Pliny the Elder mentions the export of South Arabian cassia and its transportation through the territory of the *Nabataei Trogodytae* (*Natural History* 12.98), i.e., through the southern Ḥijāz. There is also a host of references to the spices and perfumes that were to be found in Mecca as a result of trade transactions, for example, from Aden (aloe, *kundur*, *murr*,

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<sup>46</sup> If we connect the name of Ghamr dhī Kinda and the first part of the name Κιναιδοκολπιται with the presence of Kinda in Southern Ḥijāz, one might suggest that the Kinda may have been the most destructive force on the Incense Road during the first two centuries CE, known in classical tradition as Κανραῖται and Κιναιδοκολπιται. Under the pressure of the Axumites they had to move into Central Arabia and settled down around Qaryat al-Fāw.

<sup>47</sup> Stephanos of Byzantium, *Ethnica* 372.14.

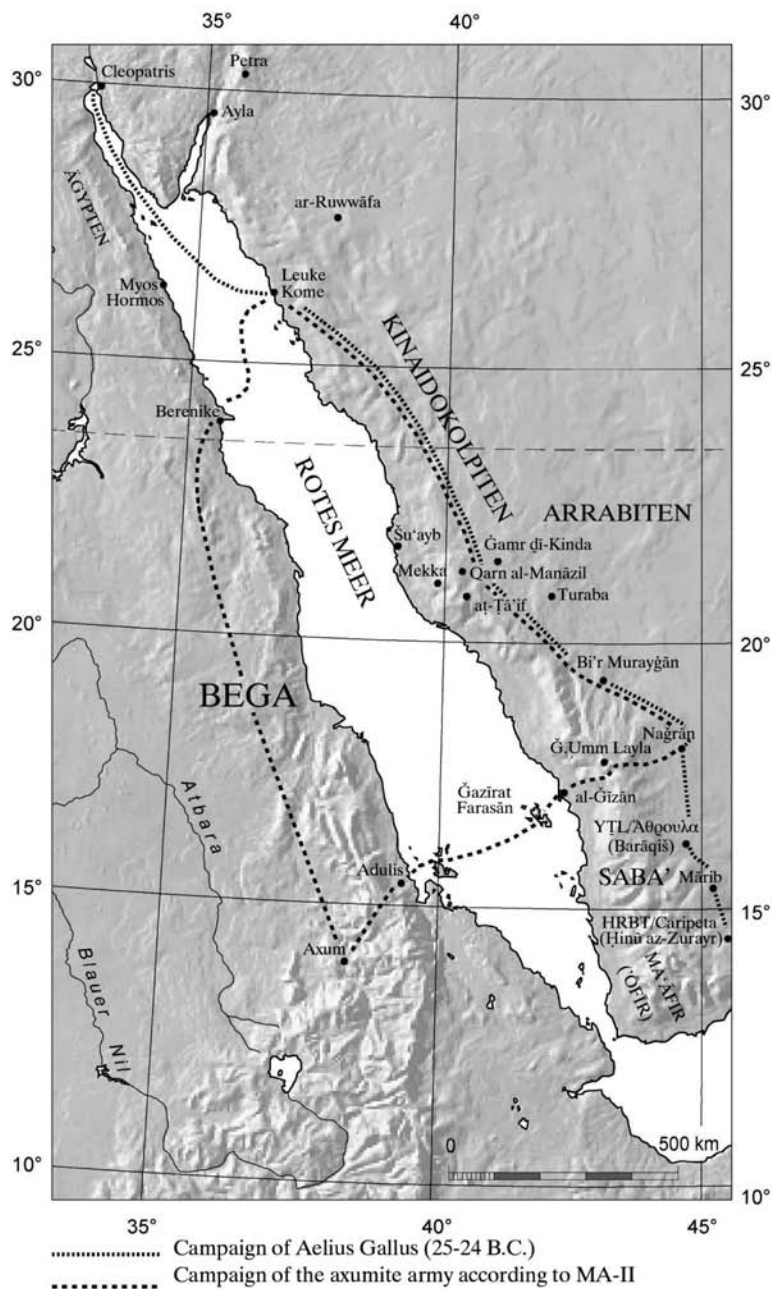
<sup>48</sup> Ibn Ḥabīb, *Kitāb al-munammaq*, 219.

<sup>49</sup> Serjeant, "Meccan Trade," 478–479.

<sup>50</sup> Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan at-taqāsīm* 98.13. See Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, s.v. *sanā*.

<sup>51</sup> Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 66.





Map 2. Campaign of the Axumite army according to MA II.



*dukhn, aṭ-ṭīb al-ma'mūl*).<sup>52</sup> The poet 'Āmir ibn Ṭufayl, whose native tribe was closely connected with the region of Mecca, mentions the balsam that grew in the land of 'Ārima:

*layāliya tastabika bi-dhī ghurūb / wa-muqlati ju'dharin yar'ā bashāmā*

In the nights when she took thee captive with her rows of pearly teeth  
/ and her eyes like a fawn's that feed on the balsam bushes.<sup>53</sup>

There is thus no reason to deny the possibility of the Meccans' participation in the perfume and spice trade.

### *Arabian Wine for India*

The fact that the region around aṭ-Ṭā'if, situated at a two-day journey from Mecca, was rich in grapes raises the question of the origin of the "Arabian" wine that was exported to India already in the first century CE. According to the *Periplus*, three kinds of wine were exported to the port of Barygaza in India: Italian wine, Laodician wine (i.e., Syrian wine from Latakya), and Arabian wine (*Periplus* 49.16.20–21). Yet only two kinds of wine were transported to the ports of East Africa, namely Italian and Laodician wine (*Periplus* 6.2.32–33). Consequently, the Arabian wine must have been picked up somewhere along the way to India. Where?

The *Periplus*, in connection with its description of the port of Muza, addresses the issue of winemaking in South Arabia (24.8.1–6). Judging by the accounts of South Arabian epigraphic documents, Arab geographers, historians and poets, viticulture must have been quite a developed industry there.<sup>54</sup> But since the port of Muza is said not to have been a starting-point for India (Pliny, *Natural History* 6.104), South Arabia cannot have been the source of the "Arabian" wine mentioned in the *Periplus*, and one must discard the idea that South Arabian wine was traded via Muza to India.<sup>55</sup> We are thus forced to look elsewhere for its probable origin. As we have seen, the "Arabian land" as conceived by the *Periplus* did not comprise the whole peninsula, but only the part stretching from Nabataea in the north down

<sup>52</sup> Serjeant, "Meccan Trade," 474–475, 482.

<sup>53</sup> Lyall, *Diwans*, 95 (2.2).

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Sima, *Tiere*.

<sup>55</sup> Maraqtan, "Wine Drinking," 105.

to Mafaritis (Ma'āfir) in the south. Since South Arabia cannot have been the source of the "Arabian" wine, the most probable region of its provenance is aṭ-Ṭā'if. At the very beginning of the Christian era, wine drinking is attested to in Mecca and Medina.<sup>56</sup> In this context it is important to note that viticulture at aṭ-Ṭā'if was a Jewish monopoly.<sup>57</sup>

Grape (*zabīb*) was a commodity commonly carried by the caravans of the Quraysh. Aṭ-Ṭabarī, in reporting the events of December 623 CE, mentions a "caravan of Quraysh carrying raisins and leather and other merchandise of Quraysh," which was accompanied by a certain 'Amr b. al-Ḥaḍramī.<sup>58</sup> The presence of a certain al-Ḥaḍramī among the Quraysh is remarkable, since it points to a connection between the Quraysh and Ḥaḍramawt. In this context, I would like to present the following observations.

'Abid ibn al-Abrāṣ (d. before 554 CE) says the following about the Jewish wine traders:

*Ka-anna riqatahā ba'da l-karā ghtabaqat / ṣahbā'a ṣāfiyatan bi-l-miski makhtūmah*

*mimmā yughālī bihā l-bayyā'u 'attaqahā / dhū shāribin aṣhabun yughlā bihā s-simah*

Meseems the dew of her lips, whenas she rises from sleep, were a draught of pure pale wine, the flagon sealed with musk—

Wine which a crowd bid against each other to buy, long stored by a vintner red of moustache and hair, most precious of brands.<sup>59</sup>

Besides the crafts, trade and navigation must have been the main occupations of the Ḥijāzī Jews.<sup>60</sup> At Qana', the point of departure for the markets of India (*Periplus* 57.19.7), the above-mentioned inscription by a Jewish trader, Kosmas, was found, which is dated to the fourth century CE. It is noteworthy that it was inscribed on the wall of a building above which a synagogue was erected. Besides their cultic functions, synagogues also fulfilled the functions of guesthouses and staging posts. This is best illustrated by the inscription of Theodotes, found in Jerusalem and dated to about 45 CE.<sup>61</sup> It states

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>57</sup> Lammens, *Ṭā'if*, 34, 146.

<sup>58</sup> Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, vol. 1.3, 1274, line 7 = Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, 424.

<sup>59</sup> Lyall, *Dīwans*, 48 (21.7–8).

<sup>60</sup> See *ibid.* (Dīwan of 'Abid b. al-Abrāṣ 8.6).

<sup>61</sup> Reinach, *Inscription de Théodotos*, 46–47, 53.

that, besides reciting and studying the law, travelers coming from abroad were to be supplied with water and a place to rest. This function is archeologically confirmed by the excavations at the “caravan city” Dura Europos and by inscriptions from other Palestinian synagogues.<sup>62</sup>

To summarize: viticulture was practiced by the Jewish population of at-Ṭāʾif, grapes played a role in the caravan trade of the Quraysh, in which a certain al-Ḥaḍramī is said to have been involved, “Arabian wine” was traded to India via Qanaʾ, and an inscription made by the Jewish caravan-owner Kosmas was found under a synagogue. If one connects all these facts, one may conclude that the caravans of Kosmas transported grapes and wine from the southern Ḥijāz to Qanaʾ, and on their way back must have carried South Arabian incenses and spices.

### *Conclusion*

Classical and Arabic sources confirm that the southern Ḥijāz in general, and the region around Mecca in particular, were intimately connected with South Arabia, East Africa, and the eastern Mediterranean through the caravan trade. The earliest references to such connections date from the second century BCE. The Meccans traded in perfumes and spices, among other things, and this trade was conducted via the Meccan territory and by the Meccans themselves. Even though one cannot speak of a Meccan supremacy in the perfume trade, the data presented above does confirm the following: Mecca lay on the Incense Road, the Incense Road survived until the sixth and seventh centuries CE, and the inhabitants of the southern Ḥijāz participated in the trade flowing through it, mostly as caravaneers. The caravan trade thus lost none of its importance to the sea routes, and functioned throughout the entire pre-Islamic period. Hence, from the last centuries BCE until the rise of Islam, the southern Ḥijāz was connected with East Africa, South Arabia, and the eastern Mediterranean by overland and sea routes and was thus open to external linguistic and religious influences.

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<sup>62</sup> Kraeling, “Synagogue,” 10–11, n. 34.

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# EARLY ISLAM IN THE LIGHT OF CHRISTIAN AND JEWISH SOURCES

Harald Suermann

## *Introduction*

Christian and Jewish references to early Islam are external witnesses that do not directly represent the internal development of the religion they purport to describe, but rather reflect the ways in which it was perceived by adherents of other religions. It must therefore be borne in mind that Jewish and Christian views of early Islam are always related to these communities' own understanding of the world: the Other (i.e., Islam) is not simply mirrored as it is, but is subjected to interpretation. Hence, the basic difficulty in evaluating these external perspectives is to determine to which extent they reflect the interpreted object rather than the interpreting subject, or vice versa.

The aim of the present paper is to contribute to such a nuanced appraisal of the Jewish and Christian sources on early Islam. I will first outline the general frame of reference within which these early attempts at making sense of a new religion took place, and then go on to present some of the statements, which Christian texts make about Islam. Since the volume of which this paper is part is devoted to the Qur'an and not to early Islamic history in general, I have limited myself to texts written before 690 CE. Naturally, I will not be able to give an exhaustive survey of the sources and thus have chosen only those which I take to be representative.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There are various collections of Christian texts on early Islam, the most comprehensive one of them being Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*. Princeton, 1997. (Citations here are according to the translations of Hoyland.)



*The First Christian and Jewish Reactions to Islam*

It is unlikely that before the Arab conquests anybody seriously reckoned with the emergence of a new monotheistic religion different from both Judaism and Christianity and in possession of its own scripture, yet basing itself on Abraham and on the Judeo-Christian history of salvation. Yet when the unexpected came about, it had to be accommodated within existing patterns of thought.

The most noticeable consequence of the emergence of Islam was the collapse of the prevailing political and social order. It is significant that the latter was not, as it were, religiously neutral, but rested on salvation theology and eschatology, since the Roman Empire saw itself as the last empire before the Second Coming of Christ. Its end would thus herald the end of the world itself, which was believed to start with universal chaos, murder, and famine. Subsequently, the Antichrist would rule the world, whereupon Christ would appear for the Last Judgment.<sup>2</sup> Jewish eschatological expectations, too, were centered on the collapse of the Roman Empire.<sup>3</sup> For the Jews, however, the breakdown of the empire did not signal the arrival of the Antichrist, but the coming of the Messiah who would restore the Israelite empire.

In order to understand the earliest Jewish and Christian reactions to the invading Arabs, it is also important to note that the Arab conquest of Palestine was preceded by a Persian one. For a while, Jews even gained control of Jerusalem, and the relic of the True Cross fell into Persian hands. All of this triggered messianic hopes among the Jews, and texts were written that interpreted the Persian conquest as a portent of the end of time and the imminent restitution of Israel. Yet with Emperor Heraclius' overwhelming victory, history took a different course. Jewish cooperation with the Persians led to a variety of measures against them, among them forced baptisms and the expulsion of all Jews from Jerusalem.

The Arab conquest of Palestine stirred up messianic expectations among the Jews anew. Once again, there were indications of the impending downfall of the Roman Empire, and it was hoped that the restoration of Israel from exile would follow—an attitude that is

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Suermann, *Geschichtstheologische Reaktion*, 193–231; Suermann, "Der byzantinische Endkaiser"; Alexander, "Medieval Legend"; Alexander, *Religious and Political History*; Reinink, "Die syrischen Wurzeln"; Reinink, "Entstehung"; Reinink, "A Concept of History"; Möhring, *Weltkaiser*, 17–104.

<sup>3</sup> See the Jewish texts cited below.

reflected in Jewish apocalyptic texts such as *The Prayer of Rabbi Simon ben Yoḥay*,<sup>4</sup> the *Mysteries of Rabbi Simon ben Yoḥay*,<sup>5</sup> and the *Midrash of the Ten Kings*,<sup>6</sup> and in an apocalyptic poem.<sup>7</sup> All of these document the belief that the Roman Empire gives way to the establishment of the messianic age. Within this logic, the leader of the conquerors—i.e., Muhammad—becomes the forerunner of the Messiah. This role was therefore not attributed to Muhammad on the basis of his teaching, but due to the eschatological and apocalyptic interpretation of contemporary events. At first, the actual teaching of Muhammad was irrelevant to the Jews.

In order to counter these Jewish claims, Christians developed a different interpretation of what was going on. This Christian counter-view appears to have been formulated somewhat later.<sup>8</sup> The Muslims were seen as an instrument of God who had sent them in order to punish the sins of the Christians. These were variously identified as moral offenses,<sup>9</sup> Monotheletism,<sup>10</sup> the Chalcedonian dogma,<sup>11</sup> or Monophysitism.<sup>12</sup> Viewing the Arabs as a scourge of God implies that the conquests were believed to be limited in time. This aspect was clearly designed to counter Jewish claims that the end of the Roman Empire had arrived. Within this Christian perspective, too, the religion of the Arab invaders was without any importance at first.

<sup>4</sup> Jellinek (ed.), *Bet ha-Midrash*, vol. 4, 117–126; Buttenwieser, “Apocalyptic Literature,” 684–685.

<sup>5</sup> Jellinek (ed.), *Bet ha-Midrash*, vol. 3, 78–82; Wertheimer (ed.), *Batei Midrashot*, vol. 2, 506–507; Buttenwieser, “Apocalyptic Literature,” 683–684; Even-Shmuel (ed.), *Midreshē ge’ullā*.

<sup>6</sup> Horowitz (ed.), *Sammlung kleiner Midraschim*, 16–32, 37–55; Buttenwieser, “Apocalyptic Literature,” 684; Even-Shmuel (ed.), *Midreshē ge’ullā*, 403–405; Lewis, “An Apocalyptic Vision”; Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden*, vol. 5, 441–449, n. 16; Baer, “Jüdische Messiasprophetie”; Steinschneider, “Apokalypsen,” Pt. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ginzberg (ed.), *Genizah Studies*, vol. 1, 310–312; Lewis, “On That Day,” 198–200; see also Suermann, “Der byzantinische Endkaiser.”

<sup>8</sup> The earliest known Christian apocalypse is that of Pseudo-Methodius. For the date of composition see Reinink, *Die syrische Apokalypse*, v–xlvii.

<sup>9</sup> See John Mochus, *Limonari*, 100–102; Sophronius “Epistola Synodica,” 197–200; Usener (trans.), “Weihnachtspredigt.”

<sup>10</sup> This can only be inferred indirectly. See Maximus “Relatio motionis §1,” 111; Garrigues (trans.), “Le martyre,” 415, 424.

<sup>11</sup> Jean évêque de Nikiou, *Chronique*, cxxi, 2; John Bishop of Nikiu, *Chronicle*, 200.

<sup>12</sup> Brock, “Early Syriac Life,” 312–313.

The *Doctrina Iacobi* provides an idea of how these debates between Christians — in this case, a baptized Jew—and Jews might have taken place. The text reports the Jew as saying:

When the *candidatus* was killed by the Saracens, I was at Caesarea and I set off by boat to Sykamina. People were saying “the *candidatus* has been killed,” and we Jews were overjoyed. And they were saying that the prophet had appeared, coming with the Saracens, and that he was proclaiming the advent of the anointed one, the Christ who was to come.<sup>13</sup>

It is frequently assumed that anti-Jewish passages in texts such as the *Doctrina Iacobi* are mere literary exercises and do not reflect any real-life debates with Jews. Contrary to this viewpoint, Gilbert Dagron, who re-edited and commented on the text of the *Doctrina*, points out that Jewish-Christian tensions and struggles in the seventh century were stronger than before, and that the ensuing polemics were more vivid and exact. Both sides closely followed contemporary political and military developments, and more so than before the Jews took the initiative in attacking Christian positions. Hence, it is likely that the Jewish-Christian debate was real and not merely a literary exercise.<sup>14</sup> Only when the Jews were no longer able to interpret contemporary events in a messianic and apocalyptic way did these debates lose their importance and acidity.

### *Statements on Islam*

Besides this debate about the status of the Arab conquest within Judeo-Christian salvation theology, Jewish and Christian texts also contain a variety of statements about Islamic doctrine and practice. The following survey will focus on the Christian sources. As I have already remarked in the introduction, these sources describe Islam in terms familiar to Christians and place it either within a biblical context, or integrate it into the history of Christian heresies.

The genres of the texts containing statements about Islam are manifold: there are chronicles that focus on the historical development of Islam, dialogues that discuss various positions ascribed to Muslims, and letters and homilies that concentrate on moral aspects, among

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<sup>13</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 57.

<sup>14</sup> Dagron and Déroche, “Juifs et Chrétiens,” 17.

others. Of course, the respective literary genre constitutes the overall frame that determines which Islamic statements are selected, and how these are interpreted. None of these sources attempt to give a comprehensive account of the new religion. Instead, only particular aspects relevant to the text's intention and subject matter are taken up.

### *The Doctrina Iacobi*

One of the earliest texts about Islam is the *Doctrina Iacobi*, to which reference has already been made.<sup>15</sup> It begins by quoting a letter the author claims to have received from a certain Abraham of Caesarea, who functions as the narrator of what follows. Abraham, after having heard about the appearance of a self-proclaimed Arab prophet, turns to a Jewish sage who tells him that this prophet must be false, because he has come armed with a sword. Here the text certainly refers to Muhammad's military raids. Abraham then makes additional inquiries and asks unnamed people who have met the Arab prophet. Their statements are said to confirm that the new prophet does not bring truth but only bloodshed. It is also reported that Muhammad claims to hold the keys to paradise, which Abraham dismisses.<sup>16</sup>

The claim to be in possession of the keys to paradise nevertheless merits closer examination. It is not contained in the Qur'an or—at least to my knowledge—in the canonical collections of ḥadīth. Obviously, the text's author wants to describe Muhammad as proclaiming a new doctrine of salvation. Yet why does he use precisely this characterization? After all, he could easily have used a more popular description, for example, that Muhammad promised paradise to his followers. Possession of the keys to paradise sounds like a familiar *topos*, yet so far it has not been located in patristic literature. The only statement at least approximating it that I have been able to find is from Ephrem's fourth *Hymn on the Nativity of Christ in the Flesh*, in which Mary says:

For Thy sake too I am hated, Thou Lover of all. Lo! I am persecuted who have conceived and brought One House of refuge for men. Adam will rejoice, for Thou art the Key of Paradise.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See also Suermann, "Juden und Muslime."

<sup>16</sup> Dagron and Déroche, "Juifs et Chrétiens," 208–211.

<sup>17</sup> Beck (trans.), *Hymnen de nativitate*, 43; Beck (ed.), *Hymnen de nativitate*, 51.

Yet even though the statement refers to Christ as the key of paradise, it is not exactly identical to the statement ascribed to Muhammad, because the latter does not claim to *be* the key but to *have* it. In view of this, it is perhaps likely that the notion does not after all derive from patristic literature, but instead has an Islamic origin.

*The Homily on the Child Saints of Babylon*

The homily was transmitted anonymously and its dating is uncertain, even though a date of composition shortly after the invasion of Egypt is probable.<sup>18</sup> It deals with the salvation of men, who have fallen into sin, and treats of the three child saints and the prophet Daniel, as well as includes a discussion of Monophysitism. In the context of an admonition to strive for a moral life pleasing to God, the author writes:

As for us, my loved ones, let us fast and pray without cease, and observe the commandments of the Lord so that the blessing of all our Fathers who have pleased Him may come down upon us. Let us not fast like the God-killing Jews, nor fast like the Saracens who are oppressors, who give themselves up to prostitution, massacre and lead into captivity the sons of men, saying: "We both fast and pray." Nor should we fast like those who deny the saving passion of our Lord who died for us, to free us from death and perdition. Rather let us fast like our Fathers the apostles [...]<sup>19</sup>

The context of the statement is clear, at least if we assume the text to have been written during the early Islamic rule of Egypt. The "Saracens" are accused of various misdoings, but the heavy tax burden, which is often deplored in later texts, is not yet mentioned. In terms of Islamic practice, only fasting and prayer are listed, which as such are common to Christians, Jews, and Muslims. The following statement could also refer to the Muslims, but might equally well apply to the Jews, since both communities deny the redemptive significance of Christ's death. However, I suspect that the statement rather means Christians who do not share the dogmatic convictions of the author. In any case, it seems unlikely that at this early time statements about Islamic doctrine were already being made.

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<sup>18</sup> Vis (ed. and trans.), "Panegyriques," 58–120.

<sup>19</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 121.

*The Dialogue between the Patriarch John I and an Arab  
Commander*

The earliest Christian information on Islamic doctrine can be found in the Syriac *Dialogue between the Patriarch John I and an Arab Commander*, which appears to be the oldest dialogue to have come down to us.<sup>20</sup> The discussion that it describes could have taken place before 648, probably on May 9, 644. Recently it has been questioned that the text could have been composed at such an early time, especially when it is compared to other Christian writings of the time. Yet it makes sense to assume that there must have been encounters between Christians and Muslims from very early on, and that in the course of these, people may have talked about religious topics as well.

However, the Muslim participant of the discussion does not give a comprehensive account of his beliefs, nor is there a description of Islamic doctrine from the Christian perspective. Nevertheless, some of the Muslim's convictions can be inferred from his questions about the Christian faith. These include the unity of all revelations, which entails that there can only be one true scripture, and the rejection of the notion that Christ is the Son of God.

*The Armenian History of Pseudo-Sebeos*

From a time shortly after the *Dialogue of the Patriarch John I*, we have an Armenian history which deals quite extensively with Muhammad and the Arab conquests.<sup>21</sup> The author claims to have derived his information from Muslim captives. Muhammad is treated in Chapter 42, and it seems that the author was very well-informed about the origins of Islam. His report runs as follows:

Then he [= Heraclius] ordered them [=Jews] to go and remain in each one's habitation, and they departed. Taking desert roads, they went to Tachkastan, to the sons of Ismael, summoned them to their aid and informed them of their blood relationship through the testament of scripture. But although the latter were persuaded of their close relation-

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<sup>20</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 459–465; Griffith, “Disputes”; Suermann, “Orientalische Christen,” 122–128.

<sup>21</sup> Abgaryan (ed.), *Patmowt'iwm Sebêosi*; Thomson (ed.), *The Armenian History*, vol. 1; Suermann, “Sebeos' Bericht,” 311–327.

ship, yet they were unable to bring about agreement within their great number, because their cults were divided from each other.

At that time a certain man from among those same sons of Ismael whose name was Mahmet, a merchant, as if by God's command appeared to them as a preacher [and] the path of truth. He taught them to recognize the God of Abraham, especially because he was learned and informed in the history of Moses. Now because the command was from on high, at a single order they all came together in unity of religion. Abandoning their vain cults, they turned to the living God who had appeared to their father Abraham. So Mahmet legislated for them: not to eat carrion, not to drink wine, not to speak falsely, and not to engage in fornication. He said: "With an oath God promised this land to Abraham and his seed after him for ever. And he brought about as he promised during that time while he loved Israel. But now you are the sons of Abraham, and God is accomplishing his promise to Abraham and his seed for you. Love sincerely only the God of Abraham. No one will be able to resist you in battle, because God is with you."

Then they all gathered in unison [...] and they went from the desert of P'aran, 12 tribes according to the tribes of the families of their patriarchs. They divided the 12,000 men, like the sons of Israel, into their tribes—a thousand men from each tribe—to lead them into the land of Israel. [There follows a report on the first battle outside of Arabia.] Then they returned and camped in Arabia.

All the remnants of the people of the sons of Israel gathered and united together; they formed a large army. Following that they sent messages to the Greek king, saying: "God gave that land to our father Abraham as a hereditary possession and to his seed after him. We are the sons of Abraham. You have occupied our land long enough. Abandon it peacefully and we shall not come into your territory. Otherwise, we shall demand that possession from you with interest."<sup>22</sup>

Some of the historical data which the text gives is accurate: Muhammad is described as a merchant who preached monotheism and abrogated the "vain cults," i.e., polytheism; he is also said to have enacted laws, four of which are named, namely, the prohibition to eat carrion, to drink wine, to tell lies, and to engage in fornication. Also, Muhammad is reported to have referred to Abraham and Moses. It is quite surprising how well the author was informed about Muhammad already around 670;<sup>23</sup> to my knowledge, the amount of information he

<sup>22</sup> Abgaryan (ed.), *Patmowt'iwm Sebēosi*, 134–136; Thomson (ed.), *The Armenian History*, vol. 1, 95–97.

<sup>23</sup> A different assessment is given by Arat, "Bischof Sebēos," 121.



provides has no parallels in contemporary Christian sources. Pseudo-Sebeos' account of the invasion of Palestine, too, corresponds to the historical facts. The battle he mentions is the battle of Ajnadayn in 634; Pseudo-Sebeos reports correctly that the Byzantine army was under the command of Theodoros, the brother of Emperor Heraclius.<sup>24</sup>

When the author links the emergence of Islam with Jewish history, he also bases himself on some historical facts. His report begins with the Jewish exodus from Edessa after Heraclius had re-conquered the city. According to Michel the Syrian, the Jews did not flee to Arabia but to Persia.<sup>25</sup> The flight of the Jews from Palestine, which had been occupied by the Persians, is documented and is mentioned by Pseudo-Sebeos as well as by other sources. These Jews fled and joined the Persian army because many of their people had been killed by the Christians of Jerusalem.<sup>26</sup>

The other events reported by Pseudo-Sebeos are more typological in nature. He connects the conquest of Palestine with God's promise to Abraham that he would give the land to his progeny. Pseudo-Sebeos extends this promise to the Arabs who view themselves as the descendants of Abraham. Like the Israelites, the Arabs consist of twelve tribes, each of which has its own patriarch (cf. Genesis 25:13–16). The Arabs are thus portrayed as the heirs of the Israelites: God had again fulfilled his promise to Abraham, this time with respect to Ismael's sons. Pseudo-Sebeos even goes a step further and relates an alliance between Jews and Arabs.

Patricia Crone and Michael Cook have relied on this text as the basis for their theory that Islam emerged out of a messianic Arab-Jewish partnership aimed at re-conquering the Holy Land.<sup>27</sup> Moshe Gil, by contrast, denies that the alliance recounted by Pseudo-Sebeos has any historical foundation.<sup>28</sup> John Wansborough,<sup>29</sup> Sydney Griffith,<sup>30</sup> and Averil Cameron<sup>31</sup> regard statements such as these as *topoi* drawn from anti-Jewish polemics, and thus also call the document's historical

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Stratos, *Byzantium*, vol. 2, 50–56.

<sup>25</sup> Chabot (ed. and trans.), *Chronique*, vol. 2, 414.

<sup>26</sup> Sebeos, *Histoire*, 69; see also Guidi (ed.) "*Chronicon Anonymum*," 26; Guidi (trans.), "*Chronicon Anonymum*," 23; Houze (ed. and trans.), "*Sanctii Georgii*," 134.

<sup>27</sup> Crone, and Cook, *Hagarism*, 6–8.

<sup>28</sup> Gil, *History of Palestine*, 61, n. 64.

<sup>29</sup> Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 117.

<sup>30</sup> Griffith, "Jews and Muslims," 87.

<sup>31</sup> Cameron, "Blaming the Jews."

credibility into question. Yet such a wholesale dismissal of the text is not justifiable, above all because it does provide undeniably correct historical details, which makes it likely that Pseudo-Sebeos had access to contemporary historical sources.<sup>32</sup>

In light of all this, Pseudo-Sebeos' claim that there was a Jewish attempt at reconstructing the Temple when Jewish-Arab relations were still close, does not appear incredible. However, the Arabs did not allow this to happen, and instead adopted the Temple Mount as their own place of prayer.<sup>33</sup> The text does not, however, indicate when this break between Jews and Arabs is supposed to have taken place; the only hint consists in the fact that the episode immediately precedes the death of Heraclius. It is in any case certain that Pseudo-Sebeos refers to the place where later on the al-Aqṣā- Mosque was to be constructed.

### *Anastasius Sinaita*

Even though the writings of Anastasius Sinaita deal mainly with Christian heresies, he does make passing mention of Islam, which he considers to be God's punishment for the spread of Monotheletism. His statements on Islam serve to buttress his own position and thus have an apologetic character.<sup>34</sup>

In the preface to his *Viae Dux*, he refers to the disputes between Christians and Muslims and sets out to clarify a number of Islamic misunderstandings of Christian doctrine, namely, that there are two gods, that God has carnally begotten a son, and that Christians worship something created. These misconceptions correspond to the three main Islamic objections to Christianity: that it amounts to polytheism, that it maintains the carnal sonship of Christ, and that Christians worship the cross.<sup>35</sup> Besides this, there are two further references to Islam: Firstly, Severos, by accepting one part of the Holy Scripture and rejecting another, is said to have acted like the Jews, Greeks (i.e., pagans?), and Arabs (i.e., the Muslims).<sup>36</sup> Secondly, the Muslims are

<sup>32</sup> Hoyland, "Sebeos."

<sup>33</sup> Abgaryan (ed.), *Patmowt'iwm Sebēosi*, 139–140; Thomson (ed.), *The Armenian History*, vol. 1, 102–103.

<sup>34</sup> Griffith, "Anastasios of Sinai," 341–358; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 92–103.

<sup>35</sup> Anastasius Sinaita, *Viae Dux*, 9.

<sup>36</sup> Anastasius Sinaita, *Viae Dux*, 113.

said to associate the concepts of incarnation and of a divine nature with corporal organs, marriage, and sexual intercourse.<sup>37</sup>

Even though Anastasius does not cite any Muslim writings, his works do exhibit a greater familiarity with Islam than earlier writers. This becomes especially clear in question 80 of his *Interrogationes et Responsiones* (written around 690 according to Griffith). Here the notion that Satan's fall was occasioned by his refusal to bow down to man (Q 7:11–12, 15:30–33, 20:116) is described as one of the myths of the Greeks and Arabs.<sup>38</sup> This is in fact the earliest tangible evidence that specific Qur'anic verses were known to a Christian author. A statement like this, which is not connected to the prevalent Islamic objections against Christianity and can hardly have been an outcome of everyday observations, documents a detailed knowledge of Islam possibly derived from written sources.

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<sup>37</sup> Anastasius Sinaita, *Viae Dux*, 169–170.

<sup>38</sup> Anastasius Sinaita, *Quaestiones*, 59, 131.

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# THE EVOLVING REPRESENTATION OF THE EARLY ISLAMIC EMPIRE AND ITS RELIGION ON COIN IMAGERY\*

Stefan Heidemann

## *The Crucial Early Decades*

How did the theology of Islam and its idea of empire evolve,<sup>1</sup> based on a Hellenistic Roman-Iranian foundation and in the face of Christianity, Judaism, Neo-Platonism, and Zoroastrianism? Since the 1970s, this much debated question has inspired skeptical polemics against what had until then been taken to constitute “established” knowledge.<sup>2</sup> The extremely divergent points of view taken in this controversy at large are possible to maintain because there are few undis-

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\* This contribution began its life as a lecture given at the Seminar of Arabic Studies at the Free University Berlin (May 29, 2006) at the invitation of Angelika Neuwirth. During my further research I profited much from discussions with many colleagues, among them Lutz Ilisch, N. Douglas Nicol, Hans-Christoph Noeske, Ingrid and Wolfgang Schulze and Stuart Sears; I gratefully acknowledge their various contributions. I would especially like to express my gratitude to Susan Tyler-Smith for various comments and her careful reading and improving of the English draft, and to Emilie Norris who undertook the final editing of the text. Illustrations: gold and copper 2:1; silver 1:1.

<sup>1</sup> There is no expression for “empire” or “state” within medieval Islamic sources. *Dār al-Islām* was used to refer to the “territory of Islam” or, more specifically, to the geographic area where Islamic jurisdiction was applied, as opposed to *dār al-ḥarb*, the territory outside Islamic jurisdiction. Early Islam obviously never needed an expression for “empire,” probably because it considered itself to be universal. The government of the caliph, with Islam as the state religion, can nevertheless be defined as “imperial”; see Münkler, *Imperien*.

<sup>2</sup> For a résumé of the past discussion see Sivers, “The Islamic Origins Debate Goes Public.” The recent German debate was initiated by Ohlig/Puin, *Die Dunklen Anfänge*. In the paradigmatic first section Volker Popp attempts to prove an Arab Christianity and the Christian character of the early “Islamic” empire by using numismatic evidence. Three years earlier, he had used the same idea as a leitmotif for a novel published under the pseudonym Mavro di Mezzomorto, *Mohammed auf Abwegen: Entwicklungsroman* (“Mohammed Goes Astray: A Coming-of-Age Novel”) and in a series of articles: “Bildliche Darstellungen,” “Bildliche Darstellungen II,” “Bildliche Darstellungen IV,” “Bildliche Darstellungen V.” Ohlig has restated his and V. Popp’s theory in an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (November 21, 2006), which received replies in the same newspaper by Nicolai Sinai (December 28, 2006) and the present author (February 28, 2007).



puted Arabic sources on the first decades of Islam. Yet since the beginning of that discussion, in the 1970s, much progress has been made. Although there has been a growing interest in sources from outside the Arabic-Islamic tradition, it was only in 1997 that Robert Hoyland undertook a systematic examination of parallel literary evidence from non-Muslim sources that predated the existing Arabic texts.<sup>3</sup> In 2003 Jeremy Johns surveyed the extant archeological, epigraphic, and numismatic sources for the first seventy years of Islam, portraying 'Abd al-Malik's reign as the most significant turning point of early Islamic history.<sup>4</sup> In 2006 Hoyland added new epigraphic material to the discussion and stressed the important role that Mu'awiya played in this process.<sup>5</sup> It is against this background that the imagery and text messages to be found on coins became more important than ever, as knowledge of early Islamic coinage has grown tremendously since the 1990s. Much new information is scattered in small articles and auction catalogues. Coins offer the only continuous and contemporary independent and primary source for the period of the genesis of the new religion and its empire from Spain to Central Asia. Frequently, interpretations of Islamic coin imagery by students of political history or the history of art disregard the proper numismatic context of the seventh century CE. The present contribution attempts to provide a brief overview of the development of early Islamic coin imagery according to the present state of research. Yet new discoveries in this rapidly evolving field might significantly change the picture. The present contribution is necessarily built on the research of many colleagues which I gratefully acknowledge.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, especially pp. 545–549, 591–598.

<sup>4</sup> Johns, "First Seventy Years," has replied to the views of Judith Koren and Yehuda Nevo, published in a series of articles during the 1990s. In 2003 their views were summarized in *Crossroads to Islam*. The two authors make extensive use of numismatics in their arguments (pp. 137–154), but because they do not take the rich research literature of the past twenty years into account, their treatment of the coin evidence and their conclusions may at best be called naive. Their main source of numismatic inspiration was the seminal article by Michael Bates, "History." Much progress has been made since then. Unfortunately, they seem to have neither personal acquaintance with numismatic sources nor any interest in the appropriate methodology. As a result the delight they take in their "discoveries" is unrestricted by any methodological constraints. For an outspoken review see Foss, "Unorthodox View."

<sup>5</sup> Hoyland, "New Documentary Texts."

<sup>6</sup> For an introduction to the numismatics of the early Islamic period, see in chronological order: Bates, "History"; Bates, "Byzantine Coinage and Its Imitations"; Heidemann, "Merger"; Sears, *Monetary History*; Bone, *Administration*; Treadwell, "The 'Orans' Drachms"; Treadwell, *Chronology*; Foss, "Kharijites"; Album/Goodwin, *Sylloge* (see the review by Foss, "Coinage"); Oddy, "Whither Arab-Byzantine Numismatics?"; Phillips, "Currency in Seventh-Century Syria"; Goodwin, *Arab-Byzantine*

*The Representation of Power and Religion up to the Period of the  
Second Fitna*

*The Early Phase: From 636 to About 655/658*

Islamic armies swiftly conquered three major zones of monetary circulation and took over much of their fiscal and monetary organization: in the center the former Byzantine territories, in the east the Sasanian empire, and in the west Germanic North Africa and Spain.



Fig. 1. Heraclius and Heraclius Constantine, *nomisma*, Constantinople, without date (ca. 616–625 CE), Oriental Coin Cabinet Jena inv. no. 2007-04-001 (4.21 g; gift of F. and G. Steppat).



Fig. 2. Anonymous, *folles*, Constantinople, regnal year 3 of Constans II (643–4 CE), Oriental Coin Cabinet Jena inv. no. 303-D05 (4.80 g).

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*Coinage*; Foss, "Fixed Points"; Treadwell, "Mihrāb and 'Anaza"; Ilisch, "Muhammad-Drachms." For the economic and political history, see Johns, "First Seventy Years," and Morony, "Economic Boundaries?"

In the Byzantine territories, the workhorse of the fiscal cycle, of taxation, and of state expenditure was the gold *solidus* or *nomisma* weighing about 4.55 g (fig. 1). The money used for daily purchases, the copper *folles* (plural *folles*) (fig. 2), was issued by the treasury and sold to money changers. In 629/30 Heraclius (r. 610–641) concentrated all eastern minting in Constantinople, the imperial capital. *Folles* of the late Heraclius and Constans II were usually anonymous.<sup>7</sup> During the Sasanian occupation of the Roman Middle East, between 606–7 and 628, irregular mints were established in Syria to supplement the circulating stock of copper coins.<sup>8</sup> In the short period of Byzantine resistance against the conquering Islamic army, countermarks were applied on circulating coins.<sup>9</sup>

In the Sasanian empire the coinage of the fiscal cycle was the uniform silver *drahm* of about 4.2 g that was struck during the reign of Khusrū II (r. 590/591–628) in about 34 mints (fig. 8). In Spain and western North Africa, the monetary economy had been in decline since the fifth century. The third of the *nomisma*, the *triens*, or *tremisis* (ca. 1.5 g), was the main coin struck in Spain and the rest of western Europe (cf. fig. 27). In North Africa, Carthage was the only mint to continue striking petty coinage.<sup>10</sup>

In the first decades after the battle of Yarmūk in 636 CE and the establishment of the Taurus border zone, Byzantine coppers remained in circulation in Syria, probably until the reform of ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 65–86/685–705) in 77–79/696–699. The obverse shows the emperor or the emperors—here (fig. 2) the standing figure of Constans II (r. 641–668) wearing a crown with a cross, holding a *globus cruciger* in one hand and a long cross in the other. On the reverse, the *m* indicates the Greek numeral 40, the mark of value of the Byzantine standard copper coin, the *folles*. Archeological finds show that from about 641 CE on, Constantinople resumed supplying substantial quantities of newly minted copper coins to its lost provinces, Syria and northern Mesopotamia. Coin imports slowed down at the end of the 640s and came to an end in the late 650s around 655/658,<sup>11</sup> a date

<sup>7</sup> Hahn, *Moneta imperii*, vol. 3, 135–136.

<sup>8</sup> Pottier, *Monnayage de la Syrie*.

<sup>9</sup> Schulze et al., “Heraclian Countermarks.”

<sup>10</sup> Bates, “North Africa.”

<sup>11</sup> Mackensen, *Spätantike Anlage*, 29–30, fn. 98; Phillips/Goodwin, “Seventh-Century Syrian Hoard”; Heidemann, “Merger”; Foss, “Coinage of Syria”; Walmsley, “Coin Frequencies,” and a forthcoming study by Pottier et al., “Pseudo-Byzantine Coinage.”

that coincides roughly with a drop in copper coin production in Constantinople. At the same time, in the year 655 or shortly afterwards, Mu'āwīya (r. 37-60/658-680) concluded a treaty with Byzantium,<sup>12</sup> to be followed by another, and more important, treaty in the year 658.<sup>13</sup>

How should this continued importation of copper coins to the lost provinces be interpreted politically? Rome-Byzantium still thought of itself as the universal world empire, but as one with soft borders, not as a state in the modern sense with well-defined borders that impose separation in a number of respects.<sup>14</sup> The selling of coppers was profitable for the Byzantine treasury. Perhaps arbitrage, the differing copper-to-gold ratio, allowed a fast export. Money changers or merchants might have been brokering the trade. Early Islam, outside the Ḥijāz, was the elite religion of a tribally organized militia. During the period of conquest, the *futūḥ*, the Islamic religion possessed only a rudimentary theology, which was probably even more basic among military units. At that time Islam would almost certainly not have been perceived as a new and equal religion by outsiders, especially when compared with the sophisticated and diverse Christian theology and all other contemporary religious systems such as Judaism, Zoroastrianism, or the pagan pantheon in its late neo-Platonic form. Contemporary Byzantium might have seen the conquest as a menacing rebellion resulting in a temporary loss of authority and—if they had noticed the religious dimension at all—as an Arab heresy of Judeo-Christian origin. Both perceptions would not have necessarily challenged the universal claim of the all-embracing Roman empire, since the idea of Rome was neutral to religion. Uprisings, territorial losses and gains, and heresies constituted a recurrent challenge during more than one millennium of Roman history.<sup>15</sup>

This early situation can be compared in certain respects with the historical situation of the Germanic migration and conquest of the western Roman empire. Despite military defeats, territorial losses, and a different Christian confession, Arianism, Constantinople and the Germanic realms kept the fiction of continuity and sovereignty

<sup>12</sup> Kaplony, *Konstantinopel und Damaskus*, 33–36 (A3). For these changing diplomatic relations see Kennedy, “Byzantine-Arab Diplomacy,” 134–135.

<sup>13</sup> Kaplony, *Konstantinopel und Damaskus*, 37–46 (A4).

<sup>14</sup> For the recent research on this aspect of empires see Münkler, *Imperien*.

<sup>15</sup> On the perception that Islam only ascended the monotheist ladder, but did not reach the heights of Christianity, see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 523–547, esp. 535–538.

of the Roman universal empire alive. In Europe, this fiction was constitutionally upheld until 1806. In the Germanic realms and kingdoms after the conquest, coins, mainly gold, were usually struck in the name and with the image of the emperor, although not always the current one, while others were anonymous. These kingdoms were autonomous both politically and in religious matters. Administrative and legal structures remained basically Latin-Roman. In contrast to the eastern Mediterranean, however, the monetary economy collapsed in almost all of western Europe except Italy.

For these early decades there is no contemporary evidence that the Arab-Islamic leaders developed an imperial ideology of their own. The idea of having a universal empire is different from having a state, with institutions and a governing body.<sup>16</sup> As leaders of the victorious Arab armies, inspired by the teachings of the new prophet, they were probably at first content with their *de facto* rule in the name of the new religion, the appropriation of existing institutions, and fiscal exploitation. Despite their successful conquests, the Arab-Islamic elite may have thought that universal rule could only be achieved within the framework of the Roman empire with its capital at Constantinople. What evidence would support such a hypothesis? Firstly, the idea of Rome was widespread and historically powerful. The Arab population and tribes in Bilād ash-Shām and northern Mesopotamia, especially the Ghassānids, had been exposed to the idea of Rome for almost eight hundred years. In the seventh century, a Hunnish ruler in Central Asia called himself “Caesar of Rome.”<sup>17</sup> Peter Thorau has even pointed to the continuity of the idea of imperial Rome in Ottoman ideology.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, up to the early third/ninth century, campaigns were undertaken to conquer Constantinople, which points to the importance attributed to that city: frequent and large scale attempts occurred in the period under study until about the time of the uprising of the caliph ‘Abdallāh b. az-Zubayr in the 60s/680s.<sup>19</sup> Vice versa, the Byzantines tried to re-establish imperial authority in Palestine and Egypt. Thirdly, al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) relates a ḥadīth of the

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Donner, “The Formation of the Islamic State.” He defines the Islamic “state,” but does not distinguish between the notion of state and that of empire.

<sup>17</sup> Humbach, “Phrom Gesar and the Bactrian Rome”; Humbach, “New Coins from Fromo Kesaro”; Schnädelbach, “A Group of Countermarked Imitative Drahms of Hormizd IV.”

<sup>18</sup> Thorau, “Von Karl dem Großen.”

<sup>19</sup> For a brief overview on the campaigns, see J.H. Mordtmann, “Kustantīniyya,” in *EP*, vol. 5, 534–535.

Prophet calling for the conquest of Rome (Constantinople), saying that until that had been accomplished there would be no Day of Judgement.<sup>20</sup> This can be read to mean that the Day of Judgement will come only after the creation of a (Roman) universal empire of Islamic denomination.



Fig. 3. Anonymous, Imitation of a *follis* of Constans II, without mint and date [20s/640s – 50s/670s], validating countermark *li-llāh*; photo Oriental Coin Cabinet Jena no. SB1312.

Already during the Persian occupation of Syria and northern Mesopotamia, local imitation of current Byzantine copper coins supplemented the circulating stock.<sup>21</sup> The situation was similar after the battle of Yarmūk as Henri Pottier and Ingrid and Wolfgang Schulze showed. Again imitations of current Byzantine copper coins emerged. Their emission went smoothly. Most of them comply with the weight standard characterizing *folles* struck in Constantinople probably until their importation ceased. Even weight reductions in Byzantium were immediately adopted in Arab Islamic Syria until the end of the 650s. Between the early 640s and 655/658, a massive import of Constans II-*folles* followed, but local production of imitations—now of the Constans II-type (fig. 3)—continued to meet the excess demand. After the import ended, the weight of the imitations was slightly reduced. They were continuously struck probably up to the mid 660s or even until about 670. The most common imitated type was the “standing

<sup>20</sup> Abel, “Ḥadīṭ sur la prise de Rome.”

<sup>21</sup> For the series struck under Sasanian authority, see Henri Pottier, *Monnayage de la Syrie*. For the later Pseudo-Byzantine coinage, see Goodwin, “Dating,” Pottier et al., “Pseudo-Byzantine Coinage” (forthcoming). I am grateful that the authors have generously shared some of their results with me.

emperor" of Constans II. These coins are encountered in a broad variety and usually have meaningless legends. Obviously, several mints were involved in the production of this pseudo-Byzantine coinage. These cannot yet be located, but their products can sometimes be distinguished from each other by the fabric of their flans, minting techniques and styles. Most likely Ḥimṣ/Emesa, the main Arab garrison city in Syria, was one of the major mints.<sup>22</sup> Fig. 3 shows a close Syrian imitation of a *follis* of Constans II with a later validating countermark *li-llāh*.<sup>23</sup>

Who was responsible for the issue of these imitated coins in Syria and northern Mesopotamia? We do not know who the regulating authorities were, but it is possible that military authorities in the garrisons, local authorities in the cities, money changers, or merchants were involved in their production. We know from the reports on the *futūḥ* that the Christian urban and parochial elite represented the cities when dealing with Islamic military tribal leaders, and that they were the mainstay of early Umayyad civil administration.<sup>24</sup>

*The Phase of Dissociation: Umayyad "Imperial Image" Coppers*



Fig. 4. Anonymous, *fals*, Dimashq, without date (ca. 50s/660 – 74/692); Oriental Coin Cabinet Jena inv. no. 303-D09 (3.84 g).

<sup>22</sup> Pottier et al., "Pseudo-Byzantine Coinage." For single groups and for detailed studies, see Oddy, "Christian Coinage," Goodwin, "Imitations of the Folles of Constans II," and Goodwin, *Arab-Byzantine Coinage*.

<sup>23</sup> Numismatists have called these coins "Pseudo-Byzantine." On countermarking in this period, see Schulze/Goodwin, *Countermarking*; Schulze, "Countermark."

<sup>24</sup> For the numismatic interpretation, see Treadwell, *Chronology*.





Fig. 5. Anonymous or *Khālid, fals*, Tiberiados (*ṭabariyya*), without date (ca. 50s/660s – 74/692); Oriental Coin Cabinet Jena inv. no. 303-C04 (4.71 g; ex. coll. Marquis de Lagoy).



Fig. 6. Anonymous, *fals*, Hims/Emesa, without date (ca. 50s/660s – 74/692); validating mark KAAON and *ṭayyib*; Oriental Coin Cabinet Jena inv. no. 303-C08 (3.85 g; ex. coll. F. Soret).

The next phase after importation and imitation can be assumed to begin in the 40s–50s/660s–670s, during the reign of Mu'āwiya.<sup>25</sup> It ends about the years 72 to 74/691 to 694, the years of the Marwānid reforms.<sup>26</sup> Luke Treadwell has conjectured that there was some sort

<sup>25</sup> Johns, “The First Seventy Years,” 421–423, analyzes the evidence of the Nessana papyri and concludes: “a centralised administrative and fiscal apparatus is absent under Mu'āwiya, and is first introduced under 'Abd al-Malik and his successors.” However, Foss, “Syrian Coinage of Mu'āwiya,” and Hoyland, “New Documentary Texts,” 399–401, challenge this view.

<sup>26</sup> The starting date for these series has been a matter of much dispute for the past thirty years. Michael Bates has suggested a “short chronology,” first in 1976 (“Bronze

of coordination, if not centralized policy in this early phase. His assumption complements the picture of a more centralized policy in state building by Mu'awiya, as it is now becoming apparent from inscriptions and papyri.<sup>27</sup> Treadwell focused on the mints of the provincial capitals Dimashq (fig. 4), Ṭabariyya (fig. 5),<sup>28</sup> and Ḥimṣ (fig. 6). These so-called "Imperial Image" coppers still depict Byzantine emperors and crosses, but in contrast to the preceding group of pseudo-Byzantine coins these coppers have carefully prepared flans and well engraved dies; and the quality far exceeds that of the imported Byzantine *folles* struck in Constantinople.<sup>29</sup> Officially recognized regular mints were set up, and were also named on the coins in Greek and/or Arabic. Validating expressions in both languages, such as

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Coinage") and again in 1986 ("History"), claiming that all the Umayyad "Imperial Image" coins were minted between 72 H and 74 H. In 1988–9 Qedar has argued in favor of a "long chronology" that begins with the closing of the Byzantine mint of Antioch in 629/630; see Qedar, "Copper Coinage of Syria." After twenty further years of research, it has become evident that these series are more complex and diverse than originally thought and cannot be fitted into the short time span suggested by Bates. See for example the series of Ḥimṣ: Oddy, "Bust Type," Oddy, "Standing Emperor." The beginning of this series can therefore be roughly dated to the 40s–50s / 660s–670s, the time of the caliph Mu'awiya. For an extensive discussion of Bates' "short chronology" and Qedar's "long chronology," see Treadwell, *Chronology*, 2–6.

<sup>27</sup> Miles, "Early Islamic Inscriptions"; Grohmann, "Zum Papyrusprotokoll in früharabischer Zeit"; Green/Tsafir, "Greek Inscriptions"; Donner, "The Formation of the Islamic State"; Foss, "A Syrian Coinage of Mu'awiya"; more material in Hoyland, "New Documentary Texts."

<sup>28</sup> Despite the long discussion about the Greek lettering on the coins of Ṭabariyya, its reading is still not firmly established due to the rarity of the coins and the variations in the lettering. De Saulcy, "Lettre à M. Reinaud (1839)," 439–440, fig. 23 (for this specimen see fig. 5), was the first who suggested a name: *XAAED*, probably read as *Khālid*; Stickel, "Neue Ermittlungen," 175–177, pl. no. 1 (this specimen); Stickel, *Handbuch* (1870), 8–13, 65, no. 1 (the plate is a composite drawing from inv. nos. 303-C04 and 303-E01); De Saulcy, "Lettre à Baron de Slane (1871)"; Walker, *Catalogue*, vol. 2, 45–49; Qedar, "Copper Coinage of Syria," pl. 5, no. 14. Meshorer, "Enigmatic Arab-Byzantine Coin," has attempted a new reading on the basis of the examples known to him: he suggested a slightly distorted *KAAON* on the left and right of the "m" with both words sharing the letters *ONO* in the exergue. This has been accepted by Treadwell, *Chronology*, 12, and Foss, "Anomalous Arab-Byzantine Coins," 7–8. Karukstis, "Meshorer's 'Enigmatic Coin' Revisited," has presented four additional specimens, and was able to show that the letters in the exergue sometimes read *ONB* (see also Karukstis, "Another Visit"). Meshorer's reading again seems questionable. On some examples, *XAAED* seems certain (see fig. 5); compare Qedar, "Copper Coinage of Syria," no. 14. V. Popp, in "Bildliche Darstellungen II," emphasizes the original interpretation of De Saulcy as *Khālid*; cf. as well Popp, "Islamgeschichte," 50, fig. 10. The identification of this *Khālid* with the famous conqueror seems unlikely for chronological reasons.

<sup>29</sup> Hahn, *Moneta imperii*, vol. 3, 136.

*KALON* or *ṭayyib* (both meaning “good”), or *jā’iz* (current), *wafā’ li-llāh* (fulfillment to God), *wafīyya* (full), or *bi-smi llāh* (in the name of God) were included in the design.<sup>30</sup>

This established Arabic as the language of the validating authority.<sup>31</sup> In the period of Mu‘āwiya, the indigenous population probably retained a strong adherence to traditional Christian symbols and may have shown a tendency to reject coins without crosses.<sup>32</sup> In later sub-phases of the Umayyad “Imperial Image” coins, when people had become used to them, we find more variety, and different Byzantine models were copied.<sup>33</sup> Mint regulation was at the level of military districts (*jund*, pl. *ajnād*), judging by the similarities of the coin design and validating marks used in one district when compared to another. It seems, though, that individual mints retained some freedom in the choice of the final design.<sup>34</sup> To complicate the picture further, these Umayyad “Imperial Image” coins were themselves imitated, sometimes closely, sometimes badly, by unnamed and at present unknown mints. The number of dies for some of these emissions runs into the hundreds.<sup>35</sup> Although some of the Umayyad “Imperial Image” coppers (e.g. Ḥimṣ, fig. 6) were struck in relatively large quantities,<sup>36</sup> their scarcity in archaeological finds suggests that they never made up a large part of the circulating stock of copper coins.<sup>37</sup> Most parts of Syria and northern Mesopotamia flourished in economic and demographic terms, and so had a need for petty coinage. Almost no attempt was made to represent the new state or religion on coins. Petty coinage, first and foremost, served as a means of exchange.

<sup>30</sup> These short expressions have no specific religious connotation and can thus be taken as mere validating marks. For a contrary view see Album/Goodwin, *Sylloge*, 84.

<sup>31</sup> Most likely the use of the Arabic validating expression was meant to reassure the Arab armies who received them as payment that the new coins are as good as the old coppers and the old Sasanian *drahms*.

<sup>32</sup> Palmer, *West-Syrian Chronicles*, 32.

<sup>33</sup> For the suggested economic logic, see Treadwell, *Chronology*, 13.

<sup>34</sup> Treadwell, *Chronology*. For Palestine see Ilisch, *Sylloge*.

<sup>35</sup> Milstein, “Hoard,” and, for a revision, Treadwell, *Chronology*, 6–10, and Goodwin, “Pseudo-Damascus Mint.” For a tentative attribution to a “pseudo-Damascus” mint and an “*al-wafā’ li-llāh*–mint” in southern Syria, probably in the *Jund al-Urdun*, see Album/Goodwin, *Sylloge*, 87, 90.

<sup>36</sup> See fn. 26, and especially Oddy’s studies.

<sup>37</sup> Foss, “Coinage of Syria”; Treadwell, *Chronology*, 12.



Fig. 7. Anonymous, *nomisma*, without mint (Damascus?), without date (ca. 660–680 CE); *Islamic Coin Auctions* 11 (2006), no. 13 (4.42 g).

An awareness of the cross as a symbol can be seen in a comparatively limited series of imitative gold coins, probably struck in Damascus, closely copying a *nomisma* of Heraclius and his son Heraclius Constantine, with slightly blundered Greek legends (fig. 7). The prominent “cross on steps” on the reverse (fig. 1) was transformed into a “bar on a pole on steps.” Hoard evidence suggests for these imitations a date not much later than 680 CE, about the period of Mu‘āwīya.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, on a rare imitation of a *nomisma* of Phocas (r. 602–610), crosses were changed into “sticks” with a small pellet on the top. Miles has suggested that the latter coin was struck at about the same time as the previous one.<sup>39</sup> At this stage of the development, and in this iconographic context, the new design was probably regarded at first as a mutilated cross. The cross might have been perceived as more than merely a Christian religious symbol and might have also been identified with the rival Byzantine empire.<sup>40</sup> Thus, it could also be described as a “de-Byzantinized” cross. This question will be discussed below in the context of ‘Abd al-Malik’s reforms.

<sup>38</sup> Miles, “Gold Coinage,” 203 (Daphne hoard); Metcalf, “Byzantine Gold Hoards,” 96, pl. 12, no. 2.66 (Nikertai hoard; now American Numismatic Society inv. no. ANS 1983.122.1). *Islamic Coin Auctions* 11 (2006), no. 13, and Foss, “Syrian Coinage of Mu‘āwīya,” have suggested a dating to the time of Mu‘āwīya; compare Treadwell, *Chronology*, 5–6.

<sup>39</sup> Miles, “Gold Coinage,” 207, no. 1. Until now, this coin is known in a single example.

<sup>40</sup> In Byzantium the cross became almost an imperial symbol denoting the victory of the emperor over his enemies; Moorhead, “Iconoclasm,” esp. p. 178. In this context, the image of Christ on the coins of Justinian II (r. 685–695, 705–711) may have played a role.

A passage transmitted by the Maronite chronicle describes the minting of gold and silver coins by Mu'āwiya and their rejection by the population, because these coins did not bear crosses. This text emphasizes the conservative character of precious metal coins.<sup>41</sup> If the passage refers to these gold issues, it suggests that the gold may have been struck by the order of the caliph whereas the issue of copper was organized on a *jund* level. Nevertheless the dating of this passage remains problematic because the minting of silver began in Syria probably not before 72/691-2 and the text might be considered as a misplaced reference to the reforms by 'Abd al-Malik.<sup>42</sup>

### *The Former Sasanian Realm*

How did the currency and visual representation of power and religion develop in the newly conquered lands of Iraq and Iran? The centralized Sasanian empire was attacked at its apogee, despite the devastation and chaos caused by the aftermath of Heraclius' victory. Its administration, its army based on cash payments, and its monetary economy<sup>43</sup> were to a significant degree under control by the center, in contrast to the declining and decentralizing Byzantine empire.<sup>44</sup> Even after the assassination of Khusrū II in 628 CE and the almost complete annihilation of the army at the battle of Nihāwand in 641 CE, institutions and the monetary economy remained intact. The centralized Sasanian state enabled the conquerors to take over the administration swiftly.



Fig. 8. Khusrū II, *drahm*, mint abbreviation 'HM (Hamadhān), regnal year 29 (618–9 CE); Oriental Coin Cabinet Jena inv. no. 302-B05 (3.46 g).

<sup>41</sup> The Maronite chronicle was completed after 664 CE. It discusses the minting of gold and silver coinage by Mu'āwiya, "but it was not accepted, because it has no cross on it" (Palmer, trans., *West-Syrian Chronicles*, 32).

<sup>42</sup> For an attribution to Mu'āwiya see Foss, "A Syrian Coinage of Mu'āwiya." For recent doubts about the dating of the passage see Ilisch, "Muhammad-Drachms," 17.

<sup>43</sup> Sears, *Monetary System*, 349–365.

<sup>44</sup> See Morony, "Economic Boundaries," for a recent account.

The typical late Sasanian *drahm* (fig. 8) of about 4.2 g shows on the obverse the portrait of the *shāhānshāh*—either Khusrū II or Yazdgard III (r. 632–651 CE)—with an enormous winged crown as sign of his royalty. On the reverse the fire altar served as the central symbol of Zoroastrianism, the dualistic Iranian religion. Priest attendants stand on either side. Beside them are abbreviations indicating the mint and the regnal year of the ruler.

From the fifth regnal year (15/635–6) onwards, Yazdgard III, the last *shāhānshāh*, was in retreat. In his twentieth regnal year, in 651 CE, he was assassinated in Marw, the last eastern remnant of his empire. Few coins were minted between the decisive battle of Nihāwand in 641 CE (regnal year 10 or 20 H) and 651 CE. Coins struck in the conquered territories are almost indistinguishable from those struck under the authority of Yazdgard III, except that the mints lay outside his shrinking realm.<sup>45</sup>



Fig. 9. “Yazdgard III,” posthumous, *drahm*, abbreviation SK (Sijistān), regnal year “20 YE” (immobilized date, 31–ca. 41 H / 651–ca. 661 CE); Oriental Coin Cabinet Jena inv. no. 304-C04 (3.49 g; gift of A. D. Mordtmann, Jr., 1874).

The next phase lay between 20 Yazdgard Era (YE) and about 30 YE, or between 31 and 41 Hijrī, or 651 and 661 CE. In contrast to Byzantium, the Sasanian empire collapsed completely and the *shāhānshāh*’s claim to universal rule ended. The Islamic conquerors did not attempt to continue the Sasanian claim of a universal empire until the Abbasids. The outlook of the Syrian Umayyads was different, being closer to the Roman tradition.

Coins continued to be struck in the names and with the portraits of “Khusrū II” or “Yazdgard III”—the portraits are almost identi-

<sup>45</sup> For a thorough study of the coins of Yazdgard III utilized to map the Arab conquest see Tyler-Smith, “Coinage in the Name of Yazdgerd III.” In addition see “Earliest Arab-Sasanian Coins” by Nikitin/Roth who discuss how to distinguish coins struck by mints under the control of Yazdgard III.



cal—and with the fire altar and attendants. The dating was according to the Yazdgard era, although most coins used the immobilized date of 20 YE (fig. 9). Frequently, but not always, additional Arabic validating expressions appear in the obverse margin, usually in the second quadrant, such as *bi-smi llāh* (in the name of God)<sup>46</sup> or *jayyid* (good) as on the Syrian copper coins. These expressions have no specifically Islamic connotations. The resulting picture for the early decades seems to correspond to a situation in which the Sasanian administration remained operational, but functioned at a provincial level and was responsible to Arab governors.<sup>47</sup> In the 30s/650s, possibly in the year 33/653–4, the mint authorities under the jurisdiction of the Baṣra prefecture, began dating coins with Hijrī years written in Pahlawī.<sup>48</sup> The introduction of the new era on coins indicates that the administrative Arabic elite gradually developed an awareness of its Islamic identity, but there was still no overt representation of the Islamic religion and its empire.



Fig. 10. Georgia, Bagratids, Stepanos II (r. 639–663 CE), *drahm*, (Tiflis?), without date; Oriental Coin Cabinet inv. no. 302-C04 (3.03 g; ex coll. H.A. Zwick, 1840); Mayer, *Sylloge*, 110, no. 1001.

<sup>46</sup> *Bi-smi llāh* is a general phrase without any specific Islamic content, therefore it is likely to be used here only as a mark of validation; compare Donner, “Believers,” 40. Crone and Hinds, *God’s Caliph*, 24–25, instead believed that the use of Allāh, God, in this phrase is the beginning of an Islamic propaganda predating the use of the name of Muhammad. Allāh, however, is the God common to all contemporary religions in the Middle East. This assumption misled them to postulate that *khalīfat Allāh* was the most important and programmatic title of the early caliphs. The epigraphic and numismatic evidence proves, however, that “commander of the believer” was the more important title (see fn. 52), and that the invocation of the messengership of Muhammad was the first distinct Islamic slogan (see the discussion of fig. 14). This misconception of the role of Muhammad in the evolving propaganda and of the title *khalīfat Allāh* in the coin protocol gave their book a false start in argumentation.

<sup>47</sup> Sears, *Monetary History*, 377–402. See also the summary by Album in Album/Goodwin, *Sylloge*, 34–37.

<sup>48</sup> Album/Goodwin, *Sylloge*, 8–9.



Contemporary Georgia shows that religious iconographic symbols were of importance in coin imagery elsewhere. Christian Georgia had belonged to the Sasanian realm and was part of the circulation zone of the Sasanian *drahm*. A strong sense of religious identity is found here at about the same time as the immobilized year “20 YE” *drahms* were being minted.<sup>49</sup> New coins, supplementing the circulating stock (fig. 10), show on the obverse a portrait resembling that of Hormizd IV (r. 579–590 CE), but the Georgian inscription names the Bagratid king Stepanos, who reigned between 18/639 and 43/663. On the reverse, the fire altar was distinctly replaced by a Christian altar with a cross on top.



Fig. 11. ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Āmir b. Kurayz, governor of the Baṣra-prefecture, *drahm*, abbreviation DP (probably Fasā in the Dārābjird district), year “43” H (immobilized date, ca. 43–47/663–668); Oriental Coin Cabinet Jena inv. no. 2005-15-002 (4.04 g; gift of H. Wilski).

The third and fourth phases<sup>50</sup> in development of the coin design cover approximately the years 30 to 60 YE, 40 to 72 H, or 661 to 681 CE, i.e. the Sufyānid period up to the Second *Fitna*. As in Syria, a gradual regulation of the administration, including minting, is visible on the coins. The names of *Khusrū* and *Yazdgard* were replaced, at first occasionally and then regularly from 50/671 with the names of the provincial governors in Pahlawī script (fig. 11). These are placed in front of the traditional portrait of the *shāhānshāh*. At many mints, the Yazdgard era ceased to be used and was replaced with the Hijrī year.

<sup>49</sup> About the same time, imitations of Sasanian *drahms* of Hormizd IV with a fire altar on the reverse are also known from the Caucasus region, but instead of the mint abbreviation they have the Pahlawī-Aramaic word *zwzwn*, meaning “silver” (*drahm*); they most commonly bear the immobilized date “six.”

<sup>50</sup> The phases are according to Album in Album/Goodwin, *Sylloge*.



Fig. 12. Mu'āwiya, "amīr of the believers" in Pahlawī, *drahm*, abbreviation *D'* (Dārābjird in Fārs), year "43" H (immobilized date; 54–55/673–675), clipped rim; Oriental Coin Cabinet Jena inv. no. 304-B07 (2.06 g; ex coll. F. Soret, ex coll. Spewitz).

Dārābjird in the province of Fārs was important in the history of the Sasanian dynasty. It must also have had a special place in the early Islamic empire, though this has not yet been explored. Dārābjird and the mints related to it struck coins in the name of the caliphs for some time, more than any other mint. Coins in the name of Mu'āwiya were only struck here (fig. 12).<sup>51</sup> His Arab title is written in Pahlawī script and the second part translated into Persian as "amīr of the believers," stressing his role as leader of the Islamic elite.<sup>52</sup>

Some years after the First *Fitna*, between 656 and 661 CE, Umayyad governors began to affirm their rule with a reference to God in Arabic. The first was the governor of the East, Ziyād b. Abī Sufyān (r. 50–64/670–684). Since 47/667–8, he promulgated regularly his authority with the legend *bi-smi llāhi rabbī*, "In the name of God, my lord." Other governors followed his example and added after *rabb* their own name, for example: *bi-smi llāhi rabbi l-ḥakam*, "In the name of God,

<sup>51</sup> See Album/Goodwin, *Sylloge*, nos. 245–246, 269. Hoyland, "New Documentary Texts," 399, accepts an old, and incorrect, reading of "41" by J. Walker and is thus misled in his conclusions.

<sup>52</sup> The title *amīr al-mu'minīn* was the most important and prominent title of royalty. The title *khalīfa* came second, if it existed at all at that point in history. Donner, "From Believers to Muslims," has suggested that the term *mu'minūn*, "believers," signified all "believers" in God and the Last Day. It is obvious that the term *mu'minūn* was used earlier than the later designation *muslimūn* in surviving inscriptions. According to Donner *mu'minūn* included Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. This wide ecumenical interpretation should be narrowed down, however. We do not know how far belief in the prophethood of Muhammad was essential to the group which termed itself "believers," but probably it was essential to their identity. Numismatic evidence shows that acknowledgement of his messengership was the first of all representations of Islam on coins. The title "amīr of the believers" also implies that these "believers" had to acknowledge the "commander" as their theocratic leader. On the one hand, the title ascribes an elite status to the "believers," while it does, on the other hand, reflect a certain religious openness, the universalistic attitude of the Islamic elite. Cf. Hoyland, "New Documentary Texts," 404–406, 409–410.

the lord of al-Ḥakam” b. al-‘Āṣ, who was Umayyad governor of the Kirmān province between 56/675–6 and 58/677–8.<sup>53</sup>

*The Second Fitna—Zubayrid and Khārijite challenges*



Fig. 13. ‘Abdallāh b. az-Zubayr, “*amīr* of the believers” in Pahlawī, *drahm*, abbreviation D’-J (Jahrum in the Dārābjird district), year 60 YE (72/692); Oriental Coin Cabinet Jena inv. no. 2005-15-004 (4.12 g; gift of H. Wilski).

The Second *Fitna*—the Zubayrid movement and caliphate of Ibn az-Zubayr between 681 and 693 CE—and the much fiercer Khārijite challenge between 687 and 697 CE constitute the fifth phase in the movement towards the first inclusion of Islamic symbols on coins, and they mark the watershed in the development towards a clear iconographic expression of the new religion and state. ‘Abdallāh b. az-Zubayr was a close, venerated member of the family of the Prophet. He emphasized the religious character of the caliphate and demanded a state in accordance with the principles of Islam, whatever this meant at the time. After Mu‘āwiya’s death in 60/680, ‘Abdallāh b. az-Zubayr strongly opposed the Sufyānid claim for the caliphate and was supported in many parts of the empire. His policy and goals are only known indirectly through the anti-Umayyad historiography of the Abbasids. Study of the coins now available for this period enables us to write a more accurate history of his caliphate.<sup>54</sup>

‘Abdallāh b. az-Zubayr’s name first appeared on coins of Kirmān in 62/681–2. In the year 64/684, after the death of the Umayyad caliph Yazīd, the coins show that he assumed the imperial title “*amīr* of the believers” (fig. 13). In the year 67/687, his brother Muṣ‘ab secured

<sup>53</sup> Album/Goodwin, *Sylloge*, 12–15; Sears, “Legitimation.”

<sup>54</sup> Rotter, *Bürgerkrieg*, focuses on literary evidence, as these coinages were little known at that time. Mochiri’s early study, *Arab-Sasanian Civil War Coinage*, suffers from the fact that it follows the then current hypothesis that the main series of Khārijite coinage used post-Yazdgard era dates; also the immobilized dates had not yet been recognized as such.

Basra, Iraq and the territories to the east as far as Sijistān. The Umayyads seemed to have lost their cause. The coin designs of the Zubayrid governors in Iraq and Iran remained almost the same as before, with the portrait of the *shāhānshāh* and the fire altar and its attendants.



Fig. 14. ‘Abd al-Malik b. ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Āmir, Zubayrid governor, *drahm*, abbreviation BYSh (Bishāpūr), year 66 H (685–6 CE); Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, in Album/Goodwin, *Sylloge*, vol. 1, no. 152 (4.23 g).

Between the years 66/685 and 69/688–9, the Zubayrid governor of the East placed the Arabic legend *Muḥammad rasūl Allāh*, “Muhammad is the messenger of God,” on the obverse margin of the coins for the first time. These were struck in Bishāpūr in the Fārs province (fig. 14).



Fig. 15. Anonymous, *drahm*, mint ‘KWL’ (Aqūlā), year 70 H (689–90 CE); Sotheby’s, *Auction* (March 18, 1983), no. 80.

According to a scrutinizing numismatic analysis by Lutz Ilisch, the Zubayrid authorities of Aqūlā, the older twin city just north of the important garrison town of Kufa, went probably in the year 70/689–90 a step further.<sup>55</sup> Coins were created with the legend “Muhammad (is)

<sup>55</sup> Ilisch, “Muhammad-Drachms.” Until further evidence is discovered, the dating of the coins to the year 70 H does leave some, albeit marginal, doubts.

the messenger of God” in front of the portrait of the *shāhānshāh* and—for the first time—the profession of faith and the unity of God, the *shahāda*<sup>56</sup> was placed in Arabic on the obverse margin (fig. 15): *bi-smi llāhi lā ilāha illā llāh waḥdahū* (“In the name of God, there is no deity other than God alone”).

In the same year, 70/689–90, an anonymous coin with the Pahlawī inscription “Muhammad is the messenger of God” in place of the governor’s name in front of the portrait was struck in the Kirmān province (*GRM KRM’N*), then probably under Khārijite control.<sup>57</sup> Zubayrids and Khārijites thus propagated the new Islamic imperial rule with reference to the Prophet and putative<sup>58</sup> founder of the state on the obverse, which is the usual side for the sovereign. The acknowledgement and invocation of the messengership of Muhammad was obviously the fundamental characteristic of the new religion. Even ideologically opposed groups referred to him in the same way and with the same phrase. With the growing debate over a community built on Islamic principles, the representation of Islam and its state became essential for the legitimization of power.<sup>59</sup> These changes were the first successful attempts in coin protocol, and they heralded the next decisive changes in the religious and imperial self-image of the elite.



Fig. 16. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. ‘Abdallāh b. Āmir, Zubayrid governor, *drahm*, abbreviation SK (Sijistān), year 72 H (691–2 CE); coll. Mohsen Faroughi.

<sup>56</sup> In the secondary literature the *shahāda* is sometimes defined to also include the invocation of the messengership of Muhammad. Here the term denotes only the profession of the unity of God.

<sup>57</sup> Shams-Eshragh, “An Interesting Arab-Sasanian Dirham”; Foss, “A New and Unusual Dirham”; Islamic Coin Auctions 9 (2004), no. 3172; see also below, fn. 65. For the history of the Khārijites, see Foss, “Kharijites and Their Coinage.”

<sup>58</sup> In his role as founder of the Islamic empire the prophet Muhammad, is as putative as Osman for the Ottoman empire, and Romulus and Remus or Aeneas for the Roman empire.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Donner, “Believers,” 40–41, on the growing role of the public representation of Muhammad.

In the year 72/691–2, the Zubayrid governor of the remote province of Sijistān in south-eastern Iran, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Āmir, brother of the aforementioned innovative governor of the east, went a step further by replacing the Zoroastrian fire altar and attendants with the profession of the new faith (*shahāda*); Iraj Mochiri has read the Pahlawī script thus: “Seventy-two / No God but he / another God does not exist / Muhammad (is) the messenger of God / SK (mint abbreviation for Sijistān)” (fig. 16).<sup>60</sup> The *shahāda* appears here in Pahlawī script and in the Persian language.<sup>61</sup> Replacing the fire altar in the same way as the altar with a cross in Georgia, it is the first known “iconic” symbol of the Islamic religion and its empire. The Zubayrid governors had targeted the ideological and religious deficiencies of the Sufyānid Umayyad regime. The probable audience of these coins’ ideological message was not only the new Arab military elite, but also the old Persian speaking Zoroastrian elite that controlled the civil administration in the east.

In the provinces under Khārijite control, Islamic religious propaganda addressed in Arabic the crucial question of legitimate power, that is, who should guide the believers: *lā ḥukma illā li-llāh*, “guidance/judgement belongs only to God,” and *bi-smi llāhi waliyyi l-amr*, “in the name of God, the master of authority.”<sup>62</sup> In 72/691–2, the Marwānids re-conquered Iraq, and in the next year, 73/692, brutally suppressed the caliphate of ‘Abdallāh b. az-Zubayr in Mecca. The ideologically much more aggressive Khārijite movement, though, still controlled much of Iran.

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<sup>60</sup> Mochiri, “A Pahlavi Forerunner,” 168–172; Sears, “A Hybrid Imitation,” 137–169; Ilisch, Review of American Journal of Numismatics 1, corrects the attribution of Sears; Johns, “The First Seventy Years,” 426–427. I would like to thank Dieter Weber for confirming Mochiri’s reading of the Pahlawī legend.

<sup>61</sup> Donner, “From Believers to Muslims,” 47, is wrong when he assigned the date of the first *shahāda* on coins to the years 66 and 67 H; only the reference to Muhammad can be found on them.

<sup>62</sup> Sears, “Legitimation”; Foss, “Kharijites.”

*The New Ideological Form of the Umayyad Empire*

*Trial and Error in the Symbolic Representation of Islam and its Empire*

The reforms and activities of 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān and his omnipotent governor of the east, al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf, can be seen on the one hand as an attempt to integrate the defeated moderate Zubayrid movement, and on the other hand, as a forceful reaction to the ongoing and ideologically much more potent Khārījite challenge. It was now at the latest, if not before, that the idea of an Islamic universal empire in its own ideological right arose. Mecca was too far away for a representative imperial religious cult to be successfully controlled. In 72/691–2 'Abd al-Malik built the present Dome of the Rock and the Aqṣā Mosque in Jerusalem, which were in all likelihood the first architectural manifestations of the new Islamic empire.<sup>63</sup> The choice of Jerusalem placed the imperial state religion in the tradition of Judaism and Christianity and in the center of the medieval world.

The elements of traditional coin design were reconsidered as well. The designers of these coins had to balance two necessities: firstly, the traditional conservatism of precious metal coin design in order to make these coins acceptable to the public, and secondly, the need to create a symbolic rhetoric for both Islam and its empire. Between 72/691–2 and 77/696–7, the Marwānid government experimented with new symbols and designs; not all the imagery is fully understood today. These experiments followed different but related courses in Syria, in the super-provinces of Kufa and Basra, and in the northern provinces (Jazīra, Armenia, and Azerbaijan).

The recurrent theme of all these coin designs was the inclusion of the formula *Muḥammad rasūl Allāh*, and increasingly the profession of the unity of God. These legends were the symbol of Islam comparable to the cross, fire altar, and menorah. Muhammad, the all-but-human messenger of God, was raised to a position almost as sacred as the divine revelation itself. The anachronistic iconographic symbols on the coins, however, were secondary in ideological terms and had to serve as recognizable marks to make the coins acceptable in cir-

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<sup>63</sup> 'Abd al-Malik may have followed the Byzantine model of erecting imperial religious buildings; see Gibb, "Arab-Byzantine Relations," 50–51, and Rabbat, "Meaning of the Dome of the Rock."



culuation. Based on the Zubayrid innovations and slogans on coins, the search process for appropriate new designs and symbolic representations of the Marwānid empire and its religion seems to have started in Damascus in 72/691–2. The process in the prefectures Basra and Kufa and the northern provinces followed a different but parallel course. With the exception of some coppers, the new emissions were anonymous.

*The First Attempts in Syria: The Years 72–74/691–694*



Fig. 17. Anonymous, *nomisma*, without mint (Damascus?), without year (ca. late 60s–72 / late 680s until 691–2 CE); Spink, *Auction 18* (1986), no. 86.

At the latest in 72/691–2, ‘Abd al-Malik began to experiment with coin designs in Syria. His administration chose yet another circulating type of Heraclius’ *nomisma* as a model, even leaving the anachronistic Greek inscription in place (fig. 17). The obverse shows three standing emperors still wearing tiny crosses on top of their crowns. On the reverse, the cross, being the symbol of the Christian Byzantine empire, was replaced by a “bar on a pole on steps.” The same symbol had been used before in the time of Mu‘āwiya (fig. 7). The emblems of the rival Christian empire were gradually removed, while the recognizable design pattern of the circulating Byzantine gold coinage was retained.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Walker, *Catalogue*, vol. 2, 18, no. 54, pl. v; Miles, “Earliest Arab Gold Coinage,” 209–210, nos. 4–5.



Fig. 18. Anonymous, *drahm*, Damascus, year 72 H (691–2 CE); Peus, *Auktion* 380 (2004), no. 988 (3.80 g).

Before 72/691–2, silver *drahms* were not known to have been minted in Syria. On the basis of the coin type, style, and mint technology, L. Ilisch ascertained that at least one workshop from Aqūlā/Kufa was brought to Damascus to introduce a silver coin type in 72/691–2. It was similar to the previous Zubayrid issues of Aqūlā. Like the Aqūlā *drahms* of 70/689–90 (fig. 15), the new Marwānid Damascus *drahms* (fig. 18) were modeled on the current Sasanian *drahm* retaining the images of the *shāhānshāh* and the fire altar with attendants. The coins are anonymous; the Arabic invocation *Muḥammad rasūl Allāh* is placed in front of the portrait, however at first without the profession of the unity of God. Similar coins were struck in Ḥimṣ in 72/691–2.<sup>65</sup> *Drahms* naming only a MHMT in Pahlawī and/or *Muḥammad* in Arabic without titles or reference to the messengership might come from further mints, such al-Ḥīra, close to Kufa, Ḥarrān, and/or one mint in the Jund Qinnasrīn in Syria.<sup>66</sup> The Zubayrid propaganda was adopted as suitable for the ongoing power struggle with the Khārijites.

<sup>65</sup> Album/Goodwin, *Sylloge*, no. 305 (year 72 H).

<sup>66</sup> For the “Muhammad *drahms*,” Sears (“Sasanian Style Coins” and “Transitional *Drahms*”) has suggested mints in northern provinces of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the Jazīra (Ḥarrān). He has identified the name Muhammad with the name of the Marwānid governor of the northern super-province and brother of ‘Abd al-Malik, Muḥammad b. Marwān. Ilisch, “Muhammad-Drachms,” has re-examined these coins; he is much more cautious in their attributions and provides more material for comparison. As the origin of the Muhammad *drahms*, he has suggested different mints such as Ḥarrān, al-Ḥīra, and an unidentified mint in the Jund Qinnasrīn (p. 24), while excluding almost Azerbaijan and Armenia. The Muhammad *drahms* are undated. Ilisch assumes that the inclusion of the name Muhammad or “MHMT” followed the same idea as the *Muḥammad rasūl Allāh-drahms*. In the cases where the name Muhammad is found twice on the coins, he supposes that at least one might refer to the Prophet. The earliest date for al-Ḥīra would thus be 66/685–6 under Zubayrid control, for Ḥarrān and the one in the Jund Qinnasrīn 72/691–2 under Marwānid control.



Fig. 19. Anonymous, *drahm*, Damascus, year 73 H (692–3 CE); Peus, *Auktion* 380 (2004), no. 989 (3.69 g).

From 72/691–2 to 74/693–4, the name *Khusrū* in Pahlawī is again found in front of the portrait (fig. 19) so that the design, except for the Arabic invocation of Muhammad, remains the recognizable standard *drahm* design.<sup>67</sup> In the year 73/692–3 the invocation of the messenger of God, Muhammad, was supplemented with an Arabic *shahāda* in the obverse margin of the silver, and probably also on the undated gold coins of Damascus (fig. 20 and 21) and on the *drahms* of Kufa (fig. 29).



Fig. 20. Anonymous, *nomisma*, without mint (Damascus), without date (73–74/692–694); Spink, *Auction* 18 (1986), no. 87.

The gold coinage followed the same course. The beginning of this series is presumably contemporary with the inclusion of the *shahāda*

<sup>67</sup> Bates, "History," 243–244; Miles, "Some Arab-Sasanian and Related Coins," 191–192, no. 6 (72 H) Jazsar, "Arab-Sassanian Dirham" (72 H); Album/Goodwin, *Sylloge*, no. 278 (72 H), no. 279 (73 H); Peus 380 (2004), no. 988 (73 H); Islamic Coin Auction 9 (2004), no. 3173 (73 H) = Baldwin's, New York Sale 9 (2005), no. 230 (73 H) = Classical Numismatic Group, *Mail Bid* 69 (2005), no. 1914; Shams-Eshragh, *Study*, 95 no. 137 (73 H); Miles, "Mihrāb and 'Anazah," pl. xxviii, no. 4 (74 H, coll. P. Balog); Walker, *Catalogue*, vol. 1, 23 no. DD1 (74 H).

on silver *drahms*.<sup>68</sup> Probably in 73/691–2, but before the year 74/693–4, the crosses were finally removed from the conventional and now meaningless image of the emperors, and the symbol on the reverse was replaced by a “globe on a pole on steps.” Probably parallel to the silver issues (fig. 19), the profession of faith, including the unity of God and invocation of the messenger of God, Muhammad, encircled the central symbol (fig. 20). The “globe/bar on a pole on steps” and these invocations had now become frequently used symbols.<sup>69</sup>

*A Consistent Formula for Syria and Northern Mesopotamia:  
The Caliph as the Representation of the Empire*



Fig. 21. Anonymous, *dīnār*, without mint (Damascus), year 77 H (696 CE); Oriental Coin Cabinet Jena inv. no. 303-A02 (4.45 g; ex coll. Soret, ex coll. Peretier).



Fig. 22. 'Abd al-Malik, *fals*, Qinnasrīn, without date (74–77/693–696); Oriental Coin Cabinet Jena inv. no. 303-F08 (3.15 g).

<sup>68</sup> Bates, “History,” 246.

<sup>69</sup> Miles, “Earliest Arab Gold Coinage,” 210–211.



Fig. 23. Anonymous, titles *amīr al-mu'minīn* and *khalīfat Allāh, fals*, Manbij, without date (74–77/692–696); Oriental Coin Cabinet Jena inv. no. 303-G06 (2.7 g).



Fig. 24. Anonymous, titles *amīr al-mu'minīn* and *khalīfat Allāh, drahm*, without mint (Damascus), year 75 H (694–5 CE); Gorny und Mosch (2007), no. 5599 (3.34 g).

Between the years 74/693–4 and 77/696, the next ideologically more consistent, and indeed almost unified, iconographic representation of the empire was created for Syria, in gold, copper, and in silver (figs. 21–24). The obverse of the gold and copper coins shows the image of the “standing caliph.” The precious metal coins are anonymous, giving only titles, but some copper issues name ‘Abd al-Malik. Luke Treadwell has suggested a connection with the earlier introduction of a standing *khaṭīb* in Kufa that will be dealt with below.<sup>70</sup> An important mark of the figure’s imperial status is his long, broad sword sheathed in a scabbard, the hilt firmly in his grip.<sup>71</sup> On the

<sup>70</sup> Treadwell, “The ‘Orans’ Drachms,” 254, 259–260.

<sup>71</sup> Hoyland, “Writing,” 593–596, without taking the numismatic and historical context into proper consideration, attempts to argue that the image is the “standing Prophet” rather than the “standing caliph.” His main argument is that the standing figure on the copper coins of Jerusalem, Ḥarrān, and al-Ruhā’ is accompanied with the name Muhammad, on account of which Hoyland identified him as the Prophet.

gold *dīnār*, the caliph is surrounded by the Arabic *shahāda* and the invocation of the messengership of Muhammad. The reverse repeats the “globe on a pole on steps.”<sup>72</sup>

The design seems to have been modified on copper coins, except for Palestine where the Byzantine numeral **ϡ** (40) was retained.<sup>73</sup> The reverse uses the familiar “globe on a pole on steps” type, but with the addition of an ellipse, the resulting design resembling the Greek letter *phi*, which was first noted by John Walker.<sup>74</sup> The precise rendering of the “globe (or other tops) on a pole with ellipse” varied considerably at the different mints in Bilād al-Shām and the western Jazīra.

On the silver coins in Damascus in 75/694–5, the image of the *shāhānshāh* remained on the obverse as the iconic mark of the *drahm*. The standing ruler is placed on the reverse (fig. 24). On either sides of his image, the title *amīr al-mu’minīn* was inscribed for the first time in Arabic language and script. Also on this coin, another title appears for the first time on a dated document, namely, reference to the emperor as *khalīfat Allāh*, “deputy of God,” in defective archaic writing (KhLFT ’LLH). The title enhanced his claim to political-religious leadership.<sup>75</sup> Both titles are also occasionally found on the paral-

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He also cites Foss, “First Century,” 758, who states that in the Hellenistic period the inscription accompanies the image. However, both overlook the fact that in the seventh century the inscription and the text are separated, as has been explained above. Hoyland also adduces the fact that the image of Christ on Byzantine coins and the “standing figure” both have long flowing hair. A forthcoming study by Ingrid and Wolfgang Schulze (see fn. 72) on the iconography of the “standing person” will show a wide variety of hairstyles and headdresses; this was consequently not a defining feature of the image. There are indeed some rare coins from Yubnā, not mentioned by Hoyland, where the standing figure is adorned with a halo, which in the late Roman period indicates divinity, accompanied by the statement *Muḥammad rasūl Allāh*; see Goodwin, *Arab-Byzantine Coinage*, 93, 110. The fact that Yubnā is only a provincial mint suggests that its iconographic interpretation is not representative of the main series. Furthermore, not only did the Prophet achieve an almost divine status, but the caliph regarded himself as “deputy of God.”

<sup>72</sup> Miles, “Earliest Arab Gold Coinage,” 212–229. Currently Ingrid and Wolfgang Schulze are working on the details of the numismatic iconography of ‘Abd al-Malik: “Kupfermünzen Abd al-Maliks aus Harran und anderen Münzstätten der Jazīra,” lecture presented during the regional meeting of the Oriental Numismatic Society, Bamberg/Germany, May 13–14, 2006.

<sup>73</sup> Goodwin, “Jund Filastin”; Goodwin, *Arab-Byzantine Coinage*.

<sup>74</sup> Walker, *Catalogue*, vol. 1, xxiii.

<sup>75</sup> For a summary of the discussion about this title see Rotter, *Bürgerkrieg*, 33–35. Crone/Hinds, *God’s Caliph*, 4–23, esp. 20–21 and fn. 81, propose that ‘Uthmān (r. 23–35/644–656) was the first who adopted the title *khalīfat Allāh*. Later references aside, their only seemingly contemporary source is a poem by Ḥassān b. Thābit (d. by 54/674). However, Rotter, *Bürgerkrieg*, 34, 248, rejects the line in question as a later Umayyad addition, see ‘Arafat, “Historical Background,” 278. Madelung’s pro-



lel copper coinage (fig. 23). These *drahms*, the following ones from Damascus, and the first emission of the reformed type of 79/698 do not give the mint name. Ilisch has inferred that ‘Abd al-Malik had intended to concentrate all the minting of silver in Damascus, as he did with the minting of gold coins, according to the Byzantine model of coin production; the mint name on the coin thus would have appeared to be unnecessary. Concerning the silver coinage, however, this centralization failed due to the significant differences to the fiscal and monetary organization of Iran.<sup>76</sup>



Fig. 25. Anonymous, titles *amīr al-mu‘minīn* and *khalīfat Allāh*, *drahm*, without mint (Damascus), without date (ca. 75–79/694–698); Baldwin’s, *Auction 26* (2001), no. 1569.

The depiction of a ruler on both sides may not have been a satisfactory design, as Treadwell has suggested. The solution to this problem was probably a new coin type with the caliph’s half bust and the arch. It does not entirely deviate from the accepted Sasanian appearance of *drahms*, but nevertheless created an ideologically more consistent design (fig. 25). It was also anonymous, but with imperial titles, though it had neither mint name nor date. Presumably, it was struck in Damascus between 75/694–5 and 79/697–8. Instead of the con-

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nounced criticism in *Succession*, 46, fn. 51, of Crone’s and Hind’s position should also be questioned. Along with the Sunnī theology, he supposes that Abū Bakr (r. 11–13/632–634) had adopted the more modest title “deputy of the messenger of God” (*khalīfat rasūl Allāh*) which was supposedly altered by the Umayyads to the ambitious title of “deputy of God.” For the title *khalīfat rasūl Allāh*, however, there is no contemporary evidence. Taking into account that the title *khālīfat Allāh* came second to that of the “commander of the believers,” and that the title *khalīfa* is for the first time attested on contemporary documents—coins—of ‘Abd al-Malik, the earlier existence of either *khalīfa* title should be questioned. If *khālīfat Allāh* was used before ‘Abd al-Malik at all, then probably more as an honorific than as a title for the office. See as well above fn. 46, 52.

<sup>76</sup> Ilisch, “Muhammad-Drachms,” 23.



ventional portrait of the *shāhānshāh*, a new half length portrait was created, with a globe on top of the headgear or cap. It was close to Sasanian iconography, yet distinctive. The figure's hand firmly holds the hilt of his broad sheathed sword similar to the "standing caliph" type. This newly created image can be understood as the representation of the caliph. The name "Khusrū", placed again in front of the portrait, has been reduced to a meaningless part of a conventional coin design. The margin carries the *shahāda* and the reference to Muhammad that had become the norm by now. The reverse shows an arch on columns with capitals. On either side of the arch are the imperial titles, as on the standing caliph *drahm*. The arch covers a lance or spear, and on either side is the inscription *naṣr Allāh* ("the victory of God") or *naṣara Allāh* ("may God give assistance"). Treadwell has discarded the earlier interpretation of the arch as prayer-niche, *mihrāb*, on art-historical reasons. Instead, he has looked for parallels in late Roman iconography, where in some cases the arch serves as a symbol of the Temple that is occasionally occupied by a menorah, while in other cases it is the *sacrum* covering the Holy Cross of Golgatha that was also in Jerusalem. Despite these far-reaching interpretations of specific buildings, the framing arch was mainly part of a late Roman convention to frame any image, here a lance, which is, according to the inscription, a symbol of victory.<sup>77</sup>

The iconographic significance of the "bar/globe on a pole on steps" and its variations are no longer known. The different representations must be considered as a group, but they lack an unambiguous counterpart in the growing corpus of early Islamic imagery. Various interpretations have been suggested, but none is entirely satisfactory because of the lack of parallel sources in literature and iconography. In 1952 George C. Miles saw it as a *qaḍīb*, a ceremonial staff or rod of the Prophet, which had become an item of the royal insignia of the Umayyad caliphs. None of the surviving images of caliphs, however, shows a staff.<sup>78</sup> Alternatively, in 1999 Nadia Jamil has inter-

<sup>77</sup> For this type see Treadwell, "The 'Orans' Drachms," and Treadwell, "Mihrāb and 'Anaza." Treadwell has convincingly argued against earlier interpretations as *Mihrāb* and *'Anaza*, the lance of the Prophet, and especially against the influential opinion of George C. Miles in "Mihrāb and 'Anazah." As a further argument against Miles's interpretation, one may add that the *'anaza* was a gift to the Prophet by az-Zubayr, the father of 'Abdallāh b. az-Zubayr, the opponent of the Marwānids. See Miles, "'Anaza," in *EP*, vol. 1, 482.

<sup>78</sup> Miles, "Mihrāb and 'Anazah," 165; Miles, "The Iconography of Umayyad Coinage"; Hoyland, "Writing," 601, fn. 67, repeats this interpretation without adding new evidence.

preted the symbol as the *qutb* or *omphalos*, the linchpin of the world, a parallel to the cross of Golgatha that is seen on the Byzantine gold *nomismas* (fig. 1), and which also signified the center of the world. This would point to Jerusalem, the center of the imperial religious cult. She supported her hypothesis with evidence from early Arab poetry stressing the importance of the *qutb* in the early world view. According to Nadia Jamil, the rotation of the world might be visually expressed in the ellipse on the copper coins (figs. 22 and 23). Her suggestion of a foreshortened representation of circular movement, though, raises serious doubts.<sup>79</sup>



Fig. 26. The Bab al-‘Amūd in Jerusalem on the Madaba map; photograph by David Bjorgen (2005) in *Wikipedia*, “Madaba” (Dec. 2007).

Hanswulf Bloedhorn has suggested another plausible interpretation.<sup>80</sup> On the famous mosaic map of Jerusalem in Madaba (sixth century CE),<sup>81</sup> a monumental Roman column is depicted as a pole on steps with something on top (capital, globe?) standing on the plaza in front

<sup>79</sup> Miles, “Miḥrāb and ‘Anazah”; Jamil, “Caliph and Qutb.”

<sup>80</sup> I owe gratefully the initial idea to Hanswulf Bloedhorn, the further argumentation is mine; e-mail, dated to March 3, 2007.

<sup>81</sup> On the recent discussion of the dating of the mosaics see Arnould, *Les arcs romaines*, 251.

of the northern gate of the city, today the Damascus Gate (fig. 26). In the early Islamic period this column was still a landmark. Al-Muqaddasī (d. 381/991)<sup>82</sup> and other writers knew the nearby gate as that of the “column,” as Bāb al-‘Amūd.<sup>83</sup> Such monolithic columns symbolized urban and civic pride and were a common feature in late Roman and even Umayyad cities, and therefore understandable even without a specific allusion to Jerusalem.<sup>84</sup> In this interpretation, the pellet on the top of the pole on the coins might represent a globe without cross, and the bar might stand for an empty platform or capital. The urban column would then be a non-religious symbol, and it would be close enough to the Byzantine Christian “cross on steps” in order to serve as recognizable mark of value.



Fig. 27. Anonymous, *triens/thulth*, Africa (Qairawān), without date (ca. 90–93/708–711), with a corrupt Latin version of the *basmala*<sup>85</sup> and of the *shahāda*; Oriental Coin Cabinet Jena inv. no. 305-B02 (1.37g; ex coll. F. Soret).<sup>86</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan*, 167.

<sup>83</sup> ‘Amūd is a singular form (*fa‘ūl*) and not a plural, as is sometimes supposed.

<sup>84</sup> Baumann, “Spätantikes Säulenmonument,” attempts to show that the column on the Madaba map of Jerusalem serves as a mere *topos* in the depiction of late Roman cities in the Middle East. Yet the rich material presented by him makes the opposite conclusion likely, namely, that such a column in Jerusalem did indeed exist, although the final archeological proof is still missing. For information on the Damascus Gate in general with an extensive bibliography, see Biederstein/Bloedhorn, *Jerusalem*, vol. 2, 271–275; Wightman, *Damascus Gate*, esp. p. 103. C. Arnould, *Les arcs romaines*, esp. p. 151, “Remarques,” and “La porte de Damas,” esp. p. 109, stresses the monumentality and emblematic character of the Roman gate in Jerusalem, but considers the existence of the column hypothetical. A similar column is visible on the mosaics in the Lion church and in St. Stephen’s church in Umm al-Rasas in Jordan. In these mosaics, too, the column is shown at the intra-mural side of the gate of Kastron Mephaa (present day Umm al-Rasas). In the center of the forum of Jerash a column may have stood as well; the base was about 2×2 m; see Harding, “Recent Work on the Jerash Forum,” 14. Although Harding thought it could only support a statue, Alan Walmsley leaves this undecided at present. I am grateful to A. Walmsley for his comment on the matter.

<sup>85</sup> *In nomine Domini misericordis [...]*.

<sup>86</sup> Balaguer, *Émisiones transicionales*, 80, 150, nos. 63–64. Album/Goodwin, *Sylloge*, no. 740. The full Latin *shahāda* reads: *Non est Deus nisi Deus est similis*.

This function of the symbol is apparent on North African gold coins.<sup>87</sup> On earlier Byzantine gold coins, not only in North Africa, the differences in the design of the cross distinguish different denominations.<sup>88</sup> The sign of the Byzantine *nomisma* was the “cross potent on steps.” This was altered in North Africa to a “bar or pole on steps.” The sign for the Byzantine *semissis* was the “cross standing on a globe”; this was continued as “globe on a pole on steps” on Islamic *semisses*. The globe, or pellet, was even retained on the later epigraphic half *dīnār* as a distinguishing mark.<sup>89</sup> The sign for the Byzantine *tremissis*, a cross potent, frequently within a wreath or circular inscription, was transformed into the early Islamic “bar on a pole on steps” marking the value of an Islamic *tremissis* or *thulth* (fig. 27).<sup>90</sup> The different appearances of the “bar/globe on a pole on steps” as, first and foremost, a mark of value is supported by its continuous use until the end of the first century Hijrī on local gold coinage of North Africa, even after the final symbolic expression of the empire on coins was established in 77–78/696–698.<sup>91</sup>

In Syria, the only gold coin struck was the *nomisma/dīnār*. A distinguishing mark for a denomination was not necessary, but one does observe a recognizable design that connects the *dīnār* with the previous Byzantine *nomisma*. The “steps” of the cross potent were the most distinct design element of the reverse of the *nomisma*. In the period of Mu‘āwīya the “bar on a pole on steps” had probably appeared for the first time (fig. 7); but without any parallel inscription or related symbol, it is not possible to interpret it as anything more than a de-Christianized or de-Byzantinized object on “steps.” As political and religious symbols, the cross and the fire altar were different. The cross was not only a political symbol of the power of the rival emperor, but also an object of worship like the icon of Christ, so it was seen as idolatry from the Islamic vantage point.<sup>92</sup> On early Islamic *drahms* the fire altar was never altered, probably because it never became a symbol of Sasanian power in the same way as the cross, and it remained a mere ritual object. The de-Christianized or de-Byzantinized cross on steps became

<sup>87</sup> The last Byzantine gold coin in Carthage was struck in 695–6; see Bates, “North Africa,” 10.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Hahn, *Moneta imperii*, vol. 3.

<sup>89</sup> Miles, *The Coinage of the Umayyads of Spain*, 116, no. 2b, pl. 1.

<sup>90</sup> Walker, *Catalogue*, vol. 2, xxxii, xl–xli, 64–78; Balaguer, *Émisiones transicionales*; Bates, “Coinage of Spain,” esp. pp. 272–273, 282.

<sup>91</sup> I owe much of this argument to a discussion with Hans-Christoph Noeske.

<sup>92</sup> Griffith, “Images.”

a conservative symbol for the value of the coin, like the *shāhānshāh* or the image of the emperor. The “*phi*-shaped symbol on steps” should be considered as a mere mark of value for the copper coins, too, replacing the Greek **M** or **m**. It might thus simply be regarded as being a Greek *phi* for *folis*, as John Walker has alluded.<sup>93</sup> Whatever the original symbolic meaning of these images might have been, it was obviously secondary to their function as marks of value, and it fell into oblivion after ‘Abd al-Malik’s reforms. The lance and the “globe/bar on a pole on steps,” or column, should hence be viewed as non-ven-erated objects of pride, power, and victory, and as a substitute for the symbols of the other religions.

*Developments in the Basra and Kufa Prefectures*



Fig. 28. Bishr b. Marwān, *drahm*, mint ‘KWL’ (Aqūlā), year 73 H (692–3 CE), coll. Azizbeglou from Treadwell, “The ‘Orans’ Drachms,” 262, no. A3.

In the Basra and Kufa prefectures and in the northern provinces, different designs were chosen; most important is the iconography developed in Kufa that is probably related to that in Damascus. Between 73/692–3 and 75/694–5, Bishr b. Marwān, the caliph’s brother and governor of the Kufa prefecture, struck coins in Aqūlā, and in 75/694–5, he minted coins also in Basra. In 73/692 he started a series of coins comparable to those of Damascus struck in the same year; that is, they were anonymous, still with the bust of the *shāhānshāh* and the fire altar, and with reference to Muhammad and the profes-sion of faith in the obverse margin. Later in the same year, though, he changed the design. The fire altar with its two attendants was replaced by a praying figure, a *khaṭīb*, with an attendant on either

<sup>93</sup> Walker, *Catalogue*, vol. 1, xxiii.

side, and with the invocations in the obverse margin (fig. 28) as before. Luke Treadwell has proved that the image records an act of devotion. Surprisingly, in the following years, 74 and 75 H, the marginal invocations were shortened to a mere reference to Muhammad as the messenger of God, obviously the most important part of the Islamic legend. During the years 65–75/684–695, the gesture of raising the hands (*rafʿ al-yadayn*) in prayer was controversial among the Muslims. Treadwell has shown that the Zubayrid governor of Basra had presumably set a precedent with this gesture which his Marwānid successor then mimicked. He concludes that the *khaṭīb* “was intended to be read as visual extension of the *shahāda* of the obverse.” The praying *khaṭīb* and his audience, the two attendants, is the first early Islamic image on coins. The name Bishr b. Marwān, placed directly under the *khaṭīb*, presumably only on the first emission, might suggest that the figure was originally intended to represent the governor. The naming of the figure was abandoned in 73/692–3, obviously in line with the anonymous Syrian precious metal coinage.<sup>94</sup>

In the years 73/692–3 to 75/694–5, Khālīd b. ʿAbdallāh, the Marwānid governor of the Basra-prefecture, placed the Arabic phrase *Muḥammad rasūl Allāh* on his Sasanian style coins in the mints of Basra and Bishāpūr.<sup>95</sup> Bishr b. Marwān also struck briefly in Basra in 75/694–5 (see above). His successor al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf continued to include *Muḥammad rasūl Allāh*, but added the *shahāda* on his coins of Bishāpūr from 76/695–6 to 79/698–9.<sup>96</sup> At the same time, also in the Umayyad northern provinces, presumably in Azerbaijan, undated *drahms* were minted based on the Hormīz IV-type with the invocation of the unity of God and the messengership of Muhammad in Arabic.<sup>97</sup>

To sum up, the Marwānids finally took over as the essential symbols of Islam on coins the Zubayrid invocation of Muhammad as mes-

<sup>94</sup> Treadwell, “The ‘Orans’ Drachms,” 263.

<sup>95</sup> Album/Goodwin, *Sylloge*, 32, nos. 106, 191, 192. Crone/Hinds, *God’s Caliph*, 25, and later Hoyland, in *Seeing Islam*, 695, have accepted Walker’s (*Catalogue*, vol. 1, 108, no. 213) reading of 71 H, which should however be corrected to 73 H.

<sup>96</sup> Album/Goodwin, *Sylloge*, nos. 214–225.

<sup>97</sup> Sears, “Transitional Drachms,” 80–86, 100–101 (4 coins known to Sears). On the left side of the fire altar the coins bear the expression *zwzwn*, meaning “silver” *drahm*. They continue the series of coins without the *shahāda* (see above, fn. 49). In 73/692–3 or 74/693–4, Maslama b. ʿAbd al-Malik conquered Azerbaijan. These coins might have been struck between 73/692–3 and 78–79/697–9. Sears, however, considers a shorter span of time, until 75/694–5.



senger of God and the Arabic *shahāda*. The phase of Marwānid experimentation between 72/691–2 and 77/696–7 shows the growing uneasiness with conventional coin designs alternating between necessary conservatism and ideologically driven innovation. Many of the iconographic symbols can be seen as non-Christian or non-Zoroastrian. Some of them, such as the lance for God's victory and the *khaṭīb*, might have a plausible Islamic meaning, and the standing caliph or his half portrait is unambiguously the representation of the empire, though precious metal coins remained anonymous. The other symbols are primarily marks of value, and any secondary meaning remains speculative. As far as the present state of research is concerned, none of the other objects—i.e., the arch or the column, if the latter is interpreted correctly—can be convincingly established as a religious Islamic symbol.

*The Profession of Faith as the Symbol of Religion, and the Word of God as the Symbol of Universal Empire*



Fig. 29. Anonymous, *dinār*, without mint (Damascus), year 93 H (711–2 CE), Oriental Coin Cabinet Jena inv. no. 306-A02 (4.23 g).

Between late 77/696 and 79/699, the definitive symbolic representation of Islam and the Islamic empire was introduced on coinage. This occurred immediately after the victory over the Khārijite caliph Qaṭarī b. al-Fujā'a, and must be seen as a response to legitimize Marwānid rule in the entire empire with Islamic propaganda common to all Muslim factions. This reform was not organized at a district or provincial level, but centrally, by the caliph in Damascus, in close cooperation with al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf, the supreme governor of the former



Sasanian east. In 77/696, new *dīnārs* were produced (fig. 29), probably in Damascus, at 4.25 g slightly lighter than the Byzantine *nomisma*. They bear the new religious symbols of Islam and its empire, the *shahāda*, encircled by the Qur'anic *risāla*, the prophetic mission of Muhammad (a shortened version of Qur'an 9:33), and on the opposite side the word of God, the beginning of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* (a shortened variation of surah 112), surrounded by the date of the striking.



Fig. 30. Anonymous, *dirham*, al-Kūfa, year 79 H (698–9 CE), Oriental Coin Cabinet Jena inv. no. 305-H10 (2.87 g; ex coll. Waidhas, Berlin 1856).

Late in the year 78/697–8, al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf, the governor of the East, ordered the reform of the *dirhams* in his realm. The new coins weighed about 2.8 g to 2.9 g with slight regional differences. The new design was very similar to that of the new *dīnārs*, but in addition carried the mint name, as was the practice on Sasanian-style *drahms*. As far as we can currently tell, the reform began in Kufa,<sup>98</sup> Azerbaijan,<sup>99</sup> Armenia,<sup>100</sup> Jayy,<sup>101</sup> and Shaqq at-Taymara<sup>102</sup> in the Jibāl. The following year saw the adoption of the new design by more than forty mints all over the east (fig. 30), many of them in the former regions of Khārijite dominance, and in the imperial capital Damascus.<sup>103</sup>

Until the time of the Abbasid caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 136–58/754–775), precious metal coins remained anonymous. Not only the name

<sup>98</sup> Sotheby's, Auction May 27, 1999, no. 132; Klat, *Catalogue*, 202, no. 539.

<sup>99</sup> Broome, "Rare Umayyad Dirham of Adharbaijan"; Sotheby's, Auction November 16–17, 2000, no. 7; Klat, *Catalogue*, 36, no. 23b.

<sup>100</sup> Naqshabandi/Bakrī, *Ad-Dirham al-umawī*, 29–30, 46, 145 (no. 14472 *mīm-sīn*); Klat, *Catalogue*, 43, no. 45.

<sup>101</sup> Peus, *Katalog* 369, no. 1467.

<sup>102</sup> ANS collection inv. no. 1971.316.1273; Islamic Coin Auctions 13 (2007), no. 15. Ilisch, in Peus, *Katalog* 369, 80–81, discusses at length the sequence of dirham issues of the year 78 H. The "al-Baṣra 78" specimen from the Subhi Bey collection is indeed dated to 79 H, as stated by Mordtmann and proven with an illustration, see Subhi Bey/Mordtmann, "Les commencements."

<sup>103</sup> Klat, *Catalogue*.

of the ruler but also his image were removed from any representation of the empire on precious metal coins. This constituted a historically unprecedented breach with Hellenistic coin imagery going back about a millennium in the Roman west and the Iranian east. The Hellenistic tradition, which placed the image of the ruler on one side, was irrevocably abandoned, and thus something new came into being.<sup>104</sup> The change was prepared during the Zubayrid and Khārijite wars by the almost complete separation of the meaningless images, serving as mere marks of value, and the Arabic inscriptions carrying ideological messages.

On the silver coins, the ruler's side bears the word of God, a variation of the complete *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, surrounded by the *risāla*, a variation of Qur'an 9:33, both representing the sovereignty of God and constituting almost a concession to Khārijite thinking. The *shahāda* is found on the opposite side. On coins in the Hellenistic tradition, this is the side used for religious symbols. The aniconism of the precious metal coins for circulation is the result of the new "iconic" symbols: the Qur'anic Word of God as an expression of sovereignty, and the profession of faith as an expression of the religion. The now meaningless iconographic designs were abandoned. Anonymity did not mean modesty, because the new Islamic universal emperor claimed to be nothing less than *khalīfat Allāh*, "the deputy of God."<sup>105</sup> This presupposes an entirely new understanding of the role of the Islamic empire and its religion.

### *Summary of the History of Early Islamic Coinage and the Representation of Empire and Religion*

Early Islamic coin iconography reveals the search for an identity of the Arab-Islamic state that finally lead to a suitable formula to represent the new, all-embracing Islamic universal empire in its own ideological right. Until the period of the Zubayrid and Khārijite wars, almost no distinct imperial representation on coins can be discerned,

<sup>104</sup> For the art-historical aspects of these innovative Qur'anic legends, see Hillenbrand, "For God, Empire and Mammon." He also sees epigraphic seals of the Sasanians as models for the design, though this is much more the case with the Zubayrid Pahlawī *shahāda*-dirham, see above fn. 60.

<sup>105</sup> By contrast, Hillenbrand, "For God, Empire and Mammon," 26, views the epigraphic coinage as a consequence of the ruler's modesty—a modesty that we know did not exist.

neither in the former Byzantine and Sasanian territories nor in previously Germanic lands. In the early seventh century, in the Byzantine and the Sasanian empires alike, coin designs were conservative and standardized in orders to serve primarily as marks of value, rather than as bearers of meaning.

In the first phase, until the late 650s, the Byzantine empire still exported copper coins into its former provinces in large quantities. Controlled local imitations of Byzantine coppers met the excess demand. Repeated attempts to conquer Constantinople can be interpreted as indicating the new Arab-Islamic elite's wish to inherit the Roman claim of universal rulership. From about the late 650s until the uprising of 'Abdallāh b. az-Zubayr, the Second *Fitna*, minting was gradually regulated at the level of the provinces and districts. In the Syria and northern Mesopotamia, mint names and words in Greek and Arabic were added to validate coins in circulation. The image of a Byzantine emperor with cross insignia was still used for these coins.

In the former Sasanian territories, there was almost no disruption in the administration of coin production. The anachronistic images of the *shāhānshāhs*, and the symbol of Zoroastrianism, the fire altar, remained the standard design until the reign of 'Abd al-Malik. Gradually, validating expressions in Arabic and the names of governors were added, and the dating of coins switched from the obsolete Yazdgard era to the new Hijrī dating. Since 47/667–8 some governors in the provinces affirmed their rule with a general reference to God. But there was no attempt by the "commander of the believers" to claim the universal rule asserted by Sasanians. This was left to the Abbasids.

The most serious political, military, and ideological challenge to the Umayyad regime was the Second *Fitna*, the caliphate of 'Abdallāh b. az-Zubayr between 62/681–2 and 73/692 and the even more aggressive Khārijite movement between 68/687 and 78/697. For the first time in 66/685–6, Zubayrid governors, as a manifestation of the new Islamic imperial self-consciousness, put on coins the invocation of the messengership of Muhammad, and then—presumably in 70/689–90—extended it by the profession of the unity of God. In 72/691–2, one Zubayrid governor in the remote province of Sijistān even replaced the fire altar of Zoroastrianism with these invocations in the Persian language and written in the Pahlawī script. These "iconic" written statements are indeed the first symbols of Islam, and

comparable to the cross, fire altar, and menorah. The Khārijite leaders, too, placed distinctive religious slogans on their coins challenging the claim of the Umayyads to rule, with the expression that there is only guidance by God. The Khārijite beliefs, though, were not at all a common denominator among all Muslims.

The reform attempts of ‘Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf can be seen as a reply to these challenges, in an attempt to integrate the Zubayrid movement and to face the ideological Khārijite menace. In Jerusalem, the Dome of the Rock became the visual center of the new imperial Islamic cult. In the period between 72/691 and 77–78/694–698, the various attempts to find images to represent both religion and empire on the coins show the growing awareness of the need for such symbols as well as the difficulties in finding suitable expressions. The *shahāda* and the reference to Muhammad as the messenger of God became standard. Many of these iconographic symbols are still not well understood, though probably they served primarily as a standard mark of value. Luke Treadwell explained that “the new Muslim iconography was secondary to its inscriptional program.”<sup>106</sup>

After the suppression of the Khārijites in the years 77–78/696–8, the coin design was radically changed. Precious metal coinage finally became anonymous as it had been in Syria before; iconographic representations were abandoned. This coin design constituted a historically unprecedented breach with the Hellenistic tradition of coin imagery. The Islamic empire had finally found its distinctive symbolic form of representation: the bare “iconic” Word of God, surah 112 of the Qur’an, representing the sovereignty of the new universal empire, along with the statement of Muhammad’s prophetic mission in Qur’an 9:33; and the profession of faith, the *shahāda*, which symbolizes the new distinct religion.

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<sup>106</sup> Treadwell, “The ‘Orans’ Drachms,” 260.

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ARABO-ARAMAIC AND ‘ARABIYYA: FROM ANCIENT  
ARABIC TO EARLY STANDARD ARABIC, 200 CE–600 CE

Ernst Axel Knauf

He told Croker that he had spent most of his life guessing  
what lay on the other side of the hill, “trying to make out from  
what I saw the shape of the country I did not see.”

The First Duke of Wellington  
according to Holmes, *Wellington*, 300.

Arabic did not become a written language and the means of communication of the largest empire that the world had yet seen as late as ca. 600 BCE. When Muhammad moved from Mecca to Medina, it already had a documented history of some 1200 years. As is always the case, “dialects” precede the standard language. One, but not the only prominent contributing factor to the emergence of an Arabic lingua franca, was the sociolinguistic impact of the Nabataean trading empire. It was their Old Arabic from which Standard Arabic, and in the eighth/ninth centuries CE “Classical Arabic,” emerged.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The author would not have been able to present his linguistic insights and theoretical reconstructions in the present form without the input received from other members of the research group, “Greeks, Romans, Jews and others: a Civilization of Epigraphy”: Hannah M. Cotton, Leah Di Segni, David Wasserstein, Jonathan Price, Shlomoh Na’eh, Seth Schwarz, and Robert Hoyland; Institute of Advanced Studies, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2002/3; nor would he have been able to move beyond the basics without the training received, in historical phonology and the methods of genetic reconstruction, from his admired teacher, Rainer M. Voigt (Tübingen, now Berlin). His gratitude extends to Manfred Lindner for the privilege to accompany him on some of his innumeral forays into the Petra environs, which opportunity transposed Ancient Nabatea from a shadow evoked in texts into a reality on the ground. The *t* (of Nabatea) was crossed by Tali Gini, who took him on a tour of the Gaza-Petra road as far as Hatzevah.

An extract of the present text was read at the research group’s symposium in 2003. Other bits and pieces were presented at the symposium “Historische Sondierungen und methodische Reflexionen zur Koranexegese—Wege zur Rekonstruktion des vor-kanonischen Koran,” Berlin, January 21–25, 2004, and in two guest lectures at the Institut für Semitistik und Arabistik, Freie Universität Berlin; thanks to the various audiences for helpful criticism and encouragement.

1. *Looking for the Invisible, or: On Doing (e.g. Linguistic) History*

A social scientist takes representative samples from the present world. A historian finds lots of samples thrown along—or in—her or his way and can only wonder what these are representative of, and to what degree. It is presupposed here that nobody would be interested in all that “junk from yesteryear,” whether inscribed or not, if it were not somehow representative of collective human behavior. In order to decide what it is that is indicated by the “facts,”<sup>2</sup> it helps to choose a not too narrowly defined object of inspection in terms of space and time. Some consciousness of the difference between a study of woods and the study of individual trees would also help; although a study of woods might profit from some knowledge of trees, the intensive investigations of ever so many trees will never teach how a wood works. It is social and economic history, i.e. history of the human masses, which shapes the reconstruction of linguistic history.

Reconstructing linguistic history from inscriptions (or other texts) demands intellectual efforts beyond the act of reading. The signs on the stone are visible, the sounds which their authors and intended audience produced in their reading are not. A further trap is hidden in the encyclopedic aspect of a language’s lexicon. It is alright, at some point during the process of language acquirement, to learn that “Hebrew or Aramaic” *ʿam* means “nation, people” (as in Neh. 9:30), but it is naïve to assume that a Nabatean had a sense of “nation” when he referred to his (and the king’s) *ʿam*.<sup>3</sup> In the context of Nabatean social structure, something like “an agnate group of fighting males” might be implied, as in Judg. 5:14, where the tribe of Ephraim comprises several *ʿammim*.

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The various brackets mark <graphemes>, /phonemes/ and [phones]. In transcriptions, *x* is used instead of *h* wherever possible. Instead of a cumbersome list of all sigla employed for inscriptions, the reader from outside comparative Semitics and/or Ancient Arabian Studies will find references to publications and/or discussions of the inscriptions involved.

<sup>2</sup> Facts are of course just another theoretical construct, but one that is indispensable for the conduct of scientific research; cf. Popper, *Objective knowledge*; id., *Conjectures*; Sokal and Bricmont, *Elegant Un Sinn*.

<sup>3</sup> Millar, *Roman Near East*, 402.



### 1.1. *Functional Multilingualism*

The world which is considered in the following pages was multilingual on many levels, including that of the individual. A language of prestige (Greek), which became a language of religion after the fourth century CE, was used as a *lingua franca* by some, whereas others spoke (and wrote) Aramaic for this purpose (which then also evolved into a language of Christian religion, especially from the fifth century onwards), and many spoke in addition to Greek and/or Aramaic one or more local (or tribal) languages, or only these. In Syria and Arabia from 600 BCE to 600 CE, it was the rule rather than the exception that people spoke more than one language (with different degrees of perfection), and used their different languages in different social contexts and for different purposes, especially if they could not only speak, but also write.

The vast majority of sixth century inscriptions from the Madaba diocese in central Transjordan are in Greek.<sup>4</sup> But Aramaic was the regional language in these days, even though it was rarely written. An inscription left by one of the bishops (IGLS 21.2.137) tells how after a prolonged drought, the episcopal order to construct a new cistern provoked plentiful rain. The people's reaction to the fortunate precipitation is quoted verbally: ʾOYBBA BAʾOYBBA, "cistern for cistern" (Aramaic), recalling the "pit for pit" of 1 Kings 3:16 and thereby the rain miracles worked by both Elisha (2 Kings 3:9–20) and Elijah (1 Kings 18). The people of Madaba in the sixth century did not only speak Aramaic (without leaving a single inscription in this language in their town), but knew their Bible in Aramaic as well. At the town, or rather large village of Nebo (Khirbat al-Mukhayyat) at the western fringe of the Madaba bishopric, the dedications of the churches are again written in a kind of Greek that would not win their authors an honors' degree at Oxford or Cambridge.<sup>5</sup> The personal

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<sup>4</sup> There is just one inscription in Early Standard Arabic (see below) of one word, and two more, slightly longer, in Syro-Palestinian, which were found at 'Uyūn Mūsā, immediately below Mount Nebo, and Khirbat al-Mukhayyat/the town of Nebo; cf. Hoyland, "Language and Identity," 187f.—an apt answer to the erudite, but linguistically misinformed article by Wasserstein, "Why did Arabic succeed?," who claimed that Greek was actually spoken by the population of sixth and seventh centuries Nes-sana (of all places).

<sup>5</sup> Greek inscriptions from the town of Nebo might show the vernacular of their authors by frequently using a genitive plural instead of an accusative plural and vice versa. This fits the morphology of the noun in (Early Standard) Arabic, where genitive and accusative plurals are indential, but not of Aramaic, which has no case endings

names are biblical or Aramaic, indicating the spoken language of the region. One of these names is Saola (Aramaic *šā'ōlā* "beggar," or *š'ōlā* "handful," or *šā'ōlā* "coughing"). Opposite to his name—which, although Aramaic, is spelled in Greek letters—one reads the (*requiescat*) *in pace* on Saola's grave, but written in Early Standard Arabic: *bi-s-salām*. The language of Saola's family was evidently Arabic. He was not a poor, half-starved Bedouin: he was prominent enough in the local community to be interred in one of its churches, and his personal name shows some degree of acculturation to the spoken language of the community, which was Aramaic (see *supra*). His knowledge of Early Standard Arabic, which was, on grounds of its temporal and spatial distribution, peculiar to the Ghassanid realm, attests his links to a world far beyond the village in which he was buried.<sup>6</sup>

The gender dichotomy, especially in a Mediterranean society with its gendering of the opposition between the inside and the outside of the house, leads to another aspect of functional multilingualism: the tradition of the "native" language becomes predominantly a female occupation, whereas males are more likely to be acquainted with (and affected by) the regional lingua franca, which they might occasionally even write.<sup>7</sup> This simple fact explains sufficiently why and how the Nabateans could write Aramaic for 600 years without forgetting their native Arabic. Another simple mental experiment shows why it was advantageous for a Nabatean, speaking an Old Arabic dialect, and a Safaite, using a form of Ancient Arabic, to communicate in Aramaic. In a multilingual system in which three languages are spoken, two speakers will always find a common language if all are bilingual. If any three speakers who happen to meet are to be able to communicate with one another, everybody must be trilingual, as the following chart shows, in which A and B, B and C, and A and C would have one language in common, but not A, B, and C:

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at all (Aramaic speakers can be expected to include the nominative plural in their linguistic comedy of errors); cf. TOYC ANΘΠΟΠΠΟΥC (gen. pl.), IGLS 21.2.100.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. for the inscription, Knauf, "Orthographie"; and for the Ghassanid realm, Shahid, *Byzantium*.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Socin/Nöldeke, "Socin an Th. Nöldeke," 230, on collecting folk tales in neo-Aramaic: "und zwar von einer Frau; die Frauen sprechen am reinsten Syrisch [sc. The Neo-Aramaic of Malula] und können oft nur schlecht Arabisch, die Männer mischen mehr Arabisch ein, die Kinder können nur Syrisch." Cf. also Cotton, "Women and law," 130f.

Language	1	2	3
Speaker A	x	x	-
Speaker B	-	x	x
Speaker C	x	-	x

Fig. 1. A simulation of a trilingual context with a minimal amount of speakers and maximal diversity among them.

In a trilingual context, it is already advantageous to have one common language, which reduces the effort of language acquisition to two per person—even if the common language is identical to no speaker’s first language.

Language	1	2	3	common
Speaker A	x	-	-	x
Speaker B	-	x	-	x
Speaker C	-	-	x	x

Fig. 2. A simulation of a trilingual context with the minimal amount of speakers, maximal diversity among them, and a common language that might or might not be identical with either 1,2, or 3.

In any multilingual system with more than three languages, the adoption of a common language becomes imperative. In a social context which is characterized by ethnic competition or tribal rivalry, it could even be advantageous to choose a common language that is not spoken by any particular group.

In the shadow of a language of high prestige, a “medium range” language may not only exist, but even thrive. The case of “Aramaic in the shadow of Greek” furnishes a telling example for a lingua franca that is not, at the same time, the language of prestige. Aramaic was the “middle class” mode of communication between “high culture” Greek and “ethnic” or “low class” Arabic. More people supposedly were bilingual in Greek and Aramaic or Arabic and Aramaic than in Greek and Arabic. An Arab, then, needed some Aramaic not only for intercourse with the peasants along the desert fringe (or other Arabs whose dialect was incomprehensible to him), but also for occasional

chats with a patrician from one of the Greek cities in Syria and Provincia Arabia. The role of Aramaic as the “interface” between the Arabs and the Greek-writing world might have, then, quite a long prehistory before it became decisive in the transmission of Greek science to the Muslim realm.<sup>8</sup>

Whereas the willingness and ability to write Greek on the part of Arabs is attested by thousands of Nabatean, Hatrean, and Palmyrene inscriptions (not all the authors of these inscriptions were Arabs, of course, but nearly all in the case of Nabatean, and most of them in the case of Palmyrene and Hatrean), the relatively low rate of Greek among the Arabs can be estimated on the basis of indirect Safaitic-Greek bilinguals like the two inscriptions found at the same cairn in the Jordanian desert, but not on the same stone. WH 1849,<sup>9</sup> in Safaitic, reports

By Wahballāh bin Zann’il bin Wahballāh bin MLL. He built for Hāni’<sup>10</sup> this shelter. He tracked horses (or: horseman) to (or: from) the region MSTY, in the year when the tribe Ḍaif was cut to pieces. So, O Lāt, grant peace!—He returned to the camp with 100 horses.

It is rather unlikely that Wahballah captured one hundred horses from his enemy (or victim) single-handedly. If he had not, at least, a cook with him, then probably a lover, and some more of his clansmen, or band. WH 1860 (one of three Greek inscriptions in this collection from the Harrah) reads

OYABAAAAC TANNHΛOY TOY {Y} OYABAAAAC

proving that Wahballāh was one of the few Safaites who could write his name also in Greek—and even decline it correctly. In the Winnett-Harding corpus of desert inscriptions, the Greek texts make up slightly less than 0.1% of the epigraphic harvest. The role of Aramaic as intermediary between the “high culture” of Greek and “low” Arabic is well attested by the numerical relation between Nabatean-Greek over Greek-Safaitic bilinguals. In Cantineau’s slim selection of thirty-nine Nabatean texts, five are Greek-Nabatean bilinguals and one is accompanied by a “summary” in Ḥijāzī Thamudic.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> On the latter, Hoyland, “Language and Identity,” 192–199.

<sup>9</sup> WH = inscriptions in Winnett/Harding, *Inscriptions*.

<sup>10</sup> His significant other? His horse? Both?

<sup>11</sup> Cantineau, *Nabatéen*. The Gadimat-inscription from Umm al-Jimāl, for instance, is a Greek-Nabatean bilingual, and likewise the Nabatean inscription from Sidon (CIS II 160, from the reign of Arethas IV). Occasionally, Safaites and Ancient

India is one of the largest English-writing countries today, in which 5% of the population master the language of Shakespeare perfectly (and furnish, from time to time, a Nobel laureate in literature), 30% reasonably to basically, and 65% not at all.<sup>12</sup> Using the “Indian” data for “Roman” Syria and Arabia—two comparable societies encompassing the whole range of life styles from those in global cities (Bombay, Antioch) to most remote and primitive tribes—one can calculate the ratio and quality of Aramaic and Greek among the Arabs as follows:

Proficiency	Greek among Syrians = Aramaic among Arabs	Greek among Arabs
Good to excellent	5%	< 1%
Poor to fair	30%	9%
None	65%	> 90%

Fig. 3. Proficiency in Greek and Aramaic among Arabs in the Hellenistic-Roman-Byzantine periods calculated on the basis of data from contemporary India.

1.2. *The Emergence of Standard Languages*

The emergence of a standard language presupposes a level of interaction frequency beyond the confines of the village, clan, or tribe. Standard languages go together with the formation of states, empires, and some kind of “world” (i.e., supra-regional) economic system.<sup>13</sup> Standard languages are always written languages;<sup>14</sup> the predominance of the written over the spoken, aided by schooling from one generation

Arabs in the Negev also wrote Greek, or Aramaic in Greek characters—cf. Milik, “Inscription araméenne”—and usually people are able to speak a language, at least to some degree, that they can write correctly. There are not too many Nabataean-Safaitic bilinguals either (cf. for one Khraysheh, “Inscription aus Jordanien”); it could be that most people who decided to write in Safaitic did so out of a certain aversion against other languages/scripts/cultures.

<sup>12</sup> Bragg, *Adventure of English*, 250–264. (“Indian Takeover”)

<sup>13</sup> For the five world economic systems that shaped, facilitated, and limited political developments in the Levant for the past 4000 years (Mediterranean I–III, Atlantic, Global), cf. preliminarily Knauf, *Umwelt*, 17–18.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Goody, *Domestication*; id., *Logic of Writing*; id., *Written and Oral*.

to the next, allows for the establishment and the maintenance of morpholexical standards with some inherent resistance to change.<sup>15</sup>

All spoken language can be regarded as “dialect” (or socio-, ideo-, regio- or whatever-lect), even the spoken version(s) of the standard language. Dialects precede the emergence of a standard language, survive that emergence, and even develop freshly on the basis of a standard once established. The evolution of languages, like the evolution of scripts,<sup>16</sup> or the evolution of animal life, passes through bottlenecks: at a certain time, most dinosaurs become extinct (with the exception of those who evolved into chicken), some mammals survive and beget, in the course of time, another flourishing tribe in the animal kingdom.

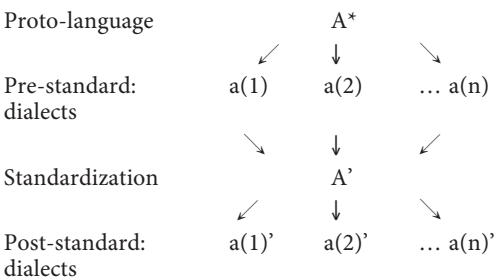


Fig. 4. Through the bottleneck of standardization.

The emerging standard language can consist of a mixture of dialects, or can be due to the success of one particular dialect to the detriment of others. In the case of French and English, it was the dialect of the capital and its immediate environs that was imposed by the nascent state’s administration on the rest of the country. Standard, or Imperial

<sup>15</sup> When the vocalization of Syriac was fixed, the spoken language must already have been in full swing towards Neo-Aramaic, for a Semitic language in which [qta] could represent the 3 ms pf, 3mp pf, and 3fp pf, is no longer functional (in Neo-Aramaic, the old Semitic perfect is replaced by periphrastic forms); cf. already Nöldeke, *Neusyrische Grammatik*, xxxivf. Barhebraeus (†1286) already seems to refer to early Neo-Aramaic as a “mountain dialect,” cf. *ibid.*, xxxvif.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Knauf, *Umwelt*, 214–216, for the disappearance of most Proto-Canaanite scripts around 1000 BCE and the survival of Phoenician writing, which fathered (or grandfathered) the Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, Greek, Latin, and Kyrillic scripts as used today. Naveh, *Alphabet*, has Phoenician, Hebrew, and Aramaic descend from a common ancestor, but also according to this model, the Canaanite alphabet from which Arabian writing had departed became extinct (together with others) in Canaan towards the end of the second millennium BCE.

Aramaic, was created by the Assyrian empire and transmitted via the Neo-Babylonian and Persian chancelleries and administrative systems. When this unifying power ceased to exist, Aramaic split again into local dialects, as had been the case prior to ca. 700 BCE,<sup>17</sup> but not immediately: in the shadow of Greek, the new administrative language of the orient after Alexander, it remained in use, with slight local variations only, well into the third century CE. The fact that Aramaic remained basically unchanged by its Jewish and Arab users for 600 years strongly indicates that it served as a written language only, like Latin north of the Alps after the fall of Rome.

Ancient Aramaic 900–700 BCE	Western archaic: Ya’udi, Sukkot	Western progressive: Damascus	Eastern: Gozan			
Imperial Aramaic 700–200 BCE	Standard Aramaic					
Middle Aramaic 200 BCE – 200/300 CE	Local sub-standard					
	Palestinian Jewish	Nabatean	Hatra Edessa (Old Syriac)		Palmyra	
Late Aramaic 300 CE – present	Western		Eastern			
	Galilean	Christian Palestinian	Western Syriac	Eastern Syriac	Baby-lonian	Mandaic
Modern Aramaic	Malula		Turoyo, Urmia, etc.			

Fig. 5. Aramaic through the imperial bottleneck.

Even if there never was an Aramaic empire, Standard Aramaic emerged as a language of imperial administration. Assyria compensated its demographic deficit in the homeland by importing population from conquered territories. In addition, the elites from western acquisitions were employed in the east and vice versa. All the early Assyrian conquests and most of the following afflicted Aramaic-

<sup>17</sup> Cf. for the history of Aramaic, Kutscher, “Aramaic”; Macuch, “Gesprochenes Aramäisch”; Goldenberg, “Early Neo-Aramaic.”



speaking areas, the dialects of which became thoroughly mixed in the process to a degree that the imperial administrators finally preferred Aramaic to their supposedly native Assyrian. Cuneiform, at the end, became a code rather than a script. "Why do you refuse to send your report in Akkadian?" Sargon rebuked one of the agents in Southern Babylonia.<sup>18</sup>

The bottleneck through which Ancient Arabic passed on its way to Early Standard Arabic was the Arabic of the Nabateans, or, to phrase it more cautiously, the language of those Arabs who left more than 95% of the Nabatean inscriptions.

## 2. *Ancient Arabic and Old Arabic, 600 BCE–300 CE*

In his survey of the Pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions,<sup>19</sup> M. C. A. Macdonald distinguishes "Ancient North Arabian" (with the definite article *h-*) from "Old Arabic" (with the definite article *'l-*). His survey is extremely useful, in descriptive terms, for the geographical distribution of the various pre-Islamic Arabic languages/dialects.

The definition of "dialect" versus "language" is a vexed question, and no attempt is made even to discuss it in the present context. According to W. Nelson Francis,<sup>20</sup> one might call a language a "dialect" if "neither its writing system nor its pronunciation nor its lexicon nor its syntax is officially normalized." But how "official" has any normalization of the English language (or one of its main "dialects," like British, American, Canadian, Australian... English) ever been? The most "official" linguistic impact was, as far as this writer is informed, the royal commissioning of the "King James Bible," which became a canonical text for the English language without any specific text of its many editions ever "authorized."<sup>21</sup> It is difficult to regard languages written in a fairly consistent orthography (as the various forms of Ancient Arabic are) not as "normalized." But then, the linguistic variation among the Ancient Arabic languages is as prominent as among the contemporary Arabic vernaculars which are covered by the discipline of "Arabic dialectology." Perhaps a relational concept of "dialect" will help: a dialect is a particular version of a language which has other forms beside it.

<sup>18</sup> Uehlinger, *Weltreich*, 487 (with a chapter dedicated to multilingualism in the Assyrian empire).

<sup>19</sup> Macdonald, "Reflections."

<sup>20</sup> Nelson Francis, "Dialectology."

<sup>21</sup> Nicolson, *Power*.

The term “Ancient North Arabian” is coined after “Ancient South Arabian.” “Ancient South Arabian” aptly labels a group of languages that are not “Arabic,” though spoken in parts of the Arabian Peninsula. But “Ancient North Arabian” genetically is Arabic, so one better calls it “Ancient Arabic” for the sake of Arabists interested in the whole history of the object of their professional dedication.<sup>22</sup> Diachronically and genetically, we are talking about two stages in the development of a single language. “Ancient North Arabic” is “Proto-Old Arabic,” just as (vulgar) Latin is proto-French and French (extremely corrupt) Late Latin. Arabic was represented for a transitional period by archaic dialects (with *h-/hn-*) and progressive dialects (with *ʿal-*) side by side. The two forms of the definite article are no more different than *aqua* is from *eau*,<sup>23</sup> and do not constitute a genetic difference between the two languages or language groups. It is as inappropriate to call South Semitic<sup>24</sup> Epigraphic South Arabian “South Arabic” as it is to label Central Semitic Ancient Arabic “Ancient North Arabian.” South Arabian furnished the script adopted for writing graffiti in ancient North Arabia. The origin of a script, however, is quite independent from the origin of the language that is written by means of that script, or Greek would be a Semitic language.

The Ancient Arabic languages are characterized by three following features, which, taken together, link them to Arabic and separate them from all other Semitic languages:

(a) The three sibilants of Proto-Semitohamitic (*s*<sub>1</sub>, Hebrew ש; *s*<sub>2</sub>, Hebrew שׁ; and *s*<sub>3</sub>, Hebrew שׂ), preserved in Ancient and Modern South Arabian,<sup>25</sup> have been reduced to *s* < *s*<sub>1</sub>+*s*<sub>3</sub> (*sīn* in Modern Standard Arabic)<sup>26</sup> and *ś* (*s*<sub>2</sub>, *shīn* in Modern Standard Arabic). The

<sup>22</sup> A simple terminological operation that renders a somewhat convoluted statement like “Arabic in the pre-Islamic period (what scholars call Old Arabic) belongs to Ancient North Arabian” (Hoyland, “Language and Identity,” 183, n. 2) less necessary.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *infra*, § 2.2.1.

<sup>24</sup> With the exception of Sabaic, cf. Voigt, “Central Semitic.”

<sup>25</sup> The phoneme *s*<sub>2</sub> is preserved in Modern South Arabian only; its present phonetic realization cannot, however, be projected back into the first millennium BCE (cf. further *infra*, n. 32–37). In Hebrew, *s*<sub>2</sub> is etymologically preserved by the combination of the grapheme <ś> with the phone [s]. The same holds true in Ethiopic—the grapheme <ś> is realized as [s].

<sup>26</sup> The existence of a <*s*<sub>3</sub>> in the earliest stratum of Ancient Arabic is disputed. Macdonald, “HU 501” finds it in Hu 501 and WiTay 4; in both cases, I prefer to read the star-shaped sign in question as /t/ (cf. *infra*, § 2.1.1). In Hu 501, *ʿbdtr* can easily be interpreted as “Servant/Worshipper of the Bull,” a name that makes perfect sense

same development is attested by Old Ethiopic, whereas in Akkadian and Canaanite,  $s_1$  and  $s_2$  have merged, and in Aramaic (during the period of Imperial Aramaic),  $s_2$  and  $s_3$ .

(b) The definite article *\*han-* > (')*al-* is prepositive, as in Canaanite, whereas the article is absent or postpositive in the other Semitic languages.

(c) The internal plural ("broken plural") is productive in Arabic (and South Arabian/Ethiopic), but restricted and/or fossilized in all other Semitic languages.<sup>27</sup>

The basic controversy regarding the nature of the definite article in Afrasian (Hamitosemitic)—is it a trait of the proto-language,<sup>28</sup> or an independent (or interdependent?) innovation in Canaanite and Arabic on the one side and Aramaic and South Arabian on the other—does not concern here. The development of the Arabo-Canaanite article within the Qedarite-Nabatean realm, from Canaanite and Ancient Arabic *ha(n)-* to Old Arabic (')*al-*, confirms Wensinck's model of a diachronic development which leads from the earlier form to the later.<sup>29</sup>

There is an etymology for *han*, but not for 'al.<sup>30</sup> The *nun* is always assimilated to the first consonant of the following noun in Canaanite, and nearly always in Ancient Arabic.<sup>31</sup> The [n]–>l- shift results from

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within the religion of Taymā', even if hitherto unattested. Macdonald's "Servant/Worshipper of Osiris" presupposes Beeston's erroneous phonology of the Arabian sibilants, and is quite impossible (cf. *infra*, n. 32). In WiTay 4, the <t/s> either represents /s/ (thus Winnett and Harding, but see the following remark on RES 2688), or the final letter is a distorted <y> (for the name *try*, here probably \**Taurī*, cf. Harding, *Index and Concordance*, 145. In RES 2688, which Macdonald rightly disregards in this context, the <s<sub>3</sub>/t> represents Aramaic /s/, a correspondence which would fit a Hadrarnitic linguistic environment; cf. Voigt, "Lautwandel." Müller and al-Said, "König Nabonid," 115f., try to identify <s<sub>3nzr, "to be on the look-out, to watch," is quite frequent in Safaitic), and in the second, a <d>. Their two Sabaic etymologies in a row for Ancient North Arabic words border on the improbable.</sub>

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Knauf, *Midian*, 69. The internal plural is best attested in Safaitic, which has the richest lexicon of all the Ancient Arabic languages/dialects, e.g. 'affus (sg. *nafs*) "souls"; *ḥiglān* (sg. *ḥaglat*) "partridges"; *nūq* (sg. *nāqat*) "she-camels."

<sup>28</sup> Thus Voigt, "Artikel im Semitischen"; cf. for the opposite view, Tropper, "Her-ausbildung."

<sup>29</sup> Wensinck, "Article of Determination"; Knauf, *Midian*, 70f., n. 334.

<sup>30</sup> Nöldeke, *Neue Beiträge*, 119–120; *demonstrativa* with -l- are usually plurals, like *ellē hallēn ha'ulā'i*, cf. Brockelmann, *Grundriss*, 316–323.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. AMMACEXOC for *h-msk*. In Hasaitic and Lihyanite, the *nun* is retained in front of a laryngeal or pharyngeal (in Lihyanite, occasionally also in front of *q*), rarely in Safaitic, cf. *hnhwly* "the Ḥawili" LP 87.

the dissimilation of geminates, mainly operative in Aramaic, but not restricted to that language.<sup>32</sup> This dissimilation was never complete except in the orthography; in Standard Arabic, the assimilated form is retained in the case of the dentals and sibilants.<sup>33</sup> The development of *h-* to *Ø-* is trivial: there is a general and supra-regional trend in Semitic linguistics which replaced original *s*<sub>1</sub>- first by *h-* and later by *Ø-*, especially in deictic elements.<sup>34</sup> The *alif* of the article in Arabic is an *alif al-waṣl*, i.e. it is only realized after consonants and at the beginning of the phrase. The generalization of <'l-> in writing concludes the ethnolinguistic genesis of the new "word." Without fixing the sequence of the two sound changes involved, the development can be charted as follows (fig. 12):

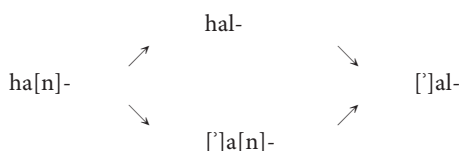


Fig. 6. From *han-* to *'al-*.

The four forms of fig. 6 are not just theoretical postulates; they are all actually attested in the Qedarite/Nabatean realm between the fifth and the third centuries BCE. It is there and then that the transition from Ancient Arabic to Old Arabic is observable in the record (fig. 7 = map 1). After the transitional period, there is an Old Arabic language—Nabatean Arabic—alongside with Ancient Arabic languages which did not, for reasons to be elucidated later, participate in the innovation.

<sup>32</sup> Brockelmann, *Grundriss*, 243–246. A by-product of the same dissimilation is the article *'am-* as in Old and New Arabic dialects, cf. Fischer, "Das Altarabische," 43; id., "Frühe Zeugnisse," 86.

<sup>33</sup> Only from a purely synchronic point of view is it possible to say that the *l-* of the article is assimilated to the following consonant, a statement which is, diachronically perceived, quite wrong. In Semitic, *n* assimilates easily, *l* and *r* rarely to nearly never (Brockelmann, *Grundriss*, 173–77) and if, to vowels rather than consonants: Ancient Aramaic *\*yihāk* < *\*yihlak*, Mehri *qôn* < *\*qarn*.

<sup>34</sup> Akkadian *šupris*, Hebrew and Old Aramaic *hif'il/haf'el*, Syriac, Arabic, and Ethiopic (')*af'el*, *aqtala*, *aqtälä*, respectively; cf. Knauf, *Midian*, 73f., Voigt, "Personalpronomina."



(a) *ha(n)*:- \*han-’ilāt “the Goddess,” in an Aramaic dedication left by a shaykh of the Qedar at Tell al-Maskhuta in Eastern Egypt, ca. 400 BCE:<sup>35</sup>

אֵלֵהֶתָא קִדְר מֶלֶךְ בְּר גִּשְׁם זִי קֶרֶב קִינוּ בֶּר גִּשְׁם זִי קֶרֶב קִינוּ  
of the Ḥanakis,” JS lih 71.3; Dedan/Hegra fourth/third century BCE; *h-msk* AMMACEXOC, Safaitic, third/second century BCE–third/fourth century CE.

(b) *hal*:- *hl-mfl ḏ* \*hal-mafālī ḏā (= hāḏā l-mafālī) “these pasture-grounds,” JS lih 71, 3, Hegra/Dedan, fourth/third century BCE.<sup>36</sup>

(c) [’]a[n]: עֲבֹדָאֲבָעִלִי ‘Abd-’ab-Ba’li, “Servant of the Lord,” Arad Ostraca (Aram.) 34 I 3; 35,1; second half of the fifth century BCE; ’-sfr *ḏh* \*’as-sifr ḏā “this inscription” JS lih. 276;<sup>37</sup> *w-gml* \*wa-g-gimāl “and the camels,” Safaitic from the Ḥarra (Cl 865).

(d) [’]al:- ΑΛΙΑΤ \*’al’Ilāt “the Goddess” Herodotus III 8, ca. 450 BCE (the scene is somewhere in the northern Sinai, along or south of the Gaza-Pelusium road); *’mr blḥgr* \*’ummira bi-l-Ḥigr “he was made an Emir of/at Hegra,” JS lih 71,4f.<sup>38</sup>

## 2.1. Ancient Epigraphic Arabic and Nabatean Arabic

From the fifth century BCE to the third/fourth centuries CE, i.e., within the time span covered by Imperial Aramaic and later Nabatean Aramaic texts authored by Arabs, a number of Ancient Arabic languages/dialects are attested within the pale of what was to become the “Nabatean realm” in the third to first centuries BCE, and had been the “Qedarite realm” before.<sup>39</sup>

### 2.1.1. Ancient Epigraphic Arabic

A look at the map above reveals the range of graphic diversity within the area (also) writing in Nabatean. Diversity of script might indicate

<sup>35</sup> Porten and Yardeni, *Textbook IV*, 233 D15.4 = Tell al-Maskhuta 3.

<sup>36</sup> Alternatively, the article is only *l*-, and *h-ḏ*- a split demonstrative; cf. Macdonald, “Reflections,” 52f. The following example from Lihyanite (JS 276) has the *ḏ*- without *h*- precedent, though.

<sup>37</sup> Macdonald, “Reflections,” 53.

<sup>38</sup> This inscription contains at least two, if not three forms of the article—quite typical for a transition period.

<sup>39</sup> Among the various arguments which this writer mustered for his argument of the Nabataeans’ emergence from the Qedarite confederacy (see, e.g., Knauf, “Nabataean Origins”), the argument of geographical continuity between the two tribal territories is the strongest, but depends on readers who can see history not only through the lenses of texts.



Fig. 8. Map 2: The personal name "Abgar" in the various local scripts of the Qedarite/Nabatean realm (adapted by the author from Hoyland, Arabia and the Arabs, 4, Map 1).



a corresponding diversity of language, but sometimes it does not. For an estimate of Ancient Arabic linguistic variance, a phonological interpretation of the various writing systems is indispensable—i.e., another attempt to look for the invisible, to guess at what is beyond the crest of the hill.

M. Macdonald complains about the absence of phonological studies on Ancient North Arabian;<sup>40</sup> which is easy to do if those analyses which already exist are ignored,<sup>41</sup> or, worse, if the possibility of phonological reconstructions in ancient languages is implicitly denied by the naïve application of modern phonetics to ancient times.<sup>42</sup>

Primarily, the relationship of signifier (grapheme) and signified (phoneme) is arbitrary. Secondly, it is no longer arbitrary once a sign-system is established. Secondary alphabets allow inferences from the receiving language to the language from which the former's script was received. Semitic<sup>43</sup> <ṭ> became Greek Theta, i.e. [t<sup>h</sup>], which leads to the assumption that "emphasis" was still realized by glottalization, not by velarization, in the Semitic donor language: it is easy to understand how [t'] could be used to express [t<sup>h</sup>], it is not at all obvious that [t] could be employed for the same end. If <s<sub>3</sub>> was used for Xi [k<sup>s</sup>], it stands to reason that the donor language still realized /s<sub>3</sub>/ as [t<sup>s</sup>] instead of [s], whereas <s<sub>1</sub>> for Sigma [s] leads to the pronunciation of /s<sub>1</sub>/ as [s] or [s ~ š] in the donor language.<sup>44</sup> In the case of

<sup>40</sup> Macdonald, "Reflections," 43.

<sup>41</sup> Like, e.g., Voigt, "South Safaitic." This oversight seems to be more serious than mere bibliographic negligence and rather indicative of the author's separation from Semitic and general linguistics, well evidenced by his adherence to Beeston's phonetic interpretation of the three "sibilants" of Epigraphic South Arabian as [š], [ç] and [s] (Macdonald, "Reflections," 46) instead of [s ~ š], [t], and [t<sup>s</sup>]; cf. for the refined values Voigt, "Personalpronomina," 56f., and for a further refutation of Beestonian phonology, Sima, "Lautwandel"; id., "Lautwandel s<sup>3</sup> > s<sup>1</sup>," 18, n. 3: Sabaic /s<sub>3</sub>/ = [s], as assumed by Beeston, is impossible in view of the Sabaeans' constant rendering of foreign /s/ by their <s<sub>1</sub>>.

<sup>42</sup> The broader problem consists in philologists, i. e. specialists for texts and their meaning, trespassing onto the grounds of linguistics and history, where it is essential to process non-textual data, and sometimes large amounts of those. It should be well noted that Beeston's phonology of the Arabian sibilants was quite innovative and refreshing at the time when it was formulated.

<sup>43</sup> Probably ninth/eighth century BCE Aramaic, or perhaps Phoenician, as earlier assumed.

<sup>44</sup> Knauf, "Alphabet"; Tropper, "Griechisches und semitisches Alphabet." The non-use of <q> for Chi [k<sup>h</sup>] points in the same direction, because the use of <q> for /ž/ in Ancient Aramaic indicates that /q/ was moving towards a lateral fricative; cf. Voigt, "Laterale," 100–104.

<sup>45</sup>Samech–Xi, the phonetic feature<sup>45</sup> [+affricate] was maintained, only the articulator of the affrication changed from [+front] to [+back]. To trace sound changes from graphemic changes means to look for the minimal phonetic change involved in the transition from the donor script to the received script.

In the following discussions, the proto-Semitic realization of the consonantal phonemes is the default assumption.<sup>46</sup> Deviations from it will have to be justified. The merger of /s<sub>1</sub>/ and /s<sub>3</sub>/ presupposes the de-affrication of /s<sub>3</sub>/: [ʃ] > [s] and accordingly, the phonetic realization of /s<sub>1</sub>/ as [s],<sup>47</sup> which then serves to transcribe foreign /s/ and /š/. There is no reason to assume any other than the original lateral realization of /s<sub>2</sub>/: [ʃ], which is still attested for the first centuries of Islam by Spanish *Alcalde* < al-Qāḍī [alkaa<sup>d</sup>ʔii], /ḍ/ (or rather, /ẓ/) being the voiced counterpart of voiceless /š/.

In Taymanite<sup>48</sup>—for which a considerable time span (or an astonishing degree of sociolinguistical and/or dialectological stratification for such a small<sup>49</sup> and lexically limited corpus) is required by its three forms for the preposition *l-*: \**limā*, \**nimā*, and \**li*<sup>50</sup>—the final *nun* of the filiation is either assimilated to the first consonant of the

<sup>45</sup> Halle, “Phonological Features.” It is not necessary, in the present context, to reconstruct the complete system of distinctive features for the languages involved.

<sup>46</sup> For the Proto-Semitic phonetic system, cf. Voigt, “Inkompatibilitäten”; id., “Semitistische Werke.”

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Voigt, “Personalpronomina”; Sima, “Lautwandel”; id., “Lautwandel s<sup>3</sup> > s<sup>1</sup>”; Tropper, “Griechisches und semitisches Alphabet”; Schenkel, *Altägyptische Sprachwissenschaft*, 37.

<sup>48</sup> The inscriptions from the Taymā’ area can roughly be attributed to the sixth to fourth centuries BCE; the Babylonian king Nabonidus, who resided at Taymā’ from 552–541, is mentioned in them: Hayajneh, “Nabonidus,” whose new material largely corroborates F. V. Winnett in Winnett/Reed, *Ancient Records*, 89–93. It is difficult, though, to attribute all the wars mentioned in these texts to the ten years of Nabonidus’ residence. A war between Taymā’ and Dedan, two places which, in the fifth and early fourth centuries BCE both accommodated a Persian governor (or resident) is easier conceivable after the Persian withdrawal. Roschinski, “Sprachen,” who has Taymanite epigraphic activity start in the fourth century, is now obsolete. Persian domination probably broke down there, as in northern Arabia in general, in the first half of the fourth century: Dandamaev, *Achaemenid Empire*, 296f.; 304f.; Knauf, “Persian Administration”; the loss of Arabia necessitated the establishment of some sort of *Limes Palaestinae* and the Idumean eparchy (between 385 and June 363 BCE, cf. Lemaire, “Beitrag idumäischer Ostraka”).

<sup>49</sup> In which the definite article is, at least, attested: *h-rkb* “the riding camel,” WiTay 3.

<sup>50</sup> Examples: *nm* WiTay 1:2; *lm* WiTay 2; *l-* WiTay 4; all quoted WiTay inscriptions in Winnett/Reed, “Ancient Records.”

patronym or, more likely,<sup>51</sup> ended up in the nasalization of /i/: *bHgg* (<*bn Hgg*; WiTay 1:1) = [*biḥHaggāg*] or rather [*bēHaggāg*]; *b'gl* (WiTay 2) = [*bē'Igl*], etc. The Taymanite grapheme for /t/ is derived from South Arabian <*s*<sub>3</sub>>, which was back then still an affricate, attested by the Minaean<sup>52</sup> transcription *dl̥t* for the Greek toponym “Delos” (it is less likely to assume that the Delians, or all Greeks of the third and second centuries BCE, spoke with a lisp).<sup>53</sup> Avoidance of the standard South Arabian grapheme <*t*> and the formation of a new grapheme based on South Arabian <*s*<sub>3</sub>> suggest that Taymanite /t/ was, as opposed to its fricative South Arabian equivalent, an affricate: [t̥]. By systemic analogy, the same should have been true for its voiced counterpart, /d/ : [d̥]. If [+affricate] was a distinctive feature of Taymanite /t/ and /d/, the two phonemes may or may not have lost the feature [+interdental], and possibly have been realized as [t̥] and [d̥].

Sharing the etymology of its <*t*> with Dedanite/Lihyanite, where the same phonological feature can be established independently of the sign's prehistory (cf. *infra*, § 2.1.2), might alternatively suggest that Taymā' borrowed this graphic peculiarity from Dedan. On the other hand, this specific realization of the /t/ is also shared by South Safaitic (see *infra*, § 2.1.3), which derived its <*t*> from a letter other than <*s*<sub>3</sub>>. In all likelihood, we are dealing here with a supradialectal phonological feature of Ḥijāzī Arabic in the second half of the first millennium BCE.

The script and language of the Dedan-Hegra-area are more or less contemporary with Taymanite. In the sixth century BCE, there was a king at Dedan, and third century inscriptions reflect Ptolemaic hegemony (or the attempt thereof) in the Ḥijāz.<sup>54</sup> The Dedanite/Lihyanite grapheme for /t/ has the same etymology as its Taymanite counter-

<sup>51</sup> The *n* disappears also in front of laryngals/pharyngals, in which case the *n* of the article \**han*- is not assimilated to the first consonant of the following noun in Dedanite/Lihyanite and Qedarite (see *infra*).

<sup>52</sup> Recently also known as “Madhabic,” a term which, however, seems not to have caught on. A Google search (August 23, 2006) resulted in 19.200 hits for “Minaean” and twelve for “Madhabic.”

<sup>53</sup> In late Hadramitic, /t/ and /s<sub>3</sub>/ merge, most probably in [s]; cf. Voigt, “Lautwandel”; /t/ naturally develops into either /t/ (as in Aramaic) or /s/ and only secondarily /š/ as in Canaanite and Babylonian Akkadian (cf. for the mechanisms involved Knauf, *Midian*, 73–77; id., “Assur.”)

<sup>54</sup> Till the first century BCE, if al-'Udhaib 45 is a Lihyanite-Thamudic-Nabatean trilingual indeed, which is hard to tell on the basis of the available photograph; cf. Sima, *Die lihyanischen Inschriften*, 18 and pl. 11b.

part. The phonological reconstruction is corroborated by an aberrant spelling which cannot be explained otherwise. In JS 81:6, *mn tqrh* stands for \**min sāqir(i)-hi* “from (whoever) wants to rob it (sc., the tomb).” There is no sound change [t] > [t̥] known which could operate here,<sup>55</sup> whereas [man<sup>t</sup>saqarahu] < [mansaqarahu] is trivial.<sup>56</sup>

Safaitic (in the north of the Nabatean realm) and South Safaitic<sup>57</sup> (in its south) are more or less contemporary with Nabatean. The inscriptions start between the third and the first centuries BCE, last remnants are encountered in the fifth century CE.<sup>58</sup>

Nabatean Old Arabic, Safaitic, and South Safaitic were, as this section tries to argue, mutually unintelligible. South Safaitic exhibits three graphemic peculiarities: normal Ancient Epigraphic Arabic<sup>59</sup> (NAEA) <t̥> stands for /g/ with the probable phonetic realization [j̥] or even [j];<sup>60</sup> NAEA |ẓ| (traditionally: <d>) represents /t̥/, whereas a new sign is created for /ẓ/, viz. O.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Pace Drewes, “Phonemes of Lihyanite,” 167. Winnett, *Ancient Records*, 124f. #7 found the meaning of the text, but could not explain its phonology. The same text also has *hn-qbr dh* (lines 2f.) instead of \**h-qbr*.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. for the affrication of [s] after dental [n], Knauf, “Sprachvergleich.” In spoken German, there is no difference between *Gans* “goose” and *ganz* “complete.”

<sup>57</sup> Also known as “Thamudic E” (which sounds somewhat technical) or “Hismaic” (which makes a correct statement on the texts’ geographical pertinence). In spite of Macdonald’s vehement opposition (Macdonald, “Reflections,” 44; 66 n. 42; id./King, “Thamudic,” 437) to the terminology of this writer, there is no point to carry that controversy any further, as long as all know what they are talking about. A rose, by any other name, would smell as sweet. Names are labels and defined by the things on which they stick, and serve simple practical purposes. Arguments *e nomine* can well be left to the last witch-hunters and other obscurantists. The relationship between Safaitic and South-Safaitic, beyond what is stated above, may now require re-evaluation in the light of “transitional” texts—northern South Safaitic or southern Safaitic?—from Moab and further north; cf. already Milik, “Nouvelles inscriptions sémitiques,” 342; and Graf, *Rome*, xiv. Macdonald’s “mixed texts” (Macdonald, “Reflections,” 50–54), call for an evaluation within the conceptual framework of bilingualism and multiculturalism; cf. Kachru, “Multilingualism and Multiculturalism,” and should, accordingly, be classified as idiolects of bicultural persons.

<sup>58</sup> For the beginning, the texts mentioning a migration of the Itureans are decisive (more than the Minaean impact on Safaitic paleography); for the end, the inscriptions in a church at Khirbat as-Samrā’. Knauf, “More Texts”; id., “Die altnordarabischen Inschriften”; id., “The Itureans.”

<sup>59</sup> The phonemics of which are postulated to be Proto-Semitic by default, i.e. as long as there is no evidence to the contrary—as is the case with [ʕ] which had evidently disappeared and merged with [s], given the absence of a <s<sub>3</sub>> grapheme (see above, n. 28).

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Voigt, “South Safaitic.”

<sup>61</sup> Macdonald, “Reflections,” 34; King, “Some inscriptions.”

For the phonological interpretation of the phenomenon, it is not necessary to decide whether O is a variation on NAEA <g> or <ʕ> (though I tend to vote for the second choice), since both possibilities lead in the same direction. From Old Aramaic to Middle Aramaic, /ʒ/ underwent the following development:

Old Aramaic	Imperial Aramaic
/ʒ/ – <q> (Assyrian <x>) – [ʔ]	/ʕ/ – <ʕ> – [ʕ]

Proto-Aramaic (Proto-Semitic) and, by inference, NAEA /ʒ/ had the distinctive features: [+lateral(=velar/uvular)] [+voiced] [+affricative], whereas its Imperial Aramaic successor has the distinctive features [+pharyngeal] [+voiced] [+fricative], i. e. [+lateral] was further lateralized to [+laryngeal] and [+affricative] became [+fricative].

For the graphemic representatives of Old Aramaic /ʒ/ the following distinctive features apply:

- <x>: [+velar] [voiced] [+fricative]  
 <q>: [+uvular] [±voiced]<sup>62</sup> [+affricative?]<sup>63</sup>

The common features of these representations are [+velar *or* +uvular] and [+fricative *or* +affricative]. In order to express these two features, the writers had to abandon the aspect [+voiced] which belongs to the phoneme according to its position in the Semitic consonantal system. When it coalesced, in Middle Aramaic, with /ʕ/, it had the distinctive features [+pharyngeal] [+voiced] [+fricative]; so [+velar/uvular] had further been lateralized, and the affricate had become a fricative, which is a common phonetic development.<sup>64</sup> The same process seems to be indicated for South Safaitic by the choice of a grapheme for /ʒ/ which is either derived from [ʕ], or [g], indicating that NAEA /ʒ/ then still was an affricate. By systemic analogy, the de-affrication should also have extended to South Safaitic /ś/ (/s<sub>2</sub>/).

If [+affricative] was the distinctive feature which forbade the use of NAEA [ʒ] in South Safaitic, it should have been the same feature

<sup>62</sup> However “emphasis” was realized in this case (see the next footnote), as a phonological category in pre-Middle Arabic Semitic it is neutral to the voiced/unvoiced opposition.

<sup>63</sup> The evidence points to a realization of Ancient Aramaic /q/ as [ʕx].

<sup>64</sup> Cf. English, Low German and Dutch *water*; Old High German *wazzar*, Middle High German *wazzer*, German *Wasser*; Klein, *Etymological Dictionary*, 1732.

which recommended the sign for South Safaitic /t/, because this is the only feature that the phoneme and the grapheme have in common:

NAEA /t/:	[+interdental] [voice] [+fricative]
NAEA  ž :	[+velar/uvular] [+voice] [+affricative]
South Safaitic /t/:	[+interdental] [voice] [+affricative]

South Safaitic /t/ (and, by systemic analogy, /d/) can be phonologically reconstructed as

/t/: [t̪]; /d/: [d̪],<sup>65</sup>

a system which would have allowed for the further simplification (without our having a chance to know whether the South Safaites went this one step more):

/t/: [t̪s]; /d/: [d̪z].

The proposed phonetic reconstructions of South Safaitic have some bearing on the vexed question of whether Safaitic and South Safaitic, the two best-documented Ancient Arabic languages, were mutually intelligible or not. In their written form, probably yes; a northern Safaite only had to learn the variant meanings of four signs,<sup>66</sup> and the language as well as the formation of the personal names would have been quite familiar. As far as the spoken language goes, they were most probably not compatible. Historical phonetic reconstruction cannot go beyond the level of the distinctive phonemic features (but it can go to precisely this level). The sounds of any spoken language come with non-distinctive features by the dozens;<sup>67</sup> the difference between [r] and [ḡ] is phonemic in Arabic, but not in German, where there are, however, dialects with [ḡ] as an obligatory positional variant of /g/.

Distinctive differences in the core area of the distinctive features for three (and by extending to their voice/voiceless counterparts, possibly five) out of twenty-eight consonants for South Safaitic being known, and the peripheral phonetic features being unknown, either

<sup>65</sup> In this case, South Safaitic appears as more conservative than NAEA.

<sup>66</sup> The fourth sign is South Safaitic <ṭ> which would have stood for /h/ in Safaitic.

<sup>67</sup> Speaking pre-TV literate Standard German with a rather strong North Western urban accent and no other German dialect at all, this writer frequently experiences speakers of southern German dialects responding in English or French because they cannot identify his socio- or ideolekt as a form of German as they are wont to know.

for the consonants or for the vowels,<sup>68</sup> the assumption that spoken Safaitic and South Safaitic were mutually intelligible has nothing to recommend it.

The results reached so far can be summarized in the following chart (fig. 9):

Letter	Script/language	Etymology	Implications
<ṭ>	Taymanite	<s <sub>3</sub> >	/t/ → [ʔ] or [ʕ] or <ṭ> <sup>Taymanite</sup> ← <ṭ> <sup>Dedanite</sup>
<ṭ>	Dedanite/Lihyanite; Ḥijāzī	<s <sub>3</sub> >	/t/ → [ʔ] or [ʕ] <ṭ> <sup>Dedanite</sup> ← <ṭ> <sup>Taymanite</sup>
<ṭ>	South Safaitic	<ḏ>	/t/ → [ʔ] or [ʕ]
<g>	South Safaitic	<ṭ>, <y>	/g/ → [ɣ] or [j]
<ḏ>	South Safaitic	<g>, <ʕ>	/ḏ/ → [ḏ] and not [ḏʕ]

Fig. 9. Ancient Arabic graphemes and phonemes: some proposed conclusions (note that “and” and “or” are used here as in Boolean logic).

Ḥijāzī Thamudic survived well into the third century CE. The inscription JS 17, dated to 267 CE, is a Nabatean-Ḥijāzī Thamudic bilingual, the author of which was much more fluent in Nabatean Arabic than in Thamudic—the Thamudic version consists of only four words. Ḥijāzī developed a new sign for /ṣ/, which originated either as a variation of <ḏ> or an acronymic pictograph based on /ṣams/ “sun,” or both. In this case, the reason for the new grapheme’s adaptation may well be graphemic rather than phonological. In Ḥijāzī, <n> had grown into a form dangerously close to the traditional <ṣ>—and who wants to run the risk of misreading *ṣākahu haṣṣaukat* “the thorn pierced him” as *nākahu hannakkāt*?

### 2.1.2. South Nabatean and North Nabatean

Nabatean Aramaic is not an Aramaic “dialect”;<sup>69</sup> it was the official written language within the Nabatean realm (read and pronounced,

<sup>68</sup> With a degree of probability verging on certainty it can be postulated that such features must have existed in South Safaitic, too, because they exist in every language known to this writer.

<sup>69</sup> Pace Morgenstern, “Aramaic Dialects.” For script, not language being the defining criterion of a Nabatean text, cf. already Cantineau, “Nabatéen,” 95: “textes araméens, d’ une écriture cursive provenant de populations arabes limitrophes du domaine araméen.”



in all probability, rather differently by different groups of its inhabitants) and, after the demise of the Nabatean state, the written language of the oasis dwellers, traders, and caravaneers of the Hījāz well into the fourth century CE. The absence of a supra-tribal Arabic standard language prior to the fourth century CE was exactly the reason, in all probability, why the Nabateans continued the use of Official Aramaic as their supra-tribal and interregional lingua franca within their political entity, after that language was well established both in the desert and the towns by the Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Persian administrations. The command of Nabatean Aramaic among the subjects of the Nabatean kings probably varied widely, from a native or first language in some of the settled communities in Moab via a second language of every trader and craftsman to a pidgin or creole when used (if at all) by goat herders in the Hījāz. Nabatean Arabic<sup>70</sup> is attested by the majority of the Nabatean personal names (which must not be regarded as fossilized—they distinguish correctly, and well into the third century CE, between the Arabic genitive and nominative, something the bearers of these names can not possibly have picked up from Aramaic), by Arabic loan words in Nabatean Aramaic (the number of which has increased dramatically with the publication of the Nahal Hever archives),<sup>71</sup> and by phonological features in both (like the West Arabian  $\bar{a} \rightarrow \bar{o}$  change).

In spite of some outspoken disbelievers in the sociolinguistic relevance of corpora of personal names,<sup>72</sup> it is quite evident that the Nabateans preserved their Arabic language well into the third century CE, whereas the Idumeans were in the process of abandoning their native (Canaanite) Edomite already in the fourth and third centuries BCE. From sixteen Idumean personal names composed with the name of the Edomite deity Qaus/Qos,<sup>73</sup> four are common Central Semitic

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<sup>70</sup> The objections against the scholarly consensus concerning the three languages spoken by the Nabataeans raised by Macdonald, "Reflections," 46–48, are based on a theoretical failure to perceive the evolution of Arabic (even where it is in the process of evolving before the very eyes of the perceiver). That Old Arabic was the first language of 95% (or more) of the writers of Nabatean texts was already the consensus of the great orientalists from Theodor Nöldeke to Enno Littmann; cf. recently Roschinski, "Sprachen," 159–162; Hoyland, "Language and Identity," 185.

<sup>71</sup> Yadin/Greenfield/Yardeni/Levine, *Documents*, 28–29.

<sup>72</sup> Macdonald, "Epigraphy and Ethnicity." In individual cases, to be sure, a name may not say very much—but then, individual cases are irrelevant for the economist and the historian.

<sup>73</sup> From Eph'al and Naveh, *Aramaic Ostraca*. A refined breakdown will have to wait for the *editio maior* by Ada Yardeni and Bezalel Porten.

(קוסנתן קוסנר) two are Canaanite (קוסנר) one is Canaanite or Arabic (קוסגד), one is Canaanite or Aramaic (קוסרס), three are Aramaic (קוסעדד קוסיהב קוסדכר), three are Aramaic or Arabic (קוסלנצר קוסלדן עלקוס), and two are Arabic (קוסיתע קוסעני). In the case of Nabatean names<sup>74</sup> formed with the theophoric element Ba'al/Ba'lu, there are four non-Arabic names, viz one South Arabian (בעלבין), two Canaanite (בעלנתן בעלמתן), and one Aramaic (רחימבעל) as opposed to seven Arabic names (אושאלבעלי) [variants אושלבבעלי [עבדלבעלי variant] עבדאלבעל גרמאללבעלי זידאלבעלי] [אושאלבעל] [עבדלבעלי variant] תיצאלבעלי שמשאלבעלי שדאלבעלי. There is not a single case of "language mix" as in Idumea (Edomite theophoric element with Aramaic or Arabic predicate). Nor is there a single "translation" of *al-Ba'lu* into Aramaic \**Ba'lā*. Orthographic mistakes (hypercorrection, like adding the nominative *-w* to the genitive *-y* in one case, elision of *'*, shortening (or elision) of final *-y* are specific Arabic orthographic mistakes all of which are also found in the text of the Qur'an.<sup>75</sup> The overwhelming Arabic character of Nabatean anthroponymy gains further momentum by counting the named in addition to the names: four bearers of Non-Arabic names (i.e., each of the four is attested once) are opposed by 314 Arabs, i.e. 98.74%.

Spoken Nabatean Arabic came in at least two dialects. The name of the Nabatean god, Dusares, is rendered differently in Safaitic and South Safaitic/Hismaic. Whereas in the north the name was borrowed as /*dūšarā*/, in the south it was /*ḏūšarā*/, i.e. Arabic /*ḏ*/ was preserved in the south, but had coalesced with /*d*/ in the north (as in recent Syrian Arabic dialects).<sup>76</sup>

<sup>74</sup> From Negev, *Personal Names*.

<sup>75</sup> Talmon, "Grammar and the Qur'an," 353–354. On the basis of the same material (but neglecting to weigh it quantitatively), Diem, "Die nabatäischen Inschriften," came to the conclusion that the Old Arabic system of case vowels was "already" breaking down in spoken Nabataean Arabic from the first century BCE onwards. The notion of a period of "pure" Arabic being followed by corruption starting at a certain place at a certain time is obsolete, cf. now Diem, "Vom Altarabischen zum Neuarabischen." "Pure Arabic" behaves like Humpty-Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's perception: ever falling, never fallen.

<sup>76</sup> To regard the northern form as an attestation of spoken Aramaic, as Macdonald, "Reflections," 46, does, is impossible. It was only Arabic that preserved the lateral character of /*š*/ (classical /*š*/) and /*ẓ*/ (classical /*ḏ*/) until the early Islamic period, amply attested also by transcriptions in other languages (thus Assyrian [ruḏay] for /Ruḏay/, [ilte'ri] for /šahri/, Spanish *Alcalde* from /al-qāḏi/). Aramaic developed the laterals differently as early as the eighth century (when the Assyrians rendered the name of the Damascene king Raḏyān as [raḥyan]). By the first century CE, the laterals

Surprisingly or not, the dialect cleavage between Southern Jordan and the Ḥawrān also shows up in the distribution of Nabatean personal names, which demonstrate a high degree of regional diversity between the main Nabatean districts.<sup>77</sup>

Y/X	Ḥawrān	Southern Jordan	Northwest Arabia	Sinai
Ḥawrān	100	12.04	25.13	15.71
Southern Jordan	7.21	100	19.44	17.55
Northwest Arabia	9.30	12.02	100	12.98
Sinai	6.79	12.67	15.16	100

Fig. 10. Percentage of personal names in region Y also attested in region X.

All three regions have the lowest percentage in common with the Ḥawrān, and Southern Jordan has the lowest of them all. The picture gains in clarity by calculating the geometrical average of the two percentages from fig. 10 (fig. 11).

Sociolinguistics cannot be separated from social and economic history. The exchange of persons (and/or goods) between the various regions of Nabataea is also evidenced in the table fig. 11. Southern Jordan and the Ḥawrān are relatively isolated in relation to each other, Ḥawrān/Sinai as well. Both the Petra region and the Ḥawrān are equally well connected to the Ḥijāz. The Hegra-Petra-, Petra-Gaza-, and Hegra-Sinai-Egypt roads formed on system and the Hegra-Dumah-Bostra road (via Wadi Sirhan) another. The Ḥijāz, in equal contact with the three other regions, turns out to be the real center of the Nabatean trading empire—then, probably, also the place of origin of their language.

2.1.3. *Results*

The phonological variation of the various languages spoken in the area under Qedarite and Nabatean control between the fifth century BCE and the third century CE can again be summarized in a table (see fig. 12).

seem to have become /ʔ/ and /s/ in all attested dialects; cf. for the laterals and their development Voigt, “Laterale.”

<sup>77</sup> Negev, “Personal Names.” The high amount of names processed (n > 1000) renders the one or other missed or misplaced reference insignificant.

Y/X	Ḥawrān	Southern Jordan	Northwest Arabia	Sinai
Ḥawrān	1	0.09 191/23/319	0.15 191/48/516	0.10 191/30/442
Southern Jordan	0.09 319/23/191	1	0.15 319/62/516	0.15 319/56/442
Northwest Arabia	0.15 516/48/191	0.15 516/62/319	1	0.14 516/67/442
Sinai	0.10 442/30/191	0.15 442/56/319	0.14 442/67/516	1

Fig. 11. Correlation of the regional personal name repertoires ( $1 > c > 0$ ) and the absolute data (names from X not attested in Y / shared names / names from Y not attested in X).

Pho- neme	Minaean	Taymā'	Dedan	Ḥijāz	South Safaitic	Safaitic	Nabatean	North Nabatean	Middle Aramaic
<i>g</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>g</i>	[ <i>y</i> ] or [ <i>j</i> ]	<i>g</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>g</i>
<i>q</i>	<i>q</i>	<i><sup>d</sup>z</i>	<i><sup>d</sup>z</i>	<i>q</i>	<i><sup>d</sup>z</i>	<i>q</i>	<i>q</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>d</i>
<i>t</i>	<i>t</i> or <i>s</i> ?	<i><sup>t</sup>s</i>	<i><sup>t</sup>s</i>	<i><sup>t</sup>s</i>	<i><sup>t</sup>s</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>t</i>
<i>s</i> <sub>1</sub>	<i>š</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>š</i>
<i>s</i> <sub>2</sub>	<i>ś</i> , <i>s</i> , or <i>t</i> ?	<i>ś</i>	<i>ś</i>	<i>ś</i>	<i>ś</i> and not <i><sup>t</sup>ś</i>	<i><sup>t</sup>ś</i> and not <i>ś</i>	<i>ś</i>	<i>ś</i>	<i>s</i>
<i>z</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>z</i> and not <i><sup>d</sup>z</i>	<i><sup>d</sup>z</i> and not <i>z</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>‘</i>
<i>s</i> <sub>3</sub>	<i><sup>t</sup>s</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	<i>s</i>

Fig. 12. Phonological variance in the Nabatean realm (note that “and” and “or” are used here as in Boolean logic).

The table should sufficiently explain why the Nabateans needed the Aramaic Standard language not only for contacts with the civilized world of the eastern Mediterranean but, most probably, also for the communication with allied or subjected tribes.

If the criterion of the “disappearance of final short vowels” is decisive for the distinction of “Old Arabic” and “Neo-Arabic,”<sup>78</sup> Taymanite

<sup>78</sup> Fischer/Jastrow, *Handbuch*, 17; Diem, “Vom Altarabischen zum Neuarabischen,” with two important *caveats*: (a) the case system was semantically redundant from the very beginnings of Arabic linguistic history, at least in prose; (b) the disap-

and Safaitic “Neo-Arabic precedes—at least in written expression—Nabatean “Old Arabic.” The Taymanite development of *\*bin* ‘Amr to *\*bi*‘Amr / *bē*‘Amr would not have been possible from a starting point like *\*b(i)nu* ‘Amr. The absence of final vowels in Safaitic is evidenced by sandhi spellings like *ngʿl* for *\*naga*‘al (Ababneh<sup>79</sup> #82), *bnzmt* for *\*bin Naẓīmat* (Ababneh #356), and even *bn kʿmhxṭṭ* for *\*bin Kaʿammih haxxuṭṭ* (Ababneh #245), which shows that the suffix of the third person masculine singular was vocalized *-uh/ih* in Safaitic and not *\*-uhu/ih*.

## 2.2. Ancient Arabic / Old Arabic Diglossia

Ancient Arabic / Nabatean Old Arabic diglossia emerged, and finally thrived, in the shadow of Ancient Arabic / Aramaic diglossia.

The temporal and spatial distributions of Nabatean and Ancient Arabic inscriptions overlap to a large extent. Nabatean inscriptions are concentrated in the Ḥawrān, Southern Jordan, the Negev, Sinai, and the Northern Ḥijāz. All these areas, or areas immediately adjacent to them like the basalt desert of Southern Syria and Northern Jordan, have also produced Ancient Arabic inscriptions,<sup>80</sup> notably, the bulk of the Safaitic and South Safaitic texts. Nabatean epigraphy ranges from the first century BCE<sup>81</sup> to the fourth century CE, with a peak during the second and third centuries (in number of inscriptions,

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pearance of final short vowels is not necessarily identical with the total disappearance of case; cf. already A. Socin in a letter to his father from Damascus, May 16th 1869: “Ein zweites Interesse liegt für uns oft in den Eigennamen der Inschriften [sc. the Greek inscriptions from the Ḥawrān]; es kommen aus einer Zeit, wo die Weltgeschichte gar noch nicht an die Entwicklung der Araber und ihrer Sprache gekommen war, deutliche vulgäraryabische Formen vor”; Alt (ed.), “Ritt durch Palästina,” 82.

<sup>79</sup> Ababneh, *Neue safaitische Inschriften*.

<sup>80</sup> For Ancient Arabic (“Thamudic” and [South] Safaitic inscriptions from the Negev and Sinai, cf. Negev, “Nabatean, Greek and Thamudic Inscriptions”; Knauf, “Vier thamudische Inschriften”; Tsafir, “New Thamudic Inscriptions”; Halloun, “New Thamudic Inscriptions.”

<sup>81</sup> Previous Aramaic texts attributed to Nabatean authors (like Cantineau II, 43f.) still show none of the peculiarities of the specifically Nabatean script, and should be regarded as proto-Nabatean. For script, not language being the defining criterion of a Nabatean text, cf. already Cantineau, “Nabatéen,” 95: “textes araméens, d’ une écriture cursive provenant de populations arabes limitrophes du domaine araméen.”

represented by the Graffiti from Sinai).<sup>82</sup> The temporal range for Safaitic and South Safaitic is more or less the same.<sup>83</sup>

The chronological profile of the Nabatean corpus cannot be extrapolated from the relatively few dated Nabatean inscriptions. Most of these derive from either the Ḥawrān or Southern Jordan and refer to the rule of Nabatean kings. The bulk of the inscriptions, the graffiti from Sinai (and Egypt) contain just a handful of dates. In Palmyra, on the other hand, a quarter of the inscriptions are dated more or less precisely.<sup>84</sup>

As a surprise to those who regard Nabateans and Palmyreneans as two “nations” with separate, if somewhat consecutive political histories, but as no surprise for those who see them as two trading organizations working (i.e. competing as well as cooperating) within the same economic world system, the temporal distribution of Palmyrene inscriptions follows very closely the hypothesized production of Nabatean and Safaitic inscriptions (see fig. 13)

The history of writing in Palmyrene ended abruptly, for political reasons, in 273 CE. But the Romans did not kill every person capable of writing Palmyrene. Nor did they put a sudden stop to a flourishing lapidary literature: the production of new Palmyrene texts declined severely well before the final catastrophe. As usual, the wealth of Palmyra was earned and accumulated some time before it was squandered on art, architecture, or politics. The sudden end—more sudden than the end of Nabatean around 300 CE, which petered out more slowly—does, however, demonstrate that Palmyrene was not a “national” language, it was a code of prestige used by the leading class of an urban tribal trading republic and its dependants.

The eastern world after the demise of the quarrelling twins, Seleucids and Ptolemies, i.e. from the Roman takeover in 64/63 BCE to the outbreak of the imperial crisis in 253/256 CE, was a mono-polar world, the Parthians on its eastern border being a nuisance, not a real danger.

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<sup>82</sup> The date of these inscriptions and the provenance of their authors was well established by Moritz, *Sinaitikult*. Negev’s calculation 3000 persons per generation (*Personal Names*, 189) might furnish a reasonable estimate for the trading population of the Ḥijāz in the second and third centuries (i.e. the persons, including dependants, living on trade); it does not say anything about the local population of Sinai at that time.

<sup>83</sup> Littmann, “Thamūd und Ṣafā”; the two Ancient Arabian scripts and languages might commence a brief time before the first century CE, and might have survived in marginal pocket briefly beyond the fourth century, cf. Knauf, “More Texts”; id., “Die altnordarabischen Inschriften.”

<sup>84</sup> Taylor, “Annotated Index.”

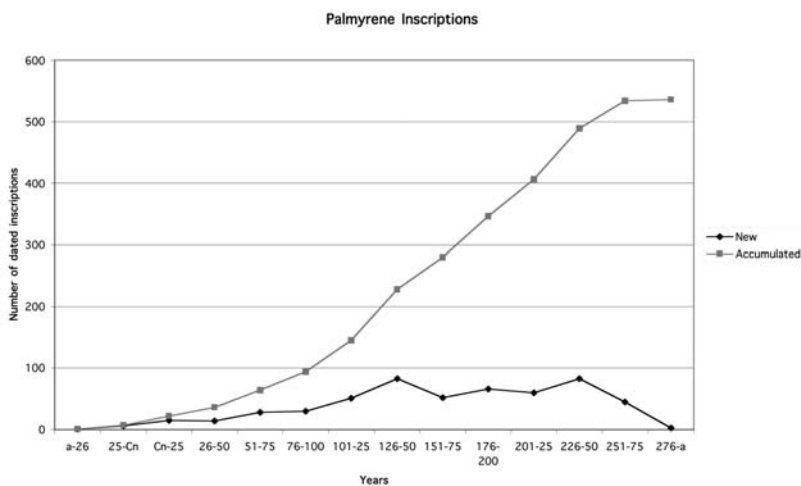


Fig. 13. The production of inscriptions in Palmyrene, first century BCE–third century CE.

With the rise of the Sasanids, the Roman East and its immediate neighborhood was again caught between two fighting poles. A mono-polar center tends to fragment its periphery; there were hundreds of Safaitic tribes and various local Arabo-Aramaic epigraphic cultures: Nabatea, Hatra, Palmyra, al-Ḥasā'... A bipolar world seems to induce some clustering in the periphery: now there are the large tribes of Tanūkh and Tayyī', soon there are the competing tribal confederacies of Ghassān and Lakhm, and who wanted to write Aramaic after 300 CE, at least in Arabia and adjacent countries, used the script (and grammar) of Edessa, until it split up again along ethnic and religious cracks.

But back to the world before 300 CE. The Nabatean god, Dūsharā, crossed over into both Safaitic and South Safaitic, and his Syrian counterpart, Ba'alshamin, also invoked by Nabateans at Petra as well as in the Ḥawrān, did the same. Nabateans wrote occasionally in Safaitic, and Safaites in Nabatean (if every tribe mentioned in Safaitic inscriptions can be regarded as a Safaitic tribe). There existed, at least within the Nabatean realm, something like a Nabatean-Safaitic cultural continuum with some kind of Old Arabic–Ancient Arabic diglossia.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Macdonald's "mixed" classes like Nabateo-Safaitic etc. represent individual expressions of that diglossia.



### 2.2.1. *The Case of the Gerrhaeans Abroad*

After the third century BCE, it was the article (ʿ)*al-* which was used by Ancient as well as Old Arabs outside Arabia, as we will see in the next paragraph; and after the third century CE, the *ha(n)*-article disappeared from the Arabian Peninsula, too.

East Arabia (al-Ḥasāʾ) with its capital city Hagar<sup>86</sup> played a prominent role in early Hellenistic international trade. To the Greeks, the region or city was known as Gerrha.<sup>87</sup> Hasaitic, attested for ca. the fifth through third centuries BCE, is indeed an Ancient Arabic language: [G]rm-hn-ʾl̥t \*Garm-han-ʾl̥lāt “Decree of The Goddess” (Ja 1043,2). But in the second century BCE, a trader from Gerrha left his name on Delos in the form THMAΛΛATOC ΓΕΡΡΑΙΟC (Delos 1442 A 82 &c), i.e. \*Tēm-al-Lāt “Servant of The Goddess.” At home, the people of Gerrha wrote their own form of Ancient Arabic; abroad, and especially abroad in the far west, they translated (or transcribed) their personal names into Old Arabic (unless there was a language change in East Arabia around 200 BCE). This behavior can be explained in various ways:

(a) At home, they still wrote Hasaitic, an Ancient Arabian language, but in spite of their archaic orthography, they spoke already Old Arabic, at least in the second century BCE (people acquainted with the English language will easily understand such a linguistic behavior; nobody says [wey oxt to hahvey thox of the nixt] anymore, but everybody still writes it).

(b) Abroad, they felt obliged to speak—or emulate—an intertribal and supra-regional form of Arabic which was, as far as can be seen, identical with Nabatean<sup>88</sup> Old Arabic.

Alternative (b) is attractive for the following reasons:

(a) It is within the (future) Nabatean realm that Old Arabic is first attested (since the fifth century BCE), not only by Herodotus but also in the Aramaic ostraca from Achaemenid southern Israel/Palestine.

<sup>86</sup> Knauf, *Ismael*, 53–4; 144–5; id., “Hagar (Person)”: *ABD* III (1992) 19–19; id., “Hagar und Hagariter”: *NBL* II (1995) 9–10; Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 16–35.

<sup>87</sup> The Greek form of the name is best explained as misconstrued by an Aramaic intermediary, who wrongly identified the first syllable of the name with the definite article of Ancient Arabic: Hagar > \*hag-Gar > \*Garrā (with the Aramaic postpositive article) > Gerrha; cf. the similar case of *al-Iskandariyya* < *Alexandreia*, and for the shift of gemination Brockelmann, *Grundriss*, 634.

<sup>88</sup> “Nabatean” in the sense of “producer of Nabatean texts”; empirically, a group whose members were also, to a high degree, members of the Nabatean tribe or subjects of the Nabatean kings.

(b) It is on the fringe of the Nabatean realm, at Dedan/Hegra, that the transition from Ancient Arabic *ha(n)-* to *(ʿ)al-* can be observed in one and the same inscription, JS lih. 71.<sup>89</sup>

(c) The Nabatean trading network, throwing its web all over Arabia and extending well to the gates of Rome, provides a feasible socio-economic background both for the origin of an inter-tribal lingua franca in the absence of any kind of political, ethnic, and religious unity.

The Nabatean trading network<sup>90</sup> is evidenced by archeological, epigraphic, and literary evidence, which attests in many cases to a permanent presence of Nabatean traders on the spot ("colonies") and in other cases, at least to trade contacts with passing Nabatean caravans or delegations. A considerable amount of Nabatean pottery (as opposed to a stray shard) can be regarded as evidence for Nabatean presence at a site, since Nabatean pottery does not seem to have constituted a trade good in considerable quantities.

For the "west," Nabatean colonies are at least attested for Damascus, Adraa, Capitolias/Bait Ras, Gadara, and Gerasa; Gaza and Rhinocolura, Sidon,<sup>91</sup> and Antioch on the Orontes; Puteoli and Rome<sup>92</sup>; contacts for Kos, Priene, Milet, Delos, and Tenos. In Egypt, a Nabatean colony existed at Qaşr/Quşair al-Khadim, Nabatean contacts are attested for Tall ash-Shuqāfiyya and Atribis.<sup>93</sup> Nabatean presence in Southern Mesopotamia, so far, is attested only in literature (cf. Pliny, *Natural History* 6.32, 145,<sup>94</sup> and 12.40). On the Arabian peninsula, Nabatean colonies existed at Qaryat al-Faw, Najrān, on Farasān island and at Mari in the south, and at Qana' and Khor Rori in the southeast (Ḥaḍramawt), whereas a single Nabatean shard from Thāj/Gerrha does not necessarily attest to more than a rejected sample left by a traveling tradesman.

The Nabateans accumulated their wealth during the fifth/fourth through first centuries BCE, squandered it on monumental architecture from the late first century BCE through the early second century CE, and lived happily, if more moderately, well into the third century

<sup>89</sup> See supra with n. 84 for JS 71.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. Wenning, *Nabatäer*; id., "The Nabateans"; Knauf, *Arabienreise*; Macdonald, "Dated Nabataean Inscription."

<sup>91</sup> Wenning, *Nabatäer*, 24 A13. The strategos of CIS II 160 would have been called *ethnarchēs* in Greek, he was the head of the Nabatean community at Sidon rather than a passing traveler (thus Wenning).

<sup>92</sup> Tomb inscription, CIS II 159; second half of first century CE(?).

<sup>93</sup> Wenning, *Nabatäer*, 127 S1 and S2. The Nabatean graffiti from eastern Egypt are, like the Sinaitic graffiti, largely sub-Nabatean, cf. Littmann/Meredith, "Nabataean Inscriptions I"; id., "Nabataean Inscriptions II."

<sup>94</sup> *Deinde est oppidum quod Characenorum regi paret in Pasitigris ripa, Forat nomine, in quod a Petra conueniunt, Characenque inde XII mp. Secundo aestu nauigant.*

CE;<sup>95</sup> they still provided spices to the markets of southern Palestine, but now as a regional, no longer as an international player. Nabatean Arabic became some sort of standard Arabic as early as the second century BCE, but it was a spoken, not a written language, and it was, in the beginning, of no interest to anybody outside the relatively small circle of Arabian international traders and shippers. It became a written language between the third and fourth century CE in post-Nabatean texts.<sup>96</sup> 500 years of Old Arabic–Ancient Arabic coexistence and/or diglossia can now be considered.

### 2.2.2. *The Maintenance of Difference: Safaitic, South Safaitic, and Hijāzī in the Nabatean Realm*

Gerrhaeans abroad adapted their Arabic to the Nabatean standard as early as the second century BCE, but Safaites, South Safaites, and Hijāzīs stuck to their native Ancient Arabian at home well through the third century; the remarkable late Nabatean (or Nabatean-Arabic) text JS 17 of 267 CE is, in fact, a Nabatean-Hijāzī bilingual. As opposed to a previous statement, this author no longer maintains that Ancient Arabic epigraphy was “wholly non-utilitarian in character.”<sup>97</sup> Safaitic texts are clearly marker of territorial possession in the case of inscriptions stating *l-PN hẓrt* “This sheepfold belongs to PN.” They may be equally possessive in the case of *l-PN h-gml* “This camel (*gamal*) / These camels (*gimāl*) belong to PN,” less the signature of a rock artist, perhaps, than a claim to the animals populating a specific pasture.<sup>98</sup> Collectively, these inscriptions are scent marks of territoriality. If they serve now as statistical representations of the spatial distribution and density of their authors, they conveyed the same information in the past to friend and foe alike. They are also markers of an ethnic boundary (and insofar, the Safaites had at least an implicit notion of cultural identity). That these groups of small tribes or clans preserved their archaic language and script, and their differences vis-à-vis their neighboring cultures, for so long indicates that they saw this as part of

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Erickson-Gini, *Crisis and Renewal*.

<sup>96</sup> With a gradual increase of Arabic versus Aramaic words from 80.65% (JS 17, Hegra, 267 CE) to 97.92% (Imru’ al-Qais at an-Nāmara, 328 CE).

<sup>97</sup> Knauf, “More Texts,” 98.

<sup>98</sup> The tribal marks, *wusūm* (sg. *wasm*), which were applicated onto animals and stones in the post-literate period all derive from Ancient Arabic letters; cf. King, “Wasm.” Every sign from *ibid.*, fig. WAS.01, corresponds to a letter in one of the Ancient Arabic scripts.

their cultural heritage, and identity, and attributed some importance to it.

The maintenance of one's difference from neighbors and, especially, the overarching culture of the Nabatean Arabic language and the Nabatean Aramaic script need not necessarily be seen as a hostile act. There were, of course, Safaites who enjoyed despoiling the Nabateans.<sup>99</sup> There were others who participated in both cultures, the local and the regional. The Nabatean cavalry man<sup>100</sup> who took service with Palmyra identifies himself as a "Rawahean Nabatean" (RES 285, dated Sept. 132 CE). For him, it was evidently important to express both identities (or tribal loyalties). The tribe of Rawah, concomitantly, has left inscriptions both in Nabatean and Safaitic, and was not the only tribe within the Nabatean realm who did so.<sup>101</sup> Nor did people who identify themselves simply as Nabateans shun the Safaitic script and language on occasions.

The ethnolinguistic picture which emerges for the third century BCE–third century CE is one of high complexity, carefully maintained. In addition to Nabatean Old Arabic, which was a spoken language only, and not necessarily spoken by every inhabitant of the Nabatean realm, these people spoke with various degrees of proficiency and frequency Aramaic,<sup>102</sup> less Greek,<sup>103</sup> perhaps Latin (at least, one should assume, at Puteoli and Rome<sup>104</sup>), and the one or the other of the local Ancient Arabic languages. Not every "Nabatean," of course, would

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<sup>99</sup> The latest addition to the "raiding the Nabateans"-corpus: Ababneh, *Neue safaitische Inschriften*, 205–349.

<sup>100</sup> Macdonald, "Bedouin State" rightly insists that a *prš* most likely refers to a horse rider and not to a camelier, as I supposed earlier (in Palmyrene iconography, cavaliers and meharists usually come in pairs, anyway). Macdonald's perception of the Nabatean kingdom as a "nation's" "territorial state" is, however, highly anachronistic at this place, for that time.

<sup>101</sup> PAES IV A 43 = RES 2065 (Nabatean); PAES IV C 1296 = CIS V 5162 (Safaitic).

<sup>102</sup> See above, § 1.1. with n. 13.

<sup>103</sup> See above, n. 13. For Greek acculturation among the Nabateans, cf. Knauf, "Dushara"; the specific illustration—Dusares/Dionysos—has rightly be questioned by Patrich, "Dionysos"; Wenning, "Hellenistische Denkmäler"; id., "Religion der Nabatäer" sees a wave of anti-acculturation under the rule of the last Nabatean king.

<sup>104</sup> Although it would not have been absolutely necessary for a resident at Rome between 100 BCE and 250 CE to have spoken Latin—Greek would have been sufficient; cf. Polomé, "Linguistic Situation," 514–516. The Nabatean funeral inscription from Rome (CIS II 159) has one line in Nabatean, and 3 lines of Latin.

have mastered all of these, but very few, if any of them can be supposed to have been monolingual.<sup>105</sup>

### 3. *From Nabatean Old Arabic to Early Standard Arabic*

#### 3.1. *First Century BCE–Third Century CE: Nabatean and Hijāzī*

The Nabatean script is a cursive script. It was developed for writing on “paper” or its ancient equivalents. It reflects the needs of a society of traders who had to keep accounts and set up contracts. Only secondarily, with the onset of conspicuous architectural consumption at the end of the first century BCE, their utilitarian cursive script was put to lapidary, epigraphic use. Unfortunately for the perception of Nabatean society through modern eyes, it is their “luxury” (and basically non-essential) written record which dominates the data base, whereas the main output of Nabatean scribal activities, the papyri, have only survived in meager installments, like the Nabatean papyri from the Babatha archive.<sup>106</sup> Once again, we have to look for the invisible—behind the crest of the hill.

It is the Arabic loan words in these documents which attest to the fact that the Nabateans, though writing their contracts in Aramaic, had developed a sophisticated commercial-legal nomenclature in Arabic to which they took recourse even in their Aramaic documents whenever their knowledge of Aramaic failed them for the one or the other technical term.<sup>107</sup> Evidently, the contracts of the Nabatean traders, written in Aramaic, were accompanied by “oral contracts” in Arabic, which again attests to the mechanism by which Nabatean Old Arabic became a *lingua franca* of commerce throughout the peninsula.

For the duration of Greek as “the world’s first language,” Aramaic happily enjoyed the position of the “world’s second language,” or “the poor/peripheral man’s Greek,” in the east. Local cultures in the

<sup>105</sup> This point was already made, quite succinctly, by Cantineau, “Nabatéen,” 93–95.

<sup>106</sup> Lewis et al., *Documents I*; Yadin et al., *Documents II*. There seem to have been seventeen Greek documents in the archive, Greek and Aramaic papyri and nine Aramaic and Nabatean items (cf. *Documents I*, 3 with n. 3 and 4).

<sup>107</sup> Yadin et al., *Documents II*, 29. The Arabic loanwords in Nabatean Aramaic include not only “local color” like *xarīf* “date grove,” but also—and even more prominently—commercial/legal technical terms like *tābīt* “valid register,” *taman* “price,” *xaliqa* “custom, manner,” *xalāṣ* “release” and *gīrar* “deceptive practice.”

Caucasus, as well as the Parthians, wrote both Greek and Aramaic regardless of what their own spoken language was.<sup>108</sup> Of the many languages spoken in and around Palmyra (Eastern Aramaic, Western Aramaic, Local Aramaic, Greek, Latin,<sup>109</sup> Middle Persian, Safaitic Arabic, Nabatean Arabic, Local Arabic, South Arabian) only three were written: Latin (very occasionally), Greek, and Aramaic. With the imperial crisis of the second half of the third century, Greek lost its splendor in the East: the Parthians' Sasanid successors wrote Middle Persian (and Aramaic, for that was the language of their economical powerhouse, the Iraq); Arabs (if not Christianized) turned away from both Greek and Aramaic.

It is in the third century that Nabatean inscriptions show more and more traits of the Arabic spoken by the Nabateans—not because the Nabateans had not spoken Arabic before, but simply, because they now learned less and less Aramaic, which had become less universal, and useful. Four of these inscriptions will be considered here in some detail. One must be well aware that the “Nabateans” of the second and third centuries did not necessarily regard themselves as ethnic “Nabateans.” The last person attested to do so was a Nabatean Rawahean cavalryman from Anat on the Euphrates, 132 CE (RES 285). Few Nabatean inscriptions of the second to fourth centuries CE come from the Negev and the Ḥawrān. Some of the undated pilgrims' graffiti at Petra may well originate from the same period, to which inscriptions date that were left by Syrian venerators of the Petraean gods in Greek. But the bulk of Nabatean inscriptions are from the *sæculum aureum* (at the same time, the bulk of Nabatean epigraphy in general, consists of 5000–6000 graffiti along the caravan routes of Sinai, left by inhabitants of the Ḥijāz, who were, however, not pilgrims on their way to a holy mountain,<sup>110</sup> but caravaneers on their way to Egypt.)<sup>111</sup>

The Aramaic inscriptions from Nabatea, Palmyra, Hatra, even Edessa produced during the first three centuries CE might well be

<sup>108</sup> Cf. Altheim and Stiehl, “Weltsprache.”

<sup>109</sup> At least, when Helena Justina and Marcus Didius Falco visited.

<sup>110</sup> Moritz, *Sinaiakult*, who successfully established both their dating and the origin of the people who left these inscriptions, but attributed a religious quality to Mount Sinai which simply did not exist before Christianity occupied that venue. The Sinai inscriptions were left by ca. 2500 writers in the course of 150–200 years, cf. Negev, *Personal Names*, 189.

<sup>111</sup> Thus Littmann/Meredith, “Nabataean Inscriptions I,” 3; cf. also *ibid.*, 13 # 34. and 16 # 46a (dated 266 CE).





The meter is *ṭawīl* with three irregularities (according to Bellamy), which, however, can be easily repaired. At the end of the first stichos, two long syllables are missing. The suggestion here is to insert *minnā* “from us,” which would also match the rhyme. It has frequently been recorded how difficult it is for people of an oral culture (as the culture of Old Arabic was back then) to dictate, not to speak of writing down, their poetry.<sup>116</sup> That the author, who must have dictated to himself, missed a word comes as no surprise. In the second and third stichoi, *lā* occupies the position of a syllable which should be short. As has been proposed in quite another context, final vowels in Ancient or Old Arabic were probably *anceps* anyway.<sup>117</sup>

In all probability, we are reading here an excerpt of one of the hymns which the inhabitants of Elusa sung to their gods well into the fourth/fifth centuries, in Arabic, to their deities (according to Epiphanius of Salamis and S. Jerome).<sup>118</sup> It has been assumed since long that the language of Classical Arabic poetry with its archaic morphology has religious roots. Here is the proof for that assumption. The Nabateans, and/or their Ḥijāzī successors in the use of the Nabatean script, did not only use some form of Early Standard Arabic in their commercial transactions all over Arabia, they also knew a form of “Formal Old Arabic” in their cult.<sup>119</sup>

The tomb inscription of Raqosh, from Hegra, dated to 267 CE, is remarkable for the fact that it is tri-cultural (JS 17; fig. 14.2). The woman interred here was a Ḥijāzī—so her name and filiation is written on the tomb in Ḥijāzī (identifying the tomb with the deceased—was the tomb the successor of the nefesh or masseba?). The Nabatean text is basically a legal stipulation regulating who can be interred in that tomb, and who cannot. As a legal text, the author still tried to write it in Aramaic, but not very successfully. One can only guess how the author read *’mh* “his mother”—*’immeh* or rather *’ummih(i)*? And finally, the text is dated to the year 162 CE of the Roman province of Arabia. Whatever the Romans thought about the southern borders

<sup>116</sup> Cf. Musil, *Arabia Petraea*, vii: “Die größte Mühe und Geduld erfordert das Notieren von Liedern und Gedichten. Die Gewährsperson kann sie zwar singen oder rezitieren, aber nicht langsam hersagen, verwechselt Verse und Worte und wiederholt den eben niedergeschriebenen Vers anders als sie ihn hergesagt hatte.”

<sup>117</sup> Brockelmann, *Grundriss*, 74f; Knauf, “Pausa.”

<sup>118</sup> Epiphanius (†403), *Panarion* 51.22, 10f; Jerome (†419), *Life of Hilarion* (PL 23), 41 § 26f; Healey, *Religion*, 67; 103.

<sup>119</sup> For the distinctions between these and other Arabic languages, see below, § 3.6.

of their Arabian province, if any Roman thought about it at all during that troubled period, the people of Hegra seem to have regarded themselves as part of the Roman world.

1. CIAP I Avdat 1. Near Avdat; late first to early fourth century CE

- (1) דכיר בטב קרא קדם עבדת אלהא ודכיר  
 (2) [...]הקים...]  
 (3) גרמאלהי בר תימאלהי צלם לקבל עבדת  
 (4) **פיפעל** לא **פדא** ולא **אתרא פכן הנא יבענא אלמותו** לא  
 (5) **אבעה פכן הנא אדד גרחו** לא **ירדנא**  
 (6) גרמאלהי כתבידה

2. JS 17. Hegra, 267 CE

- (1) d תא קברו צנעה כעבו בר  
 (2) n חרתת חרקוש ברת  
 (3) r עברמנותו אמה והי  
 (4) q **הלכת פי אלחגרו**  
 (5) s שנת מאה ושתינ  
 (6) b ותרן בירח תמוז **ולען**  
 (7) n מרי עלמא מן ישנא **אלקבר**  
 (8) t דא ומן יפתחה **חשי {ו}**  
 (9) ' **ולדה ולען** מן יקבר **ויעלי** מנה

b  
d  
m  
n  
t

3. RES 1097. Umm al-Jimāl, second half of third century CE

- (1) דנה **נפשו פהרו**  
 (2) בר שלי **רבו** גרמת  
 (3) מלך תנוח

4. Littmann, BSOAS 15, 12:23.2f. Egypt, third century CE

- (2) שלם אושו **לילא**  
 (3) **חטבתי פשמעי בנהר ובליל**

Fig. 14. Four Arabo-Aramaic Texts of the third and fourth centuries CE. The various styles indicate language(s) as follows: דכיר Aramaic — קרא Aramaic or Arabic — **פיפעל** Arabic — גמאלהי Proper Name.

Avdat and JS 17 are neither the first Arabic inscriptions, nor the last Nabatean texts. They are as Aramaic, and no less Arabic, as the tomb-inscription of Fihr b. Shullay from Umm al-Jimāl (fig. 14.3)<sup>120</sup> and one Nabatean inscription from Egypt (fig. 14.2).<sup>121</sup> They are slightly exceptional in so far as they show the Arabo-Aramaic mixture of language(s) very clearly (cf. fig. 15), but to some, but lesser degree, this holds true for every Nabatean text.<sup>122</sup>

These four texts from the third century CE are neither wholly Nabatean Aramaic nor wholly Nabatean Arabic. They attest a transitional stage during which the Nabatean-writing Arabs gradually forgot their Aramaic and replaced it with their Arabic, and were already able to commit Arabic poetry into Aramaic writing.

	Aramaic	Aramaic or Arabic	Arabic	Proper Names
Avdat (fig. 14.1)	6 + x	7	13	4
ʾUmm al-Jimāl (fig. 14.3)	2	1	2	4
Hegra (fig. 14.2)	6	13	12	5
Egypt (fig. 14.4)	0	1	4	2

Fig. 15. Word counts for third century Arabo-Aramaic Nabatean inscriptions.

3.2. The Fourth Century CE: An-Nāmara and Hegra

The first inscription in Early Standard Arabic, the tomb inscription of Imruʾulqais of an-Nāmara, “King of all the Arabs” (RCEA 1) from 328 CE is a natural continuation of the “Nabatean-Arabic” texts of the third century CE. The script is still Nabatean, but by now every Aramaic word has been replaced by Arabic vocabulary. The only exception is *br* “son (of),” doubtlessly an Aramaic logogram for *bin* or *ibn*. Nabatean written Aramaic evolved into written Standard

<sup>120</sup> CIS II 192; RES 1097. The “king of Tanūkh” mentioned in it dates the text to the second half of the third century CE.

<sup>121</sup> Littmann, “Nabataean Inscriptions I,” 12 #23:2f. (the first line is a grafitto independent of the following two lines); for the date cf. *ibid* 16 #46a (266 CE).

<sup>122</sup> Cf. Cantineau, “Nabatéen,” 95: “Le cas de l’inscription J 17 n’est pas isolé, mais seulement plus caractéristique que les autres.”

Arabic in Nabatean script without any dramatic break; the most uncomplicated assumption for the explanation of this connection is to hypothesize that the Nabateans—here understood as the authors of Nabatean inscriptions—had always spoken Old Arabic (among other languages).

The latest Nabatean inscription known, again from Hegra, is dated to the year 251 of *Arabia Provincia* (355 or 356 CE).

- (1) דנה [נפשא ו] קברתא די [בנא]
- (2) עדנן בר חני בר שמואל ריש
- (3) חגרא על מונה אתתה ברת
- (4) ערמו בר עדנן בר שמואל
- (5) ריש תימא די מיתת בירה
- (6) אב שנת מאתין וחמשין
- (7) ואחדי ברת שנין תלתין
- (8) ותממי

The language is immaculate Aramaic,<sup>123</sup> although no contemporaneous Arab would have had many difficulties reading it:

*hādhā l-nafs wa-l-qabr alladhī banā ‘Adnān bin Hunnay bin Samaw’al ra’īs al-Ḥigr ‘alā Mūnah ‘unthihi bint ‘Amr bin ‘Adnān bin Samaw’al ra’īs Taymā’ alladhī mātat bi-shahr ‘Āb sanat mi’atain wa-ḥamsin wa-’iḥdā bint sinūn thalāthīn wa-thamānī.*<sup>124</sup>

Only in the few cases not printed in boldface, the Arab reader would have had to substitute lexemes from his/her own language, i.e. to “translate” from the Aramaic. For the rest, it would have been a simple task of re-vocalization and “dialectical” variation.<sup>125</sup>

<sup>123</sup> With the exception of the numerals for 1 (Arabic instead of Aramaic) and 8 (Jewish Aramaic or Arabic instead of Ḥijāzī Nabatean (*tmwnh* CIS II 214.4; 215.6).

<sup>124</sup> This Arabic makes no claim to perfection; nor would an Arab reader of the fourth century CE have had any idea of what ‘*Arabiyya*’ could mean.

<sup>125</sup> The possibility of reading Arabo-Aramaic texts from the third century onwards as Arabic casts some doubt on the assertion of Altheim and Stiehl, *Araber IV*, 2 that Hishām ibn Muḥammad al-Kalbī could not have read Aramaic documents in the church archives of al-Ḥīra. In addition, it is unlikely that the local clergy granted access to their antiquarian treasures without guidance and/or supervision. On the other hand, the assumption (*ibid.*, 3) that Hishām read tombstones of the type represented by the an-Nāmara inscriptions remains attractive.

Relative proficiency in Aramaic at a fairly late period can easily be explained in the case of this particular author: he was a Jew.<sup>126</sup> Aramaic, no longer in use for written business transactions among the Arabs themselves, remained present in pre-Islamic Arabia from the fourth through the sixth/seventh centuries through the Jewish and Christian communities which felt no urge to translate their scriptures into Arabic; a fact which one day early in the seventh century CE would instigate a failed merchant from Mecca to give his fellow Arabs a “liturgy” or “recitation” (in Arabic: *qurʾān*) in plain Arabic, obviously being of the opinion that the other monotheistic religions had failed, or neglected, to do so.

### 3.3. *A Habit of Epigraphy in which the Fifth Century CE did not Indulge*

There is a gap of nearly two hundred years between the first inscription in Early Standard Arabic (RCEA 1, 328 CE) and the next (RCEA 2, 512 CE), a period in which the Nabatean script evolved into Early Arabic writing.<sup>127</sup> This evolution is in itself a strong indication that these two hundred years cannot have been devoid of written Arabic, even if nothing of these writings has survived. They were, however, empty of Arabic epigraphy.

From time to time the assumption resurfaces that the Arabic script did not develop from Nabatean Aramaic but from Syriac. It can be traced back to early Muslim scholarship,<sup>128</sup> but it has no other argument in its favor than the relationship of the written word to the line: while Nabatean is sublinear (the letters are hanging from the line), Syriac and Arabic are supralinear (the letters are standing on the line). This feature can be explained by the easier assumption that Nabatean writing (the origin of all individual letters) was influenced by a Syriac adstrate in Arabian scribal practice during the fourth and fifth centuries CE.

The “epigraphical gap” in Arabia and Arabic for most of the fourth and fifth centuries CE can be interpreted as the Arabic aspect of “de-Hellenization” following the imperial crisis of the second half of the third century. Within the empire, Greek as its common literary language had to compete, from the fourth century onwards, with regional

<sup>126</sup> Altheim and Stiehl, *Araber* 5, 305–309, 500 Abb. 54. The restorations in the first line are mine.

<sup>127</sup> Gruendler, *Arabic Scripts*.

<sup>128</sup> Hoyland, “Language and Identity,” 196, with n. 50.

written languages: Syriac from Mount Taurus to the Sinai, and Coptic in Egypt. The linguistic secession from the “global” standard went hand in hand with a religious secession: Syrian and Egyptian monophysitism versus the imperial (Melkite) creed of Chalcedon. In Arabia and among the Arabs, the “Hellenistic” mode to address the public (the inscription, accessible to everybody who could read, or have somebody read to her or him, its language) was replaced by the “public forum” of the new, “classical” Arabic poetry which promulgated the fame and blame of individuals as well as tribes. Although no texts preserved by the tradition seem to antedate the sixth century,<sup>129</sup> it is attested by outside sources for the fifth centuries, celebrating persons (or their legends) from the fourth century.<sup>130</sup> The language, and, as we now know thanks to the Avdat inscription, also its meters, are those of Nabatean cultic poetry, but the content is heroic instead of religious. The view that the a-religious nature of this poetry attests to a “spiritual crisis” in fifth and sixth centuries Arabia<sup>131</sup> is probably mistaken. This poetry, intended to provide a pan-Arabic means of expression and communication, had better disregard religion, which was extremely fragmented on the peninsula: There were Jewish, Christian, and pagan tribes; Christianity, probably the dominant religion in the sixth century, existed in the form of various colorful sects and denominations, which sometimes fought each other with more

<sup>129</sup> Meyer, *Gehalt*, 2: “Kein Vers, der auf uns gekommen ist, ist älter als 500, und keine zusammenhängenden Verse sind früher als 515. In ihrer ganzen Breite aber beginnt die Poesie erst ab etwa 570 zu strömen, jedenfalls, soweit wir sie kennen”; Jones, *Early Arabic Poetry*, 4–6.

<sup>130</sup> Sozomenus (wrote between 439 and 450), *Historia ecclesiastica* 6.38 (Migne PG 67: 1408–1413); Mayerson, “Mauia”; id., *Monks*, 164–172, 129, 170. For fourth century references to cultic Arab poetry see above, n. 118.

<sup>131</sup> Thus Müller, *Ich bin Labid*. In addition, these texts are exclusively handed down by Muslim scholars who might, intentionally or not, have paid little care and attention to heathen traces in a literature that they regarded as authoritative in questions of Allah’s own language; cf. Jacob, *Beduinenleben*, XVIIIff. Jacob’s view finds some support by Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-aṣnām*: only a short period immediately prior to Islam is covered by the received poetry (7,12 Klinke-Rosenberger); only the gods Ya’uq, Nasr, and Ri’ām (of those known to al-Kalbī) do not figure in poetry, because their tribes converted to some kind of monotheism already in the sixth century (ibid., 7,2ff.); he says to have heard poems on Ya’uq and Nasr, but he does not bother to quote (and thus preserve) them. The Sabaic (?) epigraphical “Hymn to the Sun,” which adopts Arabic (meter and) rhyme (together with the definite article *han-*), is very religious; cf. ‘Abdallah, “Sonnengesang”; Robin, “Inscriptions,” 516–522.

fervor than non-Christians;<sup>132</sup> and finally, there were all kinds of syncretistic interactions between these major religious streams.<sup>133</sup>

The mode of transmission of pre-Islamic poetry was, at least in theory, oral. This may or may not have been a demonstration of “tribal” values as opposed to the ink-spilling and papers-shuffling customs of “the civilized” (with the leading citizens of Arabia’s caravan towns definitely on the side of the latter). That a core part of an ancient culture remained “oral” even after the introduction, adoption, and widespread use of writing is nothing new, or unusual. The recording of religious and literary texts in cuneiform sets in some 1000 years after the invention of the script. The Jews of Elephantine in Achaemenid Egypt kept business archives and copies of textbooks which were in their temple school,<sup>134</sup> but no religious texts at all (which gives rise to the suspicion that everything necessary for the operation of their cult was handed down orally among the priestly families, and probably in Hebrew, not Aramaic). That a Nabatean near Avdat quoted, in writing, one and a half verses of religious poetry was the exception that confirms the rule, and the absence of Nabatean religious and theological texts from the record is hardly due to accident and bad luck: such writings might never have existed.<sup>135</sup> Finally, there was a very practical reason why texts of so high a linguistic complexity as those of pre-Islamic poetry must have been transmitted, at least also, orally by “poetry-adepts” who learned the works of their masters by

<sup>132</sup> The Ghassanids were Monophysite, the Lakhmids of Ḥīra Dyophysite Christians, at least nominally. Reports of human sacrifices make the Lakhmids look rather pagan, but this might exactly be the intention of the sources which report theses “sacrifices” (not everybody who kills prisoners of war does it for religious reasons).

<sup>133</sup> Ps.-Antoninus Placentinus (second half of the sixth century) attests to a pagan Arab secondary cult at the site of the Christian Sinai (which has no pre-Christian religious connotation): *Mons Sina petrosus ... In quo per circuitum cellulae multae seruatorum dei et dicunt esse Choreb terram mundam* (< Ex. 3.5). *Et in ipso monte in parte montis habent idolum suum positum Saraceni marmoreum, candidum tam quam nix. In quo etiam permanet sacerdos ipsorum indutus dalmatica et pallium lineum* (Itinerarium §38; CSEL 39, 184; cf. also Donner, *Pilgerfahrt*, 301f.). The same phenomenon might be attested by Hishām Ibn Muḥammad al-Kalbī’s “Book of Idols,” when he describes the image of a Christian Soldier Saint (who were quite popular among pre-Islamic Arabs, taking the place of pre-Christian warrior-gods like Arsu/Ruḏā) under the name “Wadd of Duma,” and the “idols” imported by Ibn Luḥayy from al-Balqā’ can hardly have been something very different from Christian icons, or eulogiae; cf. Klinker-Rosenberger, *Götzenbuch*, 35, 6–9; 5, 14–6, 2.

<sup>134</sup> Notably, the story of Ahiqar (TADAE III C 1.1), and the foundation legend of the ruling dynasty: the Aramaic version of Darius’ Bisutun inscription (TADAE III C2.1); Porten and Yardeni, *Textbook III*, 23–56, 69–71.

<sup>135</sup> To the disappointment of Healey, *Religion*, 193.



heart: a script that did not yet indicate most of the vowels simply could not adequately transmit them.

The Safaites and South-Safaites, at the periphery of the Nabatean realm which concomitantly was the Arabian periphery of the Roman-Hellenistic empire, preserved their archaic Ancient Arabic, and wrote it, in order to mark and maintain their ethnic/social difference within their rather small world, which extended, at its largest, from Lebanon to Palmyra, and from Damascus to the north of Hegra. The Ancient Arabs of the first century BCE–third century CE lived in a monopolar world. The Parthians were a nuisance, but never really a match for the Empire (and a partly Hellenized and partly Aramaic culture as well). This was to change with the rise of the Sasanids, who gave up Greek as one of Persia's official languages in the course of the third century. The Arabs were now caught, for the next four hundred years, between the fighting opponents of a bipolar world. The more than hundred small tribes (or rather clans) of the Safaites now coalesced into large tribal federations like the Tanūkh, Lakhm, and Ghassān, which could hope to play some role on the field of international conflict that Arabia had become. With the re-emergence of the large tribes (as it had already existed from the Assyrian through the Persian periods) there also emerged a pan-Arabic consciousness, not only expressed by Imru'ulqais' claim, in 328 CE, of kingship over "all Arabs"—which might have been his wish and intention, not necessarily a political reality, at least not for very long—but also by the adoption, in the course of the fourth and fifth centuries CE, of early "Poetic Arabic" as an intertribal language of prestige of the Bedouin society (as opposed to the Early Standard Arabic lingua franca of the traders).

There are, then, a number of good reasons why Nabatean and Safaitic, died out in the course of the fourth century. The long tradition of Ancient and Old Arabic epigraphy fell victim to the same mechanisms of sociopolitical change. At the end, it was regarded as a foreign, "imperial" trait in Arabic culture. That does not mean that it commenced as such. In Ancient South Arabia, the rock inscription (and later the stela, like those set up during the fifth/fourth through third centuries BCE at Ma'in in order to document the legal marriage of Minaeans with foreign women at home,<sup>136</sup> derive from the same motive as Greek epigraphy in

<sup>136</sup> Cf. for the so-called *Hierodulenlisten*, which actually are lists of foreign wives, Knauf, *Ismael*, 157. The commencement of this type of document in the fifth century BCE seems rather unlikely, since the Minaean take-over of the Arabian incense trade network is presupposed, which hardly took place before 400 BCE (cf. above, n. 48). Mildenberg, *Vestigia Leonis*, 81 and n. 13, dates these texts predominantly to the fourth century, ending with Alexander's conquest in 332 BCE. But Gaza was quickly rebuilt, cf. Diodor 17, 49.1 (331/330 BCE); 19, 59.3 (315); so a third-century date for the "lists of hierodules" remains possible.

the polis, i.e. the “principle of public documentation”<sup>137</sup> of everything that is of common interest. This “epigraphic habit” started in South Arabia alongside or even before the parallel development in Greece (indicating shared sociopolitical structures; there was more tribalism in the polis than today’s educated city-dwellers might like to think). Lihyanites who documented their care for the oasis’ irrigation system<sup>138</sup>—and therefore their right to cultivate certain plots—on rockface during the Achaemenid period received this habit from South Arabia, not from the Greeks.

The semantic continuity from epigraphic Safaitic to early Arabic poetry,<sup>139</sup> in spite of the different choice of media, underlines the literary character and quality of the Safaitic inscriptions from hindsight, and evidences the cultural continuum that spans both Ancient Arabic, Old Arabic, and Early Poetic Arabic. It is not possible to see these unifying traits simply as determined by the shared desert environment and the Bedouin way of life, for the transformation of these facts of daily life into poetical content is a matter of cultural choice: the longing for the absent, the lament for the dead, the qualities of one’s camel(s), the hunt, and the fight.<sup>140</sup> One’s daily life is usually *not* of literary interest except if one develops a point of view from which it becomes an expression of identity. The Qasida is formally as strictly organized as a “literary” or “full” Safaitic inscription, which consists of (a) the introduction of the author, introduced by *l*-; (b) the *narratio*, introduced by *w*-; and (c) the *invocatio*, introduced by *f*-. The Qasida equally has three standard parts: (a) the departure from a point of desolation; (b) the ride through the desert and the community of animal and man; (c) the arrival of the author among its implicit audience, the community of the Arabs, and the ensuing praise of the host (*fakhr*) or self-praise of the hero/singer and/or his/her tribe (*mufākhara*).<sup>141</sup> The latter replaces, in this intentionally inter-

<sup>137</sup> Rhodokanakis, *Öffentlichkeit*. In the west, the honorific inscription, a characteristic cultural trait of the polis, also ended with the third century CE, cf. Millar, *Rome*, 69.

<sup>138</sup> Sima, *Die lihyanischen Inschriften*.

<sup>139</sup> Petráček, “Quellen und Anfänge,” 402f; for the expression of territoriality and ethnic pride by the Safaites, see above, § 2.2, for the same in Arabic poetry Jones, *Early Arabic Poetry*, 1.

<sup>140</sup> Hunting and, to a lesser degree, fighting are expressed rather in the rock art accompanying the inscriptions than by the Safaitic texts; cf. Ababneh, *Neue safaitische Inschriften*, 59f; 66–76; 82f, where the hunting and fighting scenes are broken down into their human and quadruped elements.

<sup>141</sup> Müller, *Ich bin Labid*, 21–24; Jones, *Early Arabic Poetry*, 7–9.

religious literature, the former invocation of the gods. Only the most benighted positivist could want to claim that Arabic was spoken and written in the fourth century and then again in the sixth century, but not in the fifth century, because all written attestations for it are lacking between 328 and 512 CE.<sup>142</sup>

Attestations to script and writing in the pre-Islamic poetry lead again to the sixth century. Leaving aside the references to writing on rocks, which probably refer to inscriptions left by the writers of Ancient Arabic, there are also attestations to writing on paper (or what served as such), the primary use of the ESA script as attested by its cursive, not lapidary, nature:

*li' Asmā'a rasmun ka-ṣ-ṣaḥīfati a'jamā*

There is a trace of Asma that had become dotted like a sheet of writing.<sup>143</sup>

It is remarkable that this sixth-century text already refers to writing with many diacritical points, which will not be widely used in inscriptions for centuries to come—if not to writing in Syriac (cf. *infra*, § 3.4). Cursive writing with diacritical points indicates that throughout the fourth through sixth centuries CE Arabian merchants continued to trade merchandise and to keep records of their business in the Early Standard Arabic which they had inherited from the Nabateans.<sup>144</sup>

A break in the epigraphic habit is by no means an Arabian phenomenon only. In Galilee, the production of Greek inscriptions decreased dramatically in the fourth century (following the imperial crisis), to resume momentum in the fifth century and to reach its absolute peak in the sixth century. Before the crisis, there was a slight admixture of

<sup>142</sup> Given that the whole corpus of ESA texts comprises, for the time being, seven to eight inscriptions, one might claim that the “fifth century gap” appears by chance. Even if one attributes one of the two undated inscriptions (‘Umm al-Jimāl and Wādī Ramm) to the fifth century, the resulting distributions between the fourth, fifth, and sixth century of 1/1/6 contrasts to the more equal distribution of 2/3/3 with a level of significance of 95% (the probability that the actual distribution is merely accidental is 3.88%).

<sup>143</sup> Labid (late sixth century) as quoted by Jones, “Word Made Visible.”

<sup>144</sup> It is unlikely that the reference is to a text in Syriac, in which diacritical points are regularly used only for two letters (and more excessive pointing is reserved to literary texts); it is also unnecessary to doubt the authenticity of the verse based on the script presupposed by it, for diacritics did exist in sixth-century Arabic texts, see below. One does not necessarily need many scribes to keep a script and a language alive (cf. Europe in the early Middle Ages!); at Mecca, it is said, lived seventeen people who could read and write in 622 CE; Jacob, *Beduinenleben*, 163.

Latin to Greek epigraphy; after the crisis, the place of Latin is now occupied by some epigraphic expression in the native Aramaic (cf. fig. 16).<sup>145</sup>

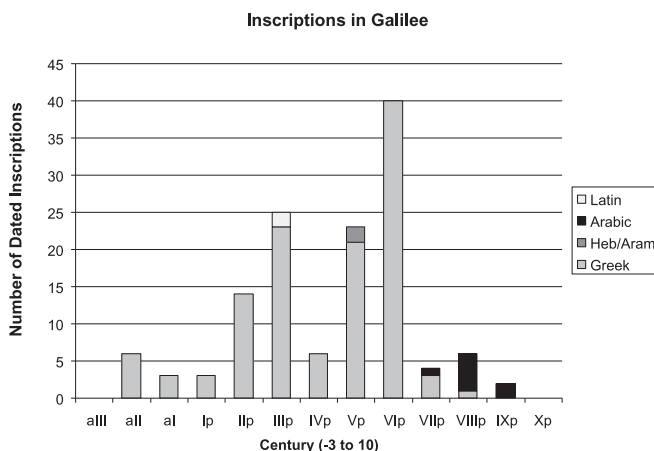


Fig. 16. Dated inscriptions from Galilee and the Golan, third century BCE to tenth century CE.

The time-lag of roughly a century between the epigraphic revival at the empire's periphery and the periphery's periphery (Arabia) is exactly what one would expect.

Much as the imperial crisis put an end to the epigraphy of the Greek *polis* as well as Nabatean and Safaitic epigraphy, so the Byzantine epigraphic boom spread, if not to Arabia, at least to the Arabs along the Syrian desert fringe. Five to six inscriptions in Early Standard Arabic are presently known from the sixth century. They were found at Zebed (RCEA 2; 512 CE; Greek-Syriac-Arabic trilingual), Ḥarrān (RCEA 3; 568; Greek-Arabic bilingual), Umm al-Jimāl (RCEA 4), Jabal Says,<sup>146</sup> the town of Nebo (Khirbat al-Mukhayyat), and Petra. The latter, not a monumental inscription on stone but just a name

<sup>145</sup> Cf. Knauf, "Speaking in Galilee." The distribution of dated inscription is taken as representative of the total.

<sup>146</sup> To those listed by Diem, "Arabic Orthography," add now Khirbat al-Mukhayyat (Hoyland, "Language and Identity," 189f.) and Petra: O. al-Ghul in: Fiema, *The Petra Church*, 151, n. 18. A growing number of colleagues (oral communications) doubts the latter's authenticity, arguing that the personal name Nā'if/Nāyef fits a twentieth century context better than the sixth century. Diacritical points are, however, occasionally found in seventh-century papyri, and, being imported into Arabic writing

incised on a wooden box, has diacritical points. All these localities are situated inside the Ghassanid realm. On the periphery of the late Roman empire, a new Arab multicultural and multilingual society was emerging. The Ghassanids communicated with the imperial administration in Greek; the liturgical language of their Monophysite church was Syriac; but for internal correspondence, and the indigenous version of building inscriptions, they adopted the Early Standard Arabic of the Ḥijāzī merchants. The language of early Classical Arab poetry, intellectually demanding as it then was and still is on the part of its audience, was quite ill-suited for administrative purposes.

### 3.4. *Diglossia or Triglossia in Sixth-century Arabia?*

There seems to be general agreement that there was as much diglossia in sixth-century CE Arabia as today, i.e. local dialects coexisted with an inter-tribal standard language, which is usually identified with Poetic Old Arabic for that period. Both the results of W. Diem<sup>147</sup> and of this paper so far pose the question of whether things could have been that simple; where, e. g., does Early Standard Arabic figure in this picture? The epigraphic evidence for the Ghassanid realm and its immediate western neighbors, like the diocese of Madaba (see *supra*, § 1.2) show some sort of Hellenistic and Aramaic revival for the sixth century: Greek was again the language of prestige, even among some Arabs;<sup>148</sup> Aramaic was again the lingua franca used by Arabs at least for their communication with the settled population along the desert fringe<sup>149</sup> and, if they were Christians, in church. How far “Ghassanid cultural imperialism” penetrated the rest of Northern Arabia is an open question; but the use of Poetic Arabic by at least

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from Syriac anyway, would be no surprise in an Arabic text of some hundred years earlier. If we only had more papyri from pre-Islamic Arabia...

<sup>147</sup> Diem, “Untersuchungen I”; id., “Untersuchungen II”; id., “Untersuchungen III”; id., “Untersuchungen IV.”

<sup>148</sup> Cf. Shahīd, *Byzantium*, 489–548, notably the “reception hall” from 578 CE at Hayyat in the Ḥawrān, and the reception hall (*praetorium*) of al-Mundhir at Rusafa (NIKA H TYXH AΛAMOYNΔAPOY). For Ghassanid presence in the Madaba region, cf. Piccirillo, “St. Sergius,” notably inscriptions 4 (ΥΠΕΡ ΩΤΗΡΙΑC ΤΟΥ ΛΑΜΠΡ’ ΘΑΛΛ[ABAC] ΛΑΥΔΑ[BIAIC] ΦΥΛΑΠΧΟC) and 5 (Ω ΕΡΕΘΑ ΥΙΟC ΑΛΑΡΕΘΟΥ Yā Ḥurētha bin al-Ḥārith).

<sup>149</sup> The first dated Arabic inscriptions since an-Nāmara 328 CE, from the year 512, is Greek-Aramaic-Arabic trilingual, and found in a geographical context of Arab settlement in Late Antiquity, resulting in a local preference for the use of Syriac rather than Greek, cf. Gaube, “Wüstenschlösser,” 189f.

some tribes and mostly outside the Ghassanid sphere of influence<sup>150</sup> as their language of prestige and/or intertribal communication now acquires a political impetus. The cultic origins of Poetic Old Arabic with its archaic and, in prose and everyday speech quite superfluous case-endings are, especially since the discovery of Avdat 1, no longer questionable. On the other hand, Luxenberg has reopened the question of how pagan (instead of non-standard Christian) pre-Islamic Arabic really was.<sup>151</sup> Tentatively, one might try to describe the language situation in sixth-century Arabia by the following chart (fig. 17):

	Ghassanid realm, Syrian side	Ghassanid realm, Arab side	Ḥīra	Christian and Jewish Arabs	“Pagan” Arabs
Language of prestige	Greek	Aramaic	Aramaic	Aramaic?	Poetic Arabic
Language of religion	Greek Aramaic	Aramaic	Aramaic	Aramaic	Poetic Arabic
Lingua franca	Aramaic	Aramaic / ESA	Aramaic / ESA	Aramaic / ESA	ESA
Local language	Dialects	Dialects	Dialects	Dialects	Dialects

Fig. 17. Languages in Arabia, sixth century CE.

Leaving Greek apart, the picture that emerges is one of triglossia, not diglossia, in which two standard languages played their roles: ESA and Aramaic. It is assumed here that also those tribes who converted to Judaism instead of Ghassanid Monophysite or Lakhmid Dyophysite Christianity exercised their religion mostly in Aramaic, not Hebrew.<sup>152</sup>

The spread of monotheism in Late Antiquity was basically the popularization of a previous elitist attitude—philosophy and the educated people had been more or less monotheistic from the fifth century BCE onwards. In its various Christian forms, monotheism served, however, also as an expression of political loyalty. Judaism or some form of “non-standard” Christianity then was the religion of choice

<sup>150</sup> Meyer, *Gehalt*, 2–4; Jones, *Early Arabic Poetry*, 10f.

<sup>151</sup> Luxenberg, *Syro-aramäische Lesart*; cf. also above, n. 131.

<sup>152</sup> Though there are some Hebrew inscriptions from the Arabian peninsula left, however, they were by Jews who migrated to Arabia, not by converts. Converts, like Dhū Nuwās, continued to write their inherited scripts and languages.

for those who did not want to take sides between Iran and Byzantium.<sup>153</sup> A basic acceptance of Christianity as a cultural given could well go with disgust for the main feuding Christian parties, much like Voltaire's *ingénu* who equally abhors Roman intolerance and Calvinist fanaticism, and might be tempted to turn away from both (what his author finally did not do).

### 3.5. *The Language of the Qur'an*

The linguistic stratification of Arabic, from the Old Arabic of the Nabateans through to the Early Standard Arabic of the fourth through sixth centuries, is characterized by triglossia rather than diglossia. Opposed to the local, tribal, or regional dialect were two supra-regional languages, not one: the Early Standard Arabic of the merchants, and the Early Classical Arabic of the poets and divines.

This trilingual situation—or quadrilingual, if Aramaic is included—requires a reassessment of the language of the Qur'an. The heated debate between Vollers, Nöldeke, Kahle, Fück, and Spitaler<sup>154</sup> as to whether the consonantal text of the Qur'an reflects a local Meccan dialect or seventh-century Standard Arabic leads to a dead end. The orthography of the Qur'an firmly places its language in the context of ESA which, however, was not yet an all-Arabian standard. The Prophet wanted to create an Arabic holy scripture, so he had to take recourse to the only written form of Arabic that existed in his time. At the same time, he produced a religious text, so it was necessary to recite the written in a manner as close to Poetic Old Arabic as possible, necessitating occasional claims that the Prophet was nevertheless no poet (*shā'ir*), i. e., inspired pagan. Kahle's "Ketiv-Qrē-theory" comes closest to what must have happened; the dimorphism, though, is inherent in the text, not produced by its tradition. When all Arabs became Muslims, Qur'anic Arabic replaced Aramaic as the "language of religion" generally and as the "language of prestige" among those

<sup>153</sup> Like the "Islam" of the Circassians, who left their native Caucasus for the Ottoman empire in the second half of the nineteenth century, and learned on arrival that they were supposed to neither eat pork nor drink wine, and the Judaism of the Falashas in Ethiopia (to a degree of 100% extracted from the Ethiopian Christian Bible), Arab conversion to Judaism in the sixth century might have been more of a political than religious act, and rather a form of sub- or para-Christianity than an expression of sincere love of the Torah.

<sup>154</sup> Vollers, *Volkssprache und Schriftsprache*; Nöldeke, "Sprache des Korans"; Kahle, *Cairo Geniza*, 142–149; Spitaler, review of Fück, *Arabiya*.



converts whose previous religion and/or political allegiance had placed Aramaic in such a role. The language situation in Arabia was now as shown by fig. 18:

	Clerics	Feudal lords and tribal aristocracy	Merchants and artisans
Language of prestige	Qur'an	Poetic OA	Qur'an / Poetic OA / ESA
Language of religion	Qur'an	Qur'an	Qur'an
Language of commerce / administration	ESA SA	ESA SA	ESA SA
Local language	Dialects	Dialects	Dialects

Fig. 18. Languages in Arabia, seventh century CE.

3.6. Early Standard Arabic and “Classical” Arabic

Early Standard Arabic became Standard Arabic not so much by the creation of the Qur'an than by its canonization, reception, and recitation. The final triumph of Standard Arabic, and the watershed between its pre-history and its history, was its introduction as administrative language of the empire by the Umayyads in 694–696 CE.

“Classical” Arabic, on the other hand, is an ideological construct like each and every other linguistic environment polluted by the concept of something “classical” (i.e., diachronically normative). This construct was created by the Arab philologists from the eighth century CE onwards when they started to study Poetic Old Arabic in order to distinguish “right” from “wrong” in the use of Arabic, and the interpretation of the Qur'an. The unity and purity of its language seemed to them, and not only to them, a guarantee of the purity and unity of the *umma*. That the standard of ‘*Arabiyya*’ did not lay in store for the Prophet ready to use (in heaven or on earth), but was a result of the Qur'an's creation and reception, was as imperceptible to them as it seems to be to a large number of western Arabists.<sup>155</sup>

<sup>155</sup> Especially those unaware of the 1200 years of documented Arab language history prior to 500 CE; cf., e.g., W. Fischer, *Grundriss* I, 38f., 87–89, and for the critical position already Jacob, *Beduinenleben*, xxx: “Auf den Schultern der alt-morgenländischen steht die neu-abendländische Wissenschaft. Sie hat von ihrer Vorgängerin ein reiches Material von Nachschlagebüchern ererbt, die ihr aber nur dann gute Dienste leisten können, wenn sie sich selbst so hoch über den Standpunkt des arabischen

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Mittelalters zu erheben vermag, wie die moderne Wissenschaft auch sonst über dem geistigen Schaffen jener Jahrhunderte steht. Leider ist das Gegenteil nur zu häufig der Fall.”

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# LITERACY IN PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE EPIGRAPHIC EVIDENCE\*

Peter Stein

## *Introduction*

When an extensive literary work, and especially a holy scripture like the Qur'an, is committed to writing, this appears to presuppose the existence of established writing practices and a minimum of literacy among the community addressed by that scripture. The holy scriptures of Judaism and Christianity, for example, emerged in the cultural centers of Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean, that is, in an area and at a time where the use of writing had been a familiar element of everyday life for centuries. By contrast, the region in which the Qur'an came into being—namely, western Arabia—does not seem to have been characterized by extensive literary production. But even though archeological evidence for this region, and especially for the sixth century, is sparse, there are indicators of a limited spread of literacy even in this area.

There can be no doubt that the Qur'an was put into writing under the influence of the Christian (i.e., Syriac, and probably also Ethiopian) and Jewish literary traditions. The Christians and Jews who were present in the urban centers of the Arabian Peninsula must have brought their holy scriptures with them into the region, and liturgical practices in these communities must have involved some use of written documents. A minimum of scribal production in Aramaic (or even Hebrew) among these communities can thus safely be assumed, even though this supposition still awaits archeological confirmation. Yet since literary production of this kind was imported from Syria-Palestine and did not have a properly Arabian origin, it will not be pursued any further within the scope of this contribution.<sup>1</sup> Rather, the present

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\* This paper is an abbreviated version of a more extensive paper published in German (Stein, "Stein vs. Holz").—I am very indebted to Michael C. A. Macdonald (Oxford) for having read a draft of the manuscript.

<sup>1</sup> These communities were dependent on the literary culture of the Hellenistic world, which is largely different from the genuinely Arabian one, and in particular

article will focus on the question of a genuinely Arabian culture of writing, that is, one developed within the Arabian Peninsula itself and existing prior to, or contemporary with, those writing traditions imported from outside. It should be noted that “Arabian” in this context is used as a purely geographical term rather than an ethnic or linguistic one, comprising all the cultures of the Peninsula (except for the regions in the far north and northwest, which were subject to strong Hellenistic influences).<sup>2</sup> Bearing in mind the explicit self-classification of the Qur’an as “Arabic,” I will therefore ask to what extent the inhabitants of pre-Islamic Arabia were able to express and receive their mother tongues by means of script.

For this purpose, the available material sources documenting the use of writing will be surveyed and classified with respect to their distribution and their importance within public and private social life. Subsequently, the question of literacy in the particular societies will be discussed. This procedure fits nicely under three questions: 1. Which materials were written upon? 2. What was written? 3. Who did the writing? Due to the fact that the archeological exploration of the Arabian Peninsula is as yet rather scanty, the following analysis will naturally be restricted to conclusions that will have to be critically reviewed once new sources become available. Nevertheless, an exhaustive examination of the epigraphic material presently known promises to yield important insights for the study of the genesis of the Qur’an.<sup>3</sup>

The following statements will concentrate exclusively on firsthand epigraphic material, while later Islamic accounts of the topic will be referred to only if they overlap with the epigraphic evidence (for a discussion of the Islamic sources in connection with the Qur’an, see Gregor Schoeler’s contribution to this volume). Due to my concentra-

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from the South Arabian one (as will be demonstrated further below). Yet even for the Mediterranean world, the degrees of literacy maintained by different scholars differ widely (cf., e.g., Blanck, *Buch*, 29, against Harris, *Literacy*, 140–141, 306–322).

<sup>2</sup> As the examples of the Nabateans and the Amīr (in Qaryat al-Fāw, Najrān and the Yemenite Jawf) show, members of ethnically “Arab” tribes could assimilate to a neighboring sedentary culture and take over its way of life, including the use of writing. While the Nabatean script was borrowed from older non-Arabic (i.e., Aramaic) traditions, the script used by the Amīr was a genuinely South Arabian development.

<sup>3</sup> The only recent attempt at providing an overview synthesizing both pre-Islamic epigraphy and traditional “Arabic studies” (*études arabes*) was undertaken by Robin, “Inscriptions.” However, his focus is mainly on linguistics and research history, while the material aspects of writing are only marginally touched upon.

tion on epigraphic sources, South Arabia, which is comparatively well documented, will receive far more attention than other parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Yet this imbalance may not be purely accidental, since South Arabia gave birth to a highly developed culture unparalleled in the rest of the peninsula already in pre-Islamic times. From the situation prevailing in South Arabia, extrapolations concerning other, and less extensively documented, regions can then be made, provided of course that a comparable level of social and economic organization can be assumed. Chronologically, the following inquiry will cover the period stretching from the eighth century BCE until the mid-sixth century CE.

### *Which Materials were Written Upon?*

First of all, let us turn to the material basis of writing in pre-Islamic Arabia, i.e., the available writing materials. The considerable progress made in the field of South Arabian epigraphy during the last decades makes it possible to sketch a fairly detailed picture of the materials used for writing down various kinds of texts. The order in which these materials will now be treated is based on their respective importance, as reflected in the number of preserved inscriptions. Let it be noted right away that the following account, based as it is on epigraphic evidence, coincides only partially with the information given by later, and mostly Islamic, sources.<sup>4</sup> In fact, this should come as no surprise, since the fact that a given writing material is mentioned in a later source does not necessarily mean that it had actually been in widespread use.

The writing material most extensively used in the Arabian Peninsula, at least according to the present state of research, were rocks and stones.<sup>5</sup> The graffiti scattered over the entire peninsula count several ten thousands.<sup>6</sup> It must be admitted that due to their firmness and

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<sup>4</sup> For the latter, cf. the overview by Grohmann, *Paläographie*, and Maraqtan, "Writing Materials."

<sup>5</sup> However, it is significant in this context that ca. 7,000 of the presently known Ancient South Arabian minuscule inscriptions on wood (see below) stem from only one place in Yemen. If we extrapolate on this basis with respect to all important cities of South Arabia alone, their number would by far exceed that of the monumental inscriptions.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. n. 44. By contrast, inscriptions carved on hewn stones or other artificial objects number only a few thousands.

immobility, more inscriptions on stone and rock may have survived than those executed in other materials, which renders any immediate quantitative comparison impossible. On the other hand, as will be shown further below (cf. n. 45 below), the background of those numerous and widely scattered rock graffiti is probably different from that of all other kinds of inscription. That is, rock as a writing material does not enter into competition with other materials, because it is restricted to a very specific kind of literacy, namely, writings by shepherds passing by (and also by campaigning generals). Even though rock, because of its nearly unlimited size, can be considered the most representative writing surface, it cannot be moved and is thus not everywhere available. Inscriptions of public relevance, like royal decrees, are thus only rarely executed in rock but rather on hewn blocks of stone, which can be erected wherever needed, for example, in the center of a town. Hence, the distribution of stone and rock as writing materials mainly depends on the distribution of representative rock surfaces in the immediate surroundings of a sanctuary or settlement: while in the rocky region of the Radmanite area, for example, even building or votive texts are written on rock (e.g., in Qāniya and the Jabal al-Mi'sāl), in oasis settlements like Mārib or the Jawf settlements, we find merely inscriptions on stone blocks. With respect to ancient South Arabia, then, stone and rock occupy an analogous representative status, yet are exchangeable only to a limited degree.

Outside South Arabia, inscriptions on rock or (more rarely) hewn stone are distributed more unevenly.<sup>7</sup> While the short inscriptions traditionally called Safaitic and Thamudic are spread over almost the entire north and west of the peninsula, more elaborated inscriptions concentrate on merely two centers of settlement along the international trade routes: the numerous Dedanic (or Lihyanic) and Minaic inscriptions from the oasis of al-'Ulā in the north-west, and the homogeneous group of the Hasaitic tomb inscriptions from the north-eastern coast. Since the Aramaic and Nabatean inscriptions from Taymā' and Madā'in Šāliḥ, respectively, must be considered part of the Aramaic cultural area, they are not dealt with in this paper. In

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<sup>7</sup> On the following, cf. Macdonald, "Reflections," with some new suggestions concerning the terminological definition of single languages and dialects. For the most recent editions of some of these corpora, see Sima, *Lihyanischen Inschriften*, and Sima, "Hasaitischen Inschriften"; for pre-Nabatean Aramaic texts, see Schwiderski (ed.), *Inschriften*.

addition, there are a small number of isolated inscriptions in Old Arabic from different places of the peninsula.<sup>8</sup>

The second most important writing material is wood (cf., however, n. 5). Thousands of inscribed palm-leaf stalks and other wooden sticks from South Arabia have come to light during the last decades.<sup>9</sup> These sticks, which on average are 10 to 15 cm long and only occasionally measure up to half a meter, were scratched with a pointed style. During the course of centuries, this practice supported the development of a specialized minuscule script used almost exclusively for inscribing sticks, whereas contemporary inscriptions on stone or metal were executed in a different monumental script which had evolved separately. In South Arabia, such wooden sticks clearly constituted the most practical writing material, since they could be used for transferring as well as storing information, while the requisite raw material is renewable, cheap, and readily available, provided there exists a minimum of agricultural activity. Against this background, other wooden surfaces like tablets, which require more elaborate processing, play only a marginal role.<sup>10</sup> Sticks made from palm-leaf stalks can be identified with what the Arabic-Islamic tradition refers to as *ʿaṣīb* (plural *ʿuṣub*),<sup>11</sup> on which parts of the Qurʾan were supposedly recorded. Even though Arabic literature mentions other kinds of wood, these have not yet been botanically identified with specific kinds of sticks.

The third rank in the list of writing materials is occupied by pieces of terracotta and pottery, which generally contain short inscriptions, often no more than a single word. In this context, however, a somewhat narrow definition of the term "writing material" must be adopted: objects of daily use like jars which are marked with names, indications of their content and the like do not count as writing media, since they were not produced or prepared primarily in order to be written upon. Nevertheless, even though the majority of inscribed containers do not therefore enter into the present discussion, there still remains

<sup>8</sup> The Old Arabic texts which have so far been discovered are listed in Macdonald, "Reflections," 61; cf. also Robin, "Inscriptions," 545–550, and Macdonald, "Old Arabic."

<sup>9</sup> The most comprehensive publication on the subject is Ryckmans et al., *Textes du Yémen*. A supplementary bibliography is given in Stein, "Minuscule Inscriptions," 183, with n. 9.

<sup>10</sup> There is only a handful of inscribed boards and tablets, mostly in the shape of "eye stela," which resemble monumental inscriptions on stone.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the references given by Maraqtan, "Writing Materials," 292–293.

a considerable amount of ostraca used as writing surfaces. In contrast with the widespread use of ostraca in the Mediterranean, however, their use in South Arabia seems to have been limited to one specific field, namely, the identification of persons buried in large tomb houses like the Awām cemetery in Mārib.<sup>12</sup> More elaborate texts on terracotta objects are almost entirely absent.<sup>13</sup>

The next material in terms of archeological attestation is metal, which is almost exclusively bronze. In some sanctuaries (e.g., the temple of Almaqah in the city of 'Amrān), inscriptions executed in bronze tablets are found instead of the stone inscriptions which were common elsewhere. Other metals like silver and gold, by contrast, play almost no role.<sup>14</sup> Given the high costs of metal objects as compared with other materials, this perhaps comes as no surprise. Besides these sanctuary inscriptions, the vast majority of inscribed objects of metal do not qualify as writing media in the sense defined above.

Other materials which could be used for writing—namely, papyrus, leather, and parchment, all of which were widespread throughout the Mediterranean, and also linen, cotton, silk, and animal bone—have not been documented archeologically, apart from very few exceptions.<sup>15</sup> That these materials were at least in limited use seems probable given the later Arabic-Islamic sources.<sup>16</sup> According to them, parts of the Qur'an were first written down on a variety of disparate materials, among them leather (*adīm*), parchment (*raqq*), papyrus (*qirtās*), as well as the shoulder bones and ribs of camels (*aktāf* and *adlā'*). In addition, mention is made of splinters of limestone, called *likhāf*, which may parallel the ostraca found in other regions of Arabia. Together with the above-mentioned palm-leaf stalks (*'uṣub*) and bones, these splinters can be characterized as the most easily acces-

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the overview by Gerlach, "Friedhof," 57. Obviously, to every corpse an ostrakon bearing his name was allotted.

<sup>13</sup> Two exceptions to this, which consist in tomb inscriptions from the Gulf region (ash-Shāriqa), are presented by Robin, "Documents," 80–81. Some few votive inscriptions on pottery vessels belong to the category of objects of daily use not specifically produced for writing. They are similar in kind to the more numerous votive texts on metal vessels.

<sup>14</sup> There is merely half a dozen amulets made of gold, silver and bronze (cf. recently Nebes, "Goldanhänger").

<sup>15</sup> Some camel bones painted with Ancient South Arabian characters have been found at Qaryat al-Fāw, cf. Ansary, *Qaryat al-Fau*, 99, figs. 3–4.

<sup>16</sup> See Grohmann, *Paläographie*, 66–117; Maraqtan, "Writing Materials," 288–300 and 305–310; with respect to the Qur'an, see *GdQ*, vol. 2, 13, and Schoeler, "Schreiben," 21–22 and 24.

sible among the genuinely “Arabic” writing materials. By contrast, leather and parchment require an extended production process, while papyrus had to be imported entirely. In all likelihood, materials such as these were brought to the area only in the course of the establishment of Jewish and Christian communities.

Finally, the exact meaning of the terms “tablets” (*alwāḥ*) and “leaves” (*ṣuḥuf*), which are also referred to in the context of the writing down of the Qurʾān, is difficult to determine. As we have seen (cf. n. 10 above), wooden tablets were not used as writing materials for daily use. It is also questionable whether the natural environment of the Arabian Peninsula would have made an extended production of wooden objects larger than simple sticks possible. Since all the other materials enumerated in connection with the Qurʾān were either imported, produced specifically in order to be inscribed, or simply picked up from the ground, the *alwāḥ* were probably wooden tablets prepared for writing purposes which, like papyrus and parchment, originated from the Mediterranean. An identification of the *alwāḥ* with the bronze tablets known from South Arabia seems far less plausible: this hard and expensive material is simply not suited to being inscribed spontaneously with matters of daily relevance.<sup>17</sup>

The term *ṣaḥīfa* (plural *ṣuḥuf*), the basic Arabic meaning of which is “smooth surface suitable for writing upon” and which is commonly translated as “leaf, page (of a book),” has a graphical, and probably also morphological, equivalent in Ancient South Arabian *ṣḥft*.<sup>18</sup> Since the root *ṢḤF* occurs in Ancient South Arabian much earlier than a possible Ethiopian influence in the region can be assumed,<sup>19</sup> a borrowing of *ṣḥft* from Ethiopic can be ruled out, which possibly holds true for the Arabic *ṣaḥīfa* as well.<sup>20</sup> Ancient South Arabian *ṣḥft* means primarily “written account, document,”<sup>21</sup> without being restricted to

<sup>17</sup> Though it may be possible that the heavenly tablet (*lawḥ*) mentioned in the Qurʾān (Q 85:22) was thought of in terms of these representative metal tablets hung in South Arabian temples, which may have been known also to visitors from other regions of the peninsula.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. al-Selwi, *Jemenitische Wörter*, 128.

<sup>19</sup> This is demonstrated, for instance, by the fragmentary boustrophedon inscription YM 546/2 (*dt ṣḥft[n]*, “this (present) document”) from the Yemenite Jawf, which belongs to the oldest known monumental inscriptions in South Arabia (Wissmann, *Geschichte*, 69f.).

<sup>20</sup> In contrast to this, the Arabic term *muṣḥaf* (“book”) is derived from Ethiopic *maṣḥaf* (“written document, book”) (cf. Leslau, *Dictionary*, 552; Burton, “Muṣḥaf”).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Beeston et al., *Sabaic Dictionary*, 142; Ricks, *Lexicon*, 135.



a certain type of writing material. This is evident especially from inscriptions in which *dt šhftn*, “this document,” explicitly denotes the respective text, carved in stone or rock.<sup>22</sup> Yet the term cannot simply be synonymous with *s<sub>1</sub>tr*, “written account,”<sup>23</sup> as is suggested by constructions like *’s<sub>1</sub>tr dt šhftn*, “the written (lines) of this document” (J 2361/14) or *hg dt šhftn w-’s<sub>1</sub>tr-s<sub>1</sub>*, “according to this document and its written (lines)” (R 3688/10; both Qatabanic), and by the genre of the respective documents, which are of a legal character. Thus, the semantic horizon of *šhft* is best located in the vicinity of “written document of legal relevance,” and the respective verb *šhf* hence denotes the writing of such a document. This fits well with the information that the *šuhuf* of pre-Islamic and early Islamic times, albeit not sealed, were of a legal character and could be hung in representative public places.<sup>24</sup> The specific meaning of the Classical Arabic term should therefore be considered a later derivation.<sup>25</sup>

With regard to the writing techniques employed, the writing was generally carved on the surface of the respective medium, i.e., it was chiseled in rock and stone, or scratched in wood or terracotta. The only exceptions are the above-mentioned bronze inscriptions, which, as a rule, were cast in models made by lost-wax technique, thus producing an inscription in relief. As already mentioned, two different types of script were in use in ancient South Arabia: a monumental script (in Arabic, *musnad*),<sup>26</sup> which in principle can be used for all writing materials, and a minuscule script (*zabūr*),<sup>27</sup> limited to writing on wooden sticks and palm-leaf stalks.<sup>28</sup> The former is characterized

<sup>22</sup> E.g., M 316/1 and YM 546/2 (fragments of stone blocks), J 2361/14 and R 3688/10 (rock surface).

<sup>23</sup> Cf., for example, the rock inscriptions J 539/1, Naqīl-Kuḥl 1/3=Gr 157/3, Ry 506/2, and the minuscule inscription on a palm-leaf stalk YM 11749/1 (all Sabaic), in which *dn s<sub>1</sub>trn* (“this document”) refers to the respective text; examples from the Qatabanian area are J 2361/7, R 3688/11.14, and R 3689/8. – By the way, also the Ancient South Arabian verb *s<sub>1</sub>tr* (“write”) was eventually transferred to Arabic as a loan word (*saṭara*, vgl. al-Selwi, *Jemenitische Wörter*, 109–110.).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Ghédira, “Šaḥīfa.”

<sup>25</sup> Thus already GdQ, vol. 2, 24, n. 4, and recently Maraqtēn, “Writing Materials,” 309.

<sup>26</sup> For terminology, cf. al-Selwi, *Jemenitische Wörter*, 114; Beeston, “Musnad,” 704–705.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Müller, “Zabūr”; Maraqtēn, “Writing Materials,” 301–306. The Arabic term is, like the root ZBR in general, of South Arabian origin (cf. already al-Selwi, *Jemenitische Wörter*, 103).

<sup>28</sup> The few examples of minuscule characters on stone or bronze objects are hardly of any importance. The relevant evidence is given in Ryckmans, “Écriture minuscule,”

by a high degree of symmetry, based on simple geometrical forms, while the latter has during the course of centuries developed from its original monumental style to a completely independent cursive script (cf. fig. 1).<sup>29</sup>

Writing with ink has not yet been attested archeologically, and the use of paint, too, has been documented in only a few instances.<sup>30</sup> Both techniques thus do not even come close to rivaling the ubiquity of engraved writing. According to the Arabic-Islamic sources, however, paint- and ink-based writing was practiced in western Arabia in the sixth century CE. These techniques are of course required for materials such as leather, parchment, and papyrus, which were reportedly used for writing down the Qur'an. In any case, the early Islamic tradition takes the use of the reed pen (*qalam*) dipped in ink for granted.<sup>31</sup> It is perhaps not surprising that for the Qur'an, a writing technique modeled on the holy scriptures of Christians and Jews was used; it does not necessarily mean that other techniques, like the scratching of wooden sticks, were unknown in those areas. As will be shown further below, however, there are reasons to assume that the inhabitants of western Arabia did not develop a writing culture of their own but rather, if they did write at all, should have adopted the established systems of their neighbors.

### *What was Written? The Content of the Epigraphic Sources*

After having examined the materials that were written on, I will now turn to the content of the surviving firsthand documents. In order to be able to determine whether there existed "literary" writings in the narrow sense of the term, I will distinguish between writing linked

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188ff.; cf. also Ryckmans, "Pétiolles," 257, with nn. 8 and 9, and Ryckmans, "Origin and Evolution," 235, n. 14.

<sup>29</sup> The palaeographical sequence of the minuscule script has been established by Ryckmans (cf. most recently "Origin and Evolution").

<sup>30</sup> Some examples of painted rock inscriptions are shown by Jamme, *Miscellanées*, 82–83 (J 2477–2481, personal names), Pirenne, "Les témoins écrits," 23ff., with pl. 13, 15–21, and al-Shaʿrī, "Epigraphic Discoveries," 179, with pl. Ib–IIa and IVb. Inscriptions on building walls have been uncovered in Qaryat al-Fāw (mostly proper names in combination with wall paintings on plaster, cf. Ansary, *Qaryat al-Faw*, 130–133, and 136–137.). For samples of painted pottery, see the specimina published by Sedov, "Denkmäler," 94–95, fig. 38d and 39d), and some of the ostraca mentioned in n. 12 above.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Grohmann, *Paläographie*, 117–123.

to the needs of ordinary life, on the one hand, and writing that does not arise from everyday concerns, on the other. In this connection, the question of which kind of material was used for which genre of texts is of some importance, since there are clear correlations between certain sorts of texts and certain media. From this, one can draw a number of conclusions concerning the possibility that there may have existed hitherto unknown literary genres.

*Documents Connected with Everyday Life*

The by far most extensive genre of everyday writings consists in documents concerning legal and economic matters. Above all there are numerous orders, cover letters, and delivery invoices, which make up the bulk of correspondence by letter, and which are recorded on wooden sticks and palm-leaf stalks. Letters containing exclusively private information, by contrast, are very rare and for the most part also concern matters of everyday relevance, for example, health problems of relatives. Confidential or even intimate correspondence has not yet been attested, something which is perhaps hardly surprising given the very open and public nature of the ancient South Arabian postal system (see n. 54 below).

Deeds of legal and economic affairs were also written mainly on wooden sticks; if they were of public relevance, they were additionally carved on a representative block of stone. While these latter served the aim of publication, the handy wooden sticks themselves, which bore the signatures of the parties involved or of witnesses, were kept in an archive. If any doubt was cast on the stone version of the document, its wooden original could be consulted for confirmation.<sup>32</sup>

Lists of personal or family names recorded on wooden sticks probably also fulfilled an economic function, since they frequently include numerals and units of measurement. Finally, isolated personal names on funerary monuments, building walls, or ostraca, must be assigned to a similar context, provided that they serve to identify the legal affiliation of the inscribed object.

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. the so-called *Öffentlichkeitsklausel* in Sabaic: *ʿhn-n ʿkr l-yyfn*, “whenever there is an objection, it (sc. the original document) ought to be produced.” See Stein, “Inscribed Wooden Sticks,” 269–272.

A group of legal texts hitherto exclusively found on stone or rock<sup>33</sup> consists in decrees and prohibitions, issued mainly by the ruler, by a deity, or by some other high-ranking official of the community. Since these documents were relevant for a wider section of the public, they were generally set up at a prominent place immediately near the object they dealt with (e.g., a sanctuary or a piece of property).

Also inscribed in stone are the numerous building inscriptions that document the construction not only of dwelling-houses and temples, but also of fortifications, tombs, and agricultural constructions like irrigation devices, cisterns, and wells. On the one hand, these texts exhibit a profoundly religious component, since all building activities are placed under the protection of the gods. On the other hand, they are also of legal relevance, since they were prominently placed on the building's façade and thus document the builder's claim of ownership.

A special subgenre of legal texts, which is unique not only in terms of its content but also its writing medium, is constituted by confessional, or expiatory, inscriptions, which were normally cast in bronze tablets and were probably hung in temples. These texts contain public confessions of cultic offenses committed by certain individuals or groups, and also record the penances imposed on them.<sup>34</sup>

The remaining inscriptions of a religious character, above all the numerous votive inscriptions carved on stone, are to be counted as everyday documents as well. Even though commissioning a stonemason to execute such an inscription must have constituted an exceptional, if not unique, event in the life of the person ordering it, within a society characterized by a predominance of ritual this practice reflects essential needs of everyday life, such as the birth of a child, recovery from a disease, or safe and successful return from a military campaign. In fact, the production of votive inscriptions appears to have been almost "industrialized," as can be inferred not only from the large amount of such texts but also from the use of stereotyped formulas, which are composed of exchangeable elements occurring

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<sup>33</sup> There are, however, some indirect indicators of the existence of such documents in the form of wooden sticks as well (cf. R 3566/21, Qatabanic: *w-l yfth dn fthn w-mhrtn b-'dm 'w 'bnm kn-m byhrg mlkn*, "and this law and decree is to be written down on wood or stone according to the command of the king"). Perhaps such wooden versions of royal decrees were kept in archives in the royal palaces that have not been discovered yet.

<sup>34</sup> For the background of this kind of texts, see Sima, "Parallelen."

in more or less all of these inscriptions.<sup>35</sup> In view of such formulaic constraints, there is thus no room to speak of a “literary” composition of these texts. A votive inscription is to be considered an accessory to the votive object itself, such as a bronze statuette.<sup>36</sup> The value of the offering made is determined not by the literary value of the text, but by the material value of the votive object itself.

In addition there are some—as yet still isolated—instances of religious texts that can be considered “literary” in a more strict sense of the word, such as oracles, omens, and proverbs. These do not, however, appear as representative monumental inscriptions, but in a rather modest form on the wooden sticks that were used for ordinary writing purposes. The content of these texts makes it likely that they were not recorded in order to preserve the society’s religious or cultural memory for future generations, but rather served practical functions within certain cultic ceremonies (e.g., oracular requests and replies, such as A 40-3 and Mon.script.sab. 85).<sup>37</sup>

As I have already pointed out, all of the above-mentioned texts are attested archeologically almost exclusively in South Arabia. Nevertheless, some of them also appear in the Arabic-Islamic literature on pre-Islamic and early Islamic history. According to these accounts, at least in the urban centers of the Ḥijāz legal documents and contracts, decrees regulating social life, and even letters were recorded in writing as early as the sixth century CE.<sup>38</sup> Yet the marked difference of the writing culture of western Arabia from that of South Arabia is evident if one considers the almost complete lack of monumental inscriptions on rock or stone from the centuries immediately preceding Islam.<sup>39</sup>

An important, yet not easily answerable question that arises in this context is in which script business correspondence in pre-Islamic

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Stein, “Schreibfehler,” 453–460.—Nevertheless, many texts do include passages that contain background information other than these stereotyped formulas. These do not, however, exert any influence on the content and syntax of these votive formulas and are therefore of no relevance for a general evaluation of the genre.

<sup>36</sup> After the Early Sabaic period, in particular from the first century CE onwards, these votive inscriptions were usually recorded on a stone block serving as the statuette’s pedestal. In other cases (such as metal vessels), the inscription is carved on the object itself. Even when the writing medium and the votive object are identical, as it is the case for votive inscriptions on bronze tablets, the actual value of the gift was determined by the material of the writing medium rather than by the text itself.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Stein, “Minuscule Inscriptions,” 187.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Schoeler, “Schreiben,” 1–6.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Robin, “Inscriptions,” 557–558.

Hijāz, if assumed to have existed at all, might have been written. If one goes by the few Old Arabic monumental inscriptions, the Arabic script came into use only about 500 CE, whereas before this people resorted to neighboring scripts like the Nabatean one in Syria-Palestine, and the Ancient South Arabian one in Qaryat al-Fāw.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, if there was any writing activity in western Arabia before the sixth century CE, it was probably followed either Nabatean or South Arabian writing practices. The former alternative is supported by the fact that the Arabic script is generally believed to derive from the Nabatean one, while the second hypothesis derives its plausibility from the coincidence of some specifics of the particular writing materials (above all the *‘uṣub*).

### *Inscriptions without Direct Connections to Everyday Life*

All the text genres mentioned above have emerged from the needs of everyday communication. We will now turn to texts that did not arise from the economic or social requirements of ordinary life, but rather were composed without any specific communicative intention. First of all, there are numerous rock graffiti left by passing nomads all over the Arabian Peninsula. Their coarse style suffices to show that these texts are far from any kind of standardization, and thus can be considered original creations of their authors. But since these inscriptions hardly ever contain anything beyond their author's name and ancestors, they are of rather limited literary expressiveness.

Far more expressive are commemorative inscriptions, usually executed on rock surfaces as well, which were commissioned by persons of high social rank (and thus able to employ a professional scribe<sup>41</sup>) on the occasion of some outstanding event. Most of these texts contain accounts of military campaigns, but also commemorate construction works and political activities, and sometimes even recount an entire curriculum vitae (e.g., ‘Abadān 1). In contrast with the stereotyped texts of ordinary building or votive inscriptions, which are characterized by their use of standardized patterns, commemorative texts are freely composed due to the singular nature of the particular events

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 545–550, and Macdonald, “Reflections,” 36–37 (cf. also the compilation of all the textual evidence *ibid.*, 61).

<sup>41</sup> These scribes sometimes recorded their names next to the inscription proper, such as in ‘Abadān 2: *w-ktb ḡn m<sup>s</sup>ḡndn ‘lz’d<sup>3</sup> grbyn bn yḡḡb*, “And this inscription (sc. the huge commemorative text ‘Abadān 1 immediately above) has written Ilza’ad the stonemason, the son of Yaḡḡib.”

and, hence, the lack of models that could have been imitated. Inscriptions of this kind, even though they belong to the most extensive epigraphic texts, are extremely rare. Stylistic elements of these texts, however, also occur in the historical passages of votive inscriptions.

There is one unique composition which stands out against all the above-mentioned kinds of texts and deserves to be classified as "literature" in the strict sense of the word. This is the so-called Hymn of Qāniya, a poem of twenty-seven lines rhyming on *-ḥk*, which is addressed to the goddess Shams and dates from the end of the first century CE.<sup>42</sup> This text is also carved on a rock surface. It shows that the Ancient South Arabian script was capable of rendering not only prose but also rhymed poetry. The existence of a literary tradition, thus, is not so much a question of script but rather a question of writing materials: all of the extensive compositions just dealt with have been recorded on stone blocks or rock surfaces, which provide almost unlimited writing space, while the only format suitable for the transport and storage of literature were wooden sticks with a markedly limited surface. In principle it would of course have been possible to record an extensive literary composition on a series of sticks tied together, yet so far no evidence for this has been discovered.

There are no indicators of the existence of a literature of an epic, mythological, or historical kind in pre-Islamic Arabia. Of course it cannot be conclusively ruled out that these kinds of texts might have been recorded on media not yet discovered, such as leather or palm leaves. However, the evidence presented above suggests that if such a literature existed, one might expect it to have been recorded at least occasionally on rock and stone surfaces, too, or to have been cited or alluded to in other inscriptions. The fact that this is not the case warrants the assumption that literature of this kind did not exist in written form, be it in South Arabia or elsewhere on the peninsula. In fact, this fits quite well with what the Islamic sources have to say about early Islamic teaching practices, which—just like the transmis-

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Robin, "Monuments," 122–125; Beeston, "Antecedents," 236ff.; Robin, "Inscriptions," 516–521.—In the meantime, two other poems in Sabaic language and script have been identified: the rock inscription VL 24 = J 2353 from Wadi Shirjān, which is called "chant" (*s<sub>3</sub>mdt*, cf. Robin, "Inscriptions," 523, with n. 47) and is composed of verses rhyming on *-r* (a fact that has recently been discovered by Anne Multhoff), and a poem addressed to the God Almaqah, forming part of the dedicatory inscription ZI 11.



sion of poetry—appear to have been based mainly on oral tradition.<sup>43</sup>

*Who Did the Writing? The Question of Literacy in Pre-Islamic Arabia*

After having surveyed the material evidence remaining of pre-Islamic Arabian writing, I will now turn to the question of who actually wrote these documents. For even though the material presented above suggests a fairly widespread use of writing at least in some parts of the peninsula, this does not imply that a large number of people were able to read and write. Statistical evidence on the rate of literacy in pre-Islamic Arabia is of course unavailable, yet there are a number of hints which might help us to approach the issue.

Of course, reliable information on the spread of reading and writing among the inhabitants of pre-Islamic Arabia is to be expected above all from authentic firsthand sources. At first glance, the Arabian Peninsula virtually appears like a stronghold of literacy: Thousands<sup>44</sup> of rock graffiti, scattered over large areas of the peninsula and written in numerous languages and dialects, testify to a centuries-old use of writing even outside the elite of rulers and priests.<sup>45</sup> However, in a just published study entitled “Literacy in an oral environment,” Michael C. A. Macdonald convincingly demonstrates that the widespread use of a certain script by a group of people as a pastime, i.e., without any economic or communicative purpose (in contrast with letters or legal documents), does not necessarily presuppose their ability, or even interest in drawing up complex economic documents

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Schoeler, *Charakter*, 53–58, and Schoeler, “Schreiben,” 7–16. According to Robin, “Inscriptions,” 559–560, the Bible—although it was the most important document of the Christians and Jews who penetrated southern Arabia in the mid-first millennium CE—was probably never translated into Sabaic. In contrast to this, the victory inscription of the Abessinian king Kaleb Ellä Ašbeḥā from Mārib, RIE 195 (Bernand et al., *Recueil des inscriptions*, 284ff.), which is as early as ca. 525 CE (for an interpretation of this text, see Müller, “Bruchstücke”), contains numerous Ethiopic quotations from the Bible.

<sup>44</sup> The Safaitic inscriptions alone amount to more than 20,000, while the Thamudic ones number more than 11,000 (according to Macdonald, “Reflections,” 44–45).

<sup>45</sup> These short texts, which contain hardly more than personal names and the respective genealogies, repeatedly hint at the nomadic life of their authors. Nevertheless, they do not contain a “message” proper, except for “I was here” (like the Arabic tribal mark, or *wasm*).

or letters.<sup>46</sup> On the contrary, a nomad who has left, say, a Safaitic inscription along his way through the Syrian desert in order to pass the time may not have been able to use this script to any practical purposes, since in the neighboring settlements, where such abilities might have been necessary, very different systems of script and language were used, namely Aramaic and Greek. Except for the markings discussed above, there was thus no reason for these nomads to write down their mother tongue, since they obviously did not engage in any advanced mercantile activities, at least judging by their inscriptions. Consequently, the authors of the Safaitic inscriptions are, so to speak, literate persons in the midst of a non-literate society (thus Macdonald, "Literacy"). The North Arabian epigraphic evidence therefore does not warrant the assumption of literacy in the sense that writing is used on a regular basis in order to perform a range of communicative tasks within commercial and social life.

A similar picture can be sketched regarding South Arabia, which is all the more remarkable since we actually do possess authentic everyday documents in the form of letters and business documents inscribed on wooden sticks. Of course, in contrast with the nomadic north of the peninsula, we do have to assume here a basically literate society in which the use of writing was part of ordinary business activities, and even of private life. This does not, however, imply that the ability to read and write was common knowledge among the inhabitants of ancient South Arabia. Even though the numerous rock graffiti of this region, which mostly contain personal names, do seem to indicate a high degree of literacy, these graffiti display more or less accurate imitations of the monumental script, normally carved by professional stone masons, up to the latest period.<sup>47</sup> Documents relevant for everyday life, by contrast, were written in the minuscule

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<sup>46</sup> I am indebted to the author for his kind permission to read and cite his ideas while the article was still in press. In what follows, his elaborate argument—which is based, among other things, on examples from both Europe and North Africa—can be rendered only in a very condensed manner.

<sup>47</sup> Whether the authors of those graffiti were actually able to read the ubiquitous monumental inscriptions remains a separate question. Basically, the representative character of a monumental inscription is not diminished by the fact that most passers-by are not able to read the text. There are numerous examples of monumental inscriptions inside and outside South Arabia that are placed, for instance, in rather elevated positions that make it impossible to read them from the ground. Hence, the purpose of such inscriptions does not consist in being legible to everybody but rather in the representative and public nature of its commanding position.

script, which during the course of centuries had evolved into a completely cursive script of its own whose characters hardly show any similarities to the monumental script of the same time (cf. fig. 1).<sup>48</sup> Assuming widespread literacy in ancient South Arabia would thus presuppose that its inhabitants had mastered two separate writing systems, and consistently kept them apart. Apart from its lack of practical plausibility, this assumption is disproven by some of the details of content and structure exhibited by the minuscule inscriptions.<sup>49</sup>

A centralized manufacture of the latter is suggested, first of all, by some of their external characteristics,<sup>50</sup> namely, the standardized shaping of the writing surface with vertical borderlines and a symbol,<sup>51</sup> (cf. fig. 2a and b), their generally precise style based on standardized shapes,<sup>52</sup> and, last but not least, the probable provenance of large amounts of these sticks from one and the same deposit.<sup>53</sup> Judging by the content of these inscriptions, it also seems likely that they were not written by private individuals but rather by professional scribes specially trained for this purpose. Letters in particular generally refer to their sender in the third rather than the first person and thus appear to have been dictated to scribes, and also read by them after having been delivered—a common practice among neighboring cultures.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>48</sup> See also Ryckmans, "Pétioles," 32. All of the very few examples of minuscule characters not inscribed on wooden sticks (cf. the references given in n. 28) do not occur on rock!

<sup>49</sup> For the following, cf. in more detail Stein, *Die altsüdarabischen Minuskelschriften*, 32–35.

<sup>50</sup> See already Ryckmans, "Pétioles," 32–33.

<sup>51</sup> The background of these symbols still remains unclear; the obviously limited repertoire of forms, however, and the fact that they occur both on letters (fig. 2a), and on legal documents (fig. 2b), suggests that they did not originate in a private context.

<sup>52</sup> Among the inscriptions known to date, there are only comparatively few cases of an extraordinarily crude ductus.

<sup>53</sup> The bulk (if not all) of the hitherto known minuscule inscriptions on wooden sticks from ancient South Arabia probably originates from one single spot near a sanctuary in the ancient city of Nashshān (nowadays as-Sawdā') in the Yemenite Jawf (cf. J.-F. Breton in Ryckmans et al., *Textes du Yémen*, 3–4). Only a very small number of Hadramitic inscriptions, mostly not yet deciphered, came to light by regular excavations in the site of Raybūn in Hadramaut (cf. Frantsouzoff, "Hadramitic documents").

<sup>54</sup> Although the Akkadian letters from Mesopotamia speak of the sender normally in first person, the so-called Messenger Formula—*ana X qibi-ma umma Y-ma*, "To X (= addressee) speak! Thus (says) Y (= sender): ..."—strongly hints at a comparable practice. Similar formulas also occur in the Syrian cultural region (cf., for example,

The comparatively rare instances where the sender of a letter identifies himself as its writer either through his signature (four letters of fifty that have so far been examined)<sup>55</sup> or through his use of the first person (three letters of fifty<sup>56</sup>) accord well with this hypothesis, for professional scribes, too, might sometimes write letters of their own. In this case, the identity of sender and scribe calls for the use of the first person, in contrast with the large majority of letters written by the scribe in the name of other, perhaps illiterate, persons. The hypothesis that these scribes learned their skill within an organized training system is supported by a number of exercise texts, which reflect various stages of such a training curriculum.<sup>57</sup>

In view of the evidence presented above, there is no question of widespread literacy among the inhabitants of pre-Islamic Arabia. Basically, two levels of literacy must be distinguished. The first one, which indeed extends throughout the entire peninsula and even existed among nomads, consists in the ability to leave behind spontaneous and brief rock graffiti, which serve the sole purpose of passing the time and fulfill no communicative function. These graffiti are found even in the remotest area and use a writing material that is abundantly at hand, namely, rock surfaces as they occur in their natural environment. In contrast with this, the second level of literacy consists in a well-developed system of social and economic communication that was limited to a number of urban centers, located above all in South Arabia. This latter form of literacy typically employs two different types of script: A monumental one used for representative purposes, which was written mainly on rock and stone, and an almost completely different minuscule script that was used for matters of everyday communication and written exclusively on handy wooden sticks. A society that employs this latter type of literacy for purposes of economic and social communication can indeed be called "literate." However, "literature" in the strict sense of the term was apparently written in neither of these scripts but rather transmitted orally.

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Schwiderski, "Präsenz des Boten," and Tropper, "Briefformular," 64–65). Furthermore, there are indications that the letter correspondence in ancient South Arabia was organized between public "offices," which means that the addressee was not given his letter at home, but rather had it read to him by some official.

<sup>55</sup> For example, Mon. script. sab. 2: 'br y'mr bn lb'm 2' m-n s<sub>2</sub>rhm d-qdhn ... w-<sup>6</sup> zbr s<sub>2</sub>rhm, "To Ya'mar, son of Labu'um, from S<sub>2</sub>arhum of (the family) Qadhān: [...]" And S<sub>2</sub>arhum has written (this)" (cf. fig. 3).

<sup>56</sup> For the evidence, see Stein, *Die altsüdarabischen Minuskelschriften*.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. for details Stein, *Die altsüdarabischen Minuskelschriften*, 38–39.

To some extent, these conclusions may be extended to the urban centers of the neighboring Ḥijāz. This would correspond to the Arabic sources on the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods.<sup>58</sup> As Nöldeke has demonstrated, what later Islamic authors have to say about the Prophet in this regard is too tendentious and inconsistent to allow an unequivocal judgement to be made.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, Nöldeke concedes that the Prophet (and several persons in his surroundings) may have possessed the rudimentary kind of literacy necessary to conduct commercial activities, while mastery of the more advanced skills necessary to read literary works, for example, can be ruled out. From the evidence presented above it is clear, however, that even if writing was used for commercial purposes, this does not necessarily mean that a large section of the population was able to read and write. Ancient South Arabian documents suggest rather otherwise, since even persons involved in business activities did not write by themselves but employed professional scribes. Against this background, the existence in Mecca and Medina of a number of people able to read and write, as is alleged by the Islamic tradition, seems quite plausible. These individuals may have been trained by members of the Jewish and Christian communities, or may even have been part of them. Yet a level of literacy beyond this can in all likelihood be ruled out.

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<sup>58</sup> For the following, cf. Schoeler, "Schreiben," 2f. with n. 8, and Robin, "Inscriptions," 557–561 (includes further references). Robin adduces an additional argument for the largely oral character of the Prophet's environment: the complete lack of contemporary written documents from the region— whether in the form of original inscriptions or in the form of secondary hints at a literary tradition, such as translations of the Bible into the local languages.

<sup>59</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 1, 12–17.

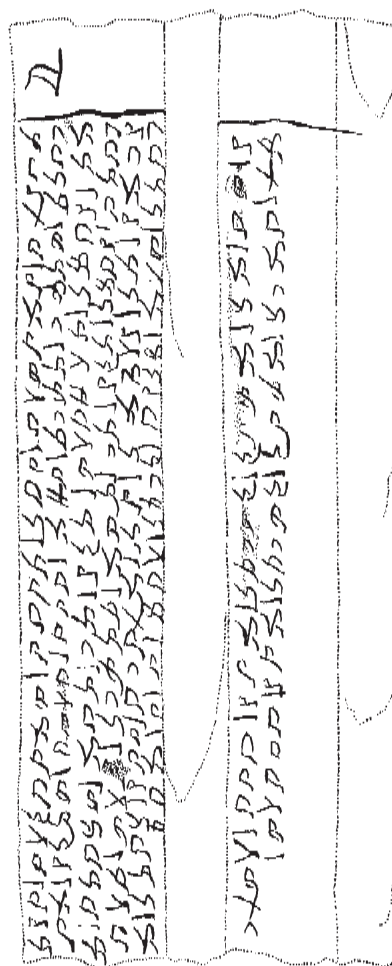
	aSab	mSab	spSab		aSab	mSab	spSab
h	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣
l	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣
ḥ	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣
m	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣
q	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣
w	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣
š	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣
r	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣
b	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣
t	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣
s	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣
k	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣
n	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣
ḥ	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣
ṣ	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣	𐩣

Fig. 1. The development of the Ancient South Arabian monumental (*musnad*, left) and minuscule (*zabūr*, right) scripts from the Early Sabaic to the Late Sabaic periods, i. e., from the eighth century BCE to the sixth century CE.

38

Vs.

Rs.



2 cm

Fig. 2a. Example of a Sabaic letter (Mon. script. sab. 38).



55

Vs.

Rs.

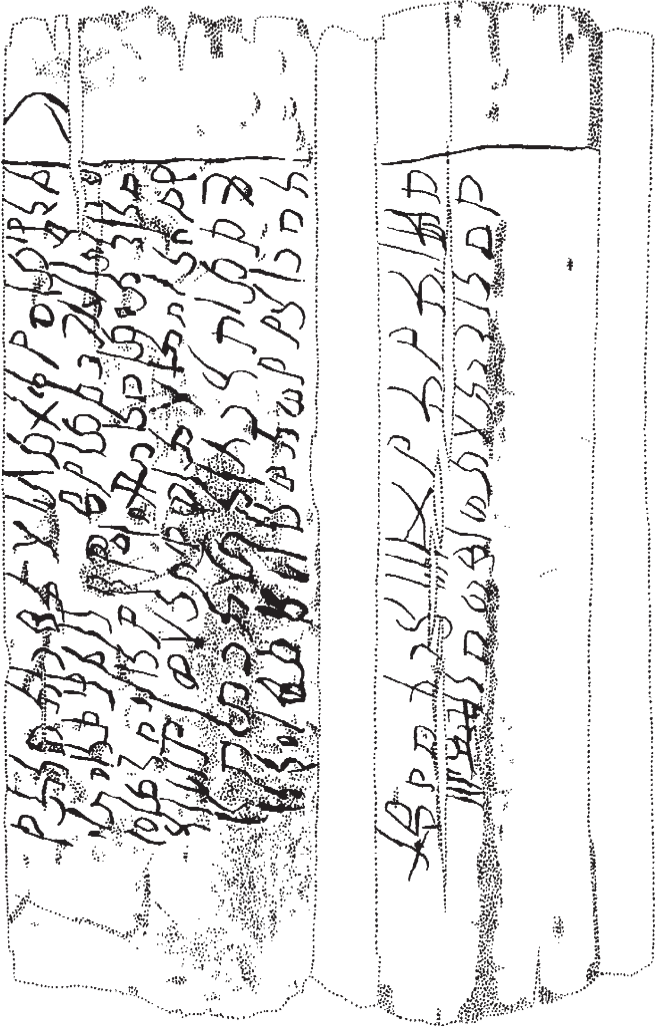


Fig. 2b. Example of a Sabaic legal document (Mon. script. sab. 55).

2

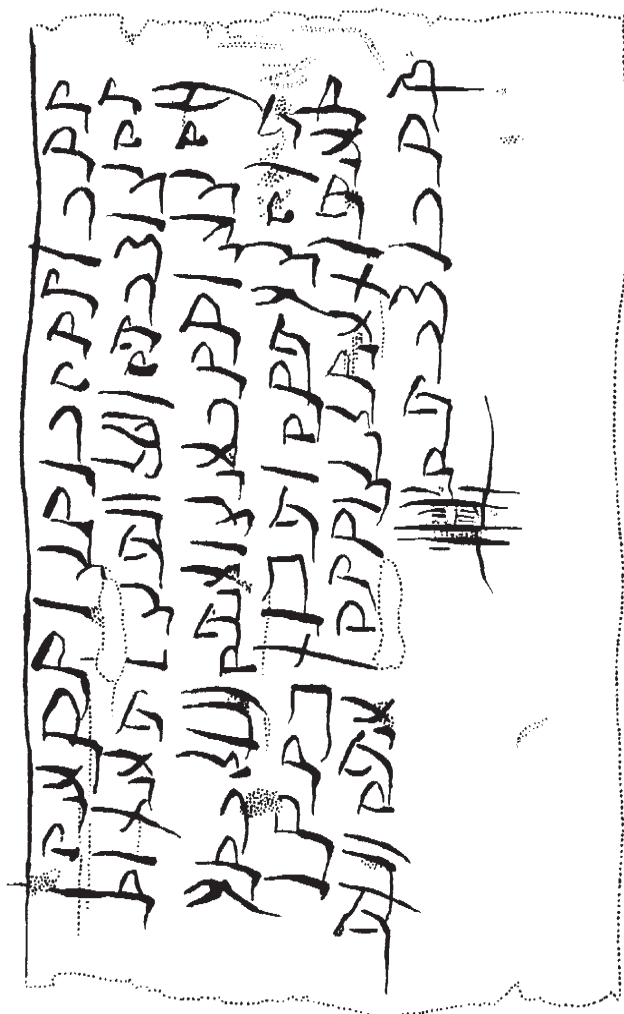


Fig. 3. Sabaic letter with signature of the sender (Mon. script. sab. 2)

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## ARABS AND ARABIC IN THE AGE OF THE PROPHET

Jan Retsö

The linguistic conditions that prevailed in Arabia at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an are one of the most hotly debated issues among Arabists. The problem is important not only for the history of the Arabic language, but also for the understanding of the nature and original purpose of early Islamic preaching. It must be said from the very outset that there is no agreement among Arabists about the linguistic situation in pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia. This also means that the linguistic status of the Qur'an itself is not univocally clear.

First, some basic facts: The language of the Qur'an, the 'Arabiyya, is a Semitic language with partly very archaic features. The phonology, syllable structure and morphology are generally seen as archaic and are, in many ways, close to Ugaritic and Akkadian, i.e., languages which were spoken in Syria and Mesopotamia in the second millennium BCE. Akkadian was spoken even later in Mesopotamia, but then in a form which had lost many of its ancient characteristics; it died out in the middle of the first millennium BCE at the latest. There has been a long debate among scholars about the time when the 'arabī language ceased to be spoken, a discussion that still continues. One school claims that it was transformed into the predecessors of the modern dialects in connection with the Islamic conquests in the seventh and eighth centuries CE. This is also the traditional view among medieval Muslim linguists. Another school maintains that the transformation had started before the rise of Islam, at least in the border regions of the Fertile Crescent, and that the conquests only speeded up this process.<sup>1</sup> At the moment, it does not appear possible to give a definitive answer, yet a new suggestion will be given below.

It is however a fact that we have no clear traces of the 'Arabiyya in contemporary documents from pre-Islamic Arabia. We do have a large amount of mostly epigraphic pre-Islamic inscriptions, which

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<sup>1</sup> For a summary of the discussion see Versteegh, *Arabic Language*, 46–51, 102–113.

amount to tens of thousands. The earliest documents whose language can be determined originate perhaps around 800 BCE, and this documentation continues until the sixth century CE. Among these, the texts from South Arabia give the most complete linguistic information, but the short inscriptions from other parts of Arabia provide at least a sketchy picture of the structure of the languages that they employ as well. We thus have linguistic documents from a period encompassing one and a half millennia before the rise of Islam. This material shows beyond any doubt that the linguistic situation in Arabia was variegated, exactly as it is today.<sup>2</sup> There are no traces of an Arabic language common to most inhabitants of the Peninsula during this period, and we have no reason to assume that such a language existed. From the sixth century CE we have a large corpus of poetry, which was created by poets from different parts of the Arabian Peninsula, yet is characterized by a highly unified linguistic form, and which in an unknown way was transmitted into the Islamic period until it was finally codified from the second Islamic century onwards. But we have no immediate reason to assume that the language of this poetry, the 'Arabiyya, was the commonly spoken language of Arabia. If this had been the case (and there are, admittedly, still scholars who think so<sup>3</sup>), it would presuppose a very special linguistic situation to have prevailed in Arabia, a situation unique to this age and which later on disappeared. If the 'Arabiyya was still spoken in the sixth and seventh centuries CE, it can only have been in parts of central and northern Arabia. It is much more likely that the 'arabī poetry could be heard everywhere in Arabia during this period, just like today's tribal poetry, the *nabaṭī* poetry, whereas the everyday vernacular in most parts of the peninsula was different.

Several scholars would object to the claim that we have no real documentation of the 'Arabiyya from pre-Islamic times by referring to the inscription from Namāra in southern Syria, which is generally considered the earliest specimen of the 'Arabiyya language. There are, however, several reasons to be somewhat skeptical about this. That text, dated to the year 328 CE, is difficult to read. It is written in an Aramaic script, i.e., an alphabet with twenty-two consonantal signs. The 'Arabiyya contains twenty-nine consonants, which in many instances would make the inscription's reading doubtful even if we

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<sup>2</sup> See Macdonald, "Reflections."

<sup>3</sup> See e. g. Versteegh, *Arabic Language*, 37, 93.



were able to read all words—which we are not, since it uses the Nabatean variant of the Aramaic script, in which many of the differences between the original twenty-two letters are difficult or even impossible to discern. There is no scholarly consensus about the reading of many words and expressions in the Namāra inscription, and we should be more cautious than is usually the case when we make judgments about its language and content.<sup>4</sup>

Something which has confused the discussion of the whole matter is the fact that the ‘Arabiyya of the Qur’an, too, is written in a variant of the Aramaic script that probably derives from Nabatean.<sup>5</sup> Apart from the defective rendering of the consonants, the writing of the holy text also uses an idiosyncratic orthography which in more than a few cases does not reflect the ‘Arabiyya but instead shows Aramaic features. A number of important elements of nominal morphology are thus not marked in this script. There is a salient discrepancy between the original orthography and the traditional oral reading of the holy text. Several decades after the first revelation, a system with diacritical signs was invented that aimed at mending the deficiencies of the Aramaic orthography and at reproducing the phonology and morphology of the ‘Arabiyya of the Qur’an in a more exact way. This implied the introduction of diacritical signs in order to distinguish consonants whose shape had become similar, and to mark specific Arabic consonants not found in Aramaic. Diacritical signs were also introduced for the vowels and certain suffixes of the ‘Arabiyya. This system, which probably was fully developed in the beginning of the eighth century, is still the norm when writing Arabic today. But we have no reason to assume that the Namāra inscription should be read in the same way as the Qur’an. There are three centuries between the two texts, and if we did not have the ‘Arabiyya in Qur’anic orthography, no one would probably identify the language of the Namāra inscription with the ‘Arabiyya. This also holds for a number of other pre-Islamic inscriptions, especially the so-called ‘En ‘Avdat inscription from the Negev.<sup>6</sup> Another matter altogether is the fact that the

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<sup>4</sup> For a survey of the different interpretations of this inscription see Retsö, *Arabs*, 467–470. One of the suggested translations is given by Versteegh, *Arabic Language*, 31.

<sup>5</sup> The basic study of the development of the Arabic script is Diem, “Untersuchungen.” For a summary of his views see Diem, “Rise.” Cf. also Gruendler, *Development*.

<sup>6</sup> For this text see Versteegh, *Arabic Language*, 32–35.

languages of these inscriptions are quite close relatives of the ‘Arabiyya—they are similar, but not identical.

The fact is that the Qur’an uses an Aramaic orthography which is reminiscent of that of the Namāra inscription, and which does not render all the details of the structure of the ‘Arabiyya. There is a difference between writing and reading or, to approach the Qur’anic terminology, between the writing, *al-kitāb*, and the recitation, *al-qur’ān*. The relationship between both is a fundamental theme in several surahs from the Meccan period. In Q 42:17 it is said that the writing (*al-kitāb*) has been sent down (*anzala*) to the ancestors of the listeners. The recitation (*al-qur’ān*), by contrast, has been “revealed” (*awḥā*) to the Prophet (Q 42:7). The listeners already possess *al-kitāb*, and the Prophet is to assure them that he subordinates himself to its authority (*wa-qul āmantu bi-mā anzala llāhu min kitābin*, Q 42:15).

Nothing of this is very transparent, and we should be cautious in assuming that we understand it right away. It is always important to keep in mind that those who want to arrive at an understanding of the Qur’an as a historical document should read it as if it were an epigraphic text from the early seventh century, and not through the lens of later Islamic interpretations. We should also keep in mind that terms like *kitāb* might have different meanings in different parts of the text. In the earliest parts, however, it seems clear that *kitāb* means “writing,” just as in the oldest ‘*arabī* poetry, and not “book,” as is usually assumed. According to the passage discussed above, the writing is of divine origin, which also must be the meaning of the famous passage Q 96:4–5: “God [...] who taught him [=man] [the use of] the pen, taught him what he did not know.” God himself has taught mankind writing. The reading of what is written, that is, its recitation, is something else, but also of divine origin. It is very plausible that the mysterious letters introducing several surahs are examples of this divine writing. See, for example, Q 12:1: “LR. These are the *āyāt* of the clear (? *mubīn*) Writing (*kitāb*).” Here, *āyāt* most likely means “letters” like the equivalent word in Aramaic and Hebrew, *āthā/ōt*.<sup>7</sup>

In these passages (Q 42:17 and Q 12:1) and several others, we find the expression *qur’ān ‘arabī*, “an ‘*arabī* recitation,” or *lisān ‘arabī*,

<sup>7</sup> For a survey of the debate about these letters, see the articles in Paret (ed.), *Der Koran*, 311–385.

“an ‘*arabī* language.” In Q 42 the *qur’ān* is a confirmation of the writing, or the *qur’ān* and the writing come from the same source, viz., the Lord, *ar-rabb*, or God, *Allāh*. The epithet ‘*arabī*’ occurs eleven times in the Meccan surahs. It always qualifies the *qur’ān*, the recitation, or the *lisān*, “the language” or perhaps “speech,” that is, the oral performance of the text in the ‘*arabī*’ language. The epithet ‘*arabī*’ is thus connected not with the written, but with the oral form of the text—the text as pronounced, not as written.<sup>8</sup> The use of the word Arabic as a designation for the language of the Qur’an, the poetry and the literature of the Islamic Middle Ages originates from these passages.

It is important to emphasize that this does not automatically mean that the original text should be read as an Aramaic one, as has been claimed by Christoph Luxenberg. The addition to the consonantal text of signs indicating vowels does not imply that its Arabic pronunciation was invented. These signs were most likely introduced to codify an already existing Arabic reading tradition. Both the consonants and the vocalized version are undoubtedly Arabic, not Aramaic, and the readings suggested by Luxenberg do not constitute an improvement of the text.

When formulated this way, several questions arise: What is the meaning of ‘*arabī*’? Why does the text have to state that its oral performance is ‘*arabī*’? What does this teach us about the linguistic situation in pre-Islamic Arabia? In the following, answers to these questions will be suggested.

First, what is the meaning of ‘*arabī*’, Arabic? The adjective is evidently derived from the word ‘*arab*’, Arabs. When looking for the meaning of this word, we should first check the contemporary or pre-Qur’anic occurrences, not the later Islamic ones, and absolutely not the modern usage. Unfortunately, there are few occurrences of the word in sources contemporary with the Qur’an itself, and the few that exist are not very informative.<sup>9</sup> But the word occurs quite frequently in sources from pre-Islamic antiquity. The first occurrence is in an Assyrian text from ca. 853 BCE that is followed by more than 3000 instances in Assyrian, Hebrew, Greek, Persian, Latin, Aramaic/Syriac, and Ancient South Arabian texts reaching until shortly before

<sup>8</sup> See Retsö, *Arabs*, 40–48.

<sup>9</sup> See Retsö, *Arabs*, 96–102. For a full survey of the contemporary testimonies see now Hoyland, *Islam*.

the appearance of the Prophet.<sup>10</sup> From these texts it is obvious what the word does *not* mean: it does not mean “nomad,” “desert-dweller,” or “Bedouin,” and definitely does not refer to the members of an Arab “nation” in the modern sense. This is so for a variety of reasons: all the ancient languages have other special terms for the first two concepts, the classical Bedouin culture did not arise in Arabia until well after the turn of the era,<sup>11</sup> and the modern concept of nationhood probably did not exist before ca. 1750 CE.

Instead of the Arabs having been an ethnic group in the ordinary sense of the word (whatever that might be), the texts seem to point in another direction. In them we read that the Arabs did not live in houses built of stone, that they did not drink wine, that they did not cultivate the soil, that the hair on their foreheads was shaven, that they only worshipped two gods, that they appeared as assistants to divine or semi-divine heroes, and—last but not least—that they had a special relationship to the camel. This picture emerges from at least three of the longer texts: from Herodotus’ *History* (fifth century BCE), from Diodorus Siculus (ca. 50 BCE), who reproduces an account by Hieronymus of Cardia written ca. 280 BCE, and, somewhat surprisingly, from a section in Nonnus’ great epic *Dionysiaca* that was composed in the fifth century CE, yet borrows its description of the Arabs from a Greek work from ca. 400 BCE.<sup>12</sup> The picture also fits a host of other testimonies in the pre-Islamic sources. The characteristics enumerated above give the impression of ideological injunctions rather than expressions of a nomadic or Bedouin way of living.<sup>13</sup> The writer of these lines has suggested that the pre-Islamic Arabs originally were a religious-cultic institution rather than an ethnic group.<sup>14</sup> The existence of such groups is not altogether unique. In the Bible we hear about the Rechabites, whose way of life bears some interesting similarities to that of the pre-Islamic Arabs as described in the texts referred to above.<sup>15</sup> The tendency in modern scholarship has been to

<sup>10</sup> A full analysis of all relevant passages in these sources is given in Retsö, *Arabs*.

<sup>11</sup> See Bulliet, *Camel*, 7–110; Knauf, *Midian*, 9–15.

<sup>12</sup> Herodotus, *History* 1.131, 3.8 (Retsö, *Arabs*, 247); Diodorus, *Bibliotheca* 18.5–19.100 (Retsö, *Arabs*, 283–289); Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 20.142–21.325, cf. also 40.294–299 (Retsö, *Arabs*, 610–614).

<sup>13</sup> Retsö, *Arabs*, 577–595.

<sup>14</sup> See the discussion and summaries in Retsö, *Arabs*, 595–622.

<sup>15</sup> 2 Kgs 10:15–17; Jer 35.

view the Rechabites as some kind of guild and not as a survival of Israel's supposed "Bedouin" past.<sup>16</sup>

The picture of the Arabs as a community different from ordinary ethnic formations also occurs in the Arabo-Islamic sources dealing with early Islamic history. It turns out that the term stood for several different groups during the first Islamic century, and that its use was expansive: it was applied to more and more sections among the Islamic movement, until it came to encompass the entire group of Islamic warriors and finally, in the latter half of the Umayyad period, the Islamic community as a whole.<sup>17</sup> This expansion of the use of the term is also reflected in the non-Arabic sources from the early Islamic period.<sup>18</sup>

This picture is of course highly controversial, since it deviates from the common opinion of what the Arabs were and are. But it is easy to show that the common opinion is not based on a thorough analysis of the evidence, but instead merely tends to follow conventional concepts about the meaning of ethnic and similar terminology in ancient sources. If it were to turn out to be correct that the pre-Islamic Arabs originally were some kind of religious community, this would certainly shed new light on the question of the language of the Qur'an. It has often been assumed that the *'arabī* passages in the Qur'an function as a kind of legitimization of the *'Arabiyya* as a language of revelation similar to Hebrew, Greek, and others, and thus endow it with a function it did not have before the appearance of Muhammad. However, support for this view from the holy text itself is meager. When the pertinent passages are read in their context, the use of this language for communicating revelations turns out to have quite a different function.

As has been pointed out, several different languages were spoken in pre-Islamic Arabia. If we choose to call these languages Arabic, this is of course perfectly legitimate. However, one must at least stop to ask if this terminology is compatible with that of pre-Islamic Arabia, or if the terminology back then might perhaps have been different. In fact, there are several instances in the pre-Islamic sources that point to the existence of a language called Arabic. Yet we do not know for sure which language is meant by these passages, only that

<sup>16</sup> Frick, "Rechab."

<sup>17</sup> Retsö, *Arabs*, 24–81.

<sup>18</sup> Retsö, *Arabs*, 96–102.

Arabic as the designation of a language was known in Arabia. Against this background it is interesting to observe that this language (or, perhaps, these languages) is/are mentioned primarily in a religious context.<sup>19</sup> This may be pure coincidence, but in the light of what the pre-Islamic Arabs seem to have been it may also be of crucial importance. A few illustrations will be sufficient. In the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, a text from the first century CE describing the coasts of the Red Sea and the Arabian Peninsula and the sea route to India, we hear about “holy men” on the island of Sarapis off the coast of Oman who use “the Arabic language.”<sup>20</sup> In Epiphanius’ *Panarion*, a work from the beginning of the fourth century CE that surveys different kinds of heresies, we read that in the ceremonies of a pagan feast in Elusa in the Negev the “Arabic dialect” was employed.<sup>21</sup> Here, we are confronted with a language that is used in a religious context and is apparently named after a religious community. Pure coincidence? Let us now turn to the Qur’an itself. The opening verses of Q 12 and of Q 41 run as follows:

’LR. These are the signs (*āyāt*) of the clear Writing (*kitāb*). We have sent it down as an ‘*arabī* recitation (*qur’ān ‘arabī*) so that you will get insight (*‘aql*).

HM. A sending-down (*tanzīl*) from the merciful, the compassionate. A writing whose signs (*āyāt*) have been distinguished (*fuṣṣilat*) as an ‘*arabī* recitation (*qur’ān ‘arabī*) for people who know (*ya‘lamūn*).

The meaning of the verb *fuṣṣilat*, which has been rendered as “distinguished,” is not certain, and the syntactic coherence of the verses is much more obscure than most translations make it appear. In spite of this, the basic meaning is clear: the ‘*arabī* recitation will give the listeners insight and knowledge, and confirm their insight. Elsewhere (Q 41:44) the text says:

Say: “It [=the recitation, *al-qur’ān*] is guidance and a healing for those who have become believers (*alladhīna āmanū*); and those who do not believe, in their ears is deafness and it is blindness for them.”

The impression is that the recitation’s revelation is directed to people who already possess a certain degree of insight and understanding. For them it is both a sign and a confirmation of what they already

<sup>19</sup> Retsö, “Das Arabische.”

<sup>20</sup> *Periplus maris Erythraei*, par. 33 (= p. 167 of Casson’s edition).

<sup>21</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 51.22.11.

have, as we have seen in the passage from Q 42 that was quoted above. This is even clearer in Q 26:192–199:

Indeed, it is a sending-down (*tanzīl*) of the Lord of the world.  
 The faithful spirit has sent it down,  
 Upon your heart that you may be a warner  
 In a clear ‘*arabī*’ language.  
 Indeed, it is in the *zubur* of the ancients.  
 Was it not a sign (*āya*) for them that the learned of the sons of Israel  
 should know about it?  
 If we had sent it down to some of the *a‘jamūn*  
 And had he recited it to them they would not have believed in it.

The “sending-down” (*tanzīl*) is the revelation of the reading. The divine voice draws a parallel between the revelation addressed to the Prophet and the previous one addressed to the Israelites. The expression *zubur* refers to some kind of ancient writings; it is now documented from pre-Islamic Yemen as the designation of writing in a special cursive South Semitic script used for letters and economic documents. The learned among the Israelites are capable of identifying the origins of this new revelation when it is in ‘*arabī*’ language. Thus, the Israelites have already received this revelation—in ‘*arabī*’ language, as it seems. Those who do not know this language, the *a‘jamūn*, do not possess this ability, and do not understand that the current message has the same origin as the one given to the Israelites. There is no doubt that the word *a‘jamūn* (plural of *‘ajam*) refers to those who do not have a good command of the ‘Arabiyya and might not even understand it. This is very clearly stated in the earliest Arabic dictionary from the end of the eighth century, al-Khalīl’s *Kitāb al-‘ayn* (s.v. ‘JM):

‘*Ajam* is the opposite to ‘*arab*. An *a‘jamī* is not an ‘*arabī*. The *a‘jam* is someone who does not speak clearly.<sup>22</sup>

The meaning of all this seems to be that the revelation’s being in Arabic is a sign or even a proof that it is a divine authority who speaks, not a human one. All the ‘*arabī*’ passages in the Qur’an seem to deal with the question of divine authority. The message is clear: the author of this text is *ar-rabb*, the Lord, or *Allāh*, one of the ancient gods of Arabia, not Muhammad or some other human being.

<sup>22</sup> This saying is repeated in later Arabic medieval dictionaries (see Retsö, “Das Arabische”).



A hint of the context within which the ‘*arabī*’ language was used is found in Q 37:36:

And they [the opponents of the Prophet] say: “Should we really abandon our gods for a *shā‘ir majnūn*?”

Q 52:29–30 is also illuminating in this regard:

So remind [them]; for you are, by the grace of your Lord, neither a *kāhin* or a *shā‘ir*.

Or they say: “He is a *shā‘ir*! We shall wait for Fate to hit him!”

According to medieval Arabic lexicographers, historians and commentators, a *kāhin* is a soothsayer. The two words *shā‘ir* and *kāhin* obviously designate different kinds of soothsayers or diviners, that is, people who were in contact with the divine world. The *shu‘arā’* are characterized in the oft-quoted verses Q 26:224–226:

And as to the *shu‘arā’*, the perverse follow them.  
Have you not seen that they err in every valley  
And that they say what they do not do?

It is difficult to view these verses as a description of poets as it is usually done. Rendering *shu‘arā’* as “poets,” which is of course its usual meaning in later Arabic, is another example of how later concepts distort the original text and its meaning. The key to the word’s signification lies in the juxtaposition of *kāhin* and *shā‘ir*: both words designate a group of people who transmit messages from the spiritual world. The opponents of the prophet must have had at least some kind of pretext to view him as belonging to these categories, even if Muhammad’s message was far more sophisticated both in form and content than those preserved from the *kuhhān*. It does not seem too far-fetched to suggest that the immediate reason for this was Muhammad’s use of the ‘*arabī*’ language. We have already seen that there are testimonies that a language called Arabic was used in a religious and cultic context. This is also evident from the Qur’an itself. If it is admitted that the Arabs themselves, after whom the language was after all named, were a kind of religious community, it becomes possible to discern a connection. Were there special groups of soothsayers and diviners among the pre-Islamic Arabs? Already in the first

century BCE, Cicero knew that the Arabs were well known as experts on divination and ornithomancy, referred to in Arabic as *'iyāfa*.<sup>23</sup>

This connection between the soothsayers and diviners with whom the Prophet was associated by his opponents, on the one hand, and the pre-Islamic Arabs, on the other, is admittedly not completely clear. But the most important thing they had in common seems to have been their use of a language that was named after the Arabs. This indicates that the *shu'arā* and the *kuhhān* did in fact belong to the Arabs. The *'arabī* language did not necessarily sound identical in every part of Arabia where there were soothsayers. It is nevertheless likely that everywhere it had a structure which deviated from the everyday vernacular tongue, the *'ajamī*. The word *'ajamī* is derived from a root meaning "crooked" and refers to linguistic inabilities of different kinds. Later, it took on the meaning of "foreigner" and was applied especially to Iranians. The use of a language deviating from the everyday vernacular by shamans and soothsayers is a phenomenon known from other parts of the world and would thus not be unique to Arabia.<sup>24</sup> Another story is the fact that already in pre-Islamic times, this language had, in certain sections of society, liberated itself from its sacral functions and had begun to be used for secular purposes like political speeches and non-religious heroic poetry, a development which, as we know, was to have enormous consequences for the cultural history of the world. It is well worth noting that according to the Qur'an, the term designating a professional user of this poetic language, that is, a *shā'ir* ("poet" in later Arabic) actually had more or less the same meaning as *kāhin*.

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<sup>23</sup> Cicero, *De divinatione* 1.42. A similar remark is found in Clement of Alexandria's and Philostratus' biography of the first-century ascetic Apollonius (see Retsö, *Arabs*, 594).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Eliade, *Chamanisme*, 91–93.

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## SOURCES FOR THE HISTORY OF PRE-ISLAMIC RELIGION\*

Tilman Seidensticker

### *Introduction*

The term “history of pre-Islamic religion” is best understood as denoting the history of religion of the Arabian Peninsula and its margins up to approximately the year 610, in other words, until the beginning of Muhammad’s activity. Its beginnings lie around 800 BC at the latest with the first evidence we have of advanced civilizations in South Arabia, which means that the history of pre-Islamic religion is as long as that of Islam to the present day, namely, fourteen centuries. This paper, however, concentrates on just the last few decades before Muhammad, and is in the main restricted to the region where he himself was active, namely the Ḥijāz. Both the time and the locality are particularly significant for Islamic studies, since parts of the Qur’anic message can be understood only when seen in this context. Unfortunately, our knowledge of the religious history of this period is considerably poorer than it appeared to be as recently as a generation ago, because the relevant information originates almost entirely from Islamic sources. This circumstance is not in itself new, but our scrutiny has become sharpened in three respects, thanks not least to Gerald Hawting’s monograph on the subject:<sup>1</sup> Firstly, it is impossible to transfer information from other regions and centuries directly to the time we are concerned with here; secondly, it is doubtful whether it is necessary or even admissible to understand the Qur’anic portrayal

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\* The topic of this paper was the subject of a lecture held on June 29, 2002, at the Seventh Colloquium on the Arabian Peninsula at the Time of Muhammad in Bamberg. I would like to express my warm thanks to Jan Retsö (Göteborg) for the evening we spent in Bamberg discussing the Jāhiliyya. Heartfelt thanks as well go to my Jena colleague Norbert Nebes for numerous answers to questions about the history of ancient South Arabian religion. A German version of this article was published under the title “Die Quellen zur vorislamischen Religionsgeschichte,” in *Asiatische Studien* 2003/4 (2003): 881–912.

<sup>1</sup> Hawting, *Idolatry*. For reviews, see Francis Robinson in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 64, no. 2 (2001): 270, and Peter Heine in *Orientalische Literaturzeitung* 96, no. 4–5 (2001): 585–587.

of the Jāhiliyya in a literal sense; and thirdly, the information given by authors of the Islamic period has often been subject to obvious Islamic influences and is sometimes contradictory.

In the following I shall examine an extensive group of sources not dealt with by what still remains the most important publication on the subject, Julius Wellhausen's *Reste arabischen Heidentums*, the so-called *talbiyas*. Other sources—the Qur'an, pre-Islamic literature and the information given by Islamic authors—will also be addressed.

Seen against the state of Wellhausen's knowledge, it was M. J. Kister who in 1980 drew attention to a group of texts that seemed to place the Jāhiliyya in a new and unexpected light. Although a number of them had already been published in the first volume of al-Ya'qūbī's history (Houtsma's edition had been published in 1883), they had apparently been widely overlooked. Kister evaluated the *talbiyas* of the various tribes of pre-Islamic times, that is, the invocations of Allāh they proclaimed in the course of the *hajj* or at Mecca. These *talbiyas* at least appear to allow us to deduce something of the theological concepts of the time. Although already in 1959 A. S. Tritton had briefly discussed the *talbiyas* included in the *Kitāb al-muḥabbar* of Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb, and had published English translations, his contribution seems to have received little attention.<sup>2</sup> In the East, Sayyid Mu'azzam Ḥusayn had given a lecture on the *talbiyas* in Trivandrum in 1937, which was then published in 1940 yet was hardly noticed in the West.<sup>3</sup> Building on and referring to Kister's work, Khalil Abū Raḥma in 1987 examined a broader range of sources. (He also refers to two essays by 'Ādil Jāsīm al-Bayātī published in 1981 and 1982, which I have not seen.) Volume ten of the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* contains an article "*talbiya*" by Toufic Fahd (published in 1998).

Common to all these publications is the absence of any attempt to evaluate the authenticity of the *talbiyas*. Expressions of doubt can be found only in two German publications in which the *talbiyas* play a more marginal role, Arne A. Ambros' essay on surah 112,<sup>4</sup> and Susanne Krone's monograph about the ancient Arabian goddess al-Lāt.<sup>5</sup> In both cases the doubts are triggered by, and largely restricted

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<sup>2</sup> Tritton, "Notes."

<sup>3</sup> Ḥusayn, "Talbiyāt."

<sup>4</sup> Ambros, "Analyse."

<sup>5</sup> Krone, *Altarabische Gottheit*.

to, just one *talbiya*.<sup>6</sup> Without further examination of their wording, the *talbiyas*, together with all the other Islamic accounts of the Jāhiliyya, were then summarily rejected by Hawting as merely reflecting Islamic perceptions of Abrahamism;<sup>7</sup> I shall return to his study towards the end of this paper. The authenticity of the *talbiyas* is central to the following investigation. We shall start, however, with as brief as possible an examination of the etymology of *talbiya* and *labbayka* followed by a section on the tradition of the *talbiyas*.

### *The etymology of labbayka*

*Talbiya* is a verbal noun formed regularly from *labbā/yulabbī*, which is itself derived from *labbayka*, “at your service!” The Arab lexicographers and grammarians

1. associate it with *labba* or *alabba* used together with the local *bi-*, “to stay at a place,” meaning roughly “persistent (in obedience to you).”<sup>8</sup>

Other explanations are also given:

2. *Labbayka* is said to be derived from *labba*, as in *dārī talubbu dārahū*, “my house lies opposite his”;<sup>9</sup> this meaning is not listed in WKAS,<sup>10</sup> and would thus appear to be an invention.

3. It is said to be derived from *labbatun*, as in *imra’atun labbatun*, “loving woman.”<sup>11</sup> WKAS cites just one instance of *labbatun* in this sense, in a verse taken from the dictionaries;<sup>12</sup> the most obvious meaning would appear to be “persistent (in love),” so that the result of this explanation is similar to the first one.

4. It is said to derive from (*ḥasabun*) *lubābun*, “most excellent (descent).”<sup>13</sup> This *lubāb* is paraphrased as *khālīṣ* so as to allow *labbayka* to be explained by *ikhhlāṣi laka*, which seems somewhat contrived.

<sup>6</sup> For Ambros’ remarks concerning the *talbiya* of the Banū Asad, and Krone’s remarks on the *talbiya* of the Thaḳīf, see below.

<sup>7</sup> Hawting, *Idolatry*, 37, 43.

<sup>8</sup> In most instances cited in WKAS, vol. 2, 182a 7–12. For *labba* with *bi-*, see *ibid.*, 75a 30–35, for *alabba* with *bi-*, see *ibid.*, 76a 31–42.

<sup>9</sup> *Tāj*, vol. 1, 465, 3–4.

<sup>10</sup> See WKAS, vol. 2, 75a–b.

<sup>11</sup> *Tāj*, vol. 1, 465, 6–8.

<sup>12</sup> WKAS, vol. 2, 77a 16–21.

<sup>13</sup> *Tāj*, vol. 1, 465, 10; cf. WKAS, vol. 2, 89 b 38–90a 1.

5. It is said to be derived from *labbun* in the sense of *ṭā'a*, “obedience.”<sup>14</sup> WKAS makes no mention of any such meaning for *labbun*,<sup>15</sup> so that this derivation, too, can be regarded as probably invented.

The ending *-ay* is generally understood as representing the accusative of the dual form; its use here is regarded not as indicating numerical duality but rather as expressive of iteration or emphasis (*li-t-tawkīd*, *li-t-takrīr*, *li-t-takthīr*).<sup>16</sup> Only the grammarian Yūnus b. Ḥabīb aḍ-Ḍabbī denies that it is a dual form, claiming that it is analogous to the forms *'alayka* and *ilayka*.<sup>17</sup> To this it has been objected that in this case the expression ought to be *labbā yadayka* (like *'alā yadayka*) and not *labbay yadayka*.<sup>18</sup>

The question of the etymology of *labbayka* has occupied Western experts as well. Hubert Grimme detected the “Thamudic preposition لَب (لَبَب)” behind it, and argued that *labbayka* “was a vestige of the ancient Semitic religion which was widespread in the Ḥijāz and its sphere of influence on the North Arabian borders before the rise of Islam, the main literary evidence of which can be found in the Thamudic inscriptions.” Grimme cites twenty-one occurrences of the preposition لَب.<sup>19</sup> Almost all these inscriptions have been republished in Albert van den Branden’s *Les inscriptions thamoudéennes*, but in each case with a quite different interpretation, demonstrating that recent research has remained unaware of Grimme’s لَب.

Hans Bauer sought the derivation of *labbayka* in *\*lā ābayka*, claiming that *\*ābay* is a jussive of *abā*. According to him, the *ā* was shortened, and the *hamza* assimilated to the *b*. Bauer also raises the question of whether *abā* might have been regularly combined with the accusative of the person.<sup>20</sup> It would appear that this is not the case, and this circumstance on its own undermines his theory.

Wellhausen describes the *-ay* ending alongside forms such as *sa'dayka*, *dawālay* and *hawālay* as being a mere “apparent dual,”<sup>21</sup> while H. L. Fleischer follows the Arabic grammatical tradition in

<sup>14</sup> *Tāj*, vol. 1, 465, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. WKAS, vol. 2, 77a.

<sup>16</sup> See Wright, *Grammar*, vol. 2, 74 AB; *Lisān*, vol. 1, 731a 13f.

<sup>17</sup> *Lisān*, vol. 15, 238b, -5ff.

<sup>18</sup> Lane, *Lexicon*, 2642c 22ff. following *Ṣiḥāḥ*, vol. 6, 2479 a 12ff.

<sup>19</sup> Grimme, “Thamudische Präposition.”

<sup>20</sup> Bauer, “*Labbaika*.”

<sup>21</sup> Wellhausen, *Reste*, 111, n. 1.



believing it to be an elliptic vocative in the dual form, the latter serving to emphasize the concept involved.<sup>22</sup> Having examined the phenomenon in comparison with similar expressions in other Semitic languages, J. Barth suspects that those words to which *-ay* appears to have been appended were formed by analogy with prepositions that ended with a radical *-ay* or *-ê*.<sup>23</sup>

A suggestion I find particularly persuasive was made as early as 1908 albeit in an unlikely place. Influenced by A. A. Bevan, Theodor Nöldeke points to the Syriac *lappay*; *lappayk* would then mean “towards thee (O God).”<sup>24</sup> The circumstance that the Arabic has a *b* instead of the *f* that would correspond to the Syriac *p* fits well with the assumption that the word was borrowed without realizing that it contained the element *appē*, “face” (which is related to Arabic *anf*). The Syriac *lappay*, “towards” is widely attested,<sup>25</sup> although not in combination with the second-person suffix in invocations to God, which must have been the starting point of the borrowing.<sup>26</sup> Nöldeke’s suggestion appears to me to have more in its favor than all the other derivations. It points towards religious influence from the north rather than the south.

### *The Tradition of the talbiyas*

The five sources transmitting more than just one or two *talbiyas* are the following:

1. Muḥammad b. al-Mustanīr Quṭrub (d. 206/821), *Kitāb al-azmina*: Quṭrub gives the *talbiyas* of twenty-four different tribes; his no. 7 is a variant of the *talbiya* of the Tamīm given at no. 6.<sup>27</sup>

2. Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb (d. 245/860), *Kitāb al-muḥabbar*: At nos. 1–10 and 12–21, Ibn Ḥabīb lists the *talbiyas* by the various “idols”;<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Fleischer, *Kleinere Schriften*, vol. 1, 302.

<sup>23</sup> Barth, “Studien,” 348ff.

<sup>24</sup> Nöldeke, “Arabs,” 668b.

<sup>25</sup> Payne Smith, *Thesaurus*, vol. 1, 279.

<sup>26</sup> The anomalous forms listed in *WKAS*, vol. 2, 183a 26 – b 11, such as *labbayhi*, *labbay yadayka*, etc., were developed only after the borrowing had taken place and occur primarily in dictionaries.

<sup>27</sup> In the following, the nos. 1–25 are used as according to pp. 116–126 of Ḥaddād’s edition.

<sup>28</sup> Even though this is admittedly a problematic expression, it will nevertheless be used for the sake of simplicity.

his no. 7 is not linked to an idol but merely to the 'Akk tribe; his no. 1 mentions the tribe involved as well as the idol.<sup>29</sup>

3. Aḥmad b. abī Ya'qūb al-Ya'qūbī (d. after 292/905), *Kitāb at-tārikh*: Al-Ya'qūbī lists the *talbiyas* of seventeen tribes; his no. 9 is a variant of the *talbiya* of the Rabī'a given at no. 8.<sup>30</sup>

4. (Pseudo?) Muqātil b. Sulaymān al-Balkhī (d. 150/767), *Tafsīr* (ad Q 22:30): Kister includes *talbiyas* taken from various manuscripts of a text which he identifies with the *Tafsīr Muqātil*. He points out that two of them only include the first ten *talbiyas* and assumes that some *talbiyas* were inserted by the commentary's transmitter al-Hudhayl b. Ḥabīb ad-Dandānī.<sup>31</sup> Abū Raḥma, on the other hand, assumes the entire section containing the *talbiyas* to have been added, either by al-Hudhayl or by later copyists of Muqātil. He justifies this by arguing that none of the works ascribed to Muqātil (*al-Ashbāh wa-n-naẓā'ir fī l-Qur'ān al-karīm*, *Tafsīr Muqātil*, *Tafsīr al-khamsmi'at āya min al-Qur'ān al-karīm*) show a tendency to such detailed digressions as those reported by Kister (ad Q 22:30, that is).<sup>32</sup> This would mean that the texts are from the late third/ninth century, or more likely from the fourth/tenth century.<sup>33</sup> In the following, however, they are nevertheless referred to under Muqātil's name. The *talbiyas* nos. 1–8 are listed by tribe; nos. 9 and 10 are assigned to a person or persons (naked women and Adam); nos. 11–20 and 22–31 are arranged according to idols, interrupted by no. 21 that mentions the tribe; nos. 32–56 are again according to tribe, even though seven of these *talbiyas* (34, 36, 37, 41, 42, 43 and 46) also mention the respective idols.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> In the following, the nos. 1–21 are used as according to p. 311–315.

<sup>30</sup> The nos. 1–18 are used according to vol. 1, 296 f.

<sup>31</sup> Kister, "Labbayka," 35f.

<sup>32</sup> Abū Raḥma, "Qirā'āt." He also believes that what Kister used were in fact manuscripts of the work which I. Goldfeld has published under the title *Tafsīr al-khamsmi'at āya min al-Qur'ān al-karīm* (Shfaram, 1980). This view is supported by the fact that, when dealing with Q 22:30, Goldfeld points out an addition by Muqātil's copyist 'Abdalkhāliq b. al-Ḥasan that contains *talbiyas* from various sources (ibid., 85, n. 254). A further, and conclusive, indication is to be found in the identical folio references given by Kister and Goldfeld. On the other hand, 'Abdallāh Maḥmūd Shihāta's edition of the *Tafsīr Muqātil* (Cairo, 1984; see vol. 3, 124, line 1, to 125, ult.) contains precisely the first ten *talbiyas* of the text published by Kister. Since the *Tafsīr al-khamsmi'at āya* is derived entirely from the *Tafsīr Muqātil* (cf. p. 7 of Goldfeld's English introduction), the puzzle can thus be solved.

<sup>33</sup> 'Abdalkhāliq died in 962 or 968 AD; see Goldfeld's English introduction, 5, n. 13.

<sup>34</sup> In the following, the nos. 1–56 are used as in Kister, "Labbayka."

5. Abū l-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī (d. 449/1058), *Risālat al-ghufrān*: Al-Ma‘arrī lists nine *talbiyas* arranged according to metrical characteristics; in nos. 3–9, the tribes are mentioned either by him or in the *talbiyas* themselves (or both).<sup>35</sup>

The material can therefore be classed into three groups: A. One list according to metrical characteristics (al-Ma‘arrī); B. one list arranged according to idols (Muqātil, nos. 11–31 = Ibn Ḥabīb, nos. 1–21); C. four lists arranged according to tribes/tribal units/persons, given here according to size: a. Muqātil I (nos. 1–8), b. al-Ya‘qūbī (nos. 1–18), c. Quṭrub (nos. 1–25), d. Muqātil II (nos. 32–56). As Kister points out, the two lists subsumed under B are largely identical.<sup>36</sup> The remaining five lists belonging to A and C all arrange the *talbiyas* in a different order, which is true even for the two lists of twenty-five *talbiyas* each, Quṭrub and Muqātil II. As already mentioned, al-Ma‘arrī’s list is arranged according to metrical characteristics (*masjū’ lā wazna lahū, manhūk, mashtūr*). The only features that al-Ya‘qūbī, Quṭrub, and Muqātil II have in common are that, broadly speaking, they list the North Arabian tribes first (nos. 1–9, 1–11, and 32–38, respectively) and then those from South Arabia (with the sole exception occurring in Muqātil II, nos. 48 and 50). Muqātil I lists Northern and Southern Arabs in no particular order.

It is not only the order of the tribes that is different, however, since some tribes are listed as having different *talbiyas* whilst some *talbiyas* are ascribed to several tribes. This may be seen from the example of the *talbiya* of the Rabī‘a. Since the focus here is on the history of the *talbiyas*’ tradition and not their content, the transliterations and translations are not complete. The rudimentary transcriptions chosen instead are merely intended to demonstrate the strongly divergent nature of the wording and ascriptions.

a. The oldest source gives the *talbiya* of the Rabī‘a tribe as: *lbyk ’llhm lbyk / lbyk mn rby’a / s’m’a mty’a / lrb m’ y’bd fy knysa wby’a / wrb kl w’sl ’w mzh r qty’a* (Quṭrub, no. 10).

b. Muqātil’s second list arranged according to tribes ascribes a slightly variant version to the Bakr b. Wā’il, a sub-tribe of the Rabī‘a: *lbyk ’llhm lbyk / lbyk ’n rby’a / s’m’a mty’a / lrb m’ y’bd fy knysa wby’a / qd khlft ’wth’nh’ fy ’sma mny’a* (Muqātil, no. 50).

<sup>35</sup> In the following, the *talbiyas* he lists on p. 535–537 are referred to as nos. 1–9.

<sup>36</sup> Kister, “*Labbayka*,” 35.

c. The second and third lines of these two versions largely correspond with al-Ya'qūbī's (as usual) shorter version, which is ascribed to the Rabī'a: *lbyk 'n rby'a / s'm'a lrbh' mty'a* (al-Ya'qūbī, no. 9).

d. Immediately preceding this, the same source also lists the following *talbiya* with a completely different rhyme for the Rabī'a: *lbyk rbn' lbyk / lbyk 'n qšdn' 'lyk* (al-Ya'qūbī, no. 8).

e. In contrast, Muqātil's first list arranged according to tribes ascribes the following *talbiya* with two rhymes to the Rabī'a: *lbyk 'llhm h'j' hq' / t'bd' wrq' / lm n'tk llmn'ha / wl' h'b' llrb'ha* (Muqātil, no. 4).

f. Quṭrub ascribes a largely identical version to the Bakr b. Wā'il: *lbyk hq' hq' / t'bd' wrq' / 'tyn'k llmy'ha / lm n't llrq'ha* (Quṭrub, no. 11).

g. Al-Ma'arri ascribes another similar version to the Bakr b. Wā'il, while Quṭrub ascribes the same formula to the *aṣṣār*: *lbyk hq' (h'j') hq' / t'bd' wrq' / jyn'k llnš'ha / lm n't llrq'ha* (al-Ma'arri, no. 6 = Quṭrub, no. 25).

h. Muqātil's second list arranged according to tribes ascribes to the Rabī'a a version which has the first two lines in common with the three versions just mentioned, but which then has three further lines with the same rhyme: *lbyk h'j' hq' / t'bd' wrq' / nrkb 'lyk ṭrq' / mstbqyn sbq' / lhlq r'ws h'q'* (Muqātil, no. 38).

i. A *talbiya* ascribed to the worship of the idol Muḥarriq, without mention of a tribe, broadly corresponds to the first two lines of the three versions just mentioned (according to Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥarriq was venerated by the Bakr Ibn Wā'il and the rest of the Tamīm<sup>37</sup>): *lbyk 'llhm lbyk / lbyk h'j' hq' / t'bd' wrq'* (Ibn Ḥabīb, no. 7 = Muqātil, no. 17).

A comparison of the *talbiyas* ascribed to the other tribes would produce similar results. As the example of the Rabī'a shows, we are faced with an overabundance of ascriptions and wordings.<sup>38</sup> In conclusion, it can be said that the sources from the third/ninth to fifth/eleventh centuries present us with six lists of varying content and length that diverge to such a degree that it is not possible to establish a clear correlation between *talbiya*, tribe, and idol. It appears that

<sup>37</sup> Ibn Ḥabīb, *Kitāb al-muḥabbar*, 317.

<sup>38</sup> Krone suggests that each tribe had two *talbiyas*, one for the venerated idol and one for Allāh, in whose honor the pilgrimage to Mecca was undertaken (Krone, *Altarabische Gottheit*, 398f.). However, my impression is that this hypothesis cannot be sustained.

there is no single Islamic source to which all the *talbiyas* can be traced back; rather, one ought to assume several traditions that were largely independent of one another. This in itself says nothing about the possibility of their pre-Islamic origins. In the following section, an attempt will be made to advance further by the use of criteria based on the *talbiyas*' content.

### *Content as a Criterion of Authenticity*

The *talbiyas* have to be measured against our knowledge of religious conditions immediately prior to the emergence of Islam, as gathered from other sources. To do this, we have to have recourse to explicit or implicit clues that can be found in the Qur'an, since the information given by Islamic historians such as Hishām b. al-Kalbī (d. ca. 206/821), or contained in the many allegedly pre-Islamic verses, is significantly more likely to have been reinterpreted or invented at a later date. Insofar as it is of interest here, the picture of the Jāhiliyya to be gathered from the Qur'an follows that given in Alford T. Welch's essay "Allah and other supernatural beings." Welch's description of the development of Qur'anic theology and thus also of the Qur'anic representation of the Jāhiliyya is strongly influenced by Richard Bell's chronology of the component parts of the surahs. Although in the present context this cannot be entered into exhaustively, it should be noted that it results in a decidedly coherent picture regarding the subject dealt with by Welch. Yet even without adopting Bell's chronological order, the content of the Qur'anic information as to pre-Islamic religion remains fundamentally unchanged; all that changes is their temporal sequence, which for our purposes is of lesser importance. Insofar as it is relevant here, Welch's outline of the Jāhiliyya is as follows:

In the earliest revelations, God is referred to as *rabb*, slightly later as *ar-raḥmān*, whom the Meccans addressed by the Qur'an appear not to have known or not to have believed in. Almost at the same time, God is described as *Allāh*. This duplication of names seems to have caused confusion, and *ar-raḥmān* seems to have been abandoned as a proper name for God very soon afterwards. The Meccans had venerated Allāh as creator, provider, and helper in distress even before Muhammad's appearance, yet did not do so exclusively, since they acknowledged other deities besides him: at first, the Qur'an does not

deny their existence, but merely claims their ability to affect human destiny to be dependent upon Allāh's permission. The inhabitants of Mecca and its surroundings worshipped three female *numina*, al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, which Muhammad's contemporaries referred to as God's "daughters." In the Qur'anic passages from the middle Meccan period, they are then described as angels (which does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Meccans). Subsequently, they are downgraded to the level of spirits (*jinn*). It was only later, in the third Meccan period, that the final Qur'anic position was adopted, that of God's absolute singularity, which ruled out the existence of other deities.

*Al-wāḥid al-qahhār wa-r-rabb aṣ-ṣamad*

One *talbiya* which Quṭrub (no. 8) ascribes to the North Arabian Banū Asad can be found in a shorter version but with the same ascription in Muqātil II (no. 35); al-Ya'qūbī only gives the beginning at no. 3 (also Banū Asad). The reference to Allāh, which only the first two sources give, is particularly striking: *al-wāḥid al-qahhār wa-r-rabb aṣ-ṣamad*. The epithet *qahhār*, "omnipotent" occurs six times in the Qur'an (12:39, 13:16, 14:48, 38:65, 39:4, 40:16), always together with *al-wāḥid*, "the One." Now if the Banū Asad really did call on Allāh as the only "One," the Qur'anic admonition that al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā and Manāt were "mere names you and your fathers have named" would have been superfluous (Q 53:23: *in hiya illā asmā'un sammaytumūhā antum wa-ābā'ukum*). The second half, containing the Qur'anic *hapax legomenon* *ṣamad* (Q 112:2), is similarly suspect of being derived from the Qur'an. It could perhaps be argued that the Qur'an is only addressed to the Meccans, and tribes in other parts of the Arabian Peninsula might already have embraced a form of monotheism that was neither Jewish nor Christian. Although this cannot be ruled out at a general level, it does seem improbable that the Banū Asad followed some sort of pure monotheism employing Qur'anic phraseology that has left no traces elsewhere. Arne A. Ambros made this point in 1986, describing the second half of the version given by Muqātil as a "Qur'anic pastiche."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Ambros, "Analyse," 238f.

*Mā na'budu l-awthāna ma'[a] man qad 'abad[a]*

This line follows in one of the three sources just discussed, namely Muqātil, no. 35.<sup>40</sup> Whereas Kister does not address the contents, Rubin offers the only conceivable meaningful translation: "we do not worship the idols with those who do."<sup>41</sup> Again, this can only be regarded as a monotheistic, and therefore suspect, statement. However, in the slightly longer version given by Quṭrub, no. 8, the passage reads: *lā na'budu l-aṣnāma ḥattā tajtahid[a] / li-rabbihā wa-tu'tabad*, "we do not worship the idols, as long as they do not strive on account of their lord and are at his service."<sup>42</sup> If this restriction (which is perhaps textually corrupt) was simply omitted in Muqātil, further reflections about the passage are superfluous.

*Wa-akhlaṣat li-rabbihā du'ā'ahā*

In the *talbiya* which Muqātil, no. 33, ascribes to the Tamīm together with several other tribes, and which al-Ya'qūbī, no. 4 (shorter version), ascribes to the Tamīm alone, the pilgrims are described as offering their prayers or worship in a pure form (*wa-akhlaṣat li-rabbihā du'ā'ahā*, the latter being replaced in the rhyme by *du'ā'hā*). Although the elements subjected to purification might in theory include stubbornness, or the lack of will to make sacrifices, vis-à-vis one god among many, this appears unlikely given the Islamic usage of *akhlaṣa*. Surah 112 is known as Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ precisely because of its explicit avowal of monotheism, and throughout the Qur'anic text expressions employing *akhlaṣa* are frequently used as antonyms for names given to polytheism. It is said of Muhammad's contemporaries that when at sea, "they will call on God, professing religion sincerely to him, yet when he delivers them safely to land, behold they associate" (Q 29:65: *fa-iḍā rakibū fī l-fulki da'awu llāha mukhliṣīna lahu d-dīna fa-lammā najjahum ilā l-barri idhā hum yushrikūna*).<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> The vowels in square brackets either do not fit the meter (*rajaz*, see Ambros, "Analyse," 238) or the rhyme.

<sup>41</sup> Rubin, "Al-Ṣamad," 205.

<sup>42</sup> I am indebted to Prof. Manfred Ullmann for his kind help in translating this passage.

<sup>43</sup> Similarly clear examples can be found at Q 39:2f. (*fa-'budi llāha mukhliṣan lahu d-dīna / a-lā li-llāhi d-dīnu l-khāliṣu wa-lladhīna ttakhadhū min dūnihi awliyā'a*) and Q 39:14f. (*quli llāha a'budu mukhliṣan lahū dīnī / fa-'budū mā shi'tum min dūnihi*). See also Ringgren, "Pure religion."



*Rabb as-sā'a/ad-dayyān*

In the *talbiya* which Muqātil, no. 47, ascribes to the Quḏā'a, Allāh is referred to as *rabb as-sā'a*. The Qur'an, however, portrays the Arab polytheists as having disbelieved in the resurrection of the body and the Last Judgement: "Will we, once we are dead and have become dust and bones, be really judged?" (Q 37:53: *a-idhā mitnā wa-kunnā turāban wa-izāman a-innā la-madīnūna*).<sup>44</sup>

In Quṭrub, no. 3, the Qays ('Aylān) are reported to have applied the epithet *ad-dayyān* to Allāh. Even if the Classical Arabic dictionaries claim that *dayyān* was used to mean "conqueror" (*qahhār*) or "secular judge" (thus applied to 'Alī b. abī Ṭālib), it is explained above all as a name of God.<sup>45</sup> The meaning of the name points to the Islamic conception of the Last Judgement. It is just as unlikely to occur in a pre-Islamic *talbiya* as the word *as-sā'a*.

In the four examples just given, doubts as to a pre-Islamic origin were raised on the grounds that they posit religious concepts—such as monotheism and the Last Judgement—which the Qur'an was able to impose only against great resistance. We now turn to a few examples where it is the degree of agreement with the Qur'an's *wording* that gives reason for caution.

*Rabb ath-thālitha al-ukhrā*

In Muqātil, no. 45, the *talbiya* ascribed to the Ḥums describes Allāh as (among other things) *rabb ath-thālitha al-ukhrā*, "Lord of the third one, the other (goddess)." We have no knowledge of a pre-Islamic trinity with Manāt in third place. Q 53:19f. reads: "Have you seen, then, al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā? And Manāt, the third one, the other?" (*a-farra'aytumu l-Lāta wa-l-'Uzzā / wa-Manāta th-thālithata l-ukhrā*). The addition of *ath-thālitha al-ukhrā* seems well motivated in this case, both by the need to find a rhyme and by the need for verses of roughly equal length (here eleven as opposed to ten syllables). Neither reason is true of the *talbiya* of the Ḥums.

<sup>44</sup> See also Q 23:82, 17:49-98, 37:16, 56:47 and 79:10f.

<sup>45</sup> *Lisān*, vol. 13, 166, pu.ff. However, the most well-known *asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā* do not include the word.

## Islām

Finally we turn to the *talbiya* of the Ḥimyar (Muqātil, no. 43), which describes the inner attitude of the pilgrims to Mecca as being *tanazzuhan wa-islām[an]*, “in abstinence and in *islām*.” The word *tanazzuh* is not found in the Qur’an. Kister considers *islām* to mean “devotion exclusively to God,” and sees in this further evidence for the existence of a pre-Islamic form of monotheism.<sup>46</sup> This cannot, however, be justified from the *talbiya* itself; here, one could either construe *islām* as signifying “devotion” in a non-monotheistic sense or, which appears more likely, as an Islamic back-projection.

Seven *talbias* speak of the idols being left behind when the pilgrimage was begun; this is not inconsistent with the Qur’anic portrayal of the Jāhiliyya, which makes no mention of the localization of the lesser gods.<sup>47</sup>

The seven are: *qad tarakū l-awthāna thumma ntābūka* (al-Ma’arrī: *aṣnāmahum wa-ntābūka*), “they have left the idols behind and sought thee” (Quṭrub, no. 17 = al-Ma’arrī, no. 8; Hamdān); *wa-khallafū awthānahum wa-‘aẓẓamūka*, “they have left their idols behind them and glorified thee” (Quṭrub, no. 4; Thaḳīf); *wa-khallafat awthānahā fī arḍi l-jubayl / wa-khallafū man yaḥfaẓu l-aṣnāma wa-ṭ-ṭufayl*, “they have left their idols behind on the slopes of the mountains and have left people behind to protect the idols and the young children” (Quṭrub, no. 9; Hudhayl); *qad khallafat awthānahā warā[’a]hā*, “they have left their idols behind them” (Muqātil, no. 33; Tamīm; cf. al-Ya’qūbī, no. 4, where the text is corrupt); *qad khallafū l-awthāna khilwan ṣifran*, “they have left the idols alone in an empty place” (Muqātil, no. 45; Ḥums); *qad khallafū l-andāda khilwan ṣifran*, “they have left the idols alone in an empty place” (Muqātil, no. 49; the people of ‘Amr b. Ma’dikarib, i.e., the Zubayd); *qad khallafat awthānahā fī wāsiṭi l-qabīla*, “they have left their idols behind in the midst of the tribe” (Muqātil, no. 55; Bajīla).

Frequent mention is made, however, of the idols’ subordinate rank with respect to Allāh. While this can be reconciled with the Qur’anic view of the Jāhiliyya, it does manifest a degree of dogmatic reflection

<sup>46</sup> Kister, “*Labbayka*,” 39f.

<sup>47</sup> According to the picture presented by Ibn al-Kalbī in his *Kitāb al-aṣnām*, idols were normally objects such as trees or stones, and less often anthropomorphic in form. However, we also have reports about household idols (Ibn al Kalbī, *Aṣnām*, 20, ult., of the Arabic text = p. 47, 7 of the German text; see also Lecker, “Idol worship”), as well as of all the Arab gods being located at the Ka’ba (Wellhausen, *Reste*, 72).

that would be inexplicable in the light of the anarchical and pluralistic religious situation that is implied by the Qur'an's silence regarding any form of theological authority backed up by political power.

### *The Idols' Subordinate Rank*

One of the invocations has been described as a *talbiya* of either the Quraysh (al-Ya'qūbī, no. 1, Ibn Ḥabīb, no. 1, idol Isāf = Muqātil, no. 11, Quṭrub, no. 2) or the cult of the Ḥums (Muqātil, no. 1); minor additions or omissions notwithstanding, it runs thus: *labbayka llāhumma labbayka / labbayka lā sharīka laka / illā sharīkun huwa laka / tamlikuhū wa-mā malaka*, "at your service, O Allāh, at your service! At your service, you have no partner other than one whom you own. You rule him, and he does not rule you (or: you rule him, and that which he rules)."<sup>48</sup> This formula begins with a monotheistic statement that is subsequently restricted—which raises the question of how such a formula could have arisen without the existence of some form of monotheism. It may possibly have been derived from the *talbiya* of Muhammad *labbayka llāhumma labbayka / labbayka lā sharīka laka / inna l-ḥamda laka wa-l-mulka / lā sharīka laka*.<sup>49</sup>

Islamic influence is probable in numerous other passages that refer to the subordination of the idols to Allāh:

– In the *talbiya* of the Thaḳīf given by Quṭrub as no. 4, we read: *'Uzzāhumū wa-l-Lātu fī yadayka / dānat laka l-aṣnāmu ta'zīman ilayka / qad adh'anat bi-silmihā ilayka*, "their 'Uzzā and al-Lāt are in your [Allāh's] hands; the idols submit to you by glorifying you; they approach you submissively in their devotion" (= Muqātil, no. 48, with the version *wa-l-Lātu wa-l-'Uzzā fī yadayka*). From the circumstance that the *talbiya* of the Thaḳīf mentions al-Lāt only in so subordinate a position, despite the fact that they are said to have been strongly attached to al-Lāt, Susanne Krone infers an Islamic coloring, or at least a mistake in ascription on the part of Muqātil.<sup>50</sup>

– In the *talbiya* ascribed to the Qays 'Aylān in Muqātil, no. 37, the latter are reported as saying: *atatka Qaysu 'Aylān[a] / [...] / dhalīlatan*

<sup>48</sup> See also al-Ma'arrī, no. 2, Muqātil, no. 32 (Kināna und Quraysh), and no. 53 (Kinda, Ḥaḍramawt and as-Sakūn). Additional references are given in Kister, "Labbayka," 33, n. 3, and in the additional notes added to the reprint of that essay.

<sup>49</sup> E.g. Quṭrub, no. 1; see Kister, "Labbayka," 34, n. 4.

<sup>50</sup> Krone, *Altarabische Gottheit*, 400f.

*li-r-raḥmān[i] / jamī'uhā wa-l-awthān[u]*, "the Qays 'Aylān have come to you, all of them and the idols are submissive before *ar-raḥmān*."<sup>51</sup>

– Muqātil, no. 40, has the 'Akk and the Ash'ariyyūn say of *ar-raḥmān*: *dhallat lahu l-aṣnām*, "the idols are submissive before him."

– In the *talbiya* of the Madhḥij given at Muqātil, no. 41 (= al-Ya'qūbī, no. 12), Allāh is described as *rabbu l-Lāti wa-l-'Uzzā*, "Lord over al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā"; similarly Muqātil, no. 45 (Ḥums; preceded by *rabbu th-thālithati l-ukhrā*).

– Muqātil, no. 43 (Ḥimyar), reads: *dānū lahū [Allāh] fī a'lām[in] / awthānuhā wa-l-aṣnām[u]*, "their idols and graven images submit to him in [...] (?)."

– The *talbiya* of the Judhām at Muqātil, no. 52, addresses Allāh as *ilāh al-aṣnām*, "god of the idols," while the *talbiya* of the Daws at Muqātil, no. 56, does so as *rabb al-aṣnām*, "lord of the idols."

In general, both here and wherever mention is made of leaving behind the idols, the use of the words *ṣanam* and *wathan* is particularly striking, since, as Hawting points out, the Qur'an does not usually employ these two concepts in connection with Muhammad's opponents but only for much earlier polytheist groups.<sup>52</sup>

On closer examination of the way the seemingly all too Islamic *talbiyas* discussed above are distributed throughout the six lists (A to C.d) described above, it emerges that some of the lists contain more than others. For the purposes of comparison, the short lists A (al-Ma'arrī) with nine *talbiyas* and C.a (Muqātil I) with eight, may be initially disregarded. The remaining lists with twenty-one, eighteen, twenty-five, and twenty-five *talbiyas* respectively are however well-suited in terms of size. Here, we see that the suspect material in list B is limited to the *talbiya* mentioned at the beginning, containing the core statement *lā sharika laka illā [...]* and which is in itself little more than a starting point. Apparently Islamic features are more common in lists C.b and C.c and widespread throughout C.d.

Yet to a certain extent, the vocabulary of list B does correspond to the Qur'anic lexicon. Thus, the *talbiya* of the devotees of Shams contains the expressions *ḥajjan li-rabbīn mustaqīmīn birruhū*, "a pilgrimage to a lord whom it is right to worship" (Ibn Ḥabīb, no. 6) and *ḥajjan mustaqīmīn birruhū*, "a pilgrimage the piety of which is right"

<sup>51</sup> For *ar-raḥmān*, see below.

<sup>52</sup> Hawting, *Idolatry*, 55. One exception is the use of *awthān* in Q 22:30; cf. Hawting, *Idolatry*, 57–60.

(Muqātil, no. 16). The Qur'an usually employs *mustaqīm* together with *ṣirāṭ*, and sometimes with *qistās* (Q 17:35 and Q 26:182), *hudā* (Q 22:67), and *ṭarīq* (Q 46:30), but never with the word *birr*, which occurs eight times in the *talbiyas*. In the *talbiya* of the worshippers of Nasr (Ibn Ḥabīb, no. 16 = Muqātil, no. 26), Allāh is addressed with *anta rabbunā l-ḥamīd*, "you are our praiseworthy lord." The term *ḥamīd* is applied to God seventeen times in the Qur'an, but not once together with *rabb*. Although Qur'anic influence cannot be ruled out in the two cases mentioned, one ought to assume *in dubio pro reo* that they provide evidence of pre-Islamic religious language that is independent of the Qur'an.

Unfortunately, while this means that list B can be regarded as largely free of suspicion, its content reveals little concerning the history of religion. Two of the *talbiyas* containing the name of an idol do appear to be of interest with regard to the relationship between Allāh and the idols. The *talbiya* of the worshippers of Jihār reads [...] *labbayka j'al dhunūbanā jubār[an] / wa-hdinā li-awḍaḥi l-manār[i] / wa-matti'nā wa-mallinā bi-Jihār[in]*, "at your service, let our trespasses be unpunished, lead us towards the clearest signpost, let us enjoy (life) for a long time and let us live long with/through Jihār (?)" (Ibn Ḥabīb, no. 4 = Muqātil, no. 14, which reads *li-aṣṣlaḥi l-manārā / wa-matti'nā wa-mallinā Jihārā*, "[...] and long experience Jihār"?). Both versions are so obscure as to preclude any conclusions. The *talbiya* of the devotees of Suwā' reads: *labbayka anabnā ilayka / inna Suwā'an* [sic] *ṭalīqun ilayka*, "at your service, we have returned to you repentant, Suwā' is not bound to you (?)" (Muqātil, no. 15 = Ibn Ḥabīb, no. 5, who reads: *ubnā ilayka / [...]* *Suwā'a* [i.e., correctly diptotic] *ṭulibna* [this with reference to the manuscript] *ilayka*). Neither of the two versions seems to me to be open to meaningful translation. Presumably the text of these two *talbiyas* has been corrupted.

The only information obtainable from the other *talbiyas* in list B is that *Allāhumma* is probably a form of address for Allāh, or at least for some male divinity, on the basis of the imperative form used. It is noticeable that the introductory formula *labbayka llāhumma labbayka* is missing from the *talbiyas* given by al-Ma'arrī, so that they might be addressed to gods other than Allāh. However, the true reason is probably that this formula fails to fit any Arabic meter, and al-Ma'arrī's interest in the *talbiyas* was limited to those open to being read metrically. It is not entirely plain whether the addressee is identi-

cal with Allāh, since even according to sources from the Islamic period it is uncertain whether Allāh was the deity of the shrine in Mecca; Pavel Pavlovitch has drawn attention to these accounts.<sup>53</sup>

As regards the two short lists A (al-Ma'arrī) and C.a (Muqātil I), both contain the *talbiya* reading *lā sharīka laka illā [...]*, which Muqātil gives as no. 1 and thereby as his starting point, while al-Ma'arrī places it at no. 2. Al-Ma'arrī, no. 8, also refers to the idols having been left behind (*qad tarakū aṣnāmahum*).

From an overall perspective, the information concerning the pre-Islamic pantheon and its structure that can be gleaned from the *talbiyas* as a historical source is thus extremely meager. The only certainty would appear to be that the custom of proclaiming invocations beginning with *labbayka* when making a pilgrimage to a holy site is pre-Islamic in origin. The Qur'an does not mention it, while the Ḥadīth assumes it as given. The expression *labbayka* was a mystery to Arab etymologists, which would have been unlikely had it been an early Islamic innovation. It seems that a small core of genuine *talbiyas* was augmented by others that originated during the Islamic period. It might even be that the genuinely pre-Islamic nucleus was even smaller than the twenty-one *talbiyas* of list B; but it is equally possible that genuine evidence of pre-Islamic worship is to be found in the "suspect" lists.

The trend which can be recognized behind the fabricated *talbiyas* is not completely uniform; on the one hand, some show clear attempts to project on the Jāhiliyya a single God and the Last Judgement, both of which are virtually incompatible with the Qur'anic "descriptions" of pre-Islamic religion. On the other hand, and very much more frequently, Allāh's relationship to the idols is depicted in a way which at first appears not to contradict the relevant passages of the Qur'an, but which portrays the Arabs as a fairly united people made up of exemplary devotees of a High God. This picture owes much to a literal interpretation of Qur'anic polemics; it is conspicuous by its lack of non-Qur'anic information on the localities and practices of worship, as well as by the anachronistic use of the nouns *ṣanam* and *wathan*, and finally by its agreement with Qur'anic vocabulary and phraseology.

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<sup>53</sup> See Pavlovitch, "*Qad kunna lā na'budu*."

*The Problem of ar-rahmān and Pre-Islamic Poetry as a Source*

The repeated mention of *ar-rahmān* as a name or epithet of the *tal-biyas'* addressee has not so far been included among the features indicating an Islamic origin, since it is uncertain whether the Arabs of central and northern Arabia only became familiar with this description through the Qur'an. The Qur'an conveys the impression that the Meccans did not understand *ar-rahmān* as being a name for God. The epithet is, however, well attested as having been the name of a deity in pre-Islamic South Arabia, and pre-Islamic poetry, too, makes use of this name on several occasions. Should it turn out that for occurrences of *ar-rahmān* outside the Yemen a Qur'anic origin must be assumed, this would open up the possibility of testing the preceding argument as to the authenticity of the various lists. The *rahmān* issue also offers an opportunity for a more general examination of the value of pre-Islamic literature as a source for the history of religion.

The Qur'anic verses in question can be found *inter alia* in Jomier's essay on the use of the name *ar-rahmān* in the Qur'an,<sup>54</sup> and in the article by Welch already mentioned.<sup>55</sup> These passages are Q 25:60 and Q 13:30:

And if it is said to them: "Prostrate yourselves before the Compassionate," they reply: "But who is the Compassionate? Shall we prostrate ourselves to what you order us?" This only increases their aversion (*wa-idhā qāla lahumu sjudū li-r-rahmāni qālū wa-mā r-rahmānu a-nasjudu li-mā ta'murunā wa-zādahum nufūran*).

Thus we have sent you forth to a nation before which other nations had passed away, so as to recite to them what we revealed to you; and yet they deny the Compassionate (*ka-dhālika arsalnāka fī ummatin qad khalat min qablihā umamun li-tatluwa 'alayhimu lladhī awḥaynā ilayka wa-hum yakfurūna bi-r-rahmāni*).

The wording of these two passages makes it appear at least probable that the opponents of the prophet were unaware of a deity by the name of *ar-rahmān*, although it would doubtlessly be possible to find an interpretation leading to less rigorous conclusions. In the first passage *wa-mā r-rahmānu* might merely mean "and what is *ar-rahmān* to us?"; and the lack of faith implied by the second passage might

<sup>54</sup> Jomier, "Nom divin."

<sup>55</sup> Welch, "Allah."



only be a generalization of the denial of a single article of faith, such as the Last Judgement or the resurrection of the body.

Jomier tends to the view that the name *ar-raḥmān* was alien to the Meccans. His opinion that *ar-raḥmān* was venerated as a monotheistic deity by the groups surrounding the “false prophet” Musaylima in the central Arabian Yamāma can claim support from two passages in aṭ-Ṭabarī’s history that describe Musaylima as having claimed to have received his revelations from *ar-raḥmān*, in whose hands the destiny of the Banū Tamīm lay.<sup>56</sup> In the absence of further evidence these accounts should be regarded with great caution, especially in view of the fact that Musaylima seems to have begun his religious and political activity only around the year 630 CE.<sup>57</sup> Despite his opposition to Medina, Islamic influence or borrowings can therefore not be ruled out. In the Yemen, however, worship of *ar-raḥmān* (*raḥmānān*) is so well attested that it is possible to speak of a monotheistic Raḥmānism in the fifth and early sixth centuries which “bore neither obviously Jewish nor obviously Christian traits and which not only members of the Jewish and Christian religious communities but also the adherents of a local Arab monotheism were thus able to adopt.”<sup>58</sup>

Among the northern Arabs as defined in linguistic terms, i.e., the nomadic and settled peoples of northern and central Arabia, the name *ar-raḥmān* occurs in four pre-Islamic verses mentioned by Brockelmann, Abū Raḥma, and Nöldeke.<sup>59</sup> The first reads:

For two years you have rushed to us, (two years) which were against you; that which *ar-raḥmān* wants he pushes through (literally: he makes

<sup>56</sup> Jomier, “Nom divin,” 379f., n. 3; the passages are from Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, vol. 1, 4, 1937, 3 and 1933, 11f.

<sup>57</sup> See Watt, “Musaylima.”

<sup>58</sup> Müller, “Religion und Kult,” 190. A survey of the different hypotheses—an ancient South Arabian Jewish monotheism in the strict sense vs. a monotheistic religion merely inspired by Judaism—is given by Iwona Gajda, who inclines towards the latter alternative (Gajda, *Ḥimyar*, vol. 1, 323–330). Coming from outside the inner circle of specialists on ancient South Arabia, Andrew Rippin has adopted a skeptical position towards the existence of a non-Jewish, non-Christian form of South Arabian monotheism (Rippin, “RHMMN”).

<sup>59</sup> Brockelmann, “Allah,” 106; Abū Raḥma, “*Qirā’āt*,” 115. Mention should also be made of the verses by poets active in the time of the Prophet. Brockelmann mentions al-Khansā’, *Anīs al-julasā’* 65:3, and Wellhausen, *Lieder* 165:5 (= as-Sukkarī, *Sharḥ* 742:6), which is ascribed to Burayq al-Hudhalī. The latter verse appears in *GdQ*, vol. 1, 112, n. 1, as does the verse of Suwayd b. abī Kāhil in *Mufaḍḍaliyyāt*, 729, v. 61. The value of these passages as evidence is rightly classified as being low.

firm or loose) ('*ajiltum 'alaynā hijjatayni 'alaykumū wa-mā yasha'i r-raḥmānu ya'qid wa-yuṭliqī*).<sup>60</sup>

This is the fifth from last verse of a forty-verse poem from the ancient *dīwān* by al-Aḥwal (d. after 259/873); the verse is also included in the *Aṣma'īyyāt*, the *Muntahā ṭ-ṭalab* and in the Qur'anic commentaries of aṭ-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr. Neither the wording nor the content of the verses give any reason to assume an Islamic origin.

The second verse reads:

There arrived gifts which *ar-raḥmān* had sent, until they were made to kneel down by the tents of Biṣṭām (*jā'at hadāyā minā r-raḥmāni mur-salatun ḥattā unikhāt ladā abyāti Biṣṭāmi*).<sup>61</sup>

This is the first of verse of a three-verse poem. Without giving his reasons, Nöldeke regards the mention of *ar-raḥmān* here as being a "Muslim correction."<sup>62</sup> Neither the content nor the choice of words is conspicuously close to the Qur'an, so that *in dubio pro reo* the verse should not be regarded as suspect.

The third verse reads:

Eat of that which your God has provided for you and be contented, for *ar-raḥmān* will provide for you tomorrow as well (*kulū l-yawma min rizqi l-ilāhi wa-aysirū fa-inna 'alā r-raḥmāni rizqakumū ghadā*).<sup>63</sup>

This is the third from last verse of a fifteen-verse piece from the ancient *dīwān* by Abū Ṣāliḥ Yaḥyā b. Mudrik aṭ-Ṭā'ī (d. ca. 250/864), as transmitted by Hishām b. Muḥammad al-Kalbī (d. ca. 206/921). The verse has also been transmitted in the *Akhbār al-muwaffaqiyyāt* of az-Zubayr b. Bakkār, the *Bahjat al-majālis* of Ibn 'Abdalbarr al-Qurṭubī, and elsewhere. Ibn Qutayba's *Uyūn al-akhbār* ascribes it, probably erroneously, to the Umayyad poet Jamīl.<sup>64</sup> The poem contains Ḥātim's replies to his wife's reproaches about the wasteful generosity for which he had become proverbially famous. The similarity to the Qur'an is evident; Q 2:60 reads *kulū wa-shrabū min rizqi llāhi*, "eat and drink from God's provision," and Q 34:15 has *kulū min rizqi rabbikum*, "eat of your Lord's provision." The editor, 'Ādil Sulaymān

<sup>60</sup> Salāma, *Dīwān* 3:36.

<sup>61</sup> Ibn Rumayḍ al-'Anazī in Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil*, vol. 1, 450, 2f.

<sup>62</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 1, 112, n. 1.

<sup>63</sup> Ḥātim, *Dīwān* 45:13.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Jamīl, *Dīwān* 78:ult.

Jamāl, also accepts an Islamic origin for this verse, as he does in a number of other cases.<sup>65</sup>

The fourth verse reads:

I lament to *ar-rahmān* how far I would have to travel to visit her, and what she has imposed on me, and that my hope is now gone (*shakawtu ilā r-rahmāni bu'da mazārihā wa-mā ḥammalatnī wa-nqīṭā'a rajā'iyā*).<sup>66</sup>

Again, Islamic influence has to be acknowledged; in Q 12:86, Jacob says: *innamā ashkū baththī wa-ḥuznī ilā llāh*, "I complain of my sorrow and grief to God." At the end of the poem, the *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (the only source for this text) reports according to Abū 'Amr (probably ash-Shaybānī) that several of the verses are also ascribed to Majnūn, whose work frequently employs the motif of the lament to God.<sup>67</sup> Although one could assume that the contrary was true, namely, that one of Majnūn's verses was incorporated into the poem by Qays Ibn al-Ḥudādiyya, the verse is not to be found in the ancient *dīwān* of Majnūn by Abū Bakr al-Wālibī (who was a contemporary of Abū 'Amr ash-Shaybānī, and thus belongs to the second/eighth and the beginning of the third/ninth century<sup>68</sup>), nor in the parallel transmissions. Yet as far as I know, the motif of the poet's lamentation to God is not attested in pre-Islamic literature, whereas it is relatively common in the Islamic period.<sup>69</sup> This means that the only occurrences which at first sight do not appear to be suspicious are the two verses by Salāma b. Jandal and Ibn Rumayḍ al-'Anazī.

<sup>65</sup> Page 117f. of his introduction. I am indebted to Prof. Ullmann for drawing my attention to the following points: 1. Several verses of this poem have been transmitted as Ma'n Ibn Aws, no. 11 (edited by Paul Schwarz, Leipzig, 1903). 2. Friedrich Schultess, in his edition of the poems of Ḥātim (Leipzig, 1897; p. 40, n. 1), draws attention to the verse's similarity to Mt 6:31–34. Its authenticity is thus questionable.

<sup>66</sup> Qays b. al-Ḥudādiyya, fragment 15:13.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. the following examples: *ilā llāhi ashkū mā ulāqī minā l-hawā* (Majnūn, *Dīwān* 209:7); *ilā llāhi ashkū mā ulāqī minā l-jawā* (169:4; also ascribed to other poets); *ilā llāhi ashkū ḥubba Laylā kamā shakā ilā llāhi faqda l-wālidayni yatīmun* (244:7; with another ascription); *ilā llāhi ashkū niyyatan shaqqatī l-'aṣā* (191:2); *ilā llāhi ashkū ṣabwatī ba'da kurbatī* (137:8; with other ascriptions); *shakawtu li-rabbī idh ra'aytuki naẓratan* (301:ult.).

<sup>68</sup> Cf. GAS, vol. 2, 392.

<sup>69</sup> In addition to Shamardal, *Gedichte* 12:8, and the four verses listed in the commentary thereon (besides those by Majnūn), see also the fragments of al-Marrār 2:4, *Naqā'id* 35:7; 'Abbās, *Khawārij* 10:1, 101:2, 103:3, 156:1, 248:1, 278:3; as-Sukkarī, *Sharḥ*, 495, v. 11; Jarīr, *Dīwān* 3:3.

Now, what do the *talbiyas* say of *ar-raḥmān*? He is named four times:

- al-Ya‘qūbī, no. 18 (tribes: ‘Akk and al-Ash‘ariyyūn): *naḥujju li-r-raḥmān*
- Muqātil, no. 40 (tribes: ‘Akk und al-Ash‘ariyyūn): *labbayka llāhumma labbayka / naḥujju* [or *ḥajjan?*, text: *ḥj*] *li-r-raḥmān*
- Muqātil, no. 52 (tribes: Judhām): *wa-ataw ilāha l-aṣnām / [...] / ta‘zīman li-r-raḥmān*
- Quṭrub, no. 3 = al-Ya‘qūbī, no. 5 = Muqātil, no. 37 (tribe: Qays ‘Aylān): *labbayka llāhumma labbayka / [al-Ya‘qūbī, Muqātil: labbayka] anta r-raḥmān[u] / [...] / [only Muqātil:] dhalīlatan li-r-raḥmān[i]* [Quṭrub: *mudhlilatan li-d-dayyān[i]*]

The four occurrences all come from lists which have already been described above as being suspect, namely: for the first instance, list C.b; for the second and third, list C.d; and for the fourth, lists C.b, C.c and C.d. List B, which appears to be free of Islamic elements, makes no mention of *ar-raḥmān*. This means that the only references to the worship of *ar-raḥmān*, which can be taken seriously, are to be found in just two pre-Islamic verses, which is hardly an impressive number. On the one hand, this would appear to confirm the general reservations against all the lists other than list B. On the other hand, it means that one has to take seriously the impression conveyed by the Qur’an that its addressees were unaware of a deity called *ar-raḥmān*.

In a well balanced summary of the issue of the authenticity of pre-Islamic literature in general, Ewald Wagner states: “What has survived is made up partly of genuine poems and in part by false poems modeled on these genuine poems. Our capacity to separate the two is very limited.”<sup>70</sup> The question of the value that ancient Arabian literature has as a source for the history of religion can therefore be decided only by examining each individual verse for too close a proximity to the Qur’an in terms of its content and independently of the history of its transmission, however favorable that might appear to be. In his 1922 essay *Allah und die Götzen*, Carl Brockelmann speaks of an “esoteric” faith in Allāh as a “creator God,” a type of deity also attested elsewhere, who was not worshipped, yet was still feared as the cause of death and was regarded as the fount of the moral order. Since he,

<sup>70</sup> Wagner, *Grundzüge*, vol. 1, 25.

however, more or less summarily regards pre-Islamic poetry as being authentic, these conclusions stand in need of re-examination.

### *Conclusion*

Upon critical examination, many pages of Islamic tradition which appear at first glance to be of great relevance to the history of pre-Islamic religion—purporting to document the invocations uttered by pre-Islamic pilgrims to Mecca—have turned out partly to be of the Islamic period in five cases out of six. The sole remaining list (B) contains very little concerning the central issue of the relationship between Allāh and the other *numina*.

In his monograph cited above, Gerald Hawting describes the entire post-Qur'anic tradition concerning the Jāhiliyya, including the *talbiyas* in general, as being unsuited to assist in reconstructing the history of pre-Islamic religion. He argues that the accounts in question contradict one another, that they are stereotyped or formulaic in character, that parallels can be shown to exist with the representation of idolatry found in other historical and geographical contexts, that the accounts do not fit particularly well with the Qur'anic polemics against the *mushrikūn*, and that the support given by archeological and epigraphic evidence is far more problematic than has generally been assumed.<sup>71</sup> While his arguments are powerful, it seems to me that his conclusion is too radical in claiming that the Islamic tradition tells us nothing at all about the Jāhiliyya and merely reflects later views of the Abrahamic origins of Islam in the idolatrous Ḥijāz. This is not a necessary result of Hawting's arguments but rather follows from his opinions about the development of the Qur'an and of Islam, which are strongly influenced by the views of John Wansbrough. The findings are just as open to a different interpretation, namely, that they may have resulted from a break in tradition caused by the rise of Islam and by the ensuing emigration of Arabs from the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>72</sup>

The changes in religious life caused by the rise of Islam, both during Muhammad's lifetime and afterwards, might be expected to have inevitably resulted in a dissociation from the religious orientation of

<sup>71</sup> Hawting, *Idolatry*.

<sup>72</sup> For the break in tradition between the time of Muhammad's death and the beginnings of Islamic scholarship, see Schöller, *Exegetisches Denken*, 113.

the Jāhiliyya, given that the Qur'anic message is hostile towards them and had just achieved an overwhelming success. The existing situation was viewed as having been erroneous in every respect. If one accepts this assessment, both individual and collective amnesia come as little surprise.

The resettlement of fighting men and entire, or parts of tribal units that took place in the course of the *futūḥ*, resulted in the dilution and fragmentation of the old social groupings; and even when tribes emigrated more or less entirely, it is to be expected that they had to regroup both internally and externally. In a situation like this, traditions concerning a section of the past that was regarded as irrelevant anyway inevitably suffered further damage.

From a certain point on, perhaps around 700 CE, both the Arabs and the non-Arab Muslims began to be interested in the Jāhiliyya once more; their reasons and motivations were as varied as the means by which they sought to acquire, interpret, and develop the fragments of information available to them. On the one hand, there are many cases of uncontrolled elaboration going as far as complete invention, yet on the other hand, there are a number of cases which display scholarly historical method—one example being Ibn al-Kalbī's conclusion that the fact that the theophoric proper names employing al-Lāt and Manāt were older than those using al-'Uzza, implied that the first two deities were more ancient.<sup>73</sup> If one then falls back on the Qur'an as being the most reliable, detailed, and comparatively homogeneous source, Welch's interpretation offers the most plausible approach. His aim, however, was to retrace the Qur'anic view of pre-Islamic religion rather than to arrive at a historical reconstruction of that religion.

Hawting emphasizes that monotheists have generally tended to describe even opponents who believed themselves to be monotheists as being idolatrous;<sup>74</sup> this has at least the virtue of questioning the literal interpretation of the relevant Qur'anic passages, and thus the

<sup>73</sup> Ibn al-Kalbī, *Aṣnām*, 11, 9ff. (Arabic text, p. 38 of the German translation).

<sup>74</sup> His examples include the Protestant polemics against Catholics as well as those of the Wahhābīs against popular Sunni Islam and the Shi'a. One might add another example that is closer to the time of the Qur'an: 'Umar Ibn Abī Rabī'a, in comparing an attractive woman to a gazelle (thus the masculine gender), says *marra bī fī nafarin yahfufnahū mithla mā ḥaffa n-naṣārā bi-l-wathan*, "she ran past me in the midst of a group (of companions) who surrounded her in the way Christians surround an idol" ('Umar, *Dīwān* 120:2).

“high god” model, in an intelligent way. However, all that this shows is that these passages do not *necessarily* have to be understood in a literal sense. Hawting does not commit himself as to the localization of the emergence of Islam any more than Wansborough does, but simply refers to the latter’s conjectures about a “sectarian milieu.” Wansbrough supposes the Qur’an to have come into existence at approximately the end of the second/eighth century; Hawting differs from him in this respect, giving a date before the middle of the second/eighth century.<sup>75</sup>

With all due respect to the Wansborough school’s search for truth, I would like to point out that if so far-reaching a revision of existing assumptions about the time and place of the emergence of Islam is developed, one firstly ought to offer a better documented alternative, and secondly to make at least an initial effort to see whether the traditional approach is capable of being sustained if one were to take all the available material into account. Among the sources which are completely ignored is the extensive *Dīwān* of the Umayyad poet ‘Umar b. Abī Rabī’a (d. before 721, perhaps even in 712). His work fits so harmoniously into the development of Arabic poetry and is so homogeneous in itself that it would be absurd to suppose it to be of apocryphal origin. Throughout his work, he mentions the *ḥajj* and the Meccan sanctuary, the Prophet’s grave (*wa-qabri n-nabiyyi*, 193:9), the resurrection (*munshiru l-mawtā*, 152:1), the messenger of God (*ni’amu llāhi bi-r-rasūli lladhī ursila*, 233:6), Muhammad’s prophethood (*wa-lladhī ba’atha n-nabiyya Muḥammadan bi-n-nūri wa-l-islāmī*, 91:11; *wa-llāhi rabbi Muḥammadin*, 328:1, cf. 330:6 and 371:1) and *islām* (74:28; 76:10; 91:16; 297:5; 428:9). This easily accessible material has not so far been explained by the Wansbrough school. Yehuda Nevo and Judith Koren, albeit not part of that school, are prepared to accept similar reinterpretations of Islamic history; at the end of their account of the inscriptions from Sde Boqer in the Negev that address Allāh as *rabb Mūsā wa-‘Īsā*, they conclude: “Such a formula indicates some variety of Judeo-Christian belief: as it stands, it cannot be either Christian, Jewish, or Muslim.”<sup>76</sup> ‘Umar b. abī Rabī’a, who is described by the sources mentioned above as having been a good Muslim of the end of the first century AH, swore by God as

<sup>75</sup> Recently Marco Schöller has criticized a number of Wansborough’s main theses, see Schöller, *Exegetisches Denken*, 120–124.

<sup>76</sup> Nevo and Koren, “Origins,” 39.



*rabb Mūsā* (‘Umar, *Dīwān* 95:5) and called him *rabb Mūsā wa-‘Īsā* (285:1). The formula may be supposed to have been used as an expression of Islam’s claim to supremacy.

It may seem as though the foregoing examination has produced mainly negative results. As regards the *talbiyas*, this is unfortunately true. I would, however, argue that the great caution with which both the Islamic sources and the far-reaching reinterpretations of recent times have to be approached ought not to be seen as a goal in itself, but rather as an expression of the standpoint that there is a middle path capable of avoiding many of the problems which have dogged the two extreme views.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> For a well-balanced description of the strengths and weaknesses of recent extreme skepticism, see Schoeler, *Charakter*, 13–24.

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## THE 'IBĀD OF AL-ḤĪRA: AN ARAB CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN LATE ANTIQUE IRAQ

Isabel Toral-Niehoff

Among the Late Antique milieus whose religious and cultural patterns should have exerted an essential influence on the emergent Islamic culture is the Arab principality of the Lakhmids at al-Ḥīra (ca. 300 until 602 CE). Situated at the West bank of the Middle Euphrates, at the fringes of the desert, it was located not only on the Roman-Sasanian frontier, but also in close proximity to the Arab tribes of the peninsula. Here, all the elements that define Islam's Late Antique heritage were to be found, namely, Christian-Aramaic, Arabic-Bedouin, Jewish, and Persian influences. Together with Najrān in South Arabia, it was one of the main Arab urban and political centers of Late Antiquity, a kingdom whose court attracted poets and merchants from all over the peninsula.

Close commercial and political ties linked al-Ḥīra and the Ḥijāz.<sup>1</sup> In the rivalry between Persia and Byzantium, the Lakhmids were the Arab representatives of Sasanid interests and tried to gain control over the Ḥijāz by securing the loyalty of the Arab tribes. Al-Ḥīra's main rival in this struggle for power and authority on the peninsula was Mecca, which strove to ally itself with those tribes that pursued a policy of independence towards the Lakhmids.<sup>2</sup> In spite of this, there were commercial connections between both cities, the caravans following an itinerary that would later become the pilgrim route between the great Iraqi cities and Mecca.<sup>3</sup> Since commerce usually involves the transfer of people as well as of ideas, it is likely that reports about the Iranized and Christianized Arabs of al-Ḥīra should have reached and left an impression on the earliest community of Muhammad.

The following article will focus on the Christians of al-Ḥīra, who, according to all the sources known to us made up a significant por-

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<sup>1</sup> See Kister, *Society*, and Kister, *Studies*, and especially his article "Al-Ḥīra."

<sup>2</sup> Kister, "Al-Ḥīra," 145–152.

<sup>3</sup> See Finster, "Reiseroute." An-Nu'mān III regularly sent a *laṭīma* (caravan of spices) to the fair of 'Ukāz (*Aghānī*, vol. 19, 75; cf. also Fränkel, *Fremdwörter*, 178).

tion of its total population and profoundly shaped its character. In the course of time, they and their monasteries became so prominent in the Arab *imaginaire* as to emerge as a literary *topos*. Being Arabs and adherents of Syriac Christianity at the same time, they maintained close contacts to their neighboring coreligionists and functioned as a cultural transmission belt between Persia, Byzantine Syria, and the Arab Peninsula. To highlight their importance within the society of al-Ḥīra, an analysis of the existing written sources will be undertaken, complemented by a brief review of the archeological material. The focus will lie on the Christians' social position and on their role in the political and religious life of the region.

Among the sources the Arabic texts, though fairly late (ninth century onwards), are the most extensive. Their information is selective, focusing on individuals, mostly kings and poets, and their narrative structure is generally anecdotal, highlighting the circumstances under which certain poetic verses were composed. They show a marked interest in tribal genealogy that reflects a world where the social position of an individual is defined through his kinship. The problematic authenticity of Arabic traditions on pre-Islamic and early Islamic history notwithstanding,<sup>4</sup> it is virtually certain that the Arabic sources on al-Ḥīra do reflect autochthonous traditions, since they mostly rely on Hishām ibn al-Kalbī, a famous Kufan historian and genealogist who explicitly claims that he consulted books and church archives from al-Ḥīra.<sup>5</sup> While many of the stories transmitted by him are doubtlessly legendary, others seem to have been distorted in the process of oral transmission.<sup>6</sup> As is to be expected, he tends to exaggerate the importance of the city and of the Lakhmid dynasty in international politics. Yet on the whole, he passes on the local store of history and legends and thus conveys an idea of how the people of al-Ḥīra saw themselves. Oral tradition on al-Ḥīra was alive in the region for a long time: according to Abū l-Baqā' (twelfth century), local children were taught the history of the Lakhmid kings at school, which was

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<sup>4</sup> To name only a few of the relevant publications: Cameron, *Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, vol. 1; Noth, *Early Arabic Historical Tradition*; Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*; Duri, *Historical Writing*.

<sup>5</sup> In *Tab.*, vol. 1, 628 and 770. For a general evaluation of Ibn al-Kalbī, s. Atallah, "Al-Kalbī"; see also Nöldeke, *Geschichte*, chap. 27. He is the main source of aṭ-Ṭabarī and Abū l-Faraj for the history of al-Ḥīra.

<sup>6</sup> Of course oral transmission cannot always be equated with distortion, but actually follows certain rules, as we know since the works of Henige, *Oral historiography*, and Vansina, *Oral tradition*.



thus considered an important part of the collective memory still into the Islamic period.<sup>7</sup> Yet the possibility of anachronisms and later distortions must be conceded, since Abbasid society developed an idealized conception of its pre-Islamic past, the Jāhiliyya.<sup>8</sup>

The Syriac sources, by contrast, are all ecclesiastical writings (chronicles,<sup>9</sup> hagiographies,<sup>10</sup> synodal acts,<sup>11</sup> acts of martyrs,<sup>12</sup> and missionary letters<sup>13</sup>), and as such no less selective. Focusing on religious topics, they are biased by the dogmatic struggles of their time. The figures that are deemed worthy of mention are exclusively persons closely related to the Christian Church, such as saints, martyrs, clerics, and monks. It is also important to take into account the specific constraints imposed by literary genre: since a hagiography, for instance, will tend to exaggerate the saint's suffering in the desert, authors are likely to follow classical and biblical precedents in describing the Arabs as uncivilized and pagan barbarians, and to interpret them as a divine trial of the holy man engaged in the imitation of Christ.

The sources in Greek, finally, are heirs to a long historiographic tradition that defines the literary devices and *topoi* an author may use,<sup>14</sup> and thus also demand a particularly attentive reading.

### *Social Position and Political Role of the 'Ibād*

Hishām b. al-Kalbī gives us a glimpse of the demographic composition of the city:

<sup>7</sup> *Manāqib*, 91.

<sup>8</sup> Drory, "Abbasid construction."

<sup>9</sup> For Syriac sources in general for this time, see the bibliographical review by Morony, *Iraq*, 620–632; see also Brock, "Syriac Historical Writing," and Fiey, "Jalons."

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Nau (ed. and trans.), *Histoires*, 7–51 (the History of Ahudemmeh); *ibid.*, 63–96 (Denha's History of Marutha).

<sup>11</sup> Chabot's *Synodicon Orientale* contains lists of bishops who signed the church synods from the early fifth until the late eighth century.

<sup>12</sup> E.g. Hoffmann, *Auszüge*.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Brock, "Syriac Historical Writing," 621. Especially useful with regard to al-Ĥira is Guidi, "Lettera."

<sup>14</sup> For instance, the passages of Procopius describing the king al-Mundir may be read as part of a typical *Kaiserkritik* attempting to discredit Justinian's policy towards the Arabs. Very useful in this context are the works of Cameron on Procopius and Agathias.

The inhabitants of al-Ḥīra consisted of three groups. One third were the Tanūkh, i.e., the Arabs who dwelled to the west of the Euphrates between al-Ḥīra and al-Anbār and further beyond; [they lived] in huts and tents of goat hair. Another third were the 'Ibād, i.e., the real inhabitants of al-Ḥīra (*kānū sakanū*) who had settled there (*ibtanaw bihā*). Finally, there were the confederates (*al-aḥlāf*), who had a covenant (*ḥilf*) with the people of al-Ḥīra without belonging to any of the two groups who had surrendered to Ardashīr, i.e., the Tanūkh and the 'Ibād.<sup>15</sup>

Who were these 'Ibād who, according to Ibn al-Kalbī, made up the sedentary population of al-Ḥīra, as opposed to the Bedouin Tanūkh? From other Arabic sources it becomes clear that the expression does not refer to the city's sedentary inhabitants in general, but was restricted to the autochthonous Christian population of al-Ḥīra and the surrounding region.<sup>16</sup> This is borne out by the fact that according to Aḥmad b. abī Ya'qūb,<sup>17</sup> only the city's Christians were referred to as 'Ibād. Another important point is that they originated from different tribes, as al-Jawharī observes in defining them as *qabā'il shatta min buṭūn al-'arab ijtama'ū 'alā l-naṣrāniyya bi l-Ḥīra wa-n-nisba ilayhim 'ibādī*—i.e., they formed a unity beyond established tribal boundaries and thus possessed their own *nisba*.<sup>18</sup> They included northern Arabs, such as the Tamīm, to which the prominent 'Ibādī family of 'Adī b. Zayd belonged,<sup>19</sup> and southern Arabs such as the Azd / Māzin (e.g., the Banū Buqayla, another important political faction at al-Ḥīra<sup>20</sup>) and the Lakhm, which included the Banū Marīna, a branch of the royal family and the main opponents of 'Adī b. Zayd.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Ṭab., vol. 1, 822 (Ibn al-Kalbī).

<sup>16</sup> Rothstein, *Dynastie*, 19.

<sup>17</sup> In Abū 'Ubaid, *Mu'jam*, 180.

<sup>18</sup> Rothstein, *Dynastie*, 19; cf. *Manāqib*, 111.

<sup>19</sup> For his tribal identity cf. *Aghānī*, vol. 2, 97; Ṭab., vol. 1, 1016; Ibn Qutayba, *Šī'r*, 135; Caskel, *Ġamharat an-nasab*, vol. 1, 80.

<sup>20</sup> Most prominent among them was the legendary 'Abd al-Masīḥ b. 'Amr b. Qays b. Ḥayyān b. Buqayla al-Ghassānī, who was famous for his fabulous longevity (350 years), and whom Khālid b. al-Walid met in al-Ḥīra as a very old man, cf. Pellat, "Ibn Buqayla." For the Banū Buqayla's tribal origin, cf. Caskel, *Ġamharat an-nasab*, 207. Cf. also Balādhurī, *Futūḥ*, 243 (trans. Hitti, 390). There was also a Qaṣr b. Buqayla in al-Ḥīra (Balādhurī, loc. cit.). The Banū Buqayla were enemies of 'Adī b. Zayd (*Aghānī*, vol. 2, 120; Ṭab., vol. 2, 1023).

<sup>21</sup> The Banū Marīna were a branch of the Lakhm and one of the region's oldest families (*Aghānī*, vol. 2, 106). Abū l-Faraj mentions their *diyār* and includes them among the 'Ibād (*Aghānī*, vol. 9, 80; *Manāqib*, 46, with a poem by Imrū' al-Qays). One of them, a certain 'Adī b. Aws, was the most prominent leader of the opposition to 'Adī b. Zayd. He was the tutor of Aswad b. al-Mundhir, half-brother of an-Nu'mān III (who was backed by 'Adī b. Zayd) and rival claimant to the city's throne. For the

Some of the 'Ibād were probably descendents of the Ṭayyi'<sup>22</sup> and Liḥyān,<sup>23</sup> while others stemmed from Rabī'a, Muḍar and Iyād.<sup>24</sup> Ibn al-Kalbī's emphasis on their sedentary character, which omits any reference to their religion, is confirmed by the fact that Christian members of the neighboring nomadic tribes are not called 'Ibād. The Christian poet al-Mutalammis (Jarīr b. 'Abd al-Masīḥ), for instance, and his nephew Ṭarafa from the Ḍubay'a (Ghatafān), frequented the court of the Lakhmids, but were not referred to as 'Ibād.<sup>25</sup> This also suggests that only established families could lay claim to the title: according to Abū l-Baqā', they "formed the majority and were the noble people of al-Ḥira, the people of the 'good families' (*buyūtāt*)."<sup>26</sup>

The second group listed by Hishām ibn al-Kalbī is the tribe of Tanūkh, the nomadic and semi-nomadic inhabitants of al-Ḥira and its surroundings. This tribal confederation, composed of different and predominantly Southern Arab clans,<sup>27</sup> seems to have emigrated from eastern Arabia (Baḥrayn) to the Sawād in the third century CE. They certainly were not exclusively nomads, as Ibn al-Kalbī suggests, but changed between nomadism, semi-nomadism, and agriculture according to the prevailing climatic and political circumstances, as most Near Eastern nomads do.<sup>28</sup> The Tanūkh seem to have come to a peace-

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fabric of intrigues surrounding an-Nu'mān's ascension to the throne, see *Aghānī*, vol. 2, 105–120; Ṭab., vol. 1, 1016–1029. It is interesting, yet probably an anachronism, that 'Adī b. Aws accuses his rival of "North Arabian" (*ma'addiyya*) cunning (*Aghānī*, vol. 2, 107).

<sup>22</sup> The Banū Qabiṣa of the Ṭayyi' had their main center in the oasis of 'Ayn Tamr, which belonged to the Lakhmids. Their most prominent member was Iyās b. Qabiṣa, governor of al-Ḥira after the Lakhmids (Balādhurī, *Futūḥ*, 243; trans. Hitti, 390). Like many of the Ṭayyi', they were probably Christian; an uncle of Iyās founded a monastery, see Yāqūt, *Mu'jam*, vol. 4, 134. Zayd's mother and 'Adī b. Zayd's cousin both belonged to the Ṭayyi' (*Aghānī*, vol. 2, 100, 105), but it is not certain that they were considered 'Ibād. The tribe was prominent in the city during the time of the conquest (cf. Donner, *Arab Tribes*, 78ff., and Shahid, "Ṭayyi").

<sup>23</sup> Cf. the remarks on the family of Aws b. Qallām below.

<sup>24</sup> *Manāqib*, 114.

<sup>25</sup> Another case at hand is the poet Maymūn al-A'shā (from Qays b. Tha'laba of the Bakr b. Wā'il), who was educated in al-Ḥira and was a Christian, as shown by his poetry, yet is never referred to as an 'Ibādī. All of them frequented the court of the Lahmid kings, but remained strongly attached to their tribes (cf. the references in Sezgin, *Geschichte*, vol. 2, 112–118, 173–175).

<sup>26</sup> *Manāqib*, 110.

<sup>27</sup> See Ṭab., vol. 1, 609–627; *Manāqib*, 97–98; Shahid, "Tanūkh"; Caskel, *Ġamharat an-nasab*, vol. 2, 80–84.

<sup>28</sup> For a typology of Near Eastern nomadism and the close symbiosis between sedentary and nonsedentary groups, cf. Khazanov, *Nomads*, 53–59, 97–102, 274–290.

ful arrangement with the Lakhmids and the sedentary inhabitants of al-Ḥīra, since the hostile nomads with whom the Lakhmids had to deal are never identified as belonging to the Tanūkh but rather to the Taghlib ibn Wā'il and Bakr ibn Wā'il, among others.<sup>29</sup>

The third group enumerated by Ibn al-Kalbī, the *aḥlāf* ("confederates"), corresponds to groups known under the same name in Mecca and at-Ṭā'if: they consisted of recently immigrated Arab clans from different tribes who sought protection through affiliation to an established tribe, and who were considered to be of inferior status.<sup>30</sup> After a few generations their social standing improved and their foreign origin lost its relevance.<sup>31</sup> According to Abū l-Baqā', the dynasty itself encouraged this process:

He (= king 'Amr b. Imri' al-Qays) introduced the great families of the Rabi'a, the Muḍar and the Iyād into the group of the 'Ibād, to which they had not belonged before.<sup>32</sup>

### 'Arab or nabaṭ? The 'Ibād's Multiple Identities

The Christians of al-Ḥīra spoke Arabic,<sup>33</sup> but like most of the settled Arabs living on the fringes of the desert, they had assimilated to the Aramaic peasant population.<sup>34</sup> Thoroughly "Aramaicized" in manners and appearance, these inhabitants of al-Ḥīra appeared as strangers to the conquerors arriving from the Arabian Peninsula, even arousing doubts in their Arab identity. This is illustrated by two traditions, which—although certainly legendary—give an idea of how the

<sup>29</sup> According to Ibn al-Kalbī (Ṭab., vol. 1, 853; Ibn Sa'īd, *Naṣwat*, 274), some of the Lakhmid troops were composed of Tanūkh. *Manāqib*, 102, remarks that only some of the Tanūkh wanted to settle down when the city was founded, while the others remained nomads.

<sup>30</sup> For references see Lammens, *Mecque*, 150.

<sup>31</sup> *Manāqib*, 112, includes the Banu Marīna, the Liḥyān, and the Iyās b. Qabiṣa among the *aḥlāf*, yet in other sources they are considered 'Ibād. It seems that after some generations they had assimilated to the latter.

<sup>32</sup> *Manāqib*, 114.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, the quotation from at-Ṭabari below. See also Trimingham, *Christianity*, 150: "The Arabs of Babylonia, settled and nomadic alike, remained predominantly Arab in cultural characteristics."

<sup>34</sup> For the demographic situation in Sasanian Iraq, cf. Morony, *Iraq*, 169–274, and Donner, *Arab Tribes*, 61–72. The most impressive general anthropological study of the complicated relationship between nomadic and sedentary peoples remains Khazanov, *Nomads*. For the Middle East, see the collected articles in Nelson, *Desert*, and Donner, "Role of Nomads."

encounter between assimilated Arabs from the north and their brethren from the peninsula was imagined in later times. According to the first tradition, Khālīd b. al-Walīd, upon his arrival in al-Ḥīra, had the following conversation with a certain 'Adī:

"Woe is you! Are you Arabs? Then why do you want revenge on the Arabs? Or Persians? So why do you want revenge on justice and righteousness?" 'Adī answered: "We are indeed true Arabs and Arabized Arabs ('arab 'ariba wa-'arab muta'ariba)."<sup>35</sup> Khālīd said: "If this were as you said, then you would not have opposed us and hated our cause." 'Adī explained: "We speak only Arabic, and this proves that our argument is true." Khālīd said: "You told the truth."<sup>36</sup>

A similar account is transmitted by al-Mas'ūdī: Khālīd b. al-Walīd comes to al-Ḥīra and there meets the wise and legendary 'Abd al-Masīḥ b. Buqayla.<sup>37</sup> When he inquires about the latter's identity and receives confusing answers, he finally asks:

"Are you Arab or Nabaṭ?" He said: "We are Nabateanized Arabs and Arabized Nabateans ('arabun stanbaṭnā wa-nabaṭun sta'rabnā)."<sup>38</sup>

Both traditions obviously serve to substantiate later 'Ibādī claims to a genuinely Arab identity, and they also allege the existence of an old covenant with the conquerors (both anecdotes are followed by reports on the terms of surrender of al-Ḥīra), yet they also reflect the estrangement both Arab groups felt towards each other.

As we have seen, the "Aramaicization" of the Arabs at al-Ḥīra concerned only their urban way of life, not their spoken language, which remained Arabic. Like all Arabs in Iraq, the majority of the 'Ibād were descended from Arabs who had emigrated from the peninsula, above all from the Yamāma and eastern Arabia, in successive

<sup>35</sup> The use of the terms *al-'arab al-'ariba* and *al-'arab al-musta'riba* (or *al-muta'ariba*) is somewhat confusing, as some equate the former with the lost Arab tribes of ancient times, while others identify them with the Southern Arabs as opposed to the Northern Arabs, who were "Arabized." Cf. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, s.v. "al-'arab"; Rentz, "Djazīrat al-'arab"; Fischer, "Kaḥtān."

<sup>36</sup> Ṭab., vol. 1, 2041.

<sup>37</sup> On the Banū Buqayla, cf. note 20.

<sup>38</sup> Al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, vol. 1, 217ff.—*Nabaṭ* is the common Arabic name for the Arameans or Syrians. The terminology is confusing, since the Arabic tradition has mixed up the little it knew of the Nabateans with remarks on the Arameans and on the pre-Islamic people of Mesopotamia. Moreover, Arabic sources also distinguish between the "Nabaṭ of Iraq" and the "Nabaṭ of Syria." The verb *tanabbata* also means "to become settled," i.e., "to adopt a typically Aramaic way of life." Cf. Fahd, "Nabaṭ." See also Trimmingham, *Christianity*, 146–147.

waves of migration, having been attracted by the fertile land of the Sawād. A representative example is the Tamīmī clan of the Banū Ayyūb, whose most prominent member was the poet ‘Adī b. Zayd. They were Christians from the Yamāma<sup>39</sup> who had immigrated to al-Ḥīra, where they had at first been *aḥlāf* but soon became members of the ruling class:

The original reason for the family’s settling in al-Ḥīra was that his ancestor Ayyūb b. Mahrūf, who lived in al-Yamāma among the Banū ‘Imra l-Qays ibn Zayd Manāt, had shed blood in his tribe and had to flee, whereupon he betook himself to Aws b. Qallām, a member of the sept of Banū l-Hārith b. Ka’b in al-Ḥīra. Between his person and Ayyūb there was a kinship on the mother’s side, and Aws received him honorably therefore and allowed him to live in his house. After some time Aws said: O son of my uncle, will you remain with me and my house? Ayyūb answered: Yes. I know well that if I return to my tribe after I have shed blood I shall not escape whole. So I have no house save yours for all times. Said Aws: I am an old man and I fear that after my death my neighbors may not allow you to the same rights as I allow, and that something might occur between you and them whereby they might violate their duty as kinsfolk. So look about you for some place in al-Ḥīra that best pleases you and let me know it, that I may give it to you as a fief or buy it for you. [...]

Before his death he [Ayyūb] had already come into relation with the kings who ruled al-Ḥīra, and these acknowledged his rights as well as those of his son Zayd. Thus Ayyūb’s position was strengthened; and there was no king of al-Ḥīra who did not provide the children of Ayyūb with presents, and beasts which carried them.<sup>40</sup>

According to other sources, the clan of Aws ibn Qallām was a well-established and wealthy family of al-Ḥīra that claimed to belong to the Liḥyān.<sup>41</sup> In the fourth century, an eminent member of the family,

<sup>39</sup> For Christianity in the Yamāma, see Trimmingham, *Christianity*, 282, and Fiey, “Naṣāra,” sec. “Christians of Arabia and the Gulf.”

<sup>40</sup> *Aghānī*, vol. 2, 99 (Ibn al-Kalbī); translated in Horovitz, “Adi b. Zeyd,” 32–33 (citations from Horovitz’ translations have been slightly modified).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. the genealogy of the Bishop Jābir b. Sham’ūn from the Banū Aws ibn Qallām b. Butayn b. Jumhayr b. Liḥyān (*Aghānī*, vol. 2, 115). For the Liḥyān, see Drewes, “Liḥyān.” Usually they are considered a branch of the North Arabian Hudhayl, but the genealogy of the Liḥyān at hand appears to be different. According to Ibn al-Kalbī, they were descended from the biblical Amalekites (Ṭab., vol. 1, 850; cf. also *Manāqib*, 114). Sometimes the Amalekites are reported to have been allies of Zenobia. All these speculations seem to indicate that the Liḥyān/Amāliqa belonged to the autochthonous population (cf. Rothstein, *Dynastie*, 64). Abū l-Baqā’ mentions a bishop Shim’ūn b. Ḥanzala from the Liḥyān at al-Ḥīra during the reign of Nu’mān I (121), probably

also called Aws ibn Qallām,<sup>42</sup> reigned for five years, thus interrupting the Lakhmid succession. Later in the sixth century, another member of the family, Jābir b. Sham'un, was bishop of al-Ḥira and played an important role as the financier of Nu'mān III.<sup>43</sup> All these reports point to a prominent role of this Christian family in the public life al-Ḥira, and it is therefore plausible that they may have introduced their relatives from the Yamāma to the ruling Lakhmids. The ties between the Banū Ayyūb and the Aws ibn Qallām remained close during the whole Lakhmid period; they intermarried<sup>44</sup> and supported the same faction in the political turmoil of the late sixth century.<sup>45</sup>

The Banū Ayyūb soon rose to the highest positions at the Lakhmid court.<sup>46</sup> Zayd and his son, the famous poet 'Adī, in particular were deeply involved in the political struggles under the last Lakhmids. Zayd was the main counselor of al-Mundhir IV and de facto ruler during the last two years of the latter's reign. His son 'Adī was the tutor of an-Nu'mān III and played a prominent role in bringing him to power.<sup>47</sup> The Ayyūb clan owed their influence in Lakhmid politics mainly to their excellent connections to the local Persian elite of the *dehqāns*. Their perfect knowledge of the Pahlavi language and their insight into Sasanian politics made them irreplaceable middlemen for both the Lakhmids and the Sasanids:

They were of a respected house, Christians who were with the Kistrās, had their maintenance with them and stood in esteem; they also had assigned them fiefs and given them rich presents.<sup>48</sup>

According to Ibn al-Kalbī, Zayd b. Ḥammād grew up in a Persian family and then took over an office in the Sasanid administration:

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the first Simeon (around 430) in the list given by Rothstein, *Dynastie*, 24. He was reported to have been responsible for the king's legendary conversion to Christianity.

<sup>42</sup> Due to chronological reasons, he cannot have been identical to the one who gave shelter to Ayyūb (see Horovitz, "Adi b. Zeyd," 33–34).

<sup>43</sup> According to *Aghānī*, vol. 2, 115 (source: al-Mufaḍḍal ad-Dabbī), 'Adī b. Zayd borrowed 80,000 dirhams from him in order to ensure the Sasanid king's approval for his candidate to the throne.

<sup>44</sup> The son of Ayyūb, Zayd, married a member of the Aws ibn Qallām (*Aghānī*, vol. 2, 98).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. n. 43.

<sup>46</sup> *Aghānī*, vol. 2, 98.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. n. 43. For the entire story, see Rothstein, *Dynastie*, 109–111.

<sup>48</sup> *Aghānī*, vol. 2, 105 (Horovitz, "Adi b. Zeyd," 40).



After Ḥammād's death Zayd was taken by the Dehqān to his own house, who belonged to the Marzubāns, and grew up with his children: Zayd had already received good instruction in the art of writing and in the Arabic language before the Dehqān took charge of him; the Dehqān now taught him the Persian language which, thanks to his diligence, he soon assimilated. The Dehqān then petitioned the Kisrā to place the postal service under him, an office which he generally entrusted only the sons of Marzubāns, and which Zayd administered for a time.<sup>49</sup>

Since his son 'Adī also received a Persian education, it appears that the Persians regularly took young members of prominent Arab families as hostages, probably in order to foster an Iranicized local elite loyal to them:

As soon as 'Adī could apply himself and was grown up, his father put him to school and, when he had acquired some knowledge, the Marzubān Farrukhamāhān sent him with his own son Shāhānmard to the Persian school where he learnt to write and read Persian till he was among the best knowers of Persian and the most eloquent speakers of Arabic and composed poems.<sup>50</sup>

When 'Adī later fell victim to an intrigue of his enemies from the Banū Marīna, Khusraw Parwīz himself wrote a letter in order to prevent his death—though in vain—, probably because he considered him his “man in al-Ḥīra.”<sup>51</sup> The Arabic tradition attributes the fall of the Lakhmids in 602 to the machinations of his son Zayd b. 'Adī, who tried to avenge his father's death. The sources contain an interesting report about Zayd taking advantage of his knowledge of Pahlavi and mistranslating an ambiguous Arabic sentence, thereby provoking the anger of Khusraw Parwīz who then withdraws his favor from an-Nu'mān.<sup>52</sup>

Historically viewed, the fall of the Lakhmids was obviously related to the general international situation, which was marked not only by the antagonism between Byzantium and Persia, but also by rebellions and civil wars in both empires. Syriac sources report that an-Nu'mān refused to help Khusraw Parwīz when he was a fugitive during the reign of Bahrām, and it is likely that after this incident the Persian

<sup>49</sup> *Aghānī*, vol. 2, 100 (Horovitz, “Adi b. Zeyd,” 35).

<sup>50</sup> *Aghānī*, vol. 2, 101 (Horovitz, “Adi b. Zeyd,” 37).

<sup>51</sup> *Aghānī*, vol. 2, 120.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 122–127; *Ṭab.*, vol. 1, 1025–1029.

king preferred to replace his disloyal vassal.<sup>53</sup> It has to be taken into account that all the traditions on the Banū Ayyūb tend to exaggerate the family's role in Lakhmid and Sasanian affairs, since our main source, Ibn al-Kalbī, relied to a great deal on local sources from al-Ḥira and perhaps on the Banū Ayyūb themselves, who remained in the region as a Christian family until Islamic times. A son of Zayd b. 'Adī called Sawād is even reported to have been one of the traditionists of al-Ḥira.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear that they were an important Iranized Christian family representing the Sasanians at al-Ḥira, though not the only prominent 'Ibādī clan: all the evidence available suggests that the political and social elite in sixth-century al-Ḥira was composed of long-established Christian Arab families that were divided into different factions competing for influence on the ruling house.

### *Ecclesiastic and Monastic Developments*

While the Arabic tradition contains valuable information about the tribal origins, social position, and political role of the 'Ibād, it remains almost entirely silent about their religious life and beliefs, the churches, and religious customs of the 'Ibād merely providing local color, as it were.<sup>55</sup> The only relevant evidence are poems ascribed to 'Adī b. Zayd and other poets from the environment of al-Ḥira that deal with some of the cosmological myths from the Old Testament, such as the Deluge.<sup>56</sup> A detailed examination of the authenticity of these verses and their religious and dogmatic implications is beyond the scope of this article. In order to learn more about the origins of this religious

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<sup>53</sup> Trimmingham, *Christianity*, 198, n. 122. Iyās b. Qabiṣa, on the other hand, is said to have helped Khusraw Parwīz and to have been rewarded with the city's governorship after Nu'mān III (Ṭab., vol. 1, 1029).

<sup>54</sup> Horovitz, "Adī b. Zayd," 68.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. for instance the romantic love-story between 'Adī b. Zayd and the Kindite princess Hind b. an-Nu'mān. Both meet in a church in al-Ḥira on Maundy Thursday and fall in love; later on, they meet in another church, and finally they marry (*Aghānī*, vol. 2, 128–131). The story was very popular and is also told in the *Thousand and One Nights*.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Hirschberg, *Jüdische und Christliche Lehren*, 53–57. Hirschberg analyzes the poetry ascribed to 'Adī and other pre-Islamic poets with regard to Christian or Jewish influences, yet does not discuss the authenticity of the verses. For the poetical works of 'Adī, see Gabrieli, "Adī b. Zayd." For further references, see Sezgin, *Geschichte*, vol. 2, 178–179.

community and its position in the harsh dogmatic struggles of the fifth and sixth centuries, we must therefore turn to other sources.

The name 'Ibād seems to be an old self-definition; later Muslim authors were at a loss as to its precise meaning and put forward a number of evidently absurd etymologies.<sup>57</sup> Nöldeke is probably right in completing the term to 'ibād Allāh or 'ibād al-masīḥ (servants of God or of the Messiah), an expression reflecting an awareness of being the true *virī religiosi*, i.e., the only genuine worshipers of God.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the designation shows that the self-understanding of the 'Ibād hinged above all on God and their community, which also applies to the Christians in Persia. Brock has shown the extent to which the ethnic and the religious identity of the Persian Christians, who called themselves "People of God," went together.<sup>59</sup>

Regarding the archeological evidence, it is unfortunate that Christian archeology in this region is still in its infancy, and that East Syrian Church architecture has not yet been well explored. At the moment, research is also hampered by the complicated political situation in the area.<sup>60</sup> The Arab and Syriac list the names of many Church buildings in al-Ḥīra and its surroundings, but so far none has been connected to any of the existing ruins.<sup>61</sup> To date, the only excavation at al-Ḥīra itself remains that undertaken by Talbot Rice in the 1930s.<sup>62</sup> In the 1970s, B. Finster and J. Schmidt conducted a general survey of Late Antique and Early Islamic ruins in Iraq and discovered two Sasanian churches in Quṣayr North near Ukhaider (probably corresponding to Dūmat al-Ḥīra in the sources).<sup>63</sup> The last expedition to the area appears to have been an excavation conducted by Kokushiyan University in Tokyo in the late 1980s. In the following years, one of the expedition's participants, Y. Okada, published several articles in which he describes his finds in 'Ayn Shay'a, a monastic site located 15 km to the west to Najaf, and analyzes them in the context of early

<sup>57</sup> Cf. *Manāqib*, 110–111.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Rothstein, *Dynastie*, 21, and Nöldeke, *Geschichte*, 24, n. 4.

<sup>59</sup> Brock, "Christians."

<sup>60</sup> For a general evaluation of the difficulties in the Gulf Area, see Potts, "Gulf Arab states." At the moment (January 2005), it is of course impossible to visit al-Ḥīra, since Najaf and Kerbela are very near and it has been declared a military area.

<sup>61</sup> Ash-Shābushtī, *Diḡārāt*, 230–256; Trimmingham, *Christianity*, 197.

<sup>62</sup> Talbot Rice, "The Oxford excavations at Hira, 1931," and id., "The Oxford excavations at Hira."

<sup>63</sup> Finster/Schmidt, "Ruinen."

Christian architecture in the region.<sup>64</sup> After comparing the area's early churches (Ctesiphon, Ḥīra, Quṣayr North, among others,<sup>65</sup> all of which date from the late Sasanian or early Islamic periods), he concludes that these southern Iraqi churches constitute a new category of architecture that is neither Sasanian nor Islamic. In a later article, he extends this new concept to the Gulf area.<sup>66</sup> This suggests a close communal tie between the Christians of Babylonia and of the Gulf, a relationship that is confirmed by tribal history. In a recent article, M. Cassis has suggested that the churches in question did not follow Western or Byzantine patterns, but rather secular Sasanian/Babylonian architecture.<sup>67</sup> Archeological evidence thus points to the existence in Late Antiquity of an independent cultural region that included Babylonia, the Gulf area, and probably also central Arabia. All of this may indicate the particularly old age of these regions' Christian communities, which apparently developed outside the sphere of Western influence.

The Syriac written sources confirm this hypothesis, since they attest that Christianity had penetrated into Babylonia and Mesopotamia as early as 150 CE; Kirkūk (Karkhā), for instance, had a bishop as early as 117–138.<sup>68</sup> Another Christian center was al-Anbār (Pērōz Shābūr), an important Sasanian garrison town on the Euphrates, which by 420 was home to an important Christian community and later became the see of both Nestorian and Monophysite bishops. It had close historical ties with al-Ḥīra: the Monastery of Mār Yūna was founded by a certain 'Abd al-Masiḥ from al-Ḥīra.<sup>69</sup> The city of al-Ḥīra was also the see of a bishop, the first evidence for which dates back to 410, when a bishop called Hosea was present at the Synod of Mār Isaac in Seleucia.<sup>70</sup> Al-Ḥīra (Aramaic Ḥirtā) belonged to the patriarchal see of Bēt 'Aramāyē in Kōke/Seleucia.<sup>71</sup> Unfortunately, of the bishops

<sup>64</sup> Okada, "Excavations"; id., "Reconsideration"; id., "Early Christian Architecture"; id., "Ain Shai'a."

<sup>65</sup> See the useful survey in Okada, "Early Christian Architecture," 74–77.

<sup>66</sup> Okada "Ain Shai'a."

<sup>67</sup> Cassis, "Bema," 13.

<sup>68</sup> Trimingham, *Christianity*, 152.

<sup>69</sup> Trimingham, *Christianity*, 197.—The Arabic tradition considers the population of al-Ḥīra to have originated from al-Anbār (Ṭab., vol. 1, 645).

<sup>70</sup> Bishop Hosea in Seleucia, in Chabot, *Synodicon*, 275.

<sup>71</sup> Morony, *Iraq*, 335. Cf. also the map on Christian bishoprics in *ibid.*, 336 (fig.7).

of al-Ḥīra almost nothing is known beyond their names,<sup>72</sup> with the notable exception of the above-mentioned Jābir b. Shamʿūn of the Aws b. Qallām clan. According to Arabic sources, ʿAdī b. Zaid borrowed 80,000 dirhams from him in order to ensure the Sasanid king's approval for his candidate to the throne.<sup>73</sup>

Syriac sources indicate that Christianity in al-Ḥīra goes back to monastic origins: a certain ʿAbdīshoʿ is reported to have founded the monastery of al-Ḥīra during the fourth century.<sup>74</sup> It was probably more akin to a hermitage, since cenobitic monasticism is usually considered to have originated with St. Pachomios (who died in 346) in Egypt, and it seems unlikely that it had arrived this early in Babylonia and Mesopotamia. Before the fifth century, traditional Syriac asceticism was mainly anachoretic and was practiced by independent ascetics of various forms, such as the *boskoi* ("grazers") and *dendrites* ("tree-dwellers").<sup>75</sup>

Since the late fifth century, Syriac Monophysite monks were indeed very active propagators of the Christian faith in Mesopotamia and Iraq, mostly among the Aramaic peasants and the Arab Bedouin of the so-called "barbarian plain."<sup>76</sup> This movement increased significantly with the restrictive anti-Monophysite policy of Justin I (518–524), which forced many Syrian monks to retreat into the desert where they concentrated their efforts on the Bedouin.<sup>77</sup> These monks are not easy to classify. In this period of Aramaic Christianity, various manifestations of asceticism existed side by side, such as hermits and cenobitic monks. Their missionary zeal forced them to adapt to the special living conditions in the desert, e.g., by introducing transportable altars and by practicing baptism with sand. Aḥudemmeḥ, the metropolitan of Bēt ʿAramāyē, was the main missionary of sixth-century Mesopotamia. Among his converts were the Taghlib, a confederation that had immigrated from central Arabia a short time ago.<sup>78</sup> He gives a vivid picture of the conditions under which he operated:

There were many peoples between the Tigris and Euphrates in the region known as Gezirta who lived in tents, barbarous and warlike; they enter-

<sup>72</sup> See the list in Rothstein, *Dynastie*, 23–25.

<sup>73</sup> See n. 43 above.

<sup>74</sup> Trimingham, *Christianity*, 171 and 189.

<sup>75</sup> Trimingham, *Christianity*, 138–145.

<sup>76</sup> I borrow this expression from Fowden's excellent study *The Barbarian Plain*.

<sup>77</sup> Trimingham, *Christianity*, 164.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 173ff.

tained numerous superstitions, and were among the most ignorant of pupils until the time the light of Christ illuminated their hearts. For some time Aḥudemmeḥ had burned with divine zeal in their regard. [...] He set himself with great patience to visit all the camps of the Arabs, instructing and teaching them in numerous sessions. [...] [H]e zealously set himself to gather together, by means of inducements, flattery and gifts, priests from many parts to enable him to establish in each tribe a priest and a deacon. He founded churches and named them after the chiefs of their tribes in order to secure their help whenever difficulties arose. He consecrated altar-slabs and placed them in the churches.<sup>79</sup>

Of all the famous monasteries of al-Ḥīra, we know the inscription of only one: Dayr al-Hind al-Kubrā, which was founded by Hind bint al Ḥārith,<sup>80</sup> the Christian mother of the Lakhmid king 'Amr b. al-Mundhir (554–570). It was copied by Hishām ibn al-Kalbī and is transmitted in later Arabic sources:

This church has been erected by Hind, daughter of al-Hārith b. 'Amr b. Hujr, the queen, daughter of kings and mother of the king 'Amr b. al-Mundhir, bondmaid of Christ and mother of His servitor in the time of the king of kings Khosraw Anūshirwān in the time of Bishop Ephrāem etc.<sup>81</sup>

Whereas Monophysitism was deeply rooted in Syriac monasticism, Nestorianism<sup>82</sup> appears to have been more associated with the official Persian church. But the expansionist approach of the Monophysite missionaries forced the Nestorians to counter this monastic offensive with similar means. According to Nestorian tradition, monasticism was reorganized in accordance with the Rule of St. Pachomius in the late sixth century by Abraham of Kaskar and Abraham of Nephtar.<sup>83</sup> They also laid down guide-lines on how to distinguish Nestorian and Monophysite monks.<sup>84</sup> This reformed cenobitic monasticism developed into a powerful force that helped to spread the doctrines

<sup>79</sup> Trimingham, *Christianity*, 172.

<sup>80</sup> She was the daughter of the same al-Hārith b. 'Amr who ruled al-Ḥīra during the Kindite interregnum of the sixth century (see Ibn Sa'īd, *Naṣwat*, 278, and *Manāqib*, 67).

<sup>81</sup> Yāqūt, *Mu'jam*, vol. 2, 709 (Trimingham, *Christianity*, 196).

<sup>82</sup> The current expression "Nestorian" is employed in order to avoid confusion, even though it is not the correct designation used today (Assyrian Church of the East or Assyrian Orthodox Church). The designation "Dyophysitism," as opposed to Monophysitism, is also problematic, since it implies a belief in two natures in Christ, which the "Dyophysitists" would deny.

<sup>83</sup> Morony, *Iraq*, 361.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 362.

of Theodor of Mopsuestia, and to convert pagans and even Monophysites.<sup>85</sup>

All of this brings up the important question of the dogmatic position of the 'Ibād regarding the controversies between Nestorians and Monophysites. Al-Mas'ūdī's statement that all of the 'Ibād were Nestorians is anachronistic and certainly does not apply to the fifth and sixth centuries, when clear dogmatic borders in Iraq did not yet exist.<sup>86</sup> The Synod of 484, where Bar Ṣawma from Nisibis established Antiochene Dyophysitism as binding for the autocephalous Persian Church, did not have a far-reaching effect. The Nestorians, as they were to be called in the seventh century, had to face stubborn resistance in the Persian Church,<sup>87</sup> which makes it unlikely that all Christians in al-Ḥīra adopted their doctrine immediately. Moreover, according to Morony, a distinctively Nestorian identity and doctrinal position did not fully develop until the seventh century, when it was fueled by the threat of a compromise with the Monophysites.<sup>88</sup>

The Syrian Desert then, which includes the environs of al-Ḥīra, was the main missionary area of Monophysite monks, where they converted many nomadic Arab tribes like the Taghlib. The above-mentioned Aḥudemmeḥ was credited with having converted the Arabs of 'Aqūla<sup>89</sup> (Kufa) and the Tanūkh,<sup>90</sup> thus attesting the Monophysite missionary focus on rural and suburban areas. The nearby oasis of 'Ayn an-Namir, for instance, adopted the doctrine of the Phantasiasts, an extreme Monophysite sect.<sup>91</sup> Al-Ḥīra thus appears to have been surrounded by a Monophysite Bedouin environment.

The city itself, on the other hand, became the center of the missionary activities of Bishop Simeon of Bēt Arshām, a militant anti-Nestorian polemicist of the early sixth century who converted some

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 361.

<sup>86</sup> Al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, vol. 2, 328.

<sup>87</sup> Morony, *Iraq*, 355–357.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 357.

<sup>89</sup> According to Trimingham, the 'Ibād were mostly called 'Aqūlāyē in Syriac sources, derived from this 'Aqūla (*Christianity*, 171 and n. 23). I suspect, however, that this is not correct, and that there was a difference between these 'Aqūlāyē Christians (who were newly converted Monophysite Arabs) and the 'Ibād from al-Ḥīra, who had been converted long ago and had strong ties with the Persian church. The existence of this Monophysite 'Aqūlāyē community explains the existence of a Monophysite bishopric in Kufa (Hoffmann, *Auszüge*, n. 1062).

<sup>90</sup> Trimingham, *Christianity*, 173 (citing the History of Aḥudemmeḥ); Morony, *Iraq*, 374.

<sup>91</sup> Trimingham, *Christianity*, 194–195.



of the city's Christian nobility to his cause. His letters provide valuable firsthand information about the religious situation at al-Ḥīra at the time.<sup>92</sup> According to Simeon of Bēt Arshām, there were pagans and Jews at the royal court, but also members of noble Christian families that had converted a long time ago. When a Christian nobleman heard about anti-Christian persecutions in Yemen, he tried to convince the king not to join this policy by reminding him emphatically: "But we are Christians, and so were our parents and grandparents!"<sup>93</sup>

During Justin's persecution of the Monophysites in 518–523, a number of Syriac monks found shelter in al-Ḥīra, which was apparently considered as neutral ground. The presence of representatives of both factions provided the opportunity for a meeting between these Monophysites and the Nestorian Catholicos Shīlas under the pagan king al-Mundhir III (reigned 503–554).

Thus the kingdom of al-Ḥīra, located as it was on the frontier between Sasanid Iran (where the Dyophysites set the tone) and Byzantine Syria (a stronghold of the Monophysites), soon got caught in a missionary crossfire, but at the same time could function as a neutral meeting ground. In 524, there was another diplomatic meeting in Ramla, a ten-day journey away from al-Ḥīra: Byzantium had sent a messenger, Abraham, to negotiate the liberation of two Byzantine prisoners held by al-Mundhir III. The gathering was attended by Shīlas and a certain Isaac as representatives of the "orthodox" Christians of Persia, by Sergios of Rusafa as a representative of the Monophysites, and by Aggaios (Ḥajjāj b. Qays), a Christian Monophysite notable from the court of al-Mundhir III.<sup>94</sup>

It is unknown how long the different dogmatic schools continued to coexist. According to Morony, the separation of Syriac Christians into two clearly defined factions is a development of the seventh century. When the School of Nisibis, an important center of Nestorian theology, was closed in 540, former students of the school refounded it at al-Ḥīra.<sup>95</sup> Due to the influence of nearby Ctesiphon and the growing missionary efforts of the Nestorian monks, the Monophysites seem to have lost their position in al-Ḥīra during in the late sixth century. The Monophysite monks retired to Najrān (in Iraq), where

<sup>92</sup> Guidi, "Lettera."

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 487–488.

<sup>94</sup> See Shahid, "Conference."

<sup>95</sup> Morony, *Iraq*, 360.

they probably converted the Namir nomads.<sup>96</sup> Around 592 the last Lakhmid ruler, al-Nu'mān III, converted to the Nestorian version of Christianity. Abū l-Baqā' explains the king's conversion by the following legend: When an-Nu'mān once fell ill, he asked for help a group of the *Ya'qūbiyya* (i.e., the Monophysites) as well as the *Nastūriyyūn*,<sup>97</sup> represented by the local bishop, a certain Shim'un b. Jābir.<sup>98</sup> Whereas the Monophysites' prayers were of no avail, the Nestorian bishop urged him to convert first, which he did together with his family and other Arab noblemen in a great ceremony in the central church of the city. Unfortunately, this, too, did not produce a result, and the Nestorian bishop of Mosul had to come. By means of a grim exorcism, the king was finally healed, and the palace and all of the pagan idols were split asunder.<sup>99</sup> This Nestorian legend (which may go back to the 'Ibād) is apt to highlight the significance of the dynasty's conversion for the identity of the local Christian community.

In Islamic times, the 'Ibād had definitely become Nestorians, and al-Ḥīra acquired legendary fame for its many monasteries and churches. In the Arab *imaginaire* it developed into the decadent Christian counterpart of Kufa. So the ruins of al-Ḥīra, evoking the vanished glory of the Lakhmid kings, came to function as an illustration of the transiency of all earthly achievements. Many legends and stories are staged in local churches and monasteries of al-Ḥīra, such as the various traditions about the Lakhmid princess Hind bint an-Nu'mān, who in her old age retired to a monastery near al-Ḥīra. During or after the Islamic conquests she is reported to have met with Sa'd b. Abī Waqqāṣ, al-Ḥajjāj and Mughīra b. Shu'ba ath-Thaqafī,<sup>100</sup> and to have mourned the past glories of Lakhmid rule with the following aphorism:

In the evening, there was no Arab on earth that did not request favors from us and glorify us, but then in the morning, there was no one from whom we did not request favors from and glorify!<sup>101</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Trimingham, *Christianity*, 169.

<sup>97</sup> It is remarkable that the story presupposes the presence of both confessions in the city.

<sup>98</sup> He is probably identical with Simeon, the militant Nestorian bishop of al-Ḥīra mentioned in Hoffmann, *Auszüge*, 97, 106, 108.

<sup>99</sup> *Manāqib*, 268–272.

<sup>100</sup> Ash-Shābushtī, *Diyārāt*, 244–246.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

Al-Ḥīra and its monasteries acquired particular fame in Arabic literature because it served as the scene of the famous orgies that were celebrated by the *poets maudits* (*shu'arā' al-mujūn*) of nearby Kufa. Staging their banquets at al-Ḥīra, these poets continued an old tradition: the genre of Arabic wine poetry (*khamriyyāt*) is from its very origin closely associated with al-Ḥīra, due to the poetry of the pre-Islamic poets 'Adī and Al-A'shā'.<sup>102</sup> Monasteries and churches in general used to be surrounded by wine shops and taverns, which attracted adherents of different religions.

### *Arabic-Syriac Bilingualism*

The 'Ibād of al-Ḥīra used Syriac as their church language, as did most of the Christians in Sasanian Iran, while their colloquial language was Arabic. Later Islamic sources confirm their Arabic-Syriac bilingualism. In Abbasid times, the 'Ibād were among the translators from one language into the other, the most famous of them being Ḥunayn b. Ishāq.<sup>103</sup> But was Syriac really the only language used by them in church, or had they translated biblical or liturgical texts into Arabic? The issue of whether there existed a pre-Islamic Arabic version of the Gospels has engendered an extensive debate that still awaits resolution. Baumstark<sup>104</sup> and Shahid<sup>105</sup> have argued in favor of such a translation, whether in al-Ḥīra or in Najrān, claiming that it is inconceivable that Arab Christians in pre-Islamic times should not have had an Arabic version of the Gospels at their disposal. Their argument rests on evidence from the Arabic sources, the history of liturgy<sup>106</sup> and on the fact that the Arabic language of the sixth century was fully developed and was already being committed to writing.<sup>107</sup> Griffith, however, maintains that "all one can say about the possibility of a pre-Islamic, Christian version of the Gospel in Arabic is that no sure sign of its

<sup>102</sup> Bencheikh, "Khamriyya."

<sup>103</sup> Griffith, "Gospel," 136, with reference to Michael the Syrian.

<sup>104</sup> Baumstark, "Problem"; cf. also id., "Evangelienübersetzung"; id., "Psalm 110."

<sup>105</sup> Shahid, *Martyrs*, 242–250.

<sup>106</sup> Baumstark points out that the rubrics of the Arab Gospels in MS Vatican Borgiana MS 95 and Berlin Or. Oct. MS 118 reflect the usage of the old liturgy of Jerusalem ("Evangelienlesung," 562–575).

<sup>107</sup> See the survey of all the arguments in Griffith, "Gospel," 159–165.

actual existence has yet emerged.”<sup>108</sup> He points to the lack of documentary evidence, since the earliest dated manuscripts written in Palestine during the Abbasid period clearly derive from Greek and not from Syriac—as one would expect in the case of a pre-Islamic translation. In view of the parallel emergence of a Christian literature in Persian that was composed for missionary purposes,<sup>109</sup> however, a partial or complete Arabic rendering of the Gospels in pre-Islamic al-Ḥīra remains a plausible hypothesis.

A much debated topic in connection with the ʿIbād is the emergence of the Arabic script. It is a commonplace in Arabic sources that Arabic was first written down in al-Anbār and al-Ḥīra, and that it was introduced to Mecca by an Iraqi Christian.<sup>110</sup> ʿAdī b. Zayd, is known to have written Arabic at the Sasanian court, where he acted as a kind of “secretary for Arabian affairs,” while his grandfather Ḥammād is said to have been the first to write Arabic in his family.<sup>111</sup> In Islamic times, the literacy of the ʿIbād in pre-Islamic times became a *topos*; thus, in the famous anecdote about the *ṣaḥīfat al-Mutalammis*—proverbial for a letter containing the order to kill the one entrusted with its delivery—the suspicious poet asks a young Christian to read him the letter he is carrying.<sup>112</sup> These accounts seem to lend some support to Starcky’s hypothesis that the Arabic script derives from a variant of the East Syriac *eṣṭrangēlā* script, supposedly developed in the chancellery of al-Ḥīra and used there for writing Arabic. Starcky’s theory, however, was convincingly refuted by Grohmann on the basis of paleographic arguments; it is now generally accepted that the North Arabian script has a Nabatean—and therefore Palestinian—origin. Nevertheless, some kind of connection to al-Ḥīra does seem to exist, since the first inscription in the North Arabic language written in a Nabatean cursive, the famous Namāra inscription, commemorates a Lakhmid king by the name of Imru’ al-Qays; and the last inscription in Nabatean, written in a cursive resembling the Arabic script, is associated with Gadhīma, king of the Tanūkh who were the predecessors of the Lakhmids in al-Ḥīra.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Griffith, “Gospel,” 166.

<sup>109</sup> See Brock, “Christians,” 78, n. 76.

<sup>110</sup> See Endress, “Schrift,” 169, nn. 25–28.

<sup>111</sup> *Aghānī*, vol. 2, 100.

<sup>112</sup> Ibn Qutayba, *Ṣīr*, 89 and 91; *Aghānī*, vol. 21, 192–195.

<sup>113</sup> See the synthesis of all the arguments (including references) in Endress, “Schrift,” 166–170.

Be that as it may, the Arabic script must have been well-known in sixth-century al-Ḥīra, and was certainly used there for administrative purposes. Since literacy is primarily an urban phenomenon, the use of written Arabic in al-Ḥīra, one of the main Arab cities of the period, is not really surprising. The 'Ibād lived in an environment where they were in daily contact with literacy as a cultural skill, and as Christians they furthermore adhered to a religion based on writing par excellence, the Holy Scripture. However, it is difficult to determine when they would write in Arabic and when in Syriac, since we know from other bilingual societies that the use of one or the other language depends on its specific communicative and social functions. Hence, the fact that written Arabic for administrative purposes, does not necessarily entail its use in church.

### *Conclusion*

The Christian inhabitants of al-Ḥīra, the 'Ibād, were members of a long-established community with deep local roots, a community that had probably arisen from the intermingling of autochthonous Aramaic peasants and Arab immigrants from eastern and central Arabia. They formed a trans-tribal unity that was clearly perceived as such from the outside, although their identity was "tribalized" by means of a *nisba*. As their self-designation '*ibād*' shows, their sense of unity relied on their awareness of constituting an elected people whose basic loyalty was to the Christian God. In spite of this, they remained conscious of their tribal Arab origins, although in the course of time these ties seem to have lost some of their importance.

As members of the sedentary population, the established families were well represented among the kingdom's political elite, but did not form a distinct political faction. On the contrary, the last decades of Lakhmid rule were dominated by fierce power struggles between the principal 'Ibādī clans who were vying for influence on the royal family. The total number of Christians in al-Ḥīra had probably increased in the sixth century, owing to the missionary efforts of both Nestorians and Monophysite monks whose activity had brought about a second wave of Christianization in the area. We do not however know for sure which position the 'Ibād adopted during these dogmatic conflicts, which were also part of the power struggle between Byzantium and Persia. The fact that the Bedouin tribes from the city's

rural surroundings who were newcomers to al-Ḥīra had all been converted by Monophysite monks, suggests an at least partial coincidence between social position and dogmatic orientation.

The 'Ibād were not only Iranized and influenced by the nearby Sasanian court in Ctesiphon, where some of them held important administrative positions, but were Aramaicized as well in so far as they were adherents of Syriac Christianity. They were in close contact with their Syrian and Persian coreligionists, and attracted the missionary zeal of monks from these regions. They, in turn, must also have contributed to the spread of Christianity, since members of the 'Ibād are reported to have founded monasteries. Probably most 'Ibād were bilingual, since Syriac was their Church language; many were also literate and able to read and write not only Syriac, but also Arabic, although we do not know to what extent.

As a lively cultural and political hub, the court of al-Ḥīra attracted many Arabs from the peninsula, who thus became familiar with a settled Christian Arab population that had adopted many of the neighboring peoples' cultural skills such as writing, Persian court culture, and Christian legends, liturgy, and church architecture. These visitors, mainly poets and merchants, would have spread information about al-Ḥīra and its Christian 'Ibād all over the Arab Peninsula, thus shaping the image of what a Christian Arab identity might look like. It is not unlikely that this had some effect on Muhammad's earliest community and its understanding of Christianity and its communal significance. Rothstein, in his *Die Dynastie der Lahmiden in al-Ḥīra*, has even put forward the hypothesis that the notion of a transtribal Muslim *umma* was modeled on the 'Ibād, an idea which certainly deserves further investigation. It is also probable that at least some biblical and Christian notions made their way to Mecca via al-Ḥīra, yet a proper appraisal of this issue would necessitate a new assessment of the authenticity of the pre-Islamic Christian poetry of al-Ḥīra.

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## AN EARLY CHRISTIAN ARABIC ACCOUNT OF THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

Kirill Dmitriev

### *Introduction*

More than most phenomena of Late Antique religious culture, the frequent reshapings of the myth of creation reveal how strongly this era was affected by interreligious relationships. As a result, its textual manifestations are extremely multifaceted, crossing the borders of different religious systems. Going back to ancient oriental patterns, the biblical account of the creation of the world goes through a long reception history in Judaism and Christianity until it finally finds its way to Islamic culture. Formal similarities between the Qur'anic creation theology and certain Jewish or Christian sources, respectively, should not therefore be viewed as corruption of an "original" motif, but rather as evidence of the common Late Antique cultural heritage that is adopted and modified in the Qur'an. This paper's focus of study, a poem of 'Adī b. Zayd al-'Ibādī (d. ca. 600) about the creation of the world and the fall of man, serves as an example of a text related to the literary milieu of the Qur'an and helps to place the latter in the context of the culture and era in which it emerged.

The main problem that besets the study of early Arabic culture, especially with concern to its religious aspects, is the problem of the authenticity of sources. This holds particularly true with respect to early Arabic poetry. The subject of this paper is a poetic work whose written form can be traced back to a time no less than two hundred and fifty years after its supposed composition at the end of the sixth century CE. How justified can the usage of such a late document be for the study of the literary background of the Qur'an? This question has both a historical and a hermeneutical implication. Historically, one should proceed from the fact that the tradition of Arabic poetry has its roots in the pre-Islamic epoch and, despite a long process of transmission in mainly oral form, is more or less authentically

preserved in the written sources currently available to us.<sup>1</sup> In a recent study on Arabic tribal poetry as an ethnographic source that exhibits an uninterrupted continuity from pre-Islamic times through to the present day, Maxim Vasilenko stresses the multi-functionality and deep social integration of Arabic verse.<sup>2</sup> This can still be observed and documented.<sup>3</sup> Thus, research in contemporary Arabic tribal poetry shows that at all points in its history, this poetry has been inseparably linked with the social life and ceremonial practices of Arabic tribal society. As such, it has a clearly evident historical dimension.

The range of accuracy in the transmission of early works of Arabic poetry requires individual investigation of each particular case. Comparing existing studies on the poetry of Umayya b. abī ṣ-Ṣalt, Tilman Seidensticker came to the conclusion that it should be possible to arrive at objective criteria for determining the authenticity of early Arabic poems.<sup>4</sup> As has been noted by Gustav von Grünebaum,<sup>5</sup> along with the analysis of the vocabulary and content of texts, an investigation of the development of literary forms and schools of early Arabic poetry is also apt to provide essential criteria. Furthermore, much closer attention than has been customary should be paid to the history of the transmission of the texts and the evidence it provides with regard to their later reception.<sup>6</sup> This can be achieved only through an extensive analysis of a wide range of textual materials. Unfortunately, publications offering reliable analytical material, like Marek Dziekan's book on the poetry of Quss b. Sā'ida al-Iyādī,<sup>7</sup> or Vladimir Polosin's vocabulary of 'Absite poets,<sup>8</sup> remain relatively rare.

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<sup>1</sup> Wagner, *Grundzüge*, 12–29.

<sup>2</sup> Vasilenko, *Plemennaya poeziya*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> A recent publication on this subject is Suvorov, *Al-'Urr i Samar*.

<sup>4</sup> Seidensticker, "Authenticity."

<sup>5</sup> Grünebaum, "Pre-Islamic Poetry"; Grünebaum, "Zur Chronologie."

<sup>6</sup> The analysis of the textual evidences of the poem presented indicates a constant process of transmission of a common source. The character of several reading variants shows very clearly that these occurred as a result of the text's reinterpretation in the environment of its later transmission. These changes, however, only occur within the framework provided by the original text and can in no way be described as systematic forgery. For further details on the textual transmission of the poem, the reader is referred to the appendix.

<sup>7</sup> Textual and literary analysis brought Dziekan to the conclusion that thirty six out of the sixty six works attributed to Quss b. Sā'ida can be regarded as pre-Islamic, see Dziekan, *Quss Ibn Sā'ida*, 229.

<sup>8</sup> Polosin, *Slovar*.

Literary criticism of ‘Adī b. Zayd’s poetic works also requires further study. This is however beyond the scope of the present paper, which will focus on one particular poem and the analysis of its lexical and thematic composition. Combined with the historical investigation of the poem’s probable origin in the Nestorian milieu of al-Ḥīra provided by Isabel Toral-Niehoff,<sup>9</sup> textual criticism can make a substantial contribution to the text’s interpretation. Although these approaches bring to light important evidence for the poem’s authenticity, they cannot yield an irrefutable solution to the question of authenticity. Yet the issue of where the text is to be historically located should not prevent a broader hermeneutical discourse. Thomas Bauer accurately points to the unjustified neglect of early Arabic literature as a source for the contextual study of the Qur’an, which he views as resulting mainly from an incorrect methodological approach towards pre-Islamic poetry.<sup>10</sup> Following his argument that poetry is an indispensable source for any study of early Arabic culture, this current paper presents a poetic work that is directly linked thematically to the issue of the Qur’an in context.

*The Poet: ‘Adī b. Zayd al-‘Ibādī*

The biographical information available on ‘Adī b. Zayd has been recently summarized by Isabel Toral-Niehoff and Theresia Hainthaler.<sup>11</sup> Here, it is sufficient to mention that ‘Adī’s life was intimately connected with the city of al-Ḥīra, where he was born in the middle of the sixth century and was executed around the year 600. Al-Ḥīra was located in South Mesopotamia, in the area where later the town of Kufa was founded. Beginning in the mid-fifth century, al-Ḥīra became one of the largest and most important Arab cities.<sup>12</sup> Its active relationships with Persia, Byzantium, and Arabia played a significant role in both political and cultural development. Al-Ḥīra’s significance within the cultural history of the Arabs derives not only from the fact that

<sup>9</sup> Toral-Niehoff, “Gestaltung des Sündenfalls.”

<sup>10</sup> See Bauer’s contribution to this volume.

<sup>11</sup> Toral-Niehoff, “Gestaltung des Sündenfalls,” 239–240; Hainthaler, “‘Adī ibn Zayd,” 158–163.

<sup>12</sup> Shahid, “Al-Ḥīra.” According to Ugo Monneret de Villard, al-Ḥīra “had to be a great city, with intense commercial traffic, so much that arrival was from the Euphrates and the Canals, as well as vessels from India and China,”—see Monneret de Villard, *Le chiese*, 32; quoted upon: Comneno, “Nestorianism,” 44.

it cultivated an urban lifestyle that differed from the traditional Bedouin way of life, but more importantly from the fact that it served as a center of cross-cultural exchange where Arabs had direct access to the Late Antique heritage.<sup>13</sup> Due to this symbiosis, Arabic culture received a significant impetus from al-Ḥīra. According to Islamic historians, even the Arabic script may have been invented in al-Ḥīra, a view that in Gerhard Endress' opinion reflects the position of al-Ḥīra as a central "connecting point of Aramaic-Hellenistic culture and the pre-Islamic Arabic world."<sup>14</sup>

The topic of the development of Arabic literacy also represents a remarkable aspect in the biography of 'Adī b. Zayd, who is perhaps the most prominent Christian Arabic poet of al-Ḥīra.<sup>15</sup> After all, he is credited with the official introduction of Arabic script to the Persian court at Ctesiphon.<sup>16</sup> 'Adī b. Zayd must have known and used the Arabic script in his work as a royal secretary, and he might therefore have applied his linguistic skills to his poetic work as well. This assumption appears particularly plausible if one takes into consideration that his poems were composed primarily in a solitary cell<sup>17</sup> from which 'Adī b. Zayd is reported to have continued writing until the tragic end of his life.<sup>18</sup> Even if manifestations of literacy in pre-Islamic Arabia are limited to "documents of an 'archival' character," as Alfred Beeston claims,<sup>19</sup> in the case of 'Adī b. Zayd, who was both a poet and an official, the possibility that he documented his verses in writing is quite high. The question of transmission, however, remains open, and is only hypothetically illuminated by this assumption.

Further details can be provided by the later history of transmission. The collection of 'Adī b. Zayd's poetic works was carried out by Hishām b. al-Kalbī (d. ca. 206/821), and his *Kitāb 'Adī b. Zayd* was used by both al-Iṣfahānī (285/897–356/967) and aṭ-Ṭabarī (615/1218–694/1295). Tradition portrays Ibn al-Kalbī as an expert on Arabic genealogy and pre-Islamic Arabic history. Ibn al-Kalbī's lost work on the churches and monasteries of al-Ḥīra was most likely based on his

<sup>13</sup> Shahid, "Al-Ḥīra," 462.

<sup>14</sup> Endress, "Arabische Schrift," 170.

<sup>15</sup> For bibliographical references on the history of Christianity in al-Ḥīra refer to Hainthaler, "'Adī ibn Zayd," 164–165; see also Toral-Niehoff, "Gestaltung des Sündenfalls," 252.

<sup>16</sup> *Aghāni*, vol. 2, 102; see also Horovitz, "'Adī ibn Zeyd," 38.

<sup>17</sup> *Aghāni*, vol. 2, 110.

<sup>18</sup> Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1020–1021, 1023, *Aghāni*, vol. 2, 110–115.

<sup>19</sup> Beeston, "Antecedents," 235.



studies of the archives of al-Ḥīra's Christian communities.<sup>20</sup> In view of the fact that Ibn al-Kalbī even consulted Palmyrenic texts and was informed of findings from Yemen,<sup>21</sup> it stands to reason that he would certainly have made use of the material available to him at al-Ḥīra, as it bordered directly on his hometown of Kufa.<sup>22</sup> It thus appears probable that the later transmission of the works of 'Adī b. Zayd may go back to a reliable source. Even though the origins of this transmission process remain undocumented, its later manifestations deserve close attention, since the history of any text is always a history of its reception as well.

Among the preserved works of 'Adī b. Zayd is a poem concerning the creation of the world, the creation of man, and the latter's fall. This poem has already been the subject of critical analysis.<sup>23</sup> However, this work cannot be viewed as complete. The text of the poem has not yet been published as a single, complete entity, but rather in several fragments.<sup>24</sup> For this reason, a new attempt to compile the text of the poem<sup>25</sup> and to analyze it in relation to its literary context is necessary.

#### *Introduction (vv. 1–2)*

1      اِسْمَعْ حَدِيثًا كَمَا يَوْمًا تُحَدِّثُهُ      عَنْ ظَهْرِ غَيْبٍ إِذَا مَا سَأَلْتُ سَأَلًا

2      أَنْ كَيْفَ أَبْدَى إِلَهُ الْخَلْقِ نِعْمَتَهُ      فَيُنَاوِرُ عَرَفْنَايَاتِهِ الْأُولَى

Listen to a story, so that one day you may retell it  
from memory, if a questioner asks (you)!

How the God of creation let appear his grace  
to us and taught us his first signs.

<sup>20</sup> Attalah, "Al-Kalbī," 494.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> The urban landscape of al-Ḥīra shifted already in pre-Islamic time "northwards, till it reached the area occupied by present-day Kufa," (see Talbot Rice, "Hira," 261); and in the ninth century al-Ḥīra and Kufa were considered to be two names of one and the same city, see Hainthaler, "'Adī ibn Zayd," 165.

<sup>23</sup> Hirschberg, *Lehren*, 82–84, 105–108; Gabrieli, "'Adī b. Zaid," 85–86; Wagner, *Grundzüge*, 167; Rezvan, *Koran*, 64, 84–85; Toral-Niehoff, "Gestaltung des Sündenfalls."

<sup>24</sup> The edition of al-Mu'ayyid (*Dīwān 'Adī b. Zayd*, 158–160) also does not include all textual material.

<sup>25</sup> See the appendix.

The words *isma' ḥadīthan*, “listen to a story,” set the mood of the poem right from its beginning. The introductory phrase echoes Jewish and Christian liturgy and their typical requests for the community to listen, especially before the recitation of scripture. The call “listen!” is also distinctive of Syrian homiletic literature.<sup>26</sup> An echo of this Jewish and Christian liturgical practice of announcing the recitation of scripture can also be found in the Qur'an. The word *ḥadīth* often precedes the Qur'anic narrations of biblical stories, for instance in

Q 20:9: *وَهَلْ أَتَاكَ حَدِيثُ مُوسَى* “Hast thou received the story of Moses?”<sup>27</sup>

The introductory lines also imply a dialogical setting, serving the purposes of both preaching and instruction—a motif to be found in both Jewish and Christian tradition that ultimately goes back to biblical precedents (Exod. 12:26–27, Deut. 6:20–21, 1 Pet. 3:15). The use of dialogue is a characteristic feature of Late Antique poetry and homiletic prose in both Greek and Syriac.<sup>28</sup> Dialogical and homiletic characters are crucial attributes of the most important forms of early Syriac poetry—*madrāshā*, *sogītā* and *mēmṛā*,<sup>29</sup> as well as the *kontakion*, a form of Byzantine liturgical poetry found in the sixth century that was significantly influenced by Syriac hymnography.<sup>30</sup> The Qur'an also includes homiletic reminiscences, as for example in Q 93:11: *وَأَمَّا* *بِنِعْمَةِ رَبِّكَ فَحَدِّثْ* “And as for thy Lord's blessing, declare it.”

Close attention ought to be paid to the expression, *abdā ni'matahū*, “He let his grace appear,” in the second line of this poem. The word, *ni'matun* “grace,” is used several times in the Qur'an, as in Q 35:3: *يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اذْكُرُوا نِعْمَتَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ* “O men, remember God's blessing upon you.”<sup>31</sup> The concept can also be found frequently in the Bible,<sup>32</sup> where it is explicitly mentioned that God's grace *appears*: Ἐπεφάνη γὰρ ἡ χάρις τοῦ Θεοῦ σωτήριος πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all.”<sup>33</sup> The verb *abdā*, “to let

<sup>26</sup> See *The Homilies of Aphraates*, 239, as an example.

<sup>27</sup> Translations of the Qur'an follow Arberry, *The Koran*. As remarked in the introduction, general lowercasing and other minor modifications have been adopted.

<sup>28</sup> Brock, “From Ephrem to Romanos,” 141.

<sup>29</sup> See Brock, “From Ephrem to Romanos”; Brock, “Syriac Dispute Poems.”

<sup>30</sup> Asmus, “Tworchestwo,” 192.

<sup>31</sup> Further references Q 2:211, 231, 3:103, 5:7, 11:20, 8:53, 14:16, 28:34, 16:18, 53:83, 114, 26:22, 33:9, 37:57, 39:8, 49, 43:13, 68:49, 92:19.

<sup>32</sup> At least 348 references.

<sup>33</sup> Translations of the Bible, if not indicated otherwise, are given according to the New Revised Standard Version.

appear,” together with the following verb, *‘arrafa*, “to let someone know,” or “to teach,” emphasize the hermeneutical aspect of the poem. This is evident from the text’s first lines, which define the perspective from which the creation story will be viewed throughout the poem. The quasi-historical report of Genesis is placed in a hermeneutical light where the recognition of God’s signs forms the basis for proclaiming his glory. As in later biblical accounts, especially those of the Psalms and the story of Job, the hermeneutical perspective is central to Qur’anic creation theology. It seems, therefore, that it is not due to coincidence that on the lexical level the verb *‘arrafa* also parallels the Qur’an. No other evidence for *‘arrafa* in the second stem or, according to two recensions of the poem, *‘allama*,<sup>34</sup> can be found in pre-Islamic poetry.

In the Qur’an, *‘arrafa* is used twice, in Q 47:5–6 and in Q 66:3. *‘Allama* appears several times, as in Q 2:31: *وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا*: “And he taught Adam the names, all of them.” However, what matters is not this formal lexical correspondence but rather the semantics of the word *āya* (pl. *āyāt*) meaning “sign,” which has evident hermeneutical implications in the poem as well as in the Qur’an. The usage of *‘arrafa*/*‘allama* in connection with *āyāt* has clear parallels in the Qur’an, where signs are portrayed as a crucial means of communication between God and man. The Qur’an describes this process with the verbs “to bring” (*atā, jā’a*, Q 2:106.211, 43:47), “to bring down,” “to reveal” (*nazzala, anzala*, Q 6:37, 10:20), “to send” (*ba’atha*, Q 10:75), but also “to explain,” “to make clear” (Q 5:75, 6:46, 7:174, 9:11), “to tell,” and “to recite” (*dhakkara, qaṣṣa*, Q 6:130, 8:31, 10:71).<sup>35</sup> The Arabic *āya* is related to the Hebrew *ōth*, meaning in biblical and rabbinical usage “sign” or “miracle.” However, in contrast to the latter, *āya* in the Qur’an refers to both non-linguistic as well as linguistic communication.<sup>36</sup> As such, it refers to God’s revelation in general. A similar tendency towards the extension of the semantic field of the concept of “sign” is found in Syriac literature prior to the Qur’an. Here, the word *āthā*, “while being used precisely as the Heb *אוֹת*, and translating *σημεῖον* both in the LXX and N.T., is also used in the sense of *argumentum, documentum* (P<sup>Sm</sup>, 413),<sup>37</sup> and thus approaches

<sup>34</sup> See appendix.

<sup>35</sup> Abrahamov, “Signs,” 8.

<sup>36</sup> Abrahamov, “Signs,” 6–7.

<sup>37</sup> Jeffery here refers to Payne Smith, *Thesaurus*, vol. 1, 413 (K. D.).

even more closely than תא the Qur'anic use of the word."<sup>38</sup> In the Syriac translation of the Gospel according to John, *āthā* refers to signs by which Jesus manifested himself as the Lord.<sup>39</sup>

The expression, *fa-ʿarrafanā āyātihi l-uwalā*, in the second line of the poem represents early evidence for the hermeneutic meaning of the word *āya* in Arabic, which probably developed in correspondence with the Syriac *āthā* and is significant for the Qur'anic concept of signs. Against the background of the Christian idea of the *logos creator*<sup>40</sup> (John 1:1.14), the description of the creation of the world as "first signs" does not appear surprising. Creation is the manifestation of the divine Word (λόγος)<sup>41</sup> and as such has to be understood as the first act of revelation. Even if *āya* in pre-Islamic poetry indicates only "signs," "road-signs,"<sup>42</sup> it is likely that the Arabic word's semantic field was extended and interpreted hermeneutically among Arabic Christians who were familiar with Syriac tradition. The poem's use of the word *āya* thus ought to be explained in terms of a shared linguistic and theological context rather than in terms of the poem's textual dependence on the Qur'an.

*The Creation of the World (vv. 3–7)*

كَانَتْ رِيَّاحًا وَمَاءٌ إِذَا عَرَانِيَّةٌ      3  
وُظْلَمَةٌ لَمْ يَدَعْ فَتَقَا وَلَا خَلَلًا

They were winds, raging water  
and darkness. He left neither rent nor gap.

No parallel for the mention of winds can be found in either the Qur'an or the Bible. In several Late Antique works, wind or air are often mentioned among the original elements such as water, fire, and earth.<sup>43</sup> However, it is unlikely that verse 3a does in fact allude to classical

<sup>38</sup> Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary*, 73.

<sup>39</sup> Payne Smith, *Syriac Dictionary*, 31. See John 2:11 as an example. For the New Testament is a disassociation from the legitimization of the religious authority through signs as means of non-linguistic communication characteristics (Mat 16:4, 24:3ff, 24:24, Mar 8:11–12, Luke 11:16 etc.).

<sup>40</sup> Compare Ps. 33:6, 9 and also Q 2:117, 3:47, 3:59, 6:73, 16:40, 19:35, 36:82, 40:68, 50:38.

<sup>41</sup> In Greek λόγος means not just "word," but also "language," "speech," "proof," "doctrine," and "reason."

<sup>42</sup> Imrū' al-Qays, LXV:1, see Ahlwardt, *The Divans*, 160; compare also Q 26:128.

<sup>43</sup> Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 15; see also Toepel, *Legenden*, 25–36.

cosmology. It is much more probable that the terms “winds and ranging water” are meant to describe original chaos, as known from Gen. 1:2 as *tohū wa-bohū*: “the earth was a formless void” וְהָאָרֶץ הִיְתָה תוֹהוּ וְבוֹהוּ. In addition, the use of the word “wind” in its plural form stresses the descriptive meaning of the passage. This discourages allegorical interpretation of the kind found in the Babylonian Talmud and other writings, where the wind is identified as one of the cosmogonic elements.<sup>44</sup>

The reference to darkness and a primordial unity of the whole of creation are also analogous to biblical accounts: וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם “And darkness covered the face of the deep” (Gen. 1:2). By contrast, the Qur’an employs the word *zulmatun* only in its plural form, *zulumāt*, which only once appears in the context of the creation of the world: Q 6:1 الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَجَعَلَ الظُّلُمَاتِ وَالنُّورَ “Praise belongs to God, who created the heavens and the earth and appointed the shadows and light.” This verse, however, should not be read as referring to original darkness, but rather to night and day and the succession of one following the other (cf. Q 3:190). Water, too, is mentioned only once in the Qur’an in the context of creation, namely, in Q 11:7. There its connotation differs significantly from the way in which water appears in the poem: لَسَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ فِي سِتَّةِ أَيَّامٍ وَكَانَ عَرْشُهُ عَلَى الْمَاءِ وَهُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ “And it is he who created the heavens and the earth in six days, and his throne was upon the waters.”<sup>45</sup> According to the Qur’an, then, water existed prior to the creation of the world. The Qur’an, therefore, does not appear to subscribe to the idea of a *creatio ex nihilo*.<sup>46</sup> Although this concept is of course not explicitly mentioned in the Bible either, it is generally assumed in later Christian theology. The wording of line 3 also does not explicitly exclude the possibility that matter might have been preexistent. However, one should not overlook the fact that the linguistic construction of *kāna* + accusative syntactically subordinates the words “winds” and “water” as compound predicates to the word “signs” in the preceding line as its subject. Thus, these elements are seen as part of the divine work of creation.

<sup>44</sup> Toepel, *Legenden*, 35–36.

<sup>45</sup> Compare Gen. 1:2: וַיָּרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם “And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (King James).

<sup>46</sup> O’Shaughnessy, “Creation from Nothing.”

- 4 فَأَمَرَ الظُّلُمَةَ الْغَوِيَّةَ فَانْكَشَفَتْ وَعَزَّلَ الْمَاءَ عَمَّا كَانَ قَدْ شَغَلَا  
5 وَبَسَطَ الْأَرْضَ بَسْطًا ثُمَّ قَدَّرَهَا تَحْتَ السَّمَاءِ سَوَاءً مِثْلَ مَا فَعَلَا

Then he commanded the black darkness and it became disclosed,  
and he separated the water from what was occupying him (before).

And he spread the earth out, then he determined it  
under the sky, adjusted (to it) as he made (it).

Lines 4–5 recall in a shorter form the events of the second and third days of the creation of Genesis. Biblical images are evoked such as the partition between light and darkness (Gen. 1:4), the separation between the water under and above the firmament (Gen. 1:6–7), and the formation of dry land (Gen. 1:9–10). The poem essentially follows the chronology of the biblical account of creation. The wording of the lines, however, exhibits no clear similarities to the text of Genesis.

*Basata l-arḍa baṣṭan* is a *figura etymologica*, meaning literally “he spread the earth out by spreading.” One version replaces *baṣṭan* with *bisāṭan* (TA, LA). The translation would then be “he spread out the earth like a carpet.” This seems, however, to be a later reading. The primary meaning of the root *b-s-ṭ* is “to spread out,” “to stretch out.” The idea that God spread out the earth is reflected in the Bible, cf. Isa. 42:5: “Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it.”<sup>47</sup>

The Qurʾan also discusses the spreading of earth in Q 2:22: الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمُ الْأَرْضَ فِرَاشًا وَالسَّمَاءَ بِنَاءً “(Serve your Lord,) who assigned to you the earth for a couch, and heaven for an edifice.” The word *firāshun*, which Arberry translates here as “couch,” has as its primary meaning “plain,” “plain land.” The verb *farasha* means “to level,” “to make plain,” as well as “to make something a bed.” This meaning is clearly attested in Q 51:48: وَالْأَرْضَ فَرَشْنَاهَا فَنِعْمَ الْمَاهِدُونَ “And the earth—we spread it forth; O excellent smoothers!” Along with *farasha*, the spreading of earth is described in the Qurʾan with the verbs *madda*

<sup>47</sup> כֹּה-אָמַר הָאֱלֹהִים | יְהוָה בּוֹרֵא הַשָּׁמַיִם וְנֹטִיָּהֶם רִקַּע הָאָרֶץ וַיַּצְעֲצֶיהָ

(13:3, 15:19, 50:7, 84:3), *saṭaḥa* (88:20) and *ṭaḥā* (91:6). *Basaṭa* is not used in the Qur'an in this context.<sup>48</sup>

6      وَجَاعَلَ الشَّمْسَ مِصْرًا لَا خَفَاءَ بِهِ      يَبَيِّنُ النَّهَارَ وَيَبَيِّنُ اللَّيْلَ قَدْ فَصَّلَا

7      وَفِي السَّمَاءِ مَصَابِيحٌ تَضِيءُ لَنَا      مَا إِن تَكَلَّفْنَا زَيْتًا وَلَا قُتْلًا

And he made the sun a limit that has no veil,  
it separates the day from the night.

And lights shine for us in the sky,  
without burdening us with oil or wick.

In pre-Islamic poetry, the word *miṣrun* has the primary meaning of “limit,” “age-limit.” Therefore, the first words of line 6 express the notion that the sun serves to mark the passage of time. The same function of the sun is depicted in Gen. 1:14. A parallel can also be found in Q 6:96: “وَجَعَلَ اللَّيْلَ سَكَنًا وَالشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ حُسْبَانًا” “And he has made the night for a repose, and the sun and moon for a reckoning.” This similarity, however, is only one of content. There is nothing in lines 6 and 7 of the poem that is immediately recognizable as having been borrowed from either the Bible or the Qur'an. The statement concerning the absence of a veil remains unclear. One possible interpretation is that this may refer to the notion that the transition from day to night and the course of time occur smoothly, without a noticeable separation.

The idea that the sun is put into service for man is resumed in line 7. This seems to be an independent poetic idea without direct sources in canonical religious texts.<sup>49</sup> It does, however, possess a rhetorical function. The reference to the listeners (“lights shine for us”) recalls the dialogical framework and the didactic character of the poem.

#### *Creation of Man, Paradise, and Woman (vv. 8–11)*

8      فَصَيَّرَ لِسِتَّةِ أَيَّامٍ خَلِيقَتَهُ      وَكَانَ آخِرَهَا أَنْ صَوَّرَ الرَّجُلَا

<sup>48</sup> *Basaṭa* is used in the Qur'an with the meaning “to spread out the hand” (Q 13:26, 17:30, 28:82, 29:62, 30:37, 34:36, 34:39, 39:52, 42:12).

<sup>49</sup> A remote parallel can be found in the parable on the carelessness of the birds in Matt. 6:26.



- 9 فَأَخَذَ اللَّهُ مِنْ طِينٍ فَصَوَّرَهُ      حَتَّى إِذَا مَرَّاهُ تَوَّاعْتَدَلَا
- 10 دَعَاهُ آدَمَ مَصُونًا فَاسْتَجَابَ لَهُ      بِنَفْخَةِ الرُّوحِ فِي الْجِسْمِ الَّذِي جَبَلَا
- 11 ثُمَّتْ أَوْرَثُهُ الْفِرْدَوْسَ يَعْمُرُهَا      وَرَوْجَهُ صُنْعَةً مِنْ ضِلْعِهِ جَعَلَا

He fulfilled his creation in six days  
and its last part was that he shaped man.

God took clay and shaped him  
until he saw him to be perfect and standing upright.

He called him with a (raised) voice “Adam!,” and the latter answered  
him  
thanks to the blowing of the spirit into the body that he formed.

After that he bequeathed to him paradise, so that he might inhabit it,  
and he made his wife, built out of his rib.

The number of days of creation is defined as six in the Bible (Gen. 2:2, Exod. 20:11, 31:17). This number is also frequently reported in the Qur’an (7:54, 10:3, 11:7).<sup>50</sup> Both sources also imply that the creation of man was the final act of creation. Its depiction in the lines 8 through 11 is close to the so-called “second creation story” of Genesis (2:4–25). The biblical origin of lines 8 and 9 can be seen by the use of the verb *ṣawwara*. The root *ṣ-w-r* contains the meaning “image,” “form”; *ṣawwara* thus means “to shape,” “to form.” In the present context, it indicates that the poet was aware of the biblical concept of man’s creation in the image of God. Gen. 1:26 reads: “Then God said, Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.”<sup>51</sup> Here the Hebrew text uses the verb *āśa* to mean “make.” In the Syriac version, the term used is *ʿbad*. Parallel to this, Gen. 2:7 uses Hebr. *yāśar*, Gr. *πλάσσω*, “to shape,” “to form” and Syr. *gʿbal*, “to form,” “to knead”: וַיִּצַּר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם: καὶ ἔπλασεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν ἄνθρωπον, ܥܠܡܢܐ ܠܡܢܐ ܠܡܢܐ ܠܡܢܐ “Then the Lord God formed man.”

The creation of humans in the image of God has an essential Christological dimension that is related to the ideas of incarnation

<sup>50</sup> Further references Q 25:59, 32:4, 50:38, 57:4.

<sup>51</sup> וַיִּצַּר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כִּדְמוּתֵנוּ The Septuagint renders Hebrew *ṣelem*, “image,” with *eikóna*, and the Peshitta with ܫܠܡܐ (*šalmā*).

and Christ as the second Adam.<sup>52</sup> Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306–373), an outstanding representative of early Syriac Christianity, understands the creation of Adam as a revelation of Christ:

ܠܚܝܬܐ ܕܥܡܡܐ ܕܝܠܕ  
ܕܥܕܐ ܠܡܢ ܠܕܝܢ  
ܕܥܡܡܐ ܠܡܢ ܕܥܕܐ  
ܕܥܡܡܐ ܕܥܡܡܐ ܕܥܡܡܐ

He revealed and showed the first-born,  
when he created Adam:  
“Let us make a man  
in our image, in our shape.”<sup>53</sup>

This parallel of Jesus and Adam also makes its appearance in the Qur'an. However, in this case, it is used in an inverse fashion to disprove man's likeness to God and, as such, to disprove the divinity of Jesus: Q 3:59 *إِنَّ مَثَلَ عِيسَىٰ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ كَمَثَلِ آدَمَ خَلَقَهُ مِنْ تُرَابٍ ثُمَّ قَالَ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ* “Truly, the likeness of Jesus, in God's sight, is as Adam's likeness; he created him of dust, then said he unto him, ‘Be,’ and he was.” The Qur'an very firmly contradicts the concept that humanity was created in God's image. This is also exhibited through various linguistic means. The Qur'an consistently describes the creation of the first human being by employing the verb *khalaqa*. *Ṣawwara*, on the other hand, is only used in the Qur'an to refer to subsequent work of God on humans. According to the Qur'an, people were first created, and thereafter shaped. Q 7:11 reads: *وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَاكُمْ ثُمَّ صَوَّرْنَاكُمْ* “We created you, then we shaped you.”<sup>54</sup> The Qur'anic distinction between the creation and formation of man is also clearly displayed in Q 32: 7–9: *وَبَدَأَ خَلْقَ الْإِنْسَانِ مِنْ طِينٍ ثُمَّ جَعَلَ نَسْلَهُ مِنْ سُلَالَةٍ مِّنْ مَّاءٍ مَّهِينٍ ثُمَّ سَوَّاهُ* “And he originated the creation of man out of clay, then he fashioned his progeny of an extraction of mean water, then he shaped him,” and Q 3:6 *هُوَ الَّذِي يُصَوِّرُكُمْ فِي الْأَرْحَامِ كَيْفَ يَشَاءُ* “It is he who forms you in the womb as he wills.”

There is an important semantic difference in the usage of the verb *ṣawwara* in the Qur'an and its equivalents in the biblical account of creation. The Qur'anic *ṣawwara* is limited exclusively to the physiological shaping of the human (Q 40:64 and 64:3: *صَوَّرَكُمْ فَأَحْسَنَ صُورَكُمْ* “And he shaped you, and shaped you well”). The book of Genesis, however, implies a shaping *in the image of God*. The context of the

<sup>52</sup> Rom. 15:14f., 1 Cor. 15:21–22, 45–47.

<sup>53</sup> *De Fide* VI:7, see Beck, *Hymnen*, 26–27.

<sup>54</sup> Compare Q 38:71–72.

poem makes it obvious that the verb *ṣawwara* in line 8 conveys the biblical concept.

What is also remarkable is the statement that the first human was shaped from *ṭīn*, “clay.” The notion of the usage of clay in the creation of man can be found in early Semitic literature, both from Mesopotamia and Ugarit.<sup>55</sup> The idea of man as clay and the creator as a kind of potter is also a biblical motif<sup>56</sup> (Isa. 64:7, Job 10:9). Job 33:6 reads:

הֲאֵינִי כַפִּידָא לְאֵלִים מִחֶמֶר קִרְצָתִי גִם־אֲנִי:

אֲנִי כַפִּידָא לְאֵלִים מִחֶמֶר קִרְצָתִי גִם־אֲנִי:

See, before God I am as you are; I too was formed from a piece of clay.

In the Qur'an the description of man as created from *ṭīn* occurs eight times. An example can be found in Q 6:2: *هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ طِينٍ* “It is he who created you of clay.”<sup>57</sup> This is in fact a distinctive feature of Qur'anic language, since in early Arabic texts the word *ṭīn* is quite rare. Only one reference to this can be found in pre-Islamic poetry, in the *dīwān* of the Jewish poet as-Samaw'al b. 'Ādiyā' (born ca. 560), VI:6:

وَيْتٌ قَدْ بَنَيْتُ بِغَيْرِ طِينٍ وَلَا خَشَبٍ وَمَجْدٌ قَدْ آتَيْتُ

Quite a few houses have I built without clay  
and without wood, and a good many honors have I won.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Greenstein, “God’s Golem,” 222.

<sup>56</sup> The creation story of Genesis, however, does not speak of “clay” (Hebr. *khomer*, Syr. *ṭīnā*), but of ‘*afar*, “earth,” “dust.” The Septuagint has γῆ, the Peshitta ܠܬܝܢܐ.

<sup>57</sup> Further references Q 7:12; 17:61; 23:12; 32:7; 37:11; 38:71, 76.

<sup>58</sup> Hirschberg, *Der Dīwān des as-Samaw'al*, 27. Some few references from the early Islamic time can be found in the *mukhaḍramūn* poets. In the following two examples the word *ṭīn* is used in the same anthropological context:

Umayya b. abī aṣ-Ṣalt (d. ca. 631) (cf. as-Saṭlī, ‘*Umayya*, 394):

كَيْفَ الْجُودُ وَإِنَّمَا خُلِقَ الْفَنَى مِنْ طِينٍ صَلْصَالٍ لَهُ خَارٌ

“How could someone deny? Verily man was created of clay (like) clay, of which baked pottery (is made).”

‘Alī b. abī Ṭālib (600–660), quoted according to *al-Mawsū‘a aṣ-ṣi‘riyya*:

مَا أَحْسَنَ الْجُودِ فِي الدُّنْيَا وَفِي الدِّينِ وَأَفْجَحَ الْبُخْلِ فِيمَنْ صِغَ مِنْ طِينٍ

“Nothing is better than generosity in this world and in faith, and nothing is more abominable than stinginess in someone who is made out of clay.”

The infrequency with which the word *ṭīn* can be found in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry must be viewed in relation to its non-Arabic origin. *Ṭīn* most likely came into Arabic as a loan-word from a North-Semitic language. Arthur Jeffery comments on the word *ṭīnā*, “clay,” in Judaic-Aramaic and Syriac: “From the same source in the Mesopotamian area the word passed into Iranian, [...] and it was probably from the same source that it came as an early borrowing into Arabic.”<sup>59</sup> One can thus assume with a high degree of certainty that an author like ‘Adī b. Zayd, living in Mesopotamia, educated in Arabic and Persian, and exposed to the Syriac Christian tradition, would most likely have known the word *ṭīn*. Again, the poem’s similarity with the Qur’anic wording is evidence of the poem’s milieu of origin rather than of textual dependency on the Qur’an.

Also meaningful is the context in which the word *ṭīn* is used in line 9a. The following expression “perfect and standing upright” (9b) evokes the uniqueness of man among other creatures, the exceptional features that bear witness to his likeness to God. This is most probably also the content of the preceding passage, which utilizes the verb *ṣawwara*. Jewish tradition interprets the straightening of Adam as a consequence of the inspiration of his earlier body,<sup>60</sup> and explicitly considers his ability to stand upright as evidence of his likeness to God: עמד על רגליו והיה מתואר בדמות אלהים “he stood on his feet and was adorned with the shape of God.”<sup>61</sup> The Qur’an does not talk about Adam’s standing upright, and in only two places does the Qur’anic description of man’s creation from clay (*ṭīn*) continue with God blowing his spirit into him (Q 32:7–9, 38:71–72), and here, too, the motif is not elaborated any further. Even Iblīs’ argument that man was created of as lowly a substance as clay is not refuted by appeal to God’s creative breath (Q 38:76). The blowing of God’s spirit into the first human is of course an echo of the biblical tradition (Gen. 2:7, Job 33:4, cf. Rev. 11:11, John 20:22). In the framework of Islamic anthropology, however, it has significantly less ontological weight than it carries in the Jewish-Christian concept of the image of God.

<sup>59</sup> Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary*, 208.

<sup>60</sup> Toepel, *Legenden*, 76.

<sup>61</sup> Text see *Sefer Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*, פרק אחד עשר, section יד line 2 from below; quoted upon Toepel, *Legenden*, 63. The later Christian tradition refers to the rising up of Adam in a soteriological context. See for example the account of *Cave of Treasures* (2:15–16): “When he rose in full length and stood upright in the center of the earth, he planted his two feet on that spot whereon was set up the Cross of our Redeemer,” see *Cave of Treasures*, 53.

The expression *وَنَفَخْتُ فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحِي* “And I breathed my spirit in him” in Q 15:29 and 38:72 is paralleled by the Syriac theologian Aphraat (290–370) *ܡܢ ܪܘܚܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ* “et insufflavit ei de spiritu suo.”<sup>62</sup> Hence, the corresponding nominal construction *nafkhatu r-rūḥ* in line 10b of the poem must not necessarily be attributed to an Islamic source.

The fact that the poem is to be traced back, not to the Qur’an, but to a shared cultural milieu, is also indicated by the last word of the line 10, *jabila*, which does not appear in the Qur’an. Only in two Qur’anic passages can derivations from the root *j-b-l* be found (*jubil-latun* and *jibillun*). These terms, however, do not seem to be used in pre-Islamic or in early Islamic poetry.<sup>63</sup> At the same time, their meaning in the Qur’an is not absolutely unequivocal: Q 26:184 *وَاتَّقُوا الَّذِي*

*خَلَقَكُمْ وَاجِبِلَةَ الْأَوَّلِينَ* “Fear him who created you, and the generation of the ancients,” and Q 36:62 *وَلَقَدْ أَضَلَّ مِنْكُمْ جِبِلًّا كَثِيرًا* “He led astray many a throng of you.” Both passages, as Efim Rezvan points out based on their contexts,<sup>64</sup> deal with legendary ancient nations, and both must be viewed in relation to the fact that the term *jbl* is found in inscriptions from Palmyra<sup>65</sup> and Lihyan,<sup>66</sup> where it signifies a “public meeting.” The term *jbl* hence belongs to the linguistic field of North-Arabic nations. Its North-Semitic origin is also evident in Syriac, where words with this root are common: the verb *g<sup>e</sup>bal*, for example, is used in the Syriac version of the previously quoted verse, Gen. 2:7: *ܡܢ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܥܕܢ ܕܥܕܢ*. In other works of Syriac literature, too, the creation of man is generally described by *g<sup>e</sup>bal*.<sup>67</sup> The use of the verb *jabila* in the text of the poem reveals the familiarity of its author with the North-Arabic, especially the Syriac, linguistic milieu. This is also reflected in the Qur’anic terms *jibillatun* and *jibillun*.

A similar point applies to the description of paradise as *al-firdaws* in line 11. This is of course analogous to the Syriac *fardayso*. The Syriac version of the Bible uses *fardayso* quite often, whereas in the Qur’an, the word used to refer to paradise as it was inhabited by

<sup>62</sup> Aphraatis sapientis, 800:4.

<sup>63</sup> See also Rezvan, *Koran*, 64.

<sup>64</sup> Rezvan, *Koran*, 65.

<sup>65</sup> Starcky, *Palmyre*, 36.

<sup>66</sup> Caskel, *Lihyan*, no. 71:5, 77:6–7, 87:3, 91:8, compare also no. 52.

<sup>67</sup> References are numerous, compare for example the Syriac version of Clement of Rome’s *Epistle to Vergins*: *ܕܐܝܬܐ ܕܥܕܢ ܕܥܕܢ* “man whom he had formed,” see *Clementis Romani Epistolae*, 71:20, and also the sixth hymn of Ephrem the Syrian: *ܕܥܕܢ ܕܥܕܢ* “he formed him at the beginning” (see Beck, *Hymnen*, 27).

Adam is always *al-janna*. The word *al-firdaus* is used in the Qur'an only twice. In both cases, it refers to the paradise to be inherited by the believers, e.g., in Q 18:107: *إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ كَانَتْ لَهُمْ جَنَّاتُ الْفِرْدَوْسِ نُزُلًا* "But those who believe, and do deeds of righteousness—the gardens of paradise shall be their hospitality." *Al-firdaus* occurs in the same context in Q 23:11, a verse that, like the text of the poem, also includes the verb *waritha*, "to inherit": *الَّذِينَ يَرِثُونَ الْفِرْدَوْسَ*<sup>68</sup> "who shall inherit paradise." Despite this similarity, one can also observe differences between the two texts. The verb *waritha* is used in Q 23:11 in the first and not in the fourth stem. Also, the Qur'anic passage discusses eschatology and not the creation of the world. The same notion that the believers will inherit eternal life in heaven is also an essential feature of the theology of the New Testament. In the Sermon on the Mount, which is not only a theological, but also a central liturgical text, it is written: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Mt 5:5). Its Syriac version employs the verb *iret*, which corresponds to the Arabic *waritha*, *ܐܝܪܬܐ*.

The second half of line 11 displays further similarities with the biblical account of creation. Firstly, there is a similar succession of events: first man is created (Gen. 2:7), then he is brought to paradise (Gen. 2:8.15), and finally his wife is created (Gen. 2:22). Secondly, the creation of woman from Adam's rib (Gen. 2:22) takes place. The Qur'an does not specify when the first woman was created, and it merely reports that God ordered both humans to inhabit paradise (Q 2:35): *وَقُلْنَا يَا آدَمُ اسْكُنْ أَنْتَ وَزَوْجُكَ الْجَنَّةَ* "And we said, 'Adam, dwell thou, and thy wife, in the Garden.'"<sup>69</sup> Arabic *dil'un*, "rib," is exhibited in pre-Islamic poetry, but not in the Qur'an. The Qur'an can be read as implying that the first woman was created from Adam; however, it does not mention Adam's rib or any other part of his anatomy, cf. Q 4:1: *يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا* "Mankind, fear your Lord, who created you of a single soul, and from it created its mate." In contrast to this, Gen. 2:22 clearly states that Adam's wife was created of his rib: "And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man."<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Q 21:105, and see Baumstark, "Arabische Übersetzung," 184.

<sup>69</sup> See also Q 7:19.

<sup>70</sup> *וַיִּבֶן יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָעֲצָלָה אֲשֶׁר-לָקַח מִן-הָאָדָם לְאִשָּׁה וַיְבָאָהּ אֶל-הָאָדָם*

One should also notice that the creation of women is described in the poem with the word *ṣunʿatun* rather than with the Qurʾanic *khalaqa*. The root *ṣ-n-ʿ* means “to make” in Arabic. This corresponds to Hebr. *bāna* and Syr. *tagen* of the biblical text. Both verbs mean “to construct,” “to form.”

*The First Commandment (v. 12)*

لَمْ يَنْهَهُ رَبُّهُ عَنْ غَيْرِ وَاحِدَةٍ      مِنْ شَجَرٍ طَيِّبٍ أَنْ شَمَّأَوْا أَكَلَا 12

His Lord did not forbid him—with a single exception—  
to smell or to eat from good trees.

The prohibition to eat from the tree of knowledge is mentioned both in Genesis (2:16–17) and in the Qurʾan (Q 2:35, 7:19). According to both accounts, the receiver of the commandment is Adam. The essential difference, however, lies in the fact that in the Qurʾan the prohibition refers explicitly to Adam and his wife, whereas in the Bible the commandment is given to Adam alone before the creation of Eve. In the verse 12 of the poem, Adam is the only human addressed. Despite the fact that the creation of women has been mentioned in the previous line, one cannot be sure whether it preceded the commandment, as lines 11 and 12 are syntactically not connected to one another.

*The Serpent and the Fall of Man (vv. 13–18)*

فَكَانَتِ الْحَيَّةُ الرَّقْشَاءُ إِذْ خُلِقَتْ      كَمَا تَرَى نَاقَةً فِي الْخَلْقِ أَوْ جَمَلًا 13

The serpent with black and white spots was, when it was created,  
as you see a she-camel in shape or a he-camel.

The motif of the serpent displays another correspondence to the book of Genesis. The Qurʾan attributes the seduction of the first human couple exclusively to the devil.<sup>71</sup> Absence of an explicit relation between the serpent and the devil in the poem is for Toral-Niehoff an important indicator that it is independent from the Qurʾan.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> The serpent can be found in the Qurʾan only in the story of Moses and the Pharaoh. In two cases (7:107 and 26:32), the word *thuʿbānun* is used, and only once—*ḥayyatun* (Q 20:20).

<sup>72</sup> Toral-Niehoff, “Gestaltung des Sündenfalls,” 249–251.



The development of the motif of the fall of humanity in Jewish and Christian transmission exhibits a gradual replacement of the serpent's figure by that of the devil. This transformation is completed in the Qur'an.<sup>73</sup> It is interesting to note that in three Qur'anic stories of paradise, which are preceded by an Iblīs passage (2:34–36, 7:11–20, 20:116–120), the seducer of man is referred to not by his Qur'anic name of Iblīs, but by the term *ash-shayṭān*. This reference to the devil as *ash-shayṭān* in the Qur'anic paradise story could be related to the fact that the Qur'anic *shayṭān*, being a loan-word from Ethiopic with the meaning "devil," was assimilated with the authentic Arabic word *shayṭān*,<sup>74</sup> which was known already in pre-Islamic Arabic culture as a metaphorical name for a serpent as well as a personal name.<sup>75</sup> Although one should not ignore this reverberation of biblical tradition, it should be noticed that the figure of the serpent from the garden of Eden, even if it is implied by the word *ash-shayṭān*, is not actually found in the Qur'an. The serpent is here totally dissolved into the devil, because the Qur'anic testing story is deprived of any attracting motivations.<sup>76</sup> Their representation, however, is the main function of the serpent motif in several works of post-biblical literature. For example, *The Cave of Treasures* explains the devil's reason for using the serpent as an attempt to hide his ugliness (4:6–12). The Arabic version of this book portrays the serpent as: *وكانت اجمل الحيوان* "And it was the most beautiful of the animals."<sup>77</sup> The depiction of the serpent in the poem has to be seen in the context of this tradition.

Line 13 describes the serpent as "speckled," Arabic *raqshā'*. In the Hebrew and Syriac texts of the Bible, the words *ārūm* and *arim* are used, respectively, meaning "crafty," "smart" (Gen. 3:1):

וְהַנָּחֹשׁ הָיָה עָרוֹם מִכָּל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יְהוָה  
וְהָיָה חָכֵם מִכָּל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה

Now the serpent was craftier than any other  
wild animal that the Lord God had made.

From the same root, *-r-m*, the Hebrew word עָרוֹם *ārom* is derived. It is differentiated in spelling from עָרוֹם by a single dot over the ו.

<sup>73</sup> Martinek, *Schlange*.

<sup>74</sup> Lane, *Lexicon*, 1552; compare Q 37:65 and see Renz, *Schlangendrache*, 96.

<sup>75</sup> Kropp, "Der äthiopische Satan," 99–101.

<sup>76</sup> On the demythologization of the creation account in the Qur'an and its theological meaning, see Neuwirth, "Negotiating Justice."

<sup>77</sup> Toepel, *Legenden*, 143, 146, fn. 4.

‘*Ārom* in Hebrew means “completely or partly naked.” Here, one can see a remote parallel to the meaning of the root ‘*r-m* in Arabic, which designates the quality of possessing two colors; this is why Arabic *a’ramu* means “speckled.” In pre-Islamic poetry, this term is used specifically in reference to serpents.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, the Arabic verb ‘*arama* means “to be evil in disposition,” “to be ill-natured.”<sup>79</sup> It might therefore be suggested that *raqshā*’ is used in the poem as a synonym for *a’ramu*.<sup>80</sup> This would provide further evidence for a biblical background with which ‘Adī b. Zayd should have been familiar through Syriac<sup>81</sup> tradition.

The semantics of the root *r-q-sh* in Arabic also warrant another observation. The description of the serpent as *raqshā*’ is common in pre-Islamic poetry,<sup>82</sup> and in applying this label the poet follows conventional usage. In addition to the meaning of “black and white,” the semantic field of the root *r-q-sh* also includes the notion “beautiful.” *Raqshun* is “good,” “beautiful,” the verb *raqasha* means “to color with two colors,” and also “to decorate,” “to embellish,” and *raqqasha* is “to embellish speech with lies.”<sup>83</sup> Therefore, *raqshā*’ conveyed not only a zoological feature, the shape of serpents, but also their beauty or ability to attract. The reading variant recorded in M<sup>P10</sup> and M<sup>V</sup> (see the appendix), which give الرشقا “elegant,” “slender,” supports this assumption. Also in another poem attributed to ‘Adī b. Zayd the serpent of the paradise is described as both *raqtā*’ “speckled” and *ḥasnā*’ “beautiful.”<sup>84</sup> The comparison between the serpent and the shape of a camel in line 13a is probably meant to be understood within this context.

The comparison with a camel can be interpreted in a literal as well as in a figurative sense. Literal similarity to a camel would imply the existence of legs, which are an attribute of archaic depictions of dragons. Serpentine dragons with legs are commonly found in ancient Near Eastern art.<sup>85</sup> In the Bible, too, the serpent of paradise is identified

<sup>78</sup> Lewin, *Vocabulary*, 284.

<sup>79</sup> Lane, *Lexicon*, 2024.

<sup>80</sup> Compare Rezvan, *Koran*, 84–85.

<sup>81</sup> Rezvan assumes direct use of a Hebrew source (see Rezvan, *Koran*, 85).

<sup>82</sup> *Raqāshun* means “serpent,” “a serpent speckled with black and white,” see Lane, *Lexicon*, 1135.

<sup>83</sup> Lane, *Lexicon*, 1135.

<sup>84</sup> See Cheikho, “Al-Iḥdāth,” 536.

<sup>85</sup> See depictions of the Marduk dragons on the Ishtar Gate. The mythological serpent-dragon came out of the symbiosis of serpent and other animals, originally

both as a dragon and the devil (Rev. 12:9): καὶ ἐβλήθη ὁ δράκων ὁ μέγας ὁ ὄφης ὁ ἀρχαῖος ὁ καλούμενος Διάβολος καὶ ὁ Σατανᾶς ὁ πλανῶν τὴν οἰκουμένην ὅλην ἐβλήθη εἰς τὴν γῆν καὶ οἱ ἄγγελοι αὐτοῦ μετ' αὐτοῦ ἐβλήθησαν "The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him."<sup>86</sup>

The notion that the serpent stood upright and had legs, found neither in the Bible nor in the Qur'an, is reflected in later exegetical tradition.<sup>87</sup> The poet was most likely aware of this legendary material. However, the true meaning of the comparison with the camel could possibly reach beyond simple borrowing. In fact, line 13 does not say that the serpent was really (like) a camel, but just that it appeared or, more precisely, was seen in a shape similar to that of a camel.<sup>88</sup> This nuance is also indicated through the double reference to a she-camel as well as a he-camel. Camels are often presented in pre-Islamic poetry as objects of prestige, whose appearance is considered to be beautiful and splendid. Hence, comparing the serpent to the shape of a camel could also metaphorically point to the beauty of the serpent.<sup>89</sup>

In any case, the text of the poem focuses only on the outward appearance of the serpent. Yet there is a change of perspective here, which can be observed also in other works of post-biblical literature, where the cleverness of the serpent is replaced by its beauty. The depiction of the serpent does not just introduce a mythological creature, but serves as an illustration for the disposition of human nature towards temptation. The story thus becomes a sermon, interpreting

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opposed to it, like birds and horses in mythologies of the post-Paleolithic era, see Ivanov, "Zmey," 468–469. For more details on the subject of the serpent of paradise, see Renz, *Schlangendrache*.

<sup>86</sup> See also Rev. 20:2; in both passages, like in Gen. 3:1, the word for serpent is ὄφης.

<sup>87</sup> Already the Ethiopian *Book of Enoch* (10:9) attributes to the descendants of the fallen angels among other features also the shape of camels, see Toepel, *Legenden*, 146. For further parallels refer to Toral-Niehoff, "Gestaltung des Sündenfalls," 244–246, and Hirschberg, *Lehren*, 107.

<sup>88</sup> The primary meaning of *khalqun* in pre-Islamic poetry is "appearance," "shape," "form," see Polosin, *Slovar*, 150; compare also Efim Rezvan's translation of this line in Rezvan, *Koran*, 84.

<sup>89</sup> Later Islamic tradition includes references to both aspects in the depiction of the serpent of paradise, the beauty as well as the anatomy: "The snake had four feet as if it were a Bactrian camel and was one of the most beautiful animals created by God," see aṭ-Ṭabarī, *History*, vol. 1, 227.

the narrative according to its moralizing intentions. This also appears clearly in the next line.

بَأْمَرِ حَوَاءَ لَمْ تَأْخُذْ لَهُ الدَّغْلَا      فَعَمِدَ اللَّيْثُ عَنْ أَكْلِهَا نُهْيَا      14

They turned to that from which they had been forbidden to eat  
on the order of Eve, who did not consider the evil<sup>90</sup> in it.

The first hemistich, 14a, talks about the human couple and not about Adam and Eve individually. This directly echoes the Qur'an in 7:22: فَدَلَّاهُمَا بِغُرُورٍ فَلَمَّا ذَاقَا الشَّجَرَةَ "So he [*ash-shayṭān*] led them on by delusion; and when they tasted the tree [...]." In the second part of line 14, however, the emphasis shifts to Eve. This corresponds to the account in the book of Genesis as well as to the depiction of the fall of man in several Jewish and Christian works of Late Antiquity, where Adam's responsibility for the fall is systematically de-emphasized.<sup>91</sup> The sharpness of the expression *bi-amri Hawwā'a*, "on the order of Eve," stresses her role as the protagonist of the fall and makes her appear as its actual instigator rather than the serpent or devil.<sup>92</sup> The gender-related implication of this aspect is secondary, however, to its allegorical connotation. The latter is probably to be considered the passage's true meaning and must be viewed in the context of an ethical-allegorical interpretation of the story of the fall that is especially dominant in the Christian tradition. The serpent becomes Eve because Eve represents the principle of human sinfulness as such.<sup>93</sup> The opening passage of the *Great Canon*<sup>94</sup> of *Andrew of Crete* (660–740), for example, includes the following lines:

My mind's Eve took the place of the bodily Eve  
for me—the passionate thought that was in my flesh.  
Showing me the sweets

<sup>90</sup> The word *daghalun*, "rancour," "evil," "deceit" is attested in pre-Islamic poetry, but is not used in the Qur'an; see Polosin, *Slovar*, 163, and Lewin, *Vocabulary*, 130.

<sup>91</sup> Toepel, *Legenden*, 155–158.

<sup>92</sup> The identification of Eve with the serpent was rhetorically supported by pointing to the similarity of the Aramaic words ܚܝܘܝܐ *hiwyā*, "serpent" and ܚܘܐ *Hawwā*, "Eve." Syriac literature also emphasizes a special relationship between Eve (Syr. ܚܘܐ) and the serpent (Syr. ܚܝܘܝܐ), see *Cave of Treasures* 4:13: "she [Eve] saw her own form [reflected] in it [the serpent]," ܚܘܐ ܬܒܐ ܬܝܠܬܐ, see Toepel, *Legenden*, 143, 150–151, 157.

<sup>93</sup> Averinzev, "Poryadok," 509.

<sup>94</sup> I:5, quoted in Amis, *A Different Christianity*, 43.

and gorging me ever on the poisonous food.

Andrew of Crete was originally from Damascus, and his liturgical poetry marks the final establishment of allegorical interpretation of biblical history in Christian hymnography.<sup>95</sup> He is preceded in this by earlier Christian homiletic literature,<sup>96</sup> all of which had a clearly moralistic approach. Especially the Late Antique Syrian and Palestinian homiletic traditions were intimately linked with liturgical poetry. As Sebastian Brock points out, in the works of Ephrem the Syrian the understanding of the biblical narrative is characterized by the author's ability "to move rapidly to and fro between the individual and the collective, between Adam and humanity as a whole."<sup>97</sup> Thus, the homiletic character of the poem, as well as some allegorical allusions in it, provide strong evidence for the argument that it originally belonged in the literary context of Late Antique Christian tradition.

At the same time, one should note that the connection between the depiction of women and the serpent motif is also found in early Islamic Arabic poetry, as was noted by Renate Jacobi in her analysis of a poem belonging to 'Umar b. abī Rabī'a (d. 93/712 or 103/721).<sup>98</sup> The poet here describes his relationship with a woman using the image of a serpent: أَظَلُّ إِذَا أَكَلْتُهَا كَأَنِّي أَكَلِمُ حَيَّةً غَلَبَتْ رُقَاهَا "It occurs to me, when I talk to her, as if I would talk to a serpent, whose charm is defeating."<sup>99</sup> The line obviously refers to the motifs of the paradise story. An allusion to this story in so profane a context and by a poet like 'Umar b. abī Rabī'a shows that the Eve/serpent motif and its allegorical interpretation was known in Mecca and Medina<sup>100</sup> at least in the second half of the seventh century.

This ethical-allegorical aspect, reflected in the fusion of the motifs of the serpent and that of woman in Late Antique literature, is also dominant in the Qur'anic representation of the fall story: Q 7: 27 يَا بَنِي آدَمَ، لَا يَفْتِنَنَّكُمُ الشَّيْطَانُ كَمَا أَخْرَجَ أَبَوَيْكُم مِّنَ الْجَنَّةِ يَنزِعُ عَنْهُمَا لِبَاسَهُمَا لِيُرِيَهُمَا سَوْآتِهِمَا "Children of Adam! Let not Satan tempt you as he brought your par-

<sup>95</sup> Averinzev, "Poryadok," 509–510.

<sup>96</sup> See Brock, "From Ephrem to Romanos," 146–151.

<sup>97</sup> Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 70.

<sup>98</sup> Jacobi, "Die Sonne auf dem Maultier."

<sup>99</sup> Schwarz, *Diwan*, CCCVIII:8 (p. 225).

<sup>100</sup> This is where 'Umar b. abī Rabī'a appears to have spent most of his life, see Montgomery, "'Umar b. Abī Rabī'a," 822.



the poem, as well as that of the Qur'an (7:27), implies that Adam and Eve were dressed prior to the fall. The nature of their garments, however, is not explained. Yet the idea that man was clothed in paradise even before the fall is reflected in earlier traditions in which these clothes are described as light and glory and by similar metaphors. In Syriac literature, the motif of clothes of light is attested since the time of Ephrem.<sup>102</sup> It is therefore likely that *labūsun* in line 15 is figurative in meaning. The Qur'an also speaks of the clothes of man (7:26)<sup>103</sup> and extends their moralistic function to bodily clothes, which, as "one of God's signs," are to remind man to dress himself with the "garments of the God-fearing."

16      فَلَا ظَهْرَ لَكَ إِذْ أَعْوَتْ خَلْقَتَهُ      طُولَ الْيَالِي وَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ لَهَا أَجَلًا

17      تَمْشِي عَلَى بَطْنِهَا فِي الدَّهْرِ مَا عَمَرَتْ      وَالتُّرْبُ تَأْكُلُهُ حَرًّا وَإِنْ سَهْلًا

God cursed it because it has seduced his creation,  
for all times and he did not set a term for it.

It goes on its belly (all) time as long as it lives,  
and dust—it eats it as hard ground even when it is soft.

A biblical parallel to the punishment of the serpent can be found in Gen. 3:14–15.<sup>104</sup> The notion of God setting a term, however, is a motif that unfolds only in post-biblical literature. Both *The Testament of Adam*<sup>105</sup> and *The Cave of Treasures*,<sup>106</sup> among other texts, mention a temporal limitation placed on humanity's exile on earth and the time remaining until salvation. God's setting of a limit here is a motif of consolation. It might be added that, according to the Qur'an, God sent people down to earth "only for a time" (Q 2:36). The concept of salvation does not appear in the Qur'an, as it does not subscribe to the idea of original sin. Qur'anic eschatology, however, is closely related to the expediency of creation and divine predetermination. The word *ajalun*, "deadline," "time limit," is employed frequently,

<sup>102</sup> On this motif in *The Caves of Treasures*, see Toepel, *Legenden*, 159.

<sup>103</sup> See Neuwirth, "Qur'an, Crisis and Memory," 142.

<sup>104</sup> The verb *mashaya*, "to go," in line 17a corresponds exactly with the wording of Gen. 3:14, both in Hebrew and Syriac.

<sup>105</sup> Robinson, *The Testament*, 58–63.

<sup>106</sup> Toepel, *Legenden*, 144, 164–166.



and is also used to refer to the end of time (Q 29:53).<sup>107</sup> What is remarkable is the universal character of the Qur'anic idea of this time limit. Nothing will remain on earth beyond this point. Even the Devil is damned until the Day of Doom and is "among those that are given respite unto the day of a known time" (Q 15:35–38). By contrast, according to the poem the fate of the serpent is sealed by the denial of any such term, which implies an immediate and irrevocable judgement. The shift from the setting of a time limit to its explicit rejection can also be traced in Jewish sources.<sup>108</sup> The Syriac theological tradition of Aphraat and Ephrem endorses the view that only common sinners will attend the Last Judgment, whereas great sinners will be banished right after the resurrection into the hell.<sup>109</sup> Also, the meaning of the Hebrew verb *qûm* and Syriac *qom*, "to rise," "to arise," and even more of the Greek ἀνίστημι and Latin *resurgo* in Ps. 1:5<sup>110</sup> express the notion that the wicked will not rise for judgment. Psalm 1, one of the central texts of Christian liturgy that was also prominent in the Syriac tradition, thus ought to be considered as one of the poem's intertexts. Syriac background can also be seen in the next line.

فَأَتَعَبَا أَبَوَانِي فِي حَيَاتِهِمَا 18  
وَأَوْجَدَ الْجُوعَ وَالْأَوْصَابَ وَالْعَلَا

Our parents became tired in their life  
and they caused hunger, continual pains and vices.

The description of the punishment is reminiscent of the biblical account. According to Gen. 3:14–19, only the serpent and the earth were directly cursed by God, whereas Adam and Eve were only pun-

<sup>107</sup> On *ajalun* in the Qur'an, see Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 3. The noun *ajalun*, as well as other derivations of the root *a-j-l*, are found in several pre-Islamic sources, see Polosin, *Slovar*, 29, and Lane, *Lexicon*, 24f. In their original semantics, they evoke the liquidation of debts. This meaning is also evident in Q 2:282, where *ajalun* expresses a certain time limit for a debt contract. Also, the idea of determination of a lifetime probably already existed in pre-Islamic Arabic culture (see Montgomery Watt, "Adjal"), which was characterized by a strongly fatalistic perception of fate (see Caskel, *Das Schicksal*). This may have been adopted and reinterpreted in early Islam, see Dmitriev, *Abū Ṣaḥr al-Hudālī*, 105–128.

<sup>108</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* 20:5; *Midrash Tehillim* 1:10; cf. Hirschberg, *Lehren*, 108.

<sup>109</sup> Frolovskiy, *Wostochkiye otzy*, 225, 232.

<sup>110</sup> חַיָּה לֹא תִחְיֶה / עַל-כֵּן לֹא-יִקְמוּ רְשָׁעִים בְּמִשְׁפָּט / διὰ τοῦτο οὐκ ἀναστήσονται ἁσεβεῖς ἐν κρίσει / ideo non resurgent impii in iudicio.

ished with hardship.<sup>111</sup> The poem adopts the same differentiation and further de-emphasizes the damnation of man in relation to God's role as punisher as well as the measure of man's penalty. Along with pointing to the difficult conditions of earthly life, the book of Genesis clearly indicates the perspective of death (Gen. 3:19). This is not explicitly expressed in the verse above. To be sure, hunger, pain, and vices are symbols of death, yet death itself is not mentioned. Moreover, the punishment is neither declared by God nor does it immediately befall mankind. Instead, "our parents" are represented as carrying out their sentence by themselves. Both verbs, *at'aba*, "to become tired," and *awjada*, "to cause," "to bring into being," are used actively. Thus, the responsibility for the men's suffering, and with it for the evil in general, is completely removed from God. This is also indicated by the character of the punishment. All three words—*jū'un*, "hunger," *awṣābun*, "continuous pains,"<sup>112</sup> and *'ilalun*, "defects,"<sup>113</sup>—express continuing states rather than a punctual event of punishment. Adam and Eve appear as the cause of punishment because they negatively changed their mode of living, and thus burdened their lives with "toil" for as long as it lasts (Gen. 3:17). This serves, however, not just to defend the divine attribute of goodness, but also to show the relationship between God and humans in a positive light. The poem does not go so far as to narrate God's consolation of Adam that can be found in the Qur'an (Q 2:37–38). However, the poem clearly downplays the irrevocability of the expulsion from paradise that is implied in Gen. 3:22–23 and leaves open the possibility of salvation. This transformation of the punishment is characteristic of the Christian post-biblical tradition and is documented, for example, by the Syriac *Cave of Treasures* (5:3).<sup>114</sup> The parallel becomes obvious in the following lines.

<sup>111</sup> Compare *Cave of Treasures* 5:2–4: "God spake unto Adam, and heartened him, and said unto him, 'Be not sorrowful, O Adam, for I will restore unto thee thine inheritance. Behold, see how greatly I have loved thee, for though I have cursed the earth for thy sake, yet have I withdrawn thee from the operation of the curse.'" See *Cave of Treasures*, 67, and Toepel, *Legenden*, 144.

<sup>112</sup> Continual, or constant pain, or emaciation of the body by reason of fatigue or disease or excessive fatigue, see Lane, *Lexicon*, 2944–2945.

<sup>113</sup> According to Lane, *Lexicon*, 2124 *'illatun*, pl. *'ilalun* means: "An accident that befalls an object and causes its state, or condition, to become altered. [...] a disease that diverts [from the ordinary occupations; [...]] An accident, or event, that diverts the person to whom it occurs from his course."

<sup>114</sup> For its comparison with the Qur'anic account of Adam's consolation see Toepel, *Legenden*, 168–169.

*Epilog (vv. 19–20)*

19 وَأَوْتِيَا الْمُلْكَ وَالْإِنْجِيلَ تَقْرُؤُهُ      نَشْفِي بِحِكْمَتِهِ أَحْلَا مَنَا عَلَا

20 مِنْ غَيْرِ مَا حَاجَةٍ إِلَّا لِيَجْعَلَنَا      فَوْقَ الْبَرِيَّةِ أَرْبَابًا كَمَا فَعَلَا

They were given the kingdom and the Gospel that we read.  
We cure with its wisdom our mental powers and vices,

Without him having any need except for making us  
lords over his creation as he made (it).

The dialogical framework of the poem becomes evident once again in the closing passage, which from the first to the last line sets up a rhetorical curve of suspense. The question implied refers to whether creation, especially the creation of man, was after all an advisable thing to do. The answer given in the poem is based on fundamental concepts of Christian anthropology, such as the sinful nature of man and the necessity of salvation. In Christian theology, these two concepts are inseparable linked. Again, the allegorical parallelism of creation and salvation comes to light. According to the Syriac *Cave of Treasures*, not only was Adam granted after his creation “the power over everything which I [God] created” (2:19),<sup>115</sup> but after the Fall “God revealed unto Adam everything which the Son would suffer on behalf of him” (5:13).<sup>116</sup> Adam’s power realizes itself only through the Gospel,<sup>117</sup> and the purpose of creation is fulfilled only in the Gospel—a perspective of salvation in which death is already overcome, and which could only be thus expressed by a Christian author.

<sup>115</sup> *Cave of Treasures*, 53; see also Toepel, *Legenden*, 57.

<sup>116</sup> *Cave of Treasures*, 67; see also Toepel, *Legenden*, 144.

<sup>117</sup> Horovitz considers the word *injilun* an indication that the line is a later forgery, since according to him *injilun* is a loan-word form Ethiopic unlikely to have been used in Mesopotamia at such an early time (see Horovitz, *Untersuchungen*, 71, and also Toral-Niehoff, “Gestaltung des Sündenfalls,” 248–249). However, the early borrowing of such a central theological term as “Gospel” appears plausible if one takes into consideration that Arabic had been a vehicle for Christian thought probably from as early as the fourth century CE (see Shahid, *Byzantium*, 744). Also, as pointed out by Meir Kister, relations between al-Ḥira and the Arabian Peninsula in pre-Islamic times were much more important than has previously been assumed (see Kister, “Al-Ḥira”). Thus, an early transmission of the word *injilun* into Mesopotamia is quite possible.

### *Conclusion*

Textual and literary analysis lead to the conclusion that the present poem was originally composed in a Christian milieu. Neither the literary nor the historical/theological context supports arguments against the early origin of the text and its composition by a Christian author like 'Adi b. Zayd. In only a very few cases do Islamic connotations allow for the assumption of direct dependence on Islamic sources. As can be seen by the use of the word *khalīfatun* in a version of line 16, this occurred due to the poem's later transmission. Similarities with Qur'anic accounts of the story of creation and the fall are due to a shared thematic basis, as well as to a shared tendency to interpret it allegorically within a broadly homiletic framework. On the other hand, the evident differences on the theological level clearly show that the text of the poem cannot be viewed as dependent on the Qur'an. This, however, does not make it less relevant. The Qur'an is very selective in its adoption of biblical tradition, and the reconstruction of this tradition in its pre-Islamic environment can significantly contribute to our understanding of the logic of its transformation in the Qur'an. In contrast to the Bible, the Qur'anic stories of creation and paradise are not comprehensive chronological reports, but are evoked in a number of separate passages with clear hermeneutical implications. The admonitory intention of the relevant Qur'anic texts is striking. The Qur'an is less concerned with the narration of history than with presenting its ethically relevant message. It does not explain something absolutely new to its audience, but tries instead to draw out the moral of something already known. Thus, the Qur'anic message does not unfold in a silent vacuum, but rather in communicative reference to its rich and diverse background. From this point of view, texts like the poem presented, which might provide an insight into the religious background of the Arabs prior to the rise of Islam, are indispensable for the historical-critical study of the Qur'an.

### Appendix 1: Sources

The main sources that transmit longer passages of the poem in coherent form are (in chronological order):

- Ḥ Jāhiz, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, vol. 4, 65–66 (ninth century).  
Eleven lines from the second part of the poem, corresponding to line 8 and lines 10 through 20 of the compiled text. This work can be found below.
- Mq Al-Maḡdisī, *Kitāb al-bad' wa-t-ta'rīkh*, vol. 1, 151 (tenth century).  
Contains seven lines from the poem's first section, lines 1 through 6 and line 8.
- AM Abū al-ʿAlā' al-Ma'arrī, *Risāla*, 264–265 (eleventh century).  
Quotes thirteen lines, equivalent to lines 1 through 4, 6 through 10, 12 to 13 and lines 16 and 17.
- M Al-Maḡrīzī, *Al-mawā'iz*, vol. 1, 86–87 (fifteenth century).  
Fifteen lines, consisting of lines 1 through 13 and 16 to 17.

The attestation of individual lines in these main sources can be represented as follows:

Line		Source		
1		Mq	AM	M
2		Mq	AM	M
3		Mq	AM	M
4		Mq	AM	M
5		Mq		M
6		Mq	AM	M
7			AM	M
8	Ḥ	Mq	AM	M
9			AM	M
10	Ḥ		AM	M
11	Ḥ			M
12	Ḥ		AM	M
13	Ḥ		AM	M
14	Ḥ			
15	Ḥ			
16	Ḥ		AM	M
17	Ḥ		AM	M
18	Ḥ			
19	Ḥ			
20	Ḥ			

Lines 1, 5 and 6 are transmitted in isolation in the following sources:

- |        |           |  |
|--------|-----------|--|
| Line 1 | T         | Tha'lab, <i>Kitāb al- majālis</i> , vol. 1, 127.                   |
|        | Az        | Al-Azhari, <i>Tahdhīb al-lugha</i> , vol. 10, 412.                 |
|        | An        | Al-Anbārī, <i>Al-inṣāf</i> , 244.                                  |
|        | B         | ʿAbd al-Qādir b. ʿUmar al-Baghdādī, <i>Khizāna</i> , vol. 10, 224. |
|        | LA        | <i>Lisān</i> , vol. 15, 233, 236.                                  |
| Line 5 | TA        | <i>Tāj</i> , vol. 3, 542, LA ( <i>mṣr</i> )                        |
| Line 6 | F         | Ibn Fāris, <i>Maqāyīs al-lugha</i> , vol. 5, 330.                  |
|        | RI        | Ar-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, <i>Al-mufradāt</i> , 469.                   |
|        | Z         | Az-Zamakhsharī, <i>Asās al-balagha</i> , vol. 2, 389.              |
|        | Bd        | Ibn al-Faqīh al-Hamadhānī, <i>Mukhtaṣar kitāb al-buldān</i> , 57.  |
|        | Y         | Yāqūt, <i>Muʿjam al-buldān</i> , vol. 1, 42.                       |
|        | TA and LA | ( <i>mṣr</i> )   |

References in the main sources display vast differences in scope. However, they overlap at several points and exhibit a stable sequence of verses within each quoted passage. This indicates the constant transmission of a common source and allows us to arrange the individual passages into a whole.

## Appendix 2: Text

## Basīt

- 1 إَسْمَعْ حَدِيثًا كَمَا يُؤْمَأُ مُحَدِّثُهُ عَنْ ظَهْرِ غَيْبٍ إِذَا مَا سَأَلْتُ سَأَلَا
- 2 أَنْ كَيْفَ أَبْدَى إِلَهَ الْخَلْقِ نِعْمَتَهُ فِينَا وَعَرَفْنَا آيَاتِهِ الْأَوَّلَا
1. Az, AM, An, M<sup>118</sup> a مُحَدِّثُهُ T, Az, AM مُحَدِّثُهُ B, LA مُحَدِّثُهُ M<sup>V C1 119</sup> لِكَي يَوْمًا تَجَاوِبُهُ Mq [كَمَا يُؤْمَأُ مُحَدِّثُهُ] . يَحَدِّثُهُ Al-Maqrizī (M) attributes the line also to Umayya b. abī ṣ-Ṣalt.
2. Mq a كَيْفَ بَدَأَ الرَّبُّ إِلَهَ الْخَلْقِ AM M [أَنْ كَيْفَ أَبْدَى إِلَهَ الْخَلْقِ] M<sup>P14</sup> بِدَاسِمِ M<sup>P18</sup> يَدَايِرِ M<sup>BM1</sup> y\*d'y\*m (rasm), M<sup>V</sup> b d'y\*m (rasm) وَعَلَيْنَا AM M [وَعَرَفْنَا b رد M<sup>L1</sup> رَبِّي M<sup>P14</sup> ] M<sup>C2</sup> بَدَايِرِ
- 3 كَانَتْ رِيَا حَاقِوْمَاءَ إِذَا عُرَانِيَّةٍ وَظَلَمَةٌ لَمْ يَدْعَ فِتْنًا وَلَا خَلَلَا
- 4 فَأَمَرَ الظُّلُمَةَ السَّوْدَاءَ فَانْكَشَفَتْ وَعَزَلَ الْمَاءَ عَمَّا كَانَ قَدْ شَغَلَا
- 5 وَبَسَطَ الْأَرْضَ بَسْطًا ثُمَّ قَدَّرَهَا تَحْتَ السَّمَاءِ سَوَاءً أَمْثِلَ مَا فَعَلَا

<sup>118</sup> The first line of the poem is the one that is most amply documented. The reason for this is the special usage of the conjunction *ka-mā* found here. Here it has the meaning “so that” and is equivalent to the common conjunction *kaymā* (see *WKAS*, vol. 1, 9). This is specific to the Kufic grammatical school, and the line is often quoted by Arabic philologists as a reference for it (T, Az, An, B, LA). This linguistic peculiarity also indicates that the line was originally composed in the region of Kufa, to which al-Ḥīra belonged. In *Kitāb al-bad’ wa-t-ta’rikh* (Mq) *ka-mā* is replaced with *li-kay*, which more unequivocally introduces a final clause. The first part of the poem is cited by al-Maqrizī in a long chapter on the creation of the world, where the focus is on the poem’s content rather than its linguistic features. It should also be borne in mind that Mq was written in Afghanistan (ca. 355/966). This makes the replacement of a specifically Kufic form with a commonly valid and unmistakable reading quite plausible. The version with *li-kay* should therefore not be considered as an inaccurate reproduction of the original, but rather as indirect evidence of the fact that the poem was known in wider circles than simply among philologists. On the other hand, the frequent citation of this line in an exclusively linguistic context does not betray any motivation for forgery, and therefore supports its authenticity.

<sup>119</sup> Superscripts following the symbol M correspond to the manuscripts used in the edition of Gaston Wiet (see al-Maqrizī, *Al-mawā’iz*).



6 وجاعَل الشَّمْسَ مِصْرًا خَفَاءَ بِهِ يَبِينُ النَّهَارُ وَيَبِينُ اللَّيْلُ قَدْ فَصَلَا

3. Mq عرانية رِيَّاحٌ وَسِيلٌ ذُو عُرَانِيَّةٍ M AM ] رياحا و مآء اذا عرانية a  
AM M] M<sup>Ms</sup> , M<sup>BM1</sup> kr'ny\*t (rasm), M<sup>BM2</sup> M<sup>C2</sup> , M<sup>L1</sup> , كُرَانِيَّةٌ , كُرَانِيَّةٌ M<sup>V</sup>  
kr'n\*y\*t\* (rasm) لم تدع AM ] لم يدع b

4. Mq, M وسيرَ AM ] وعزل b الظلم السواد M<sup>C2</sup> ] الظلمة السوداء a

5. Mq السمااء b والأرض سَوَى بِسَاطًا TA LA ] وبسط الأرض بسطا a  
M<sup>P10</sup> M<sup>V</sup> السوا M<sup>P9</sup> M<sup>C2</sup> ] مثل سوى M<sup>P9</sup> , سواء M ] سواء السوا  
ثقلا TA LA , نقلا M ] فعلا ميل

6. F, Y جعل M<sup>P14</sup> AM M TA LA , صيرَ M<sup>L1</sup> Bd M<sup>P13</sup> RI Z M<sup>P13</sup> ] جعل a  
Bd AM RI Z M TA LA مِصْرًا النمى M<sup>P14</sup> ] cons. الشمس جعلك  
قد من النهار ومنه الليل M<sup>P14</sup> ] cons. بين النهار وبين الليل b مصيرا Mq ]  
فضلا Mq ] Bd AM RI Z TA LA فضلا M<sup>P14</sup> B2 ] مذك cons.

RI quotes the line anonymously; TA and LA attribute lines 5 and 6 to Umayya b. abī aṣ-Ṣalt; note, however, that according to Ibn Barri, these lines are composed by 'Adī b. Zayd. M mentions that line 6 is written by 'Adī b. Zayd, but has also been attributed to Umayya b. abī ṣ-Ṣalt.

7 وفي السَّمَاءِ مَصَابِيحٌ تُضِيءُ لَنَا مَا إِن تَكْفُنَا رَيْتًا وَلَا قُتْلًا

8 قَضَى لِسِتَّةِ أَيَّامٍ خَلْقَهُ وَكَانَ آخِرُهَا أَنْ صَوَّرَ الرَّجُلَا

9 فَأَخَذَ اللَّهُ مِنْ طِينٍ فَصَوَّرَهُ حَتَّى إِذَا مَرَّاهُ تَرَوَّاعْتَدَلَا

10 دَعَاهُ أَدَمَ صَوْنًا فَاسْتَجَابَ لَهُ بِنَفْحَةِ الرُّوحِ فِي الْجِسْمِ الَّذِي جَبَلَا

11 ثُمَّتْ أَوْرَثَهُ الْفِرْدَوْسَ يَعْمُرُهَا وَرَوْجَهُ صُنْعَةً مِنْ ضِلْعِهِ جَعَلَا

12 لَمْ يَنْهَهُ رَبُّهُ عَنْ غَيْرِ وَاحِدَةٍ مِنْ شَجَرٍ طَيِّبٍ أَنْ شَمَّ وَأَكَلَا



14. H a فَعَمَدًا لِلَّتِي عَنْ ] H (MS Vienna ff 213<sup>r</sup>, see Cheikho, “Al-Iḥdāth,” 536) تَعَمَدَ النَّيِّ مِنْ

15. H

16. H a ] أُنْغُوتِ AM M أُطْغَتْ, M<sup>P10</sup> طَاعَتْ, M<sup>P18</sup> M<sup>C2</sup> طُغَتْ, M<sup>L2</sup> طُعْتُ, M<sup>V</sup> ṭṭ\* (rasm) خَلِيقَتَهُ H AM M] M<sup>Ms</sup> M<sup>BM1</sup> M<sup>C2</sup> خَلِيفَتَهُ, M<sup>BM2</sup> khlyf\*th (rasm), M<sup>V</sup> حَلِيبَتَهُ

17. H a ] فِي الْأَرْضِ AM M

18. H

19. H

20. H

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THE QUR'AN AND THE PROPHET'S POET:  
TWO POEMS BY KA'B B. MĀLIK

Agnes Imhof

Qur'anic scholars have repeatedly deplored the absence of a body of literature engaged in direct interaction with the Qur'an and thus fit to shed credible light on the way the latter was received, appropriated, and understood within Muhammad's lifetime. The following article argues that the immediate historical context from which the Qur'an emerged, and which it addressed, can be illuminated by recourse to the poetry contemporary with the Qur'an. In order to illustrate this claim, two poems of Ka'b b. Mālik—a Medinan poet who seems to have substantially contributed to legitimizing Muhammad's politics at Medina—will be discussed.

*Ka'b b. Mālik and his Generation*

Ka'b b. Mālik belongs to the younger generation of poets living in the direct environment of Muhammad. He was probably born around 595 CE (about 27 before the Hijra) and grew up in Yathrib (Medina). Genealogically, he belonged to the tribe of al-Khazraj, who together with the Aws had conquered Medina a few generations before his birth and had subsequently become sedentary.<sup>1</sup>

Even though these tribes had settled down permanently, their tribal heritage continued to imprint their everyday life. Rather than having fully embraced a "civic," an urban way of life, their tribal code of honor and shame, their kinship relations and their dislike of any centralized hierarchy were still the determining factors of their social life. Even tribes that had become sedentary a much longer time ago, such as the Quraysh at Mecca, had remained Bedouin in many aspects. The form of social organization which was typical of settlements conquered by previously nomadic tribes, such as Mecca and Medina, was

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<sup>1</sup> For his biography see Hāshimī, *Ka'b b. Mālik*, 51ff.; *Dīwān*, 128ff.; Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣṣāhānī, *Kitāb al-aghānī*, 15, 26–32.

the “inchoate early state”:<sup>2</sup> having assimilated to urban life as much as necessary, they preserved not only their traditional value system but also the established medium for transmitting and revising their collective memory, namely, poetry.

As I have attempted to demonstrate elsewhere, the reluctance of the tribes to embrace Islam was not so much due to a conflict between *dīn* and *muruwwa*, in the sense of umbrella concepts for diverging ethical outlooks, but rather a conflict between *dīn* and tradition: Bedouin norms of behavior, as based upon the notions of honor and shame, were defined by tradition, whereas the concept of prophecy challenged this justification of values by recourse to tradition. Thus, it was a new kind of legitimacy accorded to certain values, rather than new values as such, that lay at the root of the conflict. An examination of the early panegyrics on the Prophet, such as those authored by Kaʿb b. Zuhayr or Ḥassān b. Thābit, reveals that the poets remain pre-Islamic in style, language, motives, and world view, even if they had already embraced Islam and probably were practicing Muslims. It is not an uncommon phenomenon that the earliest adherents of a new religious system, even though they may be acting according to the new rules, do not easily assume its new view of the world. Similarly, most of the poets in Muhammad’s environment continued to adhere to the pre-Islamic system of honor and shame rather than having profoundly changed their understanding of God, man, and the world.<sup>3</sup>

The younger generation of urban Arabs, however, was more likely to have an interest in breaking with traditional values, realizing that they could only profit from the social change that took place when Muhammad came to political power in Medina. Kaʿb b. Mālik may be considered as a poet representative of this younger generation who did not challenge the function of poetry as the established medium of preserving and revising values. Yet the values he proclaimed differed strongly from those endorsed by Ḥassān and his contemporaries.<sup>4</sup> This change is paralleled by a noticeable difference in language and style: Poets such as Kaʿb b. Mālik, who were in close contact with the Prophet, were distinctly influenced by the diction, motives, and world view of the Qurʾan.

<sup>2</sup> See Claessen and Skalnik, *Early State*, 23.

<sup>3</sup> See Imhof, *Religiöser Wandel*, esp. the chapter on Ḥassān b. Thābit (159–218) and *passim*.

<sup>4</sup> See Imhof, *Religiöser Wandel*, 219–258 (on Kaʿb b. Mālik), 304ff.

*The Problem of Authenticity*

Unfortunately we possess almost no example of the poetry composed by Ka'b before his conversion. This may be due to the fact that he was very young when he became a Muslim: he is said to have been one of the first converts from Yathrib, and to have participated in the second pledge at al-'Aqaba, which specified that the inhabitants of Yathrib would give Muhammad military support. In Ka'b's poetry, which from the beginning was composed in the service of Muhammad, the military aspect remains very prominent.

The question of the authenticity of Ka'b's poetry is much easier to resolve than it is in the case with Ḥassān b. Thābit or other pre-Islamic and early Islamic poets. According to the present state of research, we can safely assume a major part of his poetry, as it is transmitted in compilations or anthologies, to be authentic.<sup>5</sup> The first poem to be discussed below appears in the *Sīra*, in *Tāj al-'arūs*, and in *Lisān al-'arab*. The *Sīra* does not present it in the context of the expulsion of the Jewish Banū n-Naḍir and the assassination of Ka'b b. al-Ashrāf, although the text itself suggests that connection.<sup>6</sup> The second poem is transmitted in *Fuḥūl ash-shu'arā'*, *Tāj al-'Arūs*, *Lisān al-'Arab*, the *Sīra*, and even *Mu'jam al-buldān*.<sup>7</sup> Its topic is the raid on aṭ-Ṭā'if, a town about 75 km away from Mecca where the goddess al-Lāt was venerated, and which possessed a Ka'ba similar to the one at Mecca. Aṭ-Ṭā'if was also the destination of pilgrimages. After a first raid against the city in 630 CE the Thaḳīf, the tribe dominating the town, sent a delegation to Muhammad offering their conversion and asking for special conditions: They wanted their idol to be left intact for one more year (which was refused), demanded that the sacred precinct (*ḥimā*) of Wajj be preserved (which was granted to them), and also asked to be exempt from prostration in prayer—which was again declined. Even though the Thaḳīf regarded prostration as a humiliation, in the end they surrendered nevertheless.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Imhof, *Religiöser Wandel*, 222, 224f., and 239f.

<sup>6</sup> This has already been pointed out by Schöller, "In welchem Jahr." The expulsion of the Jews and the murder of Ka'b took place at roughly the same time (cf. Rubin, "Assassination"; Schöller, "In welchem Jahr," 18). However, Q 59, which refers to the former event (see vv. 2 and 5), does not mention the latter.

<sup>7</sup> Detailed references can be gathered from Ṭarrād's edition of the texts (*Dīwān*, 66ff.).

<sup>8</sup> See Krone, *Altarabische Gottheit*, 196ff., 372ff.; Noja, "Religioni," 109; Ammann, *Geburt des Islam*, 34.

*Translation of the Texts*<sup>9</sup>

*Dīwān*, no. 23:

(1) The rabbis (*al-ḥubūr*), through their treachery (*ghadra*), have brought disgrace upon themselves (*khaziyat*); this is the course of ever-changing (*dhū ṣarfin*) Time (*dahr*).

(2) And this because they disbelieved in (*kafarū*) a mighty (*‘azīz*) lord (*rabb*) of great authority (*amr*).

(3) Although they possessed insight together with knowledge, and from God there had come a warner (*nadhīr*) to them,

(4) a sincere warner (*nadhīr ṣādiq*), who brought a book and verses clear and stirring (*āyāt mubayyana tuthīr*).<sup>10</sup>

(5) still they [i.e., the Banū n-Naḍīr] said: Neither do you bring anything sincere (*amr ṣidq*)<sup>11</sup> / nor clear and enlightening (*tunīr*) verses.

(6) Against this, he said: But I have already brought a truth (*ḥaqq*) concerning which anyone reasonable and experienced (*al-fahīm al-khabīr*) will proclaim me to be sincere (*yuṣaddiqunī*).

(7) And he who follows him is righteously guided in every respect (*yuhdā li-kulli rushdīn*) and he who disbelieves (*yakfuru*)—nay, ingratitude (*al-kafūr*) must be repaid.

(8) But since they had drunk treason and unbelief (*ghadr wa-kufr*) and had turned away from the truth (*al-ḥaqq*),

(9) God gave the prophet true insight (*ra’y ṣidq*). God reigns justly and is not oppressive (*yaḥḍuru*).

[...]

(19) So they have tasted the evil results of their conduct (*amr*). Three of them shared a camel,

(20) and hastened to depart for the Qaynuqā‘ [i.e., where the Q. had gone before them] and left palms and houses.

<sup>9</sup> Translations of the poems are my own. The Arabic originals are reproduced in the appendix.

<sup>10</sup> The editor understands *tuthīr* in the sense of arousing *joy* or *admiration*. Yet the text itself does not specify what it is that is being aroused or stirred. It might well be that the poet had in mind the Qur’an’s warnings, for example, which would mean that the “clear verses” stir fear. Of course it is entirely possible to read the verses as an allusion to the later dogma of the Qur’an’s inimitability (*i’jāz al-Qur’ān*), as does the editor.

<sup>11</sup> Of course *amr* could also be understood in the sense of *authority*.

*Dīwān*, no. 42:

(1) We have eradicated any doubt from Tihāma and from Khaybar,<sup>12</sup>  
and then we let our swords rest.

[...]

(5) And our swiftest riders come to you, that leave behind them a large  
crowd.

(6) When they come down on your abode you hear thunder wherever  
they alight.

(7) In the hands of the riders there are sharp thin swords with which  
they bring death to the fighters

[...]

(18) We fight as long as we live, unless you ruefully embrace Islam with  
trusting obedience!

(19) We fight and do not care upon whom we chance and whether we  
destroy inherited or acquired goods (*tilād/tarīf*).

(20) And how many clans have not gathered against us, among them  
men of aristocratic descent and [their] allies!

[...]

(23) For God and Islam! Until religion will rise steadfast and true [sc.  
will we fight?],

(24) and until al-Lāt and al-ʿUzza and Wudd [i.e. Wadd]<sup>13</sup> are forgotten,  
/ and we took from them necklaces and earrings

(25) They arrived at a decision and agreed. Whoever cannot defend  
himself will die and perish!

*Between Poetry and the Qur'an: Ka'b's Language and Style*

Stylistically, Ka'b's poetry is considered to be of lesser value than that of his contemporaries, though it is interesting to observe that Ḥassān b. Thābit also uses a simpler style after his conversion. Ka'b's poetry employs merely a small part of the traditional poetic devices of the *Qaṣīda*. His syntax is simple, and his diction is influenced by the

<sup>12</sup> The conversion of Khaybar in 629 CE was the beginning of a series of conversions, see Veccia Vaglieri, "Khaybar."

<sup>13</sup> Wudd/Wadd was widely venerated in South Arabia. His appearance in the triad conof aṭ-Ṭā'if is quite unusual.

Qur'an, as will be shown in more detail below. Sometimes Ka'b has to accommodate the meter by lengthening or shortening syllables. This may be due to the fact that his style as a whole is rhetorical: more so than the texts by Ka'b b. Zuhayr or Ḥassān b. Thābit, his is an obviously propagandistic approach. Instead of depicting the qualities or deficiencies of a person in an implicit fashion, he calls for concrete action. None of Muhammad's panegyrists resorts to menaces and promises as much as he does. His style is thus reminiscent of parenesis rather than of poetry.<sup>14</sup>

It is strikingly evident that both texts use the device of threat and promise, thus approximating a prophetic mode of speech rather than clinging to the poetic one. Even more importantly, the two poems do not fit any established poetical genre: there are no traces of the conventional parts of the Qaṣīda, such as the erotic prologue (*nasīb*), the remains of abandoned encampments (*aṭlāl*), the camel section (*raḥīl*), etc. The *raḥīl* section, it is true, was already dropped by Ḥassān,<sup>15</sup> a development one might be tempted to trace back to the new perception of time that Renate Jacobi has noted in early Islamic poetry.<sup>16</sup> Yet for the two poems under discussion, such an explanation would hardly be sufficient, as they exhibit none of the traditional Qaṣīda sections at all. In both texts, praise of persons, even of the Prophet, is not as important as it is, for example, in Ḥassān's poetry: for Ka'b, it is God and his *amr* that occupy the center of his attention. Even though the second poem does exalt the military prowess of the Muslim troops, the praise bestowed upon them has to be seen in the context of their religious mission, and therefore ultimately amounts to praise of God rather than of men. A further difference to traditional polythematic poetry consists in the fact that Ka'b's compositions are devoted to a single thematic complex, such as the expulsion of the Banū n-Naḍir or the raid on aṭ-Ṭā'if. The hypothesis suggests itself that these divergences from the traditional Qaṣīda conventions result from a conscious attempt to follow the style of the Qur'an.

In fact, it is even possible to point to specific Qur'anic intertexts. The first poem's theme and diction are reminiscent of Q 59, which, according to Islamic tradition,<sup>17</sup> was revealed in the context of the expulsion of the Banū n-Naḍir (Q 59:2.5.15):

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Imhof, *Religiöser Wandel*, 221–222.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Jacobi, "Camel-Section," 8.

<sup>16</sup> See Jacobi, "Time and Reality," and Imhof, *Religiöser Wandel*, 159–218.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. the articles by Rubin and Schöller referred to above.

It is he who drove out the unbelievers among the people of the book from their homes at the first mustering. You did not think that they would be driven out, and they thought that their forts would protect them from God. Then, God, seized them from an unexpected quarter and cast terror into their hearts, so that they destroyed their homes with their own hands, as well as the hands of the believers. Reflect, then, O people of perception. [...]

Whatever palm trees you cut off or leave standing upon their roots is only by God's leave, and that he might disgrace the sinners. [...]

Like those who, shortly before them, tasted the futility of their action (*dhāqū wabāla amrihim*). They shall have a painful punishment.

Ka'b's second poem—with its presentation of the Muslim troops as formidable warriors on swift horses whose valor can already be guessed from the noise of their hooves—is redolent of Q 100:1–5, where the Last Judgement is described in terms of the image of hooves roaring like thunder:

By the snorting chargers;  
And the strikers of fire, as they run;  
And the raiders at dawn;  
Raising thereon clouds of dust;  
Plunging therein through a throng.

### *Ka'b's Poetic Re-coining of the Qur'anic Motif of Divine Punishment*

Both texts depict the expulsion of the Jews and the victory of the Muslim troops as divine punishments comparable to those catastrophes that, according to the Qur'an, have befallen the *umam khāliya*, the ancient peoples of the 'Ād and the Thamūd, Sodom and Gomorrah, or the people of Noah. In the Qur'an, these punishments are associated with these groups' refusal to convert to true monotheism, and Ka'b portrays the opponents of the Islamic community in a similar fashion. The first poem, which accuses the Jews (as represented by "the rabbis") of treachery (*ghadr*), appears to reflect the Qur'anic notion of religion based on a sort of covenant between God and mankind, a covenant broken time and time again by human disobe-

dience.<sup>18</sup> Whereas in its pre-Islamic use, *ghadr* refers to the breaking of a promise or deserting one's tribal community, Ka'b uses the term to denote the refusal to join the Islamic *umma*, as the reference to *kuf*r in v. 2 clearly shows. This accusation of treachery is not used in the poem against the Thaḳīf, probably because it would not have sounded very convincing to a pre-Islamic Thaḳafi listener, who would not have accepted that Allāh had any claim to exclusive veneration. Yet in this case, too, the conflict is painted in a religious light: the Muslims, after having already destroyed Khaybar and overcome Tihāma, are now turning against aṭ-Ṭā'if in order to obliterate all pagan idols, and the Thaḳīf must therefore choose between conversion and war.

Ka'b's reliance on the Qur'anic punishment narratives is especially obvious in the first poem, with its references to a prophetic warner (*nadhīr*) sent by God to inform his stubborn listeners of the punishment that will befall them if they refuse to convert. There are unambiguous terminological parallels to Q 11, a text that presents the earlier warners Hūd, Noah, and Šāliḥ as claiming to be in possession of a "clear proof" (*bayyina*) (Q 11:28.53.63). Unlike the case of the Banū n-Naḍīr, however, those Qur'anic punishments were not the work of human beings, such as military troops and assassins, but were brought about by natural disasters such as floods and tempests. Yet, Ka'b's poem presents the expulsion of the Jewish tribe and the murder of their tribal poet as a direct equivalent to the natural catastrophes which, according to the Qur'an, struck earlier peoples; by implication, it is not the Muslims who are responsible for expelling the Banū n-Naḍīr, but the Jews themselves, while the Muslims only carry out God's will. Rather than drawing on traditional poetic motifs, then, Ka'b clearly emulates the literary model of the Qur'anic punishment narratives.

In the second text, by contrast, Ka'b's legitimization of violence does not employ the figure of a prophetic warner. Rather, the justification given is religion itself—i.e., the religion of the Muslims. Yet both texts share the same call for violent missionary activity. Ka'b

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Izutsu, *Ethico-religious concepts*, 88–89. One might be tempted to read Ka'b's verse as alluding to the accusation that the Jews had conspired with the Prophet's enemies. However, this is rather unlikely, or at least not central to the text's argument: since the Jews were familiar with the idea of gratitude towards God, and submission to him, as well as with the notion of a covenant, it is much more probable that Ka'b refers to their denial of Muhammad's prophethood.



extends the monotheistic claim to religious exclusivity in a way that rules out any kind of coexistence: whoever does not accept Islam has to fear for his or her life.

*Ka'b's Theocentric World View*

Ka'b's world view is starkly theocentric: whereas tribal tradition had defined human actions through the categories of honor and shame, Ka'b redefines them in terms of human obedience to God. God is the lord (*rabb*) of man, and as such he sends his messengers to deliver clear warnings, which, if not properly heeded, are inevitably followed by punishment. Within this scheme of things, only God genuinely acts, while human beings merely function as executioners of God's will. The poetological consequences arising from this new ideological position, i.e., the change in rhetorical technique, and more precisely its orientation towards Qur'anic models, have already been discussed above. In the final section I will address the social-political consequences, i.e., the denial of the traditional value system and its displacement as a source of behavioral norms, that Ka'b's theocentric world view implies.

The poetic presentation of the assassination of Ka'b b. al-Ashraf highlights the most significant difference between Ka'b's world view and the pre-Islamic one, namely, the poet's renunciation of the traditional system of kinship. Ka'b makes it clear that in his eyes religious ties supersede those of kinship. A similar point is made in his poem on the battle of Badr: "And even if you blame me, I am ready / to give as ransom (*fidan*) for the messenger of God my kin (*ahli*) and my goods (*māli*)."<sup>19</sup> It appears to be precisely this break with existing values that explains Ka'b's concern with legitimizing the Muslims' actions as an execution of divine punishment: Ka'b b. al-Ashraf was assassinated by a man from his own kin, and the Banū n-Naḍir were expelled even though they had been protected allies of the Aus and the Khazraj.<sup>20</sup> By drawing on the Qur'an, Ka'b b. Mālik is able to harness religious ties as an alternative normative source: legitimacy is no longer derived from the tribal code of behavior, but from what

<sup>19</sup> *Dīwān* 79, line 5. The Qur'an frequently employs *fidan* in this sense, cf. Q 47:5.

<sup>20</sup> See Imhof, *Religiöser Wandel*, 229–237.

Weber has called “charismatic authority”<sup>21</sup> that ultimately stems from God himself. This idea corresponds to Kaʿb’s view of the Prophet, which, unlike that held by some of his contemporaries, is a Qurʾānic one: Muhammad’s authority derives exclusively from God, not from any of the pre-Islamic sources of authority such as status, power, strength, or generosity. Had he not been singled out as the recipient of God’s revelations, Muhammad would just have been an ordinary human being (cf. Q 3:144).

Kaʿb’s use of the root *JHD* in the second poem (*jihād*, see vv. 17–19) is equally significant in this respect. *Jihād* is a concept unknown in pre-Islamic poetry and it also does not figure in most early Islamic panegyrics: Ḥassān, Kaʿb b. Zuhayr, and Labīd never use any of the derivatives from the root *JHD*. Its appearance in the second poem has to be understood within the context of man’s subordination to a superior authority, which Kaʿb describes as God’s *amr*. As pointed out above, neither poem revolves around a human being in the way traditional praise poetry does. Instead, their true subject is *amr*, the new source of authority that has come to supersede the traditional value system. An “anti-traditionalist shift” thus has taken place. It could not be expressed more cogently than by the fact that *jihād*, according to Kaʿb, destroys “inherited and acquired goods” (second poem, v. 19). Virtues and goods, both inherited and acquired, are the foundation of the pre-Islamic code of honor. The verse thus alludes to two key concepts of the pre-Islamic value system, namely, *ḥasab* and *nasab*.<sup>22</sup> In a similar vein, the Qurʾān emphasizes the eschatological abolition of traditional values (Q 80:34–37):

On a day when a man shall run away from his brother,  
His mother and his father,  
His consort and his sons.  
To every one of them on that day is a business sufficing him.

<sup>21</sup> See Imhof, *Religiöser Wandel*, 289–294.

<sup>22</sup> Interestingly the Thaḳīf also asked to be exempted from the obligation to engage in *jihād* (see Krone, *Altarabische Gottheit*, 200; Kister, “Some Reports”).

*Conclusion*

The two poems by Ka'b b. Mālik's are apt to convey an idea of the new perspectives on the Qur'an that the study of poetry contemporary with it is likely to open up. Since these poems were composed by, and for, people from the prophet's environment, they allow us a glimpse on how the Prophet's message and the Qur'an were perceived inside the early Muslim community. At the same time, they contribute to our understanding of how the earliest *umma* presented and interpreted itself. Thus they constitute an important resource for any contextual study of the Qur'an.

## Appendix: The Arabic Versions of the Poems

Dīwān, no. 23:

1. لَقَدْ خَزَيْتَ بَعْدَ رَتِّهَا الْحُبُورُ      كَذَاكَ الدَّهْرُ ذَوْصَرَفٍ يَدُورُ
2. وَذَلِكَ أَنَّهُمْ كَفَرُوا بِرَبِّ      عَزِيزٍ أَمْرُهُ أَمْرٌ كَبِيرُ
3. وَقَدْ أَوْتُوا مَعًا وَعِلْمًا      وَجَاءَهُمْ مِنَ اللَّهِ النَّذِيرُ
4. نَذِيرٌ صَادِقٌ أَدَّى كِتَابًا      وَآيَاتٍ مَبِينَةٍ تُبَيِّرُ
5. فَقَالُوا مَا آتَيْتَ بِأَمْرِ صِدْقٍ      وَآيَاتٍ مَبِينَةٍ تُبَيِّرُ
6. فَقَالَ بَلَى لَقَدْ آدَيْتَ حَقًّا      يُصَدِّقُنِي بِهِ الْفَهْمُ الْخَبِيرُ
7. فَمَنْ يَتَّبِعْهُ يُهْدِلْ لِكُلِّ رُشْدٍ      وَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بِهِ يُجِزْ الْكُفُورُ
8. فَلَمَّا أَشْرَبُوا غَدْرًا وَكُفْرًا      وَحَادَ بِهِمْ عَنِ الْحَقِّ التُّفُورُ
9. أَرَى اللَّهَ الَّذِي بَرَأَنِي صِدْقٍ      وَكَانَ اللَّهُ يُحْكِمُ لَا يُجُورُ
10. فَأَيْدُهُ وَسَلَفُهُ عَلَيْهِمْ      وَكَانَ نَصِيرُهُ نِعْمَ النَّصِيرُ
11. فَعُودِرَ مِنْهُمْ كَعْبٌ صَرِيحًا      فَذَلَّتْ بَعْدَ مَصْرَعِهِ النَّصِيرُ
12. عَلَى الْكَافِّينَ ثُمَّ وَقَدْ عَلَنَهُ      بِأَيْدِي نَاشِرَةِ ذُكُورُ
13. بِأَمْرِ مُحَمَّدٍ إِذْ دَسَّ لَيْلًا      إِلَى كَعْبٍ أَخَا كَعْبٍ يَسِيرُ
14. فَكَارَهُ فَاتَزَلَّهُ بِمَكْرِ      وَمُحَمَّدٍ أَخُو ثِقَةٍ جَسُورُ
15. فَتَلَّكَ بَنُو النَّصِيرِ بِدَارِ سَوْءٍ      أَبَارَهُمْ بِمَا اجْتَرَمُوا الْمُنِيرُ
16. غَدَاةً أَنَاهُمْ فِي الرِّتْحِ رَهْوًا      رَسُولُ اللَّهِ وَهُوَ بِهِمْ بَصِيرُ
17. وَغَسَّانُ الْحِمَّةِ مُوَارِزُهُ      عَلَى الْأَعْدَاءِ وَهُوَ لَهُمْ وَزِيرُ
18. فَقَالَ السَّلَامُ وَيَحْكُمُ فَصَدُّوا      وَحَالَفَ أَمْرُهُمْ كَذِبُ وَزُورُ
19. فَذَاقُوا غَيْبَ أَمْرِهِمْ وَبَالًا      لِكُلِّ ثَلَاثَةٍ مِنْهُمْ بَعِيرُ
20. وَأَجْلُوا عَامِدِينَ لِقَيْنَقَاعٍ      وَعُودِرَ مِنْهُمْ نُحْلٌ وَدُورُ

Dīwān, no. 42:

1. قَضَيْنَا مِنْ تَهَامَةٍ كُلِّ رَيْبٍ      وَخَيْرُهُمْ أَجْمَعُنَا السَّيُوفَا
2. خَيْرُهَا وَلَوْ نَطَقَتْ لَقَالَتْ      قَوَاطِعُهُنَّ دُوسَاءُ أَوْ ثَقِيْنَا
3. فَلَسْتُ لِحَاضِنٍ أَنْ لَمْ تَرَوْهَا      بِسَاحَةِ دَارِكُمْنَا أَوْفَا
4. وَتَتَرَعُ الْعُرُوشُ بِبَطْنِ وَجٍّ      وَتَصْبِحُ دُورُكُمْ مَحْلُوفَا
5. وَيَأْتِيكُمْ لَنَا سِرْعَانُ خَيْلٍ      يُغَادِرُ خَلْفَهُ جَمْعًا كَيْفَا
6. إِذَا تَرَلُّوْا بِسَاحَتِكُمْ سَمِعْتُمْ      لَهَا مِمَّا نَاحَ بِهَارِ حَيْفَا
7. بِأَيْدِيهِمْ قَوَاضِبُ مُرَهَقَاتٍ      يُزْرِنُ الْمُصْطَلِينَ بِهَا الْحَتُوفَا
8. كَأَمْثَالِ الْعَقَاقِ أَخْلَصَتْهَا      قُبُورُ الْهِنْدِ لَمْ تُضَرْبْ كَيْفَا
9. تَخَالُ جَدِيَّةُ الْأَبْطَالِ فِيهَا      غَدَاةُ الرِّخْفِ جَادِيَاءُ مَدَوْفَا
10. أَحَدُهُمْ أَلَيْسَ لَهُمْ نَصِيحٌ      مِنَ الْأَقْوَامِ كَانَ بِنَا عَرِيْفَا
11. أَحَدُهُمْ أَلَيْسَ لَهُمْ نَصِيحٌ      مِنَ الْأَقْوَامِ كَانَ بِنَا عَرِيْفَا
12. وَأَنَا قَدْ أَتَيْنَاهُمْ بِرِخْفٍ      يُحِيطُ بِسُورِ حُصْنِهِمْ صُفُوفَا
13. رَئِيسُهُمُ الَّذِي وَكَانَ صُلْبًا      نَقَى الْقَلْبَ مُصْطِرًّا عَرُوفَا
14. رَشِيدُ الْأَمْرِ ذُو حُكْمٍ وَعِلْمٍ      وَحِلْمٍ لَمْ يَكُنْ تَرْقًا خَفِيْفَا
15. نَطِيعُ نَبِيْنَا وَنَطِيعُ رَبِّا      هُوَ الرَّحْمَنُ كَانَ بِنَا رَوْفَا
16. فَإِنْ تَلَقَّوْا إِلَيْنَا السَّلَامَ نَقْبَلْ      وَتَجْعَلُكُمْ لَنَا عَضْدًا وَرِيْفَا
17. وَإِنْ تَابُوا نَجَاهِدُكُمْ وَنَضْبُرْ      وَلَا يَكُ أَمْرُنَا عِشَاءً ضَعِيْفَا
18. مُجَاهِدٌ مَا بَقِيْنَا أَوْ تُبَيِّبُوا      إِلَى الْإِسْلَامِ إِذَا عَانَا مُضِيْفَا
19. مُجَاهِدٌ لَا بُنَايَ مِنْ لَقِيْنَا      أَهْلُكَا التَّلَادَ أَمِ الطَّرِيْفَا
20. وَكَمْ مِنْ مَعْشَرٍ الْبُوعَالِيْنَا      صَمِيمَ الْحِذْمِ مِنْهُمْ وَالْحَلِيْفَا
21. أَتُونَا لَا يَرُونَ لَهُمْ كَهَاءً      فَجَدَّ عَنَّا الْمَسَامِعَ وَالْأُنُوفَا
22. أَتُونَا لَا يَرُونَ لَهُمْ كَهَاءً      فَجَدَّ عَنَّا الْمَسَامِعَ وَالْأُنُوفَا

23. لَأْمُرَ اللَّهُ وَالْإِسْلَامَ حَتَّى يَقُومَ الدِّينُ مَعْتَدًا حَنِيفًا
24. وَتُنْسَى اللَّاتُ وَالْعُزَّىٰ وَوُدٌّ وَتُسَلَّبُهَا الْقَلَائِدُ وَالشُّوفا
25. فَأَمْسُوا قَدْ أَقْرَأُوا وَاطْمَأْنَنُوا وَمَنْ لَا يَمْتَنِعَ يُقْتَلْ خُسُوفًا

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PART TWO  
CONTEXTUALISING THE QUR'AN



## THE QUR'AN AS PROCESS

Nicolai Sinai

### *Introduction*

The Qur'an, so Islamic sources and traditional Western scholarship tell us, did not come into existence all at once but was revealed over a period of some twenty-two years. From a religious perspective, of course, this historical spread might seem accidental, especially when viewed as the manifestation of a pre-given *umm al-kitāb* that stands above the vicissitudes of history. However, any attempt at reading the Qur'an without falling back on religious premises of this kind will of necessity have to take the processual genesis of the text much more seriously, i.e., as potentially affecting both its linguistic configuration and its theological and anthropological content—if, that is, the attempt of a chronological ordering of the Qur'anic corpus does not itself rest on faith rather than argument. In the first part of this contribution I shall claim that this is not so and that Nöldeke's approach to dating Qur'anic passages is largely sound. In the second part, I will try to show that Nöldeke's approach can be elaborated even further and that it is possible to arrive at plausible chronological hypotheses even *within* the four basic textual clusters distinguished by him. All of this implies that a truly historical reading of the Qur'an must proceed processually, i.e., that it must approach the Qur'an not as a monolithic textual corpus that is read in a basically synchronic fashion but rather as a diachronic series of individual texts. The third part then argues that a genuinely processual understanding of the Qur'an will not only have to take into account the relationship between a given Qur'anic passage and the historical context that it originally addressed, but also its relationship to the corpus of earlier recitations promulgated by Muhammad. This "intratextual" dimension of the Qur'an will then be illustrated through a brief discussion of some of the early Qur'anic narratives about Abraham (most importantly, Q 51 and Q 37).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A more detailed treatment of the Qur'anic Abraham pericopes—and a broader selection of arguments for the chronological priority of the Qur'an to the rest of

1. *From Synchronic Description to Diachronic Explanation:  
A Defense of Nöldeke's Approach to Dating*

In his study on *The Qur'ân's Self-Image*, Daniel Madigan praises Toshihiko Izutsu's application of semantic field analysis to Qur'anic studies for "avoiding the pitfalls inherent in trying to differentiate the historical stages of the Qur'ân's development." According to Madigan, traditional Western attempts at dating Qur'anic passages such as Nöldeke's, which rely heavily on "identifying shifts in vocabulary," are often little more than "completely circular."<sup>2</sup> The assignment of a given surah to the middle Meccan period, for example, is frequently based on the appearance of the title *ar-raḥmān* in it—thus begging the question of on what grounds *ar-raḥmān* ought to be considered an exclusively, or at least typically, middle Meccan expression.

Madigan's skepticism about dating should perhaps not be exaggerated. After all, the essentially synchronic approach taken by him, which is concerned with a holistic or "canonical" reading of the Qur'anic corpus in its present shape, must not necessarily be seen as conflicting with diachronic reconstructions of this corpus' textual emergence, nor as discounting the feasibility of such reconstructions. Nevertheless, Madigan's remark serves as a useful reminder that customary dating schemes are at best useful working hypotheses and stand in need of continual re-examination and revision. An in-depth reconsideration of the dating issue would certainly call for a book-length monograph; in the present context, I will simply offer a few general remarks.<sup>3</sup>

Diachronic rearrangement of a given body of literature, in Qur'anic studies no less than in biblical scholarship, typically serves the function of chronologically breaking up a corpus that displays such a degree of stylistic, thematic, and conceptual diversity that its integrity as a single piece of literature, composed by a single author during a relatively short period of time, is called into question. Such heterogeneity is certainly an easily verifiable feature of the Qur'anic corpus: Brief eschatological warnings, clad in opaque imagery and charged with a highly general call to recognize God's sovereignty, stand next

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Islamic literature—can be found in Sinai, *Fortschreibung und Auslegung*.

<sup>2</sup> Madigan, *Self-Image*, 86.

<sup>3</sup> For a stimulating and clearly argued presentation of the virtues and vices of traditional approaches to dating the Qur'an, see Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, Part Two, and particularly 76–96.

to hymns, prayers, creeds, prophetic narratives, lengthy polemics, and detailed juridical regulations. Even without providing detailed examples, it may thus be stated that some Qur'anic texts employ a very different inventory of literary forms than others, and also appear to engage a substantially different kind of audience—for example, the *munāfiqūn*<sup>4</sup> and the “Children of Israel”, who come in for extensive polemical treatment in some of the longest surahs, are completely absent from the shorter ones. The same is also true for the detailed cultic and social regulations that can be found in many long surahs, while the tensions between the various Qur'anic statements on the permissibility of wine<sup>5</sup> is acknowledged even in Islamic jurisprudence, where it provides one of the textbook examples for the doctrine of abrogation (*naskh*). And historical-critical scholarship, with its nineteenth-century attentiveness to evolution and change, is prone to detect in the Qur'anic corpus discrepancies in theological concern and content as well, such as the absence of an explicit monotheism in many of the eschatological surahs that are usually ascribed to the early Meccan period.

To begin with, any attempt at dating different parts of the Qur'an can rely on little beyond the stylistic, conceptual, and thematic heterogeneity exhibited by it. Yet to what extent can this internal heterogeneity be said to inhere in the text itself, rather than being read into it, as Madigan's accusation of circularity suggests? Consider, for example, Q 52:43 (*am lahum ilāhun ghayru llāhi subḥāna llāhi 'ammā yushrikūn*), which Nöldeke and Schwally single out as a later addition stemming from the middle Meccan period, since according to them the term *shirk* and the expression *subḥāna llāh* belong to the “spätern Sprachgebrauch” of Muhammad.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the skeptic might object, the underlying premise that polytheism is not explicitly criticized before the middle Meccan period is virtually rendered immune from falsification by excising from the surahs classed as early Meccan any passage that might indicate the contrary. Thus it might seem that the phenomenon of heterogeneity mentioned above (the fact that some passages speak explicitly about the unity of God, while

<sup>4</sup> The expression is verily likely derived from the ancient Ethiopic *manāfəq*, literally meaning “hypocrite” but also used in the sense of “heretic” (cf. Jeffery, *Vocabulary*, 272).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Q 16:67 (positive assessment of wine), Q 2:219 (ambivalent), Q 4:43 (prohibition to participate in prayer when drunk), Q 5:90–91 (unconditional prohibition).

<sup>6</sup> Nöldeke/Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. 1, 105.

others do not) is nothing empirically observable at all: it rather appears to be the result of textual surgery that first creates what it then claims to have found. Does this not warrant Madigan's imputation of circularity?

One has to keep in mind, however, that any serious chronological reconstruction of the Qur'an's textual growth will have to base itself on the convergence of a number of different criteria. Among these, lexical parameters such as the use of *ar-raḥmān* or *shirk* must of course be accompanied by formal parameters such as verse length and compositional structure. The observation that the individual surahs' average verse length varies considerably, for example, does not presuppose textual surgery of the kind illustrated above. Nor does the observation that some of the surahs, such as Q 100, are structurally relatively simple (consisting of an introductory oath series, followed by an accusation of man's ingratitude and an announcement of its eschatological consequences), while others (namely, most of those classed as middle or late Meccan) are structurally complex, exhibiting a tripartite layout in which the middle part frequently recounts episodes from prophetic history surrounded by a framework of polemics and "affirmations of revelation," to borrow Angelika Neuwirth's terminology.<sup>7</sup> Apart from these two classes of surahs, there is a third class made up of lengthy texts without any clear structural subdivision (e.g., Q 2).

Thus, based on a convergence of style (including verse length and rhyme), literary structure, terminology, and content, it is possible to discern three distinct classes of surahs. Since the present context does not allow me to present a detailed catalogue of all the relevant data, I will limit myself to offering a general outline of these three groups:

(1) Texts belonging to the first category are relatively short, and thematically center on the Last Judgment. They display a wide range of rhyme schemes and frequent changes of rhyme (cf. Q 99 with two different rhyme schemes in just eight verses, and Q 100 with three rhymes in eleven verses),<sup>8</sup> and consist of very short verses containing only one main or subordinate clause or even a single syntagm.<sup>9</sup> Surahs

<sup>7</sup> This emphasis on compositional structure, and especially the tripartite analysis of the middle and late Meccan texts, was pioneered by Angelika Neuwirth in her *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Neuwirth, *Studien*, table 2.3.1 (follows p. 90).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the survey in *ibid.*, 117–156.—For a numerically more precise attempt at measuring verse length, see the contribution by Nora Katharina Schmid

within this class are frequently introduced by eschatological temporal clauses (*idhā ...* or *yauma ...*) or oaths.

(2) Most texts within the second category can be analyzed as displaying the tripartite structure referred to above. They are introduced by standardized formulae that either stress the revelatory nature of the following (*tilka āyātu l-kitābi l-mubīn, kitābun unzila ilaika, tanzīlu l-kitābi mina llāhī*, etc.<sup>10</sup>) or are doxological in character (*al-ḥamdu li-llāhī* + relative clause or participle, *tabāraka* + relative clause).<sup>11</sup> Even though texts within this class are similar to the first one in that they depict in graphic detail the rewards and punishments meted out on Judgment Day, their thematic repertoire is much larger, including narratives from Judeo-Christian sacred history as well as argumentative subsections that interpret a variety of natural phenomena as “signs” (*āyāt*) of God’s activity within the world. Terminologically, they are distinguished by a polemical use of *ashraka* and *shirk* (“idolatry,” or more literally “associationism”) that is almost completely absent from the first category (except for the verse Q 52:43, mentioned above; cf. also the technically less developed use of *shurakā’* in Q 68:41). Whereas texts from (2) display a much more sophisticated literary structure than texts from (1), they employ a substantially reduced spectrum of rhyme schemes,<sup>12</sup> and changes of rhyme are much less frequent (cf. Q 15, Q 21, Q 26, and Q 27, where almost all verses end in *-īn/-ūn/-īm/-ūm*). As regards the parameter of verse lengths, verses consisting merely of single syntagms are almost completely absent from this class,<sup>13</sup> and verses frequently contain two, three, and even four clauses (cf. Q 7 and Q 29).

(3) The third class comprises lengthy surahs without a discernible literary macrostructure. Individual verses, which are longer than those from the above category, end in formulaic clausulae that exhibit an even more limited spectrum of rhyme schemes than texts from the first and second class.<sup>14</sup> A large number of these surahs give the

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Q 7, Q 10, Q 11, Q 12, Q 13, Q 14, Q 15, Q 26, Q 27, Q 28, Q 31, Q 32, Q 39, Q 40, Q 41, Q 45, Q 46.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Q 6, Q 18, Q 25, Q 34, Q 35, Q 67.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the surahs classed as late Meccan by Nöldeke only once employ a rhyme not emphasized on the last syllable (Q 35:39–45: *-ā/ū/ī+r/l+ā*), while there are more than twenty surahs classed as early Meccan that display rhyme schemes with penultimate stress. Cf. once again Neuwirth, *Studien*, tables 2.3.1 and 2.3.2.

<sup>13</sup> Q 37 and Q 44 are an exception. Significantly, both surahs combine characteristics of (1) and (2), insofar as they are tripartite, yet start with an oath (see below).

<sup>14</sup> For a survey of the various types of clausulae, see Neuwirth, *Studien*, 161–162.

impression of homilies dedicated to clarifying various matters of political or social controversy and frequently include detailed regulations.<sup>15</sup> Other texts, like Q 2, appear more like aggregations of originally independent texts units. Surahs from this third category are partly characterized by a distinctive terminology that is absent or at least very rare in classes (1) and (2) (such as reference to a group called the *munāfiqūn*, many instances of second-person address of the *Banū Isrāʾīl*, and addressing the text's transmitter through the words *yā ayyuhā n-nabī*).

Now, this typological classification—which so far does not involve any diachronic assumptions—recommends itself by virtue of a far-reaching convergence of different parameters, such as structure, introductory formulae, verse length, and rhyme profile. It bears stressing once again that I take this broad subdivision of the corpus into three classes of texts to be justifiable on purely philological grounds, even if the classification—like most classifications—is bound to prove somewhat fuzzy at the edges, leaving us with a number of texts that appear to fit none or more than one category. For example, many of the shortest surahs, such as Q 93, Q 94, Q 97, Q 105, Q 106, and Q 108, may be assigned to (1) in terms of the lengths of their verses and their frequent changes in rhyme schemes, yet are not eschatological in content; while others, such as Q 73, Q 74, and Q 96, conform to (1) also in terms of their content but lack introductory temporal clauses or oaths. There are also what one might call hybrid surahs that combine characteristics of two categories: Q 37 and Q 79, for example, are tripartite, which tallies with (2), yet start out with an eschatological oath, which accords with (1).

Surahs that correspond only partially to one of the above categories and surahs that fit more than one category can be integrated with the above typology in two ways. Some of them can plausibly be held to form variations on given literary conventions; this applies, for example, to texts such as Q 41, which are tripartite and display some of the formulae characteristic of (2) (such as *tanzīl* introductions) yet do not contain a narrative middle section. Other surahs are more aptly viewed as documenting transitional stages of the Qur'an's literary evolution: Q 37 would appear to reflect a stage where the tripartite structure that is characteristic of (2) had already crystallized, while the introductory oaths definitive of (1) had not yet been substituted

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Neuwirth, "Vom Rezitationstext," 95.



by announcements of revelation like *kitābun unzila ilaika*, etc. From this point of view, surahs such as Q 105 and Q 106 give the impression of belonging to a stage preliminary to (1), where these latter's eschatological concerns had not yet surfaced.

In my view it is in particular the presence of such hybrid texts that justifies a diachronic interpretation of the essentially synchronic typology outlined above, which step may be said to constitute the gist of Nöldeke's approach to surah dating.<sup>16</sup> If this step is taken, then the preceding division of the corpus into three textual clusters

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<sup>16</sup> Bell and Watt have objected that "the original unit of revelation was the short passage, and such passages were afterwards 'collected' to form suras" (Watt, *Bell's Introduction*, 73, 111; cf. Watt, "Dating"). Both also assume that these original units of revelation are indicated by thematic transitions, which are frequently marked by changes in rhyme: according to Bell and Watt, such transitions are invariably to be explained in terms of a secondary combination of originally independent monothematic passages. This assumption has been subjected to detailed scrutiny in Neuwirth's *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*, where she has been able to show that at least in the surahs belonging to classes (1) and (2) above, thematic transitions generally follow discernable structural conventions. This implies that the "original unit of revelation" was probably the surah itself, and that its polythematic character is not an outcome of subsequent editing. Structurally, the case of the surah is analogous to that of the *Qaṣīda*: nobody would view the transition from the *nasīb* to the *raḥīl* part of the *Qaṣīda*, which follows an established compositional pattern, as sufficient grounds for assuming that these sections were originally independent from each other. Hence, what Bell and Watt would describe as cases of non sequitur appear, upon a comparative analysis of all the Meccan texts, as structurally meaningful caesurae that set apart the individual parts of the surah as a whole (Neuwirth, *Studien*, 178: "Die vermeintlichen Sprünge und Brüche sind [...] die bewußt angesetzten Zäsuren zwischen den jeweiligen in sich gegliederten und mit verschiedenen Mitteln verknüpften Einzelteilen.") This does not, of course, rule out the possibility of later expansions of existing surahs, but Neuwirth's work in effect shifts the burden of proof to the one who claims that a given verse is a later insertion. Thus, at least regarding categories (1) and (2), to single out a certain passage as postdating the main body of the text in which it is contained requires a proper philological argument, e.g., an appeal to striking differences in verse length, terminology, or content, or establishing the presence of a motive for expanding the existing text (such as might consist in the need to harmonize that text with later Qur'anic promulgations). For Nöldeke and Neuwirth, then, the textual units to be dated are thus something that is given rather than something that itself stands in need of reconstruction before dating can even begin. If this is true—as I think it is—Qur'anic scholarship is actually in a much more favorable position than Biblical scholarship. For if one were to adopt Bell's approach, who sees the Qur'an as a heap of disconnected fragments, then textual surgery of the sort illustrated above would become inevitable—and it would be exceedingly difficult to carry out without resorting to rather questionable assumptions about which kind of verses, in terms of structure as well as of content, are appropriately located within a given surah, and which verses ought to be excised and placed somewhere else. Suspicions of circularity are thus perfectly in place when raised against Bell's dating attempts.

defined in terms of shared terminological and structural properties will turn into a chronological *sequence* of successive text groups (with the second group of the classification encompassing both the “middle” and “late Meccan surahs”).

It is of course entirely legitimate to wonder whether my typology could not equally well be explained in terms of a documentary hypothesis of the kind apparently envisaged by Wansbrough, who speculates that the Qur’anic *textus receptus* might be the result of an integration of different collections of prophetic *logia*<sup>17</sup>—after all, has not a broadly similar explanatory strategy been applied with relative success to the Pentateuch? Unfortunately, neither Wansbrough nor any of the scholars sympathetic to him have taken the trouble of spelling out this basic idea by identifying the source layers that have allegedly entered into the Qur’an. The explanatory value of a documentary hypothesis for making sense of the Qur’an is thus hard to evaluate, given the absence of a well-worked out version of it. However, one can at least venture the general methodological remark that a documentary hypothesis would appear particularly attractive if a sequential reconstruction of the kind offered by Nöldeke were to fail—i.e., if there were no way of arranging the Qur’anic corpus in a unilinear series of textual units that follow one another in a historically probable way. This, however, is clearly not the case. One might also object that there is no a priori reason for arranging these three classes of surahs in the chronological order suggested by Nöldeke, i.e., for postulating a development from structurally simple to structurally complex to unstructured texts; for example, it is not a priori clear that over time, verses must get longer rather than shorter. On the other hand, assuming a development from (1) via (2) to (3) does appear to provide the most plausible evolutionary narrative. One of the indications that this is so consists in the relative paucity of Biblical references in group (1), whereas groups (2) and (3) abound in references to Biblical figures and events; the Qur’anic corpus thus appears to reflect a development in the course of which a community of hearers that is originally situated outside the Judeo-Christian tradition gradually acquires a “Biblicizing” outlook on many things.

At this point, any truly committed skeptic is bound to complain that my understanding of what would count as a plausible evolutionary arrangement of the above three categories is illicitly constrained by extra-Qur’anic factors, namely, the basic outline of Muhammad’s

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Wansbrough, *Qur’anic Studies*, 47.

biography as presented in the *sīra* literature. Although I do think that at least a probable case could be made for Nöldeke's itinerary from (1) via (2) to (3) that would rest on inner-Qur'anic observations—for example, the fact that biblical references are very scarce in (1) and become successively richer in (2) and (3)—I would also submit that a sufficiently general reliance on the *sīra* narrative is unproblematic. As François de Blois points out in his contribution to this volume, Muhammad's ascent from a disenfranchised, yet charismatic eschatological preacher to a powerful tribal leader is unlike many biblical narratives in that its basic plot does not contain any of the supernatural phenomena that are so hard to swallow for modern historians: Muhammad arrives in Medina without a miraculous parting of the sea, his accession to power thereat is attributed to a deft and occasionally ruthless handling of tribal politics, and he does not rise from the dead. Consequently, even though his biography is certainly provided with a religious varnish, it appears that the latter is more like the theological spicing added to a basic layer of profane history, rather than something inextricably woven into it, as John Wansbrough has most insistently claimed.<sup>18</sup>

My contention is hence that the construction of a narratively plausible chronological scheme may legitimately operate with certain assumptions about Muhammad's biography that are external to the Qur'an itself, such as the presence of Jews in Medina, and the fact

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<sup>18</sup> The plausibility of the basic framework of the *sīra*, even if judged by non-theological standards of historical likelihood, thus points to the historicity of this framework. In his reactions to an earlier draft, Daniel Madigan has objected that the *sīra* literature frequently provides more than one plausible narrative integration of a Qur'anic verse or section, and accordingly cautioned against overrating the plausibility factor. Yet such an incompatibility exists primarily at the level of maximum detail with which the *sīra* literature is of course strikingly replete. When one steps back a bit, the broad contours of Muhammad's career seem to be something upon which writers and traditionists of very different, and even mutually hostile, theological and political orientation were able to agree. To be sure, these broad contours only allow us an excruciatingly vague glimpse into the historical circumstances surrounding the text's genesis, but they include at least the emigration from Mecca to Medina, the relatively marginal position of Muhammad at the former, and the presence of Jews at the latter. Even if most of the details that go beyond this rudimentary plot-line are the result of narrative elaboration and exegetical speculation, underneath them there is only one basic framework of Muhammad's biography—thus, we simply do not have accounts where the Hijra is said to have taken place from Medina to Mecca, or somewhere else altogether.—For an impressive array of arguments pointing to the chronological priority of the Qur'an to the rest of Islamic literature, see the first chapter of Donner, *Narratives*. Cf. also note 1 above.

that Muhammad after the Hijra increasingly came to wield political authority. If we accept this basic framework, which the *sīra* fills in with a host of admittedly very questionable specifications, then Nöldeke's way of arranging the three classes of surahs distinguished above on compositional grounds becomes very plausible, at least if we resort to lexical and thematic considerations as auxiliary parameters. The surahs referred to above as "lengthy" and "unstructured," for example, with their frequent polemics addressed to the "Children of Israel," match the broad outlines of the Medinan context. The distinction between Meccan and Medinan surahs being safely in place, the only plausible arrangement of the remaining two classes of surahs appears to be one of increasing structural complexity, where the tripartite surah form gradually emerges from an earlier textual layer still in search of the literary conventions appropriate to its particular religious concerns—and, one might add, best suited to defend Muhammad's claim to prophethood in the face of continuing polemics and challenges. What I am claiming is therefore that Nöldeke's chronology can be justified by and large through a convergence of formal, lexical, and thematic considerations, interpreted against a background of a few general assumptions about the life and times of Muhammad. The situation of Qur'anic studies is consequently hardly as aporetic as it has become so fashionable to maintain in the wake of John Wansbrough.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> It must be admitted, though, that the kind of convergence of different criteria at which a reasonable chronological scheme ought to aim will most likely never be total—as it never is in the science of history. For example, Neuwirth follows Nöldeke's and Schwally's judgement about Q 52:43, opting to exchange the verse for a two-verse alternative reading transmitted on the authority of Ibn Mas'ūd (*am lahum ālihatun ghayru llāhi fal-ya' tū bi-ālihatihim in kānū ṣādiqīn / subhāna rabbi s-samā'i wa-l-arḍi 'ammā yaṣifūn*; see Neuwirth, *Studien*, 23). The substitution of *waṣaḥa* for *ashraka* mitigates to a certain extent the passage's proximity to middle Meccan surahs at which Nöldeke/Schwally had taken offense, while the expression *subhāna* ... is retained. On the basis of this emendation, Neuwirth then computes a length of twenty verses for the third part of Q 52, a number exactly equal to the length of its second part. Since her argument for the integrity of the Meccan surahs is partially based on numerical proportions of this kind, however, one might be tempted to object that she is manipulating her evidence in order to shore up preconceived conclusions. After all, she devotes more than forty pages to a "critical re-examination of the traditional verse endings," without which numerical proportionality could hardly be established for many surahs other than Q 52. Yet what this shows is merely that in philological and historical reconstructions, the relationship between evidence and explanation is more complex than in Newtonian physics. There, the data against which rivaling explanations are judged is directly accessible in that it is not subject to the vagaries of textual transmission and can be registered numerically, i.e., without requiring a substantial

## 2. Towards an Internal Chronology of the Early Meccan Surahs

Nöldeke's approach to dating the Qur'an, which refines and elaborates the work carried out before him by Gustav Weil,<sup>20</sup> was a pioneering feat of Qur'anic scholarship because it attempted to provide a chronology of the Qur'an based primarily on internal criteria, such as style and diction.<sup>21</sup> Of course, in doing so Weil and Nöldeke only

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amount of interpretive activity. The possibility of textual corruption and intentional interpolation, no less than the frequent ambiguity of the textual material itself, often mean that the data to which a historical theory must stand up is itself not something conclusively given. The net result of this is that in theorizing about the past, a certain scope for revisions and re-interpretations of the textual data is simply legitimate, at least if the majority of these revisions can be defended on other grounds than the thesis they are taken to confirm. To a certain degree, then, dating schemes are bound to be exercises in imaginative puzzle-solving (cf. Robinson *Discovering*, 95f.). Yet this lack of deductive waterproofness ought not to be viewed as circularity—it is rather the daily bread of historical reconstruction. In a sense, the type of argument employed in chronological reconstructions like surah dating is much more akin to what philosophers call abduction, or inference to the best explanation, than to deductive or inductive types of argument. For example, when observing traces strongly resembling human footsteps on a muddy path, the “best”—i.e., the most plausible—explanation would, under ordinary circumstances, consist in supposing that these footsteps are indeed traces caused by the shoes of a human being passing by the same way. Of course, they might also have been produced by some remote-controlled piece of machinery specifically designed to leave behind traces resembling human footsteps and thus to fool unsuspecting hikers. The fact that, under ordinary circumstances, this latter explanation is bound to appear much less convincing is nothing deductively certain but is simply a matter of common sense plausibility. Much in the same way, dating schemes are abductive in that they are attempts to fit a certain amount of relatively obvious data into an evolutionary account judged above all by its narrative plausibility.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Welch, “al-Ḳur’ān,” Section Five.

<sup>21</sup> Welch (“al-Ḳur’ān,” Section Five) accuses Nöldeke and Weil of a “combination of excessive dependence on traditional Muslim dating and on matters of form and style.” As observed above, however, this alleged “dependence on traditional Muslim dating” is limited to their acceptance of the basic framework of the *sīra* narrative, which is also presupposed by Bell and Watt themselves. As regards formal and stylistic criteria, I find it hard to see how this could ever be “excessive,” providing as it does an important set of checks and balances against the exclusive reliance on one single, and possibly misleading, criterion. The fact that style and terminology are features of the literary production of an author that usually change much more gradually and at a much slower speed than content, is a proposition easily verifiable through empirical observation, and it is difficult to understand why it should not be applied to the Qur'an, at least if it is not ruled out on theological grounds. Welch does opine that “there is no reason to assume that all *sūras* with the same style belong to the same period.” This is correct insofar as it cannot be excluded that later texts might engage in a conscious imitation of the stylistic characteristics of earlier ones. It is however likely that such a conscious retrogression will only be partial, i.e., that it will not encompass *all* the relevant non-content-specific features of an earlier stage and will

follow nineteenth century philological common sense: historical-critical Bible scholarship had from its beginnings used terminological parameters (such as the various divine names that appear in the Biblical creation story) in order to reconstruct the various source layers of the Pentateuch, and at the end of the nineteenth century a somewhat related approach was applied to the Platonic dialogues by Wincenty Lutoslawsky, the founder of Platonic “stylometry.” But Nöldeke’s approach is nevertheless a significant accomplishment: for although it presupposes the basic chronological framework of the *sīra* narrative, it endows the study of the Qur’an with a crucial independence from the biographical study of the life of Muhammad, based as it is on anecdotal reports transmitted in traditional Islamic *sīra* literature. The preceding section has attempted to recast Weil’s and Nöldeke’s method to surah dating in terms of a two-step procedure consisting in a movement from synchronic description to diachronic explanation. What I take to be the most important merit of this reconstruction lies in the fact that it makes very clear that Nöldeke’s approach is *cumulative*, i.e., based on a convergence of different, and to some extent mutually independent, sets of criteria, such as structure, introductory formulae, verse length, overall surah length, rhyme profile, and content. It is very unlikely, I think, that convergence on such a significant scale is accidental; and if it is not accidental, then there must be an explanation for it; and the best explanation is arguably the evolutionary one put forward by Weil and Nöldeke, since it best accommodates the presence of what appear to be hybrid texts marking the transition from one of the above classes to the next.

If my argument is accepted to this point, the question suggests itself whether Nöldeke’s approach cannot be taken a step further: is his division of the Qur’anic corpus into three or four basic textual clusters amenable to further subdivision, i.e., can we distinguish chronologically significant subgroups *within* these clusters? In this

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therefore be to some degree identifiable. As I have been informed orally by Prof. Reinhard Kratz of the Department of Theology at the University of Göttingen, a somewhat similar situation obtains with respect to the dating of many Biblical psalms, where specialists have also come to recognize the possibility of a later imitation of early “mythological” pieces; yet even if such imitations are so successful as to be virtually undistinguishable from the original, it is probable that they will only be exceptions that would not significantly alter the overall picture. As a matter of fact, conscious retrogression is perhaps even more likely to occur in content (the primary dating criterion recommended by Welch), since an author and/or his audience are usually more aware of content-specific features of a text than stylistic ones.

second section of my contribution, I will argue that this is indeed so, and I will try to illustrate my thesis with regard to the surahs described by Nöldeke as early Meccan. In doing so, I will examine three parameters that can plausibly be held to have chronological implications. Two of them have already been used above, namely, verse length, and overall text length. The third parameter, which is best termed “structural complexity,” requires an explanation. Most Qur’anic surahs are readily divisible into thematically and syntactically defined sections, which sometimes are also marked by changes of rhyme. In surahs from the middle and late Meccan period (i.e., texts from the second group above), this general feature of the Qur’anic texts shows two developments: Firstly, a given surah simply tends to consist of *more* such subsections, and these tend to be longer and possess a greater degree of autonomy; and secondly, these sections, by virtue of relations of thematic contiguity, tend to form overarching surah parts, thus yielding a further level of structural organization. For example, the long cycle of punishment legends in Q 26:10–191 forms a surah part that can in turn be divided into thematically and syntactically defined “paragraphs.”<sup>22</sup> When looking at groups (1) and (2) above, it is clear that this presence of two levels of structural organization is a feature of the Qur’anic texts that crystallized only gradually: many texts from the first group, if allowing for any structural subdivision at all, can only be divided into “paragraphs,” whereas all the texts from group (2) can be divided into both “paragraphs” and overarching surah parts that are made up of more than one such “paragraph.”

If Nöldeke’s basic approach is sound, then the textual clusters defined by these three criteria—verse length, text length, and structural complexity—can plausibly be held to constitute consecutive subgroups within the class of early Meccan texts. The criterion of text length can of course be easily measured by simply using the overall number of verses that a surah contains.<sup>23</sup> As an indicator of verse length I will use data assembled by Nora Katharina Schmid, a research

<sup>22</sup> The “paragraphs” of Qur’anic discourse have been termed *Gesätze* in the terminology used by Neuwirth (cf. *Studien*, 175–178).

<sup>23</sup> This way of proceeding does create minor distortions, since already within the early Meccan surahs verses can significantly vary in length (verse length being, after all, my second criterion); and clearly *x* short verses are not the same amount of text as *x* long verses. A more precise determination of text length would therefore consist in multiplying a surah’s overall number of verses by its average number of syllables per verse. As the tables presented in what follows show, however, surahs that have



assistant at the *Corpus Coranicum* project who has determined the average number of syllables per verse for all of the Meccan surahs; the procedure followed by her and some of its implications are presented in detail in her contribution to this volume. The third parameter, structural complexity, will be indicated in two ways. Firstly, I will give the number of “paragraphs” that make up a certain surah. In addition to this, I will provide what might be called a “structural formula” of the surah at hand, such as  $[6+3+5]+[4+3+3+4]$  for Q 81. In such a structural formula, individual numbers indicate the number of verses that constitute the different “paragraphs,” and square brackets serve to indicate which of these sections can plausibly be held to constitute an overarching surah part.<sup>24</sup> Finally, in determining the values for all three parameters I have disregarded verses that can be clearly identified as later insertions, since these in particular distort the average number of syllables per verse.<sup>25</sup>

In what follows I will try to subdivide the early Meccan texts into groups characterized by means of these three parameters. I believe that the data is best accounted for by distinguishing four groups of early Meccan surahs, which will simply be designated as Group I, Group II, Group IIIa, and Group IIIb. I will now briefly discuss each of these groups and then append tables that list the values that the three parameters take for each individual surah.

*Group I:* Surahs in Group I are very short, usually containing no more than 10 or 11 verses. They are either structurally simple (i.e., they do not allow for subdivision into “paragraphs”) or consist of only a few and very short verse groups that do not exhibit any major

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approximately the same length also tend to have the same average number of syllables per verse, so multiplication would unnecessarily complicate matters.

<sup>24</sup> Whereas the identification of “paragraphs” (in Neuwirth’s terminology: *Gesätze*) is usually not open to major doubt, the question of whether some of these paragraphs are sufficiently interrelated to warrant being included as parts of an overarching surah part is a more subjective matter. It is of course impossible to argue through each and every case in the scope of this essay. A detailed structural analysis of all of the surahs discussed in this section will be part of the commentary on the Qur’an that is currently being prepared by Angelika Neuwirth and myself as part of the *Corpus Coranicum* project. Provisionally cf. the discussion of all surahs in Neuwirth, *Studien*.

<sup>25</sup> An example for this is provided by Q 73, the last verse of which is about half as long as the rest of the surah.—Once again, a detailed justification of why certain verses have been deemed to constitute later insertions will be provided only as part of the commentary mentioned in the previous note.



thematic transitions between them; these surahs may hence be called "monothematic."<sup>26</sup> Their average verse length ranges between 8 and 11 syllables per verse. In this regard, surah 99 is slightly exceptional insofar as it has an average of 12.6 syllables per verse, yet structurally and in terms of its length it is clearly akin to the other texts from Group I. The very short surah 105, too, contains relatively long verses (12 syllables per verse on average). It must be borne in mind, however, that even surahs with a lower average verse length may contain verses that comprise 12, 13, or even 14 syllables (e.g., 89:6.8.9.13, where the average length is 10.1 syllables), but the longer the surah the more likely it is that these by early Meccan standards exceptionally long verses are counterbalanced by shorter ones. Hence, average values are simply less representative for very short surahs like Q 105; and given the latter's overall similarity to Q 106, for example, it makes sense to include Q 105 in Group I as well.

*Group II:* Surahs from Group II show a higher degree of structural complexity: all of them are divisible into subsections that tend to be longer than those in Group I (usually between 4 and 10 verses) and possess a greater degree of structural autonomy, whereas texts from Group I are only divisible into closely intertwined verse groups. In many cases, there are also more of these subsections (*Gesätze*) in Group II, usually three or four. Q 81, which has a total of seven such *Gesätze* is an exception in this regard. Between some of these sections one can clearly discern relationships of thematic attraction that prefigure the division of later surahs into parts that are in turn made up of several thematically related subsections. Surahs from Group II display the same range in average verse length as Group I, yet they are significantly longer, typically running to about 15 to 25 verses. Q 73

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<sup>26</sup> The surahs in Group I largely correspond to what Neal Robinson has termed "surahs in a single register" (*Discovering the Qur'an*, 126–128). There are, however, three differences: (1) Robinson also counts Q 92 as a "surah in a single register," while I have included it in Group II on account of its length and its similarity to Q 91; I would also take the position that the punishment narrative in vv. 11–15 is in fact a shift in "register." (2) Q 102, which I have included in Group I, is described by Robinson as a "surah in two registers" (*Discovering the Qur'an*, 129), which I find difficult to accept: even though there may be a shift from polemics to eschatology in the last two verses, the final couplet does not really exhibit a change in subject; also, Q 102 is clearly related to Q 95, 103, 104, and 107, which are all part of Group I. (3) Robinson also counts Q 100 as a "surah in two registers." Once again, however, its final part is so closely linked to the preceding that I would hesitate to regard it as a genuinely polythematic surah. Since the text is also akin to Q 99 and 101, I have therefore included it in Group I.

is clearly an outlier value, since its average number of syllables per verse is 17.5, yet in terms of its overall length and its structure the text is best included in Group II.

*Groups IIIa and IIIb:* Surahs from Group III contain more subsections (typically between 5 and 8), and these usually encompass more verses than in Group II. Surahs from Group III are therefore significantly longer than the previous two groups, usually running to more than 40 verses. In terms of their verse length, they clearly fall into two distinct subclasses: surahs from Group IIIa display the same range of syllables per verse as Groups I and II (between 8 and 11), while surahs from Group IIIb show a marked increase in verse length (between 11 and 16 syllables). The same division can be discerned, albeit less clearly, when examining the parameter of overall text length: surahs from IIIa contain between 36 and 50 verses, while almost all surahs from IIIb (except for Q 70 and 83) have more than 50 verses.

### *Group I*

Surah no.	Average verse length (measured in syllables per verse)	Overall length (measured in verses)	Structural Subdivision	Number of verse groups
93	10.4	11	2+3+3+3	4
94	8.1	8	4+2+2	3
95 (exc. v. 6)	8.5	7	3+2+2	3
97 (exc. v. 4)	10.8	4		1
99	12.6	8	3+2+3	3
100	10	11	5+3+3	3
101	8.5	11	3+2+4+2	4
102	9.5	8	2+3+3	3
103 (exc. v. 3)	5	2		1
104	8.9	9	4+5	2
105	12	5		1
106	11	4		1
107	9.9	7	3+4	2
108	9	3		1
111	10.4	5		1

*Group II*

Surah no.	Verse length	Overall length	Structural Subdivision	Number of verse groups
73 (exc. vv. 3.4a and 20)	17.5	18	[4+5]+[4+2+3]	5
81 (exc. v. 29)	9	28	[6+3+5]+[4+3+3+4]	7
82	10.7	19	5+3+4+4+3	5
84 (exc. v. 25)	11.9	24	[6+9]+[4+5]	4
85 (exc. vv. 7–11)	7.8	17	3+4+4+6	4
86 (with vv. 15.16 counted as a single verse)	8.7	16	4+6+6	3
87 (exc. 7)	10	18	7+7+4	3
88	9.5	26	[7+9]+4+6	4
89 (exc. vv. 15.16.23.24.27–30)	10.1	22	5+9+[4+4]	4
90 (exc. vv. 17–20)	9	16	4+6+6	3
91 (v. 14 counted as two verses)	9.9	16	[4+6]+[3+3]	2
92	9.8	21	4+[3+4+2]+[3+5]	6
96	9.4	19	5+3+[6+5]	4

*Group IIIa*

Surah no.	Verse length	Overall length	Structural subdivision	Number of verse groups
53 (exc. v. 23 and vv. 26–32)	10.4	54	[6+6+6+6]+[5+5+7+7]+6	9
74 (exc. vv. 31 and 56)	8.7	54	[7+3]+[7+9+10+11]+7	7
75	11.2	40	6+[9+4+6]+[5+5]+5	7
77 (v. 27 counted as two verses)	10.5	51	[7+8]+[4+5+5]+[6+6+5]+5	9
78 (exc. vv. 37–40)	10.2	36	[5+11]+[4+6+4+6]	6
79 (exc. v. 33, v. 40 counted as two verses)	10.9	46	[5+9]+[6+6+6]+[9+5]	7
80	8.9	42	[4+6+6]+[7+9]+[5+5]	7

*Group IIIb*<sup>27</sup>

Surah no.	Verse length	Overall length	Structural subdivision	Number of verse groups
51	15.8	60	[6+3+5+5+4]+[7+7+3+2+4]+ [9+5]	12
52	16.6	49	8+[8+12]+[6+9+4]+2	7
55 (includes a chorus verse)	13.9	78	[13]+[17+6]+[9+16+17]	6
56 (vv. 8.9.27.41 counted as two verses each)	11.1	100	[7+7+14+15+17]+[6+5+3+4]+ [6+7+7+2]	13
68	15.4	52	[7+9]+[9+9]+[9+4+5]	7
69 (exc. v. 7 and vv. 7.17.19.25 counted as two verses each)	12.6	54	[3+6+4]+[7+7+6+8]+[6+3]	9
70 (exc. v. 4 and vv. 22–35)	13.3	29	6+[7+7]+[4+5]	5
83	12.6	36	6+[11+11]+8	4

Once again, the convergence of different criteria makes it likely that these four subgroups of early Meccan texts are in fact chronologically consecutive stages. For example, Groups I and II exhibit a similar variation of syllables per verse but differ in terms of overall length, with texts in Group II being significantly longer; this fact is conveniently explained by assuming that the tendency towards an increase in length, that can be observed throughout Nöldeke's four stages of the Qur'an's emergence, is operative already within the early Meccan period. Group IIIa then continues this trend: again we have a similar spectrum of syllables per verse, but the overall length of the surahs has increased once again. Finally, in Group IIIb, we do not merely observe yet another increase in text length, but now there is also a remarkable leap in verse length, which is also a general trend that is operative throughout the subsequent Qur'anic promulgations. At the same time, the surahs in Groups IIIa and IIIb, all of which cannot only be subdivided into sections but also into overarching surah parts,

<sup>27</sup> Results for surahs 52, 55, and 56 are preliminary and may turn out differently in the final version of the *Corpus Coranicum* commentary.

lead up to the multipartite surah structure that is characteristic of middle and late Meccan texts; it thus makes sense to locate them at the end of the early Meccan period not only in terms of their verse length and overall text length, but also in terms of their structural organization.

What I have tried to show in the preceding pages is that Nöldeke's chronology is amenable to further subdivision; just like the early Meccan texts, the middle and late Meccan surahs, too, could probably be subdivided into smaller textual clusters that may be understood as consecutive stages of textual growth. I would also venture the opinion that a more detailed analysis of the texts allows one to go even beyond the fourfold classification of early Meccan texts just presented. Let us take Group I as an example. Stylistically and structurally, these texts are so homogeneous that it is unlikely that the slight variations in verse length and overall text length within this group can be accorded any chronological significance. Nevertheless, the fifteen surahs that make up Group I fall into a limited number of thematic and formal text clusters:

(a) *Meccan surahs (Q 105 and 106)*: Both texts deal with local Meccan matters, the miraculous protection of the Meccan *haram* against invaders in Q 105, and the God-given prosperity of the Meccans in Q 106. The relationship between God and man, which in all other early Meccan texts is described as being gravely disturbed due to man's ingratitude and disobedience towards God (see, for example, 100:6–8 and 96:6.7), appears to function quite well according to Q 106: God protects the Quraysh, and the Quraysh in return are commanded to worship God, without there being any indication that this command might not be heeded. In general, one is struck by the absence of any polemical note towards contemporary Meccan society in these surahs: for example, whereas later texts usually refer to the Meccans either as "believers" or "unbelievers," Q 106 affirmatively speaks of the "Quraysh" without dividing them up between two trans-historical and diametrically opposed communities defined by their religious outlook.<sup>28</sup>

(b) *Announcements of judgment (Q 95, 102, 103, 104, 107)*: In striking contrast to (a), these five surahs assert a fundamental disruption of the proper relationship between God and mankind, the latter being pictured as unreliable, ungrateful, and disobedient. Formally, these

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. the similar observation by Bell, *Origin*, 73.

texts contain general indictments of man (*al-insān*), reproaches of a plurality of hearers (e.g., 102:1.2), woes, brief announcements of eschatological punishment, and short introductory oaths (Q 95 and 103).

(c) *Brief eschatological images* (Q 99, 100, 101, 111): These four surahs can be viewed as elaborating on the brief eschatological references in (b). They depict the disintegration of the existing natural and social order of things and the establishment of a new eschatological order defined strictly according to moral criteria. Formally, these texts exhibit a certain degree of continuity with (b), yet they also develop novel literary forms, such as the eschatological temporal clause (99:1–6, 100:9–11, 101:4–9), the didactic question (101:2.10), and the diptych (99:7.8, 101:6–9).<sup>29</sup>

(d) *Solace surahs* (Q 93, 94, 108): Q 93, 94, and 108 are words of solace and promises addressed to the messenger; structurally, they are built from reminders of past acts of divine grace that are followed by ethical and religious imperatives derived from them.

(e) Q 97: This surah prefigures the affirmations of revelation that frequently occur towards the end of more complex multipartite surahs.<sup>30</sup>

Let us ask once more: can this synchronic taxonomy be interpreted diachronically? I think that at least in part the answer must be in the affirmative. In discussing the possibility of chronologically ordering the surahs in Group I of the early Meccan texts, one directly touches on the much-discussed problem of what Richard Bell has called “the beginnings of Muhammad’s religious activity,”<sup>31</sup> and it is useful to approach the subject by means of a brief look at previous scholarship. Already in 1886, Snouck Hurgronje had observed that the thematic core of Muhammad’s earliest promulgation was not monotheism in the sense of an explicit affirmation of the non-existence of other dei-

<sup>29</sup> The formal elements of the Meccan surahs are analyzed in detail in Neuwirth, *Studien*. For a concise presentation in English, see Robinson, *Discovering the Qur’an*, 99–124.

<sup>30</sup> Wagtendonk (*Fasting*, 82–122) assumes a Medinan date for Q 97 on account of the *sīra* evidence. Yet the surah contains no terminological or stylistic features that would indicate a Medinan provenance, while it contains some typically early Meccan elements: an initial *innā*-statement (cf. Q 108 and Q 71), the didactic question *mā adrāka mā* ... (cf. Q 74:27, 82:17.18, 83:8.19, 86:2, 90:12, 104:5; see also Q 101:2), and generally short verses (v. 4, however, conspicuously sticks out and must be a later insertion). A Meccan dating is therefore much more likely.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Bell, “Beginnings.”

ties than Allāh but rather the reality of the Last Judgment.<sup>32</sup> An important contribution to this debate was made in 1956 by Harris Birkeland's study *The Lord Guideth*, according to which the first Qur'anic recitations were the short monothematic surahs 93, 94, 105, 106, and 108. As Birkeland points out, these five texts are unlike other early surahs in that eschatological references are almost completely absent (except for Q 93:4), and that their overall topic is divine grace and guidance rather than divine judgment. Even though Birkeland's introduction speaks somewhat noncommittally of "five old Surahs of the Koran,"<sup>33</sup> towards the end of his book he draws a more precise chronological conclusion: "It might be objected that the divine guidance was only one of the many aspects of Muhammed's original experience of God. That is true. But when this aspect is so strongly emphasized in Surahs of that incontestable old age, it must have been of a special and fundamental importance. *Structurally* it is prior to the belief in reward and punishment. For the god must be a reality before he can appear as a judge. And the age of the Surahs seems to reveal the *chronological* priority as well."<sup>34</sup>

Yet Birkeland's notion of a cluster of five "guidance surahs" with a common theological outlook is problematic, since the five texts analyzed by him in reality fall into two very different classes: while Q 93, 94, and 108 are individual addresses of the messenger (of which two, Q 94 and 108, are formulated in the first person plural), Q 105 and 106 are third-person evocations of important aspects of the communal history of Mecca. Moreover, the first three surahs are much more continuous, both in form and in content, with later Qur'anic texts: Surah 93 contains at least an allusion to the issue of eschatological reward and punishment (in v. 4), while addresses of the messenger of the sort to be found in surahs 93, 94, and 108 later become a stock element of the concluding sections of many surahs. It is therefore hardly persuasive to postulate that Q 93, 94, and 108, on account of their general theological perspective, must antedate all other early Meccan texts; for God appears just as concerned to reassure and console his messenger in many later surahs. On the other hand, Q 105 and 106 really do show some remarkable signs of discontinuity with other early Meccan surahs. First of all, their outlook is strikingly

<sup>32</sup> See Paret, "Leitgedanken," for a concise survey of the history of research on this question.

<sup>33</sup> Birkeland, *The Lord Guideth*, 5.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

parochial: they focus exclusively on Mecca and the Quraysh, whereas the outlook of other early Meccan texts is marked by anthropological generalization,<sup>35</sup> and encompasses a broad sweep of history, ranging from Arabian peoples like ʿĀd and Thamūd to Biblical figures like Abraham and Moses. This parochialism even extends to the presentation of God himself: he is the “Lord of this House” (Q 106:3), i.e., a sort of tutelary deity of the Quraysh rather than a universal creator and judge. Secondly, as has already been pointed out, in talking about Mecca and its inhabitants these two surahs adopt a remarkably affirmative tone of voice that seems surprising given the strident accusations of man in general and of the Meccan “unbelievers” in particular that are to be found in the other early Meccan recitations. Q 105 and 106 therefore do really display certain conspicuous discontinuities with the rest of the early (and later) Meccan surahs, and these discontinuities may be difficult to accommodate except by assuming that the two texts under discussion chronologically precede all other Qur’anic recitations.<sup>36</sup> It thus seems reasonable to accept at least one half of Birkeland’s hypothesis and view cluster (a) as antedating clusters (b), (c), (d), and (e).

As regards clusters (b) and (c), these are so closely related in form and in content that they are probably to be regarded as roughly contemporary. Clusters (d) and (e), on the other hand, again allow for a chronological hypothesis. What both the solace surahs and Q 97 have in common is that they are “meta-texts”: they are not devoted to the eschatological core message of the early Meccan recitations but rather to an authorization of this message and of its transmitter. This is evident in the case of Q 97, which explicitly deals with the “sending down” of the Qur’anic revelations (allusively referred to as “it”). It is however also true of the solace surahs Q 93, 94, and 108. For their communicative import of solace is certainly not exhausted by the fact that they may have provided individual reassurance and comfort to Muhammad: these texts have something to say to a larger audience of hearers, as already the inherently general nature of their concluding imperatives implies, and an important part of what they have to say to that audience is that the transmitter of the Qur’anic revelations is

<sup>35</sup> Cf. the *insān*-passages in 70:19–21, 75:3, 75:5.6, 75:14.15, 82:6–8, 84:6, 89:15.16, 90:4–11, 95:4.5, 96:6.7, 100:6–8, 103:2.

<sup>36</sup> The well-known tradition that the first Qur’anic text recited by Muhammad were the introductory verses of Q 96 is certainly a product of later exegetical speculation; for a brief discussion of the matter see my “Orientalism, Authorship, and the Onset of Revelation.”



singled out as the addressee of a divine address (and one that is strongly psalmic in tone and terminology, one might add). These surahs are thus important statements of authorization.<sup>37</sup> If this general assessment of clusters (d) and (e) is accepted, it is tempting to view the authorizing meta-discourse apparent in them as posterior to (a), (b), and (c): for a treatment of issues of authorization seems to presuppose that the eschatological message that is being authorized, as formulated in (b) and (c), has encountered resistance and objections. The surahs from (d) and (e) thus may be said to presuppose (b) and (c), while the opposite is not the case. Moreover, (d) and (e) are also closely related to certain features of Group II, where “authorization passages,” like affirmations of revelation or addresses of the messenger, start to appear as an important component of many surahs. Q 81, for example, consists of two parts, of which the first one (vv. 1–14) is devoted to a restatement of the eschatological message of the early Qur’anic recitations, while the second one (vv. 15–28) is devoted to establishing the integrity of the messenger and the reliability of the transmission process by which he receives the texts promulgated by him. The entire second part is thus devoted to an authorizing meta-discourse that has its immediate ancestors in Q 93, 94, 97, and 108. It thus makes sense to view clusters (d) and (e) as postdating (b) and (c), where the figure of the messenger is presupposed but has not yet entered Qur’anic discourse as a literary persona, and as immediately preceding Group II, where addresses of the messenger are used as component elements within more complex compositional structures. Q 93, 94, 97, and 108 consequently mark the beginning of the Qur’anic discourse of authorization, probably because the core message of the earlier recitations (b) and (c) had met with resistance and doubt that needed to be explicitly addressed.

### 3. *Intra-Qur’anic Interpretation: Abraham and the Announcement of his Son*

If my attempt to restate Nöldeke’s case for an evolutionary perspective on the Qur’an is sound, then the assumptions involved in reading the Qur’anic corpus as the literary fallout of a historical *process*—as opposed to a “flat” reading, such as Madigan’s, that renounces any

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<sup>37</sup> Functionally they may perhaps be compared with Hesiod’s encounter with the Muses told at the beginning of the *Theogony*.

chronological distinctions—are not nearly as doubtful as they have recently been made out. In the last part of this paper I will try to give a specific example for what a genuinely processual reading of the Qur'an might look like.

It is a commonplace of traditional (i.e., pre-Wansbroughian) Orientalist scholarship that the Qur'an can somehow be interpreted as mirroring the historical circumstances of the life and times of Muhammad and his followers.<sup>38</sup> The idea underlying this is of course the assumption that some sort of linkage can be established between the Qur'anic text and the environment within which it came into being, an assumption which, to my mind, is perfectly unobjectionable.<sup>39</sup> It is however methodologically advisable to emphasize that the Qur'an might not only have passively reflected contemporary events but also actively shaped them by reworking and reinterpreting them, and thus calling its followers to adopt a certain way of interacting with them.

The suggestion that a processual reading of the Qur'anic texts involves the establishment of some kind of linkage (not necessarily a passive one) between these texts and their historical context of origin—rather than opting for an exclusively internal, or “literary,” interpretation of them—is thus hardly an innovative one. There is, however, another dimension to such a processual reading that appears to be less of a truism: not only must one read a given surah in the light of its contemporary historical context, but one must also carefully explore the possibility that it might stand in an interpretive relationship to some of the previous surahs, and that this relationship

<sup>38</sup> For example, see Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 11, 18.

<sup>39</sup> Such a linkage is sometimes questioned not merely on the grounds of what we know or can know about the Qur'an's historical environment in particular, but rather in terms of the idea that no text is in any way semantically circumscribed by its context of origin. Andrew Rippin has thus recommended shifting the focus of research from the “original meaning” of the Qur'an to what the Qur'an has been taken to mean by successive generations of Islamic interpreters (cf. Rippin, ed., *Approaches*, 3–4). His skepticism as to the very idea of a text's “original meaning” has been convincingly rejected by Madigan, according to whom any statement about what the Qur'an has been taken to mean at a given moment “would fall prey to the same objections which Rippin has raised to the study of the Qur'an text itself: the issues of historical context and ‘original meaning’ apply no less to the tafsir texts than to the Qur'an text itself [...]. Thus we become trapped in an infinite regress: if it is fruitless to pursue meaning and coherence in the Qur'an, then it would also be futile when dealing with a tafsir, since it too is a text, often of uncertain provenance, and from a culture far-removed from us.” (Madigan, “Reflections,” 351; also quoted in the introduction to this volume)

might be an essential element in what a given Qur'anic text was (at the time of its first recitation) trying to say. In order to make this point, I shall first argue that Qur'anic texts were not discarded after their first recitation as literary one-way products like speeches or sermons commonly are, but continued to circulate within the community of Muhammad's followers and would thus enter into the understanding of any new revelation.

This can be seen most clearly in some of the eschatological surahs, which in their present form include what clearly are additions meant to restrict earlier statements that were felt, at some later point in time, to require further clarification. Q 84:25 and Q 95:6 are cases at hand. Both verses serve to except "those who believe and do the righteous deeds" from the preceding threats of eschatological judgment, and both stand out as later expansions already by virtue of their length and their similar formulaic wording. Most likely, the categorical accusations of "man" in general (*al-insān*, Q 95:4) that are characteristic of the early Qur'anic revelations were considered later on—after a small following had gathered around Muhammad—to require being brought into line with the dichotomy of believers and unbelievers that must have resulted from the consolidation of a Qur'anic *Urgemeinde*; certainly, so the thinking must have run, those who had heeded Muhammad's call could not have been included in God's previous announcements of punishment. It is entirely peripheral how these additions found their way into the text: one might well hold that they were the result of some later revelation granted to Muhammad by which God himself took care of updating the Qur'anic text. What is essential is rather the fact that such expansions of an existing text only make sense if that text continues to be read or recited after its first promulgation.<sup>40</sup> Already during the gradual emergence of the Qur'anic corpus, then, existing texts must have commanded a proto-canonical standing within the community crystallizing around them; they must have continued to play a role within the religious life of their adherents—most likely within the context of worship—that ensured they were sufficiently well-known by ordinary believers in order to merit and require being brought *à jour* rather

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<sup>40</sup> Similar examples can be found in Q 74:39 and Q 103:3. There are also additions that supplement earlier appeals to the free will of Muhammad's audience by a deterministic emphasis on the fact that in the end it is God who decides who will heed Muhammad's call and who will not (cf. Q 81:29 and Q 74:56). For a plausible interpretation of these passages, see Ettinghaus, *Antiheidnische Polemik*, 34–35.

than simply being discarded and substituted by new texts. Extrapolating on the above evidence for the continuing communal presence of at least some revelations, we have reason to assume a thoroughly synoptic interpretive habitus on the part of Muhammad's followers: a given surah's meaning, at the time at which it was recited for the first time, must have emerged from its semantic intersection not only with present reality but also with previous Qur'anic revelations.

Now, the point I wish to make next is that the updating of existing texts must not necessarily have taken the form of insertions into those texts themselves: it might as well have happened via the evocation of, and commenting on, these earlier surahs in new, independent surahs. This means that the phenomenon of updating and reinterpretation cannot be limited to cases of interpolation like those rehearsed above. The point, I believe, bears illustration, for which I propose to turn to some of the Qur'anic narratives bearing on Abraham and the announcement of his son.

Apart from the short allusions to Abraham in Q 87:18.19 and Q 53:36.37, the earliest extensive Qur'anic treatment of Abraham occurs in Q 51:24ff.<sup>41</sup> The relevant portion of the text runs as follows (vv. 24–37):

Has the tale of Abraham's honored guests reached you?

When they entered upon him and said: "Peace," he replied: "Peace; you are an unknown people to me."

Then he went back to his own family and brought a fattened calf.

He offered it to them, saying: "Will you not eat?"

So he conceived a fear of them. They said: "Do not fear," and they announced to him the good news of a clever boy.

Then his wife came shouting and she smote her face and said: "I am a barren old woman." They said: "That is what your Lord has said. He is indeed the wise, the all-knowing."

He said: "And what is your business, O envoys?"

They said: "We have been sent forth to a criminal people to unleash on them the stones of clay,

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<sup>41</sup> I refrain from providing a detailed discussion of the chronology of the surahs referred to in this and the next section, and assume that Nöldeke's dating of the texts (which places Q 51, Q 37, and Q 19 in that order) can be defended on the basis of what I have said above.

marked by our Lord for the extravagant.

So we brought out such believers as were therein,

but did not find in it except one house of those who have submitted.”

And we left therein a sign for those who fear the painful punishment.

It is important to note that all the other narratives from the surah's middle section are exclusively concerned with examples of divine punishment. This ties in with the fact that from v. 31 onwards, Abraham's "guests" describe the chastisement that God has inflicted<sup>42</sup> on the people of Lot (which are here referred to simply as a *qaum mujrimūn*). The announcement (*tabshīr*) of the future birth of Abraham's son itself, however, does not exemplify God's wrath against the sinners, which is so prominent in all the other narratives of the surah.<sup>43</sup> In view of the *āyāt* passage that immediately precedes the Abraham pericope (vv. 20–23), where the creation of man is briefly alluded to as a "sign" of God's power (v. 21), the *tabshīr* narrative rather seems to provide a historical illustration for God's unrestricted power of creation; the first part of the Abraham pericope thus constitutes a counterpoint to the theme of divine wrath that dominates the rest of the middle section, and it serves as an example of the general truth of God's unrestricted power to create.

Subsequently to Q 51, the *tabshīr* pericope reappears three more times, in Q 15, Q 11, and Q 29. In these later texts, however, it acquires a new significance: it is rediscovered as a medium for narratively probing the incompatibility of religious and social loyalties that must have become a central concern for the budding Qur'anic community. This process starts in Q 37:83ff., where the *tabshīr* narrative—which is the only episode from Abraham's life that the Qur'an has so far presented—is supplemented by an account of what happened to Abraham before and after the angels inform him about the future birth of his son. The Abraham pericope of the surah runs as follows (vv. 83–113):

And of his partisans was Abraham;

when he came to his Lord with a sound heart;

<sup>42</sup> In contradistinction to the Biblical account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, in Q 51 the punishment is apparently assumed to have taken place *before* the announcement.

<sup>43</sup> This has already been pointed out by Moubarac, *Abraham*, 57 (cf. also *ibid.*, 31, 33).

when he said to his father and his own people: "What are you worshipping?"

Do you desire, falsely, other gods, apart from God?

What do you think, then, of the Lord of the Worlds?"

Then he cast a glance at the stars.

And said: "I am really sick."

Whereupon they turned away from him in flight.

And he turned towards their gods, saying: "Will you not eat?"

Why do you not speak?"

Then he proceeded to hit them with his right hand.

Then they came towards him in haste.

He said: "Do you worship what you hew,  
although God created you and what you do?"

They said: "Build him a pyre"; and so they cast him into the furnace.

They wished him ill, but we reduced them to the lowest rung.

And he said: "I am going to my Lord; he will guide me.

Lord, grant me a righteous child."

So we announced to him the good news of a prudent boy.

Then, when he attained the age of working with him, he said: "My son, I have seen in sleep that I am slaughtering you. See what you think."  
He said: "My father, do what you are commanded; you will find me, God willing, one of the steadfast."

Then, when they both submitted and he flung him down upon his brow;

And we called out to him: "O Abraham,  
you have believed the vision." Thus we reward the beneficent.

This, indeed, is the manifest trial.

And we ransomed him with a large sacrifice.

And we left with him for later generations:

"Peace be upon Abraham."

Thus we reward the beneficent.

He is indeed one of our believing servants.

And we announced to him the good news of Isaac as a prophet, one of the righteous.

And we blessed him and blessed Isaac; and of their progeny some are beneficent and some are manifestly wronging themselves.

As a whole, Q 37 is much more preoccupied with God's deliverance of his "warners" (v. 72) and "sincere servants" (v. 74) than with the "fate of those who were warned" (v. 73); this must be the reason why the story of Jonah, which does not end with the unbelievers' punishment but with their conversion, was included in the cycle of narratives making up the middle part. That God's grace towards the believers is the thematic hub of Q 37 is also underscored by the middle section's refrain ("Indeed, this is how we reward the beneficent. / He was truly one of our believing servants," vv. 80–81, 110–111, 121–122, 131–132) and by the fact that "God's sincere servants" (*'ibād Allāh al-mukhlisūn*, vv. 40, 74, 128, 160, 169) is a focal term in all three sections of the text.

The Abraham narrative also serves to illustrate the miraculous assistance that God gives to his "sincere servants." Q 37 depicts Abraham as an uncompromising monotheist who cunningly destroys the idols of his people and is subsequently saved by God from death on the stake. Abraham then asks to be granted a "righteous child" (v. 100), presumably as a kind of compensation for the loss of his father and his people. Now, the following verse, v. 101 ("So we announced to him the good news of a prudent boy," *fa-bashsharnāhu bi-ghulāmin ḥalīm*) is an almost verbatim quotation of a verse from the *tabshīr* pericope in Q 51 (v. 28: *fa-bashsharūhu bi-ghulāmin 'alīm*). This coincidence is surely not accidental, especially if we recall the earlier conclusion that there is reason to postulate what I have called a synoptic interpretive habitus on the part of Muhammad's followers: for any listener sufficiently familiar with previous Qur'anic revelations, Q 37:101, by citing part of the *tabshīr* narrative, evokes the whole section Q 51:24ff. and thus functions as a *pars pro toto* integration of it into the wider biographical framework of Q 37. In terms of the text's reception by its immediate audience, the effect produced by such an evocation is the same as if the *tabshīr* pericope in Q 51 itself had been expanded by additions.

For all intents and purposes, then, the *tabshīr* pericope from Q 51 ought to be considered part of Q 37—even though the former text is

not reproduced from beginning to end, an almost verbatim quotation of one of its core verses as it were stands in for it. In a sense, Q 37, by integrating the *tabshīr* into Abraham's wider biography, is already engaged in *interpreting* it, much in the same way in which later *tafsīr* literature provides narrative contextualizations of Qur'anic verses and passages. What is the new perspective on Q 51:24ff. that results from its inclusion into Q 37?

First of all, the story of Abraham's smashing of the idols, which precedes the *tabshīr*, explains why Abraham was worthy of being granted a son in spite of his wife's infertility and of his own advanced age: by breaking with his own father and people on account of their idolatry, he has cut all his former social and genealogical bonds for the mere sake of God. Abraham has become the quintessential religious outcast and thus prefigures the situation in which Muhammad's followers must have found themselves before the Hijra. The *tabshīr* pericope from Q 51, which originally functioned merely as a prelude to the punishment of the *qaum Lūṭ* that served to illustrate God's unrestricted power of creation, is now endowed with added significance: it demonstrates that even though loyalty to God may demand renouncing one's former social and political belonging, God will ultimately restore his "sincere servants" to a new form of social belonging that is compatible with monotheism. The fact that Abraham's loss of his father is being compensated by a "righteous" son—the meaning of which certainly includes the absence of religious aberration—thus conveys a social utopia where belief in the one God, as demanded by the Qur'an, does no longer isolate an individual from his family, friends, and business partners.

It is against this background that the significance of the second part of the Abraham narrative, his attempted sacrifice of his son, must be gauged. Here, the socio-religious utopia conjured up by the first part is radically called into question, only to then be given additional confirmation. God, so we are made to understand in v. 102, has commanded Abraham to kill the very son who was to reconcile the incompatibility of social and religious belonging depicted before. There could be no starker way of calling the core message of Q 37 into question than by including into it Abraham's binding of his son: is God not after all as committed to the flourishing of his "sincere servants" as the entire surah does not tire of repeating? Why does he put his "sincere servant" Abraham through this? Of course one might reply that God simply saw fit to try Abraham once more, and more



radically so: When push comes to shove, so the story seems to say, Abraham would be prepared to repeat his former sacrifice of social belonging for the sake of God a second time; and it is only because of this enduring and consistently unshakable loyalty to God that he is worthy of the reconciliation of social and religious belonging that is symbolized by his son.

There is a further aspect, though. The Qur'an, just like the Rabbinic sources unearthed by Speyer,<sup>44</sup> is at pains to stress that Abraham's son consents in what his father plans to do (v. 102). The command to sacrifice his son is thus not only a "manifest trial" (*balā' mubīn*, v. 106) of Abraham, but of his son as well, who bears up just as well as his father, since he also acknowledges that obedience to God must take precedence over human loyalties under all circumstances. Significantly, this ties in with Abraham's request from v. 100, where he does not merely ask God for a child but for a *righteous* child (*rabbi hab lī minā ṣ-ṣāliḥīn*). Fulfillment of Abraham's request thus does not solely consist in the biological fact of his being granted offspring; rather, it is only through his son's acceptance of the superiority of religious belonging over against social and genealogical belonging that he can be ultimately assured that his request for a *righteous* son has been fulfilled. The story of the attempted sacrifice, after appearing for a moment to call into question God's solicitude for his "sincere servants," ends up confirming it in an even more radical way than the first part of the narrative: Abraham's son does not repeat the mistake of his father—which is made explicit a little bit later in Q 19:46, where the father asks: "Are you forsaking my gods?"—namely, to value family loyalties more than loyalty to God.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Speyer, *Erzählungen*, 164–166.

<sup>45</sup> My reading of Q 37 is borne out by Q 19, a somewhat later text where the issue of social isolation suffered for the sake of God, and subsequently remedied by him, is taken up once again, perhaps more explicitly so. Q 19:49 establishes a clear link between Abraham's renouncement of his family and community on the one hand, and the offspring God has granted him by way of compensation on the other: "Then, when he drew away from them and what they worshipped besides God, we granted him Isaac and Jacob and each we made a prophet." Other episodes in Q 19, such as the story of Mary (vv. 16ff.), also recount instances where a believer is deprived of human communion (v. 16 uses *intabadhat*, "to withdraw," in much the same sense in which v. 49 employs *i'tazala*) that is then restored through a divinely given (*w-h-b*, v. 5, 19, 27, 49, 50, 53) child or relative (just as Mary is granted Jesus, so Moses in v. 53 is granted Aaron). In addition, the diction of the story of Zakharias (Q 19:2–15), too, is closely modeled on the Abrahamic *tabshīr* (cf. Q 19:4.5 and Q 37:100; Q 19:7 and Q 37:101; Q 19:8 and Q 15:54; Q 19:9 and Q 51:30). Hence, whereas Q 37 integrates

To conclude: We have seen that the Abraham section in Q 37 provides a re-reading of the *tabshir* pericope in Q 51 that taps into a formerly latent aspect of the story and develops it into a narrative exploration of the incompatibility of social and religious belonging that must have been a key experience of the Qur'anic community at Mecca. Functionally, there is no essential difference between updating an existing revelation by means of an interpolation, on the one hand, and deepening or re-interpreting the significance of that text by evoking it in a later surah, on the other hand, whether it be by means of a verbatim quotation or through the use of shared diction. Hence, as a matter of general methodology, a processual reading of the Qur'an must treat later surahs' references to earlier ones—at least if one can reasonably attribute an interpretive function to them—in the same way in which additions are naturally treated: as utterances that are not semantically autonomous, i.e., make up self-contained texts, but rather say what they are meant to say only when read in close conjunction with, and in a sense as commenting upon, the earlier texts they are intended to illuminate, supplement, restrict, or modify. A processual reading of the Qur'an will thus have to take into account not only a given surah's link to its historical context of origin but also its link to the corpus of already existing revelations in order to bring to light any possible intra-Qur'anic interpretive role it might have.<sup>46</sup>

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the *tabshir* within Abraham's biography, Q 19 inserts it in an even wider framework, i.e., sacred history with its many parallel events. Just like Q 37, the *tabshir* story itself is only evoked, presumably because it was well-known enough. Once again, the evocation rests on the employment of similar diction: Q 19:49 uses the verb *wahaba*—which, as we have seen, is a focal term of the entire surah—and hence bears a close correspondence to Q 37:100 (*rabbī hab lī minā ṣ-ṣāliḥīn*), which in turn, by virtue of Q 37:101, is closely bound up with Q 51.

<sup>46</sup> Indeed it will even be necessary to take the additional, and *prima facie* ahistorical, step of attempting to evaluate a given surah's relevance in the light of *later* revelations. Of course, in doing so one must carefully distinguish between the meaning that a text conveyed at the moment at which it was first promulgated, and the meaning (or meanings) it may have taken on later, when additional texts bearing on the same subject, or employing similar terminology, had come into existence. Yet if earlier revelations did indeed continue to circulate, it is unlikely that believers kept sufficient track of their chronological priority or posteriority in order to guarantee that later revelations were able to modify the understanding of earlier ones, but not vice versa: at any given time, all the Qur'anic revelations that had been promulgated until that moment must have affected how any one of these texts was understood by the Qur'anic community.

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# QUANTITATIVE TEXT ANALYSIS AND ITS APPLICATION TO THE QUR'AN: SOME PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Nora K. Schmid

## *Introduction*

The beginnings of quantitative text analysis,<sup>1</sup> such as lists of *hapax legomena*, go back to ancient times. In the seventh century, the Palestinian Masoretes created the first frequency tables of words occurring in the Hebrew Bible. In 1466, Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) wrote his *De componendis cifris*, a treatise including a statistical survey of the Latin sounds and considerations on the proportions of vowels and consonants as well as the relative frequency of vowels and consonants individually. In the seventeenth century, Leibniz, in his *Dissertatio de arte combinatoria*, tried to find out how many expressions can be generated if one tries to create words consisting of up to 24 letters from an alphabet of 24 letters, resulting in the mind-boggling figure of 620 sextillions of possible expressions. An eighteenth-century controversy about the religious standing of the pietists was decided with the help of content analysis:<sup>2</sup> one simply counted religious keywords occurring in pietist literature.<sup>3</sup> These examples already suffice to show that quantitative considerations have always been of a certain interest, though it would be hardly adequate to speak of a continuous history of quantitative linguistics before the nineteenth century, when, boosted by the achievements of Russian linguistics, first statistics of sounds and graphemes were elaborated.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the aims and methods of quantitative linguistics, see Köhler, “Gegenstand und Arbeitsweise,” with an extensive bibliography, *ibid.*, 14 f.

<sup>2</sup> For an introduction to the notion, object, and purposes of content analysis, see Merten, *Inhaltsanalyse*, 14–33. For its history, see Merten, *ibid.*, 34–44, especially the reference to the pietists, 35.

<sup>3</sup> For the history of quantitative text analysis see Best, *Quantitative Linguistik*, 7–11.

<sup>4</sup> Grzybek and Kelih give an overview of the pre-history of quantitative methods in Russian linguistics and philology in “Vorgeschichte.”

The idea of counting textual elements in the Qur'an was not completely alien to Islamic scholars, either, even if there were other motives for counting, particularly in the formative period of Islam. From 84 to 85 AH, the members of what Omar Hamdan has called the "second *maṣāḥif* project" (see his contribution to this volume), carried out under the supervision of al-Hajjāj b. Yūsuf al-Thaqafī in Wāsiṭ, tried to work out a system of diacritic marks in order to differentiate letters. They also applied themselves to counting the consonants, words, and verses in the Qur'an, the basis for these counts being the *muṣḥaf* of 'Uthmān.<sup>5</sup> With regard to the number of consonants, three results are mentioned in the sources: 340,740, 323,015, or 325,072.<sup>6</sup> The differences between the results can be traced back to whether instances of plene spelling were included in the calculations or not. Ibn Mihrān relates that the committee arrived at a total of 77,439 words in the Qur'an.<sup>7</sup> However, such counts were not undertaken in order to analyze the Qur'an's structural qualities but had essentially two functions: they served to safeguard the integrity of its consonantal text, and they provided a basis for the text's subdivision into parts of equal length for the purpose of recitation.<sup>8</sup>

Although mathematical computations can never constitute *the* key par excellence for an understanding of the Qur'an, they may provide a new basis for discussion. After all, the Qur'an being a complex object of investigation, it certainly merits a plurality of approaches, among which mathematical techniques might legitimately figure.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, any extension of mathematical analysis to new fields of research is prone to encounter a cultural climate that is frequently suspicious of such efforts. These reservations are not entirely unintelligible given the fact that such mathematical methods do entail a certain danger of rupturing the hermeneutical relationship between

<sup>5</sup> Hamdan, *Kanonisierung*, 135–174.

<sup>6</sup> According to Ibn Abī Dāwūd, Ibn Mihrān, and the *Kitāb al-mabāni*, as cited in Hamdan, *ibid.*, 149.

<sup>7</sup> Hamdan, *ibid.*, 151.

<sup>8</sup> Hamdan, *ibid.*, 149: "Solche Zählungen bezweckten, die Vollständigkeit und Unversehrtheit des Konsonantenbestandes zu gewährleisten bzw. dessen Kontrolle zu erleichtern und die Abschnitte für die Rezitierung des gesamten [sic!] Textes gleichmäßig zu gestalten."

<sup>9</sup> Kreuzer writes in "Mathematik und Dichtung," 17: "Die 'Kunst der Interpretation' und die Geschichtsschreibung können und sollen von den neuen Verfahren nicht ersetzt, aber gefördert werden und umgekehrt; der Idealfall wäre in jedem Forschungsbereich die Personalunion von Kulturhistoriker, musikischem Interpreten, mathematischem Linguisten und ästhetischem Theoretiker."

text and reader and of unwittingly transforming what was supposed to be a simple means into an end in and of itself.

The field I am trying to enter with my considerations on quantitative text analysis and its application to the Qur'an can be described with the words of the German physicist Wilhelm Fucks<sup>10</sup> as "quantitative Literaturwissenschaft,"<sup>11</sup> that is to say, the quantitative study of literature. This kind of research addresses not only particular problems such as the identification of anonymous authors but also aims at a mathematically precise characterization and differentiation of the literary style of different kinds of texts. By means of using Fucks' methods, it is possible to distinguish stylistic characteristics that are specific for a certain language, a genre, an epoch, a certain author, and even a particular text. What can be captured statistically can also be analyzed. This leads to objective results—"objective" meaning here, as Fucks formulates it a little laconically, "mitteilbar mit Zustimmungszwang"<sup>12</sup> (i.e., its communication necessarily entailing acceptance on the part of others).

The following analysis will deal with two problems which, in recent years, have been the focus of controversial debates in Qur'anic studies. Firstly, I will be concerned with the question if and how the Qur'anic surahs (respectively parts of the surahs) can be arranged in a relative chronological order. Secondly, it has been asked whether at least some of the Qur'anic surahs can be regarded as literary units or whether they ought to be seen, as Richard Bell has argued, as late and rather accidental compilations of separate fragments.<sup>13</sup>

I will carry out my examination by an analysis of linguistic fine structures ("sprachliche Feinstrukturen"). Following Karl Knauer's definition, this term can be explained as those linguistic elements that lie beyond the limits of conscious awareness, i.e., syllables and sounds.<sup>14</sup> I will primarily devote my analysis to the syllable. Linguistic fine structures and the syllable in particular are particularly well-suited for my investigation because they represent linguistic entities that

<sup>10</sup> For a biography of Wilhelm Fucks see Aichele, "W. Fucks," 152f.

<sup>11</sup> Fucks, *Regeln der Kunst*, 77, 88.

<sup>12</sup> Fucks, *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>13</sup> See Bell, *Commentary* and of the same author *Qur'ān*, *passim*. The latter is a translation of the Qur'an with a critical re-arrangement of the surahs.

<sup>14</sup> Knauer, "Feinstrukturen," 193: "[Die]jenigen Sprachelemente [...], die jenseits der Grenze des Verstehens liegen, also Silbe und Laut, wobei in manchen Sprachen, wie z. B. im Französischen [und Arabischen; author's note] die Silbe auch Probleme der fließenden Wortgrenze mitenthält."

remain constant throughout the whole Qur'an, irrespective of internal developments and stylistic changes.

### *Preliminary Considerations*

I will start with the first question concerning the feasibility of working out a relative chronology of the surahs. Due to lack of space, I will take into consideration only the chronology elaborated by Theodor Nöldeke. It can be seen to be based upon a cumulation of different stylistic and terminological parameters as well as some considerations of content (see Nicolai Sinai's contribution to this volume for a reconstruction and defense of the underlying methodology). One of the most important criteria that Nöldeke appeals to again and again is that of verse length. Qur'anic verses, Nöldeke assumes, become longer throughout the period of the text's genesis.<sup>15</sup> The question poses itself whether the rather intuitive way in which Nöldeke handles this criterion is amenable to statistical precision, that is to say, whether it is possible to *measure* verse length. In this regard, I will be asking the following question: Does the chronology suggested by Nöldeke<sup>16</sup> stand up to quantitative scrutiny with respect to the criterion of verse length, or does already the examination of a single exemplary criterion reveal it as hopelessly subjective? As the basic unit for measuring verse length, I will employ the syllable and not the word, since words in Arabic can have very different lengths, a fact that is significantly exacerbated by the possibility of suffixation. First of all, I have therefore established the number of syllables of every verse in the surahs classed by Nöldeke as early, middle, and late Meccan.

Arabic exhibits three kinds of syllables: short open, long open, and closed syllables that are almost always short. An exception is constituted by closed long syllables which also occur in the Qur'an and will be treated here as one single syllable. In general, Arabic displays a marked tendency to shorten long vowels in closed position. Henry

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that Nöldeke works on the assumption that the length of the verses and surahs is a criterion for chronology *without* however substantiating this assumption by precise counts. If Nöldeke had counted anything, my analysis would be a circular reasoning and I would not be able to prove anything but the result of his counts. Nöldeke however, has never substantiated his argument statistically, or at least no records of such an effort have survived. A quantitative examination of his result therefore seems to be entirely justified.

<sup>16</sup> See Nöldeke/Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorāns*, 74–164.



Fleisch mentions in his *Traité de philologie arabe* the imperative forms of verbs whose second radical is *wāw* or *yā'*, for instance *qum* instead of *\*qūm*, but also subjunctive forms like *yanam* instead of *\*yanām* as well as many other cases of morphologically conditioned shortening of syllables.<sup>17</sup> For the calculation of the average number of syllables per verse some further peculiarities have to be taken into consideration. At the end of verses, the respective pausal forms will be assumed, as these are vital to Qur'anic rhyme. Frequently this results in the occurrence of closed syllables with a long vowel, as discussed above. Furthermore, the Basmallah was only taken into consideration in the *Fātiḥa*, where it is an integral part of the surah and where it is counted, at least according to the Kufic system, as a verse. Besides, it precedes every surah except for Q 9, so that disregarding it will not produce any significant distortion of the overall results.

Q 114 may serve as an example of how I have proceeded:

[bi-s mi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīm <sup>i</sup> ]	
<sup>1</sup> qul   'a   'ū   dhu   bi-   rab   bi n-   nās <sup>i</sup>	8 syllables
<sup>2</sup> ma   li   ki n-   nās <sup>i</sup>	4 syllables
<sup>3</sup> 'i   lā   hi n-   nās <sup>i</sup>	4 syllables
<sup>4</sup> min   shar   ri l-   was   wā   si l-   khan   nās <sup>i</sup>	8 syllables
<sup>5</sup> al   la   dhī   yu   was   wi   su   fī   ṣu   dū   ri n-   nās <sup>i</sup>	12 syllables
<sup>6</sup> mi   na l-   jin   na   ti   wa-n-   nās <sup>i</sup>	7 syllables

### *Some First Quantitative Observations*

If one looks at the results for the first Meccan period (fig. 1), an average of 7 to 17 syllables per verse emerges. One single result, namely that of Q 73, seems to be unusual. I will return to it below. In any case, the surahs are listed following the relative chronological order suggested by Nöldeke. In the first place (here: N1 for Nöldeke 1), we have Q 96, and at the end comes Q 1 (here: N 48). It must however be pointed out that Nöldeke's chronology is a relative and not an absolute chronology. He himself emphasizes that the order of the surahs within one of the different periods cannot be exactly determined, though it is possible to assign them to different phases.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> See Fleisch, *Traité*, 166.

<sup>18</sup> Nöldeke/ Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorāns*, 74: "Daß sich unter den mekkanschen Suren zwar einzelne Gruppen ausscheiden lassen, nicht aber eine im einzelnen

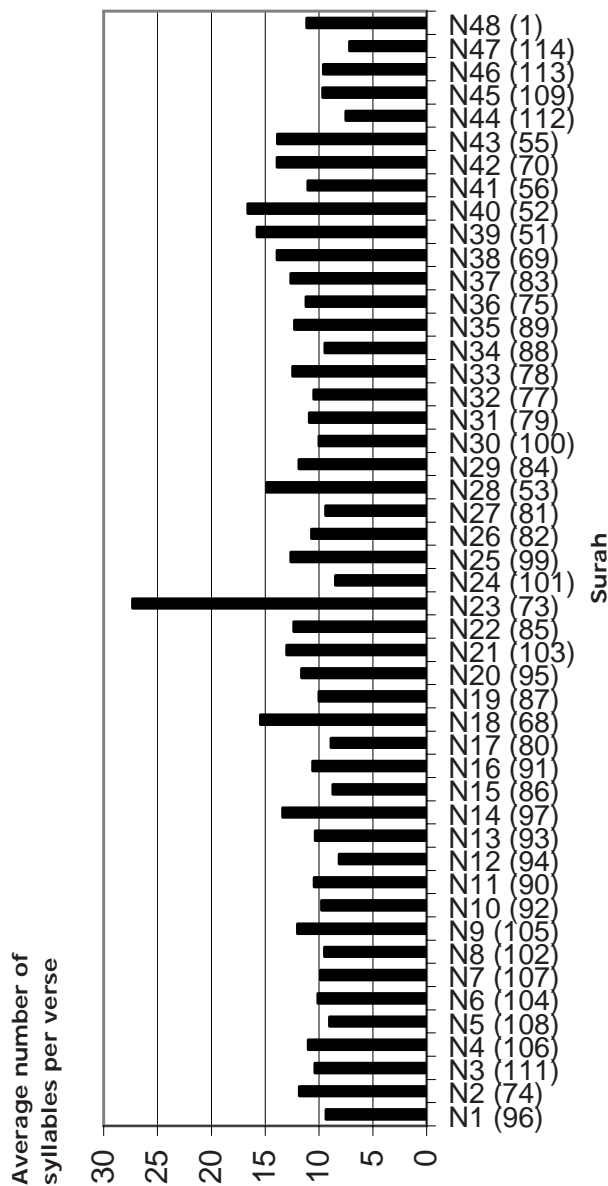


Fig. 1. Average number of syllables per verse in the surahs of the first Meccan period.

Average number of syllables per verse

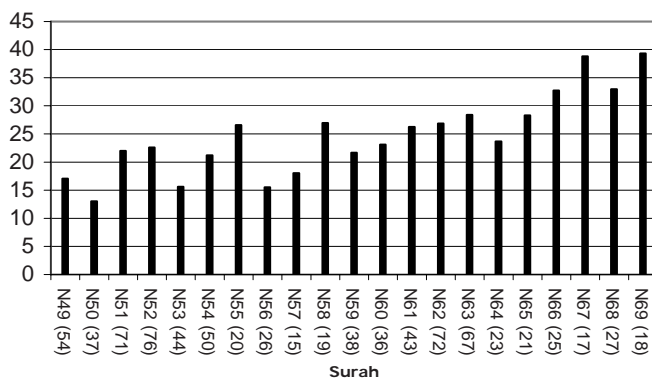


Fig. 2. Average number of syllables per verse in the surahs of the second Meccan period.

Average number of syllables per verse

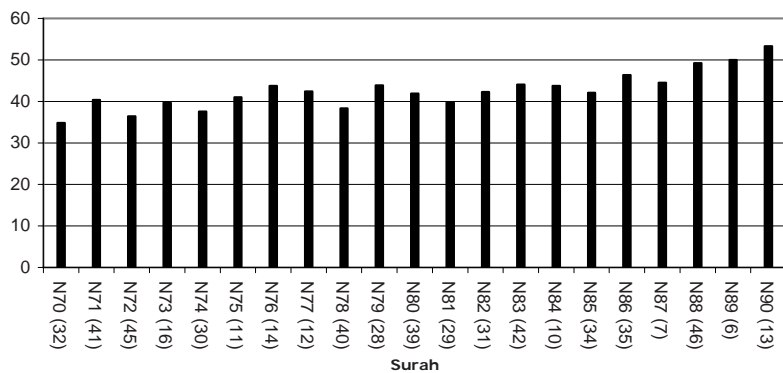


Fig. 3. Average number of syllables per verse in the surahs of the third Meccan period.

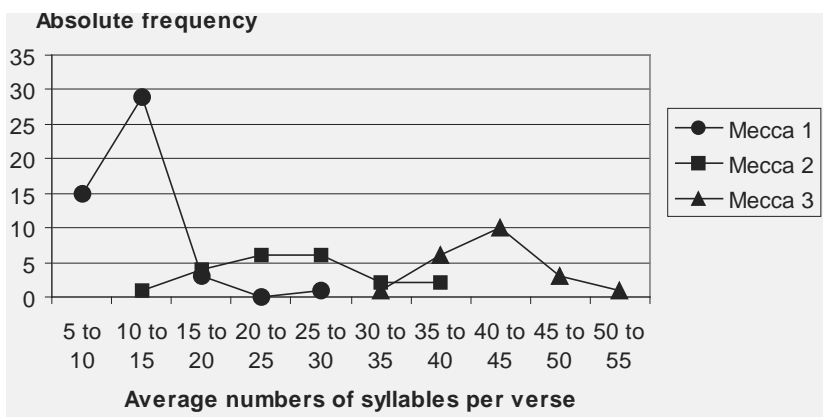


Fig. 4. Absolute frequency of the average numbers of syllables per verse in all Meccan periods.

In the surahs assigned by Nöldeke to the first Meccan period there is comparatively little discrepancy in average verse length. If we look at what Nöldeke believed to be middle Meccan surahs (fig. 2), however, we realize that the variance of the average number of syllables per verse is already a little higher—13 up to 40 syllables per verse. An upward trend becomes apparent, all the more if the order in which the surahs are discussed by Nöldeke is indeed taken to reflect their actual chronological succession.

The results for the texts that Nöldeke described as late Meccan (fig. 3) finally confirm this upward trend. The third Meccan period, in Q 32, starts with approximately the same average verse length with which the middle Meccan period ended, that is to say, with about 40 syllables. Here, too, the trend seems to indicate that Nöldeke’s arrangement of the surahs is not implausible with regard to the criterion of verse length. The maximum length, 35 syllables, is reached in Q 13, which Nöldeke lists as the last surah of the Meccan periods altogether (here: N90).

In order to make these results more accessible, I have chosen another format of representation in fig. 4. This diagram simultaneously shows the absolute frequency of the average number of syllables per verse in Mecca 1, 2, and 3. Whereas Mecca 1 reaches its maximum

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irgend genaue chronologische Anordnung aufgestellt werden kann, ist mir immer klarer geworden, je genauer ich im Lauf vieler Jahre den Qorān untersucht habe.”

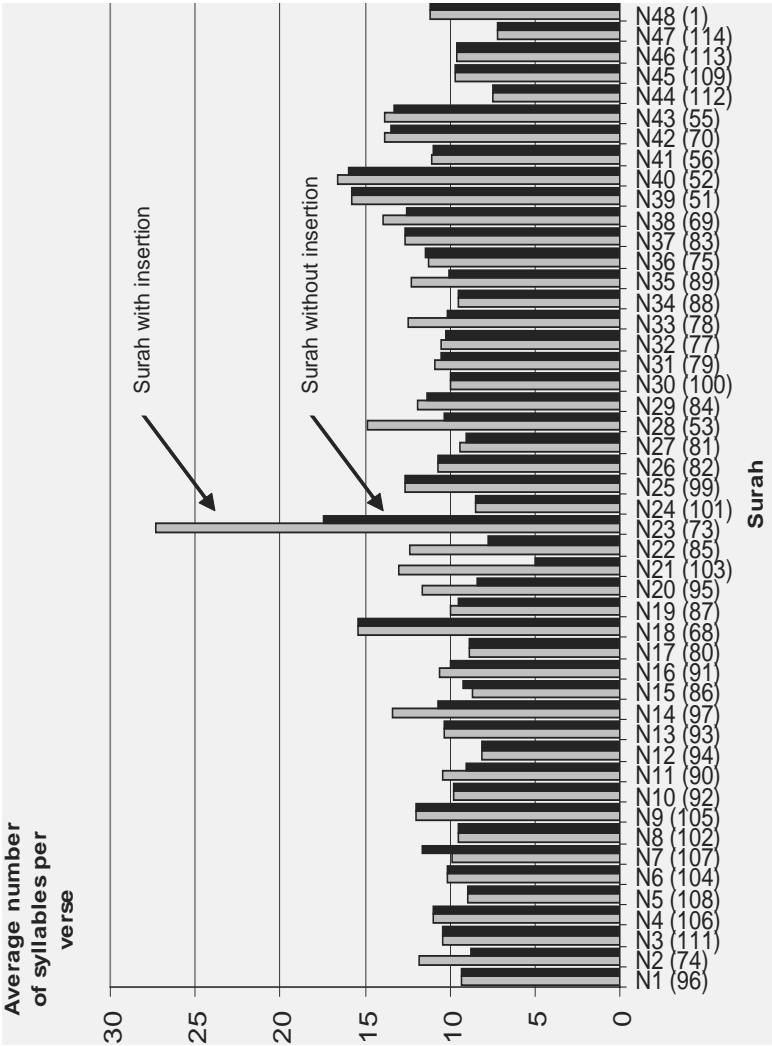


Fig. 5. Average number of syllables per verse with and without insertions (Mecca 1).

most frequently (29 times) at an average of 10 to 15 syllables per verse, the maximum of Mecca 2 lies most frequently (12 times) between 20 and 30 syllables and the maximum of Mecca 3 lies 10 times between 40 and 45 syllables. This means that the three phases differ in their maxima. Nonetheless, the transitions are fluent. Thus, even though the maximum of the absolute frequency of average verse length differs between the first and second Meccan period, in Mecca 2, too—and not only in Mecca 1—we can find surahs with an average verse length of 10 to 15 syllables. In Mecca 2 as well as in Mecca 3, we find average verse lengths of 30 to 35 syllables in some surahs, even though here too, the maxima are different. This degree of continuity would seem to provide at least some corroboration of Nöldeke's assumption that the early, middle, and late Meccan texts did in fact follow one another rather than constituting parallel, and possibly genetically unrelated, textual corpora.

For Mecca 1, we had noted a relatively big discrepancy in the average number of syllables per verse in Q 73. If one has a closer look at the surah, it becomes clear why this is so. The surah (al-Muzzammil) consists of twenty verses of which the first nineteen contain between 7 and 30 syllables, whereas the twentieth verse consists of more than 215 syllables and was identified by Nöldeke as well as by Angelika Neuwirth as a Medinan insertion. An attempt to single out possible insertions before a calculation of the average numbers of syllables per verse is shown in fig. 5 for Mecca 1.<sup>19</sup> For the present inquiry, insertions were identified on the basis of the analysis of the Meccan surahs carried out by Angelika Neuwirth, even though the whole issue has not yet been definitively settled.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the data on which fig. 5 is based takes account of the fact that the Kufic system of counting verses, which forms the basis of the Cairene edition of the Qur'an, not always accords with what seems to have been the originally intended verse division, as these can be reconstructed on the basis of immanent textual criteria such as rhyme, structure, and semantics.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> For lack of space, I will not try to do the same with Mecca 2 and 3, because the elimination of inserted verses and verse groups does not change the overall view very much. All in all the inserted verses are not self-evident if not a heavily debated issue, and in the later Meccan periods we are confronted with further problems like a few genetically non-uniform surahs.

<sup>20</sup> See Neuwirth, *Studien*, 204–235 and passim. For a different attempt at identifying insertions cf. Nagel, *Einschübe*.

<sup>21</sup> See Neuwirth, *ibid.*, 11: "Die Abteilung der Koranverse [...] ist im allgemeinen durch den Reim gesichert. Doch ist diese Vers-Gliederung der Suren nicht völlig eindeutig, da der koranische Reim eigenen Gesetzen folgt und sich mit Hilfe der für

In *Studien zur Komposition der Mekkanischen Suren*, Neuwirth carries out such a critical examination of the traditional verse divisions, and the sixty cases where she revises the traditional Kufic verse divisions have been taken into account in the above calculations.<sup>22</sup> Assuming an additional verse division or denying a traditional may of course have an impact on the average number of syllables per verse in a surah.

Taking into consideration insertions and Neuwirth's examination of traditional verse divisions, the results, as represented in fig. 5, are evened out to a certain extent. In particular for Q 74, 97, 95, 103, 85, 73, 53, 78, and 89, the average number of syllables per verse approximates more closely the overall picture.

### *Correlating Different Parameters*

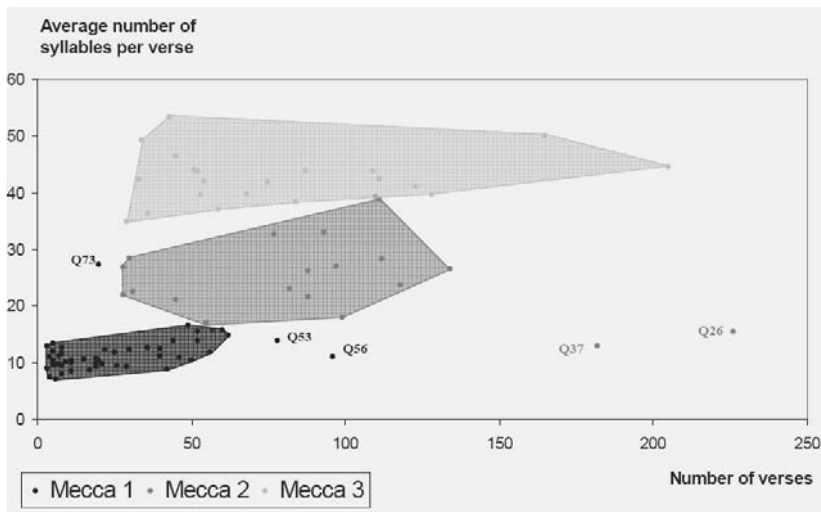


Fig. 6. Correlation of average verse length and surah length.

Even though it was possible to detect a certain continuity in verse length between the three Meccan periods, a fact that provides some prima

den Reim der Poesie bzw. des *Sağ'* geltenden Regeln nicht kontrollieren lässt [...]. Es muß betont werden, daß in der einheimischen Überlieferung die *Versabteilung* im Rahmen der *Verszählung* behandelt wird. Selbstverständlich ist nur die *Versabteilung*, und damit die Gliederung der Rede in kleine deutlich voneinander abgesetzte Einheiten, als ursprünglicher Bestandteil des Textes anzusehen [...]."

<sup>22</sup> See Neuwirth, *ibid.*, 21–63.

facie support for Nöldeke's chronology, the observations made above do not yet appear to make any particularly striking contributions to what we originally set out to investigate, namely, the Qur'an's internal evolution. However, it was observed above that a fundamental, albeit implicit, feature of Nöldeke's approach to surah dating is the idea that a relative chronology of Qur'anic surahs ought to rest on a convergence of separate criteria. It is important to note that characteristics of literary texts usually appear in some kind of mutual relationship.<sup>23</sup> Hence, to provide a thorough analysis of the structure of a literary text it becomes imperative to examine the correlation of different characteristics. Looking at the convergence of criteria may also provide insights relevant for our original question about the Qur'an's internal evolution.

In order to illustrate how one might go about statistically correlating two different textual parameters, I have chosen surah length (measured in verses per surah) and verse length (measured in syllables per verse) in order to find out whether any developments or a mutual dependence can be brought to light. This examination is carried out in analogy to Fucks' examination of the length of words in correlation to the length of sentences in the works of prose writers such as Humboldt, Bismarck, Heisenberg, and Einstein, and the works of what he calls "prose poets" such as Lessing, Goethe, and Storm.<sup>24</sup> The diagram depicting Fucks' results shows two different but nonetheless contiguous "fields of style" ("Stilfelder"). In the same manner we also arrive at three different fields of style for the surahs classed by Nöldeke as early, middle, and late Meccan. I have highlighted the three distinct

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<sup>23</sup> Ulrich, "Mathematisches Modell," 189: "Wir wollen [...] annehmen, daß wir es nur mit *drei* Stilkomponenten zu tun haben. Identifiziert man diese drei Stilkomponenten mit den Richtungen eines dreidimensionalen Koordinatenkreuzes, so sind die ästhetischen Merkmale in diesem von ihnen aufgespannten Raum als *Vektoren* darstellbar [...]. Der Kosinus des Winkels zwischen zwei Vektoren ist darüber hinaus als Korrelationskoeffizient zwischen den beiden Merkmalen definiert. Fallen zwei Vektoren zusammen und hat damit die Korrelation zwischen den durch sie repräsentierten Merkmalen den Wert 1, so sind auch ihre Projektionen identisch [...]. Stehen die beiden Vektoren senkrecht zueinander, so stellen sie zwei Merkmale dar, die vollkommen unabhängig voneinander sind; zwischen ihnen besteht definitionsgemäß eine Korrelation vom Betrag Null. Nur selten werden sich in der Analyse zwei oder mehrere Vektoren finden lassen, die vollkommen in Deckung liegen; hingegen ist es häufig der Fall, daß mehrere Vektoren zu einem Bündel zusammengefaßt werden können. Ein derartiges Bündel wäre dann die geometrische Darstellung der Affinität zwischen den Merkmalen [...]. Was hier für drei Dimensionen gilt, läßt sich ohne weiteres auch auf den allgemeinen, mehrdimensionalen Raum übertragen [...]."

<sup>24</sup> See Fucks, *Regeln der Kunst*, 32–40, but also a similar analysis by the same author and J. Lauter in "Mathematische Analyse," 113.



clouds of texts emerging from such an analysis in fig. 6. Only a few surahs fall outside of these textual clusters (Q 73, Q 53, Q 56, Q 37, and Q 26). What seems to me of further interest is the fact that the three fields—exactly as can be observed in Fucks' diagram—are not completely unrelated to each other but are rather contiguous. In fact, there are surahs that lie exactly on the border of two fields or that already intrude into the surah cluster corresponding to the following Qur'anic period although Nöldeke assigns them to the neighboring field.

What conclusions can be drawn from the above made observations? If Nöldeke's chronology is assumed, a correlated development of average verse length and surah length emerges in a statistically transparent way, which would appear to substantiate Nöldeke's work. In any case, it is clearly necessary (but beyond the scope of this paper) to further extend such a correlation of different characteristics to further parameters.

### *Measuring the Attraction Between Short and Long Verses*

The second question raised above concerned the problem to what extent the Qur'anic surahs may be regarded as meaningful literary unities or rather as random compilations that must be subjected to dissection into smaller fragments. I will try to approach this question, too, by using methods developed by Wilhelm Fucks that allow for computing the "force of attraction" or "repulsion"<sup>25</sup> obtaining between short verses (S-verses) and long verses (L-verses). The idea is that if it is possible to precisely measure relationships of attraction and repulsion by means of quantitative methods, it is probable that the respective text is a product of intentional literary composition (rather than, for example, of accidental conflation, as assumed by Richard Bell). If, on the other hand, no clear indications of systematical attraction or repulsion emerge, it is at least possible that the text in question is nothing but a random string of single verses.

A mathematical analysis of such instances of attraction and repulsion is made possible by the fact that each verse can be assigned one out of a limited number of valencies, which in the present case consist

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<sup>25</sup> The technical term for these forces is "correlation index" or "coefficient of correlation."

in the values “short” or “long.”<sup>26</sup> This is the basis for any exact mathematical analysis. Unfortunately, Qur’anic surahs are by far too short for any valid statistical analysis as carried out by Fucks, who uses textual samples containing hundreds of sentences. Yet although only comparatively big samples do in fact lead to valid results, as Fucks himself emphasizes,<sup>27</sup> an examination of the much shorter samples available in the case of the Qur’an may at least provide a stimulus for discussion.

If we follow Fucks’ analysis,<sup>28</sup> we have to start by defining which verses are to count as “long” or “short.” As the boundary below which a verse will be treated as “short” and above which it will be treated as “long,” I have chosen the arithmetic average of the number of syllables per verse in the respective surah.<sup>29</sup> Surah 72 may serve as an example in order to illustrate in brief the calculations. Its arithmetic average is about 26.82 syllables per verse. Accordingly, the sequence of short and long verses that emerges is as follows:

L S S S S L S L L L S S L L S S S S L S S L L L S S L L.

Our next step consists in counting the occurrences of the combinations S S (two short verses), S L (a short verse followed by a long verse), L S (a long verse followed by a short one), and L L (two long verses), respectively. In doing so, we will assume the last verse as being followed by the first one; we adopt a cyclical mode of counting. As a result, we observe that L L occurs seven times, S S nine times, S L six times, and L S also six times. The result can be represented as a matrix:

<sup>26</sup> The possibility of mapping textual units onto a limited number of valencies is in fact a general criterion for mathematical analyses of literary texts; see Levý, “Théorie des Verses,” 213.

<sup>27</sup> See Fucks, *Regeln der Kunst*, 58 and “Gesetzesbegriff,” 126.

<sup>28</sup> The following calculations are based on Fucks’ analysis of short and long sentences and their forces of attraction/repulsion in samples of texts of different authors. See Fucks, *Regeln der Kunst*, 56–66, 67–75; see also “Gesetzesbegriff,” 125–127.

<sup>29</sup> In favor of using what is called the median rather than the arithmetic average it might be argued that the median is in general less susceptible to freak values. This would be a means to cope with inserted verses and groups of verses, insofar as that they often result in freak values in the average number of syllables per verse. However, it is not possible to choose the median in our case because many surahs contain an uneven number of verses. The verse making up the “middle” of the surah would end up being the median itself and could neither be counted as a short nor as a long verse.

$$\begin{pmatrix} 7 & 6 \\ 6 & 9 \end{pmatrix}$$

The coefficient of correlation  $c$  can then be calculated with the help of the following formula:

$$c = \frac{\text{difference of the diagonal products}}{\text{square root of the product of the sums of lines and columns}}$$

$$c = \frac{(7 \times 9) - (6 \times 6)}{\sqrt{(7+6) \times (6+9) \times (7+6) \times (6+9)}} = 0.1385$$

Thus, the coefficient of correlation for surah 72 is 0.1385, i.e., about 14%. But what does this percentage signify? The closer the percentage approximates 100%, the more homogeneous combinations occur, that is to say, the more often do we find the combinations S S or L L. Yet the result can also be negative. The closer the result comes to minus 100%, the more heterogeneous combinations (S L or L S) occur. A zero value would then mean that short and long verses follow each other in a random fashion without any discernible pattern.

The calculation of all the correlation indexes for the first Meccan period results in an amount of disappointingly diverging percentages. The first surahs consist of no more than a few verses, so they do not lend themselves to mathematical analysis in the way described above. Yet it is possible that longer surahs will give us more consistent results. This hypothesis is in fact borne out by fig. 7, which contains the results for the surahs Nöldeke had classed as middle Meccan (see fig. 7).

Apart from three exceptions all results are positive. It stands to reason that—at least in Mecca 2—there exists a relatively clear tendency towards homogeneous arrangement of verses, that is, towards a short verse being followed by another short one and a long one being followed by another long one. That the Qur'an does in fact exhibit a comparatively marked attraction between verses that are homogeneous in length becomes clear if we compare the above results with the correlation indexes established by Fucks when investigating the sequences of homogeneous and heterogeneous sentences in samples of modern European texts (fig. 8):

Surah	Coefficient of correlation in %
54	-15
37	12
71	7
76	9
44	16
50	-2
20	29
26	4
15	17
19	16
38	25
36	7
43	3
72	14
67	7
23	10
21	17
25	3
17	-5
27	15
18	5

Fig. 7. Coefficients of correlation of the surahs of the second Meccan period.

Author	Text	Coefficient of correlation in%
Camus	<i>La chute</i>	2
Voltaire	<i>Candide</i>	3
Hume	<i>Theory of Knowledge</i>	4
Descartes	<i>Discours de la méthode</i>	5
Thomas Mann	<i>Buddenbrooks</i>	6
Sartre	<i>Qu'est-ce que la littérature?</i>	7
Bismarck	<i>Gedanken und Erinnerungen</i>	9
Huxley	<i>Brave New World</i>	10
Kant	<i>Kritik der praktischen Vernunft</i>	11
Jaspers	<i>Philosophischer Glaube</i>	18
Luke	<i>Gospel</i>	19
Kleist	<i>Marquise von O.</i>	31

Fig. 8. Coefficients of correlation in samples of 500 sentences of different authors.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> The results are extracted from Fucks, “Regeln der Kunst,” 66.

The samples analyzed by Fucks are all characterized by positive coefficients of correlation. This means that there exists some degree of attraction between homogeneous sentences in all the literary texts examined by Fucks. The same holds true for most of the Qur'anic surahs examined above. The statistical results thus appear to confirm the literary unity of these Qur'anic texts, at least when compared to the coefficients of correlation for modern European prose literature. It may thus be inferred on statistical grounds that the surahs are indeed consciously fashioned literary wholes rather than random compilations of single verses or groups of verses. In general, tendencies of equalization and organization—of which we have only examined one example particularly amenable to statistical analysis—hint at an intentional composition of the “genre”<sup>31</sup> of the surah.

Incidentally, the objection that the values computed for Qur'anic surahs may be due to mere chance can be convincingly rebutted. Fucks cross-checked his results five times with a computer simulation of 2000 sequences of binary random numbers. The results were positive and negative, namely, -2.6%, 1.3%, -1.0%, -1.6% and 0.8%. The arithmetic average of all results considered as absolute (i.e. positive) is 1.5%. According to him, this is the numerical scope that could possibly be the result of mere chance. Yet the results of my calculations for the middle Meccan surahs in some cases approximate 30%, which is far above the results Fucks had obtained from his randomized computer simulation.

With regard to the evaluation of forces of attraction and repulsion, many aspects have to be discussed. Is the arithmetic average of the number of syllables per verse an adequate boundary for the marking of short and long verses? Is it legitimate to change the definition of what has to be regarded as a short or as a long verse according to every surah, that is to say according to every new arithmetic average? Do later insertions, which I have not eliminated before calculating the attraction between long and short verses, have a significant impact on the results? Any further application of the methods illustrated in this contribution would have to take these questions into account.

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<sup>31</sup> For the suggestion to regard the surah as a literary genre of its own see Neuwirth, “Remarks,” 255ff., which is directed against the tendencies towards atomization that feature prominently in Bell's and Blachère's works.

### *Conclusion*

Quantitative methods of analyzing the Qur'an's structural qualities have not been entirely absent from Arabic philology. An example is provided by the article "Über die Anordnung der Suren und über die geheimnisvollen Buchstaben im Qoran," published in 1975 by Hans Bauer.<sup>32</sup> Bauer compares the order of the surahs in the 'Uthmānic recension of the Qur'an with the order that would result if the criterion of decreasing surah length were applied in a mathematically rigorous way. He measures their size in terms of the number of pages and lines contained by each surah. Though this attempt and similar ones represent a first step in the field of quantitative text analysis, more sustained and statistically exact inquiries are clearly called for, as they hold out the promise of opening up a new access to understanding the Qur'an's formal and structural features. Furthermore, a recourse to computer-aided methods of analysis is undoubtedly necessary; in my study, I have largely relied on my own counts, which of course makes them vulnerable to mistakes. Though the ideas of Fucks have never lost their importance, they date from the 1950s to 1970s and meanwhile have been refined by more recent computer-based and mathematical theories.<sup>33</sup> In any case, the comparative lack of quantitative studies dealing with the Arabic language or the Qur'an in particular, however, would seem to constitute an unfortunate omission.

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<sup>32</sup> Bauer, "Anordnung der Suren."

<sup>33</sup> See for example Best, *Quantitative Linguistik*, but also Bolz, "Quantitative Merkmale," who shows in detail how one has to proceed in order to carry out a computer-aided analysis of the stylistic characteristics of a given text. A field closely related to quantitative text analysis is corpus analysis, where huge amounts of data are analysed with the objective of gaining insight into language structure and use. Here, too, analysis is computer-based. See for example Biber, *Corpus Linguistics*, with ten methodology boxes.

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## AL-ḤAWĀMĪM: INTERTEXTUALITY AND COHERENCE IN MECCAN SURAHS

Islam Dayeh

### 1. Introduction

Among the twenty-nine surahs beginning with disconnected letters (*al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa'a*), seven begin with the disconnected letters *hā mīm*. These are surahs 40 (*Ghāfir*), 41 (*Fuṣṣilat*), 42 (*ash-Shūrā*), 43 (*az-Zukhruf*), 44 (*ad-Dukhān*), 45 (*al-Jāthiya*), 46 (*al-Aḥqāf*), with surah 42 beginning with *hā mīm 'ayn sīn qāf*. These surahs are commonly known in traditional Muslim sources as the *Ḥawāmīm*.<sup>1</sup>

In what follows I would like to argue that an intertextual reading, attentive to the chronological development of these surahs, will corroborate the thus far common, yet unstudied notion that these surahs are interrelated. Surah coherence—a notion which has received fair attention recently—will be broadened to include coherence in a number of surahs.<sup>2</sup>

The idea of surahs forming pairs, triplets, or quadruplets is itself not entirely new. For example, the Pakistani Qur'an scholar Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī (1903–1997) expounded the notion of surah pairs and groups which he regarded as a central task of exegetical activity.<sup>3</sup> Others have proposed surah groups, which include, for instance, the so-called *al-Raḥmān* surahs; this group of surahs bears a frequent occurrence of the divine attribute *al-Raḥmān*.<sup>4</sup> Another such group is *al-Musabbiḥāt*, i.e., surahs that begin with the verb *sabbaha* and

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān*, 6, ḥadīth no. 4612; Ibn Māja, *Sunan*, *Iqāma*, 71, ḥadīth no. 1046; Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vol 1, no. 401; Dārimī, *Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān*, 14 and 22; Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, *Thawāb al-Qur'ān*, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Recent studies on the structure and the coherence of the surah include: Neu-wirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*; Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'an*; Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*; and el-Awa, *Textual Relations in the Qur'an*.

<sup>3</sup> For a thorough study of Iṣlāḥī's exegetical contributions, see Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'an*, esp. 75–98.

<sup>4</sup> Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorāns* (henceforth GQ), vol. 1, 121; and, Robinson, *Discovering*, 89–92.

its variants *yusabbiḥu* and *sabbiḥ*; there are also the *Ṭawāṣīn*, i.e., surahs which begin with the disconnected letters *ṭā sīn*.<sup>5</sup> It will be argued that consideration of formal, formulaic, and thematic aspects shows that the surahs in question are interrelated in a variety of ways, and that this interrelatedness grants the surahs their coherence. Moreover, this coherence is to be understood in terms of complementarity, i.e., a surah complements one surah and is complemented by another. It follows that consideration of the dialectics of complementarity is necessary when engaging in an exegesis of the Qur'an.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. The Disconnected Letters, the Introduction, and Muṣḥaf Adjacency

Let us begin our investigation by looking at the disconnected letters at the beginning of the surahs.<sup>7</sup> We will observe that these surahs share the same introductory letters *ḥā mīm*, which is a preliminary indication of a meaningful connection between them. Moving on to the immediately following verses, we notice that the letters *ḥā mīm* are followed by verses in which the Qur'an is the focal theme. The verses contain a Qur'anic self-confirmation which corresponds to a pattern in which the disconnected letters are followed by a confirmation of the authoritativeness and authenticity of the Qur'an. This pattern is evident in the following examples of the first two verses of some surahs:

الم . ذلك الكتاب لا ريب فيه هدى للمتقين	Q 2 ( <i>al-Baqara</i> )
الم . الله لا إله إلا هو الحي القيوم . نزل عليك الكتاب بالحق مصدقا لما بين يديه	Q 3 ( <i>Āl 'Imrān</i> )
وأنزل التوراة والإنجيل	
المص . كتاب أنزل إليك فلا يكن في صدرك حرج منه لتنذر به وذكرى للمؤمنين	Q 7 ( <i>al-A'rāf</i> )

<sup>5</sup> They are surahs 26 (*ash-Shu'arā*), 27 (*an-Naml*), and 28 (*al-Qaṣaṣ*). Hans Bauer notices that these three surahs all begin with the Moses narrative (Bauer, "Über die Anordnung der Suren und über die Geheimnisvollen Buchstaben im Quran," 333).

<sup>6</sup> Since this study strives to be a close textual examination, it will be advisable to read this article along with a parallel reading of the *Hawāmīm*.

<sup>7</sup> Traditional Muslim attitudes toward the disconnected letters are too vast to be recounted here. On the whole, these opinions reflected their exegetical methods and objectives. Cf. for example, as-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, vol. 2, 219–221. See also the important collection of articles republished in: *Der Koran, Wege der Forschung* (ed. Rudi Paret, Darmstadt 1975): Bauer, "Über die Anordnung der Suren und über die Geheimnisvollen Buchstaben im Quran," 311–335; Goossens, "Ursprung und Bedeutung der Koranischen Siglen," 336–373; Seale, "The Mysterious Letters in the Qur'an," 374–378; Jones, "The Mystical Letters of the Qur'an," 379–385.

الرتلك آيات الكتاب وقرآن مین	Q 15 ( <i>al-Hijr</i> )
طه . ما أنزلنا عليك القرآن لتشقى	Q 20 ( <i>Tāhā</i> )
طس تلك آيات القرآن وكتاب مین . هدى وبشرى للمؤمنین	Q 27 ( <i>an-Naml</i> )
یس . والقرآن الحكیم	Q 36 ( <i>Yā Sin</i> )
ص والقرآن ذي الذکر	Q 38 ( <i>Šād</i> )
ق والقرآن المجید	Q 50 ( <i>Qāf</i> )

In the *Ḥawāmīm* surahs, the formulae *tanzīl al-kitāb min allāh* and *innā anzalnāhu* are employed to convey this meaning. Furthermore, we notice that the introductory phrase, *tanzīl al-kitāb min allāh*, appears elsewhere in the Qur'an: we find it in surah 39 (*az-Zumar*), the immediately preceding surah in the order of the surahs in the *Muṣḥaf*.<sup>8</sup>

تنزيل الكتاب من الله العزيز الحكيم . إنا أنزلنا إليك الكتاب بالحق	Q 39 ( <i>az-Zumar</i> )
حم . تنزيل الكتاب من الله العزيز الحكيم	Q 40 ( <i>Ghāfir</i> )
حم . تنزيل من الرحمن الرحيم . كتاب فصلت آياته قرآنا عربيا لقوم يعلمون	Q 41 ( <i>Fuṣṣilat</i> )
حم . عسقي . كذلك يوحي إليك وإلى الذين من قبلك الله العزيز الحكيم	Q 42 ( <i>ash-Shūrā</i> )
حم . والكتاب المبین . إنا جعلناه قرآنا عربيا لعلكم تعقلون	Q 43 ( <i>az-Zukhruf</i> )
حم . والكتاب المبین . إنا أنزلناه في ليلة مباركة إنا كنا منذرين	Q 44 ( <i>ad-Dukhān</i> )
حم . تنزيل الكتاب من الله العزيز الحكيم	Q 45 ( <i>al-Jāthiyah</i> )
حم . تنزيل الكتاب من الله العزيز الحكيم	Q 46 ( <i>al-Aḥqāf</i> )

That surah 39 (*az-Zumar*) is adjacent to surah 40 (*Ghāfir*) according to the order of the surahs in the *muṣḥaf*, suggests that surah 39 could also belong to the group in question. This is especially the case when we discover that according to one of the early codices of the Qur'an (*muṣḥaf Ubayy*), surah 39 begins with the letters *hā mīm*.<sup>9</sup> In addition, it will be noticed that the *Ḥawāmīm* surahs, including surah 39 (*az-Zumar*), all appear in the *Textus Receptus* in adjacency, i.e. in an order following one another.

Thus far, we have observed that surahs 40 through 46 begin with the same disconnected letters and that these letters are followed immediately by an introductory verse stating the authoritative nature of the Qur'an. Furthermore, surah 39 (*az-Zumar*)—which appears

<sup>8</sup> Notice however that the surah, according to the *textus receptus*, does not begin with the disconnected letters *hā mīm*. An exception to this is *muṣḥaf Ubayy* according to which the surah does begin with these letters.

<sup>9</sup> As-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, vol. 1, 128, *fī jam'ihī wa tartibihi*. Referring to this codex, Hans Bauer has made the interesting suggestion that this surah might have belonged to the rest of the *Ḥawāmīm* (Bauer, "Über die Anordnung der Suren," 324). This suggestion will be explored further in this study.

immediately before the surahs beginning with *ḥā mīm* (40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, and 46)—similarly begins with a confirmation of the Qur'an's authority. The opening verse in surah 39 is exactly identical to the second verse in surahs 44 and 46, and resembles the second verse in surah 40. This may account for the aforementioned report purporting that (per *muṣḥaf Ubayy*) surah 39 begins with the disconnected letters *ḥā mīm*. The question that arises here is of a redactional nature. Was the placing of these surahs in the current order of the *muṣḥaf* intentional? Tentatively, one could make the case that whatever function these disconnected letters might have had<sup>10</sup> and whatever led to the absence (or possible removal) of the disconnected letters *ḥā mīm* at the start of surah 39, the arrangement of the surahs in this sequence does suggest an initial understanding that these surahs are interrelated.

### 3. Meccan Surahs and Chronology

Still, matching introductions and the adjacency of the surahs in the *muṣḥaf* is arguably insufficient to establish that surahs 39 through 46 cohere. To argue for the inclusion of surah 39 and for the interrelatedness of the whole group, an examination of thematic and formulaic parallels recurring in the group is required. One would have to demonstrate that a chronological development of ideas or that a coherent body of ideas is discernable in these surahs.

A significant result of the literary-historical study of the Qur'an has been the division of surahs into four main periods: early Meccan, middle Meccan, late Meccan and Medinan. This division has yielded many interesting ideas about the prophetic vocation and the emergence of the early Muslim community.<sup>11</sup> My concern here is with the Meccan period; and of the three Meccan divisions, in particular, with

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<sup>10</sup> Bauer and Goossens have suggested that the disconnected letters *ḥā mīm* are abbreviations for the words *jaḥīm* and *ḥamīm* (both denoting hellfire) which occur most frequently in these surahs (cf. surah 40:72 and surah 44:46 and 48). The remaining surahs, although they do not contain the word *ḥamīm*, are replete with eschatological content. Cf. Bauer, "Über die Anordnung der Suren," 334 and Goossens, "Ursprung und Bedeutung," 361–362. On the other hand, Alan Jones has argued that these letters are mystical symbols intended to convey an impression of obscurity and thus they do not have any specific meaning, cf. Jones, "The Mystical Letters," 383–385.

<sup>11</sup> For a summary, see Robinson, *Discovering*, 76–96.

the late Meccan period. Late Meccan surahs share several characteristics:

(a) The verses appear longer than the early Meccan surahs, but equal in length to the verses of middle Meccan surahs, ending with the penultimate *-ūn* and *-īn*.

(b) The themes are similar to the preceding Meccan surahs: they preach monotheism and recount the Prophet's disputes with the Meccans over the resurrection, the day of reckoning, and the falsehood of the Arabian deities.

(c) The targeted listener is addressed with the formula "Oh you people" (*yā ayyuhā n-nās*), a vocative formula that denotes an engagement with several discourses (pagan, Jewish, and Christian).

(d) Since these surahs were revealed just before the emigration to Medina, many instances of Medinan interpolations are to be found in them—an indication of a need for revision due to the change of circumstances in Medina after the Hijra.<sup>12</sup>

(e) In addition, I would add, this period is characterized by a certain mood of worry and anxiety present throughout the surahs which appears to reflect the exasperation caused by the adamant resistance to the Prophetic recitations. This aspect will appear in the thematic analysis below.

Let us consider now the chronological order of these surahs. Unlike Medinan and early Meccan surahs which apparently bear allusions to the person of the Prophet and to the happenings that occurred during the lifetime of the community, late Meccan surahs appear to be most elusive in terms of their reference to historical events. Theodor Nöldeke, who exerted much effort in establishing a chronology of Qur'anic revelations based on literary criteria, himself questioned the possibility of arriving at a chronology of late Meccan surahs. He argued that these surahs reveal no inner-development on which a chronology could be based.<sup>13</sup> The following table presents the chronology of the surahs in question as proposed by Nöldeke.

<sup>12</sup> On the notion of Medinan revision and interpolations, see Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an*, 86–100, and Nagel, *Medinensische Einschübe in mekkanischen Suren*. In this context, it should be noted that the notion of the surah as a coherent unit should not necessarily imply a particular opinion about when a surah reached its final form. Surahs may be conceived of as entities for quantifying Qur'anic material which belong to a particular period or setting. Coherence is thus gradual and relative. Cf. Marshal, *God, Muhammad and the Unbelievers*, 75.

<sup>13</sup> Nöldeke, *GQ*, vol. 1, 144: "Da in den Suren der dritten Periode so gut wie gar keine Entwicklung mehr sichtbar ist, so können wir noch weniger als in denen der

Chronological order of surah	Surah
53rd surah	44 ( <i>ad-Dukhān</i> ) [middle Meccan]
61st surah	43 ( <i>az-Zukhruf</i> ) [middle Meccan]
71st surah	41 ( <i>Fuṣṣilat</i> ) [late Meccan]
72nd surah	45 ( <i>al-Jāthiya</i> ) [late Meccan]
80th surah	39 ( <i>az-Zumar</i> ) <sup>14</sup> [late Meccan]
83rd surah	42 ( <i>ash-Shūrā</i> ) [late Meccan]
88th surah	46 ( <i>al-Aḥqāf</i> ) [late Meccan]

Nöldeke's proposed chronology (the order of the *Ḥawāmīm* including surah 39) differs radically from the chronologies proffered by Muslim exegetes. Apart from surahs 41 and 45, which come at the 71st and 72nd place, all the remaining surahs are scattered throughout the Meccan period. His aforementioned general statement aside, Nöldeke does not provide clear criteria according to which he based this particular chronology. He does not tell us why he places 44 and 43 before the rest of the surahs. Rather, he seems to be more interested in discussing alleged Medinan interpolations and surah divisions, and less in surah inter-texts and development.<sup>15</sup> For instance, the fact that these surahs all begin with the disconnected letters *Ḥā Mīm* and similar introductory verses and appear adjacent in the *textus receptus* appears to be insignificant. The question that arises here is why did Nöldeke propose this particular chronology and what were his criteria?

I would venture to suggest that his main criterion here was historical. The question Nöldeke was concerned with was this: are there any allusions in the text to historical events or, in other words, are there any extra-Qur'anic reports that could date the text? And to be more accurate, the extra-Qur'anic reports that he refers to are in fact mere reports found in the exegetical literature, i.e., single narratives whose correspondence to the context of the surah is often either biased or manipulated creatively by the exegetes, at best. Nöldeke is aware of the fragile nature of these odd reports, and does in fact reject many.<sup>16</sup>

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älteren Perioden eine irgend sichere chronologische Reihenfolge aufstellen."

<sup>14</sup> Note, however, that Nöldeke does not consider the possibility of surah 39 (*az-Zumar*) being related to the rest of the *Ḥawāmīm*.

<sup>15</sup> His notes on these surahs can be found in *GQ* as follows: surah 44, p. 124; surah 43, p. 131–132; surah 41, p. 144–145; surah 45, p. 145; surah 40, p. 153; surah 39, p. 154; surah 42, p. 157–158; surah 46, p. 160–161.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. previous footnote.

But his treatment of this sole criterion is nevertheless indicative of the criterion at work here. What dictates Nöldeke's chronology of these surahs is, in my view, an inadequate understanding of historical criteria which is only complicated by the evident neglect of literary considerations. In light of these observations, it is imperative to reconsider his proposed chronology and to question the justifiability of his difficulties in establishing a chronology of these surahs. Does Nöldeke's chronology treat these surahs adequately?

Alternative and much earlier chronologies may shed some light on our problem. Let us consider now the chronologies of these surahs proposed by Muslim exegetes, as quoted by the author of *al-Itqān*, as-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505). They are:

1. 39 (*az-Zumar*) → the *Ḥawāmīm* surahs, without specifying the chronology among the surahs [attributed to Abu Ja'far al-Naḥḥās' *an-Nāsikh wa-l-Mansūkh*].
2. 39 (*az-Zumar*) → 40 (*Ḥā Mīm al-Mu'min*) → 44 (*Ḥā Mīm ad-Dukhān*) → 41 (*Ḥā Mīm as-Sajda*)<sup>17</sup> → 42 (*Ḥā Mīm 'Ayn Sīn Qāf*) → 43 (*Ḥā Mīm az-Zukhruf*) → 45 (*al-Jāthiya*) → 46 (*al-Aḥqāf*) [attributed to al-Bayhaqī's *Dalā'il an-Nubuwwa*].
3. 39 (*az-Zumar*) → 40 (*Ḥā Mīm al-Mu'min*) → 41 (*Ḥā Mīm as-Sajda*) → 42 (*Ḥā Mīm 'Ayn Sīn Qāf*) → 43 (*Ḥā Mīm az-Zukhruf*) → 44 (*ad-Dukhān*) → 45 (*al-Jāthiya*) → 46 (*al-Aḥqāf*) [attributed to Ibn aḍ-Ḍurays' *Fadā'il al-Qur'ān*].

These cited chronologies are attributed to exegetes and philologists, and are not prophetic traditions. Thus what we have before us are chronologies proposed and constructed by exegetes on the basis of a set of various criteria. The first chronology states that the *Ḥawāmīm* surahs, as a cluster, follow surah 39, but does not specify in which order these surahs appear. The second and third chronologies offer a detailed ordering which corresponds to the general chronology, while the second chronology inserts surah 44 between surahs 40 and 41.

As in the case of Nöldeke's chronology, these variant chronologies are not documented with literary analysis explaining the reasons for their particular ordering. Arguably, one would have to refer to the auxiliary Qur'anic sciences such as *an-Nāsikh wa-l-Mansūkh* and

<sup>17</sup> *Ḥā Mīm as-Sajda* is another name for surah 41, *Fuṣṣilat*.

*Asbāb an-Nuzūl* to discern the criteria that determined these proposed chronologies, a task which is beyond the scope of this study. Unlike Nöldeke, however, these variant chronologies cited by as-Suyūṭī pay due attention to the introductory verses and their adjacent ordering in the *muṣḥaf*.

Thus, whereas Nöldeke's chronology of these particular surahs appears to be inattentive to any literary criteria, these three variant chronologies seem to use the introductory verse and Muṣḥaf adjacency as criteria. I will, for the sake of argument, base the remainder of this study on this chronology. I will advance three main criteria upon which I will examine the inter-textual nature of these surahs: formulaic, thematic, and historic.

#### 4. Formula Criticism

I refer here to the work of Milman Parry (d. 1935) and Albert Lord (d. 1991) on epic poetry, which has profoundly stimulated interest in modes of oral composition and, in particular, in recurring patterns of biblical phrase and formula.<sup>18</sup> Following Parry's definition, a formula in the Homeric epic is "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea."<sup>19</sup> Formulae are present in oral poetry because they are useful. They are available to the poet to use while he is singing so that he need not invent them under the pressure of performance.<sup>20</sup>

Important contributions have been advanced in the study of the composition of ancient Arabic poetry by Michael Zwettler and James Monroe on the basis of the works of the "oral-formula" hypothesis worked out by Parry and Lord.<sup>21</sup> The application of formula criticism in the study of Qur'anic composition however remains controversial. Recently, strong support for such an approach has been advocated by the non-Arabist folklorist Alan Dundes.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse*; Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, and *Epic Singers and the Oral Tradition*.

<sup>19</sup> Parry, *Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making*, vol. 1, 80.

<sup>20</sup> Watters, *Formula Criticism and the Poetry of the Old Testament*, 8–9.

<sup>21</sup> Monroe, "Oral composition in pre-Islamic poetry"; Zwettler, "Classical Arabic poetry between folk and oral tradition," and his seminal monograph *The Oral Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry: Its Character and Implications*.

<sup>22</sup> Dundes, *Fables of the Ancients*. But see the reviews of both Abbas Kadhimi and Helen Blatherwick (see bibliography).



In a tentative evaluation of formula criticism, Angelika Neuwirth observes that, in light of her studies on the structure of the Meccan surahs, the idea of the Qur'anic text being composed and recomposed during oral performance is hard to maintain. She avers that

[t]hough such a performance practice may apply to many early sūras, it can hardly be assumed for the bulk of the qur'ānic corpus. Some early sūras that were already composed without written assistance attest to an origin in nocturnal vigils, rather than in public performances. Later sūras, comprised of multipartite verses with little poetic shaping and thus devoid of effective mnemonic technical devices, strongly suggest an almost immediate fixation in writing, or may even have been written compositions to begin with.<sup>23</sup>

Neuwirth's insights are highly significant and underline a major limitation of the application of formula criticism to Qur'anic composition: any application of formula criticism *must* take into account the structural features of Qur'anic composition, features that are suggestive of an *immediate fixation in writing* or that the surahs *may have been written compositions to begin with*. Thus, the Parry-Lord notion of a formula composed for the purposes and under the pressure of oral performance must be applied with caution when discussing Qur'anic composition.

There is however an aspect of the formula which remains unexplored. The Qur'an, inasmuch as it is the lectionary and recital of the Muslim community, it is also the first Arabic book; it is the first Arabic literary text to have been committed to writing. The Qur'an thus signifies an important transitional stage in the history of Arabic language and literature. The Qur'an witnessed and actively contributed to a transformation of literary culture from a predominantly oral to a written one. This transformation was not limited to the technological, but left great impressions on modes of composition, narration, and rhetoric. While the Qur'an strives to establish itself as the literary canon of the Arabs, it does so in a predominantly oral environment, whose literary sensibilities and modes of rhetoric are deeply rooted in performance, persuasion, and oral verse-making ingrained in formulaic language. Thus, the literary and technological conditions in which the Qur'anic text emerged shaped the way in which it was composed. Residues of oral literature, such as public speech and persuasion, and formulaic language, are evident throughout the

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<sup>23</sup> Neuwirth, "Structural, Linguistic and Literary Features," 100.

Qur'an. One may describe Qur'anic composition as a *literaturization* of ancient Arabic rhetoric.<sup>24</sup> A consequence of this observation strongly relates to our interest in oral-formulaic language: the endeavor to compose a written and finely structured Arabic literary canon could not have been successful without employment of oral modes of Arabic rhetoric and composition deeply rooted in the formula.

Turning to the Qur'anic exegetical tradition, attention to what may be called the *Qur'anic formulae* is early and can be traced to the classical philological discipline of *al-mushtabihāt* (or, *al-mutashābihāt*) which were primarily mnemonic registers devised to assist memorization. One such register is al-Kisā'i's (d. 804 AH) *Mutashābih al-Qur'ān*.<sup>25</sup> In the preface to his book, al-Kisā'i states that his purpose is to provide a list containing parallel words and utterances, so as to facilitate efficient memorization of the Qur'an.<sup>26</sup> However, what was initially a mnemonic register gradually proved to be of value for literary criticism of the Qur'an. In his entry on the *mushtabihāt*, as-Suyūṭī dedicates several pages to this particular genre, its primary literature and its uses, and discusses numerous cases pertaining to literary critical matters. Beyond the pragmatic needs of a mnemonic register such as al-Kisā'i's, as-Suyūṭī and the works he cited stressed, as it were, the literary function of these registers. Accordingly, these parallel words and utterances occur due to the repetition of a specific narrative in a variety of forms in correspondence to contextual considerations.<sup>27</sup>

The resemblance between the notion of *mutashābih* and Parry's aforementioned definition of formula is striking. Both definitions agree on two basic characteristics of a formula: multiple existence and variation. Though the idea of a "repeated word-group" is not explicit in as-Suyūṭī's definition, it is implicit in the sense that *ishtibāh*, confusion, only arises when verses are similar—they belong to the same word group. Notions of fluidity and improvisation are not accounted for here and nor should we expect them to be. However,

<sup>24</sup> George Kennedy defines the term *Literaturization* as "the tendency to shift focus from persuasion to narration, from civic to personal contexts, and from speech to literature, including poetry," see his *Classical Rhetoric*, 2ff.

<sup>25</sup> For a list of these registers, see: Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, naw' 63, vol. 2, 224–227.

<sup>26</sup> Al-Kisā'i, *Mutashābih al-Qur'ān*, 50: وتناظر من كلمات: الفرقان، ليكون كتاباً هذا، عوناً للقارئ على قراءته، وتقوية حفظه

<sup>27</sup> Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, vol. 2, 224ff. (naw' 63): وهو إيراد القصة الواحدة في صور شتى، وفواصل مختلفة.

there is a certain awareness of the nature of narrative and of how slight variation in formulae occurs due to contextual considerations. There are even efforts to discern the exegetical and rhetorical differences between variants within the same formula group. These efforts should be taken into consideration when analyzing Qur'anic formulae.

Our textual corpus, *al-Hawāmīm*, provides a plethora of examples whereby the merit of such an approach is evident. As the objective here is to explore elements of interconnectedness, the application of formula criticism will thus be limited to the identification of parallel formula and the function they serve in maintaining textual cohesion. Moreover, a mere calculation of the frequency of repetition of a given formulae is inadequate without an investigation into how these specific formulae were employed and incorporated in a variety of contexts and a multitude of surahs for the pragmatic-communicational objectives of the text.

What follows is a study of twenty cases of potential parallel formula. This list, it should be noted, does not claim to be exhaustive of all parallel formula in our corpus. Furthermore, since our concern is with cross-surah reference, rather than inner-surah reference, I have left out numerous parallel formulae within the individual surah. Our guiding question, it will be recalled, is whether our corpus contains parallel formula; and if so, to what extent do these formulae shed light on the interconnectedness of the surahs?

1) Q 39:1, 40:2, 41:2, 45:2, 46:2 (as opening, occurring only in these surahs):

تَنْزِيلُ الْكِتَابِ مِنَ اللَّهِ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَكِيمِ	1	[39] الزمر
تَنْزِيلُ الْكِتَابِ مِنَ اللَّهِ الْعَزِيزِ الْعَلِيمِ	2	[40] غافر
تَنْزِيلٌ مِّنَ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ	2	[41] فصلت
تَنْزِيلُ الْكِتَابِ مِنَ اللَّهِ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَكِيمِ	2	[45] الجاثية
تَنْزِيلُ الْكِتَابِ مِنَ اللَّهِ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَكِيمِ	2	[46] الأحقاف

The formulae here are relatively identical, all beginning with the noun *tanzil*, followed by an attribution of the revelation to God.

2) Q 39:3, 40:28 (occurring only twice in the Qur'an):

- [39] الزمر 3 إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِي مَنْ هُوَ كَاذِبٌ كَفَّارٌ  
[40] غافر 28 إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِي مَنْ هُوَ مُسْرِفٌ كَذَّابٌ

The first formula appears in the context of the denial of monotheism, thus the appellative *kādhīb kaffār*, i.e. a liar, an ingrate. The second appears at the end of a narrative which exemplifies the arrogant denial of the Mosaic message, thus the appellative *musrif kadhdhāb*, i.e. a prodigal, a liar. The nuanced differences correspond to the respective contexts.

3) Q 39:15, 42:45 (occurring only twice in the Qur'an):

- [39] الزمر 15 قُلْ إِنَّ الْخَاسِرِينَ الَّذِينَ خَسِرُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ وَأَهْلِيَهُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ أَلَا ذَلِكَ هُوَ الْخُسْرَانُ الْمُبِينُ  
[42] الشورى 45 وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِنَّ الْخَاسِرِينَ الَّذِينَ خَسِرُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ وَأَهْلِيَهُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ أَلَا إِنَّ الظَّالِمِينَ فِي عَذَابٍ مُّقِيمٍ

The first formula follows the imperative *qul* and appears in a series of five *qul* verses in the surah (verses 10–15). The believers are told to announce that the “losers are those who lose themselves and their family on the day of reckoning” and thus the announcement is part of a polemic and serves as a warning. It appears again in surah 42 in the context of presenting the destiny of the unbelievers in the hereafter. Here the same statement is evoked and quoted, presumably from surah 39, this time however it is pronounced by the believers in an eschatological setting.

4) Q 39:16, 42:23 (occurring only twice in the Qur'an):

- [39] الزمر 16 ذَلِكَ يُخَوِّفُ اللَّهَ بِهِ عِبَادَهُ يَاعِبَادِ فَاتَّقُونِ  
[42] الشورى 23 ذَلِكَ الَّذِي يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ عِبَادَهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ

There is a slight formulaic similarity which may serve to illustrate the contrast.

5) Q 39:23, 39:36, 40:33 (occurring only these three times):

39 [الزمر] 23 وَمَنْ يُضِلِلِ اللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُ مِنْ هَادٍ

39 [الزمر] 36 وَمَنْ يُضِلِلِ اللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُ مِنْ هَادٍ

41 [غافر] 33 وَمَنْ يُضِلِلِ اللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُ مِنْ هَادٍ

Identical formulae employed in the three contexts to convey the notion of God's guidance and protection.

6) Q 39:26, 41:16 (occurring only these two times):

39 [الزمر] 26 فَأَذِفْهُمْ اللَّهُ الْخِزْيَ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَلَعَذَابُ الْآخِرَةِ أَكْبَرُ

41 [فصلت] 16 لِنُذِيقَهُمْ عَذَابَ الْخِزْيِ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَلَعَذَابُ الْآخِرَةِ أَخْزَى

Apart from the alteration in the subject (the first is "God," while the second is "we") and the ending, the formulae are parallel. Both appear in the context of describing the fate of the earlier nations that disbelieved.

7) Q 39:28, 41:3, 42:7, 43:3 (occurring also in 12:2; 20:113):

39 [الزمر] 28 قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا غَيْرَ ذِي عِوَجٍ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَّقُونَ

41 [فصلت] 3 قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لِقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ

The adverbs *qur'ānan* 'arabiyyan appear frequently in this corpus. The intention here is to emphasize the Arabic nature of the text.

8) Q 39:48; 45:33 (occurring only these two times):

39 [الزمر] 48 وَبَدَأَ لَهُمْ فِيهَا مَا كَسَبُوا وَحَاقَ بِهِمْ مَا كَانُوا بِهِ يَسْتَهْزِئُونَ

45 [الجبالة] 33 وَبَدَأَ لَهُمْ فِيهَا مَا عَمِلُوا وَحَاقَ بِهِمْ مَا كَانُوا بِهِ يَسْتَهْزِئُونَ

Identical formulae despite the verb change: *kasabū* and 'amilū. Both formulae describe the fate and response of the unbelievers on the day of reckoning upon witnessing their wrongdoings.

9) Q 39:71, 39:73, 41:20 (occurring only three times):

- [39] الزمر 71 حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاؤُوهَا فَتَحَتْ أَبْوَابُهَا وَقَالَ لَهُمْ خَزَنَتُهَا أَلَمْ يَأْتِكُمْ  
[39] الزمر 73 حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاؤُوهَا وَفُتِحَتْ أَبْوَابُهَا وَقَالَ لَهُمْ خَزَنَتُهَا سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ  
[41] فصلت 20 حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاؤُوهَا شَهِدَ عَلَيْهِمْ سَمْعُهُمْ وَأَبْصَارُهُمْ وَجُلُودُهُمْ

All three formulae appear in eschatological contexts. The first concerns the arrival of the unbelievers in hell and the guardian's reproaching them. The second, in contrast, concerns the arrival of the believers in paradise and the welcoming of the guardians. The third, whose context is likewise eschatological, employs only the conditional clause *ḥattā idhā jā'ūhā*.

10) Q 39:75, 40:7, 42:5 (occurring only three times):

- [39] الزمر 75 يُسَبِّحُونَ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّهِمْ وَفُضِي بَيْنَهُم بِالْحَقِّ  
[40] غافر 7 يُسَبِّحُونَ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّهِمْ وَيُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ وَيَسْتَغْفِرُونَ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا  
[42] الشورى 5 يُسَبِّحُونَ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّهِمْ وَيَسْتَغْفِرُونَ لِمَن فِي الْأَرْضِ

The three verses illustrate the angelic prayers. Similarity occurs only in the first verbal clause in each verse.

11) Q 40:11, 42:44 (occurring only twice):

- [40] غافر 11 فَهَلْ إِلَىٰ خُرُوجٍ مِّن سَبِيلٍ  
[42] الشورى 44 هَلْ إِلَىٰ مَرَدٍّ مِّن سَبِيلٍ

This is an interesting case of parallel formulae. The focal verbs are antonyms (*kharaja* and *radda*): while the former denotes a way forward, the latter denotes a way back. The formulae complement one another.

12) Q 41:13, 42:38 (occurring only twice):

- [41] فصلت 13 فَإِنِ اعْرَضُوا فَعَلْنَا ذُرِّيَّتًا صَاعِقَةً مِّثْلَ صَاعِقَةِ عَادٍ وَثَمُودَ  
[42] الشورى 38 فَإِنِ اعْرَضُوا فَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ عَلَيْهِمْ حَفِيظًا

Identical conditional clause.

13) Q 41:25, 46:18 (occurring only twice):

[41] فصلت 25 وَحَقَّ عَلَيْهِمُ الْقَوْلُ فِي أُمِّهِمْ قَدْ خَلَتْ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ مِنَ الْجِنَّةِ وَالنَّاسِ إِنَّهُمْ  
كَأَنَّا خَاسِرِينَ

[46] الأحقاف 18 حَقَّ عَلَيْهِمُ الْقَوْلُ فِي أُمِّهِمْ قَدْ خَلَتْ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ مِنَ الْجِنَّةِ وَالنَّاسِ إِنَّهُمْ  
كَأَنَّا خَاسِرِينَ

Identical formulae.

14) Q 41:30, 46:13 (occurring only twice):

[41] فصلت 30 إِنَّ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا رَبُّنَا اللَّهُ ثُمَّ اسْتَقَامُوا تَتَرَّبَّلَ عَلَيْهِمُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ أَلَّا تَخَافُوا لَا  
تَحْزَنُوا

[46] الأحقاف 13 إِنَّ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا رَبُّنَا اللَّهُ ثُمَّ اسْتَقَامُوا فَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

Identical formulae.

15) Q 41:46, 45:15 (occurring only twice):

[41] فصلت 46 مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلِنَفْسِهِ وَمَنْ أَسَاءَ فَعَلَيْهَا وَمَا رَبُّكَ بِظَلَّامٍ لِلْعَبِيدِ

[45] الجاثية 15 مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلِنَفْسِهِ وَمَنْ أَسَاءَ فَعَلَيْهَا ثُمَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمْ تُرْجَعُونَ

Identical formulae. While the former occurrence ends by stressing God's justice, the latter stresses the notion of a return; they therefore complement each other.

16) Q 41:48, 42:35 (occurring only twice):

[41] فصلت 48 وَضَلَّ عَنْهُمْ مَا كَانُوا يَدْعُونَ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَظَنَّوْا مَا لَمْ يَكُنْ لَكُمْ بِهِ خَبِيرٌ

[42] الشورى 35 وَيَعْلَمُ الَّذِينَ يُجَادِلُونَ فِي آيَاتِنَا مَا لَهُمْ مِنْ خَبِيرٍ

The first formula appears in the context of the fate of the unbelievers: their associates fail them and they perceive that they have no place

of refuge. The second appearance of the formula, which would seem to be a quotation of the first, refers to those who dispute the signs (or verses) of God, that they have no refuge.

17) Q 41:52, 46:10 (occurring only twice):

[41] فصلت 52 قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِنْ كَانَ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ كُفْرٌ بِهِ مِنْ أَضَلِّ مِمَّنْ هُوَ فِي شِقَاقٍ

بَعِيدٍ

[46] الأحقاف 10 قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِنْ كَانَ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ وَكُفْرٌ بِهِ وَشَهِدَ شَاهِدٌ

Both verses open with the same conditional clause: "Say: If it is from God and you reject it," conveying the recurrence in various occasions of the debates on the authenticity of the Qur'an.

18) Q 42:51, 43:4 (occurring only twice):

[42] الشورى 51 إِنَّهُ عَلَىٰ حَكِيمٍ

[43] الزخرف 4 وَإِنَّهُ فِي أُمِّ الْكِتَابِ لَدَيْنَا لَعَلَّ حَكِيمٌ

The appellatives '*aliyy* and *hakim* appear together only twice in the Qur'an, in these two verses. In the first verse they are attributes of God and denote exaltedness and wisdom. In the second verse (which appears in the immediately following surah) they are attributes of the Qur'an and denote sublimity and decisiveness.

19) Q 43:2, 44:2 (occurring only twice):

[43] الزخرف 2 حم . وَالْكِتَابِ الْمُبِينِ

[44] الدخان 2 حم . وَالْكِتَابِ الْمُبِينِ

Identical formulae. These introductory verses appear in adjacent surahs.

20) Q 43:20; 44:24 (occurring only twice):

[43] الزخرف 20 مَا لَهُمْ بِدَلِّكَ مِنْ عِلْمٍ إِنْ هُمْ إِلَّا يَخْرُصُونَ

[44] الجاثية 24 وَمَا لَهُمْ بِدَلِّكَ مِنْ عِلْمٍ إِنْ هُمْ إِلَّا يَظُنُّونَ



Identical formulae, except for the verb at the end: *yakhruṣūn, yadhun-nūn*.

At the end of this survey several points should be accentuated. The formulae conveyed in these verses were pronounced and recited in different texts and on a multitude of occasions throughout the Meccan period. Reasons for the repetition and re-employment of a formula have been briefly referred to above. The use of formulaic techniques complies with a principle of economy of language required on the part of the composer, lest the audience cease to comprehend. In addition to this principle of economy, a certain measure of flexibility is also evident.

Indeed, the efficacy of a formula is closely connected to its anaphoric potential, i.e., the capacity it has to direct the attention of the listener to an external, previously mentioned point of reference. In our case, the reference is being made to earlier recitations in the *Hawāmīm* corpus.

The following metaphor might help to explain this idea. Similar to the spin of a thread, the formula is interwoven into the text and fused with other formulae to develop the text's very texture, in the same manner thread is interwoven with thread to weave a cloth. When creating a new cloth, this thread or something equivalent is used again to weave a new cloth. While this new cloth is composed from these similar threads, its *Gestalt* resembles the original, previous cloth. The formula, likewise, not only refers, by way of intertextuality, to an external discourse, but depends for its novelty and its creative continuity on this external, previous discourse.

A case in point is the function of the formula in the *Hawāmīm* corpus. In order for the individual surah to achieve its communicational objectives effectively and yet remain in continuity with the Qur'anic unfolding discourse, the surah is composed in such a manner so that it is read with consideration of its predecessor. The best possible reading of surah 46 would therefore be that which is dovetailed with a reading of the previous surahs and, especially surah 41. And the best possible reading of surah 41 would be in light of a reading of surah 40 and 39, and especially surah 39, etc.

In sum, this exercise has shown us the significance of formal patterns and how they function thematically. Variation in repetition is sometimes employed to disclose a certain aspect of a discourse, while retaining the core meaning. Having examined these formal and

formulaic patterns, let us consider now the more general and overarching thematic aspects which these surahs share.

### 5. *Thematic Complementarity*

The following part of this study is dedicated to exploring themes prevalent in the *Ḥawāmīm* corpus. I will attempt to demonstrate that the surahs treat corresponding and recurring themes, and that this recurrence is not simply redundant repetition, but rather reveals a thematic correlation that functions as conversations and dialogues between the surahs.

Islāhī called the recurrence of themes in several surahs *complementarity*, giving emphasis thereby to this significant aspect of Qur'anic composition, while stressing that the nature of this correlation is one whereby a surah *complements* another surah. Islāhī's meticulous efforts in identifying surah-surah relations led him to identify six different types of complementarity, which are:

(a) Brevity and detail, e.g. the relation between surahs 73 (*al-Muzzammil*) and 74 (*al-Muddaththir*). While the first is brief, the second is detailed.

(b) Principle and illustration, e.g. the relation between surahs 58 (*al-Mujādala*) and 59 (*al-Hashr*).

(c) Different types of evidence, e.g. the relation between surahs 12 (*Yūsuf*) and 13 (*ar-Ra'd*).

(d) Difference in emphasis, e.g. the relation between surahs 2 (*al-Baqara*) and 3 (*Āl 'Imrān*).

(e) Premise and conclusion, e.g. the relation between surahs 105 (*al-Fīl*) and 106 (*Quraysh*).

(f) Unity of opposites, e.g. the relation between surahs 65 (*aṭ-Ṭalāq*) and 66 (*at-Taḥrīm*).<sup>28</sup>

These types intimate various manifestations of one core idea, which, put in plain words, is the presence of germ ideas that are expounded and retold according to the considerations and contexts of subsequent recitations. To establish thematic coherence it is not sufficient, in my opinion, to simply identify analogous themes. What is required is an examination of how these themes are contextualized, what nuanced differences they bear, and, if possible, to explain these nuances in

<sup>28</sup> Mir, 77–79, citing Islāhī.

light of the thematic unity of the surah, surah character, and historical criteria.

In order to verify whether or not such complementarity exists in our corpus, let me propose for analysis six themes prevalent in all or some of these surahs. Some themes appear to be central to the general Meccan discourse, especially the middle and late Meccan, such as the confirmation of the Prophet's prophethood and the discourse about the opposition of the unbelievers, whereas other themes appear to be of a more universal monotheistic nature. All this will become clearer through illustration. I would like to focus on these particular themes, while noting beforehand that this attempt does not claim to exhaust all possible thematic parallels.

### 5.1. *The Arabic Nature of the Qur'an* (qur'ānan 'arabiyyan)

One of the more striking aspects of some of the passages in our corpus is the overt concern with the language of the Qur'an (see Q 39:1.2.28, Q 40:2, Q 41 throughout, but especially verses 2.3.26.44, Q 42:3.7.17 and 51–53, Q 43:2–4, Q 44:4, Q 45:2.28–29, and Q 46:4.9.12). Why do these surahs insist over and over again that the Qur'an is composed in Arabic? Is the language of the text not evident to its audience?

A close reading of these passages will show that the Qur'an is not defining the language in which it is composed, for that is evident, but what it is in fact stating is that the language employed is a comprehensible one, a language that the audience of the Qur'an can understand. The reader of these surahs will notice these surahs are intensely occupied with this issue. Among these surahs perhaps surah 41 (*Fuṣṣilat*) deals with the linguistic nature of the Qur'an the most. What can be gleaned from these passages dealing with the Arabic nature of the text, I would suggest, is that there might have been a query, or even a challenge posed to the language of this revelation. This query could have sounded like this: if the Prophet claims that this revelation is from the same source of earlier revelations, then why was his revelation not revealed in one of the languages of these earlier revelations (e.g. Hebrew, Syriac, Greek, etc.)? This challenge could have come from a pagan, a Jew, a Christian, or from all of them. The issue at stake here is the integrity of the linguistic medium itself, the Arabic language. Why an Arabic revelation?

The Qur'anic response recurs throughout the corpus: *bi-lisānin 'arabiyyin mubīn, qur'ānan 'arabiyyan ghayr dhī 'iwajin, qur'ānan*

*‘arabiyyan la-‘allakum ta‘qilūn, al-kitāb al-mubīn, allāhu anzala aḥsana l-ḥadīth, and wa-hādhā kitābun muṣaḍḍiqun lisānan ‘arabiyyan li-yundhira alladhīna ḡalamū wa-buṣhrā li-l-muḥsinīn.* In plain words: a clear and comprehensible language so that the audience may understand its message. The Qur’an therefore makes a clearly conscious and courageous preference for a comprehensible language which the audience will comprehend, over a scriptural language whose only virtue is its antiquity. Furthermore, the passages hint at a theory of divine communication that is essentially pragmatic: *qur’ānan ‘arabiyyan li-tundhira umma l-qurā wa-man ḡawlahā.*<sup>29</sup> It is not my concern to engage in an exegesis of these passages, but rather to underline some of the more salient themes and to direct attention to their distinctive features. I will briefly add that the reader of these passages will observe how significant this theme is in the corpus, so much that it is accorded great attention and elaboration. It would seem to me therefore that the truth of the Qur’anic message is intimately related to the language of its composition, Arabic, but this is a claim whose substantiation is beyond our current interest.

As for the interrelatedness of these surahs, that all of them address the issue of the linguistic nature of the text may suggest the centrality of this issue in the period during which these texts were recited. Moreover, the recurrence of this theme throughout the corpus is further justification of their interconnectedness.

## 5.2. *The Refusal of the Prophetic Message* (at-Takdhīb)

Another theme which these surahs dwell upon is the reaction of the unbelievers to the prophetic message (Q 39:24.25.32.41.45.59.60, Q 40, throughout the surah, but especially verses 4.5.68–70.83, Q 41:5.8–15.23–33.41, Q 42:7–16.48, Q 43:7.22.23.40.47.51–53.58, Q 44:13.14, and Q 46:4.9.12). The treatment of this highly important aspect of prophetic experience is well elaborated throughout the corpus. I will underline several chief issues which appear in these surahs. First and foremost, the reader will notice a conscious effort to handle this rejection. The Qur’an does not explicitly counter-reject the original rejection, but takes up this matter rather cleverly and creatively appropriates their rejection into the Qur’anic discourse. This gradually evolves into an argument for the truth of the Qur’anic message. We are told about

<sup>29</sup> This notion is emphasized in other passages in the Qur’an, cf. Q 14:4: *wa-mā arsalnā min rasūlin illā bi-lisāni qawmihi li-yubayyina lahum.*

this rejection overtly, and are provided with a catalogue of forms in which this rejection manifests itself: mockery, ridicule, unwillingness to listen, turning away, and accusations of sorts. This rejection is characterized brilliantly by several narratives such as that of 'Ād and Thamūd in surah 41 and the people of Abraham in surah 43. But by far, the most exemplary typification of this rejection of the Qur'anic message is Pharaoh's attitude to Moses and the Israelites. This narrative occurs in surahs 40, 43 and 44.

Two characters are particularly interesting here. The first is a man from the people of Pharaoh, *mu'min āl fir'awn*, who conceals his faith in the Mosaic prophecy and stands defiant against the tyranny and rejection of Pharaoh (Q 40:28ff.). The second is a man from among the Israelites, presumably a Jew of Arabia, who acts as witness to the truth of the Qur'anic message, *wa-shahida shāhidun min banī isrā'īla 'alā mithlihī* (Q 46:11). The similarities between the two characters are remarkable and allude to a particular concern with the attitude of the unbelievers throughout the corpus and the likely presence of supporters even among the rejecting community in Mecca.

Rejection of the Qur'anic message brought about even greater and far more complex challenges than that concerning the linguistic nature of the text. One of these evident and fundamental challenges was the question of prophetic diversity and genealogy. If the Muhammadan claim of belonging to a prophetic genealogy is true, then what precisely characterizes this message (the Qur'an)? Wouldn't this claim only inflict more conflict and struggle among the adherents of these prophets? And a more fundamental question, what was the cause of this conflict in the first place? These questions and their cognates were provocative and evidently hostile, but they were nevertheless significant challenges that the Qur'an had to debate (cf. for instance surah 42:7–16).

### 5.3. *Oppression*

Intimately related to the theme of the rejection of the prophetic message is the theme of the oppression that his community suffered at the hands of the unbelievers (Q 40: throughout the surah, especially 35–36.45.51–57.60.77.83–85, Q 41:15.35.38, Q 43:51–53, Q 44:19.31, Q 45:13, Q 46:35). The unbelievers are designated here as tyrant oppressors (*al-mustakbirūn*), whereas the believers are designated as the oppressed, the weak (*al-mustaḍ'afūn*). These designations appear

noticeably in surah 40 (*Ghāfir*), in which a central theme is the oppression and the suffering of the believing community, the doom of the oppressors, and consolation of the community by a promise of a victory that awaits them. The surah therefore begins with a set of appellatives attributed to God stressing his might and sovereignty over the oppressors. Moreover, the surah contains a frequent occurrence of words denoting might, strength, and power (*ba's*, *shidda*, *kibr*, *qahhār*, etc.), cf. 40:35.56.60.75.76.

The Qur'an instructs the oppressed believers to practice perseverance and to endure oppression until divine victory is granted them (40:51.52.54). In this context, *ṣabr* becomes part of the Qur'anic discourse and appears as a virtue typified in several exemplary prophets (40:35, 42:43). In surah 42:43 (*ash-Shūrā*) there is an allusion to the merit of perseverance and forgiveness: *wa la-man ṣabara wa-ghafara inna dhālika min 'azmi l-umūr*. In Q 46:35 (*al-Aḥqāf*), this virtue becomes a characteristic of a certain group of prophets, whom are given the appellative *ulū l-'azm*, and the Qur'anic command then is to endure like the endurance of those prophets: *fa-ṣbir kamā ṣabara ulū l-'azmi mina r-rusul*. The veneration of these prophets, *ulū l-'azmi mina r-rusul*, in these particular passages calls for a literary analysis of how the refusal of the Qur'anic message and the subsequent persecution of the community were creatively appropriated and refashioned such that it would become an integral part of the Qur'anic *Heilsgeschichte* and further evidence to the truth of the prophetic claim.<sup>30</sup> The *Ḥawāmīm* would appear to be a good place to start.

#### 5.4. Reflection on Emigration

However, the Qur'anic attitude toward the rejection, mockery, and oppression of the Prophet and his community was not limited to instructions of endurance and promises of an eventual divine victory. There were indeed hints at a practical solution which would end the suffering of the community, namely, emigration (Q 39:10, Q 44:23–32). Although the Qur'anic word *hijra* only appears in later Medinan texts (cf. 2:218), the idea could be traced to earlier Meccan texts.

There are two occurrences in the *Ḥawāmīm* corpus in which the emigration of the community from Mecca is referenced. The first is

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Q 40:51–55. Notice the manner in which the two verses about God's guidance to Moses and the Israelites (53 and 54) appear in the context of the instruction to practice *ṣabr* and the promise of victory.

39:10, *wa-arḍu allāhi wāsiʿa*, i.e., “and God’s earth is spacious,” which may be considered as an allusion to emigration. The second occurrence, Q 44:23–52, which is more explicit in this regard, is a continuous narrative and not just a brief hint. The narrative retells the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt following the tyranny of Pharaoh. Similar to the narrative in 40:28ff., in which the Prophet is likened, mimetically, to Moses, and his community is likened to the Israelites, the same is true of this narrative in surah 44 (which is chronologically later than the narrative in surah 40). Here, the exodus-narrative is considered a divine blessing and a journey that was undertaken under the full guidance of God. A close reading of this narrative suggests that since the Israelites fled from the tyranny of Pharaoh, so too can this be the fate of the community of believers, if God wills it. Therefore, the *Ḥawāmīm* creatively illustrate the sense of despair and worry the community was feeling, and is a deep reflection on the possibility of a recurrence of the divinely guided exodus.

### 5.5. *Anthropology*

Several passages in our corpus pertain to Qur’anic anthropology (Q 39:4–6, Q 40:64.67, Q 42:50, Q 46:15–18). There is an emphasis that man is a creation of God, and is a sign, *āya*, illustrating God’s creativity and design. This is, more or less, the general context in which the majority of these passages appear. However, there are at least two additional contexts in which anthropological passages are to be found. The first is the context of the Qur’anic refutation of God having offspring, which might be a reference to theological debates that occurred in the Meccan context (39:4–6). The second appearance of these anthropological passages is in the context of the relationship of an unbelieving man to his believing parents, and vice versa, in other words, the struggle between kinship and faith (46:15–18). What is interesting here is that these passages are far more intricately involved in their respective contexts than an isolated reading of the passages might suggest.

Concerning the interconnectedness of these surahs, these passages focus special attention to describing the stages of human creation, a description whose purpose is to stress that creation is a calculated and designed process (*ajal musamman*).

### 5.6. *Eschatological Imagery*

There is considerable eschatological content in all the *Hawāmīm* surahs (Q 39:16.56.67–75, Q 40:7–9.46–56.71–76, Q 41:19–22, Q 42:44–45, Q 43:74–77, Q 44:13.40, Q 45:27–37, Q 46:6.20.34). This element has led some to designate the *Hawāmīm* as “die Höllensuren des Koran,” i.e., the hellfire surahs of the Qur’an.<sup>31</sup> This designation, as appealing as it may seem, nevertheless fails to grasp the literary significance of these narratives.

A close reading of these eschatological narratives makes evident that there is a striking pattern in these hell-episodes, but it is not the violent or terrifying language in which they are formulated, for we do not know of any pleasant portrayal of such a place, but rather in the literary characteristics which they all share: their *dialogical* nature. We observe this in an episode in which a dialogue takes place between the believers and the unbelievers and another dialogue takes place between the unbelievers and the guardians of hell, and another between the unbelievers and their bodily organs which act as witnesses against them. Additionally, there are dialogues that take place between the unbelievers and God, and between the believers and God. The following table presents these episodes, the characters involved in each dialogue, and the fine distinctions which each dialogue reveals.

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<sup>31</sup> Goossens, “Ursprung und Bedeutung,” 361. “Die Eschatologie dieser Suren behandelt nun weniger die Freuden des Paradieses, als die qualvollen Strafen des Jenseits. Unter namentlichem Hinweis auf frühere Strafgerichte Allahs warnen sie die Sünder vor dem Höllenpfuhle. Die 7 Suren bilden, mehr oder weniger ausgeprägt, die Höllensuren des Korans.”



Pericope (verses)	Characters involved in dialogue	Specifics
39:67–75	Believers; unbelievers, guardians of hell; guardians of paradise.	Dialogue between unbelievers and guardians of hell (verses 71.72), dialogue between believers and guardians of paradise (verses 73.74).
40:46–51	Oppressors ( <i>al-mustakbirūn</i> ); oppressed ( <i>aḍ-ḍu‘afā’</i> ); guardians of hell.	Dialogue between oppressors and oppressed (verses 47.48), dialogue between unbelievers and guardians of hell (verses 49.50).
40:71–75	Unbelievers; passive voice (presumably guardians of hell).	Dialogue between unbelievers and guardians of hell (verses 73.74).
41:19–22	Unbelievers ( <i>a‘dā’ allāh</i> ); their ears, eyes and skin (as witnesses to their doings).	The ears, eyes and skin act as witnesses to the acts of the unbelievers (v. 20) followed by a dialogue between unbelievers and their bodily organs (v. 21).
42:44–45	Unbelievers ( <i>adh-dhālimūn</i> ); believers.	Reaction of unbelievers upon receiving their punishment (v. 44), reaction of believers upon receiving their reward (v. 45), no dialogue.
43:74–77	Unbelievers; <i>Mālik</i> or <i>Malak</i> (the guardian of hell)	Dialogue between the unbelievers and the guardian of hell (v. 77).
44:40–57	Contrast between the reward of the believers and punishment of the unbelievers, no dialogue.	
45:27–35	Narrative voice, embodying the character of a divine judge.	Divine voice announcing the fate of the believers and the unbelievers and the justification therefore.
46:20	Unbelievers; judge.	Fate of the unbelievers, justification of this fate.
46:34	Unbelievers, judge.	Fate of the unbelievers, dialogue between unbelievers and God.

The dialogical nature of these eschatological narratives has not been given the scholarly attention it deserves. These narratives indicate the significance these episodes are meant to convey. A close look at these narratives will show that the main objective of these episodes is the exposure of the contrast between the two parties, the believers and the unbelievers, and this exposure occurs in the presence of witnesses and a just God. Evidently then, the eschatological narratives of the *Hawāmīm* bear far greater potential than mere stories of frightening scenes, as suggested in the title “Höllensuren.” Furthermore, the dialogues are composed in what is clearly forensic language, i.e. the

jargon of court cases (e.g. *shahida*, *tujzawna*, *kitāb*, *nastansikhu*). Thus, for instance, we find in Q 41:21–22 and Q 46:34 a narrative which depicts a juridical case in which evidence is brought against the unbelievers. In Q 46:36, for example, the unbelievers admit to their wrongdoings. The episodes in which the unbelievers reveal regret and appeal for forgiveness are numerous, Q 40:49, and Q 42:44. Thus, the perspective that these surahs complement each other produces the cinematographic effect of a grand and continuous drama whose actors are well-known to the listeners, and whose scenes are presented progressively as the Qur'an unfolds.

With this in mind, it becomes clear that the scenes are not isolated narratives, but in fact complement each other and, as far as their generic characteristics are concerned, they reveal apparent dialogical and forensic aspects, which grant these scenes a richer exegetical horizon. An issue to which we will return is to what extent these episodes, in virtue of their dialogical and forensic language, are a reflection of the discussions and debates that took place between the Prophet and his Meccan townsmen.

#### 6. Additional Correspondences

In addition to the formal, formulaic, and thematic aspects that I have dealt with above, there exist more detailed and intricate correspondences which are further corroboration of the interconnectedness of the *Ḥawāmīm* surahs. These correspondences have been collected and organized in the form of the table below (see Appendix). These various observations, taken together, substantiate further the view that the *Ḥawāmīm* were composed and recited in the same period of time and that the redactors of the Muṣḥaf were aware of this and consequently arranged these surahs in an order that corresponds, more or less, to the order in which they were recited.

But when were these surahs recited? How can we describe this Meccan period? Can we refer to extra-Qur'anic sources here to understand the general milieu in which these texts were composed and recited, and thereby arrive at a better understanding of why these surahs display so many similarities? These questions will be the subject of the next section.

7. *The Meccan Sitz im Leben: The sīra and Qur'anic Narratives*

Although there are weaknesses in *sīra* sources, when carefully used they offer valuable information for understanding Qur'anic material. The *sīra*, specifically Ibn Ishāq's *sīra* as redacted by Ibn Hishām, is our main interpretative narrative.<sup>32</sup> Ibn Ishāq's recounting of the nascent community's struggle for existence in Mecca is chronological, with some periodic allusions to the Qur'an.<sup>33</sup> The *sīra* relates episodes of Meccan hostility, the Prophet's response, the vulnerability of his community, and their need for a place of protection. Debates between the Prophet and the leaders of Quraysh occupy a large part of the reports. These reports tell us about the Quraysh's challenge to the Prophet to advance evidence that would vouch for the truth of his prophecy.<sup>34</sup> The Qur'anic response takes the form of warnings embodied in punishment narratives. Subsequently, Quraysh reacted by mocking these narratives and responded scornfully by challenging the Prophet to quicken the fulfillment of his warnings, which would include their own destruction.<sup>35</sup> Then Quraysh, who are depicted as being poorly acquainted with the Judeo-Christian tradition, begin to feel outwitted by the Qur'anic recitations and turn to Jewish scholars of Arabia for support. Here surah 18 (*al-Kahf*) is referred to in the context of a Jewish challenge to the Prophet.<sup>36</sup> This is followed by a series of reports about Meccan persecution of the oppressed (*al-mustad'afūn*) among the Muslim community.<sup>37</sup> The Prophet then orders his followers to immigrate to Abyssinia (*al-Ḥabasha*) where a just Christian king rules.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, matters worsen in Mecca as the Meccans decide to endorse a boycott on Banū Hāshim, the family, and sole protectors of the Prophet. The boycott was approved in the form of a written document (*aṣ-ṣaḥīfa*) which was in effect for two

<sup>32</sup> This has been dealt with in detail by the Tunisian historian Hishām Djait in his recent monograph, *Tārīkhiyyat ad-Da'wa al-Muḥammadiyya fī Makka* [The Historicity of the Muhammadan Call in Mecca], 26–40. I will refer to Ibn Hishām, *as-Sīra an-Nabawiyya*, ed. Muṣṭafa as-Saqqā, Ibrāhīm al-Abyārī, and 'Abd al-Ḥafīdh Shalabī, vol. 1.

<sup>33</sup> For example, Q 18 (*al-Kahf*), in: Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, 294–297; Q 41 (*Fuṣṣilat*), in Ibn Hishām, 293–294; Q 38 (*Ṣād*), in Ibn Hishām, 418; Q 46 (*al-Aḥqāf*), in Ibn Hishām, 422.

<sup>34</sup> Ibn Hishām, 294–297.

<sup>35</sup> Ibn Hishām, 298.

<sup>36</sup> Ibn Hishām, 300–304.

<sup>37</sup> Ibn Hishām, 317–321.

<sup>38</sup> Ibn Hishām, 321–333.

years.<sup>39</sup> Just shortly after the suspension of the boycott, the Prophet's wife Khadija, and his main protector, his uncle Abū Ṭālib, died. The pestering continued and the Prophet felt more vulnerable and weaker than before; he began to seek the support of neighboring cities and tribes. His attempt to gain support and protection from the tribe of Thaqīf in the neighboring city of aṭ-Ṭā'if failed.<sup>40</sup> This was followed by a persistent and a mostly fruitless effort to win the leaders of Arab tribes, through meetings during the Ḥajj seasons.<sup>41</sup> Success was achieved however through talks with pilgrims from Yathrib (later called *al-madīna al-munawwara*) at a place called al-ʿAqaba. The results were very important: the acceptance of the prophetic message and the conversion of several Yathribines. The event was called *bayʿat al-ʿaqaba al-ūlā*,<sup>42</sup> and was followed by further important meetings with pilgrims from Yathrib. The two main tribes of Yathrib, Aws and Khazraj agreed to safeguard the Prophet and to provide a safe refuge for the persecuted Muslims in Mecca. This significant event was called *bayʿat al-ʿaqaba ath-thāniya*.<sup>43</sup> Meccan Muslims began to immigrate to al-Medina, followed shortly thereafter by the Prophet.

The intention of reminding the reader of these events is to provide a general background against which these Meccan surahs may be understood. In comparing the events with the *Ḥawāmīm* surahs, it is apparent that numerous instances of correspondence do exist. Yet as clear and simple as the chronological account may seem, it appears less clear, on the other hand, whether it is possible to discern a corresponding trajectory of ideas in the surahs in question. Common sense would seem to suggest beginning by identifying crucial moments and turning points which might have been the subject of reflection and commentary by the Qur'an. Such moments would include, for example: the Meccan rejection of the Prophet's recitations, their oppression of his followers, the Prophet's perplexed feelings, and his search for protection and support. This is what I have attempted to do in the previous sections.

A characteristic of the Qur'anic presentation of biblical and eschatological narratives is the manner in which these narratives are re-told: they appear merged with the account of Meccan persecution.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibn Hishām, 350–354.

<sup>40</sup> Ibn Hishām, 419–422.

<sup>41</sup> Ibn Hishām, 422–427.

<sup>42</sup> Ibn Hishām, 428–435.

<sup>43</sup> Ibn Hishām, 438–452.

Moreover, the rapid switch of verb tenses (*al-iltifāt*) is a narrative technique which implies that biblical history, conveyed through these narratives, was not a distant and vague memory; rather, it was intimately present and re-enacted *there* in Mecca.

Evidently then, the middle and late Meccan surahs expose the state of oppression the Prophet and his community experienced in Mecca. An attentive reading of the narratives communicated in these surahs shows the severity of the situation.<sup>44</sup> It was indeed the most difficult and most crucial period in the lifetime of the young community. Nowhere in the Qur'an is such a harsh response to the unbelievers present, as is presented in the middle and late Meccan surahs, symbolized in the punishment narratives.<sup>45</sup> The *Ḥawāmīm* are replete with such narratives.<sup>46</sup> The suffering of Ṣāliḥ, Hūd, Noah, Moses, and Abraham in these narratives are analogous to the sufferings of the Prophet and his community. And 'Ād, Thamūd, the proud Pharaoh, and their hosts (*al-mala'*) were evidently the adversaries, Quraysh. These narratives sought to remind them of past nations which had brought disaster and calamity upon themselves after having refused to accept the call of their messengers. In addition to an eschatological punishment, the Qur'an threatens the Meccans with a temporal punishment that would lead to the destruction of Mecca itself. In surah 41:13 the Prophet is commanded to warn the Meccans: "But if they [i.e. the Meccans] turn away, then say: I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt of 'Ād and Thamūd." The punishment narratives are therefore proof of the complex and painful situation the Prophet and his community experienced.<sup>47</sup>

Simultaneously, the Qur'an begins to urge the believers to remain strong and defiant against oppression and to endure the persecution of the Meccans. It is ultimately a trial of faith. In this context, the believers are told countless consoling and edifying stories about the

<sup>44</sup> Paret, "Der Koran als Geschichtsquelle," 24–42.

<sup>45</sup> Paret, *Muhammad und der Koran*, 84–89.

<sup>46</sup> There is mention of (a) Noah and his contemporaries in Q 40:5,31 and Q 42:13, (b) 'Ād and their messenger Hūd in Q 40:31 and Q 41:12–16, (c) Thamūd and their messenger Ṣāliḥ in Q 40:31 and Q 41:13,17, (d) Moses and the Israelites and their oppression at the hands of Pharaoh and his men in Q 40:23,26,27,37,53; Q 41:45; Q 42:13; Q 43:46; Q 46:12,30, (e) Abraham and his people in Q 42:13 and Q 43:26. There is even reference to Yūsuf in Q 40:34, and to 'Īsā in Q 42:13 and Q 43:63.

<sup>47</sup> For a detailed analysis of the Qur'anic punishment narratives in light of the biography of the Prophet, see Marshal, *God, Muhammad and the Unbelievers*, 52–115.

strength and faith of previous believers, for example, in surah 40 (*Ghāfir*).

Mecca, however, was no longer a safe place. Persecution and oppression were growing, and the Qur'anic appeal to endurance and patience seemed futile. It is at this moment that Qur'anic narratives begin to focus on the theme of the emigration of the oppressed. In a fresh telling, surah 44 (*ad-Dukhān*) places the story of the Israelite flight from Pharaoh in the context of Meccan arrogance and disbelief, as if anticipating or, even suggesting, such an option for the oppressed believers of Mecca.

#### 8. *The Ḥawāmīm in the 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān Literature*

The perspective that these surahs together form an interconnected group is not altogether new; there is in fact a recurring understanding in the Qur'anic exegetical literature that the surahs are interconnected. Perhaps the most evident illustration of this contention is the numerous ḥadīths describing the merits of those who recite the *Ḥawāmīm*. These ḥadīths were fabricated, undoubtedly, out of piety, like much of the *fadā'il al-qur'ān* literature.<sup>48</sup> If anything, these fabricated ḥadīths wanted to inform the reader about the merits of reciting these surahs, and not so much to emphasize that they cohere. Nevertheless, the fact that these fabrications focus on the merits of reciting these surahs rather than on what connects these surahs together is implicit evidence that these surahs were considered interconnected and were presumably treated as a whole in the Muslim tradition, even if the notion in the *fadā'il al-qur'ān* literature was only vaguely expressed.

There are however more explicit statements in the exegetical tradition which allude to the interconnectedness of these surahs. Let us consider three of these statements. The first is taken from Ibn Salāma's *an-Nāsikh wa-l-Mansūkh*. Ibn Salāma (d. 410 AH):

وليس في كتاب الله سبع سور تزلت في التأليف واحدة بعد واحدة إلا الحواميم.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Fadā'il al-qur'ān*, 6, ḥadīth no. 4612; Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, *Iqāma*, 71, ḥadīth no. 1046; Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 1, no. 401; *Dārimī*, *Fadā'il al-qur'ān*, 14 and 22; Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, *Thawāb al-qur'ān*, 2.

This citation emphasizes the point that it is only these seven surahs (*al-Hawāmīm*) which were arranged in the *muṣḥaf* one after the other with correspondence to their order of revelation.<sup>49</sup>

The second citation is taken from az-Zarkashī's *al-Burhān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*:

وقد يجعل اسماً للسورة ويدخل الإعراب عليها ويصرف، ومن قال هذا قال في الجمع الحواميم كما يقال طس والطواسين. وكره بعض السلف منهم محمد بن سيرين أن يقال الحواميم وإنما يقال آل حم. قال عبد الله بن مسعود رضى الله عنه: "آل حم ديباج القرآن." وقال ابن عباس رضى الله عنهما: "إن لكل شئ لباباً، وللباب القرآن حم، أوقال: الحواميم." وقال مسعر بن كدام: "كان يقال لهن العرائس." ذكر ذلك كله أبو عبيد في فضائل القرآن.

وقال حميد بن زنجويه ثنا عبد الله إسرائيل عن أبي إسحاق عن أبي الأحوص عن أبي عبد الله قال: "إن مثل القرآن كمثل رجل انطلق يرتاد منزلاً فتر بأثر غيث، فينما هو يسير فيه ويتعجب منه إذ هبط على روضات دُمثات، فقال عَجِبْتُ مِنَ الْغَيْثِ الْأَوَّلِ، فهذا العجب والعجب! فقيل له: إن مثل الغيث الأول مثل عظم القرآن، وإن مثل هؤلاء الروضات مثل حم في القرآن." أورده البغوي.

Az-Zarkashī (d. 749 AH) makes two points here. The first relates to the letters *hā mīm*: whether the plural is *hawāmīm*, and whether it is correct to call these surahs the *hawāmīm*. Second, he cites several traditions pertaining to the merits of the recitation of these surahs. One of these traditions depicts the *hawāmīm* as a series of gardens, leaving one garden and entering another, the beholder is only amazed at what he perceives. Likewise, the reader of the *hawāmīm* surahs, reading one surah after another, is marveled by what he finds.

The third statement is from *Tartīb as-Suwar* by as-Suyūṭī (d. 911 AH):

أقول: وجه إيلاء الحواميم السبع سورة „الزمر“: تأخى المطالع في الافتتاح بتزليل الكتاب وفي مصحف أبي بن كعب: أول الزمر „حم“، وذلك مناسبة جليظة. ثم إن الحواميم ترتبت لا شراكها في

<sup>49</sup> Ibn Salāma, *Asbāb an-Nuzūl*, printed on the margin of al-Wāḥidī, *Asbāb an-Nuzūl*, 267 (concerning the *asbāb* of surah 40).

الافتتاح بـ”حم“، وبذكر الكتاب بعد، ”حم“، وأنها مكية، بل ورد في الحديث أنها نزلت جملة، وفيها شبهة من ترتيب ذوات، ”الر“ الست. فانظر ثانية الحواميم وهي، ”فُصِّلَتْ“، كيف شابهت ثانية ذوات، ”الر“، ”هود“ في تغيير الأسلوب في وصف الكتاب وأن في، ”هود“: (كُتِبَ أَحْكَمُ آيَاتِهِ ثُمَّ فُصِّلَتْ) وفي، ”فُصِّلَتْ“: (كُتِبَ فُصِّلَتْ آيَاتُهُ) وفي سائر ذوات (الر) (تلك آيات الكتاب) وفي سائر الحواميم: (تنزيل الكتاب) أو (والكتاب).

ورينا عن جابر بن زيد وابن عباس في ترتيب نزول السور: أن الحواميم نزلت عقب، ”الزمر“، وأنها نزلت متتاليات كترتيبها في المصحف: ”المؤمن“، ثم، ”السجدة“، ثم، ”الشورى“، ثم، ”الزخرف“، ثم، ”الدخان“، ثم، ”الجاثية“، ثم، ”الأحقاف“، ولم يتخللها نزول غيرها، وتلك مناسبة جلية واضحة في وضعها.

هكذا أثر ظهري لطيفة أخرى، وهي: أنه في كل ربع من أرباع القرآن توالى سبع سور مفتحة بالحروف المقطعة فهذه السبع مصدرية بـ”حم“، وسبع في الربع الذي قبله ذوات، ”الر“ الست متوالية، و”المص“، ”الأعراف“، فإنها متصلة بـ”يونس“ على ما تقدمت الإشارة إليه وافتتح أول القرآن بسورتين من ذلك، وأول النصف الثاني بسورتين. وقال الكرماني في العجائب: ”ترتيب الحواميم السبع لما بينهما من التشاكل الذي خُصَّصَ به، وهو: أن كل سورة منها اسفحت بالكتاب أو وصفه، مع تفاوت المقادير في الطول والقصر، وتشاكل الكلام في النظام، انتهى“.

قلت: وانظر إلى مناسبة ترتيبها، فإن مطلع، ”غافر“ مناسب لمطلع، ”الزمر“، ومطلع، ”فُصِّلَتْ“ التي هي ثانية الحواميم مناسب لمطلع هود، التي هي ثانية ذوات (الر) ومطلع، ”الزخرف“ مواج لمطلع، ”الدخان“، وكذا مطلع، ”الجاثية“ لمطلع، ”الأحقاف“.

As-Sūyūfī here offers a detailed analysis. Three issues may be highlighted. First, his observation concerning the similarity between the introduction of surah 39 (*az-Zumar*) and the rest of the *Hawāmīm*; this observation, he points out, explains what has been reported about the *muṣḥaf* of Ubayy (cf. above). Second, he stresses the correspondence between the chronological order of the surahs and the canonical order in the *muṣḥaf*. Third, comparing the order of the *Hawāmīm* with the order of the six surahs beginning with *alif lām rā* (surahs



10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15), as-Suyūṭī makes several notes pertinent to the redaction and composition of the surahs.

### 9. Conclusion

This study has shown that the *Hawāmīm* surahs are anything but “amorphous” or incomplete,<sup>50</sup> but rather reveal a clear sense of character and unity. This sense of unity probably must have led to the arrangement of the surahs in their canonical order in the *muṣṣaḥf*. I have argued that the surahs are interconnected and that what accounts for their interconnectedness is more than just formal elements such as the disconnected letters at the beginning of the surahs.

Concerning the chronological order of these surahs, I have argued, in contrast to Nöldeke’s proposition, that the surahs were most probably revealed in the order most exegetes have presented and that the surahs exhibit a recurrence and development of a particular set of themes. Acknowledging Iṣlāḥī’s theory, I have proposed to render this recurrence, which is an essential element of Qur’anic composition, *complementarity*.

In addition, this study has strengthened the notion of a coherent identity and character that dominates the surah. Exploring formal, formulaic, and thematic parallels within the surah group has additionally confirmed the importance and the need for such an approach to the rest of the Qur’anic corpus. Clearly, an intertextual reading of the Qur’an is indispensable if we wish to explore the redaction as well as the literary composition of the text. Furthermore, although I have not engaged in an exegesis of these surahs, I have underlined some of the most salient aspects which should be taken into account when doing so. I have shown, for instance, that the surahs are intimately intertwined with the Meccan context and the vicissitudes of the nascent Muslim community. In the case of eschatological imagery, for example, we have observed that the dialogical and forensic nature of these episodes are significant and have major exegetical implica-

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<sup>50</sup> This has been suggested by Seale, “The Mysterious Letters in the Qur’an,” 377. He writes: “These short amorphous Suras I reckon to be unfinished compositions which the Prophet kept aside with the hope of being able to add to them such embellishments as parables and snatches from history, and so were marked *ḥadīth muqaṭṭaʿ*, as an indication of their unfinished character.” By *ḥadīth muqaṭṭaʿ*, Seale is referring to his interpretation of the disconnected letters *Ḥā mīm*.

tions. This observation is the outcome of the perspective that the relationship between the surahs is one of complementarity.

In conclusion, I would like to make a note concerning the scholarly value of the exegetical literature that I referred to briefly in the last section. Considering the quotations mentioned in section 8, the significance of these brief yet highly erudite statements becomes manifest. Indeed, these citations do not examine the interconnectedness of these surahs in the detailed manner I have attempted; yet they have touched upon several significant aspects of this interconnectedness. Their mentioning of the disconnected letters, the introduction, the surah order, the stylistic similarities (*tashākul al-kalām fī n-nidhām*), and the illustration of the complementarity between the surahs in the image of the series of gardens are all worthy of notice. This brings me to my last conclusion. This study suggests that quite often the *literary student* of the Qur'an has more to benefit from a critical and resourceful reading of the traditional exegetical literature than from much of modern Qur'anic scholarship. The difference between the two approaches is the difference between the view that the text is a finely interconnected whole, as our quoted exegetes assumed, and the view that it is a patchwork of miscellaneous texts, as most contemporary scholars assume.

*Appendix: Additional Correspondences*

Corresponding surahs	Specifics
Q 39 and 40	<p>(1) One of the significant, yet less evident correspondences between these two surahs is the correlation between the end of the surah 39 and the beginning of surah 40. Both the end of surah 39 and the introductory verses of surah 40 intimate the theme of divine mercy and forgiveness and that punishment (<i>al-'adhāb</i>) is only inflicted on those who deserve it. In addition, both end with an introduction giving mention to angels. The correspondence between the end of surah 39 and the beginning of surah 40 leaves the reader with the impression that surah 40 picks up from where surah 39 ended.</p> <p>(2) There is an apparent relation between surah 39:2.14 and surah 40:14: both demanding pure submission to God. It would appear that the latter occurrence complements the former.</p> <p>(3) Q 40:18, <i>wa-andhirhum yawma l-āzifa</i>, complements Q 39:71.73 in their employment of the word <i>zumar</i>. Both words, <i>āzifa</i> and <i>zumar</i>, denote crowds of people and/or their movement. In Q 39, the first occurrence, two crowds, <i>zumar</i>, are portrayed being driven to their final destiny. This portrayal having been introduced and perhaps even appreciated by the audience, the image is then encapsulated in surah 40, in the second occurrence, whereby the portrayal in surah 39 is evoked in the genitive construction <i>yawm al-āzifa</i>, the day of the driven, marching crowds.</p> <p>(4) The apparent relationship between the exhortations and admonitions of the believer of the people of Pharaoh, <i>mu'min āl-fir'awn</i>, which are narrated in surah 40:41–44 and the many commands that appear in surah 39, such as surah 39:11–17.</p>
Q 39, 40, and 41	<p>The passages surah 39:8, surah 41:51, and surah 42:48 all treat the topic of man's ambivalent attitude toward the state of grace and convenience, <i>ni'ma</i>, and the state of misfortune and calamity, <i>mušība</i>. The passages complement one another by reflecting on various aspects of the same topic.</p>
Q 41 and 42	<p>The contrast between virtues and vices which is alluded to briefly in surah 41:34, <i>wa-lā tastawī al-ḥasanatu wa-la-l-sayyi'atu</i>, is lengthily expounded in surah 42, especially in vv. 20–26 and 40.</p>
Q 41 and 43	<p>Q 41:25, <i>wa-qayyadnā lahum quranā' fa-zayyanū lahum</i>, complements Q 43:36–38, <i>nuqayyid lahū shayṭānan fa-huwa lahū qarīn</i>, whereby the latter (which is arguably also the later chronologically) passage illustrates in more detail the former.</p>

Corresponding surahs	Specifics
Q 39, 40, 41, and 42	In Q 39:75, 40:7–9, 41:38, and 42:5, mention is made of the angels who are portrayed surrounding the divine throne, ever-praising, ever-praying.
Q 44 and 45	In the context of the debate over the possibility of the resurrection of the body after death, Q 45:25–26 ascribes to the unbelievers the same argument which was ascribed to them in surah 44:34–36, namely, the demand for an immediate resurrection of their forefathers.

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THE HOUSE OF ABRAHAM AND THE HOUSE OF AMRAM:  
GENEALOGY, PATRIARCHAL AUTHORITY, AND  
EXEGETICAL PROFESSIONALISM\*

Angelika Neuwirth

*Abraham, the Ultimate Role Model*

Muslim ritual prayer, perhaps the most expressive medium of religious identity, suggests that the Islamic faith relies predominantly on patriarchal tradition. It singles out one particular prophetic genealogy as *the* model for the House of the Prophet Muhammad—namely, the House of Abraham, Āl Ibrāhīm:

*Allāhumma ṣalli ‘alā Muḥammadin wa-‘alā āli Muḥammadin  
ka-mā ṣallayta ‘alā Ibrāhīma wa-‘alā āli Ibrāhīma  
wa-bārik ‘alā Muḥammadin wa-‘alā āli Muḥammadin  
ka-mā bārakta ‘alā Ibrāhīma wa-‘alā āli Ibrāhīma fī l-‘ālamīna  
innaka ḥamīdun majīd*

It should be noted that the figure of Abraham evoked in this prayer, though no other than the biblical patriarch, is first and foremost identical with the founder of the Meccan sanctuary; he is thus an unambiguously Muslim figure, whose image has little in common with the shared ancestor of the three monotheistic religions foregrounded in modern interfaith discourse,<sup>1</sup> let alone with the character of Abraham as it is formed within Jewish tradition. Since the current essay will focus on a controversy kindled in Medina, between the time-honored heirs to the Abrahamic tradition, the Medinan Jews, and the Qur’anic community, a brief summary of Abraham’s “Qur’anic career” is in place.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For Abraham’s image within the Qur’an, see Speyer, *Biblische Erzählungen*, 121–186, and Nagel, “Der erste Muslim,” who stresses the difference between the respective images of Abraham in the diverse traditions. For Abraham’s Meccan development see Sinai, *Fortschreibung und Auslegung*.

<sup>2</sup> Firestone, “Abraham,” is not concerned with the chronological development of the Qur’anic image of the patriarch.

Given that the Qur'anic community did not share the Jewish view of the children of Abraham ranking as the "People of God,"<sup>3</sup> one finds that Abraham whose name is mentioned already in some of the earliest surahs (Q 87:19, 53:37) does not prominently figure as the progenitor of the Israelites. From the beginning of the Qur'anic discourse, the patriarch rather makes his appearance as the paragon of unconditioned confidence in God, honored with the visit of angelic messengers who announce the birth of a son to him (Q 51:24–30); in the same story, he argues with God over the fate of the people of Lot (Q 11:71, cf. Gen. 18:1–20). He appears again in the story of the *Aqedah* (Q 37:99–107), where Abraham's offering of his son for sacrifice, is recounted (cf. Gen. 22:1–19). Still more significant, perhaps, than these events, geographically located in the Holy Land and in Mecca,<sup>4</sup> is the part of his biography that precedes his sojourn in the Holy Land, when he—still residing in Mesopotamia—becomes the destroyer of his father's idols (Q 37:83–98; 21:51–73; 26:69–89, 29:16–27), an episode also known from midrashic literature.<sup>5</sup> Another part of the history before his emigration is his attempt to abstract knowledge about the divine from the observation of cosmic movements (Q 6:76–79) and his debate about God with a high-ranking figure commonly identified as Nimrod (Q 2:258), stories equally found in apocryphal literature.<sup>6</sup> The Qur'anic Abraham is thus a complex figure, who does represent the exemplary just man known from the Genesis cycle, but who at the same time is a figure endowed with Mesopotamian wisdom, and last but not least a formative role in the emergence of the Meccan cult is attributed to him.

In terms of religious politics, Abraham's significance is felt for the first time following his "prayer for Mecca," reported in a late Meccan text, Q 14:35–41. Here, Abraham mentions that he has settled some of his progeny in Mecca, and it is for their subsistence and religious guidance that he prays. Though this prayer silently relocates Abraham's focal activities from the biblically attested milieu, the Holy Land, to the Arabian Peninsula, the text itself does not display any polemical tendency directed against the heirs of the older traditions. As Tilman Nagel has recently emphasized, we have to assume that traditions

<sup>3</sup> Though their privileged rank is conceded, see e. g. Q 17:70, 2:47.122.

<sup>4</sup> The *Aqedah* story seems to allude to a rite of the Meccan pilgrimage, see Firestone, "Abraham."

<sup>5</sup> Firestone, "Abraham"; Speyer, *Biblische Erzählungen*.

<sup>6</sup> See Speyer, *Biblische Erzählungen*.



about Abraham relating him to Mecca and its sanctuary were current in the peninsula well before the rise of Islam. Thus it seems that biblical history, at the time when the Qur'anic texts were formulated, had already been reshaped by and integrated into local tradition.<sup>7</sup>

Polemical undertones become audible only later, particularly in one of the focal texts about Abraham dating from the early Medinan period. Q 2:124–129 is a kind of “prayer in consecration of the Ka’ba” (shaped in some respects in analogy to the prayer in consecration of the Temple in Jerusalem, 1 Kings 8:14–61<sup>8</sup>). This text describes the incident of the cleansing of the Meccan sanctuary carried out by Abraham and his son Ishmael in preparation for the new cult to be established there. The prayer starts with an unambiguous rejection of the Israelites’ claim to a privileged rank, their surplus “dignity for the sake of their fathers,” *zekhūt abhōt*,<sup>9</sup> which they owe to their genealogy as the sons of Abraham, Q 2:124:

When Abraham was tried by his Lord with certain commandments which he fulfilled,

He said: I am making you a spiritual example for mankind.

Abraham said: And my posterity?

He replied: My covenant does not apply to the evil-doers.

In the Qur'anic text, the biblical promise to Abraham is reinterpreted: He is not destined to become the “father of a great nation” (Gen 12:2; 18:18), but—in the vein of the Pauline concept “father of all the faithful” (Romans 4:9–12)—“an example for mankind” in general. Concerning his progeny’s “dignity for their fathers’ sake,” Abraham’s request is declined; there will be no special rank for his offspring, who have to qualify for the covenant with God with achievements of their own.<sup>10</sup> The section ends with a prayer for the extension and completion of the Meccan cult, which—in addition to the rites of pilgrimage institutionalized by Abraham himself—should in the future comprise scriptural readings as well, so as to rise to the level of a verbal service, the model known from Jewish and Christian practice of the time. Recorded in the Qur’an, Abraham’s prayer is a

<sup>7</sup> Nagel, “Der erste Muslim,” and more recently Nagel, *Mohammed*.

<sup>8</sup> Neuwirth, “Jerusalem.”

<sup>9</sup> Aurelius, “Durch den Glauben gehorsam,” 98–111. The Qur’anic reclamer of *zekhut avot* is all the more striking since the “trials” (Q 2:124) that Abraham endured, and in which he prevailed—mentioned immediately before—are usually understood as those merits that won his descendents that privileged status (cf. Mishnah Avot 5:3).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the analysis of this passage in Sinai, *Fortschreibung und Auslegung*, chap. 6.

*vaticinatio ex eventu* that has already been answered with Muhammad's appearance, Q 2:129:

Our lord, send them a messenger from among themselves  
Who will recite to them your verses,  
To teach them the book and the wisdom and to purify them.  
You are surely the mighty, the wise.

There follows a kind of self-reflexive comment on what has been said, Q 2:130:

Who would forsake the religion of Abraham (*millat Ibrāhīm*)  
Except for one who makes a fool of himself?  
We have chosen him in this world and to the Hereafter,  
He shall be one of the righteous.

The covenant of Abraham, *millat Ibrāhīm*, is so called after the "covenant of circumcision," Hebrew *berit millah*. It has a double meaning in the Qur'an: through the adoption of the Hebrew loanword *millah*, the term *millat Ibrāhīm* refers to the historical covenant with Abraham. Yet in its Qur'anic context, it is also the expression of the self-perception of the emerging Qur'anic community that is shaping itself after the model of the older covenant. The community, through its self-designation as following *millat Ibrahim*, (community of the) covenant of Abraham (Q 2:135, Q 16:123), strives to identify itself as the bearer of the Abrahamic tradition. In later Qur'anic texts, the appropriation of the figure of Abraham will develop gradually, ultimately taking on an exclusivist quality.

This development operates with the strategies of both conjunction and disjunction: At the same time that the biblical Abraham is appropriated as a prototype of the new believers, *al-muslimūn*, (Q 2:135–136), Abraham is installed as the founder of the fundamental rites of the Arabian pilgrimage that culminate with the slaughter of a sacrificial animal.<sup>11</sup> Reclaiming Abraham for a local cultic practice that is

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<sup>11</sup> He is thus implicitly credited with substituting the ritual violence inflicted on humans with the institution of animal sacrifice—a basic civilizational achievement, according to René Girard, *La Violence et le Sacré*. At the same time, it may be considered a powerful symbolic expression of masculine domination, see Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*. From an anthropological perspective, the Abrahamic sacrificial heritage, which to this day obliges the Muslim pilgrim to sacrifice a ram or a similar sacrificial animal at the culmination point of his pilgrimage, appears strikingly gender-specific, cf. Combs-Schilling, *Sacred Performances*, 239: "The ram is of course male—important to the building of the myth's implicit assumption of male dominance of communal, cosmic, and transcendent things. The culture constructs a sacrificial inter-

incompatible with non-sacrificial post-temple Judaism automatically alienates Abraham from the common biblical ground that had been shared by the community with its neighboring Jewish groups. It is true that the sacrificial aspect of Abraham's role, which in later Islamic culture becomes the most visible aspect in literary and pictorial folklore, is not equally present in Abraham's image as portrayed in the Qur'an itself, being only part of his more general foundational role: to have established monotheism at a time prior to revealed scripture. Yet historically viewed, Abraham's new function as the founder of the Meccan rites certainly sets the course for a re-thinking of the Qur'anic community's relation to Abraham and the entire set of traditions connected to him. The subsequent Islamic *fait accompli*—Abraham as the personification of the Meccan origins, the forerunner of the Prophet, and the prototype of the Muslims—tends to obscure and downplay the detours that had to be taken until Abraham and "his house" could be fully appropriated by the Qur'anic community, or—looked at from an opposite angle—could ideologically be severed from their traditional genealogical heirs, the Jews of Medina. The following article will focus on a stage of development when Abraham and the traditions connected to him were still contested between the new community and local Jewish groups, i.e. when the House of Abraham, Āl Ibrāhīm, had not yet achieved the rank of the sole role model for the Prophet and the emerging community of his followers.

### *A Counter-Paradigm: The Christian Holy Family*

The investigation will be based on a text normally regarded as early Medinan, attributed to the time shortly after the Battle of Badr:<sup>12</sup> Q 3. The text, with its very title, *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān*, points to the other genealogical group that temporarily rivals the Āl Ibrāhīm in the Qur'an: the House of Amram, i.e., the Christian Holy Family.<sup>13</sup> David Marshall, in his survey on "Christianity in the Qur'an," has described this surah as marking a change

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course and birth that overcomes the limitations of male-female intercourse and female birth and makes it an all-male event."—The gender aspect implicit in Abraham's role will, however, not be part of the discussion in this paper.

<sup>12</sup> Marshall, "Christianity in the Qur'ān," 12.

<sup>13</sup> For a more extensive discussion of the issue, see Neuwirth, "Mary and Jesus."

where we find slightly more attention (than in the Meccan and earlier Medinan texts, A. N.) paid to Jesus and Mary, especially at 3:33–58. This long narrative section must be understood in the light of Muhammad's relationship with the Jews of Medina in the period shortly after the battle of Badr. The refusal of the great majority of the Jews to acknowledge Muhammad as a prophet, along with the political threat to Muhammad which they posed, made this relationship extremely tense with the threat of violent conflict in the air; this mood of hostility is reflected at various points in the rest of surah 3 (e.g. vv. 19–25, 65–85, 110–112, 187).<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to Marshall's overall analysis, which is—necessarily—heavily reliant on *sīra* data, the present paper will exclusively consider Qur'anic data. It will analyze a particular cluster of verses that strike the reader as programmatic, expressing the community's new stance vis-à-vis the neighboring religious groups. Rather than talking about external political conflict it will focus on the latent symptoms of this conflict, namely, the intellectual controversies going on between the communities.

Sūrat Āl 'Imrān and Sūrat Maryam are the chief Qur'anic testimonies of the role played by Christian tradition within the Qur'an's formative period. Jesus and Mary are rarely present in Meccan texts.<sup>15</sup> Whereas an image of Mary as a semi-mythical sacred female figure was established with Sūrat Maryam (Q 19:1–33)—an image never resumed in Meccan surahs—Jesus was not made the object of a prophetic legend similar to those woven around Moses,<sup>16</sup> but continued to appear in the Meccan texts as a vague and highly controversial figure: not only had he been the trigger of an earlier religious schism (Q 19:37), but he apparently continued to arouse dispute among the Prophet's listeners (Q 19:37f., 43:64f.). The Meccan community, anyhow, was aware of the fact that Jesus' history is shrouded in controversy, though no details of this are mentioned in the early surahs. The Qur'anic Jesus narrative presented in the Meccan surah 19, which reports the extraordinary circumstances of his birth, focuses on Mary rather than on Jesus. It describes only one miracle performed by Jesus, which again involves Mary: while still an infant in his cradle, by speaking up on her behalf, he miraculously saves his mother's life. As regards the grown-up Jesus, on the other hand, the Meccan texts

<sup>14</sup> Marshall, "Christianity in the Qur'ān," 12f.

<sup>15</sup> See Neuwirth, "Imagining Mary."

<sup>16</sup> For the Qur'anic narratives about Moses, cf. Neuwirth, "Erzählen als kanonischer Prozess."

provide only general information: Jesus called for the exclusive veneration of God and urged his people to maintain unity, yet eventually failed to implement his message, his death even causing a schism. It is worth noticing that the controversial issue of Jesus being God's "offspring" (*walad*) is not yet a matter of christological dispute, in the sense of the intra-Christian theological debate, but rather concerns his status as an angel that was upheld by the community's pagan adversaries. The Meccan texts do not reflect an interaction between the Qur'anic community and "official Christians" of whatever denomination, but rather suggest that the nascent community shared its topics of debate with syncretistic circles, perhaps related to Jewish Christians.

The present study, through drawing on the analysis of these Meccan texts, attempts to trace a religious-political development reflected in the substantially new reading these Christian stories were given in Medina. As it is well known, in Medina earlier texts were frequently remodeled to fit the polemical-apologetic needs of the emerging community, who was now challenged by learned representatives of the older monotheistic traditions.<sup>17</sup> The fate of the Meccan Sūrat Maryam is no exception to that rule: It was subjected to a re-reading serving a double religious-political purpose; to tackle the by then burning issue of christological controversies; so as to achieve a rapprochement to the Christians, i.e., Āl 'Imrān; and to cope with the dominant Jewish tradition represented by the Āl Ibrāhīm, whose superiority in terms of scriptural authority needed to be counter-balanced.

### *A Biblical Story Narrated in Mecca and "Politicized" in Medina*

Sūrat Āl 'Imrān thus documents more than the continuation of the stories of Jesus<sup>18</sup> and Mary<sup>19</sup> from Sūrat Maryam (Q 19:1–33), a

<sup>17</sup> For another example, see my discussion of the Medinan extensions of the Meccan stories of the Golden Calf (Neuwirth, "Meccan Texts").

<sup>18</sup> For Jesus in the Qur'an, see: Busse, *Theologische Beziehungen*; Hayek, *Le Christ de l'Islam*; Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*; id., "Jesus in the Qur'an," and id., *Discovering the Qur'an*; Bouman, *Das Wort vom Kreuz und das Bekenntnis zu Allah*; Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an*; Bauschke, *Jesus im Koran*; Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*; Samir, "Theological Christian influence"; Kropp, "Beyond single words." None of these authors, however, takes interest in particular Qur'anic texts as re-readings of earlier texts, though Robinson does proceed chronologically.

<sup>19</sup> For the image of Mary in the Qur'an, see Freyer-Stowasser, "Mary." The article is not interested, however, in historical developments within the Qur'an and, again, does not present the stories as readings of earlier Qur'anic (and non-Qur'anic) texts.

function commonly ascribed to this text in recent scholarship. It rather presents their re-reading from entirely new perspectives. *Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān* does not seem to be a unity, but consists instead of diverse layers belonging to different periods of origin.<sup>20</sup> Part of the surah has been subjected to a narrative analysis focusing on the structural aspects of the piece by Mathias Zahniser.<sup>21</sup> Zahniser has divided the surah into three parts: Q 3:1–62, Q 3:63–99, and Q 3:100–198. There is indeed a clear caesura after Q 3:62, the closing verse of the section on Mary and Jesus; it is followed by a sermon addressed to the *ahl al-kitāb*, the arguments of which seem to rest on the preceding text. Q 3:1–62 should thus be considered the nucleus, and very probably the earliest part of the surah. Although the problem of the surah’s composition still awaits further investigation, the present article is confined to Q 3:1–62 and therefore can disregard the question of the surah’s unity.

What is the purpose, then, of the re-telling of the story of Mary in Q 3:33–62? Already in *Sūrat Maryam*, the stories of Mary and Jesus had received an artistically highly sophisticated presentation. At least for liturgical and edificatory purposes, another rendition would therefore not have been necessary. It is for theological reasons, then, that a new version is put forward. It is a text that historicizes the figure of the Virgin Mary, whose story was presented in Q 19 as a mythic narrative portraying her in a way reminiscent of a pagan goddess without any attention being paid to Christological issues.<sup>22</sup> What is striking is that the earlier version did not put forward any claim to a particularly privileged prophetic lineage for either Mary or Jesus, although Mary is referred to as *ukht Hārūn* (Q 19:28), obviously a genealogical reference (see below). In *Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān*, by contrast, the narrative is integrated into a genealogical discourse (Q 3:33f.) that presupposes a divine project of prophethood to be fulfilled by a plurality of prophets. The prophets involved in it are no longer labeled *rusul* but *nabiyyūn* or *anbiyā’* instead, a loan from Hebrew *nābhī*,<sup>23</sup>

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A comprehensive survey of the dimensions of the Virgin Mary’s theological significance, and particularly her reception in Eastern Christianity, is presented in *Maryam Umm Allah*, a special issue of a Maronite ecclesiastical periodical.

<sup>20</sup> Neal Robinson, “Jesus and Mary” treats the text as a unity; this is however difficult to maintain without a typology of Medinan surahs being available, see Nöldeke, *GdQ*.

<sup>21</sup> Zahniser, “Word of God.”

<sup>22</sup> See Mourad, “From Hellenism to Christianity,” 207.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Hartmut Bobzin’s contribution to this volume.

a new concept developed after a Jewish model. The genealogical relationship among these prophets is expressed by the Qur'anic neologism *dhurriyya*, which seems to echo Hebrew, *zera'*, "seed," yet semantically is closer to *tōledōt*, "generations."<sup>24</sup> Such a *dhurriyya* had until then been exclusively ascribed to figures of the Hebrew Bible, an exclusiveness that Q 3:33 appears to call into question through its juxtaposition of the Āl Ibrāhīm and the Āl 'Imrān. In order to achieve this new ranking of the Āl 'Imrān as being on a par with the Āl Ibrāhīm, their central female protagonist, Mary, is supported by a second and more active figure, her mother, who provides her with a—matrilinear—genealogy of her own. Together with her mother and her son, Mary constitutes the Āl 'Imrān, the House of Amram, which Q 3 presents for the first and only time as equal in rank with the patriarchal family of Abraham. But there is an even stronger corroboration of the new ranking of the Holy Family. Though both designations, Āl Ibrāhīm and Āl 'Imrān, are *hapax legomena* in the Qur'an, Āl Ibrāhīm, in view of the ubiquitous mention of Jews in the Medinan surahs and their frequent self-references to Abraham, is immediately understood. Things are less evident with Āl 'Imrān, since the figure of 'Imrān has never been mentioned before and is not to be mentioned after surah 3. It is the text of this surah that introduces the Āl 'Imrān as a lineage no less prominent than the venerable Āl Ibrāhīm. It is the lineage of Aaron, whose figure is hidden behind the name of his father, Amram/'Imrān.<sup>25</sup> The Christian Holy Family, then,

<sup>24</sup> It is certainly no mere coincidence that the *Gospel According to Matthew* also begins with matters of genealogy, more precisely, with two different genealogies: while the first one mentions David and Abraham as the progenitors of Jesus (Mt 1:1), the ensuing long one covers a total of  $3 \times 14$  generations and includes five female figures (Mt 1:2–16). The Qur'anic story of Jesus' family presents Adam, Noah, and the families of Abraham and Amram as elects of God and genealogically related to one another. The text thus intends not four but two progenitors, and two lineages.

<sup>25</sup> The name Āl 'Imrān was long considered to reflect a typology that connects Mary with Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, known from Genesis (cf. Q 19:38). Mourad, "Mary," has however, convincingly argued that the connection is not to Miriam but rather to Aaron, the founding figure of Israelite priesthood. Indeed, a number of liturgical texts preserved in the Eastern Church tradition, present Mary as belonging to the Aaronid lineage (these texts will be made available as part of the research project "Corpus Coranicum: Textual Documentation and Commentary on the Qur'an"). This particular relation is reflected in the Qur'an; accordingly, Mary's father, in Christian tradition Joachim, can be referred to as Amram, her mother, in Christian tradition St. Anne, as "the wife of Amram" (*imra'at 'Imrān*, Q 3:5), and her entire family as "the House of Amram," i. e., Āl 'Imrān. For the theological implications of that identification, see below. Tottoli, "'Imrān," 509, regards the inclusion of



is introduced as belonging to the “Aaronid lineage,” i.e. the Israelite priestly family. To be thus related to the Jewish temple tradition is certainly no minor pedigree in itself; it has, however, taken on additional meaning through ecclesiastical exegesis, which considers the Aaronid lineage and the Jewish temple tradition to have been inherited by the Christian church and thus to have become a core part of the Christian tradition as well. The Āl ‘Imrān, thus empowered, can figure as genuine competitors to the Abrahamic tradition. Hence, the juxtaposition of both the established and the newly introduced tradition in v. 33, and their presentation as equals, is certainly to be understood as a polemic against the privileged position of the Abrahamic tradition that can hardly be ignored.

It is worthwhile to consider Q 3:33–62 in full:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ اصْطَفَىٰ آدَمَ وَنُوحًا وَآلَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَآلَ  
عِمْرَانَ عَلَى الْعَالَمِينَ      God chose Adam and Noah and the  
House of Abraham and the House of  
‘Imrān above all beings,  
ذُرِّيَّةً بَعْضُهُمْ مِنْ بَعْضٍ وَاللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ      The seed of one another; God hears, and  
knows.

إِذْ قَالَتِ امْرَأَةُ عِمْرَانَ رَبِّ إِنِّي نَذَرْتُ لَكَ مَا فِي  
بَطْنِي مُحَرَّرًا فَتَقَبَّلْ مِنِّي إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ      When the wife of Imran said, “Lord, I  
have vowed to you, in dedication, what is  
within my womb. Receive this from me;  
you hear and know.”

فَلَمَّا وَضَعَتْهَا قَالَتْ رَبِّ إِنِّي وَضَعْتُهَا أُنْثَىٰ وَاللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ  
بِمَا وَضَعْتُ وَلَيْسَ الذَّكَرَ كَالْأُنْثَىٰ وَإِنِّي سَمَّيْتُهَا مَرْيَمَ  
وَإِنِّي أُعِيدُهَا بِلَكَ وَذُرِّيَّتَهُمَا مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ الرَّجِيمِ      And when she gave birth to her she said,  
“Lord, I have given birth to her, a  
female.” (And God knew very well what  
she had given birth to; the male is not as  
the female.) “And I have named her  
Mary, and commend her to you with her  
seed, to protect them from the accursed  
Satan.”

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Mary and Jesus among the family of ‘Imrān as a confusion that arose from “a Christian tendency to utilize earlier biblical figures as ‘types’ for later ones.” His erroneous verdict is due to a reading of the Qur’an that ignores the fact that the Qur’anic text presupposes a plethora of earlier exegetical traditions that make an immediate comparison to the biblical counterparts extremely problematic.—On the whole issue see also the article by Michael Marx.



فَتَقَبَّلَهَا رَبُّهَا بِقَبُولٍ حَسَنٍ وَأَنْبَتَهَا نَبَاتًا حَسَنًا وَكَلَّمَهَا  
رَبُّهَا كُلَّمَا دَخَلَ عَلَيْهَا زَكَرِيَّا الْمِحْرَابَ وَجَدَ عِنْدَهَا  
رِزْقًا قَالَ يَا مَرْيَمُ أَنَّى لَكِ هَذَا قَالَتْ هُوَ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ  
إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَرْزُقُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ

Her Lord received the child with gracious favor, and by his goodness she grew up comely, Zachariah taking charge of her. Whenever Zachariah went in to her in the sanctuary,<sup>26</sup> he found her provisioned. "Mary," he said, "how comes this to you?" "From God," she said. Truly God provisions whomsoever he will without reckoning.

هَذَا لَكَ دَعَا زَكَرِيَّا رَبَّهُ قَالَ رَبِّ هَبْ لِي مِنْ لَدُنْكَ  
ذُرِّيَّةً طَيِّبَةً إِنَّكَ سَمِيعُ الدُّعَاءِ

Then Zachariah prayed to his Lord saying, "Lord, give me of your goodness a goodly offspring. Yea, you hear prayer."

فَنَادَتْهُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ وَهُوَ قَائِدٌ يُصَلِّي فِي الْمِحْرَابِ أَنَّ  
اللَّهُ يَبَشِّرُكِ بِبِئْسَ مُّصَدِّقًا لِّكَلِمَةٍ مِنَ اللَّهِ وَسَيِّدًا  
وَخَصُورًا وَنَبِيًّا مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ

And the angels called to him, standing in the sanctuary at worship, "Lo, God gives you good tidings of John, who shall confirm a word of God, a chief, and chaste, a prophet, righteous."

قَالَ رَبِّ أَنَّى يَكُونُ لِي غُلَامٌ وَقَدْ بَلَغَنِيَ الْكِبَرُ  
وَأَمْرَاتِي عَاقِرٌ قَالَ كَذَلِكَ اللَّهُ يَفْعَلُ مَا يَشَاءُ

"Lord," said Zachariah, "how shall I have a son, seeing I am an old man and my wife is barren?" "Even so," God said, "God does what he will."

قَالَ رَبِّ اجْعَلْ لِي آيَةً قَالَ آيَتُكَ الْأَنْتَ كَلِمَ النَّاسِ  
ثَلَاثَةَ أَيَّامٍ إِلَّا زَمْرًا وَذَكَرَ رَبِّكَ كَثِيرًا وَنَسِيتَ  
الْإِبْرَارَ

"Lord," said Zachariah, "appoint to me a sign." "Your sign," God said, "is that you shall not speak, save by tokens, to men for three days. And mention your Lord often, and give glory at evening and dawn."

وَإِذْ قَالَتِ الْمَلَائِكَةُ يَا مَرْيَمُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ اصْطَفَاكِ  
وَوَهَبَ لَكِ وَاصْطَفَاكِ عَلَى نِسَاءِ الْعَالَمِينَ

And when the angels said, "Mary, God has chosen you, and purified you; he has chosen you above all women.

يَا مَرْيَمُ اقْنُتِي لِرَبِّكِ وَاسْجُدِي وَارْكَعِي مَعَ الرَّاكِعِينَ

Mary, be obedient to your Lord, prostrating and bowing before him."

<sup>26</sup> *Mihrāb* is the Qur'anic designation of the Jerusalem Temple used in Christian contexts. It points to a domed architectural structure. Mary, her father, and Zachariah appear in Byzantine iconography—as standardized at least from the eighth century onward—standing in a ciborium, an architectural feature that could have been rendered in Arabic as *mihrāb*. See e.g. Ousterhout, *Kariye Camii*, 18, 36, 43.

ذَلِكَ مِنْ أَنْبَاءِ الْغَيْبِ نُوحِيهِ إِلَيْكَ وَمَا كُنْتَ لَدَيْهِمْ إِذْ يَقُولُونَ أَفَلَا مَهْمُ أَيُّهُمْ يَكْفُلُ مَرْيَمَ وَمَا كُنْتَ لَدَيْهِمْ إِذْ يَخْتَصِمُونَ (That is of the tidings of the unseen, that we reveal to you; for you were not with them when they were casting quills which of them should have charge of Mary; you were not with them when they were disputing.)<sup>27</sup>

إِذْ قَالَتِ الْمَلَائِكَةُ يَا مَرْيَمُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُبَشِّرُكِ بِكَلِمَةٍ مِنْهُ اسْمُهُ الْمَسِيحُ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ وَجِيهًا فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ وَمِنَ الْمُقَرَّبِينَ (When the angels said, "Mary, God gives you good tidings of a word from him whose name is Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary; high honored shall he be in this world and the next, near stationed to God.

وَيَكَلِّمُ النَّاسَ فِي الْمَهْدِ وَكَهْلًا وَمِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ He shall speak to men in the cradle, and of age, and righteous he shall be."

قَالَتْ رَبِّ أَنَّى يَكُونُ لِي وَلَدٌ وَلَمْ يَمَسَّسْنِي بَشَرٌ قَالَ كَذَلِكَ اللَّهُ يَخْلُقُ مَا يَشَاءُ إِذَا قَضَى أَمْرًا فَإِنَّمَا يَقُولُ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ "Lord," said Mary, "how shall I have a son seeing no mortal has touched me?" "Even so," God said, "God creates what he will. When he decrees a thing he does but say to it "Be," and it is.

وَيُعَلِّمُهُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَالتَّوْرَةَ وَالْإِنْجِيلَ And he will teach him the book, the wisdom, the Torah, the Gospel,

وَرَسُولًا إِلَى بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ أَنِّي قَدْ جِئْتُكُمْ بِآيَةٍ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ أَنِّي أَخْلُقُ لَكُمْ مِنَ الطِّينِ كَهَيْئَةِ الطَّيْرِ فَأَنْفُخُ فِيهِ فَيَكُونُ طَيْرًا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ وَأُبْرِئُ الْأَكْمَهَ وَالْأَبْرَصَ وَأُحْيِي الْمَوْتَى بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ وَأُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا تَأْكُلُونَ وَمَا تَدْخِرُونَ فِي بُيُوتِكُمْ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَةً لَكُمْ إِن كُنْتُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ To be a messenger to the Children of Israel saying, "I have come to you with a sign from your Lord. I will create for you out of clay as the likeness of a bird; then I will breathe into it, and it will be a bird, by the leave of God. I will also heal the blind and the leper, and bring to life the dead, by the leave of God. I will inform you, too, of what things you eat, and what you treasure up in your houses. Surely in that is a sign for you, if you are believers.

وَمُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيَّ مِنَ التَّوْرَةِ وَلَأَجَلَ كُلِّ كَافٍ بِمَا كَفَرُوا اللَّهُ الَّذِي هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا تُفْعَلُونَ Likewise confirming the truth of the Torah that is before me, and to make lawful to you certain things that before were forbidden unto you. I have come to you with a sign from your Lord; so fear you God, and obey you me."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> At this point the figure of Joseph would have had to enter the scene; the brief summary of the episode of the casting of the arrows (Fakhry erroneously translates: "pens"), however, spares the narrator the task of mentioning of a male person actively involved in the story of Mary.

<sup>28</sup> This is a kind of motto used exclusively by Jesus, see Q 19:36; 43:64.

إِنَّ اللَّهَ رَبِّي وَرَبُّكُمْ فَاعْبُدُوهُ هَذَا صِرَاطٌ  
مُسْتَقِيمٌ

Surely God is my Lord and your Lord; so serve him. This is a straight path."

فَلَمَّا أَحَسَّ عِيسَى مِنْهُمْ الْكُفْرَ قَالَ مَنْ أَنْصَارِي إِلَى  
اللَّهِ قَالَ الْحَوَارِيُّونَ نَحْنُ أَنْصَارُ اللَّهِ آمَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَأَشْهَدُ  
بِأَنَّا مُسْلِمُونَ

And when Jesus perceived their unbelief, he said, "Who will be my helpers unto God?" The Apostles said, "We will be helpers of God; we believe in God; witness our submission.

رَبَّنَا آمَنَّا بِمَا أُرْسِلْتَ وَاتَّبَعْنَا الرَّسُولَ فَاكْتُبْنَا مَعَ  
الشَّاهِدِينَ

Lord, we believe in what you have sent down, and we follow the messenger. Inscribe us therefore with those who bear witness."

وَمَكَرُوا وَمَكَرَ اللَّهُ وَاللَّهُ خَيْرُ الْمَاكِرِينَ

And they devised, and God devised, and God is the best of devisers.

إِذْ قَالَ اللَّهُ يَا عِيسَى ابْنِ مَرْيَمَ ارْفَعْكَ إِلَى  
مُطَهَّرٍ مِنَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَأَجْعَلْ الَّذِينَ اتَّبَعُوكَ  
فَوْقَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا إِلَى يَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ ثُمَّ إِلَيَّ مَرْجِعُكُمْ  
فَأَحْكُمُ بَيْنَكُمْ فِيمَا كُنتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ

When God said, "Jesus, I will take you to me and will raise you to me, and I will purify you of those who believe not. I will set your followers above the unbelievers till Resurrection Day. Then unto me shall you return, and I will decide between you, as to what you were at variance on.

فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فَأَعَذُّهُمْ عَذَابًا شَدِيدًا فِي الدُّنْيَا  
وَالْآخِرَةِ وَمَا لَهُمْ مِنْ نَاصِرِينَ

As for the unbelievers, I will chastise them with a terrible chastisement in this world and the next; they shall have no helpers."

وَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ فَيُوَفِّيهِمْ  
أُجُورَهُمْ وَاللَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ الظَّالِمِينَ

But as for the believers, who do deeds of righteousness, He will pay them in full their wages: and God loves not the evildoers.

ذَلِكَ تَتْلُوهُ عَلَيْهِمْ مِنَ الْآيَاتِ وَالذِّكْرِ الْحَكِيمِ

This we recite to you of signs and wise remembrance.

إِنَّ مَثَلَ عِيسَى عِنْدَ اللَّهِ كَمَثَلِ آدَمَ مَخْلُوقَةٍ مِنْ تُرَابٍ ثُمَّ  
قَالَ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ

Truly, the likeness of Jesus, in God's sight, is as Adam's likeness; He created him of dust, then said He unto him "Be," and he was.

الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّكَ فَلَا تَكُنْ مِنَ الْمُمْتَرِينَ    The truth is of God; be not of the doubters.

فَمَنْ حَاجَّكَ فِيهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَكَ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ فَقُلْ تَعَالَوْا  
نَدْعُ أَبْنَاءَنَا وَأَبْنَاءَكُمْ وَنِسَاءَنَا وَنِسَاءَكُمْ وَأَنْفُسَنَا  
وَأَنْفُسَكُمْ ثُمَّ نَبْتَهِلْ فَنَجْعَلْ لَعْنَةَ اللَّهِ عَلَى الْكَاذِبِينَ    And whoso disputes with you concerning him, after that knowledge that has come to you, say: "Come now, let us call our sons and your sons, our wives and your wives, our selves and your selves, then let us humbly pray and so lay God's curse upon the ones who lie."

إِنَّ هَذَا لَهُوَ الْقَصَصُ الْحَقُّ وَمَا مِنْ إِلَهٍ إِلَّا اللَّهُ  
وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ    This is the true story. There is no god but God, and assuredly God is the all-mighty, the all-wise. And if they turn their backs, assuredly God knows the workers of corruption.

Whereas in Q 19 the two stories of Zachariah and Mary had been kept separate, albeit told in typologically and stylistically closely related narratives, they are now merged to form a single story as they do in the Gospel According to Luke. Mary's story now occupies the first place, since her birth precedes the events connected to Zachariah's family. The story of Mary's unnamed mother who vows to consecrate her child to the temple—thus following the events as they are related in the Protevangelium of James<sup>29</sup>—is strikingly explicit in its gender-specific physical detailing, talking overtly about the female womb and childbirth (*fī baṭnī, waḍa'tu, waḍa'at, unthā*). Having born a daughter instead of the expected son, the woman remains determined to fulfill her vow. She herself names the child Maryam/Mary<sup>30</sup> and hands her over to the temple, asking God to protect the child and her future offspring. It is certainly significant that the Qur'anic version, in contrast to the Protevangelium, leaves the paternal role unoccupied. It is God himself who—although well aware of the different nature of male and female, as a prophetic aside underscores—accommodates the child in the temple.

Only then does Zachariah, who is absent from the story in the Protevangelium, appear on the stage of the Qur'anic story. He has been put in charge of Mary, yet his care turns out to be unnecessary: Mary is provided for with heavenly food. Even the one male admitted

<sup>29</sup> The text of the Protevangelium is found in Hock, *Infancy Gospels*.

<sup>30</sup> Pardes, *Countertraditions*, underscores the significance of women's initiative in naming their children in various biblical accounts.

to the scene thus proves to be superfluous, and patriarchal categories of male social dominance are emphatically bracketed. Until the appearance of Jesus all the active members of the Āl 'Imrān are women. Even the ensuing story of Jesus does not eclipse the female dominance, since his submissive appearance in public and his failure to exert patriarchal authority effectively reverses, rather than recapitulates, the public self-presentations of earlier male prophets. Viewed in this way, the Āl 'Imrān, made up of faithful and submissive individuals who renounce power, and of whom the majority is female, provide a counter-model to the firmly established patriarchal family of Abraham, the Āl Ibrāhīm. The following discussion of parts of the prologue to the surah and of Q 3:7 in particular will try to show how the ideas of female virtues, particularly motherhood, were brought to bear on the way a major scriptural problematic was perceived and treated.

*The Prologue (Q 3:1–33)<sup>31</sup> and Its Relation to the Narrative  
(Q 3:34–62)*

The surah starts with an introductory hymn (Q 3:1–6) that is concerned with revelation (v. 3–4) on the one hand—mentioning the Gospel, *injil*,<sup>32</sup> for the first time—and procreation (v. 6) on the other. It thus announces the two major topics of the surah: the multiplicity and possible ambiguity of scriptural meanings, and the impact of genealogy. Both issues are perceived as intertwined. This is particularly clear in the religious-political crisis that the surah reflects: In Sūrat Āl 'Imrān two rival sources of authority are juxtaposed: the already “canonical” Abrahamic genealogy, represented by a community in possession of the scriptural authority of Jewish tradition, and the newly introduced Āl 'Imrān, a Qur'anic imagination of Christian

<sup>31</sup> For reasons of limited space, the prologue cannot be analyzed in full.

<sup>32</sup> See Griffith, “Gospel,” who does not however attempt to locate the Gospel as part of the Qur'anic discourse about revelation within the text's process of genesis.—*Injil*, which in the Qur'an denotes one single scripture and not a plurality of writings, is mentioned twelve times in the Qur'an. All of these are Medinan verses, and except for the text under discussion, all of them appear within Qur'anic debates, not as part of the announcement of a surah's topic. *Injil* is most frequently contextualized with *tawrāt* (Q 3:3, 3:18, 3:74, 5:66, 5:68, 5:110, 7:57), once it appears together with *tawrāt* and *qur'ān* (Q 9:111).

tradition as being based on simple faith. Both the established and the newly introduced tradition in Q 3:33 are presented side by side, though not without them creating a tension. In order to read the core verse of the following discussion (Q 3:7) contextually, this newly kindled tension between the pristine patriarchal Abrahamic tradition, with its scriptural experience, Āl Ibrāhīm, and the novel female-based Christian genealogy of Āl 'Imrān, must be kept in mind.

The whole passage (Q 3:1–7) runs as follows:

الم Alif Lām Mīm

اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْحَيُّ الْقَيُّومُ God, there is no god but he, the living,  
the everlasting.

نَزَّلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ وَأَنزَلَ  
التَّوْرَةَ وَالْإِنْجِيلَ He has revealed the Book to you with  
the truth, confirming what came before  
it; and he has revealed the Torah and the  
Gospel,  
مِّن قَبْلُ هُدًى لِّلنَّاسِ وَأَنزَلَ الْفُرْقَانَ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا  
بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ وَاللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ ذُو انتِقَامٍ as guidance to the people, and he sent  
down the Salvation. As for those who  
disbelieve in God's signs, for them awaits  
a terrible chastisement; God is all-  
mighty, vengeful.  
إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَخْفَى عَلَيْهِ شَيْءٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا فِي السَّمَاءِ From God nothing whatever is hidden in  
heaven and earth.

هُوَ الَّذِي يُصَوِّرُكُمْ فِي الْأَرْحَامِ كَيْفَ يَشَاءُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا  
هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ It is he who forms you in the womb as  
he will. There is no god but he, the all-  
mighty, the all-wise.  
هُوَ الَّذِي أَنزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُّحْكَمَاتٌ  
هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ وَأُخَرُ مُتَشَابِهَاتٌ فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ فِي  
قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَابَهَ مِنْهُ ابْتِغَاءَ الْفِتْنَةِ  
وَابْتِغَاءَ تَأْوِيلِهِ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَالرَّاسِخُونَ فِي  
الْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ آمَنَّا بِهِ كُلٌّ مِّنْ عِنْدِ رَبِّنَا وَمَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّا أُولُو  
الْأَلْبَابِ It is who sent down upon you the Book,  
wherein are verses clear that are the  
essence ("mother") of the Book, and  
others ambiguous. As for those in whose  
hearts is swerving, they follow the  
ambiguous part, desiring dissension  
("seduction"), and desiring its interpreta-  
tion; and none knows its interpretation,  
save only God. And those firmly rooted  
in knowledge say, "We believe in it; all is  
from our Lord"; yet none remembers,  
but men possessed of minds.  
رَبَّنَا لَا تُغِثْ قُلُوبَنَا بَعْدَ إِذْ هَدَيْتَنَا وَهَبْ لَنَا مِن لَّدُنكَ  
رَحْمَةً إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْوَهَّابُ Our Lord, make not our hearts to swerve  
after that you have guided us; and give  
us mercy from you; you are the Giver.

رَبَّنَا إِنَّكَ جَامِعُ النَّاسِ لِيَوْمٍ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُخْلِفُ الْمِيعَادَ Our Lord, it is you that shall gather mankind for a day whereon there is no doubt; verily God will not fail the tryst.

Verse 3:7 is a *crux interpretum* that has been the subject of numerous debates<sup>33</sup> since the expression *ar-rāsikhūna fī l-‘ilm*, “those firmly rooted in knowledge,” can be construed both as the end of the sentence preceding it, and as the beginning of the one following it, thus either reserving the prerogative of exegesis to God or attributing it to both God and the learned. In view of the fact that the desire for the interpretation (*ta’wīl*) of the ambiguous passages is equated with desire for dissension, the first option must have been intended: Only God is entitled to interpret.<sup>34</sup> But is it really, as current scholarship holds, the prerogative of interpretation that is at stake here? Or is it not rather a new dimension of the nature of revealed texts that is discovered in Q 3:7? I will try to focus on the novelty of the Qur’anic community’s discovery of scriptural ambiguity by contextualizing the verse with older exegetical and rhetorical traditions.

### *Ambiguity Viewed Through the Lens of a Gendered Hermeneutics*

First, it has to be noted that the concession of a hermeneutic ambiguity in scripture<sup>35</sup> comes as a surprise considering numerous previous Qur’anic self-declarations as emanating from a particularly clear (*mubīn*) text (cf. Q 12:1 and Q 26:2: *tilka āyātu l-kitābi l-mubīn*, “those

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Gilliot, “Exegesis of the Qur’an.” Cf. also McAuliffe, “Text and Textuality,” who discusses the inner-Islamic exegetical positions. For the hermeneutic implications of the verse, see Madigan, *Self-Image*, and Rubin’s review thereof; cf. also Wild, “The Self-Referentiality of the Qur’an.”

<sup>34</sup> For a more detailed justification of this interpretation, cf. Sinai, “Qur’anic Self-Referentiality,” 128. Wild, “Why Self-Referentiality?” points to the “strategic opacity” that he finds operating here. Whereas two so-called pre-Uthmanic readings of the text have a lightly different wording that clearly states that only God knew the meaning of those verses, the Uthmanic text deliberately remains ambiguous about the prerogative of interpretation. He assumes that “this is [...] an instance of an intended “strategic” opacity, for which the people who shaped the canon are responsible.”—It is noteworthy that this has become the Sunnite position, whereas Shi’ite exegesis has preferred the more open reading of the verse that extends the legitimate community of interpretation to include “those firmly rooted in knowledge.” The debate about who is and who is not entitled to interpret is by itself a debate that concerns the after-life of the *muṣḥaf* rather than the practices applied during the emergence of the community.

<sup>35</sup> See Kinberg, “Ambiguous.”

are the signs of the clear scripture"; cf. Q 43:2: *Wa-l-kitābi l-mubīn*, "By the clear scripture!", etc.). Accordingly, why should there be verses that are ambiguous? The problem remains unresolved as long as the community's ongoing debate with adherents of the older religions is ignored. Q 3:7 certainly is not an isolated theoretical statement, but its harsh rebuke of the kind of exegesis practiced by unnamed individuals seems to point to a "Sitz im Leben," responding to the community's experience with existing exegetical practices. Intertexts from post-biblical traditions, indeed, loom large behind the verses: thus the identification of different interpretations of scriptural text units is an acknowledged practice in the Jewish reading of the Bible. Jewish tradition since the Tannaitic period distinguishes different "faces" (*pānīm*) of the Torah.<sup>36</sup> This exegetical perception of scriptural texts as being per se liable to more than one understanding, i.e. as being ambiguous (*mutashābih*), seems to be reflected in the Qur'anic piece at hand.<sup>37</sup> *Mutashābih* in this understanding would be the rendering of a technical term expressing polysemy. It is followed by another technical term, *ta'wīl*, which equally points to exegetical activity and professionalism: *ta'wīl* etymologically is an Arabic rebaptism of the earlier idea of *reductio ad primum*, a kind of deduction, obviously a technique which was practiced among learned scriptural exegetes at the time of the Qur'an. Finally, the two terms *mutashābih* and *muḥkam* together resound categories of Hellenistic rhetoric, *mutashābih* matching the Aristotelian *amphibolos*, while *muḥkam* comes close to its opposite, *pithanos*.<sup>38</sup> The establishment of the antagonism *muḥkam* / *mutashābih* is thus not limited to a

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<sup>36</sup> In my view, the concept of positively connoted equivocations in scriptural verses, so prominent in Jewish tradition with its concept of *pānīm shel ha-tōrah*, did not, as Gilliot, "Exegesis of the Qur'an," holds, originate only in early exegesis but seems to be reflected already in the Qur'an itself.

<sup>37</sup> See for the rabbinic background in detail Stern, "Midrash and Indeterminacy." Stern, "Midrash," 155 judges: "Looked at this way, the citation of multiple interpretations in midrash is an attempt to represent in textual terms an idealized academy of Rabbinical traditions where all the opinions of the sages are recorded equally as part of a single divine conversation [...]. In making this choice, the Rabbinic editors did not act without precedent; indeed, they followed in a venerable tradition of early Jewish literature that included such other sacred 'compromise texts' as the Pentateuch, in which separate documentary sources are combined into a single composition as though their agenda and ideologies were compatible."

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Bonitz, *Index Aristotelicus*.



lexical innovation, or the introduction of two new terms but rather is part of a new rhetorical-philosophical discourse in the Qur'an.

It is interesting to see—and this is certainly not unrelated to the wider context of the female-centered narrative about Mary and the Āl 'Imrān—that to discredit or at least to cope with such a professional exegesis, the text uses a code that is not familiar from earlier Qur'anic discussions of revelation. Its imagery strikes the reader as charged with gender associations in contrasting the subversive “desire” (*ibtighā'*) of “sedition” (*fitna*, a word that also denotes seduction<sup>39</sup>) through scriptural exegesis with the believers' respectful clinging to the “mother text” (*umm al-kitāb*). In contrast to the skeptics' “unchaste” exploitation of the text in search of *fitna*, the believers who are “firmly rooted in knowledge” immediately reconnect the ambiguous verses to the divine origin of scripture, thus genealogically legitimizing their ambiguity; in other words, in spite of their hermeneutic ambiguity, the problematic verses are accepted as such, given that they are part of *umm al-kitāb*.

The qualification of the core of scripture as *umm*, “mother,” deserves attention: it initiates the conflation of two discourses, the vertical and power-informed discourse of verbal revelation (*tanzīl*), on the one hand, and the more submissive female discourse of maternal conception and reproduction (*waḍ'*), on the other. The scriptural image of *umm al-kitāb* may be due again to the Qur'an's place in a debate. It seems to reflect, albeit not precisely in that way, a hermeneutic category used in rabbinic scholarship where a reading according to the securely transmitted scriptural text is a reading “that has a mother,” i.e. in scripture itself (*yēsh ēm la-miqrā*), in contrast to a reading that freely diverges from the canonical shape and merely

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<sup>39</sup> Though *ibtighā'* in the Qur'an is mostly oriented towards spiritual targets, such as the face of God, or His approval, it may also denote less noble desires such as covetousness (Q 13:17). Since the Qur'anic word for “whore” in the Mary narrative (Q 19:20.28) is from the same root BGHY, however, the term's sexual connotation does not seem to be wholly alien to the Qur'an. In view of the fact that the objects of *ibtighā'* are usually spiritual, its conjunction with *fitna* appears particularly subversive. In the Qur'an, *fitna*—the basic signification of which is “temptation,” although it can also mean “trial,” “straying from the right path,” and “intracommunal strife”—often refers to a divine strategy to test human belief. Now, an agent of *fitna* par excellence, though not explicitly figuring as such in the Qur'an, is woman; cf. the ḥadīth *mā taraktu ba'di fitnatan adarra 'alā r-rijāli min an-nisā'* (Wensinck, *Concordance*, vol. 5, 63; the ḥadīth is adduced in Saleh, “The Woman as a Locus of Apocalyptic Anxiety,” 128).—Fakhry's translation of *fitna* as “sedition” blurs its gender implications.

relies on the transmitted consonantal structure that is qualified as *yēsh ēm la-masōret*.<sup>40</sup> Very much like the word *umm* in the Qur'anic expression *umm al-kitāb*, the Hebrew *ēm* here functions as a warrant of authenticity. The new hermeneutical tool to deal with scripture as entailing polysemy, then, is most plausibly explained as having been suggested by Jewish circles in Medina.

*Whose Ambiguity? Accommodating Christology in the Qur'anic  
Vision of Scripture*

What might have caused this new perception of the ambiguity of scripture? One could imagine a scenario exclusively confined to the Qur'anic community and its Medinan Jewish interlocutors. These Jewish learned might have demonstrated their tools of biblical interpretation to the Qur'anic community, perhaps also alerting its members to the existence of polysemous terms in the Qur'anic texts themselves, thus potentially undermining their convincing powers and possibly leading to confusion. The debate according to this vision would have been a Jewish-Qur'anic debate concerning the nature of scripture as such and the legitimacy of interpretation. The problem of ambiguity in this framework would be an exemplary issue of self-referentiality, i.e., of reference to the emerging text of the Qur'an. Q 3:7 according to this scenario, would reflect nothing more than an occasional polemic, a controversy that could have been settled by the verdict communicated in the verse. This kind of reading the Qur'an by isolating individual verses from their context, however, fails to do justice to the rhetorical structure of the surah with its purposeful cross-references. Following a suggestion made by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd,<sup>41</sup> therefore, another scenario is equally worth considering. Abu Zayd assumes that the focus of the debate should have

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<sup>40</sup> See the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Sukka* 6b and elsewhere) and the discussion in Bacher, *Exegetische Terminologie* I, 119f. (I owe these references to Dirk Hartwig). Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 65, unjustifiably rejects these Jewish intertexts and argues that they do not fit the Meccan use of *umm al-kitāb*.

<sup>41</sup> This suggestion was made by Abu Zayd in the context of a keynote lecture delivered during the summer academy "Literary and Historical Approaches to the Bible and the Qur'an" that was convened by the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin in September 2007 in Istanbul. His interpretation relies, however, on *sīra* data, involving the Christians of Najran, who according to Islamic tradition are the addressees in Q 3:63, whereas our approach tries to dispense with data from the Islamic tradition.

been not on the problem of exegetical practice as such, but rather on a particular theological issue perceived as ambiguous *par excellence*, namely, Christology. This interpretation is appealing, not only in view of the centrality of Christian traditions in the surah, but even more in view of another observation: Both the prologue and the narrative of the surah introduce new discourses, one genealogical, the other rhetorical. Q 3:7 in particular expresses rhetorical principles that fit well with the rhetorically and philosophically informed Christological debates. It is true that the Qur'anic text does not make the object of the rhetorical discourse explicit, but one might argue that it is implicit in the structure of the surah. Indeed, looking closer we find traces of the issue of Christology in the prologue, even before the narrative about the two extraordinary deliveries of the two children, that of Mary and that of Jesus, unfolds.

The gendered image of *umm al-kitāb* from Q 3:7 is preluded by the preceding verse's (Q 3:6) reference to procreation, which anticipates the hermeneutic debate about the *āyāt muḥkamāt* and the *āyāt mutashābihāt*: "It is he who forms you in the wombs as he pleases, there is no God but he, the mighty, the wise." While this verse seems at first to be concerned with God's omniscience, it may also be read as a statement about giving birth and motherhood. There is an implicit correspondence between the antagonism of two kinds of scriptural verses and the fact that, before delivery, God "forms" the child in his mother's womb, where his/her gender is not yet clearly identifiable (*muḥkam*). Accordingly, the unborn child remains *mutashābih* to human observers, although God himself is of course knowledgeable about his sexual identity, and the mother itself is a warrant of the fact that the child will in due time emerge unambiguously as that which it is. The divinely willed fact of this ambiguity is fore-grounded in the story of Mary's birth, since her mother is unaware of bearing a female child and thus pledges her to the temple, in order for her to be raised in the way a male child destined to become priest would be raised—an ambiguous issue informed by the problem of gender. Moreover, the nature of the unborn in terms of its divinity or humanity is equally reserved to God: Jesus' birth is *kayfa yashā'u llāh*, to say the least, in so far as he was conceived without a father altogether and the problem of his divine/human nature is an ambiguous issue *par excellence*. These observations seem to suggest that the problematic of Christology should have been the subtext of the discourse about the ambiguity of scriptural expression.

This hypothesis is corroborated by the striking presence of gender-specific allusions: The juxtaposition of Q 3:6 and 3:7 with their anaphoric introduction *huwa lladhī* and their analogous figures of thought brings about a conflation of the two main discourses of the entire section Q 3:1–63, i.e., the discourse of revelation and scriptural meanings on the one hand, and that of procreation and genealogy on the other. While the former portrays knowledge as something that is vertically handed down (*tanzīl*), the latter puts forward a much more inclusive understanding of knowledge that is considered to inhere in the very nature of creation. It is worthwhile noting that God makes, in both of his acts of procreation and revelation use of a female agent, i.e. maternal womb (*rahm*) for sexual reproduction, and the core of scripture (*umm al-kitāb*) for revelation.

Since the process of revelation involves a female agent, the *umm al-kitāb*, an agent respected by the believing listeners, it is only logical that the aberration of the unbelievers should be described in gendered terms as well: they cling to the “ambiguous” (*mutashābih*) since they “desire disorder” (*fitna*), a term that conveys a conspicuous allusion to the female power of seduction. *Ibtighāʾ* further takes up a key word from Sūrat Maryam, which in Q 19:20 reads: *lam akun baghiyyan*, and in v. 28: *lam takun ummuki baghiyyan*. The hermeneutic treatment of scripture, either respectfully or improperly, is thus coded in terms taken from the world of male responses to the female.

### *Byzantine Mary Reflected in the Qurʾanic Texts*

More directly however, the gendered subtext to Q 3:7 should be related to the issue of Mary as evoked in Sūrat Maryam, a text that is re-read in Sūrat Āl ʿImrān.<sup>42</sup> The text of the prologue proves intimately related to perceptions expressed in Eastern Christianity where the figure of

<sup>42</sup> There are some textual parallels in Christian writings. So, the observation of ambiguity or obscurity of passages in St. Paul’s letters is conceded in 2 Pet. 3:15–16: “And so does Paul in all his letters when he speaks of his subject though they contain some obscure passages which the ignorant and unstable misinterpret to their own ruin as they do to the other scriptures.” Stefan Wild (ed.), *Self-Referentiality in the Qurʾan*, 18, who adduces this text—discovered by Nicolai Sinai—comments: “This passage resembles sura 3:7 in which the Qurʾan states that it contains ‘clear’ and ‘ambiguous’ verses, and that only those ‘in whose minds is swerving’ seek out the ambiguous verses to incite strife in the community.” Though there is a similarity to the Qurʾanic statement, there are important differences: 2 Pet. 3:15–16 does not establish an antagonism of clear and ambiguous verses to be classified as the two basic

Mary—as can be seen in iconography, for example the Byzantine mosaics of the Istanbul Kariye Camii<sup>43</sup>—is regarded as not only the object of theoretical dispute but also an eloquent advocate of the Christian *skandalon*,<sup>44</sup> the paradox of Christology. It is particularly striking to notice that the issue of a female locus of divine communication is coded in hermeneutic terms similar to those of Q 3:7 in a central liturgical text of Eastern Christianity, the *Akathistos Hymnos* (the “Praise of the Virgin”) that is recited during Lent. This text focuses on the hermeneutical function of the Virgin Mary in communicating the divine word—just as the Qur’anic *umm al-kitāb* defies the attempts of professional interpreters to decode it, Mary renders mute the professional practitioners of human communication, the rhetoricians:

*Rhétórás polyphthongous hós ichthyás aphónous horómen epi soi, Theotoke. Aporousi gar legein to pós kai Parthenos meneis kai tekein ischysas. Hémeis de to mystérion thaumazontes, pistós boómen:*

*chaire, sophías theou docheion. Chaire, pronoiás autou tameion. Chaire, philosophous asophous deiknyousa, chaire, technological alogous elenchousa.*

*Innanā narā l-khuṭabā’a l-mufawwihīna qad ḥaṣalū fī ma’nāki ka-samaki lladhī lā ṣawta lah. Li-annahum yataḥayyarūna fī an yaqūlū: kayfa ṣaṭa’ti an talidī wa-talbathī ‘adhrā’. Wa-ammā naḥnu fa-nata’ajjab minā s-sirri wa-nahtufu bi-īmānin qā’ilīn:*

*Ifraḥī yā man aẓharat l-falāsifata juhalā’, ifraḥī yā man awḍaḥat mu’allimiyā l-kalāmi lā kalāma lahum...*<sup>45</sup>

kinds of scriptural verses. The term *dysnoetos* furthermore denotes less polysemy than obscurity. The statement in 2 Pet. 3:13–16 rather than establishing a noetic category of ambiguity is speaking about a shortcoming in St. Paul’s arguments. Nor does the text refer to any theologically ambiguous issue that might have called for a re-discussion in the Qur’anic community.—In view of the momentousness of polysemy in Jewish exegesis, I would prefer to connect the identification of the issue of *mutashābih* to the exegetical category of *pānīm shel ha-tōrah*. This does not, however, weaken the possibility that it had been the issue of Christian theology that made the community particularly sensitive to ambiguity in scriptural expression.

<sup>43</sup> See Ousterhout, *Kariye Camii*, passim. Some of the illustrations are included in the contribution by Michael Marx.

<sup>44</sup> Eloquently expressed by St. Paul in 1 Cor. 1:23: “a scandal in the eyes of the Jews, and foolishness in the eyes of the Greeks.”

<sup>45</sup> For the Greek version, see *Oi ekklesiastikoi hymnoi eis tēn hyperhagian theotokon*, 3. stasis, 62, and for the Arabic rendering, see Yaghnām, *Ar-rumūz ar-rūḥiyya*, “Khidmat al-madiḥ alladhī lā yujlas fihi; al-madiḥa ath-thālitha,” 132.

We find the great rhetoricians rendered mute like fish when confronted with you, who gave birth to God. They are unable to spell out how you could give birth remaining a virgin. We however, admiring the mystery, in belief call out: Rejoice, you who were the receptacle of God! Rejoice, you who stripped philosophers of their philosophy! Rejoice, you, who made the instructors of speech speechless...<sup>46</sup>

Whereas the Virgin Mary is usually portrayed as maximally endowed with the power of persuasion, one verse of the hymn presents her as an object of controversy, and thus approximates the notion of ambiguity that is so crucial in Q 3:7. For the believers, Mary constitutes an unambiguous symbol of faith, yet for the unbelievers she functions as a catalyst of disturbance: “Rejoice, you who is ambiguous for the unbelievers, rejoice, you who personifies the pride of the believers (*chaire, tón apistón amphibolon akousma, chaire, ton pistón anamphibolon kauchéma; ifraḥī yā khabarā yaltabisu ‘alā l-kuffār, ifraḥī yā fakhrā li-l-mu’minīna lā yushawwihuhū ltibās*).”<sup>47</sup> In this text, which has numerous parallels in Eastern Church liturgy, it is not the “mother of the Book,” but rather the “mother of the Incarnate Word” that is praised as an object of faith for the believers, and ambiguity appears solely before the eyes of the unbelievers. Of course, the two texts and their contexts are very different: in the Christian case, it is the miraculous nature of the Virgin Birth that calls into doubt the validity of rational discourse, whereas the Qur’anic notion of *umm al-kitāb* is a rather abstract concept. Yet in both cases, the female coding of truth functions as a warrant of authenticity.

Though it is problematic to claim that the Qur’anic text consciously or unconsciously draws on the hymn, there is in both texts a striking merger between the rhetorical and the genealogical discourse. In Eastern Christianity, this double discourse is a chief characteristic of Mary and thus of Christology—in the Qur’an, this merger is reserved to Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān, the text par excellence about the Holy Family. One has, of course, to bear the entire theological paradigm in mind to fully appreciate this statement. In fact, the Qur’anic reference of the Christian Holy Family, through the re-use of proper names (Q 19:28: *yā ukhta Hārūn*, Q 3:35: *imra’at ‘Imrān*), to the biblical family of Amram—whose most prominent member besides Moses and Miriam is Aaron—, is only the tip of an iceberg in a comprehensive

<sup>46</sup> The translation is my own.

<sup>47</sup> Yaghnām, *Ar-rumūz ar-rūḥiyya*, 132.

theological discourse.<sup>48</sup> This reference to the priestly Aaronid line<sup>49</sup> implied in Mary's and her mother's names reflects nothing less than the positioning of the figure of Mary in the interface between Judaism and Christianity. To add a few details: The Qur'anic narrative presents Mary as closely attached to the Temple. In Q 19:16 she is said to have retreated "to an Eastern place," *makānan sharqiyyā*, which can be interpreted as an allusion to the Eastern Gate of the Temple, which according to the vision of Ezechiel (chapters 43 and 44) marks the border between the worldly and the eschatological city. The Eastern Gate is a place that in the apocryphal gospels (particularly in the Protevangelium of James) as well as in Byzantine iconography,<sup>50</sup> is closely connected to Mary's family history, being the site on which her father mysteriously learns about his aged wife's having miraculously become pregnant. The Eastern Gate of the Temple, through which according to Ezechiel 43:1–12 God had moved out of Jerusalem leaving the city to destruction was traditionally believed to have been closed since then,<sup>51</sup> thus becoming a symbol of closure as such. According to Jewish messianic tradition, which again refers to Ezechiel 43:4, it is expected to be opened only with the coming of the Messiah. Christian theologians who adopted this motif—thus translating topography into physiology—related it to Mary/Christ and trans-

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<sup>48</sup> I am basing myself here on a number of passages from Syriac texts (among them the hymns of St. Ephrem) identified by Yousef Kouriyhe and Michael Marx, which will be made accessible as part of the research project "Corpus Coranicum: Textual Documentation and Commentary on the Qur'an."

<sup>49</sup> Aaron and his family in juxtaposition to Mary figure prominently in the mosaic program of the Kariye Camii, see Ousterhout, *Kariye Camii*.

<sup>50</sup> The scene is presented in the Kariye Camii, see Ousterhout, *Kariye Camii*, 36. Though the mosaics date only from the thirteenth century (Palaiologian Renaissance) they may be equally considered representative for earlier Byzantine theology.

<sup>51</sup> For the history of the Eastern Gate, see Küchler, *Jerusalem*, 183, 194–203. It is noteworthy that the long tradition about the Eastern Gate and its closure is historically and archeologically not securely verifiable. The imagination of its closure in any case is part of the extensive eschatological vision articulated by the prophet Ezechiel (see 43:1ff. and 44:1–3). The entire concept of the Eastern Gate thus may have been purely text-referential, without a basis in real architecture until the erection of the Byzantine structure (before 570), that coincided with the emergence of the apocryphal gospels celebrating the events in Jesus' family history that are topographically connected to the Eastern Gate. These theological issues apparently had to be architecturally marked. Shortly later, in Umayyad times, the gate was integrated into the Islamic vision of Jerusalem as an eschatological scenario, and reconstructed as a highly adorned gate, called *Bāb al-Rahma*, that was closed only much later, and for reasons unknown.



formed Mary, through whose body the Messiah will come forth, into an image of the Temple. Going another step further, it is Mary who, being a representation of the “new Temple,” the Church, after the “old Temple” had become void of priestly presence with the last priest Zachariah’s<sup>52</sup> son John not continuing the Temple service but becoming the “forerunner” (*prodromos*) of Christ—is destined to occupy their place in the core space of the cult. Christology thus replaces priesthood. Mary’s sojourn in the temple symbolizes the overtaking of religious territory: the Christian church is presented as “inheriting” the most sacred site of Judaism.<sup>53</sup>

These issues, of course, are not made explicit in the Qur’an, and it seems problematic to assume their implicit presence there. Yet they are alluded to; their traces are re-contextualized in the Qur’anic discourse. Whatever elements of the Christological discourse we can assume the Qur’anic community to have been aware of, these elements should probably be qualified not so much as “unclear” or semantically “ambiguous,” but rather as downright paradoxical, “a scandal for the Jews and foolishness for the Greeks.”<sup>54</sup> To come back to our hermeneutic antagonism: What if the opposition of *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* was to denote not that of “theologically plain” vis-à-vis “theologically problematic,” but that of “unambiguously clear” vis-à-vis “paradoxical”? Though the Jewish perception of the *panim* of the Torah is not related to the notion of paradox (which seems to be alien to Jewish thinking), it can certainly be subsumed under the category of

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<sup>52</sup> It should be noted that Zachariah’s story (Q 19:1–15, particularly 19:11) in the Qur’an entails a kind of *vaticinatio ex eventu*, i. e. a prophecy that has already come true: he orders his community to sing praise in the morning and the evening, *sabbihū bukratan wa-‘ashiyyan*, thereby anticipating an ecclesiastical ruling. Ecclesiastical evening prayers (the so-called “Benedictus” indeed entails Zachariah’s (biblical) hymn [Lk 1:68–75]), the morning prayers entail the hymn of Mary, see below, note 62. This is another indication of the Qur’an’s close—though perhaps not realized—connection to the Christian claim to the legacy of the temple: Zachariah, a priest in the Jewish temple, is presented to have ordained a prayer ritual of the Christian Church.

<sup>53</sup> This is reiterated in the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom (fourth century), beginning with the words “Redeem o Lord, your people and bless your priestly heritage!” This verse transfers the Jewish claim of election from the Jewish people to the Christian community whose “clerics” are taking the place of the priestly class in temple worship.—It is worthwhile noting that such a spatial concept of disinheriting and inheriting occurs in the Qur’an as well when Mecca is established as the New Jerusalem, see Neuwirth, “Jerusalem in Islam.”

<sup>54</sup> 1 Cor. 1:23.



ambiguity as constituting a special case of it. Further intertextual reading will, however, be needed to ultimately decide that question.

What we can at present claim with some plausibility is that Jewish traditions about the multiple interpretations of scripture and the connected technical terms of exegesis should have penetrated the horizons of the Qur'anic community through a reflexive process of debate. The appropriation of the Jewish concept of the *pānīm shel ha-tōrah*, the "faces of the Scripture," was to result in more than an addition to the already existing Qur'anic archive of ideas. It was to provoke a questioning or even undermining of already achieved positions, primarily the previously held Qur'anic view of the necessary clarity and unambiguity of scripture. Although Q 3:7 seems to look on the technique of *ta'wīl* rather unfavorably, yet by acknowledging the existence of *mutashābihāt* and the possibility to deal with them in exegesis, the community takes notice of a new hermeneutical tool to decode scriptural speech.<sup>55</sup> Once this new knowledge had reached the Qur'anic community<sup>56</sup>, burning controversial issues like that of Christology could be classified in hermeneutical terms and thus be "explained," or at least made acceptable. And—what is perhaps even more momentous—from then on, the door was open for the multiplication of Qur'anic readings, one of them being the recognition that divine communication takes on not only unambiguously clear but also ambiguous, even paradoxical forms.

### *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān vs. Sūrat Maryam: A Canonical Process*

One might describe the relation between Q 19 und Q 3 in terms of what James Sanders has called a "canonical process":

Canonical criticism focuses on the communities that found value in what the ancient individuals produced as members of those communities, and the value they found may not have been exactly what the author or speaker actually had in mind. The phenomenon of resignification

<sup>55</sup> Though it is certainly true—as Sinai, "Qur'anic Self-Referentiality," 129, states—that in Q 3:7 "human interpretation of the corpus is [...] seen as a moral temptation, not as an epistemological necessity," the mere assertion that there are verses with more than one legitimate meaning comes close to acknowledging the only relative certainty of any understanding of scripture.

<sup>56</sup> *Mutashābih* is used elsewhere in the Qur'an in the context of scripture with a different—exclusively positive—connotation, meaning "similar to each other," see the late Meccan verse Q 39:23, and cf. Kinberg, "*Muḥkamāt* and *Mutashābihāt*." Such an intra-Qur'anic shift in meaning is, however, not unique.

begins at the moment of original speech of reading. But the crucial observation is in the first instance of repetition. Why did members of the community reread or repeat what had once been said?<sup>57</sup>

What James Sanders notes for the Bible is applicable to the Qur'an as well, even though the "ancient" text (Sūrat Maryam) is not separated from its re-reading (Sūrat Āl 'Imrān) by as long a time span as is usually the case for biblical books. Still, the second text totally revises the message of the first one and adopts it to the Medinan community that has an obvious interest in being able to claim the protagonists of Q 19 for a new and existentially significant purpose, namely, to counterbalance the authority of their Jewish opponents. This is achieved not through a completely new text but through the medium of an older text that was regarded as authoritative, or in some way as "canonical." What matters primarily in Q 3:1–62 is the politicization of the earlier story of Q 19, the original function of which had been purely didactic and edifying. Mary's story is retold in order to support a female-dominated genealogy of elects, Mary being staged as one of two women who entertain a particularly close relation to the divine. Both her presence and her family's in Q 3 thus serve as a response and counterbalance to what until then had been the only acknowledged prophetic genealogy, namely, that originating in Abraham. To embark on this theological venture, however, Mary and Jesus had to be stripped of the Christological implications, which from the perspective of the strictly aniconic monotheist mindset of the community must have seemed highly problematic. This is achieved through the Jewish notion of the multifaceted nature of scripture, which provides a vantage point from which the phenomenon of paradox becomes wholly acceptable.

Though the Qur'an in general subscribes not only to "the erasure of the female from representations of divine generativity," already evident in Patristic thought,<sup>58</sup> but also to the elimination of the female from participation in any of the divine tasks, it is striking to observe that the expression *umm al-kitāb* in Q 3:7, which at first sight has all the appearance of a technical term, does retain some of the female connotations that it lexically possesses. The female, at one point dis-

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<sup>57</sup> Sanders, *Canon and Community*, 41. The present author has tested the canonical approach for the Qur'an in several articles such as "Erzählen als kanonischer Prozess."

<sup>58</sup> Burrus, "Begotten, not made," 189.

covered as an—albeit passive—agent in the communication of the divine message, by this turn in perspective induces a more complex perception of the process of revelation. Indeed, the entire landscape of revelation shifts, and female metaphors now infiltrate a discourse which had until then been dominated by exclusively male notions; as Q 3:7 points out, revelation is traced back to a female source, *umm al-kitāb*.<sup>59</sup> By means of claiming an affinity to the predominantly female Āl ‘Imrān, the early community is empowered to cope with the dominance of the Abrahamic patriarchal tradition that is in possession not only of superior prestige but also of refined and sophisticated exegetical tools. This attempt at integrating a non-patriarchal tradition, imagined as being imprinted by female rather than male experiences,<sup>60</sup> constitutes an important stage in the shaping of the Qur’anic message that is all too easily overlooked, since the whole demarche eventually came to be eclipsed again by the archetypical patriarchal Abrahamic paradigm.

With this in mind, it comes as no surprise that towards the end of the prologue of Q 3, in v. 26, the Prophet is called upon to recite a verse drawn from the *Magnificat*, Mary’s hymn of praise from Luke 1:46–55, which in the Christian Church is transmitted as a kind of shorthand of Mary’s message<sup>61</sup>:

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<sup>59</sup> The notion of *umm al-kitāb* had been introduced already in Meccan texts; thus, in Q 43:4, the Qur’an is retraced to *umm al-kitāb* as its source; in Q 13:36 *umm al-kitāb* is presented as being “with God”; in both texts the concept seems already to have been “lexicalized” and become a technical term, employed to render something like a “matrix of Scripture,” without retaining gender associations. The notion arguably reflects an earlier current concept of scriptural hypostasis, cf. Jeffery, *The Qur’an as Scripture*, that figures particularly prominent in the Book of Jubilees, a Jewish apocryphal text of the second century BC not infrequently recalled in the Qur’an; on the Book of Jubilees, see more recently Najman, “Interpretation.”

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Michael Sells, who to my knowledge was the first to raise the issue of female subtexts in the Qur’an, although without attempting to trace diachronic developments (Sells, “Literary Approach”). The feminist study of the Qur’an is still in its beginning; apparently, it is less interested in the text’s gender aspects than its reformist potential (cf. Badran, “Feminism and the Qur’an”).

<sup>61</sup> The *Magnificat* is part of the ecclesiastical morning prayer—thus corresponding to the *Benedictus*, Zachariah’s hymn, that is recited in the evening prayer, see above note 54.

قُلِ اللَّهُمَّ مَا لَكَ الْمُلْكُ تُؤْتِي الْمُلْكَ مَنْ  
تَشَاءُ وَتَنْزِعُ الْمُلْكَ مِمَّنْ تَشَاءُ وَتُعِزُّ مَنْ  
تَشَاءُ وَتُذِلُّ مَنْ تَشَاءُ بِيَدِكَ الْخَيْرُ إِنَّكَ عَلَى  
كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

Say: "O God, master of the kingdom, you give the kingship to whom you please and take away the kingship from whom you please. You exalt whom you please and humble whom you please. In your hand is all the good, and you have the power over everything!"

As David Flusser has shown, both the *Magnificat* and the *Benedictus* (Zachariah's hymn from the same gospel) eventually go back to a Maccabean revolutionary anthem.<sup>62</sup> The revolutionary tone of the *Magnificat* is well suited for the core message of Sūrat Āl 'Imrān: the toppling of the predominance of the exclusively Abrahamic receivers of revelation, and the elevation of another group of legitimate receivers, the Āl 'Imrān, who are represented not by patriarchs, but by two female protagonists and a conspicuously submissive male figure free of the associations of patriarchal authority. They are, however, credited with the merit of continuing the other Great Tradition, the Israelite temple heritage, the Aaronid lineage. But the revolutionary words that in Christianity belong to Mary, have become in the Qur'an the Prophet's motto who, with the promulgation of this text, daringly attaches his cause to a seemingly powerless, though historically no less significant agency. However, the theological implications connected with this female-dominated genealogical group, the House of Amram, whose individual figures in spite of their gender are trusted to have been part of the divine-human communication, cannot be accommodated into the Qur'anic discourse except by means of the exegetical professionalism that is cultivated in the House of Abraham, namely, the notion of the multiple "faces" of scripture. Although the emotional inclination of the community in Sūrat Āl 'Imrān may have been toward the House of Amram, Āl 'Imrān, the argument in favor of their acceptance depends on a hermeneutical device: the distinction between the clear and ambiguous, or even paradoxical, "faces" of the divine word—an intellectual legacy appropriated from the learned members of the House of Abraham.

<sup>62</sup> See Flusser, "Magnificat."

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GLIMPSES OF A MARIOLOGY IN THE QUR'AN:  
FROM HAGIOGRAPHY TO THEOLOGY  
VIA RELIGIOUS-POLITICAL DEBATE\*

Michael Marx

Two new contributions on Christian intertexts of the Qur'an give cause to rethink the complex role that the figure of Mary plays in the Qur'an: Samir Khalil Samir, "The theological Christian influences on the Qur'an: a reflection," and Suleiman A. Mourad, "Mary in the Qur'an: a re-examination of her presentation."<sup>1</sup> It is a felicitous coincidence that a database of Qur'anic intertexts, entitled "Texte aus der Umwelt des Korans" (Texts from the environment of the Qur'an), is currently being established in the framework of the project *Corpus Coranicum* at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences.<sup>2</sup> This offers a welcome basis for a more in-depth examination of some of the questions raised in these papers. For theological issues in the Qur'an—as highlighted in the title of Samir's essay—still remain under-researched. Since the theological questions tackled in the Qur'an form part of the still widely undetermined mass of pluricultural Late Antique debates, any discussion of these questions demands that the Qur'anic text be contextualized within as broad as possible a spectrum of previously existing traditions. The methods and the individual stages involved in this contextualization procedure also need to be defined. The following contribution begins with a brief summary of the research carried out until now on the figure of Mary in the Qur'an.<sup>3</sup> In the main part, Suleiman Mourad's and Samir Khalil Samir's analyses of the pertinent Qur'anic texts from Q 19 and Q 3

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<sup>1</sup> Both published in Reynolds (ed.), *The Qur'an in its Historical Context*.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Marx, "Koranforschungsprojekt."

<sup>3</sup> I will not include the late Qur'anic anti-trinitarian polemics into the investigation.

will be discussed and their methodologies revisited. The results will reveal the need to re-examine Mary's theological relevance in the Qur'an itself—a topic addressed in the final section, which focuses on the religious-political and Mariological aspects of the texts. These do not receive an exhaustive treatment in the two papers, since they are primarily concerned with transmission processes. The intention of the present paper, thus, is both to reconsider the Qur'anic texts and to review previous methods of working with intertexts.

I will proceed from the methodological stance adopted by Sidney Griffith, who in a comparable investigation of reception history within the Qur'an seeks to tread a cautious path between two ideologically charged positions. "It is hoped that the hermeneutical assumptions applied in this one study might suggest ways to avoid some of the extremes and the thematic methods of past inquiries into the presumed foreign influences on the Qur'an."<sup>4</sup> My aim is not to find evidence of "external influences"—which appears to be the objective of Samir Khalil Samir—nor to merely reposition Qur'anic texts within Christian traditions, as attempted in Suleiman Mourad's work, but rather to embark on a more hypothetical venture, i.e., to discover clues pointing to debates about the person of Mary that the Qur'anic community might have engaged in.

### *An Outline of How the Figure of Mary is Developed in the Qur'an*

In Q 19:16–33, a middle Meccan text, Mary is presented as a semi-mythical, sacred figure—an image that remains prevailing not only in the later Qur'anic texts, particularly Q 3:33ff., but throughout the later Islamic tradition,<sup>5</sup> and which paints so poetic a picture<sup>6</sup> that Mary might be said to possess a prophetic history of her own from the Meccan phase of the Qur'anic communication onwards. This is in contrast with the figure of Jesus, whose image remains inconsistent and vague in the Qur'an and who from the Qur'anic text entered into Islamic historical tradition as a controversial figure. Not only does

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<sup>4</sup> Griffith, "Christian lore," 131.

<sup>5</sup> See Totolli, *Biblical Prophets*.

<sup>6</sup> See Mourad, "From Hellenism to Christianity and Islam."—For a juxtaposition of the images of Mary and Jesus in the Meccan texts see Neuwirth, "Imagining Mary."

the Qur'an present him as having brought about a schism in the church (Q 19:37), he equally remains the subject of arguments between different groups amongst the Prophet's audience (Q 19:34). In the most memorable story concerning Jesus, that of his birth in Q 19:22–33, far more attention is devoted to his mother than to him; the story is also typologically closely linked to the birth of John the Baptist (Q 19:2–15) and does not distinguish Jesus as being in any way superior to John. All the other Qur'anic texts involving Jesus take the form of fragmentary episodes from his life.<sup>7</sup> As in the Gospel of Luke, the story of Mary is linked with that of Zachariah the priest, yet not in terms of a sequence of events but rather as a kind of parallelization—an observation that will be seen to be significant when it comes to the association of Mary with the Temple. The only miracle ascribed to Jesus during the Meccan period (Q 19:30–33) again concerns his mother: he saves her life and her reputation by miraculously speaking up for her while still a baby in his cradle. Whereas the Meccan surahs mention Mary just one more time—Q 23:50<sup>8</sup> recalls the flight to Egypt—she becomes conspicuous again in the Medinan texts where her name occurs some thirty times.

But above all else, the Medinan period sees an increase in her theological importance, so that already in the early Medinan Sūrat Āl 'Imrān (Q 3) we find something of Medinan religious politics inserted into the initially hagiographical presentation of Mary. The old story from Q 19 is reread and to a certain extent “politicized”; the focus shifting from Mary as an individual figure to the significance she has as the central figure in a genealogy, the Āl 'Imrān, a group that is credited with representing a religious tradition of its own.<sup>9</sup> This development may be understood as expressing a temporarily chosen “apologetic stance” in favor of Christianity<sup>10</sup> as against Judaism. Indeed, one might claim that Q 19 is subjected to a reinterpretation for religious-political ends: to curb the influence of the predominant Jewish tradition, as represented by Āl Ibrāhīm, whose authority is founded on writing and exegetical competence and which needed to

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<sup>7</sup> See Robinson, “Jesus in the Qur'an,” and id., *Discovering the Qur'an*; see also Boman, *Wort vom Kreuz*, and Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an*.

<sup>8</sup> See Mourad, “Mary in the Qur'an.”

<sup>9</sup> See Neuwirth, “Mary and Jesus.”

<sup>10</sup> See Neuwirth, “Meccan texts—Medinan additions?”

be counterbalanced in the Qur'anic community's confrontation with older traditions.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the hagiographical and political dimension of the debate about Mary already described,<sup>12</sup> one also ought to consider her theological significance; as an inter-testamental figure, Mary marks the interface between the Jewish Temple worship and its reconfiguration in the Church and thus stands at the crossing-point between a Judaism bereft of the Temple and Christianity claiming the role of successor, or to put it more plainly: she marks the beginning of Christianity. The main aim of this contribution is to point out the symbolism that is linked to the theological positioning of Mary between the two traditions competing at the time of the Prophet.

A fourth aspect is that of religious polemics. Most of the numerous Medinan references to Mary target Trinitarianism; their significance for the community in Medina and shortly afterwards for early Islamic religious polemics can hardly be overestimated. These verses are quoted extensively in the earliest dated textual witness we have of the Qur'an, the inscriptions at the Dome of the Rock.<sup>13</sup> Despite this, these texts will not be discussed at this point, not just because of the limitations of the present format, but above all because a contextualization of the various pieces of information scattered throughout a number of surahs would require an amount of preliminary work that goes far beyond that which is possible in a single essay. The completion of the *Corpus Coranicum* intertext database is an indispensable prerequisite to accomplishing such a task.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This tendency is clearly recognizable in the prologue (Q 3:1–32) that for reasons of limited space cannot be discussed here at length.

<sup>12</sup> See Neuwirth, "Mary and Jesus."

<sup>13</sup> See Busse, "Arabischen Inschriften."

<sup>14</sup> Presentations of Mary until now do not offer much more than an account of the plots, though often involving references to earlier traditions, see Busse, *Theologischen Beziehungen*.

*The Current State of Research*

The story of Mary in the Qur'an has not yet been systematically researched.<sup>15</sup> Generally speaking, what has been done is to explain individual texts in isolation from one another,<sup>16</sup> i.e., to put forward separate explanations of the two Qur'anic pericopes on Mary, Q 19:16–33 and Q 3:33ff., that do not take account of diachronic developments. A detailed examination of the various stages in the development of the way she is presented (as outlined above, from hagiography through religious debate to theology) thus remains a desideratum—indeed the entire issue of how the figures of the prophets develop within the Qur'an has remained largely unexplored.<sup>17</sup> The majority of researchers still refuse to recognize that the chronology of the text allows it to be reconstructed as a record of Muhammad's proclamations and that it can be interpreted as part of the process of establishing a community; this continues to impede the kind of serious discussion of Qur'anic theology in its gradual stages of development which is needed if the significance of the figure of Mary is to become clear. Thus we find that the article on Mary in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* discusses not the development of Mary in the Qur'an, but focuses on isolated points in the Qur'anic texts and concentrates for the rest on inner-Islamic exegesis.<sup>18</sup> Intertexts are mentioned by Horowitz,<sup>19</sup> Speyer,<sup>20</sup> and later by Busse,<sup>21</sup> all of whom, however, confine themselves to re-establishing a historical connection between the traditions.

More recently, Loren D. Lybarger has embarked on a re-examination of the figure of Mary under the aspects of gender and prophetic authority.<sup>22</sup> Her numerous valuable observations do not however lead up to a consistent image that would do justice to the complex role of the figure of Mary in the Qur'an. The diverse stages of Mary's chang-

<sup>15</sup> For the Meccan developments see Neuwirth, "Imagining Mary," where due attention is given to Mourad, "From Hellenism to Christianity and Islam."

<sup>16</sup> See more recently Mourad, "Mary in the Qur'ān."

<sup>17</sup> An early attempt to scrutinize the Meccan development of the figure of Moses is presented by Neuwirth, "Erzählen als kanonischer Prozess."

<sup>18</sup> Freyer-Stohwasser, "Mary."

<sup>19</sup> Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 262.

<sup>20</sup> Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*.

<sup>21</sup> Busse, *Theologischen Beziehungen*.

<sup>22</sup> Lybarger, "Gender and Prophetic Authority."

ing function in the Qur'anic discourses remain outside the scope of the author who draws no conclusions from her occasional chronological allocation of Qur'anic texts; her approach is thus virtually synchronic, even relying at times on Islamic exegesis. The intra-Qur'anic references Lybarger adduces—such as a relation between the birth-pangs of the earth in Q 99 and Mary's solitary giving birth to a child in the desert—appear as accidental associations rather than hermeneutically relevant references, since both texts (Q 19 and Q 99) belong to otherwise unrelated Qur'anic discourses. Lybarger does not systematically consider pre-Qur'anic intertexts related to Mary herself, though she occasionally observes “echoes” of the Protevangelium of James. She ventures however to relate the Qur'anic Mary to the “Woman clothed with the sun” from the Apocalypse of John.<sup>23</sup> The assumption of such a reference would require a systematic examination of the alleged apocalyptic dimension of the Qur'anic texts that so far does not exist. The essay, though certainly pioneering and replete with important insights, in general severely suffers from a lack of theological information such as is indispensable for any investigation into the reception history of a figure so central in Christian tradition as Mary. It is deplorable that Qur'anic studies are still carried out in rather isolated circles of scholars, and this is perhaps why Samir's and Mourad's work takes no notice of Lybarger's valuable contribution, although their approach could be understood as an attempt to restore the intertextual basis that is missing in Lybarger's essay.

Suleiman Mourad's article “From Hellenism to Christianity and Islam: The Origin of the Palm Tree Story concerning Mary and Jesus in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and the Qur'ān” is of outstanding importance for an understanding of the intertexts relating to the Meccan texts on Mary that takes into account their theological dimension. Not content with merely comparing the narrative data with those of the Gospel of Luke and the apocryphal gospels already recognized as intertexts in previous scholarship, his discussion includes typological parallels in ancient religious mythology as well. In particular he has come closer to finding a satisfactory solution to the problem of the way Mary is addressed in the Qur'an as a “sister of Aaron” (Q 19:28). Whilst this was formerly considered to be a case

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<sup>23</sup> Lybarger, “Gender and Prophetic Authority,” 247.

of mistaken identity,<sup>24</sup> more recent studies have tended to assume a typological connection—God addresses Mary in the same manner as Miriam, the sister of Aaron.<sup>25</sup> This interpretation is successfully refuted by Mourad (see below). Above all, Mourad has shown that the “romantic” image of Mary as a young woman giving birth alone beneath a palm tree in the desert, and being fed and consoled by the fruits of the tree (Q 19) is not—as previous approaches that only considered the parallels with the Gospel of Luke have assumed—merely the result of an idiosyncratic reinterpretation in the Qur'an. His examination of the topographical context of the event recalls the story of the flight to Egypt that is told in the apocryphal Gospel of James, where a palm tree also plays a central role as a provider of food in the desert. Furthermore, the story of Hagar—which Mourad does not consider—can of course not be ignored as a typologically related image either. Mourad goes a step further and contextualizes the birth story in terms of a type of ancient pre-Islamic storytelling found in Hellenistic environments, the narratives of divine births; in particular, he recognizes a prototype for the Qur'anic birth story in accounts of the birth of Apollo. Taken as a whole, he succeeds in demonstrating that the middle Meccan story of Mary is in accord, if not with the canonical presentation of Jesus' birth, then with the descriptions given in numerous extra-canonical Christian texts that circulated widely in Late Antiquity, in other words, that it reflects widespread Christian traditions and images drawn from ancient traditions.

*Mourad's Interpretation of the Genealogy of Mary in Q 19:28, 66:12, and 3:35*

However, even Mourad's approach—like that of most of the contributions to the collection in which it was published—remains essentially “vertical.” His concern is to find evidence of the “sources” of the Qur'anic versions of Christian stories; his gaze is one of X-raying the text of the Qur'an in order to discover earlier texts. Now, as has

<sup>24</sup> See Mourad, “Mary in the Qur'an,” n. 2, with extensive bibliographical references.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Tottoli, “Imrān,” 509, and compare Busse, *Theologischen Beziehungen*. For Mary, see Freyer-Stowasser, “Mary.”

most recently been emphasized by Griffith,<sup>26</sup> the Qur'anic story goes beyond a mere reproduction of assimilated traditions, but rather places them within a new context. As a result, what is required is not just an analytical reading but a synthetic reading as well. Such a reading cannot limit itself to sequences of thought familiar from older traditions but has to consider the differences, the "surplus meaning": the indications contained in the text that hint at an exegetical re-reading implying a shift away from former perspectives. In the text under consideration, these indications are above all references to Old Testament prototypes (Amram, Aaron) that are present in the Qur'anic story but which are not known as such from either the canonical or the non-canonical gospels. These references have in turn to be understood as being part of the successive process of appropriation, so that Qur'anic chronology has to be introduced as a grid in order to sound out the development that the various adaptations of older traditions have undergone. This method of seeking out the function of the differences and of taking the chronology of the Qur'an as a parameter has not yet gained general acceptance in Qur'anic research.<sup>27</sup>

It is interesting at this point to look at how Mourad approaches this "surplus meaning," i.e., the details of the story that go beyond those found in the parallel Christian traditions and which obviously determine the way in which the text was understood by the Qur'anic community. For it is the exegetical comments reflected in the Qur'anic references to the Old Testament that encapsulate and convey the new target of the Qur'anic version of the story. Although it is impossible to determine with certainty whether this surplus meaning is the achievement of a conscious theological intervention by the Qur'anic community or whether it had already become associated with the image of Mary before and was simply appropriated by the community, it is nevertheless precisely this kind of exegetical detail that has to be recognized in order to read the Qur'an in the entirety of its hermeneutical layers.

Mourad discusses the reference of Mary to Aaron in Q 19:28 together with the two other verses that make a similar ascription, Q 3:35.36 and Q 66:12. Although his main concern is to differentiate between the sources for the picture of Mary presented by Q 19 (Meccan period, primarily: Luke), and Q 33, or Q 66 (Medinan period, Protevangelium of James), he does not address the fact that Mary is

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<sup>26</sup> See the quotation in the first section above.

<sup>27</sup> See the attempt by Neuwirth, "Mary and Jesus."



from the outset linked to an Aaronid genealogy, quite independently of the traditions that inspired the respective Qur'anic texts—a detail that is not found in any of the Christian traditions he identifies and which consequently might be expected to have attracted his attention.

In chronological order the verses are:

Q 19:28: *Yā ukhta Hārūna mā kāna abūki mra'a saw'in wa-mā kānat ummuki baghiyya* ("Oh Sister of Aaron, your father was not a wicked man nor was your mother a harlot.")

Q 3:35: *Idh qālati mra'tu 'Imrāna rabbi innī nadhartu laka mā fī baṭnī muḥarraran fa-taqabbal minnī, innaka anta s-samī'u l-'alīm.* ("When 'Imrān's wife said, 'Lord I dedicate to your service that which is in my womb. Accept it from me. You alone hear all and know all.'")

Q 66:12: *Wa-Maryama bnata 'Imrāna llatī aḥṣanat farjahā wa-naḥakhnā fīha min rūhina wa-ṣadaqat bi-kālimāti rabbihā wa-kutubihī wa-kānat mina l-qānitīn.* ("And Mary, 'Imrān's daughter, who preserved her chastity and into whose womb we breathed our Spirit, who put her trust in the words of her Lord and his scriptures, and was truly devout.")

Mourad advocates the explanation of this Qur'anic ascription of Mary's relationship to the family of 'Imrān in allegorical terms, insisting that it is not a direct genealogical or typological reference to 'Imrān and Aaron. He bases his argument on the Arabic phraseological convention of using *ukht*, *bint*, etc., to refer to membership in a group that does not necessarily correspond with direct family relation. He builds on earlier descriptions to explain the implications of this attribution to Mary: she is, according to at least some of the genealogies quoted in Arabic exegetical literature, part of the priestly line of Aaron, which means that she can be referred to by reference to him or his father 'Imrān—a membership to which Mourad does not, however, ascribe any theological implications. Although the motive is seen as helping to make the narrative of Mary's extramarital pregnancy and delivery more spectacular and thus life-threatening in the eyes of the people of the time, who would have associated membership of a group close to the Temple with particularly strict observance of the law, the theological relevance of Mary's links with the Temple remain otherwise unexplored in Mourad's work.

What would have been fruitful to pursue, particularly from the starting-point adopted by Mourad who links Mary to the Temple tradition, are the further references to the Temple found scattered throughout the Mary stories. It is striking that the story of Mary in





Fig. 1. The Presentation of Mary in the Temple.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> These and the following pictures are not contemporary to the Qur'an but date from the so-called Palaeological Renaissance of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They are taken from the volume of Ousterhout, *The Art of the Kariye Camii*, here p. 42. The monastery of *chora*, now Kariye Camii, in Istanbul, preserves a rich Mariological series of pictures that is typologically very close to the intertexts discussed in this article. The pictures are therefore quite appropriate as illustrations of the Mariological statements discussed.

breathing temple of the exalted God! Hail Mary, rod of strength and lamp of ample light! Hail Mary, who received the greeting of Gabriel and gave life to the House of Adam!<sup>31</sup>

Even if this interpretation is not made explicit in the Qur'an, the text nevertheless refers to an eastern place belonging to the Temple. Thus, the references to the Temple extend far beyond Mary's Aaronid genealogy. This may also be deduced from a Qur'anic text to which Mourad only briefly refers towards the end of his article:

The references to both Amram and Aaron must, then, be taken, allegorically. This leads me to argue that Amram of sūrat Āl 'Imrān, Q 3:33: "God exalted Adam and Noah, Abraham's descendants and the descendants of 'Imrān above the nations," is the biblical Amram, father of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, and the ancestor of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Moreover the reference to Mary's mother as Amram's wife is a reference to the biblical Amram in the sense that Mary's mother was married to a descendant of his.<sup>32</sup>

This thesis of the allegorical use of the Aaronids in the Mary story demands further explication, which leads us to Samir Khalil Samir's contribution.

### *Samir Khalil Samir's Reading of Q 3:33*

Samir's principal interest, like that of Mourad, lies in finding evidence of intertexts for the Qur'anic representations of Mary. Proceeding, however, from the vantage point of an authorial paradigm that presupposes Muhammad as the premeditating author of the Qur'an—a stance not taken by Mourad—Samir understands the Christian traditions that he adduces as having exerted decisive "influences"<sup>33</sup> on that author. His authorial model tacitly presupposes the appropriation of the traditions reflected in the Qur'an to be the exclusive and pre-meditated work of the one individual Muhammad. What appears much more probable is the assumption that the traditions referred to form an essential part of the general cultural background

<sup>31</sup> *Panqītā*, 45. The *Panqītā* (see bibliography) is a collection of prayers and hymns used in the liturgy of the Syriac Orthodox Church. Unfortunately, a critical edition of these crucial texts is still lacking.

<sup>32</sup> This essential finding has remained excluded from scholarly attention, often because an explanation for Mary's genealogy is sought in Islamic exegetical literature, see Lybarger, "Gender and Prophetic Authority," 243, n. 8.

<sup>33</sup> Samir, "Mary in the Qur'an," 141.

of a broadly educated intellectual elite, from which at least some of the first followers of the Prophet might have come. According to the most plausible model, therefore, the Christian traditions reflected in the Qur'an should not be seen as being due to "external influences" on the Prophet—an approach already rejected by Griffith—but rather as "legacies," traditional lore familiar to the educated of the time, which the nascent community was prepared to accept in part, to revise in other parts, but partly also felt obliged to reject categorically.

Verse Q 3:33, which is not dealt with by Mourad and which Samir takes as the starting point for one of his examples of external influence, reads:

*Inna llāha ṣṭafā Ādama wa-Nūhan wa-Āla Ibrāhīma wa-Āla 'Imrāna 'alā l-'alamīn, dhurriyyatan ba'duhā min ba'dīn, wa-llāhu samī'un 'alīm*  
 ("God exalted/elected Adam and Noah, Abraham's descendants and the descendants of 'Imrān above the nations [...])")

The verse does not stand alone but is the rhetorically emphasized introduction to a lengthy pericope on the life of Mary, beginning with a direct mention of the "wife of Amram," i.e., the mother of Mary. Q 3:33 can be understood to define the agenda for the following pericope. Samir Khalil Samir interprets this verse in isolation from its Qur'anic context, reading it as the reflection of a Christian typology familiar from Patristic literature. He sees in the text a reflection of the motive of the five covenants concluded between God and mankind, an idea that can already be found in the works of Origen (d. 254), Chrysostomos (d. 407) and, in Arabic, in (pseudo-)Eutychios of Alexandria, in fact Peter of Bayt Ra's, a ninth-century Bishop of Capitolia in Jordan and author of a *Kitāb al-burhān*. The first of these covenants, according to this model, was established with Adam, the second with Noah, the third with Abraham, the fourth with Moses, and the fifth with Christ. Samir sees this sequence reflected in Q 3:33 where four figures of Christian salvation history are mentioned, or rather, where the families of such figures are listed: Adam, Noah, the House of Abraham, and the House of 'Imrān. They are presented as having been "elected," a notion that Samir equates with their being qualified to enter a covenant with God. However, in the Qur'an mention is made of only four instead of five such figures, Moses and Christ being absent. In order to make sense of this fact, Samir interprets the term Āl 'Imrān as standing for two covenantal partners, namely, both for Moses, the son of Amram, who would not otherwise figure in the

Qur'anic series, and for Christ, whose family is evidently directly addressed as Āl 'Imrān, as becomes apparent in the story that follows. According to his reading, the verse is a Qur'anic reflection of Christian typology. For Samir, this discovery suggests the following conclusion:

From whom could such an enumeration come from if not the Christians? More precisely, if one accepts our interpretation of the expression "Āl 'Imrān," that encompasses at once Moses and Jesus, then it could only come from a Judaeo-Christian milieu, that is from Christians who have preserved Hebrew traditions. For Jews Āl 'Imrān is none other than Moses (along with Aaron and Miriam). The fact that the Qur'anic tradition, on the contrary, attributes this name to the family of Mary and Jesus, shows that there is a Christian tradition here. For this reason I conclude that there is a Judaeo-Christian tradition here.<sup>34</sup>

But what does such an interpretation, which does not consider the allegorical value of the allusion to Amram nor take any interest in the Qur'anic context, yield for the understanding of the Qur'anic text itself? Certainly, the idea of individual men of God having been chosen was by no means new in the Medinan period; one could even speak of a Qur'anic topos;<sup>35</sup> the notion can already be found in the Meccan surahs Q 42:13 (Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus) and Q 6:83–86 (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Noah, David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Zachariah, John, Jesus, Elias, Ishmael, Elisha, Jonah, and Lot). Related prophetic genealogies can be found in Q 29:27 (Meccan; Abraham, Isaac, Jacob), Q 19:58 (=Medinan addition; Adam, Noah, Abraham, and perhaps the Christians of the time), Q 57:26ff. (Medinan; Noah, Abraham, Jesus), and Q 3:33 (Medinan; Adam, Noah, Abraham, Amram).<sup>36</sup> The absence of Moses from all the

<sup>34</sup> Samir, "Mary in the Qur'ān," 143. Samir does not take notice of earlier research on the subject, though it would have presented a corrective to his thesis.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Hartmut Bobzin's contribution to this volume.

<sup>36</sup> These texts connect a series of prophets without, however, in most cases claiming that they are genealogically related. The Medinan interpolation of a genealogy in Sūrat Maryam, Q 19:58, encompassing all the prophets that had been recalled in the text of the surah, appears to be an attempt at classifying a number of prophets under particular genealogical clusters, namely Adam, Noah, Abraham, and 'Imrān, prophets that had been introduced in Q 3:33. The insertion runs as follows: *ulā'ika lladhīna an'ama llāhu 'alayhim mina n-nabiyyīna min dhurriyyati Ādama wa-mimman ḥamalnā ma'a Nūḥin wa-min dhurriyyati Ibrāhīma wa-Isrā'īla wa-mimman hadaynā wa-jtabaynā idhā tutlā 'alayhim āyātu r-raḥmāni kharru sujjadan wa-bukiyyā*, the last group obviously reflecting the Christian tradition characterized by humbleness. Here, explicit mention of the Āl 'Imrān is replaced by a paraphrase. Even in this ver-



Medinan lists is noticeable. The argument that the Qur'anic lists of chosen men of God from Abraham to Christ draw on a Christian legacy is certainly convincing, although it should be noted that not all these lists include Jesus, and even culminate in him. That the term *Āl 'Imrān* refers to the Christian tradition is of course a generally accepted interpretation. Nor can there be any doubt as to the usefulness of recalling the patristic intertexts concerning the covenants and the lists of the chosen for a deeper understanding of Qur'anic prophetic genealogies. It seems, however, doubtful to assume that *Āl 'Imrān* refers to the "descendants," i.e., the religious followers, of both Moses and Jesus, especially when this claim is at times based on references to Jewish tradition, and at others, on Christian tradition. But what is more important: the genealogical contextualizations of Mary do not name Moses at all, but refer exclusively to Aaron (Q 19:28) or his father Amram (Q 3:33.34, 66:12). Indeed, the intention appears to be to revive memories of the Temple tradition founded by Aaron rather than to recall memories of the Mosaic covenant. Accordingly, the Mosaic covenant cannot be assumed to be included in the list even by implication. If Moses, who is a much more prominent figure in the Qur'an than *'Imrān* who only serves to provide a name to a tradition, is not explicitly named, this negative evidence should be regarded as in effect a theological statement.

A principal question arises as well: Why indeed should all five of the covenants established in Christian tradition be involved in the context of Q 3:33? What purpose would be served by such an exact reflection of Christian tradition in the Qur'an? The assumption of the Qur'an's faithfully clinging to earlier traditions suggests itself only if one sees the Qur'an as a text compelled to copy from existing older texts.<sup>37</sup> Samir, who regards the Qur'an as a work authorially created by Muhammad, nevertheless rules out the possibility that a verse such as Q 3:33 could be a purposive expression that went beyond its links to older traditions, i.e., that it could have a new theological, even political, relevance to a real situation in the life of the community. The supposition that the perusal of biblical traditions should be related to the community's real situation does, however, suggest itself with regard to the Medinan texts that differ from the Meccan texts in that they

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sion, where five elects are mentioned, Moses is missing and is replaced by *Isrā'il* (= Jacob).

<sup>37</sup> This is the position of Luxenberg, *Syro-aramäische Lesart*.

often intervene into religious-political debates.<sup>38</sup> With this allegation, the understanding of Q 3:33 that is here proposed goes some way beyond Mourad's interpretation, who regards Āl 'Imrān as referring exclusively to historical figures, namely, the Holy Family and their predecessors in the history of salvation, i.e., the family of Amram.

My reading thus agrees with Mourad in arguing that Āl 'Imrān does indeed refer to the founding family of Christianity, a reference that is mediated through the allegorical reading of the Qur'an's Old Testament subtext. However, based on the previous work of Angelika Neuwirth cited in the references, I also claim that the term Āl 'Imrān, just like Āl Ibrāhīm, has a religious-political point, being aimed at the actual inheritors of the Aaronid and Abrahamitic traditions who were contemporaries of the early Qur'anic community.

*The Religious-Political Purpose of the Mary Pericope in Q 3:33–62:  
Vindication of the Āl 'Imrān as Equal in Rank to the Āl Ibrāhīm*

In order to retrace the real situation behind the text, we first have to read the verse in the context of the surah. Since the surah as a whole raises a number of issues that cannot be addressed here, I will confine my attention to the first main section. Verse 3:33 can be seen to be a manifesto by virtue of its rhetorical form; its rhetorically expressive beginning shows it to be a proclamation to the community. An unprejudiced examination of its microstructure reveals a twofold difference to the alleged Christian intertext adduced by Samir: the Qur'anic text not only limits itself to four instead of five privileged biblical figures, but in two cases replaces the names of the individuals by references to their descendants. It has obviously escaped Samir's attention that Q 3:33 does not refer just to Abraham and Amram respectively, but to their families or successors, the Āl Ibrāhīm and the Āl 'Imrān. Why then do we find groups of successors mentioned twice and juxtaposed with mentions of individuals? Evidently, the two references to families are not intended to evoke the memory of the prominent figures from the past history of salvation, but are aimed at their actual contemporary adherents, the communities of their spiritual successors as representatives of specific religious traditions. The word *dhurriyya* is used in the Qur'an both in the sense of an

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. "Meccan texts—Medinan extensions."



actual physical genealogy and of a spiritual adherence, the participation in a "prophetic project." In other words, it is the generations of Jews, the Āl Ibrāhīm, and the generations of Christians, the Āl 'Imrān, until the time of the Prophet, which are the object of the Qur'anic discussion. Both groups are descendants of the two ancestors Adam and Noah, the Christians in addition being descendants of Amram. Why does this have to be explicitly stated? The concern is evidently to foreground the "chosen" nature and, by implication, the equality of two religious political groups that were active on the religious-political stage of the time and stood in opposition to one another. Such an attempt to vindicate the two groups' equal prestige would also explain the fact that Moses remains unmentioned, as his presence would have considerably tipped the scales in favor of Judaism.

It is remarkable that the Qur'an does not mention the term Āl 'Imrān except in this passage; the name 'Imrān itself only occurs once more, as part of the name of Mary (Q 66:12). It would appear that Q 3:33ff. is concerned with a debate that was not to be continued in the Qur'an. Although it is true that the corresponding mention of Āl Ibrāhīm does not reoccur in the Qur'an either, this designation has enjoyed a spectacular afterlife in Islamic liturgy; as is well known, it survives in post-Qur'anic times as the only reference to a biblical family or progenitor to be included in daily prayers.<sup>39</sup> But let us return to the Qur'anic verse. The descendants of Abraham, to which Q 3:33 refers as Āl Ibrāhīm, had been a strong presence right up to the time of the Qur'anic community,<sup>40</sup> even if they are not always called by that name; in the early Medinan period, the Qur'an frequently refers to them as Banū Isrā'īl, and later as *alladhīna hādū*. That the term *āl* is used to allude to the founding fathers becomes clear from references such as Āl Ya'qūb (Q 12:6, Q 19:6). The fact that the same wording involving *āl* that is ordinarily used to refer to a recognized lineage is transferred to a genealogical group not previously mentioned and not known under that label from parallel traditions is very likely not devoid of religious-political import. The Āl 'Imrān are in the foreground while the Āl Ibrāhīm are "measured" against them, and vice versa.

<sup>39</sup> See Neuwirth's contribution on "The House of Abraham and the House of Amram."

<sup>40</sup> For the development of Abraham in the Qur'an see Sinai, *Fortschreibung und Auslegung*, and Neuwirth's contribution to this volume.

But while the narrative pericope that begins in Q 3:33 treats the Āl 'Imrān in detail, the competing group of Abraham's descendants are not the explicit focus of this section of the surah. Their progenitor Abraham does however belong to the genealogy of the Holy Family; at this point the Qur'anic text evokes the Lukan tradition of beginning the story of the Nativity with a genealogy. It is not the Davidic line but the Abrahamitic one that is highlighted. Each of the groups, the Abrahamites and the Aaronids, is evidently weighed against the other; the obvious purpose being to establish the common descent and hence the equal position of both, the founding family of Christianity and the bearers of the Abrahamitic tradition. For even without explicit mention, the bearers of the Abrahamitic tradition are "present absentees" in the text: they are the challengers in the altercation that accompanies the efforts of the Prophet throughout the time in Medina, the struggle for the authority to interpret monotheistic scripture. The purpose behind mentioning both Āl 'Imrān and Āl Ibrāhīm, it has been suggested, was to establish a counter-tradition not previously brought to the fore, which would prove a match for the then omnipresent bearers of the Abrahamitic tradition.

The process of establishing the Āl 'Imrān, previously not regarded as being a major religious tradition, in the consciousness of the Qur'anic community takes place on two levels, as is shown in Angelika Neuwirth's contribution on "The House of Abraham and the House of Amram," which will now be briefly summarized. First, the prolog to the story of Mary (Q 3:1–32) presents a new encoding of the process of revelation, which had previously been presented in purely "vertical" terms as a message from above consisting of clearly understandable verses. In Q 3:7, an additional agency connoted as female, *umm al-kitāb* is introduced into this course of events, presented as a transcendent *corpus* from which all clearly understandable scriptural verses (*āyāt muḥkamāt*, Q 3:7) emanate. At the same time the existence of shimmering, oscillating verses (*mutashābihāt*) is conceded. For starting with the proclamation of this surah, which marks a hermeneutic turning-point in the Qur'an, the revelations are no longer regarded as necessarily entirely clear and the possibility of their ambiguity is admitted, thus inviting interpretation. The problematic effect of the ambiguous verses on skeptic listeners is again connoted in terms of female categories; a degree of seductive power (*fitna*) is ascribed to these verses, thus establishing a counterpart of the legitimating notion of *umm*. This new aspect of gender that now imprints

the perception of scripture is confirmed by the presence, right from the prolog, of a second line of argument that appears complementary to that of "revelation" (*tanzīl*), namely a discourse of motherhood, and procreation. This latter discourse occasionally touches on the first in view of the fact that it biologically entails similar phenomena of ambiguity, such as the pre-natally undetermined gender of the child (Q 3:6). By focusing in advance on female qualities and gynecological processes such as will be central to the story of Mary that follows, the prolog anticipates the topic of the birth of Mary and her own motherhood up to the birth of Jesus<sup>41</sup> and moreover the gender-oriented subtext of that story. At the same time, qualities attributed to actual Christians in other Qur'anic texts from the same period, like the Medinan supplement to Q 19:58—qualities such as humility, penitence, and pious observance of the liturgy—are also highlighted.

A careful reading of the prolog also shows that the Āl Ibrāhīm are presented in the text in a manner that is unique in the Qur'an. For it is that group's emblematic quality, their scriptural erudition and exegetical professionalism, that is reflected in the Qur'anic community's new awareness of the possible ambiguity of the scriptural verses, their new discourse of the *mutashābih*. Certain technical terms used in exegesis which are reflected in the text of the prolog are evidently derived from Jewish exegetical practice as was current among the Jewish scholars of Medina, representatives of the Āl Ibrāhīm (again, see Angelika Neuwirth's contribution on "The House of Abraham and the House of Amram").

The Qur'anic text thus deals with both the Āl Ibrāhīm and the Āl 'Imrān, though only the latter are present as the semantic subject of the text, while the former figure hermeneutically: as initiators of exegetical methods. Although the story of the Holy Family may be the major theme of the text, there is also a shift in gender that is certainly not unconnected to the story of the two founding mothers of Christian tradition, Mary and her mother. A further novelty, the community's awareness of the ambiguity of scriptural verses, drawn from the wisdom of the contemporary Āl Ibrāhīm, even if the reference is not explicit, should not be underestimated either. Nevertheless, the surah's perspective on the bearers of the revealed word of God is

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<sup>41</sup> This evidence of a gendered subtext underlying the prolog would have corroborated the thesis of Lybarger, who is well aware of the significance of rhetorics in the discourse. Here again, a background in Late Antique exegetical traditions appears indispensable for a microstructural reading of the Qur'anic texts.

unique in the Qur'an: it is the only time that patriarchal authority, as embodied by the Āl Ibrāhīm with its exclusively male membership, is accompanied on equal footing by the authority attached to the virtues of humility and penitence as represented by women associated with the Āl 'Imrān.

*Glimpses of Mariology: The Perception of Mary and the Āl 'Imrān as the New Representatives of the Temple*

The Qur'anic story presents Mary as the sister of Aaron, and as the daughter of Amram without, however, making the theological significance of these ascriptions explicit. At the same time, Mary in the Qur'an is constantly connected to the Temple. Yet the implications of this relationship is not functionally exploited in the Qur'an. This does not, I think, mean that these implications did not form part of the knowledge of the listeners. On the contrary, one ought to assume that the close relation existing between Mary and the priestly family of Aaron as well as the Temple as such was familiar in a milieu where Syriac church traditions seem to have been current, a formative role of the Syriac church in the milieu of the Qur'anic emergence being generally accepted. Yet Christian Mariology, as it emerged after the Council of Ephesus in 431, where Mary was officially proclaimed to be the "Mother of God" (*theotokos*)—a proclamation that opened the way for her acknowledgement as an allegorical manifestation of the Church, i.e., the New Temple—was certainly not immediately acceptable to the Qur'anic community but needed to be negotiated. Given the insistence on a transcendent image of God and given the absence, indeed rejection, of allegorical interpretations of the earlier traditions in the Qur'an, Christology and Mariology in all likelihood caused severe theological problems to the community. As the outcome of their negotiation of the issue of Mariology, Mary's Christological significance appears to decrease: although her close connection to the Aaronid line and the Temple remains valid for the Qur'an, it is deprived of its complex allegorical dimension.

In what follows, some references to the Christian Mariology that is found in Syriac liturgy will be presented, thus highlighting both Mary's genealogy as a member of the House of Aaron/Amram, and Mary's close connection to the Temple. These intertexts will make the changes that occurred with the transition from the Christian to

a Qur'anic Mariology perspicuous. The collection of the intertexts here presented is not complete; the choice is ultimately due to the current state of development of the Corpus Coranicum's intertext data base. References such as these are expected to increase in the course of time.

### *Mary's Genealogy*

Although the exact genealogical attribution of Mary to Aaron as his sister and to Amram as his daughter seems not to be recorded in Syriac tradition, Mary is related to Aaron in an allegorical fashion in Ephrem's (306–373) *Hymns on the Nativity*:

ܐܬܬ ܡܝܪ ܕܥܡܪܐܡ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ  
ܕܥܡܪܐܡ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ

The Rod of Aaron flourished and the dry wood bore fruit. Its symbol today received its explanation: it is the virginal womb that bore.<sup>42</sup>

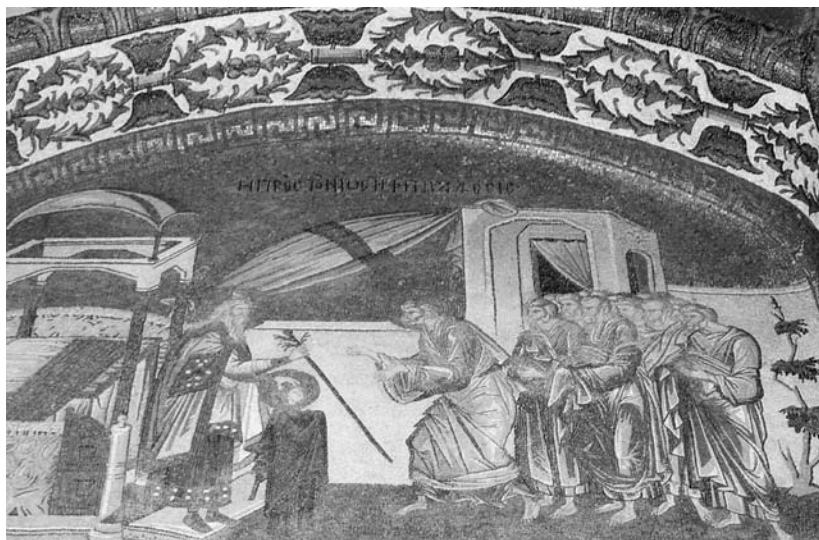


Fig. 2. The Virgin is entrusted to Joseph, whose rod—a re-embodiment of the Rod of Aaron—has miraculously flowered.

<sup>42</sup> Ephrem, *Hymnen auf die Geburt*, 3.







Fig. 3. Presentation of Mary in the Temple; in a scene within the scene, the virgin is seated in the Temple and fed manna by an angel.

The Qur'anic Zachariah story in Q 19 involves still further anticipations of later developments: Zachariah, when punished with muteness for his disbelief in the divine prediction, orders his community by gestures to sing praise *bukratan wa-'ashiyyā* (Q 19:11), "in the morning and the evening"—a liturgical ordinance that seems to anticipate the later ecclesiastical institution of the recitation of the Benedictus (Zachariah's hymn, sung in the morning) and the Magnificat (Mary's hymn, sung in the evening).



Fig. 4. The priest Zachariah is shown praying in the Temple.



In the ecclesiastical tradition, Zachariah, the last priest, is equally instrumental in preparing for the public manifestation of Mary's electness. In an apocryphal retelling of the story of Mary, Zachariah is instructed to perform the following:

ܐܒܝܬܐ ܕܐܒܝܬܐ ܕܐܒܝܬܐ ܕܐܒܝܬܐ ܕܐܒܝܬܐ ܕܐܒܝܬܐ ܕܐܒܝܬܐ  
ܕܐܒܝܬܐ ܕܐܒܝܬܐ ܕܐܒܝܬܐ ܕܐܒܝܬܐ ܕܐܒܝܬܐ ܕܐܒܝܬܐ ܕܐܒܝܬܐ  
ܕܐܒܝܬܐ ܕܐܒܝܬܐ ܕܐܒܝܬܐ ܕܐܒܝܬܐ ܕܐܒܝܬܐ ܕܐܒܝܬܐ

Zachariah, Zachariah! Go out and assemble all the widowed men among the people! Each of them shall bring you his rod. The rod that the Lord will honor with a sign, his bearer shall receive Mary as his wife.<sup>46</sup>

The miraculously flowering rod is thus transferred from Aaron to Joseph, who is typologically taking his place as Mary's closest relation. This rod has remained an emblem of Joseph all throughout the history of Church iconography. The event of the flourishing rod is only alluded to in the Qur'an (Q 3:44), where the messenger is excused for not presenting the story in detail.

Whereas these intertexts, in accordance with the Protevangelium of James and the Qur'an, present Mary as being located in the Temple, the Temple thus remaining a real place, Syriac liturgy presents her more often as an allegory of the Temple itself or, alternatively, of an accessory of the Temple, such as the Ark of the Covenant, the lamp, the Menorah or, again, the Rod of Aaron that is attached to the Ark. In the same vein, an anonymous hymn praises Mary with the words:

ܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ  
ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ  
ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ

The Ark, the lamp, and the Rod of Aaron denote you, Virgin, who fulfils the scriptures. You have become the Mother of God whom his servants and all the worlds praise.<sup>47</sup>

An anonymous prayer book enumerates further allegorical representations of Mary:

ܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ  
ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ  
ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ ܕܐܪܬܐ

<sup>46</sup> Çiçek (ed.), *Taš'itā*, 7f.

<sup>47</sup> *Panqītā*, 152.

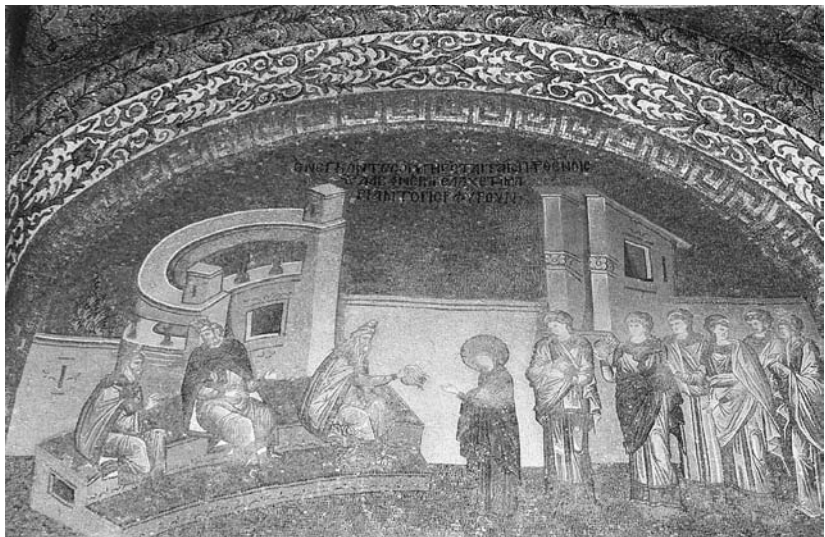


Fig. 5. The Virgin receives the skein of purple symbolizing her purity.



Fig. 6. Mary is allegorically called the “burning bush,” since the bush that burns without being consumed symbolizes the Virgin Birth.

You who has been compared to the shrub, to the skein of purple wool, to the cloud and to the Ark, to the menorah and to the Rod of Aaron, thus affirming the secrets of the Prophets, you we all praise.<sup>48</sup>

Mary is finally praised as the allegorical Temple at the celebration of her funeral (Dormition of the Virgin):

[illegible]

Hail Mary, O dove who bears the eagle of the old days! Hail Mary, pure and sacred young woman, O residence of the heavenly king! Hail Mary, Rod of Aaron! Hail Mary, closed gate that is not opened! Hail Mary, breathing temple of the exalted God! Hail Mary, rod of strength and lamp of ample light! Hail Mary, who received the greeting of Gabriel and gave life to the House of Adam!<sup>49</sup>

Thus Mary, allegorically representing the Temple, has been replaced in the Qur'an by the veristic image of Mary *in* the Temple. Mary, who allegorically represents the Rod of Aaron placed in the Temple, is now replaced by the "real" person, Mary, the "sister of Aaron," the Aaronid.

The allegorical prerogatives of the Christian image of Mary have thus been eliminated. Still, traces of a Mariology have remained. How are these to be interpreted? Simply as signs that have lost their previous theological function? Or should these traces not rather be understood as constituents of a new Qur'anic Mariology: as indicators of the replacement of a theologically highly implicative notion by a theologically more neutral one, apt to legitimize the appropriation of the discourse of Mary in the Qur'an—a discourse that in its Christian shape was irreconcilable with Qur'anic monotheism? Should these traces perhaps be regarded as re-formulations not only fit to appease those listeners who rejected the Christian dogma, but also able to reconcile listeners with a Christian background, who in the Qur'an found a figure of Mary that, although deprived of her mythic dimension, yet had some of her insignia preserved? These traces of a Christian Mariology—the

<sup>48</sup> *Panqītā*, 150.

<sup>49</sup> *Huššāyē d-Ēdē Mārānāyē*, 45.



Fig. 7. The mosaic shows how the Ark of the Covenant is carried to the new Temple. The virgin is related to the Ark of the Covenant: both the virgin and the Ark are containers of God.

replacement of Mary, allegorically understood as the Temple/Church, by Mary *in* the Temple, and the replacement of Mary, allegorized as the revived Rod of Aaron by Mary, the “sister of Aaron,”—would then be comparable to the replacement of the Christian title of Jesus as the “son of God” by the Qur’anic “Jesus, son of Mary.” In both cases, part of the earlier formula is preserved and left audible for the listeners, but at the same time is rid of its Christological implications.

Mary thus is present in the Qur’an, but Mariology has been rigorously de-mythified, allegories having been changed into veristic statements. Yet, not least because there are still recognizable traces of the allegorical intertexts adduced above, the Qur’anic figure of Mary has preserved a strongly poetic, spiritual dimension.

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# THE “SEAL OF THE PROPHETS”: TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF MUHAMMAD’S PROPHETHOOD\*

Hartmut Bobzin

## Introduction

As is well known, Q 33:40 describes Muhammad as “the messenger of God and the seal of the prophets (*khātam an-nabiyyīn*),” a statement which today is generally understood in the sense of finality—in other words, as claiming that there will be no prophet after Muhammad.<sup>1</sup> Yet the mere fact that “prophetic” movements within Islam have arisen again and again shows that the word “seal” (*khātam*) has also been understood differently, not just as indicating the finality of Muhammad’s prophethood, but also in the sense of confirmation, i.e., as a form of continuity with earlier prophets.

This is confirmed by an examination of as-Suyūṭī’s (d. 1505) extensive commentary on the Qur’an *ad-Durr al-manthūr fī t-tafsīr bi-l-ma’t’hūr*, which reveals a variety of interpretations of the term “seal.” ‘Ā’isha, for example, is reported to have said, “Say ‘seal of the prophets’ and not ‘there will be no prophet after him!’” while another ḥadīth quoted by as-Suyūṭī states:

A man once said in Mughīra (b. Shu’ba)’s presence: “God bless Muhammad, the seal of the prophets, there will be no further prophet after him!” Mughīra replied: “Content yourself with saying ‘seal of the proph-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the amusing anecdote in an-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-‘arab*, vol. 11, 14: “A woman who had been passing herself off as a prophetess was brought before the caliph. He asked her: ‘Who are you?’ She answered: ‘I am the prophetess Fāṭima.’—‘Do you believe in Muhammad’s message?’—‘Yes,’ she replied, ‘all that he preached is true!’—‘But do you not know that Muhammad said: There will be no prophet after me (*lā nabiyya ba’dī*)?’—‘I know it well; but did he also say: There will be no prophetess after me? (*lā nabiyyata ba’dī*)?’”

ets.' For we have been told that Jesus, blessings be upon him, will come again, and if he comes, he would be both before Muhammad and after him (since he has already appeared earlier)!"<sup>2</sup>

The expression "seal of the prophets" has recently been examined by Carsten Colpe, who traces it back to Tertullian's (d. after 220) *Adversus Judaeos* (composed soon after 208). Here, the expression refers to Jesus and is used polemically against the Jews; it appears in the interpretation of an important passage from the Book of Daniel (9:24) that in early Christianity was frequently read in a messianic sense.<sup>3</sup> Without entering into the question of how plausible Colpe's derivation may be, I would like to add that very similar thinking in a very similar context can be found in some homilies by the Syrian theologian Aphraates (d. shortly after 345), who also applies the expression to Jesus and employs it against the Jews.<sup>4</sup> This appears particularly relevant given the significance of Aphraates' world of thought, and of Syrian monastic teaching in general, for Muhammad's early revelations, as pointed out long ago by Tor Andrae.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Aphraates regards Moses and Jesus as being the two greatest prophets—an understanding of prophethood reflected in the Qur'an, where Moses is shown as the leader of the "Children of Israel" (*banū Isrā'īl*), and Jesus as that of the Christians (*naṣārā*). Quite characteristically, Aphraates also presents a typological exegesis of the Old Testament in which earlier prophets prefigure, and not merely foretell, the life of Jesus. The Qur'an interprets the traditional Judeo-Christian histories of the prophets in a similar fashion, yet does so with regard to Muhammad.

<sup>2</sup> Suyūṭī, *Durr* (ad loc.).

<sup>3</sup> Colpe, "Siegel," 77. Those interested in the entire spectrum of possible interpretations of the term "seal" should also consult Friedman's *Prophecy Continuous*, which debates the issue based on a wide range of source material, with particular regard to the modern "prophetic" movement of the Aḥmadiyya.

<sup>4</sup> Especially in the *Taḥwīyāthā* against the Jews and concerning persecutions; cf. Wright, *Aphraates*; German translation by Bert (1888) and recently by Bruns (1991).

<sup>5</sup> Andrae, *Mohammed*, chap. 3.

*Messengers and Prophets: Some Statistical Observations*

In the following, I would like to focus on the second part of the "Seal Verse," which has hitherto been largely ignored by scholars, and in particular on the concept of "prophet" (*nabī*). What is immediately obvious is that Q 33:40 places *nabī* in close proximity to another concept that is also applied to Muhammad, namely, the term "messenger" (*rasūl*). The entire verse reads:

Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but he is the messenger of God and the seal of the prophets (*mā kāna Muḥammadun abā aḥadin min rijālikum wa-lākin rasūla llāhi wa-khātama n-nabiyyīna*). God is cognizant of everything.

I should first like to examine more closely the two words "messenger" and "prophet." Today, both are used to refer to Muhammad, often without any discernible difference in meaning; Khoury's German translation of the Qur'an, for example, at one point even translates *rasūl* as "prophet" (Q 38:14)! The fact that the two are not always interchangeable can, however, be seen from certain everyday expressions. Thus Muhammad's birthday is referred to as *mawlid an-nabī*, "the birthday of the Prophet," and the call to pray for Muhammad is *ṣallū 'alā n-nabī*, "pray for the Prophet." The *shahāda*, on the other hand, refers to Muhammad as a *rasūl*: "I confirm that there is no god other than God, and that Muhammad is the messenger of God." The *sīra* literature also describes Muhammad mainly as the "messenger of God" (*rasūlu llāh*). It may be briefly noted that the Qur'an does not use the expression "prophet of God" (*nabiyyu llāh*), the earliest occurrences of which I have discovered in ḥadīth literature<sup>6</sup> and in aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 923).

Now it is a sound linguistic principle that two different expressions are likely to carry different meanings, so that it may be supposed that the expression "seal of the prophets" in the Seal Verse was not used without reason. In order to reach any further conclusion, one has to examine the complete text of the Qur'an for its use of the terms *nabī* and *rasūl*. The number of occurrences of each expression is recorded in the following table:

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Wensinck, *Concordance*, vol. 6, s.v. *nabī*, 332ff.

<i>nabī</i>			<i>rasūl</i>		
singular	<i>nabiyyun</i>	54	singular	<i>rasūlun</i>	236
plural	<i>nabiyyūna</i>	16	plural	<i>rusulan</i>	96
	'anbiyā'u	5			
	total	75		total	332

Here, three things are noticeable: Firstly, the word “messenger” occurs 332 times, four times as often as “prophet” (75 occurrences). Secondly, on the basis of Nöldeke’s chronology,<sup>7</sup> “prophet” appears predominantly in Medinan surahs and plays hardly any role in Muhammad’s early revelations. Thirdly, the application of *nabī* to Muhammad himself also does not occur before the Medinan surahs.

If taken seriously therefore, the Qur’an’s use of language stands in marked contradiction to the frequently held view that in Mecca Muhammad was primarily a “prophet,” while in Medina he was primarily a “statesman.” This division into periods has been adopted unquestioningly by a whole series of European biographies, from Karl Ahrens to Hans Heinrich Schaeder and W. M. Watt, and is often accompanied by the assumption of a “break” in Muhammad’s life. Yet such conceptions of Muhammad’s actions are, to put it bluntly, closely linked to the understanding of prophethood current in modern Western theology, according to which a prophet is someone inspired or at least authorized by God and charged with the task of proclaiming a particular message concerning the future. This message can be socio-political in nature, as was the case with the classical biblical prophets such as Amos, Isaiah, or Hosea, yet it is insisted that the prophets were not themselves politicians. The biblical scholar Walter Zimmerli has drawn attention to this, as he puts it, decisive “mistake” on the part of Muhammad: “La faute de Mahomet consiste en ceci: au moment où la puissance lui fut offerte, il n’est pas resté un prophète.”<sup>8</sup>

It will readily be admitted that attempting to understand the nature of Muhammad’s prophethood on the basis of biblical precedents is a questionable method. It is, however, just as questionable to make uncritical use of the understanding of prophethood advanced by Muslim biographers of Muhammad, since Ibn Iṣḥāq’s *sīra*, for exam-

<sup>7</sup> See *GdQ*, vol. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Zimmerli, *Prophète*, 32.

ple, is based on a definite concept of what a prophet ought to be like and of the course Muhammad's life must therefore have taken; it must therefore be used with the utmost caution when analyzing Qur'anic notions of prophethood. The only legitimate method must be to begin with a scrupulous examination of the Qur'an's own employment of the word. Whether it is thus possible to discover Muhammad's own self-understanding as a prophet must remain moot. To put it very briefly: Even though the Qur'an does have indisputable value as a historical source, it remains a primarily kerygmatic text, that is, it represents the transmission of a religious message, it is a "proclamation."

### *The Early Qur'anic Image of Muhammad*

How is Muhammad presented in the Qur'an? As is well known, the earliest surahs contain purely descriptive references to Muhammad, the oldest and clearest of which is "warner" (*nadhīr*, *mundhīr*; cf. Q 51:50.51, Q 79:45), followed by *mudhakkir* or "exhorter" (just once, in Q 88:21). Only later do we find "bearer of good news" (*bashīr* or *mubashshir*; see, for example, Q 35:24); interestingly enough, this designation is never used alone but always together with "warner." In addition, there is of course the word "messenger" (*rasūl*), used twice together with the attribute *mubīn* (Q 44:13 and Q 43:29), which means "unambiguous, clearly understandable, evident." More frequently, this latter attribute appears in conjunction with "warner."

When regarded in the context of the "clarity" of Muhammad's task described in these expressions, the various Qur'anic statements distinguishing him from other categories gain a new significance. Muhammad is said not to have been a "poet" (*shā'ir*, Q 69:41, Q 52:30) nor yet to have been "possessed" by a "spirit" (*jinn*)—in other words, *majnūn* (Q 68:2.51, Q 52:29), as poets were said to be (see Q 37:36: "Are we going to forsake our gods for the sake of a poet possessed?"). Nor was he a "magician" (*sāhir*) or one of the ancient Arabian soothsayers (sg. *kāhin*). A summary of these distinguishing statements reveals two things. Firstly, that they cover the entire range of ancient Arabian ecstasies, who were defined by established expressions and associated with certain religious or social institutions; by contrast, this was not true of the terms "warner," and perhaps also, "messenger." Secondly, the mode of speech (*qawl*) these ecstasies employed

was decidedly elaborate and in a certain sense artful. The poets' *qaṣīdas* were metric and full of imagery and metaphor; as far as can be seen from the scant evidence available, this also holds true for the rhyming prose (*saj'*) of the soothsayers (*kuhhān*). In contrast to this, Muhammad's speech is described as being "clear."

A systematic compilation of all the imperatives and prohibitions which the Qur'an describes as having been addressed to Muhammad by God reveals the singular nature of Muhammad's actions in Mecca in even sharper focus. Two categories can be drawn up on the basis of content. On the one hand, there are commands defining Muhammad's public duties, described in terms corresponding with the functional definitions quoted above like "warner" and "exhorter": "Arise and warn" (Q 74:2), "So announce to them the good news of a very painful punishment" (*fa-bashshirhum bi-'adhābin 'alīm*, Q 84:24), or simply the command to "remind" his audience (*dhakkir*, Q 87:9, 88:21, 51:55, 52:79). All of these imperatives define Muhammad's task as that of a preacher of penitence for his city (*qarya*) or people (*umma*). On the other hand, however, there is also a group of injunctions that refer to Muhammad as a person and to his relationship with God. These demand certain virtues of him, such as *ṣabr* (steadfastness, patience) or *tawakkul* (faith in God), or call on him to leave matters to God (*dharnī* ..., cf. Q 68:44). In addition, they require a number of pious actions, as seen in the verbs *sabbaha* (to praise), *dhakara* (to mention), and *sajada* (to prostrate oneself): "Proclaim the praise of your Lord when you arise" (*sabbih bi-ḥamdi rabbika ḥīna taqūm*, 52:48); "And mention (*wa-dhkur*) the name of your Lord morning and evening. And for part of the night, prostrate yourself (*fa-sjud*) to Him and glorify (*sabbih*) Him all night long" (Q 76:25.26). These instructions in particular bear a clear resemblance to an ascetic, not to say monastic, ideal of piety. The closest parallels are to be found in Syriac Christian monasticism.

If one were therefore to seek to characterize Muhammad on the basis of the early Meccan surahs, it would be as an ascetic preacher of penitence. He warns of the coming Day of Judgment when there will be no one to plead man's case before the righteous Lord, the Creator, who has the power to kill and restore to life. Preaching this message to the Meccans, Muhammad met with disbelief and resistance. In order to legitimize his mission and to give it sufficient weight, the Qur'an draws on the examples provided by earlier messengers of God (*rusul*). This happened by means of what Josef Horowitz has

termed “Straflegenden,” i.e., punishment narratives, according to which each “people” has its own messenger (*rasūl*) who is sent by God to “remind” it. In the six cases mentioned most frequently in the Qur’an, the respective people accuse the messenger of lying, and meet with instant retribution. The people are destroyed, the messenger survives—sometimes, as in the case of Noah, accompanied by a small band of adherents faithful to him.<sup>9</sup>

*The Qur’anic Use of nabī*

It is in this context that the term *nabī* is first employed, most strikingly in Q 19, where it occurs in a sort of catalogue. On closer examination of the figures to whom the Qur’an ascribes the titles “prophet” (*nabī*) or “messenger” (*rasūl/mursal*), the following picture emerges (brackets indicate non-explicit occurrences):

Name	nabī	rasūl
Adam ( <i>Ādam</i> )	(x)	
Enoch (? <i>Idrīs</i> )	x	
Noah ( <i>Nūḥ</i> )	x	x
Abraham ( <i>Ibrāhīm</i> )	x	
Lot ( <i>Lūṭ</i> )	(x)	x
Ishmael ( <i>Ismā‘īl</i> )	x	x
Isaac ( <i>Ishāq</i> )	x	
Jacob ( <i>Ya‘qūb</i> )	x	
Joseph ( <i>Yūsuf</i> )	(x)	
Moses ( <i>Mūsā</i> )	x	x
Aaron ( <i>Hārūn</i> )	x	x
Samuel	(x)	
David ( <i>Dā‘ūd</i> )	x	
Solomon ( <i>Sulaymān</i> )	x	
Elijah ( <i>Ilyās</i> )	(x)	x ( <i>mursal</i> )
Elisha ( <i>al-Yasaʿ</i> )	(x)	x ( <i>mursal</i> )
Jonah ( <i>Yūnus</i> )	x	
Job ( <i>Ayyūb</i> )	x	
Zacharias ( <i>Zakariyyā</i> )	(x)	
Hūd		x

<sup>9</sup> See Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*; cf. Marshall, *God, Muhammad and the Unbelievers*.

Name	nabī	rasūl
Ṣāliḥ		x
Shuʿayb		x
John the Baptist ( <i>Yahyā</i> )	x	
Jesus ( <i>ʿĪsā</i> )	x	x
Muhammad	x	x

As the table shows, all the figures described as *nabī* come from the Judeo-Christian tradition and have been aptly described by Arent Jan Wensinck as “biblical saints.”<sup>10</sup> This link to Judeo-Christian tradition is not quite so generally the case for the “messengers”; there are also far fewer of them. The survey also shows that the oft-repeated rule of thumb “Not every *nabī* is a *rasūl*, but each *rasūl* is a *nabī*” is not strictly true.

An attempt to discover the characteristics of the two groups based purely on the Qurʾan reveals a number of features common to both prophets and messengers, such as a scripture (*kitāb*), miracles (*āyāt*), and inspiration (*waḥy*).<sup>11</sup> It is impossible to differentiate clearly between *rasūl* and *nabī* on the basis of just these characteristics. Having been sent to a specific people, on the other hand, is a constitutive feature of a *rasūl*. This cannot be true of prophets, not least because in contrast to the messengers, they are partly determined by their genealogy, that is, they all come from a particular lineage (*dhurriyya*).<sup>12</sup>

With this we have a further important characteristic for some of the prophets named in the Qurʾan, namely, that of having been “chosen” by God. This was to have a significant effect on the veneration of Muhammad in later Islam as God’s “Chosen One,” *al-muṣṭafā*, or *al-mukhtār*. The following overview shows whom the Qurʾan describes as having been “chosen”:

<sup>10</sup> “Bibelheilige” in German; see Wensinck, “Muhammed und die Propheten,” 170.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Bijlefeld, “Prophet.”

<sup>12</sup> This genealogical aspect can be seen very clearly in Q 3:33: “God chose Adam, Noah, the family of Abraham and the family of ʿImrān above all mankind.”



Name	<i>iṣṭafā</i>	<i>ijtabā</i>	<i>ikhtāra</i>
Adam ( <i>Ādam</i> )	x	x	
Enoch (? <i>Idrīs</i> )		(x)	
Noah ( <i>Nūḥ</i> )	x	(x)	
Abraham ( <i>Ibrāhīm</i> )	x x	x (x) (x)	
The family of Abraham ( <i>āl Ibrāhīm</i> )	x		
Lot ( <i>Lūṭ</i> )		(x)	
Ishmael ( <i>Ismāʿīl</i> )		(x) (x)	
Isaac ( <i>Ishāq</i> )	x	(x)	
Jacob ( <i>Yaʿqūb</i> )	x	(x)	
Joseph ( <i>Yūsuf</i> )		(x)	
Moses ( <i>Mūsā</i> )	x	(x) (x)	x
Aaron ( <i>Hārūn</i> )		(x)	
The Children of Israel ( <i>banū Isrāʾīl</i> )			x
Saul ( <i>Tālūt</i> )	x		
David ( <i>Dāʿūd</i> )		(x)	
Solomon ( <i>Sulaymān</i> )		(x)	
Elijah ( <i>Ilyās</i> )		(x)	
Elisha ( <i>al-Yasaʿ</i> )		(x)	
Jonah ( <i>Yūnus</i> )		x (x)	
Job ( <i>Ayyūb</i> )		(x)	
Zacharias		(x) (x)	
John the Baptist ( <i>Yahyā</i> )		(x)	
Mary ( <i>Maryam</i> )	x	(x)	
The family of Imran ( <i>āl ʿImrān</i> )	x		
Jesus ( <i>ʿĪsā</i> )		(x) (x)	
Muhammad			
The Servants of God ( <i>ʿibād Allāh</i> )	x		

The “chosen ones” include almost all the figures to whom the title *nabī* applies. It is significant that they are joined by three groups: the “family of Abraham,” the “Children of Israel,” and the “family of ʿImrān,” which correspond to the Jewish patriarchs or pre-Mosaic Jewry (= *āl Ibrāhīm*), Mosaic Jewry (*banū Isrāʾīl*), and post-Mosaic Jewry together with Christians and Jewish-Christians (= *āl ʿImrān*). Belonging to these “chosen ones” is therefore an essential attribute of the prophets and of their families as named in the Qurʾan. The Qurʾanic prophets all display one further characteristic. Each has given a “pledge” (*mīthāq*) that was accepted by God and thus has resulted in a “contract” or “covenant” (*ʿahd*). Such a covenant is not

restricted to prophets but includes all of the “chosen ones” named above.

The Qur’anic notion of prophethood is thus closely bound up with the history of God’s “chosen people” and with the concept of covenant. A closer examination of the terms “successor” (*khalīfa*, derived from the verb *khalafa*) and “inheritance” (the verb *waratha* and its various derivations) leads to a similar conclusion.<sup>13</sup> The title “messenger,” on the other hand, does not exhibit this historical connotation, despite the fact that it does bear certain similarities to the concept of apostleship as found in the New Testament and the early Church. “Messenger” can without difficulty be applied to figures from Arabian history, such as Hūd, Šālīḥ, Shu‘ayb—and, of course, Muhammad.

### *Muhammad as a Prophet: The Medinan Context*

How then did the term “prophet” (*nabī*) come to be applied to Muhammad? It should be remembered that the Qur’anic evidence shows that apart from two disputed passages, which will be discussed below, Muhammad was first described as a prophet in Medina. One of the issues figuring most prominently in the Medinan surahs is of course the polemic against the local Jews. Viewed in purely political terms, the issue was of course that of who was to hold power. This conflict is reflected in the Qur’an, albeit not as a historical account but, as it were, translated into theology. At bottom, this conflict rested on two opposing claims to have been “chosen”: it revolved around the question of which community—the Jews of Medina or the new arrivals from Mecca—was God’s true “chosen people.” Since the prophets were the central protagonists of biblical salvation history, presenting Muhammad as a *nabī* implied that he was the most recent representative of that history; his and his adherents’ claim to supremacy is thus supported by means of a quasi-genealogical continuity with earlier “chosen” individuals and communities.

This is confirmed by Q 33, which also contains the Seal Verse. Immediately noticeable is the circumstance that this surah exhibits almost a quarter of all occurrences of the word *nabī* (seventeen out of seventy-five); one might well argue that its basic topic is precisely to serve as a “reminder” of the identity of the true prophet. On six

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<sup>13</sup> See Prenner, *Muhammad and Musa*. A similar conclusion was reached by Wolfdietrich Fischer, “Selbstverständnis Muhammads.”

occasions, the address "O Prophet" (*yā-ayyuhā n-nabiyyu*) is used to mark new and important sections of the surah. Another conspicuous feature of the text is that it contains a whole series of prerogatives of the Prophet, some of which concern his relationship to women, while others are to be of particular significance for the later Islamic veneration of Muhammad. He is called a "good example" (*uswa ḥasana*, v. 21) whose life one should seek to imitate; he is described as a "shining lamp" (*sirāj munīr*, v. 46), an expression which was to lead to the light symbolism widely associated with Muhammad in popular belief and mysticism; and God and his angels are said to invoke blessings on the Prophet (*inna llāha wa-malā'ikatahū yuṣallūna 'alā n-nabī*, v. 56), which is the basis for the later obligation to invoke blessings when the Prophet's name is mentioned.

In our context, however, the most significant passage besides the Seal Verse (v. 40) is verse 7:

And (remember) when we took from the prophets their covenant and from you and from Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, son of Mary, too; and we took from them a solemn covenant.

Here, "from you" (i.e., from Muhammad) is emphasized by the fact that it precedes the names of all the other prophets. Muhammad is given a prominent position in a chain of succession or a genealogy of "chosen" prophets, whereby the covenant concluded between God and his prophets also applies to Muhammad's people, the Islamic *umma*. It is this sense that Q 7:157f. twice refers to Muhammad as the *rasūl an-nabī al-ummī*, that is, a prophet belonging not to the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*), but to his own Arab *umma*; the term *an-nabī al-ummī* is thus best rendered as the "gentile prophet."

According to Q 7, Jews and Christians can find this prophet "mentioned in the Torah and the Gospel." I shall come back to the relevant passages further on. It is, however, only in the light of this statement that one can fully appreciate what was the primary issue in the conflict with the Jews—the age-old differentiation between true and false prophecy, or the Jews' refusal to recognize Muhammad as a prophet in the Jewish tradition, as Johan Bouman has noted.<sup>14</sup> In what is partly a development of Wensinck's well-known work *Mohammed en de Joden te Medina*, Bouman gives two reasons for this:

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<sup>14</sup> See Bouman, *Der Koran und die Juden*, 69.

According to Jewish tradition, prophets do not seek political power. The fact that Muhammad does so provides the evidence that he is not a prophet. And prophets [...] are not led by their fleshly desires as Muhammad is.<sup>15</sup>

This last point is inextricably bound up with Muhammad's polygamy and especially with his marriage to the beautiful Zaynab bint Jahsh. According to Muslim historians, she had first been married to Muhammad's adopted son, Zayd b. Hāritha. Ibn Sa'd, in his great biographical work, relates that Muhammad once sought to visit Zayd at home but found him absent and met Zaynab. From this meeting a relationship developed.<sup>16</sup> One might suppose the story would follow a course similar to that of David and Bathsheba familiar from the Old Testament, but one would be wrong. For insofar as one can tell from our knowledge of ancient Arabic law, Muhammad's adopted son Zayd enjoyed the same status as a biological son. Muhammad could not therefore have married Zayd's wife. However, Q 33:4 states that God "did not make your adopted sons your sons in fact." One can read this as an announcement of the extensive discussion in verses 37–40 of whether a believer (*mu'min*) is permitted to marry the wife of his adopted son, a section that leads on to the Seal Verse:

And (remember) when you said to him whom God favored and you favored: "Hold on to your wife and fear God," while you concealed within yourself what God would reveal and feared other men, whereas God had a better right to be feared by you. Then, when Zayd had satisfied his desire for her, we gave her to you in marriage; so that the believers should not be at fault regarding the wives of their adopted sons, once they have satisfied their desire for them. For God's command must be accomplished.

The Prophet was not at fault regarding what God prescribed for him as was his way with those who were gone before. And God's command is a pre-ordained decree.

Those who were delivering God's messages and feared Him, fearing none other than God. God suffices as a reckoner.

Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but is the messenger of God and the seal of the prophets. God is cognizant of everything.

The word *ḥaraj* ("offense, offensiveness, crime") is used twice in this passage, indicating the problematic nature of the situation. It is

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>16</sup> See Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. VIII, 71ff.

nevertheless advisable to avoid Bouman's expression "fleshly desires"—probably unintentionally, he has adopted a traditional Christian interpretation of the passage that can be traced back to John of Damascus (d. ca. 750).<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that writers such as Ibn Hishām (d. 830) make no mention of the episode, while Ibn Sa'd (d. 845) describes it so freely, does appear to indicate that the whole matter was regarded as in some way offensive. The Qur'anic text clearly contains an apologetic element; this was, however, probably not originally directed towards Muhammad's own followers, as may be seen from the conclusion of the passage, the Seal Verse. If the text first denies that Muhammad was guilty of adultery, and then appends a prophetic statement of such significance, the text can only be addressed to an audience who has denied his prophethood precisely because of his conduct. The only plausible addressees of the section are therefore the Jews of Medina.

*The Nature of True Prophecy: Some Relevant Rabbinic Intertexts*

Since we have no direct, contemporary source material concerning the Medinan Jews (other than the Qur'an, of course), a short detour is necessary at this point. A brief passage in the Mishnah, at the end of the tractate *Sanhedrin*, tells us that adultery is one of the characteristics by which a "false prophet" may be recognized (the punishment being strangulation). The Babylonian Talmud adds no further comment. It should be noted here that the Talmud contains little concerning the nature of prophecy, since common opinion had it that there would be no further prophets after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans.<sup>18</sup> Rabbinic Judaism therefore regarded ancient prophecy primarily as a matter for classificatory speculation: Was prophecy limited to Israel? What was the nature of prophecy? What should a prophet be like? Answers to these and other questions are found scattered throughout the Talmudic material, often in the form of anecdotes. The tractate *Shabbat* for example states that a prophet has to be a "wise, brave, rich, and well-grown man" (92a). What concerns us here, however, is the quite different question of what a prophet ought *not* to be like according to Jewish teaching, what he is absolutely prohibited from doing.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 91.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Baba Batra 12a.

The most detailed description of the ideal Jewish prophet is to be found much later in the *Guide of the Perplexed* (*Dalālat al-hā'irīn*) by the famous religious philosopher Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), who also authored one of the most important commentaries on the Mishnah. Maimonides describes the features characterizing true and false prophets and states that a true prophet will abandon the desires of the flesh and hold them in contempt, this being the first step that has to be taken by those in search of truth and by prophets in particular.<sup>19</sup>

Whether Maimonides' ethics, and in particular his antipathy towards the human body, owe more to the Aristotelian tradition than to traditional Judaism is not the main issue here. What is significant is rather that he supplements his argument with an important example from the Old Testament, the case of the two false prophets Ahab and Zedekiah, who, according to Jeremiah (29:23), "committed adultery with their neighbors' wives, and have spoken lying words in my name, which I have not commanded them." Without ignoring the dangers inherent in basing my argument on a work written much later than the Qur'an, the biblical quotation used by Maimonides had certainly been known for a long time. It is thus at least likely that Q 33:37–40 might have been attempting to refute Jewish allegations that Muhammad should be seen as a "false prophet" because he had committed adultery.<sup>20</sup>

Wensinck and Bouman mention a further aspect, namely, that Jewish tradition proscribes prophets from seeking power. Yet this view is not based on genuine Jewish sources but largely on statements attributed to the Jews by early Arabic historians. If one consults Jewish sources, the issue appears in a different light. Here, what is essential to true prophecy is rather that prophecy is conceived as a phenomenon confined to Israel. This is also how Ibn Ishāq describes matters when he reports Muhammad's Jewish opponents to have said: "There is no prophecy (*nubuwwa*) amongst the Arabs, but your master (i.e., Muhammad) is a king (*malik*)."<sup>21</sup> In other words, Muhammad, on account of his Arab, non-Jewish origin, is in no way associated with the specifically Jewish tradition of prophecy. Aṭ-Ṭabarī, in a still more interesting passage, reverses the emphasis: Shortly before his conver-

<sup>19</sup> *Guide*, 371 (pt. 2, chap. 36).

<sup>20</sup> One can find more details regarding the Jewish background of this passage in the German version of this paper, cf. the introductory note.

<sup>21</sup> Guillaume, *Life*, 270 (p. 400 of Wüstenfeld's edition).

sion to Islam, Abū Sufyān, the leader of Muhammad's Meccan opponents, is reported to have said to Muhammad's uncle al-'Abbās: "Your nephew's power (*mulk*) has become great," whereupon al-'Abbās replied: "Beware! It is prophethood (*nubuwwa*)."<sup>22</sup> Rather than presenting prophethood as something incompatible with the exercise of power, here Abū Sufyān is made to understand that he is confronted with a particular kind of power, namely, the authority inherent in true prophethood.

### *Moses as a Paradigm*

What concerns us here is not how Muhammad succeeded politically in asserting his claim to be a *nabī* against the opposition of the Medinan Jews, but rather how this is theologically justified. The Qur'an provides a clear answer to this question: the figure of the "messenger and prophet." It can hardly be a coincidence that the prophet whom the Qur'an mentions most often is Moses. Prenner's research has given us a much clearer understanding of the significance which the Mosaic stories in the Qur'an have as metaphors for the salvation-historical background of Muhammad's mission.<sup>23</sup> When read with this in mind, it becomes evident that according to the Qur'an there was no such thing as a "break" in Muhammad's development: Moses at first functions as a preacher of penitence and then leads his people out of Egypt, thus assuming the role of the law-giver in the desert. Each role follows naturally from the other. Instead of a "break," there is merely a turning point in the lives of both men: the Exodus for Moses, the Hijra for Muhammad.<sup>24</sup>

Once we recognize that on a theological level Moses can be seen as a paradigm for Muhammad, we can easily find other analogies. One particularly significant example is near the beginning of Q 5, which gives a number of dietary prescriptions. Here, the word *al-yawma* ("today, this day") appears several times, most importantly in the following statement from v. 3: "Today, I have perfected your religion for you, completed My grace on you and approved *islām* as

<sup>22</sup> Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, vol. 1, 1633.

<sup>23</sup> Prenner, *Muhammad und Musa*.

<sup>24</sup> Angelika Neuwirth, in her analysis of the Qur'anic Moses narratives, has shown in detail how they serve as a narrative medium for articulating the position and function of Muhammad himself. See Neuwirth, "Erzählen als Kanonischer Prozeß."

a religion for you.” Which day does this refer to? Nöldeke and Schwally assume it to have been a day in the last year of the Prophet’s life.<sup>25</sup> With slightly more justification, Erwin Gräf takes it to have been a date shortly after the Hijra when Muhammad was still seeking to win over the Jews and therefore at pains to demonstrate to them that he was familiar, and in agreement, with their laws.<sup>26</sup> Yet a different, and possibly more fruitful, approach is suggested by Hartwig Hirschfeld, who has pointed out the “deuteronomistic” nature of this passage.<sup>27</sup> What did he mean by this? In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses begins his great speech proclaiming the Ten Commandments with the words: “Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your ears this day” (5:1). Throughout his speech, as a kind of renewal of the covenant concluded at Horeb, “this day” is repeated again and again. It seems to me that the beginning of Q 5 is part of a similar covenanting speech, also alluded to by Q 33:7 (see above). A covenant of this kind is not a historical event, but rather a part of salvation history; it has to be seen as a kerygmatic date and as such cannot be dated with historical precision.

Hirschfeld’s suggestion, even though at first sight of merely negative value, is however helpful in a quite different way. Today, the “Deuteronomists” are seen as having edited the books of the Old Testament in order to bring them into line with a particular concept of redemption in which prophets play an important role as proclaimers of the one God. It is here that the notion of the violence suffered by the prophets is first presented, an idea that is later taken up by the Qur’an. The Book of Deuteronomy also contains an extremely important passage on soothsayers of all kinds and on true and false prophets (18:9ff.), and the same chapter also reports Moses’ proclamation to the Children of Israel: “The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken” (18:15). Q 7:157f., which has been quoted above, speaks of the so-called “heathen prophet” (*an-nabī al-ummī*) and states that the “People of the Book” can find him mentioned in the Torah and the Gospels. It is not unlikely that this is indeed a polemical reference to the passage in Deuteronomy—as Muslim apologists have always maintained.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 1, 228.

<sup>26</sup> Gräf, *Jagdbeute*, 52.

<sup>27</sup> Hirschfeld, *New Researches*, 133.

<sup>28</sup> Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 104.



In summary, then, the Qur'an's portrayal of Muhammad's prophethood is characterized by a typological association with the figure of Moses. The way Moses is portrayed owes much to Judaism and to Jewish Christianity. The figure of Moses allowed Muhammad's idea of a theocracy to mature ("Fear God and follow his messenger"). Just as Jewish Christianity regarded Jesus as a prophet who confirmed and completed Moses' prophecy, the Qur'an views Muhammad as having completed Moses' work. Consequently, it is in this sense that the expression "seal of the prophets" must primarily be understood.

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## READING THE QUR'AN AS HOMILY: THE CASE OF SARAH'S LAUGHTER\*

Gabriel Said Reynolds

### *Introduction*

In surah 11 (Hūd), the Qur'an refers to messengers (*rusul*) who come to Abraham and give him the good news of the promised birth of a son and a grandson (vv. 69ff.). Immediately thereafter (vv. 77ff.), the text refers to messengers, apparently the same messengers, who come to warn Lot of the destruction of his people. This narrative sequence, of course, accords with Genesis 18–19. Yet the quality of the narrative is quite different in the Qur'an. The Bible provides a detailed story, beginning with Gen. 18:1–2: "Yahweh appeared to him at the Oak of Mamre while he was sitting by the entrance of the tent during the hottest part of the day. He looked up, and there he saw three men standing near him."<sup>1</sup> The Qur'an, on the other hand, provides only allusions. It mentions neither the Oak of Mamre nor a tent, nor the heat of the day, nor does it specify the number of messengers at three.

Evidently, the Qur'an is not borrowing or retelling the biblical story, but rather commenting on it. Accordingly, there is a distinctly homiletic feel to this passage. It is all carefully rhymed, according to the *fāṣila* of a penultimate *-ī* or *-ū*. It is interrupted on several occasions with pious reminders, such as verse 73, when the messengers ask, "Do you wonder at God's command? May the mercy and blessings of God be upon you, O people of the house. Surely he is praiseworthy and glorious." Even the very substance of the story seems to be remolded by the homiletic goals of the author. In Gen. 19:26 there is a terse reference to Lot's wife turning into a pillar of salt, a

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\* I discuss the issues involved in the present article more thoroughly in a paper for the *Fifth Woodbrooke-Mingana Symposium on Arab Christianity and Islam*, cf. G. S. Reynolds, "The Qur'ānic Sarah as Prototype of Mary," in *The Bible in Arab Christianity*, edited by D. Thomas, Leiden 2007, 193–206.

<sup>1</sup> The translation is according to the *New Jerusalem Bible*.

punishment, it seems, for her decision to look back at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Thus when Jesus seeks to warn his audience that on the Day of Judgment “anyone who tries to preserve his life will lose it” (Luke 17:33), he exclaims “Remember Lot’s wife!” (Luke 17:32). In Q 11:81, however, the demise of Lot’s wife is already predicted by the messengers; it is preordained (cf. Q 7:83; 15:60; 29:32). The message is clear: God’s will is ineluctable. Thus the Qur’an—much like Jesus in Luke’s Gospel—alludes to the biblical story of Abraham and Lot as a medium by which to express a religious message. That only an allusion was necessary suggests that the Qur’an’s audience, like that of Luke, was already familiar with the details of the story.

Yet the allusive style of the Qur’an was a source of great consternation to Muslim scholars. For when Qur’anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) arose, the exegetes (*mufasssīrūn*) were either not aware of the details of the biblical story to which the Qur’an alludes, or, perhaps more likely, were mistrustful of biblical literature and commentary. Either way, they kept the Qur’an separate from the Bible. Instead of turning to biblical literature for the details of the visitation story, the *mufasssīrūn* attempted to find those details by extrapolating the references in the Qur’an. This proved particularly vexing in regard to one peculiar detail of this passage: the mention of Abraham’s wife laughing in Qur’an 11:71. It is to this detail that the present paper is dedicated.

Incidentally, if the homiletic quality of the Qur’an was problematic to the medieval exegetes, it could be quite helpful to critical scholars today. For if the Qur’an is a homily, in this case a homily on a biblical narrative, it ceases to be in a competitive relationship with the Bible (or any other text on which it might be commenting). On the contrary, the two texts become the best of friends, one helping the other along. One text provides the material, the other text provides the interpretation. The Qur’an can no longer be accused of borrowing from the Bible or vulgarizing the Bible. The Bible, meanwhile, can no longer be off limits to studies of the Qur’an, which no longer appears *ex nihilo*. On the contrary, this model would demand that students of the Qur’an become no less students of the Bible. Hopefully the virtue of this model will become evident through the simple example that follows.

*The Qur'anic Evidence*

From the Qur'anic evidence alone, the following information on the incident during which Abraham's wife laughs emerges. Certain messengers (*rusul*, perhaps best understood through Greek ἄγγελος) of indeterminate number come to Abraham with good news. He rushes to bring them a roasted calf,<sup>2</sup> which they do not touch. The rejection of his hospitality scares Abraham, but the messengers reassure him with the declaration that they have been sent to Lot's people. In verse 71 two things happen. First, Abraham's unnamed wife, who is standing by,<sup>3</sup> laughs. Second, the divine first person plural voice of the Qur'an announces: "Thereupon we announced to her the good news of Isaac, and after Isaac, of Jacob." Abraham's wife does not seem pleased with the news. She is upset or scared by it, proclaiming *yā-waylatā*, and remarking that both she and her husband are old. She describes this matter as *'ajīb*, which Yusuf Ali and Shakir translate as "wonderful," but Pickthall and Fakhry as "strange." Finally, after Abraham's amazement passes, and he too receives the good news, he debates with God the fate of Lot's people (an allusion to the famous haggling with Yahweh over the fate of Sodom, Gen. 18:22–33).

The story of Abraham's visitors is repeated in Q 51:24–34, but here the visitors are referred to (v. 24) as Abraham's guests (an allusion undoubtedly recognizable to the Qur'an's audience) and described (v. 25) as a *qawm munkar*, an "unusual people," perhaps an allusion to the supernatural character of these visitors. This term also seems to have something in common with Q 11:70, where it is related that Abraham *nakirahum* (usually understood as "felt mistrust" or the like) when they did not touch the food. Presumably the non-Qur'anic characters of Munkar and Nakir receive their names, and their vocation as angels of punishment, from these references.

In Q 51:28–29 there is also an important difference with Q 11, for here when the angels seek to reassure Abraham, they do not do so, as in Q 11:70, by telling him that their mission is against Lot. Instead, they reassure him by delivering the good news of a son to be born. At this, Abraham's wife is distraught and comes forth screeching (*fi*

<sup>2</sup> This follows the traditional reading, *ḥanīdh*, which is poorly attested in Arabic. The *scriptio defectiva* of this term, which allows for scores of different readings, may have been misread. The meaning of *ḥanīdh* is anyway unclear.

<sup>3</sup> Ibn Mas'ūd's reading has *wa-huwa jālisun* after the mention that she is standing. See Jeffery, *Materials*, 47.

*ṣarratin*), hitting her forehead,<sup>4</sup> and shouting ‘*ajūzun ‘aqīmun*, “old and sterile.”<sup>5</sup> If the passage in Q 51 does not refer to Abraham’s wife’s laughter, it nevertheless illuminates the reason for it. In light of this second passage, the role that the Qur’an assigns to Abraham’s wife in the visitation story is clear: to express shock and disbelief at the promised miracle, be it by screeching, hitting her forehead, laughing, or reminding the reader that she and her husband are old. She laughs, then, because she finds the idea of having a son amazing, not unlike the Sarah of Gen. 18.

Most *mufasssīrūn*, however, do not arrive at this conclusion. In fact, they are remarkably uncertain about this allusion to the laughter of Abraham’s wife, whom we might now confidently refer to as Sarah. Abraham Geiger sums up the explanations of the *mufasssīrūn* for Sarah’s laughter as “die mannigfaltigsten abgeschmackten Vermuthungen.”<sup>6</sup> He is referring, in politically incorrect language, to the polyvalent<sup>7</sup> method of the commentators on this question. Aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), for example, provides six different, and mutually exclusive, explanations for the laughter, proposing one thereof as “more correct,” but not ruling out the others. Abū Ishāq ath-Tha’labī (d. 427/1036) also offers six different explanations.<sup>8</sup> Fakhr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) lists nine.<sup>9</sup>

### *The Helpful ḥila*

In their attempts to understand the allusion to Sarah’s laughter, the *mufasssīrūn* are above all troubled by the order of the text, that is, by the fact that Q 11:71 refers to her laughter before it refers to the annunciation of Isaac. This fact leads aṭ-Ṭabarī, for example, to reject the idea that Sarah laughed due to the annunciation. Before rejecting this interpretation, however, aṭ-Ṭabarī mentions that those who

<sup>4</sup> If indeed this is the meaning of *ṣakkat wajhahā*, as aṭ-Ṭabarī contends; see *Jāmi‘ al-bayān* ad loc. (vol. 11, 464).

<sup>5</sup> In a third passage, Q 15:51–53, the visitors are again described as Abraham’s guests, and, again, they reassure Abraham with the good news of a son to be born. Cf. also Q 29:31.

<sup>6</sup> Geiger, *Mohammed*, 128. Cf. also Sidersky, *Légendes musulmanes*, 46; Speyer, *Biblischen Erzählungen*, 147–150; Ammann, *Vorbild und Vernunft*, 19ff.; Ammann, “Laughter.”

<sup>7</sup> On this term, see Calder, “Tafsīr.”

<sup>8</sup> See Firestone, *Journeys*, 52–59; ath-Tha’labī, ‘*Arā’is*, 74–76.

<sup>9</sup> Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, ad loc. (vol. 18, 21–22).



defend it do so by *ta'khīr al-muqaddam*, that is, by understanding that which comes earlier in the text—the laughter—as though it comes later. This is a classic *hīla*, a creative trick to solve an otherwise intractable problem. Aṭ-Ṭabarī recognizes this and, accordingly, is mistrustful.

Yet not every *hīla* is wrong. The Qur'an here has a reason for *ta'khīr al-muqaddam*. The Qur'an was not written as a reference book. Its syntax is shaped by a variety of concerns, not only informative but also homiletic and, in this case, literary. This section of Sūrat Hūd, as mentioned above, follows the rhyme scheme, or *fāṣila*, of a penultimate *-ī* or *-ū*. For this reason verse 71 concludes with Jacob, *Ya'qūb*, a character who otherwise has no place in the annunciation to Abraham and his wife, not in biblical literature, and not in the other Qur'anic pericopes, which mention only a single boy (*ghulām*; Q 15:53; 51:28). Indeed, the scriptural trope of the divine or angelic annunciation generally concerns only the son, not the grandson.<sup>10</sup> Jacob appears here due only to the *-ū* in the penultimate position of his name, a quality that his father does not share.

Neither does a *-ū* appear in the report of Abraham's wife's laughter (*fa-ḍaḥikat*), for which reason it cannot come after the reference to the annunciation. If the *fāṣila* were not an issue, the verse might have read *wa-imrā'atuhū qā'imatun fa-bashsharnāhā bi-Ishāqa fa-ḍaḥikat*, "His wife was standing by, and we announced to her the good news of Isaac. Then she laughed." Indeed, this is how the verse should still be understood, with a little help from a *hīla*.

### *The Qur'an's Participation in a Larger Interpretive Tradition*

Thus the Qur'an's allusion to the laughter of Sarah is apparently consistent with the biblical narrative of her laughter. Yet a second problem lurks beneath the apparent meaning of the pericope. In the Hebrew Bible the report that Sarah laughed, *tiṣḥāq*, explains the origin of Isaac's name, *Yiṣḥāq*. This etiology, however, is lost in the Arabic Qur'an, since the verbal root for laughter (*ḍ-h-k*) does not match the Arabic form of Isaac's name, *Ishāq*.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the annunciations of Samson (Judg. 13:3), Samuel (1 Sam. 19–20), John the Baptist (Luke 1:13; Q 3:39, 19:7), and Jesus (Luke 1:28–33; Q 3:45; 19:19).

Yet if Arabic *Ishāq* does not match Hebrew *Yiṣḥāq*, it matches the Syriac form of Isaac's name precisely.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in Syriac, too, the verbal root for laughter (*g-ḥ-k*) does not match Isaac's name (*Ishāq*). In Syriac Christian literature, therefore, the etiology that is so prominent in the Hebrew Bible's reference to Sarah's laughter disappears. In its place, a new meaning for Sarah's laughter appears. According to the traditional Christian typological reading, the annunciation to Sarah foreshadows the annunciation to Mary. The opening of the womb of Sarah, who was long past childbearing age anticipates the opening of the womb of Mary, who had not known man. Luke himself shapes his description of the annunciation to Mary on the model of the annunciation to Sarah. In Gen. 18, Sarah asks herself, "Now that I am past the age of childbearing and my husband is an old man, is pleasure to come my way again?" (v. 12). In Luke 1:34, Mary wonders, "But how can this come about, since I have no knowledge of man." In Gen. 18:14, the Lord confirms the message, declaring, "Nothing is impossible for the Lord." In Luke 1:37, the angel reminds Mary, "Nothing is impossible for God." Finally, while Sarah laughs in amazement at the annunciation, Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, whose son John leaps in her womb at the approach of the unborn Jesus. Mary then confesses her joy to Elizabeth in the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55).<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly Mar Ephrem, in his *Hymn on Abraham and Isaac* (§27), compares the laughter of Sarah to John's reaction at the approach of Mary and Jesus: "And as John by leaping, so Sarah by laughing revealed the joy."<sup>13</sup> Moreover, and here is the key point, Ephrem relates that Sarah's joy was not on account of her promised son Isaac, but rather on account of Jesus (§26): "Sarah did not laugh because of Isaac, but because of the One who is born from Mary." Sarah's laughter, therefore, is to Ephrem a foreshadowing of Mary's amazement at the annunciation of Jesus. This typological parallel can also be found in the Qur'an. In Q 11:71, the divine voice relates *bashsharnāha bi-ishāq*, "We announced to her the good news of

<sup>11</sup> On this, see Nöldeke, *Amalekiter*, 30–32; Grünbaum, *Neue Beiträge*, 143; Horowitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 90; Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 60.

<sup>12</sup> Note that Philo, in *De Mutatione Nominum* (166), describes Sarah's laughter as an act of deep spiritual joy.

<sup>13</sup> See *S. Ephrem Syri Opera*, vol. 1, 49. Regarding the authenticity of this text, which is extant only in Greek, the editor Mercati notes (5–6) that both the content and style agree with the known Syriac works of Ephrem, but adds that this in itself is not conclusive proof of authenticity.

Isaac,” while in Q 3:45 the angels say to Mary, *inna llāha yubashshiruki bi kalimatin minhu*, “God gives you good news of a word from him.” In Q 11:72 Sarah responds, “Woe is me, shall I bear a child while I am an old woman, and this, my husband, is an old man, too? This is truly a very strange thing,” while in Q 3:47 Mary responds, “Lord, how can I have a child when no man has touched me?”

There is reason to believe, then, that in its reference to Sarah’s laughter the Qur’an is participating in an interpretive tradition, prominent in the thought of Syriac Christian writers like Ephrem, according to which the annunciation to Sarah is connected with that to Mary. In this case, at least, a clearer understanding of the Qur’an emerges not by separating it from the Bible, but by joining the two together.

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THE QUR'ANIC COMMANDMENT OF WRITING DOWN  
LOAN AGREEMENTS (Q 2:282)—PERSPECTIVES OF  
A COMPARISON WITH RABBINICAL LAW\*

Reimund Leicht

As is generally known, Abraham Geiger's much quoted and ground-breaking work *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen* (originally 1833, 2nd ed. 1902) represents the first attempt to systematically examine Jewish elements in the Qur'anic tradition. One striking aspect of this work spanning some two hundred pages is, however, that while the narrative sections of the Qur'an are analyzed exhaustively, those legal rules Muhammad is supposed to have adapted from Judaism are dealt with in a mere *seven* pages. And moreover, in these seven pages Geiger focuses almost exclusively on rules for prayer and a few provisions concerning the status of women in divorce proceedings.

It would seem that such a remarkable imbalance did not escape Geiger's attention, for at the end of the respective section he writes:

As Muhammad had very little intention of imposing a new code of individual laws, since his aim was much more the spread of new purified religious opinions, and as in the matter of practice he was far too much of an Arab to deviate from inherited usages, unless they came directly into opposition to these higher religious views, it is easily to be explained how so few borrowings are to be found in this part and much even of what is adduced might perhaps be claimed to be general oriental custom.<sup>1</sup>

This view of Muhammad as being exclusively a preacher of "purified religious opinions" who only intervened in legal issues in exceptional cases, not undisputed in today's scholarship on Islam, is undoubtedly due in part to Geiger's very own form of liberal religiosity, which ascribed the legal dimensions of Judaism only a subordinate role and

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\* I am grateful to Paul Bowman for his help in translating this article from the original German.

<sup>1</sup> Geiger, *Judenthume*, 88f. Geiger's work was translated into English by F.M. Young in 1896 under the title *Judaism and Islam*.

so sought to recognize the same in Muhammad's proclamations.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, the direction Geiger set with this specific emphasis would seem to have still exerted considerable influence on subsequent Qur'an research. Here, great attention has been and still is paid to Jewish influences in theology and narratives—foremost Heinrich Speyer's *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (1931) springs to mind, a work that for instance R. Paret continually refers to in his Qur'an commentary<sup>3</sup>—whereas a similar reference work for the legal passages is conspicuous by its absence.

It should be remembered, however, that any search for possible Jewish influences on legal conceptions and rules in the Qur'an touches on an extremely sensitive area of current discussion on the beginnings of Islamic law. At issue in these ever stormy and controversial debates are both the continuity of Qur'anic and later Islamic law as well as locating key institutions of Islamic law in the pre-Islamic Hijaz or the Christian, Sasanian, and Jewish cultures of the conquered territories in Syria, Persia, or Iraq. Representative of the seemingly unbridgeable differences are, on the hand, P. Crone, who in her work emphatically advocates the influence—in part mediated through Judaism—of Roman provincial law,<sup>4</sup> and W. Hallaq on the other, who for his part repudiates this claim no less vehemently.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the fact that the possibility of Jewish influence on early Islamic law is at least once again being considered in current debates,<sup>6</sup> a comprehensive and open-ended (if not open-minded) examination into Qur'anic legal conceptions in the light of Jewish traditions has

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<sup>2</sup> Geiger's portrayal is closely related to the position taken decades later by Schacht, *Islamic Law*, 10–14, and criticised by Goitein, "Muslim Law." For a more recent evaluation of the role played by legislation in the Qur'an, see Hallaq, "Law."

<sup>3</sup> Paret, *Koran*, passim.

<sup>4</sup> Crone, *Roman Law*, 12: "We may begin by noting that there was no Roman law in Iraq except in so far as it had arrived in the guise of Jewish law"; see also the article by the same author, "Qasāma."

<sup>5</sup> See W. Hallaq's critic of Crone in "Provincial and Roman Influences," and his introduction to the essay collection *The Formation of Islamic Law*, XXIV–XXVI.

<sup>6</sup> In *Origins*, 4, W. Hallaq expresses his openness to viewing Qur'anic law in the context of Jewish (and Semitic-Mesopotamian) law, despite his skepticism towards any Western influences infusing Islamic law: "While law as a doctrine and legal system does not appear to have been on the Prophet's mind during most of his career, the elaboration of a particularly Islamic conception of law did begin to emerge a few years before his death. The legal contents of the Quran, viewed in the larger context of already established Jewish law and the ancient Semitic-Mesopotamian legal traditions, provide plentiful evidence of this rising conception."

yet to be undertaken.<sup>7</sup> Hence, the following pages represent an attempt to interpret a non-narrative, non-haggadic passage from the Qur'an. The aim is to use an individual case to again pursue the question if it is instructive to read the Qur'an's legal regulations, which as a rule may be expected to represent innovative reforms designed to ensure or at the very least improve the functioning of the believers' community, against the backdrop of the rabbinical tradition. Under particular scrutiny is precisely where the possibilities and the limits lie for a "comparative" study between Qur'anic and Jewish law.

For this purpose, a single verse has been selected: Q 2:282. It deals with the commandment that loan agreements be put into writing. As far as I can see, in contrast to the Qur'anic prohibition on interest (2:275–279; 3:130; 4:161; 30:39), this verse has never been discussed in the context of its possible infusion with Jewish influences, and beyond the context of comparative law it is yet to be at the center of scholarly interest.<sup>8</sup>

However, before embarking on the interpretation of the Qur'an verse, a few qualifications and problems need to be delineated and broached which arise when comparing Qur'anic and Jewish-rabbinic law, even if one proceeds from the assumption that—as in our case—the writing commandment in the Qur'an may well stem from external influence:

1) Even with objective Qur'anic "borrowings" from cultural contexts outside the Arabian Peninsula, it remains questionable if the writing commandment is due to Hellenistic-Roman, Syrian-Christian, Persian, or Jewish influence. The written form for loan agreements was already universally recognized in the culture of Late Antiquity. General cultural differences must not be equated automatically with the influence of one specific special cultural form, in our case the Jewish.

2) A further problem emerges when one considers how earlier research (e.g. by Asher Gulak)<sup>9</sup> has established that there was no

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<sup>7</sup> As P. Crone in her aforementioned monograph *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law* stated rather than proved the importance of Jewish law, the only attempt hitherto undertaken to substantially trace Jewish influences in Qur'anic law is her essay "Jāhili and Jewish Law: The *Qasāma*."

<sup>8</sup> Brief interpretations of this verse are to be found in Hallaq, "Contracts and Alliances," and Jackson, "Debt." Moreover, the verse is also regarded as a key example of the discontinuity between Qur'anic and Islamic law: see Schacht, *Islamic Law*, 18–19; Crone, "Two Legal Problems," in particular 10.

<sup>9</sup> A. Gulak, *Urkundenwesen im Talmud*.

Jewish document law in the proper sense, but that rabbinic Judaism had essentially also adopted and adapted Greek-Roman models. A Hellenistic or Roman document model can thus be mediated through Judaism and indeed possibly even adopted as such in early Islam without having to display anything specifically “Jewish.”

3) This is additionally complicated by the fact that more recent research on Jewish documents from the second century has shown how diverse Jewish contracts were. This reveals that our key comparative material—rabbinic Judaism and the norms it represented—reflects only *one* “Jewish” position in this period. This problem becomes all the more significant when one considers that we barely know which kind of Judaism the Jewish tribes in Medina represented—a problem that likewise pertains to analysis of the influences in the field of Haggadah.

4) Finally, it should not be overlooked that we possess no direct evidence of rabbinical loan contracts with which we could compare the Qur’an. While original Jewish documents from the early period (above all till the second and third century CE) have been preserved, neither a complete text of a loan contract nor procedures for its drawing up are described in rabbinic literature itself. In addition, there are no original documents at all. We must therefore reconstruct the information required from different statements gleaned from rabbinic literature.

Nevertheless, here the attempt will be undertaken to interpret the written requirement set out in Qur’an verse 2:282 in the light of the rabbinical tradition. As this verse is a complex web of different rules,<sup>10</sup> the text of surah 2:282 will be subdivided:<sup>11</sup>

You who believe, when you contract a debt<sup>12</sup> for a stated term, put it down in writing:

<sup>10</sup> In the present context I shall refrain from attempting to date the Qur’an verse, its components, and composition, for this is irrelevant to the issues addressed here.

<sup>11</sup> M. A. S. Abdel Haleem’s new translation of the Qur’an is used here (*The Qur’an*, 32).

<sup>12</sup> The Qur’anic word for “debt” is *dayn*, for which also the presumably denominative verb *tadāyana* (VI.) is to be found in the present verse. Despite a certain semantic proximity, this root is not identical with the roots of *dīn* (religion) or *dayyān* (judge). If the thesis of a rootage of the Qur’anic loan agreement in Hellenistic and Jewish law examined in the present essay is corroborated, then an etymological derivation of the word *dayn-un* from the Greek *daneion* (= *danion*) under the phonetic metathesis of the *i* is not improbable. For the meaning of *daneion* in Greek law, see Rupprecht, *Untersuchungen zum Darlehen*, 3–13, and Thür, “Daneion (δάνειον).”



Have a scribe write it down justly between you. No scribe should refuse to write: let him write as God has taught him.

Let the debtor dictate, and let him fear God, his Lord, and not diminish [the debt] at all.

If the debtor is feeble-minded, weak, or unable to dictate, then let his guardian dictate justly.

Call in two men as witnesses.

If two men are not there, then call one man and two women out of those you approve as witnesses, so that if one of the two women should forget the other can remind her.

Let the witnesses not refuse when they are summoned.

Do not disdain to write the debt down, be it small or large, along with the time it falls due: this way is more equitable in God's eyes, more reliable as testimony, and more likely to prevent doubts arising between you.

But if the merchandise is there and you hand it over, there is no blame on you if you do not write it down.

Have witnesses present whenever you trade with you one another, and let no harm be done to either scribe or witness, for if you did cause them harm, it would be a crime on your part.

Be mindful of God, and he will teach you: he has full knowledge of everything.

The verse opens with a general urging to record loan agreements in writing. This is followed by a part on the technicalities of such a recording and verification through witnesses. This first part of the verse is then concluded by the warning not to forgo the written form even with small business transactions. It is obvious that the overall goal is to achieve the universal application of the writing principle.

The following sections represent supplementary instructions. For instance, in direct connection with the urging to always apply the written form, a rule is endorsed that grants certain loan transactions be exempted from this prescribed form after all. In addition, the requirement is weaved into the text—although objectively it is not clear why—that simple exchanges of merchandise are to be corroborated by witnesses, without however a writing document being mentioned. In contrast to this, the warning that scribe and witnesses are not to incur disadvantage through their actions appears to refer back to the rules laid out in the first section. The verse is concluded by an

admonishment to fear God and the reference to God as a wise teacher, which perhaps once more takes up the beginning of the verse (“No scribe should refuse to write: let him write *as God has taught him*”).

Little is said about the intention, occasion, and aim of this rule. At most, it is clear that “doubt” in loan transactions is to be prevented (*al-lā tartābū*). This allows us to surmise that this verse is an attempt to establish peace under the law, as would seem fitting for a reform project like Islam. The Muslim community is to become stronger and pacified by reducing the potential causes for legal disputes.

But to be able to elaborate in greater detail on the historic-cultural context of this writing requirement, the Qur’an text needs to be interpreted in a step-by-step analysis that compares it with parallel sources. In the current connection, it is of course impossible to fully illuminate all of the side collateral regulations laid out in this complex verse, not least because the legal kernel of contracting a debt in particular remains so vague that it is hardly open to any further meaningful explication.<sup>13</sup> Rather, the analysis will concentrate on the following aspects, by means of which the core statement of this verse—the *commandment* to have loan agreements put *in writing*—can then be reconstructed:

- 1) The essence of the commandment to record in writing and the resultant loan document.
- 2) The function of the persons involved.
- 3) The perception, interpretation, and function of the legal instrument of the written form in the Qur’an verse.

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<sup>13</sup> Given the wording of this verse, we may presume that the debt entered into here and designated with *dayn* concerns an everyday transaction where the lender hands over to the debtor a specific sum of money or an amount of other fungible things based on the agreement that the same amount be returned at a specific point in time. If one relates the Qur’anic prohibition of interest (surah Q 2:275–279; 3:130; 4:161; 30:39) to this verse, the loan was probably without interest. This would mean that the loan transaction corresponds to the Roman *mutuum* or the interest-less Greek *daneion*; see Kaser and Knütel, *Römisches Privatrecht*, 244, and Rupprecht, *Untersuchungen zum Darlehen*, 3 and 79–81 (on loans free of interest and the possible Jewish background). All further details of the contract agreement, for example liability and possible penalty clauses, remain unspecified.

*The Essence of the Commandment to Have Loan Agreements Put in Writing*

Most other legal systems are basically familiar with the written form when contracting loans, but as a rule it is not obligatory. For instance, both Roman<sup>14</sup> and Greek-Hellenistic<sup>15</sup> law refrain from stipulating the need for a written form. The same obviously applies for Syrian law.<sup>16</sup> In the post-Classical age however, the written form is viewed as self-evident for all major business transactions, penetrates into general legal praxis as a quasi obligation (“vulgarism”),<sup>17</sup> and becomes a distinguishing feature of oriental “common people’s law.”<sup>18</sup>

Jewish law, too, has in principle no obligation to render agreements in written contractual form, although, since early times, observance of the written form is regarded as a hallmark of particular probity. This is clear in the context of other legal transactions, for instance Jeremiah’s purchase of Hanamel’s fields in Anathoth (Jer 32:10) or of the depositing of money for safekeeping in Tobit 5:3.<sup>19</sup> Later rabbinical law though only prohibits concluding loan contracts without witnesses and urgently recommends drawing up a contract. This rule found a classical formulation in the *Mishneh Torah* of Maimonides (1137/38–1204), who writes in the *Hilkhhot Malwe we-Lowe* 2.7:

אסור לאדם להלוות מעותיו בלא עדים ואפילו לתלמיד חכם אלא אם כן  
הלווה על המשכון והמלוה בשטר משובח יתר וכל המלוה בלא עדים עובר  
משום „ולפני עור לא תתן מכשול” וגורם קללה לעצמו:

A man is forbidden to lend his money without witness, even to a scholar, unless he lends it in a pledge. And he who lends on a writing is still more praiseworthy. He who lends without witnesses transgresses the commandment of *Thou shalt not put a stumbling-block before the blind* (Lev 19:14), and brings a curse upon himself.

Maimonides’ regulation undoubtedly represents a concretization of a Talmudic debate to be found in the Babylonian Talmud, Baba Mezia 75b:

<sup>14</sup> There exist only a few exceptions; see Kaser, *Das römische Privatrecht*, first section, 231f; *ibid.*, second section, 75ff.

<sup>15</sup> Weiss, *Griechisches Privatrecht*, 433ff.

<sup>16</sup> See the discussion of the Syrian-Roman legal code below.

<sup>17</sup> Kaser, *ibid.*, 76; on debts, 369.

<sup>18</sup> Kaser and Knütel, *Römisches Privatrecht*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> For an interpretation of this and parallels to oriental law, see Fitzmyer, *Tobit*, 186f.

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב:  
 כל מי שיש לו מעות ומלוה אותן שלא בעדים עובר משום "ולפני עור לא תתן מכשול".  
 וריש לקיש אמר גורם קללה לעצמו, שנאמר: "תאלמנה שפתי שקר הדוברות על צדיק עתק בגאווה ובוז".  
 אמרו ליה רבנן לרב אשי: קא מקיים רבינא כל מה דאמור רבנן!  
 שלח ליה בהדי פניא דמעלי שבתא: לישדר לי מר עשרה זוזי דאתרמי לי קטינא דארעא למזבן.  
 שלח ליה: ניתי מר סהדי ונכתב כתבא!  
 שלח ליה: אפילו אנא נמי?  
 שלח ליה: כל שכן מר דטריד בגירסיה משתלי וגורם קללה לעצמי!

Rab Judah said in Rab's name: He who has money and lends it without witnesses transgresses the [commandment] *Thou shalt not put a stumbling-block before the blind*. Resh Lakish said: He brings a curse upon himself, as it is written; *Let the lying lips be put to silence; which speak grievous things proudly and contemptuously against the righteous*.

The Rabbis said to R. Ashi: Rabina fulfills all the Rabbinical requirements. He [R. Ashi] sent to him [Rabina] on the eve of the Sabbath: "Please, let me have [a loan of] ten *zuz*, as I just have the opportunity of buying a small parcel of land." He replied, "Bring witnesses and we will draw up a bond." "Even for me too!" he sent back. "You in particular," he retorted, "being immersed in your studies, you may forget, and so bring a curse upon me."

In order to be able to adequately understand this Talmudic debate, we need to first recognize that it is composed of several different elements of varying historical date. The first part contains two dictums from Talmudic scholars (Amoraim) of the first generation, third century CE (Rav, Resh Laqish), who both deal with the requirement of witnesses when concluding agreements. The second part presents an anecdote involving Rav Ashi and Rabina, which is to be dated to the Late Amora Period (fifth century CE). For this reason, the first part of the Talmudic discussion needs to be considered first of all.

The dictums by Rav and Resh Laqish given in the first lines of the Talmud text speak of the requirement to execute a loan only in the presence of two witnesses. The difference between the two rabbis resides only in the form, with both justifying this view on the basis of a biblical verse. Rav points out that should a loan contract be incorrectly concluded, "a stumbling-block" would be "put before the blind," while Resh Laqish fears that whoever lends money without witnesses could become publicly cursed.

Rav's interpretation is rather unproblematic. It turns on a common rabbinical interpretation of the verse Leviticus 19:14, which strictly

prohibits giving a person who is not virtuous and law-abiding, “the blind,” an opportunity to sin, “to put a stumbling-block” before them. In this sense, the fear is that, upon handing out a loan without the presence of witnesses, the loanee could exploit a later opportunity to unlawfully deny receiving the loan and so acquit himself of the debt.

In contrast, greater difficulties are presented by Resh Laqish’s view that the lender who does not insist on formal criteria could bring about his own curse. This runs counter to the obvious and intuitive perspective: it is *he* who exposes himself to the danger that the loan will not be repaid. Why should he be cursed for this?

To explain this difficulty, the editor of this Talmudic discussion follows up with the anecdote about Rav Ashi and Rabina. Here, two people come together whose probity is beyond doubt. The question thus arises if in this case, for which the interpretation of Leviticus 19:14 is quite clearly irrelevant, the witness rule applies. The anecdote begins with the teachers telling Rav Ashi that Rabina has obeyed all the rules proclaimed by earlier scholars. To verify this claim, Rav Ashi feigns a loan request from Rabina that is intentionally formulated in such a way that no delay can be admitted: shortly before the Sabbath begins, Rav Ashi asks Rabina for a loan so that he—taking advantage of a favorable opportunity—can quickly complete the purchase of a piece of land. But Rabina refuses to comply with this request, insisting on the correct observance of the prescribed procedures. Seemingly astonished at Rabina’s behavior, Rav Ashi demands an explanation for this clear display of mistrust in his character. In response, Rabina declares, Rav Ashi is so preoccupied with studying the Torah that it is not unlikely that he will later forget the loan. When he, Rabina, is forced to demand back the loan after the agreed time period expires, but is unable to present any evidence, and due to his forgetfulness Rav Ashi denies ever receiving a loan, then it is *Rabina* who runs the risk that the public will not believe *him* because of Rav Ashi’s famed probity and so *he* will be cursed for his behavior.

What is so remarkable about this editorial composition is that the later, second part not only interprets the earlier dictum of Resh Laqish, but extends its reach by adding a further element: whereas amongst the early Amora there is no mention of the written form for loan contracts, at least not expressly, Rabina demands explicitly the drawing up of a written contract to accompany the presence of two witnesses. Although the written form was therefore presumably from

time immemorial not a condition for ensuring the validity of a loan agreement and quite clearly secondary to corroboration by witnesses, it seems that amongst the Babylonian rabbis of the fifth century it had become such an established element of legal rules that it is mentioned automatically.

If one compares this status of the writing requirement for loan contracts in rabbinical law with the rules set out in the Qur'anic verse 2:282, then, despite first impressions, the legal conception is no different. Fundamentally, the verse does not lay down the legal significance of the written contract. But if one considers the formulation of the text, at no point does the given wording support the assumption that the Qur'an presupposes a loan to be *only* then legally binding when the written form is observed.

Rather, given the wording in its entirety, it has to be assumed that the loan document required here was supposed to be what is generally characterized as an "instrument of evidence." This is a document that can and should only then serve as evidence when a dispute emerges about the loan at a later date, as a means to prove that a loan was in fact granted.

But this poses a problem for interpreting the Qur'anic text from a legal perspective: the verse demands something that is objectively not necessary for constituting a legally valid transaction. In other words, viewed legally, the Qur'anic verse sets out a conception in which the relationship between lender and debtor is also binding when no written contract is drawn up. The Qur'an is thus demanding here something in the form of a categorical obligation that, viewed strictly in legal terms, is not meant as binding. Muslim jurists had problems with this, and it is hardly a coincidence that later jurists downgraded the obligation of the written form to that of a mere recommendation.<sup>20</sup> It is well known that the repudiation of documents as evidence in Islamic law, which interlopes here, naturally exceeds the case presently under discussion,<sup>21</sup> but nonetheless a rejection of a proper *obligation* to the written form, and the evaluation of the verse as stating the requirement of this form, does not seem to be what the author meant, even if in a certain sense it lies in the logic of the issue at hand.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Schacht, *Islamic Law*, 193.

<sup>21</sup> Brunschvig, "Bayyina."

<sup>22</sup> See also Hallaq, "Contracts and Alliances," 433: "Despite the relative detail of this verse and the clarity of the prescription to write down contracts, Islamic law

Generally we can conclude that the document type underlying the Qur'an verse is that of the "instrument of evidence." As such, the Qur'anic conception essentially follows the Hellenistic understanding of documentary instruments<sup>23</sup> and, as depicted above, the rabbinical view in the Amoraic period.<sup>24</sup> What remains remarkable, however, is that, like the Talmud, the Qur'an verse attached religious importance to observing the written form.

### *The Function of the Persons Involved*

The character of the document to be formulated becomes more pronounced when one looks at how it is to occur and which functions the involved persons are to perform. Basically, the Qur'an verse names four or five possible parties in bringing a loan contract (*dayn, tadāyana*) into existence: 1. Debtor (*alladhī 'alayhi l-ḥaqqu*); 2. Lender (a more specific designation is not given); 3. Scribe (*kātib*); and 4. Witnesses (*shahīdān*).

#### *The Debtor*

Basically we may assume that in the view of the Qur'an the debtor is obliged to repay the debt incurred through the loan upon the expiration of the set time period (*ilā ajalīn musamman*). In addition, the Qur'an verse entrusts the debtor with the responsibility for having a contract drawn up. The verse clearly lays down that the debtor (*alladhī l-ḥaqqu 'alayhi*) is to dictate (*wa-l-yumlil*) the contents of the document to the scribe (*kātib*). Although the etymology of this verb is uncertain, the meaning is clear: only the debtor has influence on the text of the loan contract, which is reflected in the explicit and dual exhortation not to deduct anything from the debt (*lā yabkhas minhu shay'an*); and to fear God (*wa-l-yattaqi llāha rabbahū*).

This initially surprising prescription of the Qur'an is nevertheless explainable when one considers the Greek and Jewish documenting

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neither recognized the validity of written instruments nor elaborated a general comprehensive theory of contracts and obligations. [...] The Qur'anic injunction to reduce contracts to writing reflected the legal practices in the Near East, [...]. Why Islamic law—which developed primarily in the Fertile Crescent, Egypt and the Hijaz—broke away from this practice, even at the expense of ignoring a Qur'anic prescription, remains largely a mystery."

<sup>23</sup> Wolff, *Papyri*, 141–144.

<sup>24</sup> Gulak, *Urkundenwesen im Talmud*, 30–35.

practice for loan contracts that was current in Late Antiquity: the usual written form for loan agreements was that signed contracts were not written for both contractual parties, but rather the debtor declared his debt to the creditor *unilaterally* and avouched for the resultant obligations. As per the frequently employed formulation “admission of debt,” this form is mostly called the “homology,” stemming from the Greek *homologō*, which correspond to the Hebrew and Aramaic terms *hoda’ah* or *’odita* in Jewish law.<sup>25</sup> In Jewish law, it was initially irrelevant in principle if the homology was formulated in direct speech as a so-called *cheirographon*, a conventionally stylized letter by the debtor addressed to the creditor, or in indirect speech as a so-called *syngraphē*. This becomes evident in the Tosefta tractate Baba Batra 11:3:

בין שכתוב בו לזה פלוני מן פלוני ובין שכתוב בו אני פלוני לויתי מן פלוני והעדים למטה כשר.

Whether it is written in it “Mr. So-and-so has borrowed from M. Such-and-such,” or whether it is written in it, “I, Mr. So-and-so, have borrowed from Mr. So-and-so”—so long as the witnesses have signed their names below, it is valid.

What is decisive is that the homology is a “declaration by a party”<sup>26</sup> and not a mutually agreed-upon “contract,” meaning that only the declaratory side commits itself to an obligation. This also explains why the early Mishnaic law expressly admits the possibility that the homology may also be drawn up in the absence of the second contractual partner, in our case the lender (Baba Batra 10:3):

כותבין שטר ללוה אף על פ' ישאין מלוה עמו, ואין כותבין למלוה, עד שיהא לוה עצו, והלוה נותן שכר.

They write a writ of indebtedness for the borrower, even though the lender is not with him, but they do not write a writ for the lender, unless the borrower is with him. The borrower pays the scribe’s fee.

The aforementioned story about Rav Ashi and Rabina from the Babylonian Talmud, and Baba Mezia 75b, corroborates this as well, for no mention is made of any meeting between the two, only that a document was drawn up in front of witnesses. All of this makes it

<sup>25</sup> On the latter, see Gulak, *Urkundenwesen im Talmud*, 2–6; on the Greek-Roman homology, see Mitteis and Wilcken, *Papyruskunde*, 72–76; Weiss, *Griechisches Privatrecht*, 431–433; Taubenschlag, *Greco-Roman Egypt*, 293f.; Wolff, *Papyri*, 107.

<sup>26</sup> Weiss, *Griechisches Privatrecht*, 432.



clear that the debtor is solely responsible for the content of the debt document or borrower's note and therefore also bears the costs.

This particular role afforded to the debtor, enabling the borrower's note to be drawn up in the *absence* of the lender, is presumably mirrored in the Qur'anic account as well. That the *debtor* shall dictate is not the only striking feature; there is also the already mentioned dual reference as to how the debtor shall not deduct anything from the debt (*lā yabkhas minhu shay'an*) and shall fear God (*wa-l-yattaqi llāha rabbahū*). It is improbable that a lender would be prepared to extend a loan to a debtor if he has heard that the loanee has dictated false details about the loan to the scribe. Only when one assumes that it is *not* imperative for the lender to be personally present at the drafting of the borrower's note and, in addition, he is unable to directly verify the content upon receiving the note—for example if he is illiterate—does the exhortation to religious probity become a functionally meaningful element of the requirement to formulate a debt document.<sup>27</sup>

If one therefore assumes that the drawing up of a debt document does not presuppose the presence of both contracting parties, it is significant that it is this, a loophole in an otherwise faultless procedure, that the Qur'an tries to bridge by the reference to piety: a loophole in procedure that opens up with the *given form* of the document, the homology exempting the lender from being present, under the pre-existing social conditions of the creditor's possible illiteracy! In the legal regulations set out in the Qur'an verse, the reference to fidelity to God fulfills a subsidiary function when applying a new legal instrument!

It is striking that, as far as I know, there are no corresponding admonitions in the Jewish-rabbinical or the Greek texts. This contrast

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<sup>27</sup> The formulation at the beginning of the Qur'anic verse—put it down in writing, have a scribe write it down justly *between* you (*wa-l-yaktub baynakum*)—, which is sometimes interpreted in the sense of “he should record in your presence” (as for example in the German translation of the Qur'an by Khouury) does not contradict this interpretation, for in a similar context the word *bayna* is used in a far more general meaning in the Syrian-Roman legal code simply describing the contractual relationship *between* the parties that is in the making, cf. Bruns and Sachau, *Syrisch-Römisches Rechtsbuch*, 27 (§106): “Wenn ein Mann mit einem anderen eine Rechtssache hat, und eine Schrift existiert nicht *zwischen* ihnen, welche die Sache darlegt, sondern es trifft sich, dass eine von den Parteien spricht, dass sie Zeugen habe, so nehmen die Gesetze nur an zwei oder drei, glaubwürdige freie Männer, die niemals bei schlechten Thaten gefunden worden sind [...].”

makes it obvious that the religious supplement to the commandment is a reflex of the functional difficulties which an extensive use of the instrument of written documents encountered in Arab society.<sup>28</sup> This implies neither that the written loan document must have been completely unknown in pre-Islamic Arabia, nor that one should imagine Arab society to have been a cultural wasteland plagued by widespread illiteracy.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, it needs to be noted here that the form, whereby the religious sanctioning of the written loan contract in the Qur'an goes beyond the rabbinical tradition, sheds light on the *social context* in which the requirement was to take effect.

### *The Lender*

Up to this point, our investigations reveal the contract and document form assumed in the Qur'an verse to be *a record of evidence* that complies with the typical form of a unilateral homology familiar to us from Hellenistic and Jewish sources. This also explains why the verse we are dealing with here attaches practically no importance to the lender; indeed, he is not even named directly. Disregarding for the moment the general formulation at the beginning of the verse (*'idhā tadāyantum bi-daynin*—when you contract a debt), he is assigned no special task for the correct procedures in creating a loan contract. The Qur'an verse's silence over the lender is thus a mirror image of his general superfluity in respect of the requirement to have agreements put into writing.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The admonishment directed at the scribe and witnesses not to evade the task could also be due to these kinds of difficulties. Here it needs to be noted that the Qur'an displays at other points awareness for the functional problems impeding the introduction of the written form. It is striking that directly following the formulation of the writing requirement in verse 2:282 the same is modified in a restrictive sense for the case of "merchandise is there" (*tijāra ḥāḍira*) and for sales transactions (*'idhā tabāya'tum*): only witnesses and no longer the written form are required. The subsequent verse also speaks of functional difficulties which could arise should scribes be absent when traveling and reiterates the admonishment to the witnesses (2:283). Unlike in the rabbinical world, where writing is also urged on the basis of religion but did not represent a problem, for the Qur'an the writing requirement was obviously tied to considerable, astoundingly significant practical hurdles!

<sup>29</sup> See the interpretation on the role of the scribe below.

<sup>30</sup> The possibility needs to be examined that the second person plural at the beginning of the verse is not addressing the two parties concluding a contract, but a number of debtors ("when you contract a debt"). In this case the lender—in accordance with his lack of function—would not be specifically named in the verse at all.

*The Witnesses*

The homology was one of the most widespread forms employed for Greek documents in Late Antiquity. The so-called *cheirographon*—a “hand” contract mostly conventionalized stylistically into a letter—became the most prevalent form in the Byzantine era (from 400 CE onwards). It was particularly easy to handle because it did not require any witnesses and thus needed to be written and signed by only the debtor or, where applicable, a scribe.

It is striking, however, that, in contrast to this *cheirographon* praxis, witnesses are expressly named in the Qurʾan verse as an indispensable component in the formulation of a valid loan document. With regard to the function of these witnesses and based on our analysis up to the present point, their only possible role could be to testify to the *statement* made and written down by the debtor, but not to the act constituting the relationship, the handing over of the loan, which they most likely do not attend.

As for details, the Qurʾan verse leaves us generally in the dark, so that it can only be assumed that the witnesses are to testify to the debtor’s statement. Nonetheless, it is characteristic for the Qurʾanic regulation that exactly two witnesses have to be present at the document’s drawing up. It remains unclear if the debtor must sign the document as well. Another uncertainty is whether the document must bear the scribe’s name.

The Qurʾanic stipulation of this number of witnesses<sup>31</sup> is absent in the Greek and Roman sources. Moreover, it is worth remarking that this rule, which was elevated to a general rule in Islamic law, is to be found only here in the Qurʾan. The only other statement on witness rules<sup>32</sup> in the Qurʾan sets out that four witnesses have to be present when dealing with adultery (4:14; 24:4); this may be seen as a possible tightening of the two-witness rule by doubling the number, whereby the former would have to be assumed as a known prerequisite. It is therefore conceivable that the two-witness rule only first entered into Islamic law through the present stipulation and was not so generally well known as its prevalence in later Islamic law would seem to suggest. This begs the question: where is the source of this principle to be sought?

<sup>31</sup> Here we have to pass over the Qurʾanic rule on witness statements by women, for which there is not a direct parallel in rabbinical law.

<sup>32</sup> See in general Peters, “*Shāhid*.”

Here, too, Jewish law provides important starting points: starting from the verse *על פי שני עדים או על פי שלשה עדים יקום דבר* (“at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established,” Deuteronomy 19:15), the two-witness principle is in fact the rule in almost every case in rabbinical law; even if for a specific type of document, which has in the meantime become known as a “Doppelurkunde” (a sealed enfolded interior and an exterior open to view: *גט מקושר*), three witnesses were prescribed as early as the Mishnah (Baba Batra 10:2):

גט פשוט, עדיו בשנים. ומקושר, בשלשה. פשוט שכתוב בו עד אחד, ומקושר שכתוב בו שני עדים, שניהם פסולין.

A plain deed requires two witnesses and a folded [one] three. A plain [deed] that bears the signature of one witness [only]. And a folded [one] that bears the signatures of two witnesses [only] are both invalid.

At the same time though, the praxis of using the “folded double document” became increasingly unusual, so that we have to assume for seventh-century Judaism that the “plain deed” (*גט פשוט*) testified to by two witnesses was the rule.<sup>33</sup>

All too hastily drawn conclusions about possible Jewish influences need to be avoided however, for rudiments of the two-witness rule were also adopted in the Syrian territories of the Roman Empire, as emerged in the passage from § 106 of the Syrian-Roman legal code quoted above.<sup>34</sup> But it is in all likelihood of a later date and was not applied as systematically as in rabbinical law. In contrast, rabbinical law not only prescribes that two witnesses are required for a loan document, but also that the witnesses must receive the explicit mandate to draw up the homology, otherwise the homology is invalid (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 40a):

הודאה בפני שנים וצריך לומר כתובו.

A *homology* must be made in the presence of two persons, and one has to say: “Write.”

<sup>33</sup> Koffmahn, *Doppelurkunden*, 12ff.; 61–64 (on witnesses).

<sup>34</sup> Bruns and Sachau, *Syrisch-Römisches Rechtsbuch*, 27 (§106): “[...] es trifft sich, dass eine von den Parteien spricht, dass sie Zeugen habe, so nehmen die Gesetze nur an *zwei oder drei*, glaubwürdige freie Männer, die niemals bei schlechten Thaten gefunden worden sind [...]”

Recapitulating the aforesaid, it becomes apparent that the document type forming the basis of both rabbinical loan law as well as the Qur'an verse, represents a binding two-witness homology which in this form is unknown in Greek, Roman, or Syrian law. Whereas all the exterior characteristics of the Qur'an verse mentioned up until now may well lead back to a Hellenistic influence in general, a feature of Jewish loan contracts appears in the kind of attestation demanded.

However, it should not be ignored that there are differences between rabbinical law and the Qur'anic version. These concern not only the rules pertaining to witness statements by women, not evident in rabbinical sources, but also—and above all—the status of the final person involved in the whole procedure, that of the scribe.

### *The Scribe*

It is striking that as a rule the rabbinical texts quoted up until now assume that the witnesses write down the document, as expressed in the aforementioned passage taken from the Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 40a: "The homology must be made in the presence of two persons [witnesses], and one has to [expressly] say, 'write!'" While it may be expected that the witnesses could always call on the services of a professional scribe, A. Gulak nonetheless recognizes in this "that the main role in preparing documents was accorded to the witness, whereas the scribe's role was only a subordinate one."<sup>35</sup>

This stands in—at least apparent—contradiction to the regulations set out in the Qur'an verse, which not only provides for the recording of the document by a scribe, but even assigns the scribe a divinely sanctioned activity and accords him almost supernatural abilities: in the wording of the Qur'an, he should write like no lesser a figure than Allah himself had taught (*kamā 'allamahū llāhu*). Unsurprisingly, the function granted to the witnesses in the Qur'an verse recedes significantly in comparison.

In interpreting this finding of an "apotheosis" of the scribe's activity, one must presumably resist the temptation to see in this special emphasis a direct reflection of its juristic significance. A careful observation of the exact description of the scribe's function reveals namely a massive reduction in the technical complexities of his activity. In Late Antiquity professional scribes exerted considerable influence on

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<sup>35</sup> Gulak, *Urkundenwesen im Talmud*, 19.

the development of document formulas and their importance for the evolution of law should not be underestimated.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, the Qur'an verse says nothing about the contractual type to be applied when concluding a loan, nor does it mention anything about other technical details for its drawing up. Rather, it seems as if a procedure, unknown or only sparingly known in its details, is hypostatized by the text's author as a whole. With this move, what is elsewhere a conventional legal praxis and technique is stylized in the Qur'an into divine instruction.

It is most likely that what is reflected in this form of the presentation is a complexity or cultural divide: the written form per se, which had long been a matter of course in other areas of the Middle East, and thus in Judaism, is "discovered" and sacralized as a means of creating legal peace for the Muslim community in the Qur'an. This step entails recourse to an already existing legal instrument, for the Qur'an certainly does not conceive a new form of written contract but rather integrates existing knowledge *en bloc* into the legal order of the Muslim community. Accordingly, the special emphasis placed on the scribe should not be seen as stemming from juristic expertise, but as a specific form of perception and representation: veneration for the "scribe's art."<sup>37</sup> Compared with this, the special role of the witnesses, characteristic for the technical processing of the Jewish loan contract, remains untouched in terms of its actual function. This shows that, similarly to the already discussed case of the religious reference to God when the procedural gap emerged upon the absence of the loanee and/ or his illiteracy, the sociological component needs to be integrated into any interpretation of the Qur'an verse: the Qur'anic depiction does not necessarily correspond to an objective emphasis on the persons involved in producing a written loan document, but it does presumably spring from the conditions of a prophetic appointment of an adopted legal instrument.

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<sup>36</sup> Rupperecht, "Greek Law," in particular 338.

<sup>37</sup> While not comparable in absolute terms, the question of the state of writing and illiteracy in pre-Islamic Arab societies is of interest. There are a few statements in the Qur'an which interpret writing as a divine gift par excellence (for example, surah 96:4–5), but these only provide limited insight into just how widespread writing was; see Günther, "Literacy"; Jones, "Orality and Writing."

### *Summary*

Our analysis of the basic structure of Q 2:282, as well as the functions of those persons involved in contracting a loan agreement, has attempted to reconstruct the essence of the Qur'anic stipulations on the written form. To achieve this it proved unnecessary to trace in detail the numerous legal stipulations of the verse which extend and modify this rule (e.g. the specific form of Qur'anic witness law; the admonishments issued to scribes and witnesses not to evade their duty; representing those who, for whatever reason, are deemed incapable of concluding an agreement; the exclusion of transactions involving circulating merchandise from the written requirement; the limits placed on the requirement when traveling in 2:283). Rather, in terms of the commandment to put agreements into writing we are able to summarize a couple of results which already identify the possibilities and limits for drawing a comparison between Qur'anic and rabbinical law.

Basically, the analysis has made it clear that, even for a non-Agga-dah verse dealing exclusively with legal issues, as embodied in Q 2:282, a comparison with rabbinical law is potentially productive for understanding the Qur'an. The perspective of comparative law helps us to develop lines of questioning valuable for comprehending the text.

One issue that is not to be confused with this is, however, the historical dependence. As much as the parallel occurrences in the Jewish sources and the Qur'an would seem to suggest that direct dependencies exist, the Jewish influence should most certainly not be overestimated: the Greek document traditions have also proven to be congruent with the Qur'anic conception of written loan agreements in many points. Nevertheless, we were able to show that not only the religious sanctioning of the written form for loan agreements but also the specific arrangement of the Qur'anic document—in particular with regards witnesses—is closely connected to Jewish role models. By all caution, it is to be reckoned that in this case Judaism had passed onto early Islam a general Hellenistic cultural artifact—the written loan agreement—in a specifically molded form.

This deepens our understanding of the Qur'anic requirement of writing: as could be shown with regard to the scribe's art, the Qur'an verse analyzed here contains a peculiar sacralization of a professional activity, a clear sign that a legal instrument yet to become completely familiar was adopted in the course of Islam's reform project, even

though this adoption was faced with considerable technical and perhaps even cultural barriers. This observation was also made precisely where the aspect of a fear of God in ensuring the correctness of the homology's dictation by the debtor was to guarantee the correct formulation of the document. Both cases show that the cultural-historical transition to the written form in concluding legal transactions obviously presented a considerable problem, one which the Qur'an sought to solve with the help of a transcendental reference. In this way, the written requirement for loan agreements proves to be a case study for the form in which innovations from the surrounding culture were adapted and religiously sanctioned in early Islam, so that they could then become building blocks for the reorganization of the Islamic community.



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## ISLAM IN ITS ARABIAN CONTEXT

François de Blois

The last two to three decades have seen the emergence of a new school of Islamic studies in the West, a school whose adherents commonly refer to themselves as “revisionists.” The main thrust of this direction is to contest the validity of the traditional Muslim accounts of the place and time of the origin of Islam and to locate this in a more northerly place (for example, in Babylonia or the Syrian desert) and in a more recent time (perhaps as late as the eighth or ninth century). In recent years the thrust of the revisionist tendency has been directed increasingly towards contesting the textual validity of the Qur’an and reconstructing a supposedly older version of the Muslim scripture.

From the onset, the protagonists of the “revisionist” school have declared their debt to the well-established tradition of the historical-critical study of the Christian scriptures which emerged since about the beginning of the nineteenth century. It seems to me, however, that there is a fundamental difference between the historical contexts of New Testament studies on the one hand, and Qur’anic studies on the other.

The historical-critical study of the New Testament is an important phenomenon within the history of Christianity, and specifically within its Protestant direction. It is a logical continuation of the Reformation. The Reformation began by rejecting the main components of Christian tradition and reclaiming the Bible as the sole source of doctrinal authority. But already Luther and the other founding fathers of Protestantism differentiated between the books that they found in their copies of the Bible, distinguishing “canonical” and “deuterocanonical” or “apocryphal” writings, and even questioning the authority of the later strata of the so-called “canonical” writings, notably the Book of Revelation. It was therefore only the next logical step when Christian scholars began, around the end of the eighteenth century, to investigate the different strata within the individual books of the New Testament. The criticism of the New Testament is part of the

cultural history of the West and is an important manifestation of the de-Christianization of European society.

By contrast, the modern "revisionist" criticism of the Qur'an is not a phenomenon of Islamic society but of Western academic scholarship. It emerged not from within Islam itself but from what in the East is still regarded (rightly or wrongly) as the "Christian" Occident and is perceived by modern Muslim apologists as the continuation of a long-standing Christian and Jewish enmity towards Islam, a continuation of the Crusades and of European imperialism.

But I wish to approach this question from a different angle, not from that of the sociopolitical context of modern Western Qur'anic scholarship but from a source-critical analysis of our historical knowledge of the earliest history of Christianity and of Islam.

Christianity emerged in a very well defined and well known historical and geographical context, namely in the Roman province of Palestine in the first century of our era. The political, social, and cultural history of Roman Palestine is very well documented in contemporary writings by pagan, Jewish, and Christian authors; moreover, the region has been the object of intense archeological investigation unparalleled probably by any other region in the whole world. By contrast, the traditional account of the origin of Islam places it in a region about which we have actually no independent historical information at all. Although the northern and southwestern fringes of the Arabian Desert are relatively well documented by historical sources and archeological investigation, we do not really have any historical data about the homeland of Islam, Mecca and Medina, the Ḥijāz, apart from the Islamic sources themselves. Nor has there ever been any archeological excavation in Mecca or Medina. From the historian's point of view, the ancient Ḥijāz is a blank on the map. But this means that any investigation of the Qur'an and of early Islam takes place in a historical vacuum.

On the other hand, there is a very striking difference between the picture of Jesus that emerges from the New Testament and the picture of Muhammad in the Qur'an and in early Muslim tradition.

Let me reiterate just a few actually well-known points about Jesus and the New Testament. The books of the New Testament were composed at different times and contain glaring discrepancies both in their narrative content and in their theological content. The canon of the New Testament, as we know it now, with its four, in part contradictory, Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the Pauline and pseudo-

Pauline epistles, the so-called Catholic Letters, and the obviously late Book of Revelation, did not come into being, as a canon, until towards the end of the second century. The most ancient Christian sects recognized as a rule only one version of the Gospel, not necessarily identical with any one of the four contained in our modern Bibles; for example, the so-called "Jewish Christian" groups accepted only a version of what we now know as Matthew, the Marcionites a shorter version of what we now call Luke. There are very significant textual variants in the ancient manuscripts of the New Testament. Whole passages are missing in some copies. The Gospel attributed to Mark has two variant endings (two substantially different accounts of the Resurrection) and there are significant variant readings in virtually every verse of the New Testament. The oldest part of the New Testament, the half dozen or so authentic letters of Paul, contain virtually no biographical information about Jesus apart from the statement that he was crucified and resurrected, and indeed Paul declares his lack of interest in the testimony of the disciples concerning what Jesus did or said in the flesh; the only true gospel, Paul declares, is the one that he himself received from the risen Christ.<sup>1</sup> In the narrative parts of the four canonic Gospels, Jesus is depicted almost exclusively as a doer of miracles and consequently they cannot be regarded as historical or biographical documents in any meaningful sense of these words, while the teachings that these Gospels put into the mouth of Jesus are, at least in part, theologically dependant on Pauline doctrine. They cannot therefore be seen as records of the actual teachings of Jesus, but reflect certain defined positions in the history of Christian doctrine.

Since the nineteenth century many theologians have sought to differentiate the person and teachings of the "historical Jesus" from the already mythical Jesus of the canonic Gospels, the Jesus of "Christianity," but there have been others who have doubted whether the two can in be fact separated, that is, whether we actually have any means to recover the presumably historical figure lurking behind the myth. The eminent theologian Julius Wellhausen, a very well-known scholar in the fields of Old Testament, New Testament, and Islamic studies, remarked, in the early years of the twentieth century, that "the historical Jesus has, for quite a long time now, been elevated to

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<sup>1</sup> See Gal 1:6–12.

a religious principle and played off against Christianity.”<sup>2</sup> But in fact we are only capable of constructing “from unsatisfactory fragments a makeshift concept of the teachings of Jesus.”<sup>3</sup> We have no other picture of Jesus than the one that has left its imprint on the Christian community. But here his personality “appears only ever in a reflection, refracted through the medium of Christian belief.”<sup>4</sup>

Now let us take a look at Muhammad and the Qur’an. In contrast to the New Testament, the Qur’an is, on the whole, a book of consistent style and consistent theological content. Although the surviving Muslim sects (the Shi’ites, Kharijites, and those who eventually came to be known as Sunnites) separated from each other within a decade of the death of Muhammad, they all agree on the content of the Qur’anic canon. By contrast, the surviving Christian sects, all of which split off from Roman imperial Christianity at a very late date, not earlier than the fourth century, have different versions of the biblical canon; for example, the Ethiopic church has a whole series of books not contained in other versions of the Bible. Within the Qur’anic canon, there are no really substantial textual variants.<sup>5</sup> The so-called “reading variants” (*qirā’āt*) recorded in medieval writings on Qur’anic sciences are for the most part mere graphic variants, that is, different spellings of the same recited texts, and even the very few true textual variants hardly ever make any difference in the content of the book. This is equally true of the ancient Qur’an fragments discovered in San‘ā’, in so far as the person who was entrusted with their analysis, some twenty years ago now, has actually allowed them to be published rather than merely slung about in effusions of sensationalist journalism. I have already suggested elsewhere<sup>6</sup> that the virtual absence of real textual variants in the Qur’an is the result of

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<sup>2</sup> Wellhausen, *Einleitung*, 104: “Der historische Jesus wird, nicht erst seit gestern, zum religiösen Prinzip erhoben und gegen das Christentum ausgespielt.”

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 103: “Aus ungenügenden Fragmenten können wir uns einen notdürftigen Begriff von der Lehre Jesu machen.”

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 104: “Ohne diese Nachwirkung in der Gemeinde können wir von der religiösen Persönlichkeit Jesu uns keine Vorstellung machen. Sie erscheint jedoch immer nur im Reflex, gebrochen durch das Medium des christlichen Glaubens.”

<sup>5</sup> This point was made very clearly by none other than the grandfather of the “revisionist” school, the late John Wansbrough, in his *Quranic Studies*, 203: “Of genuinely textual variants exhibiting material deviation from the canonical text of revelation, such as are available for Hebrew and Christian scripture, there are none. The Quranic masorah is in fact entirely exegetical, even where its contents have been transmitted in the guise of textual variants.”

<sup>6</sup> De Blois, “*Hijāratun min sijjil*,” 65, n. 10.

the fact that the transmission of the Qur'an has always been primarily through oral rather than through written tradition. The situation is similar with that of the Vedas, which were composed much earlier than the New Testament or the Qur'an and transmitted for many centuries exclusively orally. In the Vedas there are actually no real textual variants. But this means that the methodology of textual criticism and source-criticism, as applied with such success to the New Testament, cannot be transferred automatically to the Qur'an. A different kind of source requires a different kind of methodology. The acceptance of the oral nature of Qur'anic transmission also means that the currently fashionable wheeze of rewriting the Qur'an by altering the diacritical marks is unlikely to lead to any useful result. I have emphasized this in my recent review of the book by the author who writes under the pseudonym "Christoph Luxenberg."<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to the miracle stories that make up virtually the whole of the Christian Gospels, the *sīra*, the traditional biography of Muhammad, is "realistic" in the sense that it contains virtually no public miracles, that is, miracles supposedly witnessed by large groups of people. The *sīra* does, of course, record the private miracle of Muhammad receiving the Qur'an from an angel. But from a positivist, skeptical point of view it is possible to accept that highly imaginative people in pre-modern times sincerely believed that they received their knowledge through divine inspiration. We do not hesitate, for example, to believe that Joan of Arc sincerely believed that she had spoken to angels, or that William Blake sincerely believed that he saw the prophet Ezekiel sitting beneath a tree in the English countryside, and we should not doubt that the same was possible in the case of Muhammad.

I mentioned before the great theologian and Islamicist Wellhausen. Is it not remarkable that the same Wellhausen, who rejected the Christian Gospels as a source of reliable biographical information about Jesus, had no hesitation to accept the *sīra* as a basically realistic account of the career of Muhammad? Was Wellhausen really so skeptical about the scriptures of his own religion and at the same time so naively gullible about those of another religion? Is not the difference rather that the *sīra* is, I am not saying true, but at least psychologically plausible, while the Gospel is manifestly not a biographical account but a document of faith? My conclusion is thus that Jesus is

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<sup>7</sup> Review of Christoph Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran*.

a biographically intangible figure located in a very well documented historical milieu, whereas Muhammad is a biographically at least plausible figure located in a historical vacuum.

This vacuum cannot at present be filled. But, while waiting, for example, for eventual archeological or indeed epigraphic discoveries from the excavation of the holy sites in Mecca and Medina, it is possible to extrapolate certain characteristics of ancient society and religion in central Arabia from the data of other Semitic cultures, and specifically from the relatively well-documented civilizations in south-western Arabia and the northern fringes of the Arabian desert, and to confront these with the data contained in the Qur'an. In a series of contributions in the course of the last twelve years, I have attempted to interpret various passages in the Qur'an in the light of attested Arabian parallels. Thus, in a paper on the Qur'anic *ṣābi'ūn* presented at the Seminar for Arabian Studies in 1992 it was suggested that this term refers not, as has been claimed, to one or another of the religious communities in Southern Iraq, but to what the Muslim sources call the *zanādiqa* (Manicheans) among the Quraysh, the Prophet's own kinsmen.<sup>8</sup> Then in the paper on the Qur'anic term *sijjil*, read at the same seminar in 1995, this term was linked not with a Persian compound *sang-gil*, "stone-like clay," as has been accepted by most of the *mufasssirūn*, but with the name of the North Arabian deity \**šiggil* (Aramaicized as *šngl'* etc.).<sup>9</sup> Subsequently, in the paper on the Qur'anic term *naṣī'*, presented at the Seminar for Arabian Studies in 2002, it is shown the Qur'anic *naṣī'*, in sense of the illicit postponement of a ritual act to a different month in the cultic calendar, has a very striking parallel in one of the south Arabian inscriptions from Haram, where the authors offer their penance to the god Ḥalfān for the fact that they "postponed" (*nasha'aw*) a certain ritual by two months. The same inscription mentions also a "pilgrimage" (*ḥajj*) to a specified locality at a specified point in the calendar. In both points, the Haram inscription thus anticipates concerns of the Qur'an and underlines the continuity of religious observances in pre-Islamic and Islamic Arabia.<sup>10</sup>

The *ḥajj* at Mecca, the circumambulation of the Ka'ba, the kissing of the Black Stone, and the related ceremonies have no conceivable

<sup>8</sup> De Blois, "Sabians."

<sup>9</sup> De Blois, "Ḥijāratun min sijjil."

<sup>10</sup> De Blois, "Qur'an 9:37."



rationale in the dogmas of Islamic monotheism; they are manifestly a remnant of the pagan past. Their essential incongruity in the context of Islam is expressed in the well-known ḥadīth according to which the caliph 'Umar addressed the Black Stone with the words: "Had I not seen the Prophet kissing thee, then I would never have kissed thee." This (as Wellhausen, once again, put it) "rough-hewn piece of paganism" at the very heart of Islam<sup>11</sup> exemplifies the fixation of Islam, and of its Arabian antecedent, on specified immutable sacred places, very much in contrast to the situation in the Old Testament, where Yahweh is adored in a mobile tabernacle, which only at a late stage is brought to rest at a specified place, for the Jews in Jerusalem, but for the Samaritans at Nablus. The god of the children of Israel is a nomadic god, but the god of the sons of Ishmael dwells immutably in a fixed sacred precinct. This is corroborated by the South Arabian evidence and certainly argues against the "revisionist" endeavor to situate the origin of Islam somewhere other than in Central Arabia. The Bible did not "come from Arabia," but the Qur'an did.

But what about the manifestly non-Arabian, that is to say, Christian and Jewish elements in primitive Islam? In my paper on the Qur'anic term *naṣrānī*, first presented at the Seminar for Arabian Studies in 1998, and the one on the term *ḥanīf*, presented at the same seminar in 2000, both subsequently published in an expanded form,<sup>12</sup> it was suggested that the doctrines that the Qur'an ascribes to the "Nazoreans" (*naṣāra*) agree less with those of the mainstream Christian communities in Syria and Iraq than with those of the ancient "Jewish Christian" sects, that is, precisely those whom the Catholic polemicists call "Nazoreans." The question of the influence of "Jewish Christianity" (and also of Arab paganism) on early Islam was further developed in the paper "Elchasai – Manes – Muḥammad,"<sup>13</sup> in part developing a line of thought pioneered by the famous Protestant theologian Harnack already in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Against

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<sup>11</sup> Wellhausen, *Reste*, 68–69: "In dem Umgange um die Ka'ba und dem Küssen des schwarzen Steines, in dem Laufe zwischen alČafa und alMarva, und in dem Feste von 'Arafa hat sich der altarabische Cultus an einer seiner Hauptstätten, wenn nicht an der Hauptstätte, bis in die Gegenwart lebendig erhalten. Muhammad hat dies klotzige Stück Heidentum zu einem Teil des Islam gemacht, nachdem er es zuvor umgedeutet, gereinigt und verschnitten hatte."

<sup>12</sup> De Blois, "Religious Vocabulary."

<sup>13</sup> De Blois, "Elchasai – Manes – Muhammad."

<sup>14</sup> See the chapter "Der Islam" in Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 2, 529–538. More recently the subject has been addressed also by Pines, "Note."

the still widely held view that “Jewish Christianity” was a phenomenon exclusively of the Ancient Church I have insisted on the evidence of Muslim authors that the followers of at least one “Jewish Christian” sect (the Elchasaites) were still “numerous” (as an-Nadim puts it) in the swamps of southern Iraq as late as the tenth century. The attested persistence of Elchasaism in Iraq until the tenth century poses at least the question of the possibility of the persistence of similar (“Nazorean”) sects in the historically largely unmapped provinces of central Arabia three centuries earlier. For beside those distinguishing features which Islam shares both with Judaism and with the “Jewish Christian” sects (circumcision, prohibition of pork and carrion, praying towards Jerusalem), there are, more significantly, positions that separate Islam both from Judaism and from Catholic Christianity, but link it with “Jewish Christianity,” for example the prohibition of wine, but most significantly a prophetology which emphasizes the sameness of the teachings of all the prophets and which regards Jesus, in particular, as a champion of the law of Moses rather than as its abrogator.

The picture that I propose for the religious landscape in Mecca at the dawn of the Islamic era includes thus the existence of a “Jewish Christian” (Nazorean) community, which used Arabic as its cultic language,<sup>15</sup> which practiced circumcision, shunned the consumption of pork, prayed towards Jerusalem, and adored a “trinity” consisting of God the Father, his son Jesus, and a female Holy Spirit (the mother of Jesus), and which had a canon consisting of the Torah and some form of the Gospel, but excluding the prophetic books of the Old Testament (the Nazoreans do not seem to have recognized any prophets between Moses and Jesus).<sup>16</sup> Muhammad was brought up as a pagan (as indeed the *sīra* informs us). As a young man he had close contacts with the Nazoreans at Mecca and adopted many of their teachings. But he also got to know about Catholic (presumably Melchite) Christians, and his criticism of Nazoreism, with its implied tritheism, is essentially from a Catholic position. At an early stage in his prophetic career, Muhammad adopted the Nazorean practice of

<sup>15</sup> See my discussion of the name *Yaḥyā* in de Blois, “Religious Vocabulary,” 12.

<sup>16</sup> This is (broadly speaking) the position of the pseudo-Clementine *Homilies*. The Qur’anic names of the Old Testament patriarchs and of the protagonists of the Gospels (Jesus, Mary, John, Zachariah, etc.) all derive from Semitic (Hebrew or Aramaic, though occasionally restructured) forms. By contrast, the Qur’anic names of the post-Mosaic prophets (e.g. Yūnus / Jonah) derive from the Greek forms found in the Septuagint. This suggests that Muhammad’s awareness of these figures derives not from the Nazoreans but from Melchite Christians.

praying towards Jerusalem, but after his break with the Nazoreans he reinstated the (pagan) Ka'ba as the house of the one true god, reinterpreting it as a shrine erected by Abraham in his (Pauline) capacity as the paradigm of the salvation of the Gentiles.

I hope to pursue this line of investigation in further studies, also in regard to the question of ancient South Arabian monotheism and the apparently "Jewish" elements (circumcision, Sabbath, etc.) in Ethiopian Christianity.

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## LOST IN PHILOLOGY? THE VIRGINS OF PARADISE AND THE LUXENBERG HYPOTHESIS

Stefan Wild

### *The Nature of the Qur'anic Paradise*

It is plausible that the idea of a utopian heavenly garden as a reward for believers was born in the desert. An oasis with shade, trees, fruits, and rivers is a powerful counter-notion to the desert with its merciless sun, its almost perpetual drought, its sandstorms, and its life-threatening infertility. Paradise is also a place where human survival does not depend on labor like agriculture. This garden of paradise, a limitless oasis, was the first abode of mankind. It is paradise lost, the luxurious garden of innocence as created by God, a place without pain, disease, sin, or death. When Adam and his wife—the latter nameless in the Qur'an—are evicted from this paradise, human history begins. This garden is the shared paradise of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim mythology. Then there is a second paradise. This other paradise is the land that is fairer than day, promised to the believer in the hereafter according to Christian and Muslim eschatology, but not according to classical Jewish eschatology. It shares many characteristics with paradise lost, but is not identical to it.

The Qur'anic eschatological paradise as the negation of a miserable reality is described in more detail than the parallel notion in Christianity. It is true that according to Revelation 22:2 the world to come is full of trees and water, its trees bearing fruit every month. But the Qur'anic paradise is altogether the life that man on the Arabian Peninsula did *not* have in the seventh century. It is, however, not only the projection of a counter-reality. It also serves as a powerful motif in the rhetorical strategy of a prophetic eschatological narrative, and aims at convincing the listener to believe in what is so alluringly described. The vivid details of the narratives of paradise and of hell support the idea that the Qur'anic revelation depicted eschatology as something imminent and close by, not something destined to

happen in an unforeseeably distant future.<sup>1</sup> The Qur'anic narratives of paradise and hell are linked to two basic topics of the earliest messages of the Prophet: the message of the bodily resurrection of the dead and the message of the approaching Day of Judgment with its apocalyptic catastrophes. The Prophet as a *nadhīr* warns of hell as the consequence of disbelief, while the Prophet as a *bashīr* brings good tidings and announces paradise as a reward for the believers.

The following remarks concentrate on this Qur'anic narrative of paradise and largely disregard later Muslim theology and legends. Whereas the Qur'an tells us few details about the lost pre-historical garden of Adam's paradise, the eschatological paradise is presented in vivid and sensual detail.<sup>2</sup> This garden is above all a place and a space. It is somewhere above, in the sky, in a part of heaven. In Qur'anic language, the word for "sky" and "heaven" is the same (*samā'*, *samawāt*). God is spatially located *above* mankind. When he reveals his commands to mankind, he sends the Qur'anic revelation *down*. The usual Arabic name for "paradise" is *al-janna* ("the garden," plural: *al-jannāt*). This word occurs in the Qur'an also as the designation of a man-made garden. Twice we find another name: *firdaws*, a word of Iranian origin, which is also the root of Greek *paradeisos* and of Aramaic *pardaisā* and was taken over from Greek by most European languages as *paradise*, *paradis*, *Paradies*, etc.

How does the Qur'an describe the eschatological paradise? There is a wealth of detailed information and imagery. The space of paradise is very large—"as wide as the heavens and the earth" (Q 3:133; 57:21). The climate in paradise is mild and temperate; paradise has gates and is guarded by angels (Q 39:73), etc. On the other hand, God, who is the central actor in the Last Judgment and dominates the narrative of the Day of Judgment, hardly ever appears in the descriptions of paradise. He has prepared paradise for the believers, but only plays a marginal role in the Qur'anic passages describing paradise.

The utopian character of this eschatological counter-reality is clear. The hereafter promises the gratification and happiness that man is for the most part deprived of in his natural environment and in society. Both nature and society constantly endanger his physical survival. In the real world of the Arabian Peninsula of the seventh century CE,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Hasson, "Last Judgement," 138. According to Q 16:77, the Judgment is "like the twinkling of the eye, or even nearer."

<sup>2</sup> Saleh, *Vie future*; Horovitz, "Paradies"; Smith/Haddad, *Islamic Understanding*; Afsaruddin, "Garden." Al-Azmeh, "Rhetoric," is also an important contribution.

life was for most people “poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”<sup>3</sup> Paradise is the negation of this Hobbesian condition. First of all, paradise is a safe place (Q 44:51) where nothing has to be feared. This safety is there for all eternity; men and women will be forever in this blissful state. In the community of paradise, there is no harsh word or strife; the blessed greet each other with the words “peace, peace” (Q 56:25–26). All human senses are involved in this blissful gratification: rivers of water, milk, wine, and honey flow by (Q 47:15); men and women partake of delicious food like meat and fruit, they perfume themselves, they rest on soft cushions or carpets. Voices in paradise are not shrill but subdued; the blessed are dressed in expensive foreign clothes and wear jewels and pearls. Paradise is also the space of lawful inebriation. The believers drink wine mixed with water and sealed with musk (Q 83:25–26), wine having been decreed unlawful in this world, but lawful in the hereafter. And, of course, paradise is also the space of a supernaturally enjoyable sexuality. Enter the maidens of paradise.

### *The Houris*

The English word “houri” is derived via Persian from the Arabic word *ḥūr*, an adjective in the plural (fem. sing. *ḥawrā*), which means “having eyes in which the contrast between black and white is very intense.” This can also be said of the eyes of the gazelle and is considered a mark of female beauty. This word occurs four times in the Qur’an, three times together with the word *‘īn*, which means “wide-eyed,” (fem. sing. *‘aynā*).<sup>4</sup>

The maidens of paradise are not always called *ḥūr* or *ḥūr ‘īn*. If the usual chronology of the Meccan verses is correct, Q 78:31–34 is one of the earliest passages, if not the very earliest passage, mentioning “maidens” in paradise—but not under the name of *ḥūr*:

The God-fearing will score a victory,  
Gardens and vineyards,  
And round-breasted (*kawā‘ib*) mates,  
And a brim-full cup.

<sup>3</sup> 3 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 13. Hobbes adds “solitary,” which life in Arabia probably was not.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Horovitz, “Jungfrauen”; Jarrar, “Houris.”

These maidens are mentioned again in Q 55:56–58, but here, too, they are not called *ḥūr*. In the gardens, there will be

maidens lowering their glances and they have not been touched before them by any man or jinn (*qāṣirātu ṭ-ṭarfi lam yaṭmithhunna insun qablahum wa-lā jānn*). [...]

They are like rubies and coral (*ka-annahunna l-yaqūtu wa-l-marjān*).

In Q 52:19–24, the divine voice describes paradise for the God-fearing and introduces the houris:

Eat and drink merrily, for what you used to do.

Reclining on ranged couches, and we [i.e., God] shall wed them to wide-eyed houris (*bi-ḥūrin ʿin*). [...]

And we shall supply them with fruit and meat, such as they desire.

They will exchange therein a cup wherein there is no idle talk or vilification.

And boys of their own will go round them, as if they were hidden pearls.

Q 44:51–56 runs:

However, the God-fearing are in a secure place;

In gardens and well-springs.

They wear silk and brocade facing each other.

Thus it will be; and we gave them wide-eyed houris (*bi-ḥūrin ʿin*) in marriage.

They call therein for every fruit in perfect security.

They do not taste death therein, except for the first death [...].

In both passages, the believing men will be *married* to the maidens. But the idea of marriage is not always clear. In Q 37:48–49 these houris appear again, but marriage is not mentioned:

And they also shall have wide-eyed maidens (*ḥūr*) averting their gaze.

They resemble hidden pearls.

Q 55:62–75 states:

And beneath them are two other gardens.

So, which of your Lord's bounties do you both deny?



Or dark green color. [...]

Therein are two gushing springs. [...]

Therein are fruits, palm trees, and pomegranates. [...]

Therein are beautiful, virtuous maidens (*khayrātun ḥisānun*). [...]

Wide-eyed, cloistered in pavilions. [...]

No man or jinn touched them before.

One of the longest Qur'anic passages that describe paradise is Q 56:15–38:

[They will be] upon beds interwoven with gold;

Reclining upon them, facing each other.

While immortal youths (*wildānun mukhalladūn*) go round them,

With goblets, pitchers, and a cup of limpid drink.

Their heads do not ache from it and they do not become intoxicated.

And with such fruits as they care to choose;

And such flesh of fowl as they desire;

And wide-eyed houris (*ḥūrun ʿīn*),

Like hidden pearls;

As a reward for what they used to do.

They do not hear therein idle talk or vilification.

Only the greeting: "Peace, peace!"

As for the Companions of the Right; and behold the Companions of the Right?

They are in the midst of thornless lotus trees,

And braided acacias,

And extended shade,

And overflowing water;

And abundant fruit,

Neither withheld nor forbidden,

And uplifted mattresses.

We have formed them [fem. pl., i.e., the houris] originally;

And made them pure virgins (*abkāran*),  
 Tender and unageing,  
 For the Companions of the Right.

The literary technique seems to be one of accumulation in order to depict and invoke limitless pleasure. In this cosmos of sensual delight, Muslim paradise gives sexuality a prominent place. Sensual gratification without sexuality seems unthinkable. All this is in contrast to the other eschatological place without sexuality: hell. The Qur'anic paradise is a space of desire and instant fulfillment.<sup>5</sup> It is true that the sexual imagery is strong, but it is only one sensual feature of paradise among others. It seems that nineteenth-century Egyptian Muslim exegesis was influenced by European puritan attitudes, when Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935), a pillar of Muslim reformism, claimed that the houris must definitely either be no more than the earthly wives of the believers or that the believer would have one houri over and above his earthly wife.<sup>6</sup> Muslim tradition developed this heavenly imagery with delight. Islamic legends claim, for example, that Jesus, as one of the most venerated pre-Islamic prophets, will have a hundred houris in paradise.<sup>7</sup>

Muslim exegetical literature interpreted the imagery of paradise in a variety of ways ranging from the literal to the purely metaphorical and allegorical, from an insistence on the sensuality of the imagery to the explanation that this sensuality was of a different kind or of a higher plane, and therefore incomparable to earthly pleasures.<sup>8</sup> It is, however, only in modern times that Muslim exegesis noticed that the Qur'anic discourse on paradise seemed to be a male discourse. Nothing is said about the gratification of female sexuality. Combs-Schilling's judgment that "Christianity's imagination of paradise is asexual, while Islam's is one of infinite male orgasm"<sup>9</sup> is not wholly devoid of truth. The Qur'an often stresses that paradise is open for believing men *and* women. In fact, paradise admits the believer together with his parents, wives, and children (Q 40:8; 13:23), i.e., with the extended three-generation family. But apparently there is no male equivalent to the

<sup>5</sup> Pace al-Azmeh, "Rhetoric," 217.

<sup>6</sup> Saleh, *Vie Future*, 127; Riḍā, *Fātāwa*, nos. 193, 196; cf. al-Azmeh, "Rhetoric," 216.

<sup>7</sup> Wensinck/Pellat, "Hūr," 582.

<sup>8</sup> Saleh, *Vie future*, 130ff.

<sup>9</sup> Combs-Schilling, *Sacred Performances*, 96.

houris. Modern Muslim exegesis, however, did find it. Muḥammad ‘Alī (d. 1931) says: “Just as the gardens, rivers, milk, honey, fruits, and numerous other things are both for men and women, even so are *ḥūr*.”<sup>10</sup> In a modern German translation of the Qur’an, the translator adds to the verses mentioning the wide-eyed *houris* (*al-ḥūr al-‘īn*) a footnote and explains that these words can grammatically mean male and female spouses, thus endorsing a fully bisexual notion of paradise.<sup>11</sup> The union of man and woman receives in the Qur’anic imagery of paradise a religious aspect. Earthly sexuality is but a pale prefiguration of the perfect sexuality of paradise.<sup>12</sup>

The *houris* in paradise, and with them human sexuality in the Islamic hereafter, became favorite topics of Christian anti-Islamic discourse. The existence of the houris seemed to sum up the Christian idea that Islam was not a spiritual religion.<sup>13</sup> From the time of Johannes Damascenus onward, Ramón Lull, Allan of Lille, William of Auvergne, and many others in the Middle Ages preceded Martin Luther in considering the Muslim paradise disgusting, or ridiculous, or both. In his *Türckenschriften* written in 1529/30, Luther attacked Islam, which he called the “Turkish religion,” and the Qur’an. In Luther’s polemic anti-Turkish, i.e., anti-Islamic discourse, traditional themes figure prominently: the lack of the doctrines of the trinity and of incarnation; and of a proper miracle of confirmation for Muhammad’s prophethood; and, last but not least, “the carnal character” of the Qur’anic paradise. He scorns: “How drowned is this Mahmet in woman’s flesh, in all his thoughts, words, works. On account of his lust, he can neither speak nor act due to his lust, everything has to be flesh, flesh, flesh.”<sup>14</sup>

The three pillars on which these attacks rest are: the fact that the Qur’an allows the Muslim male to have up to four wives at a time and an unspecified number of concubines as slaves; that Muhammad himself had more than four wives; and, finally, that the houris are part of paradise. This was still an issue for the literature produced by

<sup>10</sup> Quoted according to Smith/Haddad, *Islamic Understanding*, 167.

<sup>11</sup> Hofmann, *Koran*, 399; cf. also al-Azmeh, “Rhetoric,” 216.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Ghazzālī (d. 505/1111) in his *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm ad-dīn*, book 12: *an-Nikāḥ*. See Bauer, *Islamische Ethik*, quoted in al-Azmeh, “Rhetoric,” 216, n. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Daniel, *Islam*, 148–152.

<sup>14</sup> “Wie ist der Mahmet in der Frawen fleisch ersoffen, in allen seinen gedancken, Worten, wercken, kan fur solcher brunst nichts reden noch thun, es muss alles fleisch, fleisch, fleisch sein.” Martin Luther’s preface to the *Confutatio Alcorani* of Ricoldo da Monte Croce (d. 1320), here quoted according to Bobzin, *Koran*, 143, n. 285.

Christian missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The consternation of Christian theologians at what they considered to be a travesty of paradise can be felt also in more modern studies. So Wilhelm Rudolph writes: "Muhammad's ideas of eternal salvation lack any spirituality, they show a crass materialism."<sup>15</sup>

There is an evident contrast between the Muslim paradise and the Christian one. In the latter, the blessed lead an angelic life, in which sexuality or marriage is explicitly denied.<sup>16</sup> Jesus' doctrine denies sexuality as a feature of life after death. "They that shall be accounted as worthy to obtain that world [...] neither marry, nor are given in marriage." (Lk 20, 35) Only modern theosophists like Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) had a place for sexuality in paradise: "Conjugal love is the basis of all manners of love in heaven."<sup>17</sup>

### *Luxenberg's Hypothesis*

Christoph Luxenberg's book *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* (The Syro-Aramaic reading of the Qur'an: A contribution to the decoding of the Qur'anic language)<sup>18</sup> became an international success story. Luxenberg's hypothesis is an offshoot of a massive and systematic scholarly enterprise that started in the first part of the nineteenth century with Abraham Geiger's book *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* On the basis of the source-critical approach, so successful with regard to the Bible and the New Testament, a similar project was initiated with regard to the Qur'anic text. This led to the attempt of identifying the "sources of the Qur'an." Muhammad's revelations were broken down into a multitude of pagan, Jewish, Zoroastrian, Christian, Mandeian, Manichean, and other sources; parallels and influences were investigated; "omissions" and "misunderstandings" duly noted. The approach was usually atomistic, in the sense that single verses or isolated words were scrutinized. Etymology was often a focus, as is documented by the older secondary literature:

<sup>15</sup> Rudolph, *Abhängigkeit*, 32.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Lang, *Himmel und Hölle*, 36–46, see especially note 5 on page 48.

<sup>17</sup> Lang/McDannell, *Kulturgeschichte*, 292.

<sup>18</sup> The publisher has announced a second corrected and enlarged edition for 2004. This paper went to press before it came out. A volume on the debate about Luxenberg's book, edited by Christoph Burgmer, has come out in 2005 (*Streit um den Koran. Die Luxenberg-Debatte: Standpunkte und Hintergründe*).

Theodor Nöldeke's study of "arbitrarily used and misunderstood loan-words in the Qur'an" (1910), Alfons Mingana's "Syriac Influence on the Style of the Kur'an" (1927), Arthur Jeffery's *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (1938), etc. All these writings were part of an international but strictly European discourse. Above all—and this became an issue later on—Muslim scholars never participated in it.

There were at least two earlier systematic attempts to construct a pre-canonical version of the Qur'an, which would be free of all ambiguities and obscurities. In the 1930s, Richard Bell (d. 1952) proposed a major re-arrangement of the surahs and verses of the Qur'an. Already the earliest Muslim exegetical scholarship had distinguished Meccan surahs from Medinan one, and identified Meccan passages or verses in Medinan surahs as well as Medinan passages and verses in Meccan surahs. Bell attempted a rather radical re-arrangement of Qur'anic verses by explaining why passages seemingly unrelated to the context had frequently crept into the collection of the Qur'an. He explained this "by the supposition that this passage had been written on the back of a 'scrap of paper' used for one of the neighboring passages which properly belonged to the sura."<sup>19</sup> By reassigning these passages to their original position, the original pre-canonical unity of the verses was to be re-established. In this approach, the Arabic text of the verses and passages remained untouched, but the result was a major reshuffling of the text, in which the order of verses often differed radically from that of the canonical text. On the whole, Bell's hypothetical re-arrangement was respectfully acknowledged but hardly ever adopted. The number of other equally probable re-arrangements was too high.

The second attempt was more systematic. It saw in the Qur'anic text a composite structure of two radically different elements and was presented by Günter Lüling in his *Über den Ur-Qur'an. Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qur'an* (1974).<sup>20</sup> The author believed that he had discovered two layers of texts, one with a "one-dimensional" Arabic Islamic wording and another older one, in which a secondary Islamic sense had been superimposed on a number of originally Christian pre-Islamic texts. In the latter case, these texts—often Christian hymns—had been revised and altered to fit the later Islamic dogma. Parts of the pre-canonical

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Watt, *Bell's Introduction*, 101.

<sup>20</sup> In the meantime, an English translation has appeared (Lüling, *Challenge*).

Qur'anic text had, therefore, originally been strophes or stanzas of a Christian hymnal, written or recited in Arabic. Lüling attempted to reconstruct this pre-text. He did not receive the scholarly attention he should have received; the German-speaking scientific community stifled the book through silence. In France, the echo was a little more favorable, but Lüling's thesis never gained a broader reception.

Christoph Luxenberg's *Syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran* is less systematic in its approach and concentrates on issues of vocabulary and single words. He also has a subtext of sorts. But in his case, Aramaic words were misread or misunderstood as Arabic not in a Christian-Arabic hymnal, but in scattered Christian fragments composed in Syriac. "For L(uxenberg) the Koran is not written in Arabic, but in an Aramaic-Arabic mixed language, which was spoken in Mecca at the time of Muhammad. Mecca was originally an Aramaic settlement. [...] This mixed language was recorded, from the beginning, in a defective script, i.e., without vowel signs or the diacritic points, which later distinguished different consonants. The author denies the existence of a parallel oral tradition of Koran-recitation. [...] The Arabs could not understand the Koran, known to them as it was only from defectively written manuscripts and reinterpreted these documents in the light of their own language. The proposed 'Aramaic reading' of the Koran allows us to rediscover its original meaning."<sup>21</sup>

Luxenberg describes his *modus operandi* in the following way: he concentrates on those Qur'anic expressions that have been declared "obscure" ("dunkel") by Western and often also by Muslim scholarship. He will then consult one of the most detailed Muslim commentaries on the Qur'an, the commentary of aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 923), in order to check whether it has a more suitable interpretation. If not, he will check the *Lisān al-'arab*, one of the most extensive medieval Arabic-Arabic dictionaries for a possible different meaning. If there is still no satisfying meaning, Luxenberg will check whether an Aramaic homonym can be found for the word or the expression in question and whether this "Syro-Aramaic" reading yields a different meaning with an "objectively better sense." "Syro-Aramaic," also called Syriac, was probably chosen because it is the best-known Aramaic dialect. In a number of cases, Luxenberg claims, this Syro-Aramaic reading gives "a decidedly more logical sense" than the

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<sup>21</sup> De Blois, "Review," 92.

Arabic word. If all of this still leads nowhere, the diacritical dots marking the Arabic consonants are to be modified to find a better meaning by fitting an Aramaic root into the modified Arabic consonantal text; finally, a hypothetical Arabic text is translated into Aramaic.<sup>22</sup>

My first and main objection to this approach is not that it does not yield results. My main objection is that it yields far too many results. My second objection is that, for Luxenberg, everything happens in the realm of orthography and reading. This disregards the important role that recitation played in the preservation of the Qur'anic text. My third objection is that there is no attempt to explain how the actual wording of the text could have arisen out of "errors" and "misunderstandings." And my fourth and last objection is that there is little evidence for an Aramaic-Arabic "mixed language" spoken in Mecca in the seventh century CE. In the following analysis, however, I want to concentrate on a further methodological problem of Luxenberg's approach, for which I take the passages dealing with the heavenly virgins to be a good example. Put briefly, the problem is: How can we define an "obscure" word or passage, how can we tell a "more logical" sense from a less logical one? Luxenberg says that the starting point for his work is the diagnosis that a word in a given passage is obscure. The question is: What exactly is obscure, and for whom?

In the case of the *houris*, Luxenberg names two additional arguments for his claim that the pre-canonical Qur'an never mentioned "virgins of paradise." Firstly, the Qur'an says time and again that it confirms earlier revelation like Jewish and Christian scripture. As the notion of *houris* forms an essential part of eschatology and cannot be found either in Christian or in Jewish scripture, the Qur'an would contradict itself if it contained such an element. Secondly, according to Q 43:70 and 36:56, male believers will be re-united with their wives in paradise. One merely has to imagine—says Luxenberg—these earthly wives in their supposedly heavenly bliss having to watch how their husbands enjoy the pleasures of making love to the *houris* in order to see how preposterous the idea of the *houris* really is.<sup>23</sup>

To comment on the first point: It is true that the Qur'an states that it is the confirmation of earlier revelation and scripture, especially of

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<sup>22</sup> Luxenberg, *Lesart*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 221ff., 229ff.

Jewish and Christian revelation. And it is true, that Jewish and Christian revelation do not mention houris. But, of course, there are almost countless other details that are not shared by all three scriptures. Qur'anic eschatology alone abounds with differences from Christian and Muslim scripture. To change the Qur'anic text on the strength of this argument is bold indeed. As regards the second argument, a patriarchal and tribal concept of human society dominated pre-Islamic culture as well as the Qur'an and allowed the Muslim to have up to four wives simultaneously and—at least in principle—an unlimited number of concubines in this world. Such a notion can hardly be said to be incompatible with the idea of houris in paradise.

Luxenberg then solves what he considers a textual problem by taking recourse to an Aramaic etymology and proposes as the “true meaning” of the expression hitherto interpreted as houris: “white (crystal-)clear (grapes).” This was certainly one of his most startling and sensational interpretations, and was frequently quoted in the wake of the world-wide media stir created by his book. In the introductory part to his chapter on the houris, Luxenberg explains: “It was not the Prophet who misunderstood Christian pictures of paradise, but it was rather Muslim exegesis, which, under the influence of Persian ideas about the mythological virgins of paradise, misinterpreted Qur'anic transcripts of Christian-Syriac hymns that contained descriptions of paradise analogous to these hymns.”<sup>24</sup>

Luxenberg deals with the three instances in which the Qur'an mentions the *ḥūr 'īn*, namely Q 44:54, 52:20, and 56:22–23.<sup>25</sup> In Q 56:22–23, the houris are compared to “hidden pearls” (*wa-ḥūrun 'īn ka-amthāli l-lu'lu'i l-maknūn*). Q 44:54 and 52:20 state: “We [i.e., God] gave them wide-eyed houris in marriage” (*wa-zawwajnāhum bi-ḥūrin 'īnin*). In all three cases, Luxenberg explains the Arabic *ḥūr* as an adjective derived from the Syro-Aramaic verb *ḥwar*, “to be white,” while *'īn* is explained as an Arabic pausal form of the Aramaic plural *'aynē*, which is rendered as “jewels,” the whole expression meaning “crystal-clear (grapes).” The Arabic context does not fit this emendation, so the preceding word *wa-zawwajnāhum* has to be replaced by a different one. Luxenberg opts for *wa-rawwaḥnāhum*, and the whole sentence of Q 44:54 and 55:20 is then rendered “we

<sup>24</sup> Luxenberg, *Lesart*, 224.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 226–240.



will make it comfortable for them under white, crystal-clear (grapes).”

If we unlock the door of imaginable Arabic readings for the Qur’anic letters, traditionally read as *bi-ḥūrin* ‘in, we find that the first graphic cluster *bi-ḥūr* alone allows for numerous homographs: *bi-ḥawar* (“in a white poplar”), *bi-jawr* (“with injustice”), *bi-juwar* (“in pits”), *bi-jiwarr* (“in a rainshower”), *bi-jawz* (“with walnuts”), *bi-ḥawz* (“by acquisition”), *bi-khawar* (“in weakness”), etc. These different readings demand different contexts. For the preceding word *wa-zawwajnāhum* (Q 44:54 and 52:20) as an isolated word in its ‘Uthmānic *rasm*, the following possibilities exist: *wa-rawwajnāhum* (“and we made them saleable”), and *wa-rawwahñnāhum* (“and we perfumed them”). Luxenberg prefers the reading *wa-rawwahñnāhum*, but translates “we made it comfortable for them,” although this meaning is not attested in Classical Arabic. Moreover, the defective writing of *zwnjnhm* (first person plural) can be interpreted as a first person singular, a second person masculine singular, a second person female singular, and a third person female plural verb in the perfect. If the whole context is in doubt, it becomes very difficult to decide. All this presupposes that the initial *b-* in fact corresponds to the Arabic preposition *bi-*, and not to the first consonant of an Arabic or Aramaic root. This, of course, is also open to doubt.

Since Luxenberg views the whole context to be open to radical questioning of this kind, there is practically no context left to be trusted. Moreover, according to Luxenberg, the mixed Arabo-Aramaic language of the pre-Qur’an postulated by him adheres neither to the rules of Arabic nor to those of Aramaic morphology and syntax. The multitude of possible “interpretations” therefore increases, whereas the criteria to decide between them become fewer and fewer. Even further variants are generated when we permit ourselves, as Luxenberg does, to transpose the Arabic *rasm* into Syriac and to allow for almost limitless misunderstandings, misreadings and mistakes on the way and back. Unhampered by any context, we are drowned in a sea of possibilities.

Once Luxenberg is satisfied that the hitherto accepted meaning of the expression *ḥūr* ‘in has to be abandoned, other female inhabitants of paradise rapidly disappear. In Q 37:40–49, Q 38:52, and Q 55:56, we find heavenly maidens described as *qāṣirāt at-ṭarf*, “restraining their glances,” i.e., behaving as maidens ought to behave. Luxenberg explains:

As there can be no question of houris anymore, it would be paradoxical to talk of their (restrained) “glances”—as this word has been understood in Arabic so far. We thus have to look for a meaning compatible with “grape” or “vine.”<sup>26</sup>

The *qāṣirāt at-ṭarf* are then deciphered as “low-hanging fruits.” Luxenberg refers to Q 38:53 (“This is what you are promised for the Day of Reckoning”), which closes the surah’s description of paradise (Q 38:49ff.), and adds with a triumphant touch: “This Qur’anic statement is essentially clear and excludes all imaginary ideas. There is no more than eating and drinking in paradise.”<sup>27</sup>

The “purified spouses” (*azwāj muṭahhara*), who in Q 2:25, 3:15, and 4:57 are promised to the believers, turn out to be “all kinds of clean fruit”—relying on the principle that “all other Qur’anic passages that until now have been taken to refer to the maidens of paradise have to be seen as descriptions of these paradisiacal grapes.”<sup>28</sup> Luxenberg then turns to the *kawā’ib* mentioned in Q 78:31–34 (quoted above), an interpretation he regards “not worthy of the Qur’an,”<sup>29</sup> and transforms them into “lush, juicy (fruit).” The “pure virgins, tender and unaging” traditionally understood to be referred to in Q 56:34–37 (see above), are dismissed as “aberrant ideas”<sup>30</sup> and replaced by the following reconstruction: “(They will have) vine-bowers, drawn up, which we have caused to grow high, and made them ice-cooled, juicy first-fruits.”

The “beautiful, virtuous maidens” who in Q 55:72–75 (and similarly in Q 55:56) are said not to have been touched “by any man or jinn” seem to be especially repellent to Luxenberg. He comments:

Of all expressions connected with the imagined houris, the interpretation “to deflower” [Paret renders *ṭamatha* as “entjungfern”] is the height of insolence. Anyone who reads the Qur’an with a modicum of empathy will at this point lose his patience. This cannot be blamed merely on ignorance: it takes a fair amount of impudence to even think of something like this in connection with a holy scripture, which the Qur’an is, and to impute it to the Qur’an. We will thus strive to re-establish the dignity of the Qur’an.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Luxenberg, *Lesart*, 243.

<sup>27</sup> Luxenberg, *Lesart*, 247.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

This sentence, I think, reveals one of Luxenberg's unformulated pre-conceived ideas as far as the maidens of paradise are concerned. There is little philological obscurity in these texts. Yet, for Luxenberg, it is unthinkable that a divine voice, a holy scripture could admit undisguised sexuality to paradise. So Luxenberg's claim to restore "the dignity of the Qur'anic text" seems to be less the outcome of philology than a reflection of somewhat Victorian prejudices. His translation of Q 55:56—"Therein are low-hanging grapes [ready to be plucked] that have not been defiled by man or jinn"—bears further witness to this tendency. It would be equally possible to scrutinize the Song of Songs, form the impression that such a text with all its sexual and erotic allusions and innuendoes cannot possibly be God's word, and then look for philological methods to re-read the text by changing certain words into more acceptable "innocent" ones.

Of all maidens and female consorts, Luxenberg admits only the believers' earthly wives (*azwāj*) into the Qur'anic paradise. Luxenberg does not emendate verses Q 43:70 ("Enter paradise, you and your wives joyfully!") and Q 36:56 ("Together with their spouses they are reclining on couches in the shade"), or a verse like Q 40:8, where God is asked to accept into paradise along with the believers "those who have been righteous of their fathers, their spouses [*azwāj*], and their progeny" (also at Q 13:23). Yet, in the statement "they will also have their pure spouses there" [*wa-lahum fihā azwājun muṭahharatun* (Q 2:25; 3:15; 4:57)], the word *azwāj* is treated as "obscure" and thus as standing in need of re-interpretation. Based on the fact that *zawj* in the Qur'an and elsewhere does not always mean "spouse," but can also mean "pair" and "species," Luxenberg translates these three verses by "Therein they will have all kinds of pure fruit."<sup>32</sup>

After the heavenly maidens have been removed from paradise, the immortal youths (*wildānun mukhalladūn*) of paradise cannot be tolerated any longer either. These eternally young men functioning as cupbearers in the banquets of paradise are mentioned in Q 56:17–19, and are called "youths" (*ghilmānun*) in Q 52:24. Q 56:17–19 is traditionally translated in the following way:

While immortal youths go round them,

With goblets, pitchers and a cup of limpid drink,

Their heads do not ache from it and they do not become intoxicated.

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<sup>32</sup> Luxenberg, *Lesart*, 242.

Luxenberg notes that these youths—like the houris—are not mentioned in Christian descriptions of paradise and wonders briefly how to turn these “youths” into “grapes.”<sup>33</sup> Then he offers the following solution: Arabic *wildān* corresponds etymologically to Syro-Aramaic *yaldē* (“children”). The Syriac expression *yaldā da-gpettā* (“child/fruit of the vine”) is mentioned in the Syriac translation of the New Testament in the account of the Last Supper (Mt 26,29, Mk 14,25, and Lk 22,18). This allows Luxenberg to render *wildān* by “fruit of the vine,” while *mukhalladūn* is changed into *mujalladūn* (within the possibilities of the ‘Uthmānic *rasm*) and is translated as “ice-cooled”—a meaning that is, as far as I can see, not attested to in classical Arabic. Since Arabic morphology does not apply and can therefore be disregarded, Luxenberg proposes the following translation: “Ice-cooled (grape-)juices circulate among them in a cup from a spring, which causes neither headache nor exhaustion.”<sup>34</sup>

Q 52:24 *wa-yaṭūfu ‘alayhim ghilmānun lahum ka-annahum lu’lu’un mahnūn* is usually translated: “And boys of their own will go round them, as if they were hidden pearls.” Luxenberg states that *ghilmān* must be a synonym of *wildān*, without bothering to explain which Aramaic word could be at the root of the “misunderstood” Arabic form *ghilmān*. He maintains that the comparison with pearls “rules out the meaning ‘youths,’” and that *la-* is to be taken “simply as the intensifying Arabic particle *la-*.” After morphology, syntax is on its way out. Luxenberg then proposes the translation “Among them fruits go round that are as if they were pearls [still enclosed in the shell].” He comments: “The philologically caused misinterpretation of the maidens of paradise as well as that of the youths of paradise clarifies the measure of alienation of Qur’anic exegesis compared with the originally Christian symbolism of the wine of paradise.”<sup>35</sup> Some readers may have wondered why the girls with swelling breasts, the houris, the youths, and even some of the wives of the believers all have to be reduced to grapes. But if there is a Christian agenda behind it that somehow associates the grapes of the Muslim paradise with the wine of the Eucharist, then it all makes sense.

All this should not be taken to mean that the quoted passages from the Qur’an are completely clear. They are not. There are numerous

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 268–269.

problems in the eschatological Qur'anic passages dealing with the heavenly maidens. The relation between wives and houris in paradise is not clear—but this is not a philological problem, but an inherent ambiguity in the message. The attribute *'urub*, which is applied to the houris Q 56:34 (in addition to “of equal age” and “virgins”), is explained by Muslim exegesis in many different ways, ranging from “chastely amorous” to “sexually aroused.” Here, there seems to be a lexicographical *crux*. Syntactically, even the eschatological perfect in verbs like *wa-zawwajnāhum* is in need of explanation.

Moreover, we can admittedly not be sure as to what the origin of the imagery of the houris and the perpetual youths is. There have been earlier attempts to solve the problem of why the Qur'anic paradise contains houris, whereas the Christian paradise does not. According to E. Berthels, the houris were of Zoroastrian origin.<sup>36</sup> Carra de Vaux in 1938 proposed the idea that the Prophet had seen in Syria, or possibly on the Arabian Peninsula, Christian paintings of paradise and had misinterpreted the angels on these paintings, mosaics or miniatures as young men and women. Hence, the houris: “All these descriptions [i.e., of the Qur'anic maidens of paradise] are quite clearly drawn pictures; they are probably inspired by the art of painting. Muhammad or his unknown teachers must have seen Christian miniatures or mosaics representing the garden of paradise and have interpreted the figures of angels as being young men or young women.”<sup>37</sup>

Tor Andrae put forward a third hypothesis claiming that the Church-father Ephrem Syrus (d. 373) had in one of his *Hymns on Paradise* alluded to something like the houris. The relevant passage says: “To him, who has with prudence abstained from wine [in this world], the vines of paradise come more joyfully, and each of them extends their grapes so that they [the vines] give them [the grapes] to him. And if in addition he has lived in chastity, they [the vines] lead him into their pure bosoms, because as a monk he did not fall into the bosom and bed of marriage.” Edmund Beck was the last one to deal with this Syriac passage. He saw in it an exceptionally vivid description of the charms of the grapes of paradise, but rightly denied that this could be an allusion to heavenly maidens in paradise.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Berthels, “Jungfrauen.”

<sup>37</sup> Carra de Vaux, “*Djanna*,” 1014–1015. This approach has been discussed and put into a wider perspective by Radscheit, “Iconography.”

<sup>38</sup> Beck, “Parallele”; idem, “Houris.”

Nobody knows the immediate cause that first brought the idea of the houris into the Prophet's mind. What is clear, however, is that the concept of the houris is extensively contextualized in the numerous passages of the Qur'an that mention these virgins, be it under the name of houris or not. The pre-Qur'anic first *movers* that introduced this idea into what Muhammad claimed to be his revelation may be forever indiscernible. We should not overlook, however, that here is a clear contextuality with pagan Arabic literature, which Josef Horowitz was the first to refer to. The Arabic words *al-ḥūr* or *al-ḥūr al-ʿīn* as synonyms of beautiful women occur frequently in the pre-Islamic poetical tradition. In describing a luxurious banquet, the poet al-Aʿshā Maymūn (d. after 625) enumerates the following essentials:

*Wa-miskun wa-rayḥānun wa-rāḥun tuṣaffaqu*

*Wa-ḥūrun ka-amthāli l-dumā wa-manāṣifu*

*Wa-qidrun wa-ṭabbākhun wa-ka'sun wa-daysaqu*

And musk and basil and wine, mixed with water,

And big-eyed beauties (*ḥūr*) like statues, and servants,

And a cooking pot, a cook, a goblet and a plate.<sup>39</sup>

This somewhat Bacchanalian description of a drinking party comes fairly close to some Qur'anic descriptions of paradise. The assumption that the notion of the houris, as developed in the Qur'an, goes back to a textual "misunderstanding" of Aramaic words seems superfluous. On the contrary, the assumption of such a "misunderstanding" that leads to cascades of further misunderstandings entails a phalanx of additional hypotheses. No amount of good or bad philology can obliterate the fact that the imagery of Qur'anic eschatology is deeply sensual and in a way materialistic. This may baffle or even scandalize the observer. The pleasures of paradise find their counterpart in the horrible tortures of the Qur'anic hell—depicted in even more graphic detail, and are no less scandalous ones. Both are part of the Qur'anic message. They are, as parts of an eschatological imagery, completely and abundantly contextualized. If there is obscurity in the eschatological passages, it is an obscurity of detail. As far as the wide-eyed houris and the immortal youths are concerned, it is possible that a

<sup>39</sup> Horowitz, "Jungfrauen," 67.

broader knowledge of Late Antiquity will help us explore other avenues where precedents for these ideas might be found.

Luxenberg's main argument against the houris, however, was not the obscurity of the passages in which they occur. Rather, his argument was that the textual existence of the houris was morally incompatible with the status of a holy book. The scandal, if scandal there is, seems, therefore, to be mainly in the eye of the beholder. The reality of Aramaic loanwords and of Aramaic influence in and on Arabic, including the language of the Qur'an, is generally accepted. But at least as far as the passages involving the houris are concerned, Luxenberg's hypothesis of a mixed Arabo-Aramaic language as having constituted the original language of the Qur'an is demonstrably highly improbable.

But we should also reverse the question. If the utopian paradise of the hereafter that fulfills all human dreams is a paradise of the senses, why on earth should sexuality be suppressed in this imagery? To phrase it differently: the question may be much less why the Qur'anic paradise knows a blissful state of sexual satisfaction symbolized by the houris. The question should rather be: how can we explain the total absence of sexual imagery in the Christian heaven? Sexual images do exist in Christianity, but in a completely different context. The relation between Christ and his Church is described in the New Testament as the relation of a bridegroom to his bride. But in the Christian paradise, the god-fearing only eat and drink.

There is another aspect of the Qur'anic descriptions of paradise that I can only mention in passing. The Qur'an developed as a text in constant and intensive competition with Christian and Jewish scripture. This was, among other things, a competition for the hearts and minds of the listeners who first heard the Qur'anic recitation. The extremely vivid description of heavenly bliss in the Qur'an was a bid for the hearts of these listeners, who may have known something of Jewish and Christian scripture. There was probably an element of outbidding, of the Qur'an trying to outstrip its predecessors. This is equally true for the description of hellfire. In the Qur'an, the punishments and tortures of hell are described with a wealth of ghastly detail unparalleled in Christian or post-canonical Jewish scripture. As Islamic art only rarely and marginally permitted pictorial or plastic representations, language was the only medium to make revelation sensual. There could be no *biblia pauperum* in Islamic culture, no huge gilded frescoes or mosaics showing the uneducated illiterate



believer the truths of eschatology. In the case of the Qur'an, only the holy text, as recited in Arabic language, held the magic that could convince the illiterate mind.

*Does It Matter?*

In the framework of attempting to study the pre-canonical text of the Qur'an, the Luxenberg hypothesis is important. I have tried to show that it does not work for the passages that mention the maidens of paradise, and I doubt whether it works elsewhere. For the study of the Muslim reception of the Qur'an, the question whether the houris were "originally" white grapes or not, does not matter. Once a sacred text is canonical, the text stands as it is. This text in the form in which we have it has shaped the Muslim community for more than 1300 years as its foundational text. And this text speaks of the maidens of paradise and of the houris as important parts of its heavenly imagery. From canonicity onward, exegesis is the only tool for the believer to explain and interpret the text. The text before canonization cannot be an object of exegesis for the believer.

But how about the pre-canonical stages, in other words: how about the Qur'an before it became the Qur'an? Canonization is a historical process. We know far less about this process than we would like to know; there is not even agreement on the exact date when the canonization of the Qur'an was finished. There is, however, a growing awareness among scholars that more knowledge about the canonization of the Qur'an, and therefore about pre-canonical versions of it, could bring us closer to a re-contextualization of Qur'anic texts. This enterprise is, however, fraught with danger. While it is certain that during the process of canonization some later verses were introduced in earlier surahs and vice versa, it is difficult to see how a general re-shuffling of verses according to necessarily subjective criteria could lead us to more solid ground. Richard Bell tried it—under different premises—without notable success. A more fruitful approach has been advocated by Angelika Neuwirth. She proposes to compare with each other Qur'anic verses that deal with one topic but show a marked difference in perspective, and to embed these verses into their proper historical contexts.

Theses like those of Bell, Lüling, and Luxenberg display an evident charm. Their common feature is that they seem to give a new shape



and a new sense to an old text, which emerges as having never been really understood. This is, of course, a bold and noble undertaking. It also puts the philologist into a very enviable position, one which most philologists dream of. He has a magic wand. Some dots are changed here and there—and a whole mythology, and with it a holy book, collapses. This gives a cabbalistic twist to their efforts. The intended effect resembles Rashad Khalifa's (d. 1990) esoteric attempt to read the number 19 into the letters of the Qur'an, and his claim that only by accepting this "mathematical miracle" can a full understanding of the Qur'anic message be achieved. For Lüling and Luxenberg there is an added element. Implicitly, these authors seem to say: "The Muslims do not even understand their own revelation. An outsider has to come to tell them what their holy text really means." Both Lüling and Luxenberg insist on their intention to help Muslims improve their understanding of the Qur'an, and that the adoption of their theories is the key for a bright Muslim future. I have no doubt about their sincerity. But that does not alter the situation.

Muslims often see the works of non-Muslim scholars on Islam, and especially on the Qur'an, as attempts to undermine central tenets of Muslim belief. There is a whole modern Muslim apologetic literature trying to refute these writings, which were and often still are seen as politically motivated attacks on Muslim identity. Often the whole corpus of non-Muslim writing on Islamic subjects is rejected. While the dividing line concerning the Qur'an is steadily moving from a mainly non-Muslim/Muslim antagonism to a debate conducted largely within Islam, three issues should not be confounded. The first issue is that scholarship has the right to ask all questions. There can be no academic censorship that precludes expressing and discussing certain ideas. Historical criticism, text-linguistic, and literary approaches to the text and other methods of modern scholarship cannot be banned from research on the Qur'an. A second issue is that the religious or cultural background of a scholar must not be used to discredit his or her ideas. The third issue is that a contribution to a Qur'anic topic authored by a non-Muslim cannot be considered true just because it causes a scandal and is opposed by Muslim scholarship.

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# THE ETYMOLOGICAL FALLACY AND QUR'ANIC STUDIES: MUHAMMAD, PARADISE, AND LATE ANTIQUITY\*

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## *Introduction*

The voluminous secondary literature on the Qur'an that discusses its supposedly foreign vocabulary is so unruly that it is impossible to characterize. Yet one can safely assert that there is one rule that has been used as a foundational premise in the works of scholars engaged in establishing the lineage of Qur'anic vocabulary. The rule is presented differently by different scholars, but in a nutshell it states that for every word in the Qur'an for which the native philological tradition fails to give a solitary explanation and instead offers multiple meanings, modern scholars have to presume that they are dealing with a foreign word. This is a benign enough view. It is, however, the next step in this exercise that is of interest here. Having determined that a word in the Qur'an is foreign, scholars have gone ahead and presumed that its meaning in a cognate language or in its purported language of origin was the determining factor, and not its usage in its Qur'anic context. I will show in this article that such a method is neither defensible on linguistic or philological grounds, nor does it deliver us the insight that it promises into the Qur'an.

It is not clear how this rule was first formulated, yet one can find examples of it dating back to the beginning of the last century. Let me give examples culled from different historical periods. The first comes from *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* by Arthur Jeffery, arguably the most important summation of scholarly work done on

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the origins of Qur'anic vocabulary during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In discussing the word *furqān*, Jeffery states that:

The philologers [Arab philologers], however, are not unanimous as to its meaning. [...] This uncertainty and confusion is difficult to explain if we are dealing with a genuine Arabic word, and is sufficient of itself to suggest that it is a borrowed term.<sup>1</sup>

Jeffery seems to imply that native philologists were competent enough to offer us the meaning of any native Arabic word that they may have encountered in the Qur'an. Therefore, the implication is that discord among the philologists—and here he really means Qur'an commentators—as to the meaning of a certain Qur'anic term is itself reason for calling into doubt its Arabic origins.

Both claims are problematic, to say the least. It is not clear why native scholars from a later historical period in any tradition, who are at a linguistic remove from the documents they are examining, should be equipped to solve all the riddles of their inherited language. Far more unfounded is the supposition that the failure on the part of medieval scholars to come up with a unanimous explanation of a word means that we should conclude that we ourselves are unable to solve the problem using the customary philological methods, on the premise that the native philologists were disinterested parties who did all that they could to solve the problem at hand. Moreover, our unwillingness to reinvestigate a given term in its linguistic tradition first before reaching a conclusion about it carries the implicit conviction that knowledge of that linguistic tradition, Arabic in this case, has remained static since medieval times. The rule articulated by Jeffery is thus categorical in its implication: if the native philologists have failed to come up with one meaning, modern scholars have to look into other languages to explain these words.

If we are to take seriously the rule that the absence of a native unanimity on a term disqualifies it, then we have to call into doubt a large portion of undisputedly Arabic vocabulary of the Qur'an as being non-Arabic. The simple fact is that Qur'an commentators were rarely in accord on the meaning of most of the Qur'anic terminology. One only need peruse any medieval commentary to observe this fact. Take verse Q 93:7: "Did he not find you [Muhammad] erring (*dāllan*),

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 226.

and guide you?" It should come as no surprise that Muslim commentators offer various interpretations in order not to give us the lexical meaning of the word *ḍ-l-l*. Indeed, by az-Zamakhshari's time, a clearly articulated statement against a literal understanding of the verse had become central to how this word was interpreted. One cannot understand the word here, az-Zamakhshari indignantly states, to mean Muhammad was a heathen.<sup>2</sup> No modern scholar would consider it worth his time even to entertain the idea that *ḍ-l-l* is a foreign word.<sup>3</sup> In this instance medieval commentators were not so much elucidating as obfuscating. The lexical meaning was precisely the meaning they did not want to be operative. Muslim commentators' disagreement over the meaning of a certain word, in and of itself, can hardly be used as a criterion to decide what words to count as foreign.

Yet even a scholar of the caliber of Franz Rosenthal, though uncomfortable with this rule, is unwilling to discard it. Here is his torturous reasoning as to why, although this rule is unconvincing, we are all the same obliged to use it in order to elucidate the word *aṣ-ṣamad*:

It might seem an all too obvious and unconvincing argument to point to the constant differences of the interpreters and conclude from their disagreement that none of them is right. However, there is something to such an argument. Although most of the commentators have their special axe to grind, one should think, at least in a number of instances, that if an evident and simple explanation existed, there would have been much less obstinate disagreement.<sup>4</sup>

But what is Qur'anic commentary literature, if not the most theological of Islamic literatures and, as such, a field that does not offer us simple straightforward explanations for words that can become a source of doctrinal dispute? Every rising theological camp sought to find support for its positions in the Qur'an and soon after its codification, words and sentences were taken out of context to support such positions.<sup>5</sup> Why should an obvious meaning of the word *ḍāllan* in

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<sup>2</sup> For az-Zamakhshari's treatment see my *Formation*, 146–149. See also Rubin, *Eye*, 90–96.

<sup>3</sup> The root *ḍ-l-l* is not a common Semitic word, for only South Arabic and Arabic have this root; see Zammit, *Lexical Study*, 265.

<sup>4</sup> Rosenthal, "Some Minor Problems," 68.

<sup>5</sup> In the case of *aṣ-ṣamad* the theological use of this term is too apparent for it to escape the probing of a careful eye. The word was used to justify an understanding of the nature of God. See below the article by van Ess for more on this word.

Q 93:7, which might destroy, for example, the prophetic infallibility doctrine, be allowed by Muslims commentators to exist?<sup>6</sup>

Modern scholars have long misunderstood the function and aims of medieval Qur'anic exegesis. Though medieval Qur'anic exegetes always claimed that they were engaged in a disciplined philological approach to the Qur'an, one can demonstrate that that was not always the case. Taking medieval Qur'an commentators at their own word, modern scholars have been quick to think that what we read in any given Qur'an commentary reflects the state of philological knowledge at the time it was written. This could hardly be the case, however, given the myriad concerns that were motivating the exegetes. Much of their work was actually a keenly crafted attempt to circumvent philology, while playing by its rules. Add to that the anthological nature of the exegetical tradition, whereby various conflicting interpretations for a certain word were accumulated instead of being discarded, and we have a situation that is ripe for misunderstanding. On the one hand scholars have assumed that they were doing philology, on the other we mistrusted their conclusions. Yet, instead of recognizing the complicated character of the tradition of *tafsir* for what it is, we have viewed it only as a sign of the ignorance of the medieval scholars and as a sign of the failure of their philological tools. Because the anthological feature of medieval Qur'anic exegesis was seen as a major indication that the philological solutions from Arabic were exhausted, a new way was sought to solve the problems encountered in the text.

Far more misleading than even the misunderstanding of the anthological nature of *tafsir* has been the recourse of scholars to classical dictionaries with the assumption that philological discussions of Qur'anic roots found there would be more likely than commentaries to tell us the meaning of a term without any theological biases. This is of course not the case, as Lothar Kopf long ago showed us.<sup>7</sup> Lexicography and the study of the Qur'an went hand in hand in many instances, and rarely do lexicons dare to undermine the maneuvers of the commentators. Rather, they reinforce each other's findings.

Modern scholars have felt that a comparative Semitic philological exercise would solve the problem of difficult terms. In a few instances this supposition worked well in advancing our knowledge of Qur'anic

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<sup>6</sup> On the doctrine of the infallibility of prophets see Bravmann, "Origin."

<sup>7</sup> See Kopf, "Religious Influences."



terms. Yet, the enterprise of finding origins of the foreign vocabulary was from the beginning highly speculative and undisciplined, and many modern scholars came to it with their own prejudices and preferences. As a matter of fact, most of the scholars working on Qur'anic terms were far more interested in finding cognates than in studying the Qur'anic terms in their context. In this sense they fit James Barr's depiction of the philologist who, when asked about the meaning of a word, gives all the meanings of the cognates of the word but not of the word he was asked about. His analysis of this approach is worth quoting in full here:

The comparative emphasis, like the historical, tended to make an appreciation of semantic realities rather more difficult. We all know the type of philologist who, when asked the meaning of a word, answers by telling us the meaning of its cognates in other languages. This over-etymological approach is the result of excessive reliance on comparative thinking. The meaning of a word is its meaning in its own language, not its meaning in some other. To say this is not to deny that it is of considerable interest to know the meaning of cognate words in cognate languages. But the characteristic procedure of many scholars has been to start with comparative data; and the attempt to state the meaning in the actual language under study (in our case, Hebrew) has often been biased by a striving to fit this meaning into a possible derivation process starting from the comparative material. Thus comparative emphasis, which has done so much to clarify fields like phonology and morphology, has often tended to confuse the field of semantics.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, the background and training of the modern scholars engaged in this process is reflected in their findings. Thus those studying Northwestern Semitic languages will see Ugaritic behind obscure Qur'anic words, while those inclined to see Islam coming out of a Christian background would prefer Syriac etymologies; those favoring a Jewish matrix would see Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic as the sources of many Qur'anic terms.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Barr, *Comparative Philology*, 90.

<sup>9</sup> One only needs to read the titles of the works from this vein of scholarship to realize that there was a race as to who could claim Islam as their progeny. The situation was such that J. Fück was forced to write an article with the title "The Originality of the Arabian Prophet."

## Aṣ-ṣamad

A good example that illustrates the degree of confusion that comes from following the rule of absence-of-native-unanimity is how modern scholars dealt with the word *aṣ-ṣamad* of Q 112:2, a *hapax legomenon* in the Qur'an. The first modern scholar to study the term, Rosenthal, having realized that medieval philologists failed to offer one explanation, takes that as a reason to search in other Semitic languages for cognates.<sup>10</sup> Rosenthal claims that *aṣ-ṣamad* was "a survival of an ancient Northwestern Semitic religious term."<sup>11</sup> But since the Qur'anic usage does not accord with the new-found meaning Rosenthal discovered—which he now takes to be the "genuine" meaning of *aṣ-ṣamad*—he has to conclude that the term "may no longer have been properly understood by Muhammad himself." This statement—fascinating as it is to our ears now—is an unavoidable conclusion if one is to accept the premise of his exercise and follow it to its logical conclusion. The medieval philologists were unable to give a unanimous meaning to a term and hence one has to conclude that it is foreign. Having found the putative foreign origin of the Qur'anic term, the modern scholar looks back on the Qur'an to discover that the new meaning given to the word does not make sense there, hence Muhammad must have misunderstood the word and misused it. That Muhammad misunderstood words he used would become the refrain of a whole scholarly literature.<sup>12</sup> As to the question what Muhammad or the Qur'an understood the word to mean and how it was used, no one seems in a hurry to answer. In our quest for a meaning of a term in its context, the Qur'an, we forget about the context, declare the

<sup>10</sup> See note 4 above where I quoted his reasoning.

<sup>11</sup> Rosenthal, "Some Minor Problems," 83.

<sup>12</sup> Theodor Nöldeke entitled the third section of his study of the language of the Qur'an as "Willkürlich und missverständlich gebrauchte Fremdwörter im Korān." He went on to state that Muhammad has changed the meanings of the supposed loan-words either as a rule or out of sheer arbitrariness; see his *Neue Beiträge*, 23. Arthur Jeffery had a special category of words that Muhammad invented or misunderstood: "It has been remarked that not infrequently that the Prophet had a penchant for strange and mysterious sounding words, though frequently he himself had not grasped correctly their meaning, as one sees in such cases as *furqān*, and *sakīna*. Sometimes he seems even to have invented words, such as *ghassāq*, *tasnīm*, and *salsabil*." See his *Foreign Vocabulary*, 39. Muhammad was being turned into a badly trained philologist by nineteenth-century scholars, as such he was conceived in their own image. The amount of languages that Muhammad had to have dabbled in is staggering according to this explanation of the genesis of his prophetic career.

word misused and turn the text into a high school paper by a student writing in a foreign language he has barely mastered. Meanwhile, the fundamental bedrock of philology that a term, any term, must have an intelligible meaning in its linguistic context is all but forgotten.

Köbert, writing in 1961, sees the meaning of *aṣ-ṣamad* as originating from a Jewish context.<sup>13</sup> By 1981, the term has become a “problem” that Schedl is determined to solve.<sup>14</sup> Schedl is in agreement with Köbert’s understanding of *aṣ-ṣamad* as a translation of the Hebrew *šūr* (“rock”). Interestingly, Schedl regrets the absence of an Arabic early Targum for the Hebrew Bible. The implication is that such a Targum would have solved the problem at hand and showed, apparently inconclusively, that *aṣ-ṣamad* would have been used by Muhammad to translate the Hebrew *šūr*.

It would take an article by Uri Rubin in 1984 to recover the heart of the matter. In order to offer a solution to the meaning of *aṣ-ṣamad*, Rubin has to formulate a new and different methodology than the one that has been so far assumed vis-à-vis the proper way to study difficult Qur’anic terms.<sup>15</sup> Rubin sees the problem arising from the refusal on the part of modern scholars to assess what the medieval Muslim exegetes have to offer. The different meanings offered by the tradition were not sheer inventions but arose out of theological considerations as well as philological investigations, and thus one must not dispense with the whole material, but rather reevaluate it. In order to understand any term, a general assessment of all the available Arabic sources has to be undertaken. Rubin seems to mean that it matters little that medieval Muslim scholars differed about the meaning of a term; the difference should not be taken to mean that these scholars have done an exhaustive analysis within the Arabic language, or for that matter that the term cannot be explained by reference to the usage of the term inside its linguistic context. Thus only after such an investigation, and in the case that we fail to find a sound philological reading depending on Arabic sources, could we move on to study the cognates in other languages. Far more importantly, Rubin refuses to offer a reading of *aṣ-ṣamad* that is independent of the whole of surah 112. In many ways Rubin is restating the obvious: a sound philological investigation has to study all the available evidence on a

<sup>13</sup> Köbert, “Gottesepitheton.”

<sup>14</sup> Schedl, “Probleme,” 14.

<sup>15</sup> Rubin, “Al-Ṣamad,” 197–217.

given term and its context. That these two basic exercises have been missing, however, in many of the discussions on the term is characteristic of the field of Qur'anic etymological studies.

By the time a post-mortem analysis of the literature on *aş-şamad* appeared in 1986, it had to deal with eight articles, almost seventy pages in total.<sup>16</sup> By then it had become clear, however, that the claim for a foreign origin of the term had to be fully discounted. The author, Arne Ambros, states that no shred of evidence exists to support a foreign borrowing or even foreign influence.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, Ambros failed to realize the significance of Rubin's work and that his article marked a departure from the usual method of studying Qur'anic terms.

In looking at the learned articles written on *aş-şamad* before Rubin's, one is struck by both their erudition and their flimsiness. At the heart of the exercise is the supposition that finding the suitable cognate would solve the problem of the inclusion in the Qur'an of a word that is supposedly not understood either by Muhammad or the Qur'an. At no point was the historical question raised whether the proposed cultural or religious interaction between Arabic and the putative origin of a given term is even feasible: for example, how did a Northwest Semitic root, despite the death of the language it came from, survive underground to surface in Arabia a millennium later? Far more damning to this kind of approach to the Qur'an is the fact that in scholarly circles no interest was expressed in *aş-şamad* before it was pronounced foreign. The moment it was, however, a slew of articles was produced on its foreignness. The Qur'an can only repay our attention when we catch it in an act of borrowing, which invariably entails the judgment that it itself does not understand what it is pronouncing. As such, we philologists are not only deciphering the Qur'an, a right we are entitled to, but we are discovering that the Qur'an was not using words properly. As such we understand the Qur'an better than it understood itself, and we are thus able to tell what it means to say without even accounting for what the Qur'an thought it was saying.

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<sup>16</sup> Ambrose, "Analyse."

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 221. His analysis is confirmed by the work of Martin Zammit who does not find any cognates for the root *ş-m-d* in any of the eight Semitic languages he investigated. See his *Lexical Study*, 258. Thus a root that is mostly attested in Arabic was deemed un-Arabic because we ourselves failed to recognize the complex history of Qur'anic exegesis.

A remarkable example of the lack of historical perspective in the literature that had analyzed *aş-şamad* is that none of the scholars who had worked on this verse mentions that it is the earliest attested Qur'anic chapter we have. Surah 112, which includes the word *aş-şamad*, was stamped on the first Arabized gold and silver coins of 'Abd al-Malik (minted ca. 696 CE onwards).<sup>18</sup> Thus it would stand to reason that such a prominently figured surah would have been intelligible to the early Arab population who were the targeted audience of the propaganda on imperial coins. But perhaps this search for origins is an unavoidable obsession in our scholarly approach to religious traditions which reduces the essence of a phenomenon to its genesis, since this approach is part of the evolutionary hermeneutical model of the Enlightenment and modernity. To speculate about origins, regardless of whether we have evidence for our musings or not, is considered more "scholarly" than researching a more documented later period. The prestige of the field lies in explicating how the "thing" originated in its infancy, thus any new theories of origins are accorded a level of tolerance and recognition that is denied to any other kind of account.

Finally, the medieval Muslim scholars left us with a huge literature on the interpretation of this surah. Surah 112 was one of the earliest chapters to detach itself from the Qur'an and to start receiving independent analysis, yet one is hard-pressed to find any reference in the secondary literature to this engagement with surah 112 in Islamic religious history, let alone a study or analysis of such an engagement.<sup>19</sup> It is of course not the duty of Qur'an specialists to study the subsequent history of the reception of the Qur'an, this being the job of scholars who study *tafsīr*. In the case of *aş-şamad* it was by a close reading of the literature of *tafsīr* that Rubin was able to solve the riddle—if indeed there was one.<sup>20</sup> Prior to the appearance of Rubin's

<sup>18</sup> Heinz Gaube, "Numismatik," 232. The whole of surah 112 was inscribed by mosaic on the Dome of the Rock, see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 699–700 (for coins of 'Abd al-Malik), 696 (for Dome of the Rock inscriptions).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. with Rosenthal: "It would be tempting to trace the history of the word in Muslim dogmatics, philosophy, and mysticism," in his "Some Minor Problems," 76.

<sup>20</sup> Gordon Newby admits that the exegetical tradition was more or less in unanimity regarding the meaning of *aş-şamad*, the tradition preferred the same meaning that Rubin established. It is interesting that Newby claims that we have to know the meaning of the word in isolation before we can solve the riddle of the surah 112, thus turning the philological exercise on its head: "the consensus, *ijmā'*, that the word means the relied-upon sayyid, obviously presents a barrier to our understanding, and the

article, the muddled methods of those studying the word forced Josef Van Ess to despair of their ways and decide instead to take the reader into a history of the interpretation of this term in Islamic religious history as a far more defensible scholarly endeavor.<sup>21</sup>

### *The Etymological Fallacy and Qur'anic Studies*

It is perhaps appropriate to pause here and ponder the foundations and assumptions of the exercise that we have seen characterizes so many of the etymological approaches to the Qur'an. One is reminded of the criticisms of James Barr, who dealt with the same approach to the Hebrew Bible and who pointed out the fallacies that lie at the heart of such an approach. Barr reminds us that an etymological investigation studies "the past of a word, but understands that the past is no infallible guide to its present meaning."<sup>22</sup> He adds that etymology "is not, and does not profess to be, a guide to the semantic value of words in their current usage, and such value has to be determined from the current usage and not from derivation."<sup>23</sup>

Despite these modest declared claims of etymology, Barr goes on to document and describe what might be called the "etymological fallacy" that underpins many of the scholarly approaches to biblical words. Barr's account of the false application of etymology in the field of biblical scholarship describes the problems of much of the scholarship done on the Qur'an:

Nevertheless there is a normative strain in the thought of many people about language, and they feel that in some sense the "original," the "etymological meaning," should be a guide to the usage of words, that the words are used "properly" when they coincide in sense with the sense of the earliest known form which their derivation can be traced; and that when a word becomes in some way difficult or ambiguous an appeal to etymology will lead to a "proper meaning" from which at any rate to begin.<sup>24</sup>

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first task is to seek a definition of *aş-şamadu* before the syntactical problems of verses one and two can be solved." See his "Sūrat al-Ikhlās," 129.

<sup>21</sup> Josef Van Ess is rightly impatient with the literature on *aş-şamad* and he takes Ambrose to task; see his *Youthful God*, 4 and esp. note 27, p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> Barr, *Semantics*, 107.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Barr emphasizes that the "etymology of a word is not a statement about its meaning but about its history." This has to be kept in mind when approaching the Qur'an, for while indeed a few of its key terms are loanwords, their etymological history is at best of secondary significance in our understanding of their usage in the Qur'an. Barr also states that it is quite "wrong to suppose that the etymology of a word is necessarily a guide either to its 'proper' meaning in a later period or to its actual meaning in that period."<sup>25</sup> For while it is true that etymology seeks the "original" meaning, Barr continues, "the (historically) original is necessarily not the 'general' or the 'proper.'"<sup>26</sup>

Let me give an example of another Qur'anic term and the history of the scholarly investigation into its etymological meaning, the word *ḥanīf*.<sup>27</sup> One of the latest to study the word was Andrew Rippin, who points to the fact that no other word has been so extensively studied.<sup>28</sup> Rippin wisely avoids any rehashing of the etymological speculations that have been put forward and instead offers a detailed analysis of its Qur'anic usage and a refutation of any claim to certainty about its etymology, with the exception of a possible Syriac origin. Rippin concludes that the term *ḥanīf* in the Qur'an "reflects a notion of basic religious impulse in humanity towards dedication to the one God. This is part of an overall social and ritual religious context, for sure, but more importantly, it is the basis of the Qur'anic ideology of belief which is embodied in the myth of Abraham and captured in the word *muslim*."<sup>29</sup> This is a remarkable moment in the history of the study of the word *ḥanīf*; for once a scholar has decided that a proper approach to the term *ḥanīf* is first and foremost an analysis of its occurrence in the Qur'an. This analysis is sufficient to give us a clear and definite idea as to how it was used and what it meant there. One has to ask as to what purpose the previous attempts at finding the "original meaning" were carried out: to understand the Qur'anic term

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>27</sup> See now Rubin, "Ḥanīf."

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Rippin, "RḤMN." Since then a new study on *ḥanīf* has been published, see de Blois, "Naṣrānī." De Blois' article has the most extensive bibliography to date on *ḥanīf*. His analysis however, does not change the picture of what I have to say here about earlier studies done on the term.

<sup>29</sup> Rippin, "RḤMN," 161. Cf. with de Blois: "*ḥanīf* can, in all Quranic contexts, plausibly be translated as 'gentile,' or more specifically as a 'person in the state of religious innocence, not bound by Jewish law,' even if this is not the most immediately obvious rendering." De Blois, "Naṣrānī," 23–24.

better or to postulate a source from which it originated? In either case, Rippin shows that the etymological history was not necessary for achieving a proper understanding of the term in the Qur'an.

While Rippin dismisses most of the etymological speculations offered for *ḥanīf* and points to the inherent problems with such speculations, he notes that all scholars are in agreement that the Arabic word comes from the Syriac *ḥanpā*, which means "heathen." Taking a closer look, however, shows that there is no such unanimity. He then asks: "How was the word transformed from a term of rebuke to one of eminent spiritual development?"<sup>30</sup> Once more we see lurking behind this question the etymological fallacy: that knowing the history of a word might help with understanding its current usage. There are endless possibilities as to how such a transformation might have happened; but then of course we are presuming that Arabic did not have such a term, an argument made from silence, and that Arabic had to borrow it in the first place.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, if we were to presume it is a borrowed term, one is bound to ask if we are as absolutely certain that the word was from Syriac as Rippin states. Rippin mentions the already discussed fact that the Nabateans had a cognate of *ḥanīf* and that it was used to designate one of their co-religionists. Nabih Faris, the author of the most extensive study on the etymology of *ḥanīf* before Rippin's, was of the opinion that it came to Arabic from its Nabatean usage.<sup>32</sup> If this is so, then is it really from Christian Aramaic (Syriac)? A similar case could be made that the word comes from Hebrew, where the root is used to denote heretics, something that Uri Rubin points out. The absence of a clear methodology governing these etymological musings makes us very hesitant to take any of the possibilities as certain. Yet, even if we were certain of the origin of the word, its usage in the Qur'an is uniquely after its own fashion.

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<sup>30</sup> Rippin, "RḤMNN," 167.

<sup>31</sup> One of my graduate students, Kevin Casey, put forward the proposition that Muhammad took a term of abuse (*ḥanīf* in Aramaic and Syriac means pagan or ungodly) and gave it a positive connotation. This is a sociological phenomenon we are familiar with, when a minority takes on the most abusive term used against it and turn it into a word of pride to be used by the minority to describe itself, thus robbing the word of its power to dominate. Casey is working on publishing his paper.

<sup>32</sup> "From the evidence which has so far been presented the conclusion seems incapable that Koranic *ḥanīf*, with all that it implies, must have come via pre-Islamic Arabic from the dialect of the Nabataeans, in whose language it meant a follower of some branch of their partially Hellenized Syro-Arabian religion," in Faris, "Development," 267.



Rubin was right to relegate the evidence from non-Qur'anic usage of *ḥanīf* to secondary significance in his article on the term in *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*.

In recent decades scholars working on Semitic languages, and Hebrew in particular, have called into question the whole discipline of Semitic etymological studies when it bears on semantic usage as it has developed during the last two centuries. Since Qur'anic etymological studies were an outgrowth of that discipline, we should bear in mind the caveats raised there when studying the Qur'an. These scholars have not only shown the inconsistency and unscientific approach of the whole etymologizing exercise, but have doubted its very usefulness.<sup>33</sup> Moshe Goshen-Gottstein, in his *Introduction to the Lexicography of Modern Hebrew*, is pointed in his critique of a discipline that was primarily a theologically-driven enterprise.<sup>34</sup> He characterizes this quest for the "etymology" of the Hebrew words as a search "in effect, for the 'true meaning' of a biblical expression according to Arabic, Aramaic, etc.—with an intent of almost a 'true tiding.' This quest came for the most part in order to achieve exegetical understanding of a difficult passage, and this often would have a theological bias. The same linkage of words or roots that could be used to suggest relevancy for solving an exegetical problem was regarded as the 'correct' etymology."<sup>35</sup> Goshen-Gottstein then states the obvious result of such an approach: "The discovery of an etymological-exegetical solution turned into the yardstick according to which the dependency of Hebrew words on words in other languages was a given; and since the text which they were trying to comment upon was a Hebrew text

<sup>33</sup> See the debate in Brekelmans et al. (eds.), *Questions*, esp. the articles by James Barr (pp. 39–61) and J. F. A. Sawyer (pp. 63–70).

<sup>34</sup> Goshen-Gottstein, *Introduction*, 160–162 (in Hebrew). I would like to thank here Dr. Isaac Hollander for translating the relevant parts of this introduction (private communication). Paragraph 244 is worth quoting in full here: "The problematic degree of all etymological work may be sensed if we point out at the outset that in the various fields of linguistics there is no unified approach to the actual purpose or function of the term 'etymology.' There are several traditions as to etymological works, and it is possible that in this particular lexicon—linking a Semitic tradition of study to the lexicographic tradition of the European languages—they may end up contradicting each other. The etymology is indeed the most enticing part of the variant readings ('Apparat'), but from a scientific standpoint it is also the most uncertain, most dangerous and most prone to failure. The simple comfortable and safe solution is that the author of a lexicon completely exempts himself from dealing with etymology. We have not chosen that path."

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

(the Hebrew Bible), it was the Hebrew language in any case that appeared to be the borrowing and depending language.”<sup>36</sup>

The same effect is blatantly clear in the case of the Qur’an, for not only was its vocabulary presumed derivative and mostly misused, but in the end its very theology was seen as confusedly primitive. Thus any discrepancy between the theology of the Qur’an and that of Christianity and Judaism was seen as a mere garbling of what was supposed to be a failed borrowing and not a new take on an old problem. Perhaps the clearest sign of the awareness within the discipline of biblical studies of the problems of the etymological approach is the fact that the editor of *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, David J. A. Clines, refused even to contemplate the citing of cognates in the entries of his dictionary, let alone allowing for etymological discussions. Thus the proud achievement of nineteenth century philology, the cognate lists that are given priority in *Brown-Driver-Briggs’ Hebrew Dictionary*, is now discarded. Clines discounts the citing of cognates as neither justifiable by modern linguistic methods nor by any merit of their own.<sup>37</sup> If there is a rule to keep in mind, then, it is this: *The meaning of a word is derived from its linguistic medium, and that holds true even for “borrowed” words.*

It is also clear that most of the significant scholars working now on the Qur’an have either fully admitted the limitation of etymological work, as Andrew Rippin does, or have totally eschewed the method, as Uri Rubin does. Indeed, in his entry on “Foreign Vocabulary” in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, Rippin highlights the limitations of

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>37</sup> Clines, *Dictionary*, 14–18, esp. 17–18 no. 7: “Cognates in other Semitic languages have not been listed in this dictionary. Such information has become traditional in Hebrew lexicography of the last two centuries, but its presence in a Hebrew dictionary is highly problematic, and it is difficult to see what purpose it serves. Theoretically speaking, that is, data about the meaning of cognate words in Akkadian and Arabic, for example, are strictly speaking irrelevant to the Hebrew language; and, practically speaking, there is evidence that the significance of the cognates has been systematically misunderstood by many users of the traditional dictionaries. It is often said, for example, that the function of noting the cognates is to indicate how it is that we know the meaning of the Hebrew word to be such and such; but this is incorrect, since there is usually quite a complex set of evidences for such matters, ranging from internal consistency within the Hebrew texts to the testimony of ancient versions and to Jewish lexicographical and exegetical tradition; and there is no reason to privilege the particular type of evidence, problematic as it is, that is provided by the cognate languages.” See also the pertinent remarks on pages 25–26; the whole introduction is an antidote to the flawed etymological legacy in biblical studies (and hence Qur’anic studies).

this enterprise, in so far as modern scholars are unable to work out a clear methodology that allows for certainty in their speculations. So why bring the topic up? Are we not beating a dead horse? There are several reasons why I am presenting my own investigation of this method. The first is that no such systematic analysis and probing of the foundations of etymological approach have been undertaken in Qur'anic studies. Thus the field is almost forty years behind when compared to biblical studies. The second is that despite the demonstrated absence of a scientific justification for etymology as a guide to the meanings of Qur'anic usage, the method is still alive and well in Qur'anic studies.

The impetus for the continuous survival of the etymological approach to the Qur'an and for the preponderate significance of etymological studies in the field of Qur'anic studies lies in the dearth of pre-Qur'anic textual or material evidence at hand. We lack any significant paleographic, archeological, epigraphic, and historical evidence from before the rise of Islam from the Ḥijāz area; we are still as surprised as the seventh century inhabitants of the Near East as to why Islam came out of Ḥijāz and why at that particular moment in history. The unfortunate and unjustifiable downgrading of pre-Islamic poetry at the beginning of the twentieth century to the level of an unreliable source left us virtually nothing with which to compare the Qur'an. As such, an etymological study becomes a substitute for all that is missing. In the absence of such a pre-Islamic corpus we are unwilling to admit the severe limitations that face anyone trying to study the *Sitz im Leben* of the Qur'an. The proper response to this predicament would have been for us scholars to concentrate on the Qur'an itself, and to refine our methods of reading that text. Instead, we have opted to declare the text unreadable, or if readable, unwieldy, and to proceed to etymological reflections. The fruitful studies of Hartwig Hirschfeld, Edmund Beck, M. M. Bravemann, Harris Birkeland, Toshihiko Izutsu, Angelika Neuwirth, Uri Rubin, John Wansbrough, and even Arthur Jefferey (I have in mind his short monograph, *The Qur'ān as Scripture*), have unfortunately not changed the nature and method of approaching the Qur'an. A classic such as *Mohammed und der Koran* by Rudi Paret is hardly ever mentioned now by scholars. As a consequence there is an absence of methodological refinement in the field due to a lack of cumulative scholarly engagement with the work of these scholars. To give one example, despite the work of Angelika Neuwirth's *Studien zur Komposition der*

*mekkanischen Suren* on the coherent unity of Mekkan surahs, we still hear about the “apparently arbitrary structure and organization” of the Qur’an.<sup>38</sup>

There are thus several reasons for a re-examination of the theoretical foundations of the scholarly work on the meaning of Qur’anic words through etymological analysis. The most significant is the sheer amount of this literature. This literature still weighs heavily on new scholars entering the field, and one is bound to be impressed by the acumen and erudition of this production and to forget its tendentiousness and its flimsy scholarly foundations. Indeed, one is bound to think that this is *the proper method* of doing Qur’anic studies. The etymological study of the Qur’an is so deeply rooted in the field that it is an *idée fixe* even outside the confines of Qur’anic scholarship. It indeed influences the whole *Geist* within which Qur’anic scholarship is received and disseminated.<sup>39</sup>

Finally I have been compelled to review the etymological studies on the Qur’an by the phenomenon of the periodic flare-up of interest in etymologies as the key to solving “the mystery of the Qur’an.” This can be seen in two ways. The first way is peripheral: a non-specialist on the Qur’an writes a piece dealing with some Qur’anic terms. I will take Michael Cook’s recent book as my example of this type. The second is the major way, when a new book such as that of Christoph Luxenberg would claim that by positing a foreign origin to most of the “difficult” words one solves their mystery and hence the supposed matrix of the Qur’an. This is usually done with a lot of publicity as if to announce a truly new method of studying the Qur’an.

### Strata and širāṭ

In 2000 Oxford University Press issued a book by Michael Cook on the Qur’an in its series, Very Short Introduction, entitled: *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction*. Cook takes the opening chapter of the Qur’ān (*al-Fātiḥa*) as an example to adumbrate the message of the

<sup>38</sup> David Waines in his *Introduction to Islam*, 23. This is just one textbook example of the usual way of dismissing the Qur’an by simply declaring it disheveled.

<sup>39</sup> Notice the widespread reporting in the media that the maidens of paradise, a staple of Islamic eschatological thinking, were a mistaken belief on the grounds that they are a misreading of a Syriac word. Many have not read the Qur’an, but many can tell you about the etymology of the *al-ḥūr al-‘īn*; see *The New York Times*, March 2, 2002, for a report on Luxenberg’s claims in regard to this misreading.

Qur'an. As customary in these Oxford booklets, a concept or a snippet of information is enclosed in a box and printed in boldface to highlight it. Cook, having translated *al-Fātiḥa*, dwells on "The Straight Path," the famous *ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*, and places the information pertaining to this term in a box. I quote the box in full here:

"The Straight Path": *al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*. The word *ṣirāṭ* is interesting. The Romans used the Latin "strata" for the kind of paved road they built so straight. From them the word passed to the peoples of their empire and even beyond, so that from "strata" derive both the Arabic *ṣirāṭ* and the English "street." But whereas "street" has remained a secular term, *ṣirāṭ* came to be used only in religious contexts. It is a curious feature of the word that it has no plural in Arabic, reinforcing our sense of the uniqueness of the Straight Path.<sup>40</sup>

The word is interesting, apparently, because of its etymology; the reader is informed that the word comes originally from the Latin *strata*. This insight is nothing we owe to modern scholarship, for some medieval Muslim exegetes were aware of its foreign origin. Cook, however, makes two observations, the first that the word *ṣirāṭ* "came to be used only in religious contexts." Cook could not be talking about how the term was used in the Qur'an, for the term *ṣirāṭ* in the Qur'an is not only used in religious contexts.<sup>41</sup> Q 7:86 speaks of those who squat in every highway (*ṣirāṭ*) threatening and corrupting the believers, while Q 35:66 speaks of God turning blind the unbelievers such that they roam the road (*ṣirāṭ*). So strictly speaking *ṣirāṭ* in the Qur'an is not only used in religious contexts. All the same, having moved to explain its post-Qur'anic understanding, it is not clear why Cook does not give us the most common and general understanding of the term that has become standard among Muslim commentators. There *ṣirāṭ* is taken to refer to the bridge that traverses Hell and connects to Heaven. The term *ṣirāṭ* became an integral part of the eschatological imagination of Islamic medieval thinking. Thus the reader is still not informed about the meaning of the word in its *many* contexts in the Qur'an itself, nor in post-Qur'anic literature. The reader will never be. If in a very short introduction to the Qur'an one has space to offer only the bare minimum, Cook has decided that telling

<sup>40</sup> Cook, *Koran*, 9.

<sup>41</sup> Cook was misled here by Arthur Jeffrey who mentions that *ṣirāṭ* was "used only in religious sense," see Jeffrey, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 195.

his readers that *ṣirāṭ* derives from Latin *strata* is the most enlightening piece of information we need for an appreciation of the term.

But let us look more closely at the term *ṣirāṭ* in the Qur'an. The term is used forty-six times in the Qur'an, and one cannot speak of one usage—Jeffrey's observation notwithstanding.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, it is clear that the *ṣirāṭ* in Qur'anic Arabic comes to denote not a straight path but a path, any path, and that is why the adjective "straight" is always added, among other adjectives. To state its origin is hardly illuminating.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, to understand the use of *ṣirāṭ* in the Qur'an, one has to investigate what I call the "theology of orientation" that the Qur'an fashions. The Qur'an weaves a matrix of words around the concept of journeying, guidance, path, and destination. It speaks of finding one's way, of getting lost, of roaming the earth, of straight paths and crooked paths (Q 7:86); it speaks of lurking near highways to ambush, it speaks of stampeding on a highway; it speaks of darkness lit by lightning through which one attempts to walk, only to halt again as the skies darken, thus recreating day and night in an instant, guidance and bewilderment in the flash of a moment, while the believers have their light guiding them on the way. It depicts believers wondering as to where one should face when in need of guidance, only to be answered that direction is meaningless, for God's face is everywhere. Lost in the desert, a human being rushes to a mirage only to find God waiting there.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed the vocabulary is so rich and so varied, the imagery so complex and adroit that one has to take this imagery as fundamental in the message of the Qur'an as to how it understands guidance, and hence salvation.<sup>45</sup> At the heart of this theology, finally, lies the justification for migration or *hijra*, arguably the most important act instituted by Muhammad and the beginning of the Islamic calendar and

<sup>42</sup> See note 41 above for the observation of Jeffrey.

<sup>43</sup> On roads and camels in Late Antiquity see Bulliet's *Camel*.

<sup>44</sup> The verse (Q 24:39) reads: "As for the unbelievers, their works are like a mirage in a desert. The thirsty traveler thinks it is water, but when he comes near he finds that it is nothing. He finds God there, who pays him back in full. Swift is God's reckoning."

<sup>45</sup> See these roots in the Qur'an, all relating to paths, streets, and journeying: *ṭrq*, *slk*, *wrd*, *nhj*, *shr'*, *mshy*, *sār*, *sh'b*, *hām*, *athr*, *jrā*, *wf'*, *'rj*, *'dā*, and finally the famous *sbl*. These are only few of many other roots that deal with the theology of orientation.

the Islamic polity.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the Qur'an equates the two words *sabīl* ("path") and *ṣirāṭ* ("path") and a study of the relationship between the two terms is unavoidable. Indeed, Q 14:12 had the prophets speaking about God guiding them to the paths (*subulanā*); thus, even linguistically the Qur'an has pluralized the word path in one of its usages in the context of divine guidance (cf. also with Q 69:29 where the case is even more apparent). Such a thematic approach to the Qur'an as the one I am proposing is exactly what an etymological, atomistic approach to the Qur'an will not allow.<sup>47</sup> The Qur'an, according to the underlying premise of the etymological approach, is a disparate hodgepodge of a book, derivative at the lexeme level, chaotic at the compositional level, and ultimately fascinating only in so far as that we will never be able to explain its paradoxical power to hold the attention of the benighted Muslims. Indeed, a few pages before the box on *ṣirāṭ*, Cook in another box all but declares the Qur'an impossible to categorize, regardless of what is meant by that, and sure enough the idea that the chapters of the Qur'an do not have "thematic unity" makes its appearance here.<sup>48</sup> According to Cook, the Qur'an is not a story book, like the book of Exodus (although Cook informs the reader that the Qur'an does mention Moses a lot), and it is not a Deuteronomy (although it has many legal passages). It does have preachy parts, but not like the Gospel where Christ is preaching; in the Qur'an it happens that God preaches. Here once more, the Qur'an

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<sup>46</sup> Q 4:97 mocks those who refuse to revolt against oppression by reminding them that God's land is vast and as oppressed they were obliged to migrate or else they have only themselves to blame.

<sup>47</sup> Thus Cook's section on guidance is more concerned with showing how the Qur'an's statements do not coalesce: "This is not a question to which the Koran provides an answer; it is after all, a scripture, not a treatise on dogmatic theology." *Koran*, 17.

<sup>48</sup> Readers are spared an earlier judgment of Cook's about the literary character of the Qur'an that appears in Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 18: "The book [the Qur'an] is strikingly lacking in overall structure, frequently obscure and inconsequential in both language and content, perfunctory in its linking of disparate materials, and given to the repetition of whole passages in variant versions." See a similar, but a rather harsher assessment in his *Muhammad*, 68. The first time Cook offers this assessment on the Qur'an he attributes it to Wansbrough; by the time it appears in *Muhammad*, it is already his own view. For the history of European "appreciation" of the style of the Qur'an, see Stefan Wild, "Die schauerliche Öde." It is regrettable that this article is not translated into English.



is *ab initio* impossible to categorize for it fails to conform to a certain extra-Qur'anic notion of what should be or should not be Scripture.<sup>49</sup>

The second nugget of information Cook offers to the reader is about the absence of a plural to the term *ṣirāṭ*: "It is a curious feature of the word that it has no plural in Arabic, reinforcing *our* sense of the uniqueness of the Straight Path." This information is, needless to say, wrong. There is a plural for *ṣirāṭ* in Arabic: *ṣurūṭ*. There is more than one actually. This plural is attested in Classical Arabic, and in Modern Standard Arabic—since it is not clear to which Arabic Cook is referring. An inspection of the commonest of Arabic modern dictionaries, *al-Munjid*, (the equivalent of high school Webster dictionaries), gives the plural. Cook either got the misinformation from Surūsh,<sup>50</sup> or was misguided by the nature of classical medieval Arabic lexicons. These lexicons are not exhaustive collections of all the instances and morphologies of a word, and indeed, in most cases, plurals are not given when the noun fits a standard pattern of plural formation. Had Cook perused any of the classical Qur'an commentaries, however, he would have encountered the plural there. Thus az-Zamakhsharī, having discussed the term exhaustively, does give its plural: *wa-yujma' ṣurūṭan, naḥw kitāb wa-kutub* ("the plural is *ṣurūṭ* like in the case of *kitāb*, 'book,' which has the form *kutub*").<sup>51</sup> But one does not need this arcane knowledge about the whole apparatus of medieval Arabic; a careful reading of the instances of *ṣirāṭ* in the Qur'an would have sufficed. Had Cook read all the citations of *ṣirāṭ* in the Qur'an he would have been more careful and looked more closely at the word. There seems to be many a *ṣirāṭ*, even one that leads directly to Hell (Q 37:23). Even a close reading of Sūrat al-Fātiḥa (and I would say the proper reading), which Cook translated, would have alerted him that the Qur'an already posits at least two *ṣirāṭs*, if not more.

Having discussed *ṣirāṭ*'s origin and the presumed absence of a plural, Cook moves on to inform the reader that "our" sense of the

<sup>49</sup> Cook, *Koran*, 6. Cook seems to be elaborating on the words of David Waines in his *Introduction*, 23.

<sup>50</sup> Since Cook mentions later in his book the work of Surūsh, *Ṣirāṭ*, he might have got his information there. I have, however, been unable to find any reference in Surūsh's book regarding an absence of a plural to *ṣirāṭ*, but his discussion of the term on p. 27 might be construed to imply that.

<sup>51</sup> Az-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, ad loc. Az-Zamakhsharī is thus stating the obvious: *ṣirāṭ* has a regular plural that makes it uninteresting to lexicographers who were more interested in recording the unusual forms.



uniqueness of the Straight Path is reinforced. One is bound to ask whom Cook has in mind when he says “our.” Is it the native reader who had a supposed knowledge of the absence of the plural? Or is he implicating the reader of his book, who having been supplied with an “expert’s” knowledge and insight, is now privy to a fundamental resonance of the word that escapes the consciousness of the natives, yet somehow is operative all the same upon their subconscious? The rhetorical sleight of hand, the “our,” thus is the locus where the knowledge of the underlying structure of the language now purports to allow us a moment of profound understanding of the effect of the text on the believers.

Cook fashions his small book around his etymological and philological presentation of *ṣirāṭ*.<sup>52</sup> The wrong information about the absence of a plural is used not only to imply an exclusivist orientation of the message of the Qur'an—not a difficult thing to prove by other citations from the Qur'an—but to impinge directly on the ability of what Arabs, that is modern Arabs, can and cannot express in their own language. Cook finishes his small introduction to the Qur'an by discussing a modern Persian work with the title “Straight Paths.”<sup>53</sup> The point here is that *ṣirāṭ* in the original Persian title of the book has been pluralized; the implication is that because of the strictures of their language, the Arabs have been so far unable to conceptually conceive of pluralism. The last two sentences of Cook's book, also intended as a punch-line, state that “it may not be wholly accidental that Surūsh writes in Persian. The very title of his book defies translation into Arabic.”<sup>54</sup> One is left puzzled at the meaning of such a sweeping statement.

It should be clear why I have taken the trouble to disentangle what appears at first to be a trivial mistake by a non-specialist on the Qur'an. It is indeed inconsequential whether Arabic has a plural or not for *ṣirāṭ*. It hardly matters. But the conclusions built on such an “objective” observation are what counts. The point made by Cook—that of an Arab mind unable to envision a map with more than one broad

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<sup>52</sup> Another box devoted to *ṣirāṭ* is placed at the middle of the book, p. 110. Here Cook misses the significance of the debate on foreign vocabulary in the medieval tradition. For a nuanced detailed analysis of the nature of the debate on foreign vocabulary in the Qur'an in medieval literature see Andrew Rippin's entry on “Foreign Vocabulary” in *EQ*.

<sup>53</sup> See note 51 above.

<sup>54</sup> I offer here a translation of the title in Arabic: *ṣurūṭ mustaqīma*. The other plural for *ṣirāṭ* in Arabic is *aṣrūṭ*, which can be used also.

road—is so succinct, so cogent, that it is what sticks in the mind of the reader. Etymological studies as practiced in Qur'anic studies are hazardous because they are given the role of social sciences: one need not do much to discover what Arabs are beside some philological musings. An absence of plural of a word and its Latin origins become our window to a collective mental setting. Higher criticism of the Qur'an turns out to be an exercise in explaining the modern Arab character. It seems that we have barely left the nineteenth century. That etymological studies are predominantly an ideological tool in Qur'anic studies, as they were in biblical studies, is a reality that has to be stated and stated clearly.

### *Luxenberg and How to Read the Qur'an*

The second type of etymological work that I would like to discuss is exemplified by the new book *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* by Christoph Luxenberg. The author claims to read into the Qur'an a supposedly suppressed or misread Syriac *Urtext* which the early readers of the Qur'an—as well as Western scholars of the past two hundred years—failed to recognize. The work has fundamental flaws in its methodology, indeed if one could call such a hash of a work methodical in any way, in itself reason not to bother reviewing it. The book, however, has generated such excitement—never before has a work on Qur'anic studies been featured in major European and American newspapers and magazines—that a refutation of its faulty premises has to be undertaken.<sup>55</sup>

The overarching justification the author offers for this reading rests on two suppositions that he makes in his introduction.<sup>56</sup> The first is the fact that native commentators, when confronted with these parts of the Qur'an that are of Syriac Christian origins, were at the “end of their Arabic.” In other words, no amount of philological work based on Arabic language on the part of medieval commentators was able to decipher the Qur'anic text into clear meaning.<sup>57</sup> The main argument

<sup>55</sup> It is an indication of the dire situation in which the field finds itself that such a blatantly polemical work is not immediately recognized for what it is, and thus requires this refutation.

<sup>56</sup> Luxenberg, *Lesart*, 1–22.

<sup>57</sup> Luxenberg does make a nod to the philological principle of *lectio difficilior*, the principle that a difficult reading is better than an easy reading till we prove differently,

for judging the native exegetical tradition as having failed to properly read the Qur'an is the presence in aṭ-Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-bayān* of the phrase "the people of exegesis are in discord over the matter" (*ikhtalaf ahl al-ta'wīl fī ta'wīl dhālika*).<sup>58</sup> This phrase, Luxenberg claims, shows that the native commentators are not sure of the meaning of the supposedly Syriac Qur'an that lies in front of them.<sup>59</sup> One cannot dispute that many times the native commentators did not understand the Arabic text—or did not want to understand it—and as I have made clear, there are several reasons why this is the case. But to deduce from this that the language of the Qur'an itself is what is mysterious, and hence non-Arabic, instead of faulting the methods of the exegetes, is unjustifiable.<sup>60</sup> Aṭ-Ṭabarī's Qur'an commentary is used by Luxenberg as the main source for fishing for words that need elucidation and hence re-reading as Syriac.

Let us once more revisit medieval Qur'an commentaries and look more closely at their structure, nature, and suppositions, to see if the presence of this sentence can be used as an indication that the Arabic of the Qur'an is unclear. To repeat what I have already said earlier, medieval Qur'an commentaries were not, as many modern scholars suppose, after "one" meaning for any given word or verse. The fundamental characteristic of medieval Qur'anic commentaries was their anthological nature, whereby the exegetical premise was that words and verses can have more than one meaning, and it was the business of the commentator to adduce them to the reader. Thus to come across the sentence "the people of exegesis are not agreed on the meaning of this verse" in aṭ-Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-bayān* is like finding fish in the sea.

I will give two examples selected randomly from aṭ-Ṭabarī. In discussing Q 7:17 "then I will come upon them from the front and from the rear, from their right and from their left. Then you will not find the greater part of them grateful," he informs the reader that "people of *ta'wīl* are in disagreement on the meaning of this verse."<sup>61</sup> No word in this verse is remotely unclear, problematic, or for that

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but then moves on to dismiss its relevance outright in the case of the Qur'an. On *lectio difficilior* see Greetham, *Textual Scholarship*, 282. See also West, *Textual Criticism*, 50–51.

<sup>58</sup> Luxenberg, *Lesart*, 10.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> The relationship between modern Qur'anic studies and the native exegetical tradition is yet to be investigated fully.

<sup>61</sup> aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, ad. loc.

matter a loanword. The same holds for Q 7:26, on whose meaning exegetes are not in agreement, etc. Thus medieval Qur'anic exegesis is not taken on its own terms, but is used by Luxenberg in order to argue for a project whose scholarly credentials are dubious in the extreme. I cannot see how a careful reader of aṭ-Ṭabarī would manage to claim that this sentence could reflect the clarity or the ambiguity of the Qur'anic text or even the totality of the history of the medieval exegetical tradition regarding the Qur'an—after all aṭ-Ṭabarī is at the beginning and not at the end of this complicated history. Indeed, sometimes the very obvious in the Qur'an is the locus of extensive commentary, not to explain it to the reader, but exactly the opposite, to excise a theological conundrum or expound on a doctrine that has no Qur'anic basis. Thus a major aim of medieval Qur'anic exegesis is not taken into account by Luxenberg: exegetes sometime obfuscate, and they do that precisely because they want to “explain.”

That the Qur'an has some unclear passages and words is of course obvious. It is not clear, however, why Syriac should ever be an option to explain these passages, let alone why using Syriac as the primary code of elucidation for them is methodologically justifiable. Luxenberg claims that since the Qur'an, supposedly, developed under the hegemony of Syriac culture and since, as he claims, Arabic at that time was not a written language, it is thus self-evident that the initiators of the Arabic script have their model in what he calls the Syro-Aramaic cultural sphere.<sup>62</sup> He goes on to add that since most of these Arabs were Christians and took part in the Syriac Christian liturgy, then reading the Qur'an as a work whose model and underlying foundation are Syriac is the right method to use in solving its unclear parts. This is the second presupposition about how to understand the development of the Qur'an that the author uses as justification for his work.

These assertions of Luxenberg about the Qur'an growing out of solely a Syriac Christian cultural sphere and about the state of the Arabic script at the time of the rise of Islam are so unhistorical that they are perplexing, at least until the polemical intent behind the assertions is understood. It is not clear which Arabs Luxenberg is talking about: those of the second century CE, the third, or the fifth, or the seventh. When he claims that Arabic was not a written language, he seems to be generalizing, basing himself on the state of Arabic

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<sup>62</sup> Luxenberg, *Lesart*, vii–ix.

script up to the third century CE. Yet he leaves his statements vague enough that one is left to believe that on the eve of Islam, Arabic was a language that had barely found its own script. The footnote he cites for all these sweeping claims is based on Nöldeke's nineteenth century work, where it is clear that Nöldeke is speaking not of the seventh century Arabs, but of their ancestors in the second and third century CE, when the Nabateans and Palmyrians were ruling the steppes of Syrio-Palestine.<sup>63</sup>

Moreover, Luxenberg gives the pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions short shrift. His statement that Arabic script has developed out of a "Syro-Aramaic" background is left ambiguous, so that the reader is left with the impression that it was through Syriac that Arabs learned how to write. He does not seem to have read the work done on the development of Arabic script since the mid-twentieth century, or if he has, he insists on ignoring it or reinterpreting what it signifies. Both Nöldeke and Grohmann have suggested that Arabic script developed out of the Nabatean alphabet. Since their pioneering work other scholars have confirmed this origin. In her review of the state of the art on the development of Arabic script, Beatrice Gruendler makes clear that the scholarly community is now in agreement that Arabic script developed out of Nabatean script, and that it developed rather early: "At the present state of paleographic evidence, the emergence of the Arabic *abjad* must be assigned to the late second or third century CE, between the latest cursive Nabatean and the earliest attested Arabic script."<sup>64</sup>

Indeed, one of the most troubling features of Luxenberg's book is its neglect or ignorance of the massive literature on the complex social, political, and religious situation in Late Antiquity in the Near East. In vain does one search for a refined understanding of the historical developments in this area. Scholars working on the Near East of Late Antiquity have shown us the complexity of the developments taking place and more importantly of the danger of sweeping generalizations about these developments. The absence from Luxenberg's bibliography of the works of Averil Cameron, Irfan Shahid, Christian Decorbet, Garth Fowden, Frank Trombley, J. H. W. Liebeschuetz, Fergus Millar, Joseph Henninger, Toufic Fahd, Michael Lecker, Julius Wellhausen, Robert Schick, and J. F. Haldon, to name but a few of the scholars

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., viii.

<sup>64</sup> Gruendler, "Arabic Script," 139.

who have worked on Late Antiquity, suffices to point to the degree that his work lies outside scholarly consensus.<sup>65</sup> Even with all the acumen of these scholars and the abundance of the sources from Late Antique Byzantine Near East, we still do not have a clear picture as to what the linguistic situation was in Syria, and to what degree Christianization of the countryside was complete by the end of the sixth century CE. To venture to speak about the Ḥijāz area and inner Arabia without using paleographic, epigraphic, and historical evidence is hazardous in the extreme.<sup>66</sup>

Averil Cameron, for example, warns against any generalizations about Syria and its culture in the sixth century. She disputes the notion of high and low cultures, one associated with Greek, the other with Syriac; moreover, she disputes the notion that Greek lost its significance in the Near East to advancing Syriac. She also calls into question the very notion of a Syriac culture “as a separate entity.”<sup>67</sup> She then highlights three important points when considering the cultural and linguistic state of the Near East in Late Antiquity; the first is that Greek cannot be considered the language or culture of outsiders in the Near East. Hence Luxenberg’s assertion that the only cultural influence on the Arabs was Syro-Aramaic is unhistorical. The second point that Cameron makes is that “the spectacular development of Syriac literature has to be taken into consideration,” though this should not force us to overlook the third point, that “Semitic culture had already been represented by Arabs, and later by a form of Arabic, in these regions since the Nabatean period (ended AD 106).”<sup>68</sup> She then concludes by stating:

The culture of the Near East in late antiquity was a fascinating mosaic which can only be interpreted by reference to local differentiation. The great difficulty remains of matching modern notions of “Arab,” “Syrian,” “Semitic” and other such terms, which are still entangled in a mesh

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<sup>65</sup> Cameron, “Eastern Provinces”; see also her articles in id., *Changing Cultures*; Schick, *Christian Communities*; Chuvin, *Chronicle*; Fahd (ed.), *L’Arabie préislamique*; see also id., *Panthéon*; Trombley, *Hellenic Religion*; Liebeschuetz, *Diocletian*; Haldon, *Byzantium*; Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs*; Décobert, *Mendiant*; Kaegi, *Byzantium* (see especially his first chapter where he discusses the sources and methods of researching this period); Miller, “Empire”; Lecker, *Muslims, Jews, and Pagans*; Wellhausen, *Reste*; Henniger, “Pre-Islamic Bedouin Religion.”

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, the article of Graf, “Rome,” for an example of a measured analysis of evidence pertaining to North Arabia in Roman times.

<sup>67</sup> Cameron, *Mediterranean World*, 184.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 185.

of confusion and even prejudice, with the actual situation in our period. What might perhaps be observed in late antiquity is a heightened awareness of and readiness to proclaim local traditions, with a consequent increase of their visibility. [...] Yet the Christianization of Syria progressed very slowly in its early stages and was still incomplete in the sixth century. Again, there is no simple description which can do justice to the whole picture.<sup>69</sup>

Indeed we are now aware that paganism survived in Syria into the late sixth and early seventh century, even into the Islamic period, as J. F. Haldon makes clear.<sup>70</sup> In his review of the epigraphic evidence, Liebeschuetz summarizes as follows:

There was resistance to the destruction of temples in the Arabian provinces, too, and here paganism seems to have maintained itself longest of all. Roman Arabia certainly has impressive Christian sites, but not only did the carving of pagan inscriptions continue longer than elsewhere but even by the 6th century Christian inscriptions had not achieved predominance which in N. Syria they gained in the second half of the 4th century. The success achieved by Islam in Syria after the Arab invasions is easier to understand if we bear in mind that over large parts of rural Syria the population had become Christian within the last 150 years or less.<sup>71</sup>

Luxenberg fails to be specific as to what the situation was in Ḥijāz at the time of the rise of Islam. Indeed, it is remarkable that he fails to mention any Jewish influence on the new religion, given the presence of Jewish tribes in Ḥijāz, and the earlier Jewish Kingdom of South Arabia, and the fact that Rabbinic Judaism is easily discernable as an interlocutor of the Qur'an. Luxenberg fails to also mention any possible influences from Arab paganism, South Arabian religions, Roman and Hellenistic cultures.<sup>72</sup> To claim that the sole determinant factor in the rise of Islam is Syro-Aramaic Christianity itself needs proving and could not simply be used as a basis for an elaborate rereading of the text of the Qur'an. Furthermore, his use of "Syro-Aramaic" as the word for Syriac Christianity is a misleading hypercorrection, for it

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 185–186.

<sup>70</sup> Haldon, *Byzantium*, 327–337; see also the stories related by John Mochus (d. 619 or 634) about pagan Arabs in Palestine/Jordan quoted in Shahid's *Byzantine*, vol. 1, 597–600.

<sup>71</sup> Liebeschuetz, "Epigraphic Evidence," 498.

<sup>72</sup> See Fowden's *Empire* for a detailed analysis of the situation of the Near East on the eve of the rise of Islam, especially chap. 6. Fowden's work remains one of the finest studies on the rise of Islam in the context of the culture of Late Antiquity. See also Décobert, *Mendiant*, especially 17–55.



seems to convey the notion that Jewish Aramaic is also included in his consideration, which is not the case.

Luxenberg then posits seven steps that he will use to decipher those problematic locutions in the Qur'an that aṭ-Ṭabarī failed to solve. I will list them here briefly:

1. In the case of a verse that Western scholars consider *dunkel* or obscure, Luxenberg would revisit aṭ-Ṭabarī<sup>73</sup> and see if scholars have overlooked a meaning that might fit and solve the problem; failing this,
2. Luxenberg would inspect Arabic Lexicons (he really means the *Lisān*) to see if aṭ-Ṭabarī failed to mention a meaning that is available there; failing this,<sup>74</sup>
3. Syriac roots will be examined to see if homonyms or cognates could help solve the meaning of the Arabic term; failing this,
4. The diacritical pointing of the Cairene royal edition of the Qur'an would be either removed or manipulated to arrive at a better Arabic term that the readers failed to see; failing this,<sup>75</sup>
5. Under the altered conditions obtained in number 4, Luxenberg would investigate whether a Syriac term could be found that would help shed light on the meaning of the term; failing this,
6. The Arabic term that so far has defied a suitable explanation and seems to be a genuine Arabic term would then be back-translated into Syriac, in order to see if the meaning of the Syriac term, in Syriac, could make better sense in the context (such is the absurdity of the rules of a philology gone amok!)
7. On a separate level, Luxenberg investigates a wholly different category of "genuine" Arabic Qur'anic words that have no satisfactory explanation either in the *Lisān* or when one back-translates them by going to Syriac medieval dictionaries (never mind the contamination from Arabic). On the whole this method

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<sup>73</sup> The fixation on aṭ-Ṭabarī by Luxenberg is itself a reflection of the Golden Age myth that governs non-specialists' and even many specialists' approach to the genre of *tafsīr*. Is aṭ-Ṭabarī really the beginning and the end of Qur'anic exegesis?

<sup>74</sup> We leave aside the ahistorical understanding exhibited here of the relationship between the Arabic lexicon and the tradition of Qur'an commentary. Luxenberg fails to tell us why he does not revisit the other Qur'anic commentaries that arose after the rise of the lexicographic tools starting with the *Lisān* onwards.

<sup>75</sup> Note here that Luxenberg is upholding the consonantal integrity of the transmitted Qur'anic text. This golden rule would be thrown out when it threatens his Syriac readings of the Qur'an. See later on this.



has been very helpful according to Luxenberg; Syriac medieval cognates to these words have a meaning that can explain the Arabic terms.

The first point that one needs to emphasize here is that the result of this exercise on the part of Luxenberg is the discovery of a Syriac Christian *Urtext* beneath the apparent Arabic of the Qur'an. Few if any are the instances whereby, following these rules, Luxenberg manages to produce genuine Arabic terms that can be solved either by going back to aṭ-Ṭabarī or to the *Lisān*. The exercise, so to speak, is predetermined.

Far more damaging on the methodological level is the absence of a fundamental principle of linguistic and textual analysis: namely, that in studying a text, any text, one should first and foremost study it before stepping outside it to interpret it. Luxenberg implicitly accepts the coherence of the Qur'anic text and the fact that it constitutes a cohesive whole; if so, then the only proper way to approach such a text is to read and study it as a whole. Its language, style, content, presuppositions, logic, diction, vocabulary, and mode of expression should be assessed first in order to analyze it. What is *dunkel* in a certain verse could be illuminated, or better understood, when compared with other parts that are either linguistically or thematically similar. This rule, the *sine qua non* of philology, which Rudi Paret and Edmund Beck have already emphasized, is woefully neglected by Luxenberg.<sup>76</sup> This is an axiomatic rule, and that we need to reiterate it is all the more an indication of the flawed approach that Luxenberg constructs in approaching the Qur'an.

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<sup>76</sup> Rudi Paret: "Was den Kommentar angeht, so soll er [...] einem ausgesprochen historischen Verständnis des Korans dienen, d. h. aus dem Text jeweils das herausinterpretieren, was Mohammed ursprünglich in einer durch bestimmte Zeitumstände und Milieuverhältnisse gegebenen Situation damit sagen wollte." (See the introduction to his *Der Koran, Kommentar und Konkordanz*) Id.: "Mit besonderer Sorgfalt habe ich den Koran selber zur Deutung des Textes beigezogen, indem ich zu jedem Vers und Abschnitt alle irgendwie in Betracht kommenden Parallelstellen ausfindig gemacht und die einzelnen teils gleichartigen, teils unterschiedlichen Formulierungen in sprachlicher und sachlicher Hinsicht gegeneinander abgewogen habe." (See the introduction to his translation of the Qur'an.) Of great significance is his book *Grenzen der Koranforschung*, where he discusses what methods and techniques one has to employ for studying the Qur'an. Edmund Beck's article "Die Sure ar-Rūm (30)" is also a fundamental article that serves as an example of how to approach the Qur'an, see especially 134–135.

Surely, one will face many problems when dealing with the Qur'anic text. And if we accept that it comes from the early seventh century CE—and Luxenberg does accept this—then we are all the more stuck with the Qur'an alone. This is yet further reason to concentrate on the Qur'an to see what it says and what it presupposes, takes for granted, etc. One may resort to other material in so far as this material can be first proven to be of relevance, i.e., contemporaneous with the Qur'an and produced in the same milieu. To speak of "influence," however, and then to proceed to make the texts that supposedly influenced the Qur'an the main criteria for reading it, is to render the Qur'anic text into a puzzle whose parts are only decipherable by an external code. The Qur'anic text in the method of Luxenberg is obliterated as a unity, and its coherency is denied from the very beginning. Indeed, the approach outlined above results in a total dismantling of the Qur'anic text, rendering it putty in the philologist's hands.

Moreover, it is indeed inconsistent to presume that Syriac is at the base of the Qur'an on the one hand as Luxenberg does, and to use the supposed misreadings of the medieval Muslim commentators on the other as a proof that the Qur'anic text is indecipherable through the proper philological methods. Why would what Muslim scholars did and did not do matter if we are concerned with the seventh century meaning of the Qur'anic text? This question is one that Luxenberg neither asks nor seem to be bothered by. Moreover, what Western scholars considered *dunkel* fifty or sixty years ago should not mean it will remain so forever. Nor does it mean that solutions for difficult passages in the Qur'an are not possible using the methods these same scholars developed.

Another point that needs addressing is rule number 4, where Luxenberg takes liberty with the Masorah of the received Qur'anic text and alters it in order to arrive at a "satisfactory" meaning for certain words. He refuses to follow through the logical conclusion of this premise. If the received Masorah does not stand when we face difficult passages (although even here the judgment of what constitutes difficult has to be addressed), then why should it hold in clear passages? If guesswork was at hand in passages that are *dunkel*, then most probably the whole Qur'an must have been supplied with diacritics haphazardly. This much Luxenberg argues, since he concludes from the alleged fact that the Masorah was supplied much later that it is unreliable. If we agree to this analysis, then the whole of the Qur'an has to be re-read using whatever method Luxenberg thinks

proper. As such, before any discussion of any particular word in a verse, he has to supply us with a full reading of the whole chapter and the context in which the word is found. Thus when he chooses to discuss the words *al-hūr al-ʿin* (the “large-eyed” ladies of paradise; I will return to a discussion of this term later) in passages talking about paradise, Luxenberg seems not to notice that he already submitted to the received Masorah on one hand, and is challenging it on the other at the same time, with no clear distinction as to why this is so. Having called into question the whole of the Masorah, one needs to state clearly why it is still to be relied upon in certain sections while other words need to be supplied with a different diacritic pointing.

The liberty that Luxenberg allows himself in changing the diacritics of the Qurʾanic text rests on two implied misunderstandings of the nature of the development of the Qurʾan. They resemble the assumptions that James Barr had already detected in the works of some scholars on the Hebrew Bible. The first notion is that there was “a long period during which the consonantal text was carefully cherished and transmitted.” The second is the notion that “a late and arbitrary process in which a vocalization [in the case of Arabic also diacritics] was more or less imposed on this text by men who indeed tried their best to understand it but were handicapped by their knowledge of Hebrew [in Luxenberg’s case it is Syriac, which is the text of the *Ur-Qurʾan*].”<sup>77</sup> James Barr asks if this is a credible picture in the case of the Hebrew Bible; and we are bound to ask the same of the Qurʾan. First, the earliest attested quotations of the Qurʾan, those present on the Dome of the Rock, have diacritics; but even the earliest manuscripts that we have, the ones written in slanted Ḥijāzī script, have diacritics. British Library Or. 2165 has numerous diacritical pointing. The process of supplying diacritics was not a late, inorganic development in the history of the Qurʾan, as Luxenberg would have us believe. To paraphrase Barr and apply his insights to the case of the Qurʾan, Luxenberg’s approach assumes that the Arabs lost early on the understanding of their scripture and transmitted it faithfully, all the same, and then later on tried to clothe it with an invented diacritical system that obfuscated it.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>77</sup> James Barr, *Comparative Philology*, 194.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 194–195: “Does it not raise in another form the question which Nyberg raised against the older textual criticism, namely that it assumed that the Jews very early lost the understanding of what their own Scripture meant, while they transmit-

To claim that there is no secondary literature that bears on this particular topic, as Luxenberg does, is of course inaccurate. James Bellamy has spent his scholarly career doing exactly this, trying to propose certain emendations to the received Masorah.<sup>79</sup> To read Bellamy's leveled and measured arguments and premises as to how and when one needs to amend the Qur'an and to look at Luxenberg's work is to realize the difference between scholarly work and polemical work.

### *Paradise in the Qur'an and Luxenberg's Analysis*

I will here select an example of Luxenberg's analysis of the Qur'anic text and show why it neither follows the rules he proposes (notwithstanding the fact that the rules themselves are flawed), nor does his analysis stand on its own.<sup>80</sup> I will look closely into his analysis of the paradise motifs in the Qur'an, the maidens and the youths of paradise, since it is the largest continuous analysis of a Qur'anic concept in his book. I am also choosing this section because it was the most frequently cited story in the sensational coverings by tabloids and newspapers of this book. Luxenberg claims that the whole Muslim understanding of the maidens (*al-ḥūr al-'īn*) and the youths of paradise, and consequently Muslims' entire understanding of Qur'anic paradise, is based on a misunderstanding and misreading of a putative Syriac Qur'anic *Urtext*. He claims that if the Qur'an is read properly, that is, as a Syriac text, one will find that it talks about neither maidens nor youths.

It is in the preamble to this long section that we encounter for the first time the real and only principle that governs Luxenberg's exercise. It soon becomes clear that a polemical doctrinal assumption about what the Qur'an should mean is the impetus behind Luxenberg's

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ted it by a mechanical copying procedure? And, it would appear (in this we go beyond what Nyberg argued), having transmitted this consonantal skeleton of a Scripture by a mechanical copying procedure, did they then centuries later attempt to clothe it in the flesh of a newly created vocalization?"

<sup>79</sup> See his "Some Proposed Emendations"; id., "More Proposed Emendations." The interesting question that Luxenberg never asks here is that why, if the text of the Qur'an is proving difficult to read, should we not do first what Bellamy or any textual critic would have told us to do: emend the text using the language it is written in and test if sensible emendations can work? Moving into a different language is methodologically indefensible.

<sup>80</sup> Luxenberg, *Lesart*, 221–269.

re-reading of the Qur'an and not any obscurity in the Qur'anic text as such. Luxenberg claims that in so far as the Qur'an states that it came to confirm the previous scriptures (Q 2:41.89.91; 3:3; 4:47; 5:46; 6:92), and insofar as Q 4:82 means what Luxenberg understands it to mean—that the Qur'an is saying that it agrees with all that is in previous revelations (Jewish or Christian?)—then any differences between the Qur'an and previous scriptures have to be accounted for.<sup>81</sup> Luxenberg claims that the Qur'an is true to its word on this particular aspect of its nature. When read as a Syriac text the Qur'an happens to tally perfectly well with the previous "scripture." Luxenberg never manages to tell us what scripture he thinks of, but it is clear that he has a confessional theological understanding of Scripture in mind here; that is, he is not talking about the Hebrew Bible as it has come to be seen and understood in Rabbinic Judaism, but as it has been understood by the typological reading of the lens of the New Testament.

The claim that the Qur'an tallies with Christian Scripture is certainly one of the least substantiated claims about the Qur'an and the nature of its relationship to previous scriptures ever to be stated. First, Luxenberg fails to take into account the polemical tone of the Qur'an, where on the one hand it claims that it is nothing but what God has already revealed in previous revelations, and on the other that it itself is now a judge and an arbitrator for what the people of the book differ about. What do we do with a verse such as Q 27:76, "This Qur'an expounds to the Israelites most of the matters over which they disagree" and many others in the Qur'an? As for the attitude of the Qur'an towards Christianity, it suffices to read the Dome of the Rock Qur'anic inscriptions to realize that from early on we have a distinct polemical attitude towards Christianity. I am limiting myself to the Dome of the Rock inscriptions (of the late seventh century CE) simply to make the point that from early on the Qur'anic attitude was one of polemics, even before the exegetical tradition that Luxenberg claims came to stand between us and the Qur'an. The Qur'an is nothing if not a polemical work whose main thrust is to secure itself a position in the claim for truth and in the Abrahamic divine covenantal scheme.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 225. Verse 4:82 reads: "Will they not ponder on the Qur'an? If it had not come from God, they could have surely found in it many contradictions." Luxenberg translates this as following: "Were it (the Koran) not from God, they would have found in it [with comparison to the Scripture] many differences." We are not told how the phrase he added came into being.

The Qur'an is always disputing what Jews and Christians have to say, denying them the foundations of their claims.<sup>82</sup> To turn around and claim that Q 4:82 says that the Qur'an agrees with all that is in the "scripture," which it does not, is baffling, if it is not sheer polemics on the part of Luxenberg. Early Islam is thus denied even the possibility that it might have grown out of Judaism and Christianity and yet self-consciously differed from them. To Luxenberg, the difference between Qur'anic Islam and Christianity are mere philological misreadings on the part of Muslim exegetes who have failed to recognize the Syriac subtext of the Qur'an.

Moreover, Luxenberg claims in the same preamble to his analysis of the Qur'anic paradise that his approach is "pure philology" ("rein philologische Deutung").<sup>83</sup> After so many historical and cultural claims that have been advanced to explain who originated Islam, where and how, each presenting itself as historical assessment of the situation on the eve of the rise of Islam, Luxenberg's claims that he is indulging in something that can be called "pure philology" is perplexing. That he could claim that there is such a thing as "pure philology" shows to what degree he lacks a sophisticated methodology and is caught in a totally mistaken conception of what philology is about. Not only is a post-modern attitude to the problems of historical studies lacking, but even something as mundane as a rigorous historical approach to textual criticism is nowhere in the picture.<sup>84</sup>

Luxenberg claims that since the concept of paradise in the Qur'an is a Christian one—a point not open to dispute since he takes it as an axiom—then any differences between the Qur'an and the Christian understanding of paradise have to be the work not of Muhammad, but of the commentators. Note that we thought the Qur'an was supposed to tally with Christian scripture and not Christian doctrines—

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<sup>82</sup> Granted the Qur'an does seem to have unorthodox Christian ideas as to what Christianity is about; Jesus' childhood becomes miraculous, Mary is seen as part of the Trinity, the Trinity is called a lie, the Last Supper is a table from heaven, and Christ was a mere human like Adam. Jesus is the Messiah, but that does not preclude Muhammad's coming. He is not divine, yet he is God's word. Far more interesting is that the *injl* (Gospel) is seen as a divine book that was revealed to Jesus. I am not sure how all this tallies with Late Antique Syriac Christianity; saying that all these Qur'anic doctrines are the result of corruptions in the Qur'anic text or the result of misreading of its Syriac words might get us out, but the Dome of the Rock's inscriptions are an insurmountable impediment to Luxenberg's argument.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>84</sup> For a detailed discussion of philology, both old and new, see the special issue of *Speculum* 65 (1990), entitled *The New Philology*.

an important distinction since paradise in the New Testament is not as fully elaborated a theme as it is in the Qur'an, but this is the least problematic issue with Luxenberg's analysis. Luxenberg thus wants to read the expression *ḥurun 'in*, taken in the Islamic exegetical tradition to refer to the large eyes of the maidens of paradise, as a Syriac expression which means "grapes" (or "raisins"). Yet he fails to mention that the maidens of paradise are not something the exegetical tradition is in discord about. Thus there is no *dunkler* aspect here to warrant Luxenberg's starting a fresh investigation. It is not that the Qur'anic text is unclear inasmuch as it does not tally with the Christian beliefs that prompted Luxenberg to re-read the Qur'an. There is thus no linguistic or textual reason whatsoever for the central contention of Luxenberg's study to claim that the Qur'an is Syriac.

When Luxenberg mentions that al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286) is uncertain about the maidens of paradise, he fails to elaborate that what al-Bayḍāwī is wondering about is whether the maidens are the earthly wives of the believers or new virginal wives, hardly a philological point, but rather an interpretive one. Al-Bayḍāwī's discomfort reflects a rising tension between the domestic conceptions of happiness of the urbanite medieval scholars and the Qur'anic paradise they are promised in the life to come. From early on, we start witnessing in the medieval exegetical literature a discomfort towards the presence of these maidens and the relationship between them and the human wives of the male believers. Thus we start seeing discussions as to who is better, who is more beautiful, etc. Luxenberg's use of al-Bayḍāwī betrays the complete lack of historical understanding that permeates his approach to Islamic religious history. What al-Bayḍāwī said centuries after the codification of the Qur'an is taken out of context and used as a proof that the Qur'anic text is unclear. Never mind that in setting forth his seven steps, Luxenberg promised us to inspect aṭ-Ṭabarī's analysis and the *Lisān* before indulging in the Syriac reading of the Qur'an.

What is more methodologically flawed about Luxenberg's supposed Syriac reading of the expression *al-ḥūr al-'in* is that in order for this reading to work, he has to re-read many clear and unambiguous Qur'anic terms that surround the expression, expressions about which there is no discord in the exegetical literature. Even mundane words such as the verbs to "marry" and "be purified," are called into question. He has to do this in at least thirteen instances, rendering the Qur'anic text absolutely unstable. Ambiguous or not, the Qur'an is



thus re-read at the whim of the author. Nothing can stand in the way of the preconceived outcome of his exercise.

Moreover, Luxenberg fails to mention that the Qur'anic paradise, even with the absence of maidens, is still radically different from any Late Antique Christian understanding of paradise, including St. Ephrem's poetical depictions. The inhabitants of the Qur'anic paradise are bedecked with silk-embroidered cloths and gold and silver jewelry; they sit in drinking sessions, recline on furniture, they are served drinks in cups on golden trays, and more importantly, seem to eat flesh of birds (*lahm ṭayr*, Q 56:21). None of this is mentioned in the *Hymns on Paradise*; animals are not allowed into the realm of the blessed, let alone the notion that one should be eating their flesh. What is of course ironic is that Edmund Beck has already proven that the maidens of paradise in the Qur'ān are not from St. Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise*.<sup>85</sup> Yet Luxenberg insists that the *Hymns* are the basis of the Qur'anic paradise, thus the maidens have to be a misreading of the Qur'anic text. If the mountain does not come to Muhammad, then Muhammad has to go to the mountain! One is left with the impression that Muhammad, having taken his inspiration of paradise from St. Ephrem, is unable to embellish it, and we are not told why this is the case. If St. Ephrem could have a vision of paradise, why cannot Muhammad? Luxenberg seems to think that grapes are less fantastic a thing to encounter in the afterlife than boys or virgin brides. That the Qur'ān has its own understanding of the afterlife is denied simply because it is derivative.

Let me leave Luxenberg's analysis of the maidens of paradise for the time being and move to his treatment of the verses that deal with the youths of paradise. It is here that the whole arbitrariness of Luxenberg's exercise and its polemical nature is blatantly clear. We stand face to face not with philological readings but with philological acrobatics. Luxenberg victoriously declares that the "dream" of the Muslims about the maidens of paradise that awaits them is nothing, and he will move on to abolish the dream of the youths of paradise, and hence any one seeking solace—one presumes he has in mind the lewd Muslims—shall find none.<sup>86</sup> The tone is inappropriate for speaking about a religious community's conception of eschatology. Even

<sup>85</sup> Beck, "Eine christliche Parallele."

<sup>86</sup> Luxenberg, *Lesart*, 260: "Ist nun der Traum von *Hūrīs* oder *Paradiesjungfrauen* dahin, mag mancher in der Vorstellung der verbleibenden *Jünglinge* des Paradieses Trost suchen. Denn auch von solchen soll im Koran die Rede sein."



if the whole Islamic paradise was dreamt up by later commentators, without basis anywhere, should it be ridiculed? Many are the later Islamic conceptions that were read into the Qur'an, from the notion of punishment and reward in the grave before resurrection, to Muhammad's intercession on the behalf of his *umma*. Indeed, the Qur'an itself goes against these two cherished Islamic (Sunnī) conceptions, for death in the Qur'an is seen as a long sleep and intercession is something that God does or does not grant according to his will. Scholars of any religion can cite many examples of such re-reading of scripture in the long history of any religious tradition. It is the stuff of the religions of scripture; the ability to read into the scripture new ideas is what keeps them going. To ridicule this process is the business of polemicists; to study it is the business of scholars.

Luxenberg claims that the word for youth in the Qur'an (*wildān*) in Q 56:17 and 76:19 should be read as the Syriac *yaldā da-gpettā* (daughters of vine, or wine), since the Qur'an cannot be speaking about something that is not present in the "scriptures" that he claims came before it. Here, instead of offering an example from the *Hymns of Paradise*, the text that supposedly inspired the Qur'anic paradise which Luxenberg used to refute the maidens of paradise, he has to go to the Gospel of Matthew (26:29), where the Syriac phrase appears—never mind that the verse in the Gospel is not about paradise.

Let us recall the rules that Luxenberg set at the beginning of his book as the justification for re-reading the Qur'an as Syriac. The premise was that the text should present us with difficulty (*Dunkelheit*). The Qur'anic passages at hand speak of male servants serving wine on trays to the believers. There is nothing either ambiguous about the language or the context. Moreover, no subsequent Muslim exegete was ever at the end of his Arabic here. There is actually no disagreement whatsoever in the exegetical tradition on the meaning of this word in the Qur'an. Thus the reason that is compelling Luxenberg to re-read *wildān* is not any ambiguity in the Qur'anic text. The word is actually a common Semitic word. Hence to claim it is Syriac and not Arabic is absurd, especially since it is written in Arabic with a *wāw* and not a *yod* as it would be in Aramaic were it indeed from Syriac. Any Semitic paleographer who finds this word in an Aramaic text written with a *wāw* has to deduce that there is a contamination from Arabic. Thus, the word as it appears in the Qur'an has to be Arabic. Yet, even if we, for argument's sake, read *wildān* as a Syriac word, it would still mean youths. Thus even in Syriac it agrees with

Arabic. Luxenberg has to add a new word not attested in the text or in any other manuscript, and he does so without any justification. What textual integrity does the Qur'anic text have? If it is a Syriac text, why is it writing Aramaic roots using Arabic spelling and, in the case of *wildān*, with *wāw* instead of *yod*? Why is it deleting essential Syriac words also? And how did Luxenberg deduce that this Syriac word is the missing word? The more important question is how many other such instances are there in the Qur'an of its dropping Syriac words? Luxenberg offers none.

However, the Achilles' heel of Luxenberg's analysis is Q 52:24, where a synonym, *ghilmān* for *wildān*, is given. Luxenberg dismisses this verse as if his analysis still stands. But if the consonantal Qur'anic text is giving a synonym to a word then it must mean that that word, *wildān*, was understood at the time of the fixing of the codex (if not at the time of its writing) to mean what the synonym means, i.e. youths. If so then we cannot accuse later Muslim commentators of not getting it right. The redactors of the Qur'an itself at the level of its codification read *wildān* and *ghilmān* as equivalent. Either the consonantal skeleton (*rasm*) of the Qur'an stands as a whole and thus we have to take the synonyms for words to be what they are, or if not, then we are calling into question the whole stability of the transmitted consonantal text. And if the consonantal Qur'anic text was re-read and adjusted using Arabic philology, then how can we reconstruct the Syriac *Urtext* that is now either emended, deleted, or corrupted, by making it conform to Arabic philological norms?

I will here offer a thorough reading of the verses that deal with "youths" in the Qur'an and show why it is impossible to accept the reading of Luxenberg. The verses that have the word "youths" in them are:

Q 52:24: *yaṭūfu 'alayhim ghilmānun lahum ka-annahum lu'lu'un maknūn*

Q 56:17–18: *yaṭūfu 'alayhim wildānun mukhalladūn / bi-akwābin wa-abāriqa wa-ka'sin min ma'in*

Q 76:19: *wa-yaṭūfu 'alayhim wildānun mukhalladūn idhā ra'aytahum ḥasibtahum lu'lu'an manthūran*

The verses where the Qur'an gives the same phrasing without the word youths are:

Q 37:45.46: *yutāfu 'alayhim bi-ka'sin min ma'in / baydā'a ladhdhatin li-sh-shāribīn*

Q 43:71: *yutāfu 'alayhim bi-ṣiḥāfin min dhahabin wa-akwābin [...]*

Q 76:15–17: *wa-yutāfu 'alayhim bi-āniyatin min fiḍatin wa-akwābin kānat qawārīrā / qawārīra min fiḍatin qaddarūhā taqdīrā / wa-yusqawna fihā ka'san kāna mazājuhā zanjabīlā*

As I have shown, Luxenberg is neither following his own rules, nor does what he is doing stand on its own merit. Thus, an uncontested word, *wildān*, is declared Syriac, which is impossible, since it should have been written with a *yod* and not a *wāw*. Luxenberg then adds a Syriac word into the text, something we were not told about in the rules. Moreover, the Qur'an offers a synonym for *wildān*, and thus we have internal evidence that the word is indeed what the Qur'an says it is! But even with all these dubious stratagems Luxenberg has still to face the syntax of the Arabic sentence. In all the instances where *wildān* appears, it is the subject of the sentence, and thus even with his new reading the sense does not stand. Wine cannot serve itself after all. Consequently Luxenberg has to claim that the verb *yatūf* (active form) is to be read as *yutawwafu* (passive form) in Q 56:17 and 76:19. The purpose is to render the word *wildān* into the object of the sentence and not its subject. But as Q 37:45, 43:71 and 76:15 make abundantly clear, when the Qur'an uses the same verb in the same context (verbatim repetition) in the passive, it uses *yutāf*. Moreover, the only words missing in the passive sentences are the words *ghilmān* and *wildān*, and thus they are the subjects and not the objects. There is *no other possibility* but to read *ghilmān* and *wildān* as the subjects of the sentences. To claim that the issue of the subject is clarified by the content of the *Hymns of Paradise* is not only perverse, but simply nonsensical. The syntax of the sentence has to be the deciding factor, not the content of the supposed text that influenced the sentence. Notice that Luxenberg is now having recourse to the *Hymns* and not the Gospel of Matthew. Luxenberg claims that in the *Hymns of Paradise* the plants and fruits lower themselves to the believers. Thus the same should hold true in the Qur'an. But the Qur'an is speaking of cups and trays which are circulated among the believers.

There is moreover another problem that Luxenberg has to address, the article *bi-* in the Arabic sentences. This article is never attached to the words *wildān* and *ghilmān* in the examples we have, but it is

attached to the other nouns in the sentence which could only be possible if these nouns, that is the ones that have the article, are the objects of the verb. The article is thus not attached to the subject. The article *bi-* is thus another irrefutable indication as to how to read the sentence. To get around this insurmountable textual problem, Luxenberg claims that the particle *bi-* is ambiguous in these verses and that in any case the Qur'an does not differentiate between the usage of *bi-* and the article *fi*.<sup>87</sup> There is no supporting evidence for such a statement, and if Luxenberg has any examples of such confusion from the Qur'an, he should supply them. The usage of *bi-* here is not only very clear, but it is also idiomatically Arabic. When *bi-* is used with verbs in Arabic it turns them into factitive. I will quote here the leading comparative Semitic philologist who happens to speak about this kind of *bi-* at length:

In all Semitic languages we find a number of verbs, the actual meaning of which depends not merely on their context, but also on the prepositions and prepositional phrases which they govern. Such combinations based on sequentiality of verb and preposition create syntagmatic relations which give a new dimension to the semantic load of the verbs in question. In Arabic, for example, intransitive verbs denoting movement acquire a factitive meaning when they are used with the preposition *bi-*; e.g. *atāhu bi-kitāb*, "he came to him with a book," meaning that "he brought him a book"; *qāma bi-ghāratin*, "he got up with a raid," means that "he launched a raid."<sup>88</sup>

The article *bi-* thus makes it unambiguous that *wildān* and *ghilmān* are the subjects of the sentences. If they were the objects, then the particle *bi-* should have been attached to them. This is why Luxenberg needed to claim that *bi-* in the Qur'an is haphazardly used, which in linguistic terms is nonsense. Even if Arabic then was a mixture of many languages, it would still have had a grammar.

For those who know Arabic it has been for long apparent that I am belaboring the point here, which is exactly my purpose. However you choose to read the sentence, you will have to violate the text in order to read it the way Luxenberg wishes. But we are not told why the whole sentence is in Arabic and only the word *wildān* is a reflection of a Syriac *Urtext*. The method of Luxenberg is so idiosyncratic,

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<sup>87</sup> Lesart, 267: "Die Präposition *bi* bedeutet im Arabischen sowohl *mit* als auch *in*, da der Koran zwischen *bi* und *fi* nicht immer unterscheidet und die gleichlautende syro-aramäische Präposition *b* beides bedeuten kann."

<sup>88</sup> Lipinski, *Semitic Languages*, 566.

so inconsistent, that it is simply impossible to keep his line of argument straight.

Yet let me ask the reader this question: who in the mythology of Antiquity and Late Antiquity was the cup-bearer of Zeus, and was rewarded for his services by being granted immortality, thus remaining a youth for eternity? I am speaking here of Ganymede. The similarities between the Qur'anic youths and Ganymede are too stark to be coincidental. Both are cup-bearers who reside in the heavens, both are eternally youthful (hence the Arabic term *mukhallad*, "made immortal," is very fitting and it is not *mujjallad*, "frozen," as Luxenberg would have us believe), and they both are of exceptional beauty (like hidden pearls, as the youths of paradise are described).<sup>89</sup> The appearance of the Ganymede of Olympus in the Qur'anic paradise is not as surprising as one might think.<sup>90</sup> The Arabs of Ḥijāz were the last upholders of paganism, and they doubtless shared the by-then universal mythological heritage of the Late Antique world, or at least were familiar with its broad conceptions. The whole joyful hedonistic atmosphere of the Qur'anic paradise is more akin to the lives of the gods of Olympus than to the asceticism and sensibilities of Late Antique Christianity. Late Antique Christianity was busy enshrining the monastic ideal. Christian polemicists could hardly contain their disgust at the sensuality of the Qur'anic paradise.<sup>91</sup> Reading the *Hymns*

<sup>89</sup> Indeed verse 52:24 could be seen as echoing a faint voice of the erotic tones of the Ganymede myth. The verse has a possessive pronoun, the youths *belong to* (*ghilmānun lahum*) the believers, which was politely glossed over by almost all the commentators. Luckily, the Arabic *belles lettres* tradition was not so coy. One of the most famous of Arabic medieval homoerotic epistles makes clear that there is something more to these boys than meets the eye. See al-Jāḥiẓ's *Mufaḳarat al-Jawāri wa-al-ghilmān*. There the author leaves no doubt that some Muslims understood the verses to have sexual undertones.

<sup>90</sup> On Ganymede, see the dissertation of Penelope Cromwell Mayo, *Amor Spiritualis*. See also Saslow, *Ganymede*.

<sup>91</sup> The Syriac Dionysius (d. ca. 842 CE) has this to say about Muhammad's paradise: "As for Muhammad's conception of Paradise, it is sensual and crude in the extreme. He envisages food and drink, copulation with glamorous courtesans, beds of gold to lie upon with mattresses of coral and of topaz, and rivers of milk and honey. They also maintain that there will be an end of torment. Their view is that every man suffers torments commensurate with the sins he has committed, then comes out of that place into Paradise." (Palmer, *Seventh Century*, 132) The Greek historian Theophanes (d. 818) has this to say: "He taught his subjects that he who kills an enemy or is killed by an enemy goes to Paradise; and he said that this paradise was one of carnal eating and drinking and intercourse with women, and had a river of wine, honey and milk, and that the women there were not like the ones down here, but different ones, and that the intercourse was long-lasting and the pleasure continuous; and other

and the Qur'anic depictions one is struck by their different considerations and presuppositions. The Qur'anic depictions could not be more different than their supposedly Christian sources. St. Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise* are a long poetic analogy of what paradise is like, and the poem makes clear that all the imagery is metaphorical and as such a textually induced imagery.<sup>92</sup> Muhammad's paradise is a visionary and prophetic proclamation of a world to come that is declared a reality and the only certitude in the universe. Is Luxenberg claiming that Muhammad or the Qur'an could not even get the spiritualizing analogy of Ephrem had they read it? The Light Verse (Q 24:35) and the hundreds of examples in the Qur'an of *amthāl* make clear that when it suited the Qur'an or, when it wanted to, it could wrap its mind around an image, and the images are not bad at all. Qur'anic paradise was a paradise of bodily as well as sensual enjoyment, with full attendants of youths as cup-bearers and unearthly women as wives.

Let us return now to the maidens of paradise and ask the same question. Who was the consort of Zeus, and who had come to represent the very essence of marriage and blissful copulation both in Heaven and earth? I am speaking here of Hera, the *boōpis*, the "oxen-eyed" goddess.<sup>93</sup> That is what the *al-ḥūr al-ʿīn* ("wide-eyed") expression is, a reflection and elaboration on the mythical cow-eyed female goddess of marriage. The Qur'an was thus promising a blissful heavenly marriage to the believers. Note that both Ganymede and Hera have been transformed by the Qur'an into a multitude of Ganymedes and Heras. Some of the purist Arab philologists were upset with the expression *al-ḥūr al-ʿīn*, not because they did not know what it means, but on the contrary because they insisted it should have only referred

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things full of profligacy and stupidity." (Theophanes, *Chronicle*, 465) Both Dionysius and Theophanes are drawing on a lost Syriac common source which both Lawrence Conrad and Robert Hoyland believe is Theophilus of Edessa (d. 785), see Hoyland's *Seeing Islam*, 400–409 and 631ff. The earliest Christian polemical text to poke fun at the Qur'anic paradise is John of Damascus, see Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 138–141.

<sup>92</sup> See Saint Ephrem, *Hymns*, 155–157; see also the Syriac edition by Beck, *Hymnen*, 47–48.

<sup>93</sup> I owe my discovery of this motif to Professor Marc Witkin of the Classics department at Middlebury College. The literature on things Greek is as usual immense, on Hera see O'Brian, *Transformation*. It is important to point out that one aspect of Hera, her ability to renew her virginity, will be also ascribed to the houris, but not without improving on the myth. While Hera can do that only once a year and that after bathing in the spring of Canathus, the houris regain their virginity after finishing intercourse. Thus every copulation is a deflowering.

to the eyes of cows and animals. Why the Qur'an was using it to describe females was a problem they could never come to solve to their own satisfaction. Could it be that the Qur'an, by using an elliptic construct, was after the alliteration between the name Hera and the word *hūr*? That might be possible, but lest I be accused of what I am complaining about, I hasten to add that this presumed alliteration is mere conjecture on my part with no evidence. Whatever the antecedents of the Qur'anic paradise are, we have to admit that there is a strong parallel here between two mythical worlds, that of the Qur'an and Greek mythology.<sup>94</sup> We can only come up with probable scenarios to explain the similarity between the two, and short of new evidence we cannot venture beyond this.<sup>95</sup> Yet it should be clear from my analysis that reading the Qur'an as an Arabic text is in no sense meant to absolve it of "borrowing." On the contrary, in this instance we are able to discover a pagan background that would have been lost if we pretended that the text is otherwise. But let it be clear that discovering parallels and borrowings should not become an end in itself. My drawing attention to the parallels between the Qur'an and Greek mythology is done primarily to discredit any claim that these motifs as present in the Qur'an are so unique that they must be a confusion resulting from textual corruptions. In the final analysis, an account of paradise in the Qur'an has to be based on the Qur'an itself.

It is perhaps appropriate now that I sum up my assessment of Luxenberg's method. The first fundamental premise of his approach, that the Qur'an is a Syriac text, is the easiest to refute on linguistic evidence. *Nothing in the Qur'an is Syriac, even the Syriac borrowed terms are Arabic, in so far as they are now Arabized and used inside an Arabic linguistic medium.*<sup>96</sup> Luxenberg is pushing the etymological

<sup>94</sup> For the latest assessment of Greek and Arabic interaction see Fowden, *Quṣayr 'Amra*, 248–290.

<sup>95</sup> See now Jarrar, "Martyrdom," on the later development of the myth of the maidens of paradise in early Islamic literature.

<sup>96</sup> For a sober assessment of the difficulties encountered in etymological analysis, see Mankowski's introduction to his *Akkadian Loanwords*, 1–13. See especially his quotation from O'Connor's article "Arabic Loanwords," 215: "Reconsideration of Cantineau's list involves the fundamental difficulty of all intra-Semitic language study: there is a common stratum of vocabulary and grammatical structure which makes it impossible to assign many words and formants to a particular language. The difficulty of recognizing loans of various sorts is inversely proportional to the relationship of the languages." The point I have raised all through this article is not about the absence of borrowing and loanwords, a phenomenon that is easily attestable, but of semantics. The etymology of a word is a poor indication of what it means in a new context. Cf.



fallacy to its natural conclusion. The Qur'an not only is borrowing words according to Luxenberg, it is speaking a gibberish language: Arabic in so far as he decides it is not Syriac, and Syriac in so far as he claims it is not Arabic. For his theory to work also, the Qur'an has to be two different things at the same time: on the one hand, a paleographically frozen seventh-century document that represents a document used by Muhammad, and on the other, a garbled text that has been modified by later Muslim scholars who were clueless as to its meaning. Luxenberg is claiming that for the last two hundred years, scholars (that is Western scholars—forget for the time being about the Islamic tradition) have totally misread the Qur'an. Indeed, no one can read the Qur'an. Only he can ferret out for us the Syriac skeleton of this text. Only he has the key to decipher the Qur'an. Luxenberg's method is oracular, not philological. What we thought all along was an Arabic word is actually a Syriac word; and they all uncover a Christian layer that has been misread by all of us. Indeed, one could describe Luxenberg's method as a typological reading of the Qur'an masquerading as philology. Luxenberg's work is in the final analysis a Christian polemical tract. As such it belongs to a venerable tradition.

That the two consorts of Zeus appear in the paradise of the Qur'an is rather befitting. For what is the Qur'an but a grand barbarian attempt at solving all the problems besetting Late Antique society? It is not merely that the long-awaited barbarians appeared at the gates of the old civilized cities of the Near East (from the wrong direction, no less), but they came also with a solution, not to everybody's liking of course, for the problems that were plaguing that world. Christianity and Judaism were both harmonized (and in the process admonished),

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with the remarks of Brett in his *Biblical Criticism*, 105–106: “One of the characteristic features of synchronic linguistics may be described in the same way. Especially since the publication of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*, linguists have emphasized that the meaning of a word may bear little relation to its prehistory. To put the point positively, a lexical item (which may be larger than a single word) is most adequately understood as a function within the synchronic system of which it is part. Over the past three decades, this point has been repeatedly stressed by biblical scholars like James Barr and John Sawyer who have been anxious to correct the misuse of diachronic hypotheses formulated by comparative Semitists. Once again, the point has not been to deny that words have a history; rather, it is emphasized that synchronic semantic description, which seeks to understand language within its contemporary linguistic system, has methodological priority. Diachronic semantics is strictly speaking dependent on the results of synchronic description, and not the other way around.”



the life of the gods of the pagan world was turned into the future awaiting humanity in paradise, and an imperial dream of world dominion was enacted. In that sense Muhammad has more to do with Constantine than with Jesus, and more to do with Moses than with Paul. This was a bitter victory of the periphery over the center. My understanding of the event of Islam in Late Antiquity, hence of Luxenberg's misuse of philology, is thus fully based on the work of scholars studying this period, in particular the understanding of Garth Fowden and, more recently, Peter Brown and Polymnia Athanassiadi.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, it is rather remarkable how little hold Christianity managed to have on the author of the Qur'an. To claim, as Luxenberg wishes to demonstrate, that Christianity is the single determining factor is thus to mistake the whole thrust of the Qur'an in the historical setting in which it originated.

We modern scholars have long been caught in the web of the self-presentation of early Islam. For not only was the prophet of this religion presented to us as illiterate, and the Qur'anic word *ummī* now taken to mean "illiterate" instead of "unversed in Scripture," but his people were claimed to be fully axenic and unsullied by contact with other civilizations. Arabs burst into the Near East, as it were, from the bosom of the desert, with a book from heaven and having barely heard of the world outside. The foreign vocabulary of the Qur'an belies this image. Arabs were "not unhellenized," to use a favorite phrase of Cavafy, and they were not cut off from civilization. The presence of foreign words in the Qur'an has thus to be understood not as the direct work of Muhammad alone but of the Arabs before and around his time. Unfortunately for the scholarship on early Islam, sensational positions get the most publicity. If, on the one hand the Qur'an is taken seriously and fully analyzed, as Wansbrough admirably did, then its complexity is deemed as too sophisticated to be the work of Arabs of the early seventh century of the CE.<sup>98</sup> On the other hand, given what we are supposed to know about the Arabs of the seventh century—all based on early Islamic propaganda, I should

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<sup>97</sup> See the second edition of Brown's *Rise*, 285–294. The analysis of Brown of the rise of Islam is one of the most succinct and historical one could ever hope for. It sums up the whole literature on Late Antiquity and allows us a better understanding of the rise of Islam. See also the remarks of Athanassiadi in her article "The Chaldaean Oracles," 181.

<sup>98</sup> We could hardly find a more learned reader of the Qur'an than Wansbrough; that he had failed to see the Syriac Ur-text and instead read the Qur'an as a classical Arabic text is a headache Luxenberg does not seem willing to face.

add—then a Qur'an coming out of such isolated nomadic tribes should not be worthy of sustained analysis. Only the German school, best represented in the works of Nöldeke, Schwally, Paret, and Neuwirth, has been willing to deem the Qur'an both a seventh-century document and one worthy of serious study.

One of the most pernicious harms done to the field of Qur'anic studies as a result of the preoccupation with foreign vocabulary has been the failure to allow an analysis of the Qur'an as a text to take hold in the scholarly tradition. Having accused the medieval commentators of an atomistic interpretive approach to the Qur'an, we ourselves have failed to offer a genuine alternative. We keep hearing about the absence of thematic unity in the chapters of the Qur'an, but we have never been able to offer an explanation, for example, as to why some are one paragraph and some are sprawling booklets. Is it possible that we have not given enough attention to their structure? Angelika Neuwirth's work has yet to be carried further; meanwhile some of the most profound analysis of the Qur'an has come from camps unexpected. The article of Norman Brown on surah 18 remains a stinging rebuke to our failure as Qur'anic studies specialists to appreciate the thematic unity of even the most apparently maddening of chapters.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Brown, "Apocalypse."

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THE RELEVANCE OF EARLY ARABIC POETRY FOR  
QUR'ANIC STUDIES INCLUDING OBSERVATIONS ON *KULL*  
AND ON Q 22:27, 26:225, AND 52:31

Thomas Bauer

1. *Tunnel Vision—Or the Current State of Affairs*

“Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments” (“Texts from the World of the Old Testament”) is a publication series that is well-known to virtually every Orientalist and Old Testament scholar. Designed to offer a better understanding of the Hebrew Bible, this series provides translations of texts contemporary with the Hebrew Bible from Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, from South Arabia, Persia, and other regions of the Ancient Middle East; and in spite of its wide range of cultural representations, it succeeds admirably. By contrast, the situation regarding research into the world of the Qur'an is quite different. To be sure, Christian sources about early Islam have been investigated to some degree, and an attempt has even been made to write about the early history of Islam based on these sources alone. But even so, the history of the Arabian Peninsula and the Middle East during the time of the Prophet is relatively poorly researched. For example, there is little research on the Sasanid Empire, which was contemporary with the revelation of the Qur'an. Or, even worse, on the Lakhmid rulers, vassals of the Sasanids, and their pro-Byzantine counterpart, the Ghassanids. Indeed, the standard reference texts about the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids date back to 1887 (Th. Nöldeke, *Die Ghassānischen Fürsten aus dem Hause Gafna's*) and 1899 (G. Rothstein, *Die Dynastie der Laḥmiden in al-Ḥīra*)!<sup>1</sup> It is hard not to be discouraged by the fact that, in comparison to Hebrew Studies, even today, Nöldeke and Rothstein still serve as standard reference works. Given the degree to which Western scholars value a critical historical approach, it seems odd that so much of

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<sup>1</sup> Recently, Isabel Toral Niehoff has submitted a *Habilitationsschrift* on al-Ḥīra at the Free University of Berlin. Since it is not yet available in print, cf. her contribution to this volume for a preliminary survey of some of her results.

contemporary research into the history of the Qur'an seems to be able to get by without any real or serious critical consideration of the texts contemporary with it.

This is all the more remarkable since in Qur'anic studies, it is possible to explore the "world" of the holy text quite thoroughly and even more deeply than it is feasible in Old Testament studies. There exist hundreds of elaborate and lengthy literary texts which were *au courant* at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an, either contemporary with it or immediately preceding or following it. Such texts not only tell us much about the political and literary environment of the Qur'an, they also tell us much about the linguistic and cultural horizons of those who were the first to hear the recitations of the Qur'an. Almost perversely, Qur'anic scholars do not show much enthusiasm about the existence of this literature. Again the situation in biblical studies is remarkably different. Just think of the excitement and enthusiasm with which the discovery of Ugaritic texts was first met, when it was finally possible for Old Testament scholars to hold these ancient Canaanite texts in their hands and decipher them. By contrast, scholars of the Qur'an have a far more impressive corpus of contemporary texts to work with—yet appear to do little more than shrug their shoulders at these riches. Although no Hebrew from ancient times would ever have heard the Ugaritic Baal hymn, it is entirely probable that many who first heard the Qur'an would also have been familiar with the Mu'allāqa of Ṭarafa. For Arabic exegetes of the Qur'an in the millennium after the emergence of the science of study of the Qur'an, it would have been a matter of course to know about such texts. For the greater percentage of modern scholars today, such an expanded knowledge appears to be virtually non-existent.

Rather than offering any genuine scientific reason for the lack of interest in Arabic poetry contemporary with the Qur'an, Qur'an scholars tend to belittle this admittedly somewhat bulky mass of literature as irrelevant—if they think it even necessary to justify their lack of attention at all. Arguments against such a widening of the scope of research, often unstated but implied, tend to fall into one or more of three categories: 1) that the Qur'an can and should be understood on its own terms alone; 2) that the authenticity of pre-Islamic poetry is doubtful; and/or 3) that poetry as literature has little relevance for religious texts.

The principle that one should understand the Qur'an in and of itself was more staunchly advocated in Rudi Paret's time than it is



today. By modern literary, hermeneutical, and text critical standards, such a view now seems hopelessly antiquated, even more so because the Qur'an is a text that refers repeatedly to other texts—including, among others, references to poets. Although it is important to investigate the Qur'an on the basis of its internal and intratextual connections, this should not be done at the expense of taking into consideration its intertextual dimension as well. Such a cultural solipsism cannot be defended in the face of intertextual and culturally contextual research and the advances in understanding that have resulted from it.

The claim that early Arabic poetry is a fabrication from the early Islamic period (Margoliouth, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn) is outdated. The most recent proponent of this hypothesis is of course Christoph Luxenberg, who, without presenting any evidence whatsoever, accused Theodor Nöldeke of “having too much respect for the exaggerated age assigned to so-called early Arabic poetry.”<sup>2</sup> Now it is indeed true that the corpus of early Arabic poetry is, in fact, among the most controversial subjects in the field of Arabic studies (surpassed only by the controversies surrounding the Qur'an).<sup>3</sup> Yet specialists in the field no longer appear haunted by questions of authenticity but rather are interested in those avenues of inquiry that are typically pursued by other literary scholars, no matter what the language or origin of the respective body of texts. They seek, for example, to reconstruct the patterns of literary communication that were existent in pre- and early Islamic time. Such scholars no longer see early Arabic poetry as a disorderly corpus of texts filled with a strange and difficult lexicon, but rather as a body of texts whose internal structure has become more and more transparent over time. Different literary periods, each with its own developments, have been discerned and established; schools of thought and influences learned; and a complex picture—one that is growing ever more complex as research continues its explorations—has been emerging regarding the ways in which pre- and early Islamic society has used this literature for communicative purposes. But the picture is still dismally incomplete—a state of affairs that is for the most part due to the lack of serious scholars in the field.

<sup>2</sup> Luxenberg, *Syro-aramäische Lesart*, 210 (my translation).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Montgomery, *Qaṣīdah*, 1: “Within the domain of Classical Arabic literature, only the Qur'an has generated so much controversy and disagreement.”

The complexity of the corpus puts to rest any notions of falsity, for in order to create such an extensive literature with its own development over a considerable time span, it would not have been enough to falsify single poems, but it would have been necessary to invent a whole history of literature. It can be shown that the chronological frame that is given by the early philologists can be corroborated by modern methods, which, of course, were not available to early Arabic scholars. Thus, the far more reasonable hypothesis is that a large part of the artistically elaborated poems is genuine and was composed by exactly those poets to whom they were attributed, and that these poets lived roughly in the period which early Arabic philologists claimed they lived in. There will always be exceptions and special cases, of course. One must be aware of controversial poets such as Umayya ibn Abī ṣ-Ṣalt, poorly attested poems that fall outside the canon, poorly attested poets, and even political verse, which is fairly easy to imitate, etc. But these kinds of potential forgeries can be detected with sound philological methods. Such debates will of course continue to occupy scholars for some time, but this does not diminish the value of poetry for understanding the environment of the Qur'an.

The third argument that ancient Arabic poetry has little relevance for students of the Qur'an is founded on the (mistaken) belief that such poetry can contribute little, if any, to understanding the Qur'an as a religious text. Because non-Qur'anic literature is indeed sparse in its religious references, it is tempting to give credence to this argument. And, in fact, the few pagan, Christian or Jewish references in early Arabic poetry that have been unearthed thus far do not contribute much to our understanding of the contemporary background of the Qur'an. However, the problem is not so much one inherent in the corpus of poetry, as it is the way in which essential and insightful questions have been framed (or perhaps, more accurately, not been framed). Until recently, those questions that attempt to extract theological information from non-Qur'anic literature were privileged, and when answers were not forthcoming, this literary corpus was deemed useless as a source of information for the early history of Islam. Early Arabic literature will prove, however, to be a far more productive source for the cultural background at the time of the Prophet if it is approached using current literary and cultural methods of inquiry appropriate to the sources at hand. An inquiry into cultural patterns, attitudes and values, beliefs, and mores as displayed in poetry, on the one hand, and in the Qur'an, on the other, would yield valuable

insights. One could start with a single concept, such as *ṣabr*, and see what a comparison of this concept in both the Qur'an and in poetry would yield. Other concepts, such as virtue, manliness, ideas about death and sexuality, expression of feelings such as fear, sorrow, and joy: all of these would be appropriate themes to explore both groups of texts. Inquiries such as these would without doubt more effectively demonstrate the "originality of the Qur'an"<sup>4</sup> than any singular or one-sided approach (such as questions limited to a history-of-religions approach), especially when the Qur'an's contrast not only to pre-Islamic monotheism but also to the make-up of the contemporary Arabic world is taken into account. Although the kind of research pioneered by Georg Jacob and Werner Caskel<sup>5</sup> is still relevant today, there now exists not only a far larger corpus at our disposal, but also a more precise and insightful methodology, developed in such fields as literary studies, ethnology, historical anthropology, and the "history of mentalities" (*histoire des mentalités*). Such approaches have already been used quite successfully in Arabic Studies, even as they have been scarcely used with regard to the pre- and early Islamic period.<sup>6</sup>

But even in the long-established discipline of philology, there is still much work to be done. Again, investigations of concepts deriving from religion and the realm of religious meaning have been almost exclusively focused upon. While they are of course useful, they have led to an insular rather than to a comprehensive understanding of the Qur'an. One of the few exceptions is the work of Tilman Seidensticker on the verb *sawwama*, in which he was able to clarify fully the meaning of a Qur'anic expression by way of an explication of the use of this verb in early Arabic poetry.<sup>7</sup> In any case, as long as modern scholars continue to ignore the riches that lie before them in the corpus of pre- and early-Islamic poetry, then the more likely it is that people like Luxenberg will find a receptive and gullible audience easy to delude with scandalous claims.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. the title of a well-known essay by Johann Fück: "Die Originalität des arabischen Propheten."

<sup>5</sup> Jacob, *Altarabisches Beduinenleben*; Caskel, *Schicksal*.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Conermann and von Hees (eds.), *Islamwissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft*.

<sup>7</sup> Seidensticker, *Das Verbum sawwama*.

## 2. *Negative Intertextuality*

There is yet another reason why scholars of the Qur'an are deterred from looking more closely at contemporary literature. Even the briefest of examinations of the two bodies of texts reveals that they share little in common. So different are the Qur'an and contemporary poetic literature that one can hardly come up with a better example of difference if one tried. From their different ways of using language to their notable differences in content, hardly any similarities are to be found. This distinction is so marked that it might well seem virtually pointless to claim that Arabic poetry can make any serious contribution to an understanding of the Qur'an.

Almost, but not quite. For by now, it is clear that I intend exactly to do just that: to encourage an examination of poetry, however different it may be, in order to more fully understand the Qur'an. And it is precisely because of this difference that I believe these two sorts of texts can gain so much from a comparison. Poetry was well known and accepted as the most important medium of public discourse in pre-Islamic Arabia. Such discourse is mentioned several times in the Qur'an. The Prophet himself had to deal with poets and poetry repeatedly. He spoke about poetry, and he spoke to poets. Given this kind of emphasis on poetry, it is thus all the more astonishing that, unlike the comprehensive work done thus far on elements of Judaism and Christianity in the Qur'an, there exists simply no corresponding attention to co-existing elements of pre- and early Islamic poetry. Although the differences between the two corpora are what strikes one first and most forcibly, it is precisely these differences that require examination and inquiry. And, above all, the question is "why?"—why should such profound differences exist, and what do they mean? To list a few here as a starting point, I offer the following:

1) Poetry and the Qur'an pursue quite different ends and thus deal with entirely different themes. Scarcely a theme found in the Qur'an would have been treated by the poets. The two corpora reflect a widely different worldview and thus pose essential human questions quite differently. Thus we should be made suspicious when parallels do appear, when for example an expression like *rayb al-manūn*, which belongs more to the world of poetry, surfaces in the Qur'an. I will come back to this point later on.

2) Meter and rhyme are the parameters which distinguish poetry from prose. Although the Qur'an displays several elements charac-

teristic of poetic style, it follows entirely other principles of construction than does pre- and early Islamic poetry. Most importantly, it does not use meter, and its rhyme follows different parameters than that of poetry. Because unrhymed prose was not known as a literary form in pre- and early Islamic Arabia, the Qur'an can be considered as an exact antithesis of poetry insofar as its form is concerned.

3) The stylistic devices used in poetry and in the Qur'an are complementary to each other. The two most important stylistic devices in Arabic poetry were a specific form of metonymy, on the one hand, and the simile, on the other.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, metaphors, parables, and allegory play a prominent role in the Qur'an, but play virtually no role in poetry.

4) Contemporary poets consciously sought to achieve an unusual and difficult diction. A poet was proud when his hearers were confused as a result of his difficult vocabulary. His verses were so convoluted in construction "that his obscure vocabulary brought the listeners to tears" (*yastabkī r-ruwāta gharībuhā*).<sup>9</sup> By contrast, if the lexicon of the Qur'an itself may be difficult to understand, this is not the case because it lacks a foundation in recognizable Arabic words but rather because so many words—including many non-Arabic loan words—had no counterpart in their contemporary context. It is thus possible that the Qur'an is said to be *mubīn* (Q 5:15, 6:59, 10:61, and elsewhere) because it hardly contains any *gharīb* expressions or idioms that were so typical of contemporary poetry.

5) Although a full study that compares the grammar of the Qur'an with that of poetry is still needed, some differences are immediately apparent. For example, I will elaborate a bit later on the concept of the "poetic *kull*," a construction that is exceedingly common in the poetry of the time, but appears only very seldom in the Qur'an.

What stands out from this list is the fact that the Qur'an is, in many ways, the complete antithesis of contemporary poetry. The Qur'an appears to be exactly what it was intended to be: a text styled in such a way as to achieve an effective public reception, but also to be as unlike poetry as possible; as different as it possibly could be and still be recognizable as a stylistically elevated text. Any attempt to make the language more like that of contemporary poetic expression would have blurred the differences between poetic and prophetic

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Bauer, *Altarabische Dichtkunst*, vol. 1, 172–204.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Bauer, "Muzarrids Qaside," 65.

speech. Too much similarity, and contemporary listeners might well have mistaken the text of the Qur'an for a poem, and a bad poem at that. On the other hand, a text that was too overtly different, too far removed from the literary conventions of the time, would have been out of reach for its audience. When one also considers that early Arabic poetry was well known to those also hearing the Qur'an, there can be no doubt that their impressions and reception of the Qur'an would have been considerably influenced by the contemporary conventions of poetry. If, under these conditions, the Qur'an were to have any effect on such an audience, it would have to achieve a delicate balance between two poles or extremes: to be close enough to poetry to be recognizable as a text on a high and aesthetic level, but different enough to be revelatory.

Yet it is also clear that poetry can play a role in our understanding of the Qur'an. Poetry provides us with an understanding of the parallels of words, expressions, stylistic devices, rhetorical and aesthetic strategies, and concepts that are found in the Qur'an. But more importantly, poetry also offers an understanding of those grammatical, rhetorical, and aesthetic phenomena that *are consciously avoided* in the Qur'an. Thus poetry provides us with a way of understanding some of the peculiarities of the Qur'an, as it seeks to achieve the reverse of poetry contemporary with its revelation, or a kind of negation of poetry. Thus one can speak of a *negative intertextuality*; that is, an avoidance of certain features, that has just as formative an influence on the shape of the text as would be the reverse, a similarity of certain features. A comparative examination of the Qur'an and the literature contemporary with it does not necessarily require starting with a word or phrase in the Qur'an and then asking where it is found in ancient Arabic literature. It is equally important—and perhaps more important—to do the reverse: to start with the latter and ask what of it *is not* found in the Qur'an.

### 3. *The Grammar of Kull* (Q 22:27)

Although I have just argued for a fundamental difference, a kind of negative intertextuality, between the Qur'an and its contemporary poetry, it is also equally true that, over and again, similarities emerge, as would be expected given that the first hearers of the revelation of the Qur'an were also expected to listen to and understand poetry—

thus the same hearers would have to have understood both revelation and poetic expression at that time, even as they were being converted to the revelations they were hearing for the first time. Thus we do have a kind of positive intertextuality. This typically manifests itself in the form of idioms, certain grammatical constructions, shared stylistic devices, and the like. Although such similarities may be few and far between, relatively speaking, they require special study precisely because of their unusualness.

A good example of what might be called a case of positive intertextuality can be found in verse Q 22:27, in which the use of *kull* requires an understanding of how this seemingly simple word was used in poetry:

وَأَذِّنْ فِي النَّاسِ بِالْحَجِّ يَأْتُوكَ رِجَالًا وَعَلَى كُلِّ ضَامِرٍ يَأْتِينَ مِنْ كُلِّ فَجٍّ عَمِيقٍ

Rudi Paret has translated this verse as follows: "Und ruf unter den Menschen zur Wallfahrt auf, damit sie (entweder) zu Fuß zu dir kommen, oder (w. und) auf allerlei hageren (Kamelen reitend), die aus jedem tief eingeschnittenen Paßweg daherkommen!"

Pickthall's English translation goes as follows: "And proclaim unto mankind the Pilgrimage. They will come unto thee on foot and on every lean camel; they will come from every deep ravine."

Arberry's translation is nearly identical: "[...] and proclaim among men the Pilgrimage, and they shall come unto thee on foot and upon every lean beast, they shall come from every deep ravine."

The two English translations are marred by an obvious mistake: the subject of *ya'tīna*, a verb in the feminine plural, cannot refer to "the men," but only to "the camels." Paret's translation is more correct, but still I would prefer a slight modification and subsequent translation as follows: "Kündige unter den Leuten die Pilgerfahrt an, damit sie zu Fuß oder auf lauter Mageren [d. h. Kamelen], die aus all den tief eingeschnittenen Bergpässen herauskommen, zu dir kommen," which would correspond in English to: "And proclaim among men the pilgrimage, so that they will come to thee on foot or on all those lean ones [i.e., camels] that come from out of all the deep ravines."

The main difference between my recommended translation here and Paret's translation revolves around the treatment of the word *kull* ("all," "every"), the grammar of which is more difficult than most translators of the Qur'an have assumed. Again, Arabic poetry can provide for a better understanding of this word, as will be shown.



However, it is first necessary to explore this particular expression, and particularly the way in which it is often translated—or mistranslated—in modern Western languages.

In virtually every textbook and grammar of Arabic, one can read that *kull* followed by a definite plural noun means “all,” whereas followed by an indefinite singular noun it means “each” or “every.” Thus *kullu l-buyūti* would mean “all houses,” *kullu baytin* would mean “every house” or “each house.”<sup>10</sup> A statement like this, however, does not explain why such a translation is preferable; it simply proposes a rule for translation. But what really is the difference between “alle Häuser / all houses” and “jedes Haus / every house”? Even in German and English the phrases are often interchangeable, and there are more than these two. Consider the following phrases: “Dogs that bark don’t bite,” “a dog that barks doesn’t bite,” “every dog that barks doesn’t bite,” “all dogs that bark don’t bite.” This is not the place for a more detailed discussion of the rules of “all, each, every” in English, German, and Arabic, but the example may suffice to show that the rules given in the textbooks are far from satisfying.

Although the putative explanation “*kull* + n. pl. def. = ‘all’; *kull* + n. sg. indef. = ‘each’ or ‘every’” is far from being a well-formulated grammatical rule, most translators of the Qur’an have followed it conscientiously, as the above examples show. But this explanation is not only unsatisfactory; as regards classical Arabic it is quite plainly wrong. Therefore, a typical classical Arabic phrase such as *wa-tafarraqa l-Muslimūna fī kulli wajhin*<sup>11</sup> cannot be translated as “and the Muslims were scattered in each direction.” Rather it should be translated as “and the Muslims were scattered in all directions.”

The circumstances become even clearer when we regard the form *kullu l-buyūti*, which, according to the above “rule” of the textbooks, would be the equivalent to “all houses” or, in German, to “alle Häuser.” If *kullu l-buyūti* were indeed the normal construction for saying “all houses,” it would occur thousands of times in classical Arabic texts. Yet this particular phrase is almost never to be found in classical Arabic literature. I could not find a single piece of evidence for *kull* + n. pl. def. meaning “all x” in either the entirety of the *Sīra* by Ibn Ishāq / Ibn Hishām or in all three volumes of al-Wāqidī’s *Maghāzī*,

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Wright, *Grammar*, 2:204; Cantarino, *Syntax*, vol. 2, 126f.; WKAS, s.v. *kull*.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Wāqidī, *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, 231, line -8; see also *ibid.*, 97/4, 235/-2, 283/7, 293/9, 299/-6, 321/-4, 332/-7, 338/7, 343/2, 345/-6, etc.



even though one might well claim that in German or English the word "all" would most certainly have been used. In those very few instances where *kull*, followed by the definite genitive plural, is attested in classical texts, it means "all kinds of x." In early Arabic, as well as in the entirety of classical Arabic, and even today in the novels of Naguib Mahfuz, *kullu l-buyūti* means "all different kinds of tents/houses."

A close reading of Arabic texts, therefore, shows that (1) *kull* + n. pl. def. (*kullu l-buyūti*) hardly ever occurs in ancient Arabic poetry, in the Quran, or even in classical prose texts; (2) that wherever *kull* + n. pl. def. does occur, its most obvious meaning is "all sorts of different x" rather than "all x"; (3) that, if *kullu l-buyūti* is not the classical Arabic equivalent of "all houses," the rule of the textbooks, which formulates the difference between *kullu baytin* and *kullu l-buyūti*, is entirely wrong. Therefore, it is equally questionable that the best or even only correct translation of *kullu baytin* is "every house." Instead, it is all too obvious that the phrase *kullu baytin* does not only serve as the equivalent of "every house," but also takes the function of the English phrase "all houses."<sup>12</sup>

To sum up: *kull* + n. sg. indef. can be translated not only as "every x" but also as "all x," whereas *kull* + n. pl. def. would correspond to "all kinds of x." Obviously, classical Arabic does not make the same distinction between "every x" or "all x" that English and German do.

This kind of careful attention to the usage of *kull* could have resulted, in and of itself, in many improvements in the translation of the Qur'an. It should have been observed, as a matter of course, that the purported usual or typical form for "all" hardly occurs at all in the Qur'an, just as it hardly occurs at all in poetic literature. In fact, it can be observed that the syntagm *kull* + n. def. pl. occurs only in the phrase *kullu th-thamarāti* (Q 2:266, 7:57, 13:3, 16:11.69, 47:15), where it clearly means "all kinds of fruit." It should make us suspicious that the form that, according to the textbooks, is supposed to

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<sup>12</sup> The reason why *kullu l-buyūti* came to be understood as "all houses" may have been the phrase *kullu n-nāsi*, which seems to have been used quite early in the sense of "all people" instead of *kullu insānin*, which is conspicuously rare. Perhaps *kullu n-nāsi* was easier to pronounce in the dialects in which initial *hamza* was elided, and, after all, there is no great difference between "all sorts of people in the town" and "all people in the town." Note, however, that *kullu n-nāsi* does not occur in the Qur'an. One might also consider an analogy to the phrase *jamī' an-nās*.

be the regular classical Arabic equivalent for English “all” does not appear at all in the Qur’an with that meaning, and when it does appear, it means something different!

However, it is not my purpose to go into a lengthy discussion here about the differences between “every/each” and “all” in English and “jede/r/s” and “alle” in German. Suffice it to say that in many places where Paret and other translators have given the translation as “each” or “every,” “all” would have been the more suitable choice. To mention but one example, that of Q 10:79. Following the textbook rule, German and English translators have: “Bringt mir jeden kenntnisreichen Zauberer (herbei)” (Paret), “Bring me every cunning sorcerer” (Arberry), or “Bring me every sorcerer well versed” (Yusuf Ali). Translations like these may seem to imply, however, that, out of a known group of magicians, only those who are especially learned or cunning should be brought. But that is not what is meant. It should rather be translated to mean, “Bring me all (learned) magicians!” That is, “bring me all magicians, for they all consider themselves learned.” Therefore, a translation like “Bringt mir alle / all jene kenntnisreichen Zauberer,” “bring me all / all those learned sorcerers” would be closer to the original meaning.

Additionally, the syntagm *kullu baytin* has more meanings, in addition to “every house” or “each house” or “all houses.” In addition to universalizing the elements of a set, *kull* can also have a demonstrative function, i.e., to point to and define within a set those elements which are intended to be universalized. This demonstrative function can be seen quite clearly in the following verse from Labīd, speaking at the time of the Prophet:<sup>13</sup>

وَلَكِنْ مَالِي غَالَهُ كُلُّ جَفْنَةٍ إِذَا حَانَ وَرْدُ أُسْبَلَتْ بِدُمُوعِ

This verse is an example typical of the genre of “self praise” (*fakhr*), in which the poet presents himself as an embodiment of the pre-Islamic ideal of *murū’a*, or “manliness.” The subject here deals with generosity that reaches the utmost level of a general potlatch. Islam opposed this self-destructive way of generosity and replaced it by a more moderate idea of charity.

A free paraphrase of the verse would be: When it is time again for people to go to “drink,” i.e. to satisfy their needs, from the poet’s

<sup>13</sup> Labīd, *Dīwān*, 70, no. 10/5.

generosity, the poet offers them bowls full of camel meat, the fat of which flows over the brim of the bowls so that the bowls seem to shed tears. This is done in such a quantity that, metaphorically spoken, these bowls “destroy” all of the poet’s camels. In this verse, the phrase *kullu jafnin* cannot be adequately translated by either “all bowls” or by “each bowl,” given that bowls have not been mentioned before and so the referent would be unclear. There is no given set of bowls *all of which* have robbed the poet of his cattle, but the set of bowls in question is delimited and presented as being of a somewhat largish quantity at the same time that it is universalized by *kull*. *Kull* therefore carries out three distinct referential functions simultaneously: “*there is a large quantity of bowls*,” “*I am talking about these bowls*,” and “*I am talking about the whole set of these bowls*.” In English and German, these functions cannot be conveyed by words like “all” and “every,” which universalize a given set, but have little determinative value. The determiner has to be added as a separate word and we have to say something like “all the bowls,” “all those bowls,” or “all(e) die Schüsseln.” In Arabic, instead, the function of the definite article or the demonstrative pronoun is already fulfilled by *kull*, which is the reason why the singular noun that is preceded by *kull* cannot take the article *al-* in addition. Thus it is reasonable to translate the above verse as follows:

But all those bowls that flowed over with tears (of fat) when it was time again to go to drink, have robbed me of my cattle.

Additionally, it is not necessary in German or in English to use “all” for *kull*. An alternative is to use a zero article before the noun or a predeterminer before the non-count noun. Thus it is possible to say “worry has made him old early,” or “his worries have made him old early,” or “all the worry/all of the worry has aged him while still young.” But it is not possible to say “all worries have made him old early” or “every worry has made him old early.” Just as in the above example, where one can say “all of the bowls” or “all those bowls” or even just “bowls” or “the bowls,” but not “all bowls” or even “every bowl.”

The construction *kullu baytin* can therefore be used in classical Arabic in a distributive sense (as English “each” or “every” or German “jede/r/s”) or in a non-distributive sense (as English and German “all/alle”). It can refer to an already known set of elements, or it can define and determine this set by itself. *Kullu baytin* can therefore have

a number of different possible translations, among them: 1) each house; 2) all houses; 3) all (of) the houses / all those houses.

These insights thus offer the possibility for a better understanding of Q 22:27, as quoted above. In this verse, we heard that the pilgrims came “from *kull* deep ravine” (من كُلِّ بَحْ عَمِيقٍ). The word *kull* here operates in a similar way as it did in Labīd’s line. Up to this point there is no prior referent for “ravine” and thus it would not be immediately clear just which mountain valleys and passes were meant. Would this mean every one in the world? In Arabia? In the immediately surrounding area? Instead, *kull* as a first step refers to a relatively large number of deep ravines, which then is indicated to be taken in its totality: “There are no few deep mountain valleys here, and camels emerge from out of them all.” It is enough to insert a definite article or a demonstrative pronoun for an adequate translation: Pilgrims come “from all the deep ravines / from all those deep ravines.” In German, “aus jedem tief eingeschnittenen Paßweg” (Paret) is not an adequate translation. Rather, “aus all den tief eingeschnittenen Paßwegen” fits the intended meaning.

Yet another example is found in Q 11:59, where it is hardly reasonable to think that the people of ‘Ād follow *everyone* who strays from the right path, as most translations of *wa-ttaba’ū amra kulli jabbārin ‘anīd* suggest: “And followed the command of every powerful, obstinate transgressor” (Yusuf Ali); “and followed the command of every froward potentate” (Pickthall); “und folgten dem Befehl eines jeden (vom rechten Weg) abschweifenden Gewaltmenschen” (Paret). These translations suggest that the people of ‘Ād follow every man as soon as he is a transgressor. But this is absurd. Being a transgressor can have hardly been the criterion for the ‘Ād to decide to follow someone (here a tyrant). Instead, the ‘Ād used to follow their tyrants as a general rule, whether they have departed from the righteous path or not. The above translations give a tone of absurdity to the passage. Rather, an adequate German translation using Paret’s words would be “und folgten dem Befehl aller möglichen vom rechten Weg abschweifenden Gewaltmenschen.” In English, I could conceive of a translation like “they followed the command of many a tyrant who had digressed from the right path.” Another similar example, that of Q 26:255, will be treated more extensively below.

But back once again to Q 22:27, where yet another use of the word *kull* appears, at first sight, to seem to correspond to the pattern just

discussed: *'alā kulli ḍāmīrin*. Once again, *kull* can be translated neither by the word "each" or "every," nor by the word "all." A translation that states that the pilgrims came "on every lean camel" or "on all lean camels" does not make much sense. Instead, translations like "auf allerlei/lauter Mageren" (the first is Paret's choice), or "on all sorts of / nothing but lean ones" are better choices for conveying the original Arabic sense.

Constructions of this kind, where the word *kull* occurs before an adjective only (that is, with no corresponding noun), occur so frequently in poetry that it is strikingly apparent. Early Arabic poetry often uses long strands of adjectives preceded by the word "*kull*," in passages in which the poet boasts about, for example, his animals or weapons: "we mounted all the galloping ones (i.e., horses)," or "we mounted all kinds of galloping ones," or "we mounted on many a galloping one" and "we reached for all the sharp ones (i.e., swords)," or "... nothing but sharp ones," or "... many a sharp one." The use of *kull* in this fashion is so typical of poetry that the construction might well be called the "poetic *kull*." Semantically, what we have here is simply another instance of the demonstrative component of *kull* that was described above: "There is a not small number of swords. All are sharp" becomes "we reached for all those sharp ones ..." or "we reached for nothing but sharp ones."

What is remarkable about this construction is this: as omnipresent as this use of the "poetic *kull*" is in poetry, it is by contrast virtually absent as a construction in the Qur'an. Thus the *kull* phrase alone therefore signifies an unmistakable reference to the world of early Arabic poetry.

Although infrequent, poetic style does occasionally show up in verses from the Qur'an, as in Q 22:27, in which a stylistic device appears which is found most typically—and most importantly—in early Arabic poetry, the metonymy, or rather a specific kind of metonymy (or synecdoche) which is as characteristic of early Arabic poetry as is the Kenning (a form of metaphor) for old Norse Scandinavian poetry. Whenever an object becomes the focus of interest in pre-Abbasid Arabic poetry, whether it be camels, swords, or onagers, it must not be mentioned by its common name but by a metonymy, which takes the place of the common name (which itself does not appear at all). In most cases the metonymy designates a characteristic feature or a habitual act of the object in question. Thus a poet would avoid saying, "I mount a camel that is as fast as an onager," but would

look for other words for the animals. He might say instead “I mount a fleet one that is as fast as a braying one” or “I mount a light-brown meager one that is as fast as the one with the white stripes on the flank,” etc. In a corpus of eighty-three onager episodes from the pre-Islamic into the Umayyad period, the onager is introduced by its common name (*‘ayr*) only once. Instead, through combining conventional metonymic expressions or inventing new ones, the poet is able to establish his originality and achieve an eloquent literary effect.<sup>14</sup>

As central as metonymic expressions of this kind are to poetry, they are rarely found in the Qur’an. The fact that such metonymies are so absent from the literary style of the Qur’an represents an important example of negative intertextuality. The fact that only very few examples of this stylistic device occur throughout the Qur’an would seem to suggest that the device was *consciously* avoided. In those few places where it does appear, it is therefore all the more striking. A very preliminary list of possible cases of metonymies in the vein of early Arabic poetry might comprise the following items: *rawāsī* (13:3 and elsewhere), *qāṣirāt aṭ-ṭarf ‘in* (37:48 and elsewhere), *aṣ-ṣāfināt* (38:31), *al-ḥūr* (44:54 and elsewhere), *dhāt alwāḥi wa-dusur* (54:13), *khayrāt ḥisān* (55:70), *qaswara* (74:51), *mu‘ṣirāt* (78:14), *kawā‘ib atrāb* (78:33), *aṣ-ṣākhkha* (80:33), and *raḥīq makhtūm* (83:25). For each and every single one of these occurrences, it should be asked how and in what way these words or phrases make intentional reference to or are connected with good reason with the world of poetry. Once again, Q 22:27 proves to be an instance of direct intertextuality with poetry.

Another reference can be found in the next word, one that may at first appear somewhat insignificant—but is not: *fajj*, “ravine.” This word is frequently attested in poetry, quite often in the phrase *min kulli fajjin*.<sup>15</sup> But it is a *hapax legomenon* in the Qur’an. The Qur’an almost always refers to the natural world and its phenomena with general and relatively non-descriptive words. Trees are called *shajar*, palms *nakhl*, and mountains *jibāl*. This is *mubīn*, plain and clear language. But such language would have appeared overwhelmingly banal to the poets. By contrast, the poets were proud of their ability

<sup>14</sup> For further details, see Bauer, *Altarabische Dichtkunst*, chapter 8 (vol. 1, 172–204).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. e.g. Lewin, *Hudāilian Poems*, 326.

to name and describe the plants, to give every palm the name of its specific kind, and to mention every land formation with the most precise term possible. When the early Arabic philologists began in the eighth century CE to compose treatises about plants, camels, horses, sheep and goats, wells and pasture grounds, and other such subjects, they did not do this in order to understand the Qur'an better, but rather to preserve the most distinguished part of their heritage, their literature. The often heard claim that Arabic lexicography owes its existence to a desire to better understand the Qur'an is simply false, for the Qur'an did not contain any words of the kind that earlier lexicographic tracts had taken such pains to clarify. Only very few words in the Qur'an represent an exception to this rule. *Fajj* is one of them. It is the only term for a specific kind of terrain which is more descriptive than the general and more common words for mountain (*jabal*) and valley (*wādī*).

Containing as it does three distinct elements as described above—"poetic" *kull*, metonymy, and exactitude in naming a geographic terrain—Q 22:27 provides us with a clear reference to the world of pre-Islamic poetry. It is certainly no coincidence that this verse deals with the *hajj*, a pre-Islamic ritual of pilgrimage. Only when a larger number of passages that contain such references to the early Arabic world have been analyzed and compared can we determine just how much intertextuality—or negative intertextuality—we are dealing with. However, what is most clear at this point is that the strong reference to poetry that is contained in this verse becomes not only more evident but also more convincing when we are aware of the pattern of an absence of such intertextuality that is the norm between early Arabic poetry and the Qur'an.

#### 4. *The Surah of the Poets Revisited* (Q 26:225)

As I have been arguing all along, early Arabic poetry is in its totality more important for Qur'anic studies than has generally been acknowledged, primarily because (in the absence of any more direct correlation between the two) the corpus of poetry forms an important background against which the Qur'an emerged. Thus I will venture a further interpretation of the much discussed verse from the Surah of the Poets, Q 26:225. This verse has been translated a great many times. Curiously, no one thus far has ever considered it necessary to



check Arabic poetry itself for an interpretation of the verse which, given that poets are the subject of the verse, would seem to be an obvious connection. The text of Q 26:224–226 runs as follows:

وَالشُّعْرَاءُ يَتَّبِعُهُمُ الْغَاوُونَ  
أَلَمْ تَرَأَهُمْ فِي كُلِّ وَادٍ يَهيمُونَ  
وَأَنَّهُمْ يَقُولُونَ مَا لَا يَفْعَلُونَ

Verse 226 offers hardly any questions or uncertainties. Typically translated as “And that they do say what they do not do” (Zwettler), this verse could hardly be rendered in any other way. By contrast, vv. 224–225 offer multiple possibilities for different interpretations, as the following German and English translations show:

– Paret: “Und den Dichtern (die ihrerseits von den Satanen inspiriert sind) folgen diejenigen, die (vom rechten Weg) abgeirrt sind. / Hast du denn nicht gesehen, daß sie in jedem Wadi schwärmen [...]?”<sup>16</sup>

– Henning: “Und die Dichter, es folgen ihnen die Irrenden. / Schaust du nicht, wie sie in jedem Wadi verstört umherlaufen?”<sup>17</sup>

– Arberry: “And the poets—the perverse follow them; / Hast thou not seen how they wander in every valley [...]?”<sup>18</sup>

– Pickthall: “As for poets, the erring follow them. / Hast thou not seen how they stray in every valley [...]?”<sup>19</sup>

– Bell: “And the poets—them follow the beguiled. / Seest thou not that in every wādi they fall madly in love [...]?”<sup>20</sup>

– Shahid: “And the poets are inspired by those who lead astray. / Have you not seen how they wander / wander distraught in every valley [...]?”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Paret (trans.), *Koran*. In English: “And the poets (who, in their turn, are inspired by Satan), are followed by those who have erred (from the right path). Have you not seen, that they swarm in every Wadi?”

<sup>17</sup> Henning (trans.), *Koran*. In English: “And the poets, the mistaken follow them. Do you not see, how in every valley they run around distraught [...]?”

<sup>18</sup> Arberry (trans.), *The Koran Interpreted*.

<sup>19</sup> Pickthall (trans.), *Meaning of the Glorious Koran*.

<sup>20</sup> Bell (trans.), *The Qur’ān*.

<sup>21</sup> Shahid, “Koranic Exegesis.” It is not entirely certain that Shahid would have translated these verses in exactly the way that I have given them above; he himself did not provide us with a complete text of translation. For v. 224 cf. 569; for v. 225 cf. 571; for v. 226 cf. 568. Cf. also Shahid, “Another Contribution.”



– Schub: “As for the poets—the only ones who follow them are the fundamentally disoriented. / You know well that these (fundamentally disoriented) are the ones who flounder about in every wadi [...]”<sup>22</sup>

– Zwettler: “And the poets—them the perverse do follow! / Hast thou not seen that in every valley they are wildering?”<sup>23</sup>

Yet the greatest differences of opinion concern verse 225. Paret translates this verse, which he clearly did not understand, by an equally incomprehensible German phrase. Most other translators understand *hāma* to mean roughly something like “to err, wander, be distracted, stray” with further qualifying information added by such adverbs like “confused, directionless, distracted, bewildered.” These translations obviously owe their existence to the fact that there are not too many things that poets can sensibly do in a valley, and to stray in it, while having lost one’s course, seems to be one of the most obvious ones. However, the problem here is that *hāma* does not have this meaning at all. This meaning can neither be found in early lexicons (such as al-Azhari’s *Tahdhīb al-lughā*)<sup>24</sup> nor is there a single occurrence of the verb in this meaning in the whole of pre-Islamic poetry. It seems clear that the meaning of *hāma* as “wander around” or “stray” has been somewhat capriciously selected as one way to make sense of this text. It should be rejected as a possible translation. Zwettler’s translation “wilder” provides the additional problem that it is an archaic English expression for what is, as we shall see, a most common word of everyday usage in the Arabic language at the Prophet’s time.

<sup>22</sup> Schub, “Qur’ān 26:22.”

<sup>23</sup> Zwettler, “A Mantic Manifesto.”—In a later treatment of this *āya*, Zwettler translates: “[...] that in every wādī [thirstily] they do wilder?” The addition of “thirstily,” albeit in square brackets and without comment, brings his interpretation closer to the one I am offering here, although “wilder” still is not the proper meaning of *hāma*. Cf. Zwettler, “Sura of the Poets,” 114.

<sup>24</sup> Al-Azhari, *Tahdhīb al-lughā*. The *Tahdhīb* is an indispensable tool for research on the Qur’an and on pre- and early Islamic poetry, not the least because al-Azhari states his sources so very precisely (contrary to the *Lisān al-‘arab*, which gives only al-Azhari’s name whenever he is quoted). The reader can thus distinguish how expert any given translation may be. Thus, for example, an explanation of a geographical term that is given on the authority of al-Naḍr ibn Shumayl is to be given precedence over the explanation by, let’s say, al-Aṣma’i. Zwettler is right to refer to al-Azhari’s work as a “massive and too seldom consulted dictionary.” (Zwettler, “Sura of the Poets,” 116).

Bell is the only one of the translators cited above who provides us with a translation that is based on a meaning that the word *hāma* at least really does contain: to “fall madly in love.” This meaning is found not only in the lexica of the time, but also in poetry. For example, ‘Abīd ibn al-Abraṣ says in one of his lines: *fihinna Hindu l-latī hāma l-fu’ādu bihā*,<sup>25</sup> “among them (i.e., among the women in their litters) is Hind, by whom my heart is enflamed with passionate love.” But could this be the intended meaning in the Qur’anic verse about the poets? Apart from the fact that *hāma* in the sense of “fall madly in love with” should have an object introduced by *bi-*,<sup>26</sup> there remains the question of why love would come into play at all at this point. And, as Shahīd has already observed, wadis are not the most obvious places to fall in love, even less so “every wadi,” which means nothing less than the following absurdity: as soon as a poet enters a wadi, he falls madly in love. This is not the normal social behavior of poets.

Although Arabic poetry offers evidence that *hāma* may mean “seized by intense love,” this is nonetheless not at all the most common meaning of the root *h-y-m*. It is, however, very probable that the word *yahīmu* is used in the Qur’an with much the same meaning as it is used in poetry. This meaning is “to be thirsty in the highest degree,” “to be at the verge of dying of thirst,” “to be suffering from extreme pains of thirst,” “to go crazy from thirst.” It is from this primary meaning that the secondary and more metaphorical meaning derives, that is, “to languish from love,” “to die of love,” “to be crazy in love.” It is not difficult to find any number of examples for the primary meaning in pre- and early Islamic poetry. Most often the form occurs as *hīmun*, a plural form of *hā’imun*, f. *haymā’u*. It is used most typically to describe camels, but also can be said of onagers and humans.<sup>27</sup> The context usually involves a description of a desert journey in which the poet describes how he has passed through a desert for days on end with no water. A typical passage can be found in a poem by Labīd, in which he says, among other things (vv. 6–11):

Many a wide desert have I passed through on able she-camels, weary  
their soles and flesh,

which the heat of midday covers every day with sweat that seems to be  
tar in their armpits.

<sup>25</sup> Lyall (ed.), *Diwans*, 11 (‘Abīd 21:5) (my translation).

<sup>26</sup> See also *Aṣma’iyyāt* 15:8.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Bauer, *Altarabische Dichtkunst*, vol. 2, 497 (index).

They set off for a long journey and exposed themselves to the burning of the midday sun and the simoom.

So they became the desert's ships and summoned up all their courage to endure five days of thirst in a mirage-flooding, biting desert,

(Such a desert) I crossed to known areas, with unkempt men and fatigued camels from 'Īd's breed, almost dying of thirst (وأطلاج من العيدي) (هيم).<sup>28</sup>

Thus far, Labīd offers us an example that is entirely typical of the use of the word *hīm*. One can easily find such typical examples in large number throughout the whole of early Arabic literature. The verb *hāma* (*yahīmu*), meaning "to die of thirst," is also attested in early Arabic poetry. A verse from 'Āmir ibn al-Ṭufayl, an exact contemporary of the Prophet, runs as follows:

تَرعى فَرَارَةً فِي مَقَرِّ بِلَادِهَا وَتَهَيِّمُ بَيْنَ شَقَائِقِ وَرِمَالٍ

Fazārah pasture their camels in the very midst of their home-land, and the herds suffer torments of thirst between the long rugged strips clear of sand, and the sand-hills.<sup>29</sup>

The poet wants to make the tribe of the Fazāra appear ridiculous, and reproaches them for letting the cattle die of thirst out of fear of an attack rather than driving them out to water.

These pieces of evidence may suffice to establish that "almost dying of thirst" or "suffering from thirst" is the most frequent meaning that can be assigned to the word *hāma* in early Arabic poetry. It is also apparent that this meaning occurs in the Qur'an as well, in Q 56:54f. in describing the conditions in hell:

فَشَارِبُونَ عَلَيْهِ شُرْبَ الْحَمِيمِ

فَشَارِبُونَ شُرْبَ الْهَيْمِ

Paret's translation runs:

Und obendrein (w. darauf) werdet ihr heißes Wasser trinken,

So (gierig) wie Kamele, die die Saufrkrankheit haben (?).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Labīd, *Dīwān*, 101–103, no. 13. On line 10 cf. WKAS 2/1:226 b 23–35.

<sup>29</sup> Lyall (trans.), *Diwans*, 114/102 ('Āmir 9:1) (Lyall's translation).

<sup>30</sup> "And on top of everything else, you will drink hot water / as (eager) as camels that are stricken with the drinking-disease (?)."

Considering the many examples of *hīm* that occur in the literature, it is difficult to justify a translation that uses the word “Saufkrankheit” (“drinking disease”) and its accompanying question mark. But the passage means nothing less than that the inhabitants of Hell are “dying of thirst.” Note that *hīm* is used here obviously to refer to camels and therefore provides another rare example of a metonymy in the vein of ancient Arabic poetry.

If we take into account both the internal evidence in the Qur’an and the evidence from poetry that backs it up, then it seems most likely that *yahīmūn* in Q 26:255 means “almost dying of thirst.” And that brings us back now to the problem of Bell’s translation as “crazy with love.” While it is far more plausible that someone in the desert would be suffering from thirst rather than dying from love, it is still unclear what thirst has to do with poets. But in order to solve this puzzle, we need first to make a digression.

#### 5. Poets and Other Liars (Q 52:31)

Although poets and poetry are quite specifically mentioned in verse Q 26:224ff., other (less specific and less detailed) references can also be found in verses Q 21:5, 36:69, 37:36, 52:30 and 69:41. In all these references care is taken to declare that the Prophet Muhammad is not a poet and that his proclamations shall not be taken as poetry. Especially interesting is Q 37:35–37, which run as follows:

إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا إِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ  
وَيَقُولُونَ أَأَنْتَ لَتَأْتِرْكُونَا الْهَيْتَا الشَّاعِرِ مَجْنُونٍ  
بَلْ جَاءَ بِالْحَقِّ وَصَدَقَ الْمُرْسَلِينَ

Arberry translates: “[...] for when it was said to them, ‘There is no god but God,’ they were ever waxing proud, saying, ‘What, shall we forsake our gods for a poet possessed?’ ‘No indeed; but he brought the truth, and confirmed the Envoys.’” Similarly, Pickthall has: “For when it was said unto them, There is no god save Allah, they were scornful And said: Shall we forsake our gods for a mad poet? Nay, but he brought the Truth, and he confirmed those sent (before him).”

Yet even as clear as this passage is, it still presents us with a potential problem of misinterpretation. For in this place and this place alone, the word *shā'ir* is used with the word *majnūn*. Because Goldziher in his *Abhandlungen zur arabischen Philologie* had already collected passages according to which a certain form of poetry (but not poetry as a whole) had been considered in earlier times as inspired by demons, this passage has been taken as confirmation of this theory. Thus this passage has been used as evidence that the statement according to which the Prophet is not a poet was made in order to oppose the accusation that the Prophet was inspired by demons.<sup>31</sup> Irfan Shahid's interpretation of verse Q 26:224ff. rests on this assumption. However, such an interpretation of the passage Q 37:36 cited above is only possible if verse 36 is considered apart from its context. From the following verse, it is made more than eminently clear that it was not the type of inspiration which disturbed the sinners, but rather that they merely doubted the truthful content of the proclamation.

Yet another point should make us suspicious. The passage suggests that the sinners had indeed regarded Muhammad as a poet. But the reasons given are quite curious ones: that the sinners always accused the Prophet of being a poet whenever he preached that, "there is no god but God." This is an unusual connection, given that the text of the Islamic confession of a monotheistic God does not give the slightest occasion for thinking about poetry, neither in a linguistic nor in a stylistic way. The only thing that it has, in the eyes of the sinners, in common with poetry, is that it is a lie. And that makes them think of poetry.

Other passages confirm this. Muhammad is taken not only to be a poet, but also as a *kāhin* or magician (*sāhir*). Now, we do not know very much about the kinds of activities a *kāhin* would have engaged in, but the little we do know does not correspond at all with the actions of Muhammad. Where magicians are concerned, this lack of correspondence is even clearer: Muhammad was clearly no magician; he was not able to perform magic. The charges levied against Muhammad are not that he *would* perform magic, but rather than he *could not* do so. Behind the reproach against him as a would-be magician stands none other than the charge that he is a liar: *hādhā*

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<sup>31</sup> The *locus classicus* for the inspiration of poets by jinn is Ignaz Goldziher, "Higā'-Poesie." Note that Goldziher is much more cautious in his conclusions than most of his followers.

*sāḥirun kadhdhābun* (Q 38:4). The charges that Muhammad would have been known as a *majnūn*, as a possessed person, belong in the same category. Despite the many references to Muhammad as *kāhin*, *sāḥir*, *shā'ir*, und *majnūn*, which appear in various combinations,<sup>32</sup> these do not in the least imply that he was believed to be all these things. Rather, they function as a debasement. In the eyes of the residents of Mecca, with their emphasis on a sober rationality, Muhammad simply appeared to be lacking in reliability. By equating the Prophet with these dubious kinds of people, his denouncers merely wanted to brand him as a liar—without necessarily postulating any further commonalities with any of these groups.

But above all stands the accusation that Muhammad's message is nothing less than a lie in and of itself. This is the real claim that lies behind any accusation of Muhammad being a poet. For example, in Q 36:69, we find:

وَمَا عَلَّمْنَاهُ الشِّعْرَ وَمَا يَنْبَغِي لَهُ إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا ذِكْرٌ وَقُرْآنٌ مُبِينٌ

We did not teach him poetry. Poetry would have been inappropriate for him. It is nothing other than a reminder and a clear Qur'an.

In admitting that Muhammad is not a poet, this verse answers opponents that reproach the Prophet not for being a poet, but rather for *not* being one. The excuse is offered that it would not suit the Prophet to be a poet. Then two important differences between the Qur'an and poetry are offered: The Qur'an is *dhikr*, an admonition, and contains ethical dimensions that are not found in poetry (that is, according to its believers, for of course poetry may also be ethically-oriented, although differently so, and thus not accepted as such by the religious). And the Qur'an is *mubīn*, which poetry is not. Early Arabic poetry is full of words that are difficult to understand, full of metonymies and comparisons; these are available only to the most refined connoisseurs. Such poetry is highly intertextual, containing a great number of intertextual references. Only those who could recognize the intricate designs of a motif, a formula, a comparison could truly appreciate its aesthetic qualities. Early Arabic poetry was a matter for a narrow and high stratum of aristocrats, experts, enthusiasts, and not at all intended for the common folk.<sup>33</sup> The production of such texts would not be at all an appropriate undertaking for the Prophet.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. EQ, s. v. "Insanity."

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Bauer, *Altarabische Dichtkunst*, vol. 1.

By contrast, the Qur'an claims to be an entirely different kind of literature. Its purpose is to convey an ethical message, a proclamation intended to reach out to everyone and not just to a small group of connoisseurs. Therefore, the Qur'an is intentionally free from the obscure stylistic devices that marked poetry, is thus *mubīn*, as it is stated some thirteen times. In order for the Qur'an to be a *kitāb mubīn*, a clear or transparent book, as it is so often claimed, there must be something against which it is measured that is not *mubīn*. And this is, on the one hand, the non-Arabic writing of the Jews and the Christians, but also, on the other hand, as this passage shows, Arabic poetry with its consciously artificial and highly wrought language.

Before we return to a consideration of Q 26:224ff., I would like to look at a final passage, Q 52:29–31, in which poetry is also the topic:

فَذَكِّرْ فَأَنْتَ بِنِعْمَةِ رَبِّكَ بِكَاهِنٍ وَلَا مَجْنُونٍ  
أَمْ يَقُولُونَ شَاعِرٌ نَّبَرَّيْصُ بِهِ رَيْبَ الْمُنُونِ  
قُلْ تَرَبَّصُوا فَإِنِّي مَعَكُمْ مِنَ الْمُرِصِينَ

Therefore remind! by the Lord's blessing thou art not a soothsayer neither possessed.

Or do they say, "He is a poet for whom we await Fate's uncertainty"?

Say: "Await! I shall be awaiting with you." (Arberry)

Here, too, it is above all established that Muhammad is neither a *kāhin*, nor someone possessed, nor a poet. Already this string of reproaches to which the verse answers reveals that the unbelievers cannot possibly have been convinced that he really ever was a *kāhin* or a poet, since if Muhammad had offered conclusive evidence that he was a member of one of these groups, any identification with any one of them would have excluded the others. For a poet and a *kāhin*, to say nothing of the charge of being a magician, have nothing in common, except for the fact that, in the world in which Muhammad then lived, they had the reputation of telling lies. Additionally, one can observe in the above passage that *majnūn* and *shā'ir* mean two different things. Thus there is not necessarily a connection between being a poet and being possessed.

The main argument in Q 52:29–31 is directed against the accusation that the Prophet is a poet. The statement of the disbelievers is cited here in direct speech, and it may seem somewhat enigmatic at first sight. Paret offers the following translation: “(Er ist) ein Dichter. Wir wollen abwarten (und sehen), was das Schicksal an unvorhergesehenem (Unheil) für ihn bereit hat.”<sup>34</sup> Contrary to Arberry’s more adequate translation quoted above, Paret places a period after the word “poet.” He begins a new sentence with the word *natarabbaṣu*. This gives the impression that Paret sees no connection between being a poet and the ominous “unforeseen disaster,” but rather that the predictions of disaster have more to do with the ill-will of the unbelievers. However, this is not the case, for the words *natarabbaṣu bihī* represent a relative clause, one that modifies the word “poet.” This seems to create a rather strange meaning, for why should poets be singled out for misfortune any more than any other beings? But this is not what is meant: it is not that poets are more often victims of *rayb al-manūn*, but rather simply that they talk about such things as *rayb al-manūn* more often than other people!

The word *manūn* occurs in the Qur’an in this one passage only. Although the word *rayb* is more often attested in the Qur’an, it has a different meaning here than it does in all of the other passages. The word *maniyya*, which is almost identical in meaning with the word *manūn*, does not appear in the Qur’an at all. The concept of fate as it is implied by the words *manūn* and *maniyya*<sup>35</sup> is foreign to the message of the Qur’an. By contrast, these two words occur quite frequently in poetry and represent essential and key concepts about the world as it is portrayed by early Arabic poetry. Additionally, in many passages where the word *manūn* is used in poetry, it appears in combination with the word *rayb*.<sup>36</sup> Even more telling is the fact that the phrase *rayb al-manūn* is also an important keyword in early Arabic poetry. To be a victim of *rayb al-manūn* can mean either the imminence of one’s own death or the death of a close relative, and thus it is typically heard as a lament in poetry of mourning. On hearing this expression, every contemporary of Muhammad must have inevitably thought of poetry. And verse Q 52:30 also raises the subject of the poet. Therefore, one cannot avoid the conclusion that the expression

<sup>34</sup> “(He is) a poet. We will wait (and see) what unforeseen (disaster) fate has in store for him.”

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Caskel, *Schicksal*.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. evidence in Caskel, *Schicksal* and Lewin, *Hudāilian Poems*.



*rayb al-manūn* in this verse represents a *quotation* from poetry, as if it were something said by the unbelieving. Such people were not, as we have seen, especially convinced by Muhammad's poetic abilities; this expression here is meant to be somewhat ironic and derogatory. Thus the choice of exactly this expression is extremely skillful, because the opponents of Muhammad could succeed at putting words into the mouth of the supposed poet that were diametrically opposed to the message of the Qur'an. Compare, for example, the rejection of the *dahr* in verse Q 45:24. Thus the mockery of his opponents did not rest with simply describing Muhammad as a poet; they went further and ascribed to him the doctrines about which he as a poet would have had to speak. If he were, in fact, a true poet, then he certainly would have had to begin to speak about *rayb al-manūn* happening to him. Somewhat crudely given, Muhammad answers: "Then you'd still be waiting."

Knowledge of early Arabic poetry thus allows us to recognize in Q 52:31 an ironically used quotation from poetry that is put into the mouth of the opponents of Muhammad.

#### 6. *Poets Dying of Thirst in the Wadi (Q 26:225 Continued)*

It is finally time now to return to a deeper consideration of verse Q 26:225. We have seen that, in general, poets in Muhammad's environment were not trusted to tell the truth. And Muhammad was accused of being a poet for no other reason than that. In the same vein, the real accusation in Q 26:226 is not that he is a poet, but rather a liar. This is made very clear when it is said of the poets "that they say what they do not do."

This passage in the Surah of the Poets is apparently directed at a different audience than those passages in which the reproaches that the Prophet be a poet are refuted. The purpose of Q 26:224–226 is to show that poets are in fact truly liars. So these verses must be directed at those people who had no prejudice against poets as liars. The target of these verses are those who are followers of the poets, those who believe in them and share their world view.

The worldview of the aristocratic elite stemming from powerful Bedouin tribes is characterized by the concept of the *murū'a*, which describes a heroic and manly ethos held by a social group who were not mere herders of camels (this work was carried out by slaves and

lesser tribes). Rather, they were seen instead as heroes of war and battle, of the hunt, of the feast and even of poetry, whereby the ability to compose formally perfect and effective poems was not only mere literary talent but itself a part of this system of values.<sup>37</sup> By contrast, the word *murū'a* does not occur in the Qur'an.

The virtue of *murū'a* includes bravery, generosity, courage, a sense of honor, and other similar qualities. All of these values are glorified in early Arabic poetry. Talks of fights, wine and feats, the *maysir* game, of the hunt, of conquests in love with pampered and elegant women, and other such subjects occur frequently. When the poets spoke of these subjects, to be sure, they might exaggerate and embroider them, but it cannot be claimed that they were outright lying. In Q 26:226, instead, the poets are accused of “say[ing] what they do not do.” Consequently, we have to look for a common motif in pre- and early Islamic poetry, in which the poets boast of acts which in reality they did not perform.

The most obvious solution is the following: One of the actions by which one proves one's *murū'a* is suffering deprivation and facing dangers. As one of the most common of themes in poetry, proving oneself is often achieved by fighting bravely or in bearing the hardships of a long desert journey. There could hardly have been even one poet who did not treat this subject in some fashion or the other. The desert journey of Labid has already been mentioned above. We also find this theme even more frequently in the writings of Ka'b ibn Zuhayr, another contemporary—and at first opponent—of the Prophet. Again and again, this poet has described in his *qaṣā'id* how he crossed a dangerous desert, one in which it was easy to get lost because there were no recognizable landmarks, a desert that was “dun and dangerous, in which the whistling of the Djinn is heard and which only ‘whole’ men dared to cross,”<sup>38</sup> a wasteland in which the wolves howl, the bleached bones of carcasses lie about—a desert where one could easily die from thirst.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> See Montgomery, “Dichotomy.”

<sup>38</sup> Ka'b ibn Zuhayr, *Dīwān*, 36: *بِمَضِيعَةِ غَيْرَاءَ تَعْرِفُ جَنْهَا مَذَكَّارُ*. Oskar Rescher translates: “[...] in einer erdfarbenen gefährlichen Wüste [...], in der der Djinn Pfeifen zu hören war und die nur ganze Männer zu durchqueren wagen” (Rescher, *Beiträge*, 103).

<sup>39</sup> Additional evidence from Ka'b: p. 73–81 (trans. Rescher, *Beiträge*, 113–115); p. 92–97 (trans. Rescher, *Beiträge*, 117–119); p. 124–125 (trans. Rescher, *Beiträge*,

And therein lies the explanation for verse Q 26:225. What the poets say but in fact do not do, is found in the Qur'an itself: *fi kulli wādin yahīmūn*, "to die from thirst in all those wadis." Just as with *rayb al-manūn* in Q 52:30, the meaning is intended to be ironic; the only difference is that it is represented indirectly rather than as direct speech. In countless pieces of poetry, poets claim to have crossed a dangerous desert where for days on end there was no water to drink, where they and their camels were dying of thirst. But this is exactly what the poets, as members of a wealthy and aristocratic upper class, did not do: "die from thirst" in the desert. This theme is treated in poetry for several reasons: because it is one of the most major and conventional themes of poetry, because the poet can thus show off his artistry, because it is wonderfully suitable as a way of showing the virtue of the *murū'a*; because in poems of praise it is also well-suited as a motif of transition, which allows the poet to describe, as if before the very eyes of the person being praised, the many exertions which had to be taken and undergone in order for him (the poet) to come before the praised one and praise him. In reality it would not have occurred to any poet to make such a dangerous ride through the middle of a difficult desert. The wars at that time in the north and south of Arabia show that it was indeed possible to transport whole armies through the desert and across Arabia. And it was entirely possible to avoid such conditions as hunger and thirst on the way to Mecca, al-Ḥira, or any other place that might reasonably be treated in the poetry of the day. Could there be any better proof of the mendacity of the poets than the fact that they nevertheless insisted in claiming otherwise?

Three additional points still need to be briefly mentioned in order to drive home the intentions of the Qur'an here. First of all, the meaning of *kull* in *fi kulli wādin* is worth singling out. It is an example of the demonstrative function of *kull* as described above, in which it is still open to question exactly which wadis are being referred to, since there has been up to this point no discussion of any wadis, and the listener cannot glean from his previous knowledge nor from the context precisely which wadis suddenly are being talked about. With this reference, the set of the wadis is thus established first by means of this word *kull*; only secondarily is this number universalized.

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129–130); p. 136–139 (trans. Rescher, *Beiträge*, 134–135); p. 216–221 (trans. Rescher, *Beiträge*, 154–156).

Therefore, this expression should not be translated here as meaning “in each wadi” or “in every wadi,” but rather “in all the wadis” or “in all those wadis,” or perhaps even as “in all kinds of wadis.”

Although the preceding verse (Q 26:224) causes us no problems in its translation, nonetheless translations from Paret and Shahid do give occasion to raise a couple of remarks. First of all, the verse is a topic-comment sentence, in which the theme “the poets” is brought forward against the usual word order and sentence construction, in order to place special emphasis on it. Such topic-comment sentences are frequently found in the Qur’an. Just to mention two examples:

Q 42:26: *وَالْكَافِرُونَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ* “And the unbelievers—for them awaits a terrible chastisement” (Arberry);

Q 55:10: *وَالْأَرْضَ وَضَعَهَا لِلْأَنَامِ* “And earth—He set it down for all beings” (Arberry).

Unlike Paret’s translation (but in correspondence with most English translations), this construction should be reflected in the translation.

Finally, a short notice on Irfan Shahid’s translating the word *ghāwūn* as “lead astray” may suffice, given the thorough refutation of this idea by M. Zwettler, with which I completely agree.<sup>40</sup> The main argument against Shahid’s interpretation is the evidence within the Qur’an where *ghāwūn*, in all six passages in which the word *ghāwūn* occurs, means “to go astray.” The closest parallels to our verse are offered by Q 15:42, where both *ghāwūn* and also *ittaba’a*<sup>41</sup> occur. In this passage, God says to Iblīs that he shall not have authority over his servants “except those that follow thee, that is, those who go astray” (*illā man ittaba’aka minā l-ghāwīn*, my own translation).

I have already addressed the fact that Shahid’s idea of the poets’ demonic inspiration is somewhat overblown. Professional poets were regarded at this time as artists who achieved immortality by means of their own artistry (as can be shown by many poetic passages). Furthermore, professional poets mention demonic inspiration only very seldom and often with an ironic twist. Instead, in the many lines in which poets boast of their skill in poetry, they always insist that their poetry be their very own and individual achievement. Demons

<sup>40</sup> Zwettler, “Sura of the Poets.”

<sup>41</sup> Shahid’s suggestion that *ittaba’a* is used in a technical way here and means something like “inspired” has no basis (Shahid, “Koranic Exegesis,” 569).

are never mentioned in this context as a source of inspiration.<sup>42</sup> For Paret's parenthetical insertion ("die ihrerseits von den Satanen inspiriert sind"), which even for Paret is extraordinarily redundant, there is no basis.

Thus it remains that the *ghāwūn* are those people who go astray. That is, Q 26:224–226 is more appropriately translated as follows:

And the poets: Those who go astray follow them. /

Don't you know that they "die from thirst in all kinds of valleys," /

and that they (as you can see) do not do what they say they do?<sup>43</sup>

This passage makes two points: It begins as a straightforward and rather simple statement about the path of righteousness: whoever follows the poets is not following the right path, that path that leads to salvation. But it also contains a somewhat surprising point, which is that, in the end, this is exactly what the poets themselves say! The poets themselves are being quoted, as they themselves say that they constantly "die from thirst in all those wadis"! The same destiny thus awaits those who follow the poets. Or maybe not. For there is also a second surprising twist to this saying: in reality, poets do not die of thirst at all in the valleys, but are just boasting. That of course makes the accusation here even worse: those who follow the poets have lost their way because poets are liars, when they glorify the deceitful ideal of the virtue of the *murū'a*.

These verses are a rhetorical gem. With the utmost brevity (a style known as *ijāz* in Arabic rhetoric and used to the utmost in the Qur'an), and by a clever word play full of biting irony, a popular theme of poetry is turned back against the poets. A powerful argument is thus evoked, one which warns people against following the poets in the value system of the *murū'a* which they represent. As Q 2:227 also makes clear, it is not the act of poetry per se which is bad, but rather

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<sup>42</sup> The overestimation of the idea of demonic inspiration of poetry is the main shortcoming of Zwettler's article "A Mantic Manifesto." I know of no single, non-ironic *qarīd*-line composed by a Mukhaḍram poet, in which his verses are ascribed to the inspiration of jinn. Instead, there are dozens of lines in which a poet is proud of his own inimitable lines, which he considers the exclusive achievement of his own poetic faculty.

<sup>43</sup> In German: "Und nun zu den Dichtern: Ihnen folgen die, die in die Irre gehen. / Man weiß doch, daß sie 'in allerlei Wadis vor Durst schier verschmachten,' / und daß sie (wie man sieht) nicht tun, was sie sagen!"

the old Arabic world view of hero-worship and boastful worldview perpetuated by the poets.

Although this verse—which in a sense quotes back to the poets their own formulations— represents an exception rather than the rule, it should nevertheless be clear by now that there is a constant “presence” of early Arabic poetry in the Qur’an as a whole, be it in the form of lexicographic, grammatical, and stylistic parallels between poetry and the Qur’an, or through the use of allusions and quotations, or, lastly but perhaps most importantly, in the conscious avoidance of some of the key characteristic elements of poetry. The fact that entire collections of the poems of early Arabic poets such as the *Dīwān* of Bishr ibn Abī Khāzim, to mention just this example, remain fully unresearched is an indicator of just how much work in the world of Arabic poetry remains. While it is equally clear that Qur’an research would benefit from explorations into the world of both Syrian and Ethiopic sources, quite obviously the best place to start is with those texts that derive from that period immediately surrounding the revelation of the Qur’an, namely, early Arabic poetry.

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## QUR'ANIC READINGS OF THE PSALMS\*

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### *Introduction*

*Kullu man 'alayhā fān*—"everyone on earth is to perish / but the face of your Lord, full of majesty and grace, shall abide." This Qur'anic verse is the expressive headline of a funeral inscription on the tomb of Turkān Khātūn,<sup>1</sup> a pious Mongol lady who had in her will ordained to be buried in Jerusalem, in a mausoleum on Ṭarīq Bāb as-Silsilah. The verse has spoken to innumerable pious, who since Turkān Khātūn's time, the fourteenth century, have passed through that road on their way to the Ḥaram ash-Sharīf and the Aqṣā Mosque. The verse for the Muslim observer evokes one of the most significant texts of his tradition, Sūrat al-Raḥmān. But were it realized and read by non-Muslims as well, it would speak to them no less suggestively, since it reflects a verse of the Psalms, Ps 104:29/31, which says about God's relation to mankind: "They all perish, to dust they return [...] may the glory of the Lord endure forever"—in Hebrew: *tōsēf rūḥām yigwā'ūn we-el 'aphārām yeshūbhūn [...]* *yehī kebhōd YHWH le-'ōlām*. The Qur'anic verse thus is a poetic reminder of the truth that Jerusalem, the emblem of monotheism, is a palimpsest of plural traditions, some of which—certainly the Psalms—permeate the entire fabric; it also proves that the Christian tradition did not close the gate of biblical interpretation.

The topic of this paper is this very kind of intertextuality between the Qur'an and the Psalms, though as confined to the early Meccan texts. Heinrich Speyer,<sup>2</sup> an eminent representative of pre-Second-World-War German Qur'anic scholarship, has alerted us to the large amount of traces of psalm verses reflected in the Qur'an. He lists no less than 141, a number that can be easily increased through a micro-structural reading of the Qur'an, such as is presently undertaken in

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\* I thank Ghassan El-Masri for patiently correcting my English.

<sup>1</sup> See Borgoyne, *Mamluk Jerusalem*, 321–324.

<sup>2</sup> See Rosenthal, "Speyer's Die biblischen Erzählungen."

the framework of the *Corpus Coranicum* project at the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften. The evaluation of these Psalm references as to their new function in the Qur'an, however—eighty years after Speyer's death—is still to be achieved. There are obstacles in the way for both Western criticism and Islamic tradition. In contrast to the narrative parts of the Qur'an, whose relation to earlier traditions is often immediately evident in view of shared protagonists and plots, reminiscences of the Psalms often consist in small-scale references like an individual image or idea and thus easily escape scholarly attention. For traditionalist Muslim scholars, the problem of their retrieval lies deeper: Although there is a deep interest in the discussion of the traces of earlier scriptures in the Qur'an, documented in the early classical exegetical genre of the *Isrā'iliyāt*, there is complete silence in the Islamic tradition vis-à-vis the Qur'anic reflections of the Psalms. Indeed, to draw a connection between the Psalms and the Qur'an touches on a core Qur'anic prerogative, the exclusive Arabness of its linguistic form, imagery, and literary composition. The obviously given Arabic character of the Qur'anic text, on the one hand, and the factual presence of psalm intertexts in the Qur'an, on the other, thus raise the challenging question of how the Qur'an could appropriate psalm texts without itself turning into a paraphrase of those earlier Hebrew or Syriac texts, which in the milieu of the Qur'an's emergence played a formative role in shaping liturgical language. This paper tries to show for a particularly striking case of psalm intertextuality that we are here confronted, not with simple mimesis, but with the much more dynamic process of one—new—literary text eclipsing and outbidding an older other, with a deep awareness of the significance of the Arabic language involved.

### *The Qur'an and the Psalms*

The Psalms as a partial corpus of the Bible are from early on familiar to the Qur'anic community. Already a middle Meccan surah, Q 17:55, mentions a scripture ascribed to David, called *zabūr*,<sup>3</sup> "Psalms," a designation whose use as a technical term seems to have been pro-

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<sup>3</sup> Q 17:55 *wā-ātaynā Dā'ūdā zabūrā* ("and we gave David the Psalms"). *Zabūr* is mentioned here like in Q 4:163 without article, as against Q 21:105, where the article is used. The plural *zabur* (Q 26:196, 16:44, 35:25, 3:184) denotes "heavenly writings in which human deeds are recorded", see Horovitz, "Zabūr."

moted by the Qur'an<sup>4</sup>; *zabūr* is equally mentioned in Q 21:105 (middle Meccan) and Q 4:163 (Medinan). The Psalms, strictly spoken, thus coexist as a scripture in itself with the Torah (*at-tawrāt*), given to Moses, and the Gospel (*al-injīl*) related to Jesus—without, however, reaching a position comparable to theirs as an authoritative precursor of the new revelation; David's Qur'anic significance is also much below that of Moses and Jesus. It is only one Qur'anic statement that is explicitly connected to the Psalms, namely, Q 21:105: *wa-la-qad katabnā fī z-zabūri min ba'di dh-dhikri anna l-arḍa yarithuhā 'ibādiya ṣ-ṣāliḥūn* ("we wrote in the Psalms—after the praise—: my just servants will inherit the earth")—which in its wording is reminiscent of Ps 37:9.11.29.<sup>5</sup> Even more, however, than through their concrete textual form, the Psalms are present in the Qur'an as a liturgical type, to a degree that one can assume psalm intertexts for wide parts of the early Qur'anic texts. Indeed, many early surahs sound like distant echoes of the Psalms, such as the "consolation surahs" al-Kawthar (Q 108) and ash-Sharḥ (Q 94), or Qur'anic hymns like al-A'lā (Q 87) and al-'Alaq (Q 96), or "refrain surahs" like ar-Raḥmān (Q 55), which will be discussed below, and al-Mursalāt (Q 77), the latter two recalling psalms shaped in the form of a litany. Since liturgical piety imprinted by psalm texts has to be presupposed for the Syrian Churches whose impact reached out into the region of the Arabian Peninsula,<sup>6</sup> this mode of liturgical expression should not have been alien to the Qur'anic community either<sup>7</sup>—although it would of course be problematic to exclude an impact exerted on the peninsula by Jewish liturgical traditions as well. Since there are no translations of

<sup>4</sup> Fraenkel, *Fremdwörter*, 248.—Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 148–149, holds that "the word must somehow have arisen as a corruption of some Jewish or Christian word for the Psalter." Since *zabūr* is etymologically related to Arabic *z-b-r* (*zabara* = to write down; cf. also *dhabara*, used in poetry for the operations of a Himyarite scribe, see Montgomery, "Nexus," 286), it may be the result of the fusion of a Jewish or Christian designation of the Psalms by a derivative of *z-m-r*, like Hebrew *mizmōr* or Syriac *mazmōrā*, with the Arabic root *z-b-r* that designated the operation of writing. This development probably is not to be attributed to Muhammad himself, as Horovitz, *Jewish Proper Names*, 61–62, holds, but must have taken place in pre-Qur'anic times, since the word occasionally appears as a designation of the Psalms in ancient Arabic poetry. Horovitz admits a pre-Islamic use of *zabūr* only in the sense of "writing," and therefore views the Qur'anic connection between David and the *zabūr* as a Qur'anic innovation. This however is unlikely in view of the pre-Islamic poetic evidence quoted below.

<sup>5</sup> Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 348.

<sup>6</sup> See the contribution by Isabel Toral-Niehoff to this volume.

<sup>7</sup> Griffith, "Christians and Christianity."

the Psalms<sup>8</sup> attested for the pre-Islamic period,<sup>9</sup> one has to assume that they were transmitted to their Arabic speaking recipients by oral, perhaps even non-Arabic tradition—an issue that cannot yet be decisively settled on the basis of the present state of research. A recently proposed hypothesis deriving the term *sūra* from a Syriac term denoting “recitation of psalms”<sup>10</sup> would fit well with the intertextual presence of the Psalms in the early *surahs*: *sūra*, according to that hypothesis, would be related to the Syriac *shūrāyā*, “beginning,” used in liturgical practice as an introductory recitation of psalm verses preceding the reading of biblical core texts.<sup>11</sup> The concept of *shūrāyā* that might have been the model of the Arabic *sūra*<sup>12</sup> thus would originally have referred to the liturgical function of texts—a function that the Psalms indeed share with the early Qur’anic *surahs*. This Christian connection seems to be corroborated by an extra-Qur’anic datum, the famous verse by Imru’ al-Qays that associates the *zabūr* with a scriptural corpus in the hands of Christian monks:

*Atat hijajun ba’dī ‘alayhi fa-aṣbaḥat  
ka-khaṭṭi zabūrin fī maṣāḥifi ruhbānī*

Years have come upon it since last I was there and, in the morning  
it was like the writing of a *zabūr*, contained in the codices of monks.

Since recitation of the Psalms was an important element of monastic piety, it is likely that *zabūr* in this verse refers to a psalm corpus rather than to holy scripture in general.<sup>13</sup>

It is striking to observe that the particular type of piety relying on psalms becomes apparent exactly in the period of the Qur’anic genesis when the new cult of the community is developing—in Theodor

<sup>8</sup> In Christian Arabic tradition, the Psalms are called *al-mazāmīr* (pl. of *mazmūr*), after Hebrew *mizmōr*.

<sup>9</sup> Schippers, “Psalms,” 314–317.

<sup>10</sup> Neuwirth, “Structure and the emergence of a community.”

<sup>11</sup> Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum*, 488.

<sup>12</sup> Neuwirth, “Spatial relations.”

<sup>13</sup> The verse (from Ahlwardt, *Divans*) is translated and discussed by Montgomery, “Nexus,” 286, who however advocates an understanding of *zabūr* in the general sense of “a holy writing.” However, the context in which the expression appears suggests that *zabūr* here denotes the particular scriptural corpus of the Psalms that played a key role in monastic life from the fourth century onward. The word thus would have been used in its Qur’anic meaning already in pre-Islamic times.—There is yet another pre-Islamic verse, by the Jewish poet Sammāk, that uses the word *zabūr* in the meaning of Psalms, see Horovitz, *Jewish Proper Names*, 62.

Nöldeke's categories: at the end of the early Meccan period.<sup>14</sup> The liturgical formulae familiar from Jewish and Christian contexts that are instrumental in that process have been unearthed by Anton Baumstark.<sup>15</sup> His attempt to distinguish between these reminiscences as to their Jewish or Christian origin is however highly problematic in view of the no longer definable borderlines between different religious traditions that were probably characteristic of such culturally marginal areas as the peninsula.

Equally problematic is the perspective adopted by Hartwig Hirschfeld<sup>16</sup> and subsequently by Heinrich Speyer, according to which the Qur'anic reflections of psalms are due to auctorial revisions of the texts. What we must assume to have been current in the Qur'anic milieu are not fixed texts but a common liturgical language promoted through oral tradition, which only in a few individual cases results in an unambiguous reflection of individual psalm texts in the Qur'an. As a rule, this language remains limited to particular images or a particular combination of ideas. As is well-known, the Psalms are—in contrast to the Qur'an—immediate reflections of the way of life of a rural society. Without the assumption of psalm intertexts, it would be hard to account for the presence in the Qur'an of such rural images as the fruit-bearing tree as an image of the just (Q 14:24–26), or allusions to the vegetative cycle, like the use of the sprouting yet quickly withering grass as an image of the transitoriness of man (Q 105:5). All of these images are predominant in the Book of Psalms. As a rule, in Qur'anic contexts, blessings of nature are viewed as gifts necessitating human gratefulness,<sup>17</sup> an idea that is less frequent in the Psalms. Figures of thought like the derivation of a human commitment from the experience of divine grace, indeed the duty to utter praise, or the idea of the ultimate impossibility to hide one's deeds from divine notice, or the permanently ongoing divine trial, but his guidance as well—all these are characteristic for both textual corpora. In both texts, much mention is made of nocturnal wakes and prayer, of faithfulness to what has been personally recognized as truth, even in defiance of a majority of deniers and liars. The ambivalence of man, his

<sup>14</sup> Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorans*, vol. 1. An attempt to synchronize the developments of both text and cult has been presented by Neuwirth, "Vom Rezitationstext über die Liturgie."

<sup>15</sup> Baumstark, "Gebetstypus."

<sup>16</sup> Hirschfeld, *Beiträge*.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Cragg, *The Event of the Qur'an*, 146–162, and Graham, "Winds."

liability to hubris and self-deceit,<sup>18</sup> are also familiar to the speaker/transmitter of both textual corpora. But most strikingly, the Psalmist<sup>19</sup> and the *persona* of the transmitter of the Qur'an, are equally deeply stirred by the closeness of their personal God, whose face (*wajh/pānīm*) they feel is turned toward them.<sup>20</sup>

These common traits of the two textual corpora call for a re-thinking of the interpretation of those early surahs that—until now—have primarily been understood, in accordance with Islamic tradition, as biographical testimonies, entailing information about the personal situation of the prophet Muhammad. Thus, Q 93:6–8 was understood as a Qur'anic reference to the biographical fact that the Prophet had been raised as an orphan and had only through his marriage to a wealthy woman been released from his degrading social position. Similarly, Q 94 was taken as a biographical hint to a personal crisis in the life of the Prophet.<sup>21</sup> But it is exactly the decisive verse *mā wadda'aka rabbuka wa-mā qalā*, "your Lord did not forsake you nor scorn you," that has a counterpart, though not a verbal correlate, in a psalm expression, see Ps 22:25: *kī lō bhāzā we-lō shiqqēs 'enūt 'ānī we-lō histīr pānāw mimmennū*, "He did not despise nor loath the poor nor did he conceal his face from him." Although a reference to the personal situation of the Prophet is in no way to be excluded, the text-referentiality of the verse should be taken equally seriously. It is exactly because the Psalms contain universally valid statements about the psychic situations of a pious person and his dependence on divine support that they have proven so apt for liturgical repetition, even across the borders of individual religious traditions.

The observation that early Meccan surahs are structurally similar to the Psalms, which equally constitute polythematic compositions, has long been made.<sup>22</sup> The fact that the Qur'anic texts are intended to be used as liturgical texts and thus—like the Psalms—to be "performed," i.e. to be chanted supported by a cantilena, is obvious from their composition.<sup>23</sup> Several surahs even point to the practice of recita-

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Cragg, *The Event of the Qur'an*, 95–109.

<sup>19</sup> I use this expression to refer to all the poets involved in the Psalms, without distinguishing between them.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Cragg, *The Event of the Qur'an*, 163–181.

<sup>21</sup> Birkeland, *The Lord Guideth*, 37, 38–55.

<sup>22</sup> Neuwirth, "Bemerkungen"; see also Schippers, "Psalms."

<sup>23</sup> Investigation in the compositional structures of Qur'anic surahs as undertaken in Neuwirth, *Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*, widely relies on scholarly approaches to the Psalms.

tion—exercised in the framework of a vigil—as the locus of the receiving of new texts. Regarding their literary shape and their function, the early Qur'anic texts are much more closely related to the Psalms than—as is usually held—to the Bible as such. At the same time, striking differences exist. The early Qur'anic texts are in no way a paraphrase of the Psalms; their vision of history is completely different from that of the Psalmist; while many psalms praise divine “deeds of salvation in history,” the emerging world view of the Qur'an relies far less on history than on a new eschatology-oriented perception of linear time that is to be communicated to the listeners, many of whom are still adhering to cyclic perceptions of time as are expressed in pre-Islamic poetry.<sup>24</sup> As a consequence, the eminent presence of the Day of Judgment instills a number of image sequences with an ideological dimension. Thus, perceptions of nature as the magnificent work of divine creation, the so-called “*āyāt* of nature,”<sup>25</sup> are usually not presented for the sake of an immediate praise of God, but much more often as signifiers of an unmentioned signified: they are proofs of God's omnipotence, an issue that again is the pre-condition for the acceptance of the core part of the early Qur'anic message, i.e., the resurrection of the dead. At the same time, the early Qur'an as well as the Psalms record the experience of vigils spent over prayer and recitation, from which both the Psalmist and the transmitter of the Qur'an draw inspiration and spiritual enrichment. Yet, as a rule, their subsequent religious experience manifests itself in different venues: in individually shaped human-divine dialogues in the case of the Psalmist, and in a missionary message addressed to listeners in the case of the transmitter of the Qur'an.

Similarities and differences between both corpora, of course, become most evident in those cases where the Psalms and the Qur'an enter into an intertextual conversation extending over longer sections of texts. Two such cases will be discussed in the following: briefly in the case of the parallel between Q 78 and Ps 104, more extensively in the case of the Qur'anic analogue to Ps 136, namely, Q 55.

<sup>24</sup> See Tamer, *Zeit und Gott*.

<sup>25</sup> Neuwirth, *Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*, 192–197; Cragg, *The Event of the Qur'an* 146–162; Graham, “Winds.”

*A Psalm Reflected in the Qur'an: Q 78.1–16 and Psalm 104:5ff.*

Whereas the relationship between Q 55 and Psalm 136 has been repeatedly realized,<sup>26</sup> that between *Sūrat an-Naba'*, Q 78:1–16, and Psalm 104:5ff. seems to have escaped scholarly attention, although the psalm is frequently mentioned as a Qur'anic intertext in Speyer's list.<sup>27</sup> The numerous traces of this psalm in the Qur'an, some of which will be discussed below, can be explained by the psalm's prominence in Jewish and Christian liturgy.<sup>28</sup> The two texts related to each other are Q 78, *Sūrat an-Naba'*, and Psalm 104. The Qur'anic text reads as follows:

*Controversy about eschatology*

- |   |   |                                  |
|---|---|----------------------------------|
| 1 | What are they asking each other about?  | عَمَّ يَسْأَلُونَ                |
| 2 | About the great tidings,                | عَنِ النَّبَأِ الْعَظِيمِ        |
| 3 | Concerning which they are disputing.    | الَّذِي هُمْ فِيهِ مُخْتَلِفُونَ |
| 4 | Indeed, they will certainly know!       | كَلَّا سَيَعْلَمُونَ             |
| 5 | Then, indeed, they will certainly know! | بُرْكَلا سَيَعْلَمُونَ           |

*Ayāt-cluster*

- |   |  |                                    |
|---|--|------------------------------------|
| 6 | Have we not made the earth as a couch<br>for you | أَلَمْ نَجْعَلِ الْأَرْضَ مِهَادًا |
|---|--|------------------------------------|

<sup>26</sup> Hirschfeld, *Beiträge*; Speyer, *Biblische Erzählungen*; Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*; Neuwirth, *Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*.

<sup>27</sup> Speyer mentions thirteen Qur'anic references to Ps 104, yet without considering Q 78.

<sup>28</sup> In Judaism it is recited at the end of the morning service on Rōsh Ḥōdesh, the first day of the new month, see Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 106, who stresses however that the oldest source of his information goes back to no earlier than 1300 (Elbogen, *ibid.*, 10). Today, it is also recited after the Shabbat afternoon service from the beginning of the reading cycle in autumn—i.e. Pārāshat Be-Rēshīt, read immediately after Shemini 'Aseret / Simḥat Tōrāh—until Shabbat ha-Gādōl just before Passover (kind information from Tobie Strauss, Hebrew University). Though it is unknown when this order was introduced, it is worth considering it in order to appreciate the significance of the text in tradition (I have not seen the book by Moshe Weinfeld, *Ha-litūrgiyah ha-yehūdī ha-qedūmah*, Jerusalem, 2004). In Christian tradition, parts of the Psalm serve as a prayer after meals. In ecclesiastical prayer, it is recited on Tuesday mornings, see Cicek, *Kethobho*, 41.



- |    |   |  |
|----|---|--|
| 7  | And the mountains as pegs                               | وَالْجِبَالِ أَوْتَادًا                              |
| 8  | And created you in pairs                                | وَخَلَقْنَاكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا                           |
| 9  | And made your sleep a period of rest                    | وَجَعَلْنَا نَوْمَكُمْ سُبَاتًا                      |
| 10 | And made the night as a garment                         | وَجَعَلْنَا اللَّيْلَ لِبَاسًا                       |
| 11 | And made the day a source of livelihood                 | وَجَعَلْنَا النَّهَارَ مَعَاشًا                      |
| 12 | And built above you seven mighty<br>(heavens)           | وَبَنَيْنَا فَوْقَكُمْ سَبْعًا شِدَادًا              |
| 13 | And created a shining lamp                              | وَجَعَلْنَا سِرَاجًا وَهَّاجًا                       |
| 14 | And brought down from the rain-clouds<br>abundant water | وَأَنْزَلْنَا مِنَ الْمُعْصِرَاتِ مَاءً<br>ثَجَّاجًا |
| 15 | To bring forth thereby grain an<br>vegetation           | لِنُخْرِجَ بِهِ حَبًّا وَنَبَاتًا                    |
| 16 | And luxuriant gardens?                                  | وَجَنَّاتٍ أَلْفَافًا                                |

*Eschatology*

- 17 The day of decision is a term appointed.      إِنَّ يَوْمَ الْفُصْلِ كَانَ مِيقَاتًا

Follows an eschatological final part, vv. 17–40.<sup>29</sup>

Q 78 is among the “eschatological surahs” that are particularly frequent in the early stage of the Qur’anic communication process. The short introductory Part I (vv. 1–5), which is introduced by a rhetorical question, evokes a topic that is contentious within the audience. Although not identified explicitly, “the great tidings” are, in view of the centrality of eschatology in the early texts, easily identified as the Day of Judgment, all the more since the surah continues with a threat addressed to the skeptics (vv. 4–5). The following Part II (vv. 6–16) dialectically refers back to the beginning: the catalogue of divine acts of creation (‘*āyāt*-cluster’) serves to dissolve doubts in divine omnipotence that still prevent some of the listeners from subscribing to belief in the Day of Judgment. The third part (vv. 17–40), starting with an evocation of the Day of Judgment, again deals with eschatology. The assertion

<sup>29</sup> For the composition of the surah see Neuwirth, *Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*, 217.

of its reality merges into an “eschatological scenery,”<sup>30</sup> i.e., a depiction of the cosmic developments leading up to the Day of Judgment, that culminates in a “diptych,” i.e., a double portrait of the blessed and the cursed in the world to come.

Q 78 offers one of the very rare cases in which a non-narrative biblical subtext is clearly discernable, since the *āyāt*-cluster, vv. 6–16, is evidently a reference to Psalm 104:5ff.<sup>31</sup>:

- |   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| 1 | Bless the Lord, my soul! Lord, my<br>God, you are very great! You have<br>donned majesty and splendor;             | בְּרַכִּי נַפְשִׁי, אֱת־יְהוָה:<br>יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי, גִּדְלַת מָאֵד; הוֹד וְהָדָר<br>לְבָשָׁתָּהּ.   |
| 2 | Covering yourself with light as<br>with a garment, stretching the<br>heavens like a curtain                        | עֹטֶה-אֹר, בְּשָׁלְמָה; נוֹטֶה שָׁמַיִם,<br>כִּי־רִיעָה.   |
| 3 | He who roofs his upper chambers<br>with water; he who makes clouds<br>his chariot; he who moves on<br>winged wind. | הַמְקַרֵּה בַמַּיִם, עַל־יִוְתָיו:<br>הַשָּׁם-עָבִים רְכוּבוֹ; הַמְהַלֵּךְ,<br>עַל-כַּנְפֵי-רוּחַ. |
| 4 | He makes the winds his messen-<br>gers; the flaming fire his<br>attendants.  | עֹשֶׂה מְלָאכָיו רוּחוֹת; מְשָׁרְתָיו,<br>אֵשׁ לְהֵט.  |
| 5 | He established the earth upon its<br>pillars, that it falter not forever<br>and ever.                              | יָסַד-אֶרֶץ, עַל-מְכוּנֶיהָ; בַּל-תִּמוּט,<br>עוֹלָם וָעֶד.  |

(vv. 6–12: myth of the separation of the waters).

- |    |   |   |
|----|---|---|
| 13 | He waters the mountains from his<br>upper chambers; from the fruits of<br>your work the world is sated. [...]                   | מְשָׁקֶה הָרִים, מֵעַל־יִוְתָיו; מִפְּרִי<br>מַעֲשֶׂיךָ, תִּשְׂבַּע הָאָרֶץ.                  |
| 14 | He causes vegetation to sprout for<br>the cattle and plants through<br>man’s labor to bring forth bread<br>from the earth [...] | מַצְמִיחַ חֲצִיר, לְבִהֵמָה, וְעֵשֶׂב,<br>לְעִבְדַת הָאָדָם;<br>לְהוֹצִיא לֶחֶם, מִן-הָאָרֶץ. |

<sup>30</sup> These terms have been introduced in Neuwirth, *Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*.

<sup>31</sup> Translation by Danziger, *The Art Scroll Tehillim*, sometimes slightly modified; “hash-Shēm,” one of the Jewish interpretations of the Tetragrammaton (which is used by Danziger), has been replaced by the more neutral “the Lord,” since the Arabic sixth century reception of the Bible presupposes the translation of the tetragrammaton as *kyrios*, “the Lord.”

- 19 He has made the moon for the measuring of time, the sun knows its destination. עֲשֶׂה יָרֵחַ, לְמוֹעֲדִים; שֶׁמֶשׁ, יָדַע מְבוֹאוֹ.
- 20 You make darkness and it is night, in which every forest beast stirs. תַּשְׁתְּ-חֹשֶׁךְ, וְיְהִי לַיְלָה-- בּוֹ-תִרְמָשׁ, כָּל-חַיֵּיתוֹ-יָעַר.
- 21 The young lions roar after their prey and seek their food from God. הַכִּפְּרִים, שֹׁאֲגִים לְטֶרֶף; וּלְבָקֶשׁ מֵאֵל, אֲכָלִם.
- 22 The sun rises and they are gathered in, and in their dens they crouch. תִּזְרַח הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, יֵאָסְפוּ; וְאָל-מְעוֹנֹתָם, יִרְבְּצוּ.
- 23 Man goes forth to his work, and to his labor until evening. יֵצֵא אָדָם לַפְעֻלּוֹ; וְלַעֲבֹדָתוֹ עַד-עֶרֶב.

The text of the psalm continues as a hymn.

Despite the different frameworks—the praises enumerated in the psalm form an integral part of an extended hymn,<sup>32</sup> while in the surah they are framed by eschatological sections—both texts display significant common traits. The most striking of these is the image of the earth as a tent that does not recur in the Qur'an again (Ps 104:2, Q 78:6–7). The earthly tent is presented as firmly resting on pillars (Ps 104:5, cf. Q 78:7), and as having the sky as its roof (Ps 104:2) that is fixed to the earth by tent-pegs (Q 78:7). In both texts, the image of the tent is not exclusive, however: in the surah, the assumption of “seven firm ones” with the sun as their lamp (Q 78:12–13)<sup>33</sup> does not fit with the tent metaphor without generating tension. Similarly, in the psalm, the tent-metaphor collides with the perception of the cosmos as a multi-storied house of God, from whose “upper chambers” (Ps 104:3.13) God provides for his creation.<sup>34</sup> This blatantly anthropomorphic image is not reflected in the Qur'an, this being perhaps due to an exegesis-like “correction.” Both texts also present a number of natural phenomena like clouds (Ps 104:13, Q 78:14), mountains (Ps 104:13, Q 78:7), the sun (Ps 104:19.22, Q 78:13) and the night (Ps 104:20, Q 78:10) as well as human subsistence derived from the growing of plants (Ps 104:14; Q 78:15–16) as divine gifts. In both

<sup>32</sup> For an interpretation of the psalm, see Zenger, *Psalmen*, vol. 2, 29–43.

<sup>33</sup> Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 29f., refers to Q 71, a text very similar to Q 78, and comments: “Ps 104:8–10 describes the mountains in a way similar to the Qur'an. It is worth noting that the Psalms always played an important role in the Jewish liturgy and were familiar from frequent recitations to both Jews and Christians.”

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Gunkel, *Psalmen*, 448.

texts, the window of time reserved to human activity is the light day in which man is to gain his living (Ps 104:13; Q 78:11), an idea that is not mentioned again elsewhere in the Qur'an. However, regarding the function of the night, both texts diverge; the surah mentions—in addition to the data adduced in the psalm—the idea that men have been created as gendered pairs, a perception typical of Qur'anic creation theology (see e.g. Q 55), for whom the night serves as a space for sexual fulfillment. This idea, which again may be an 'exegetical correction,' is expressed in a strikingly novel metaphor: the human pair is presented as clad in a cosmic garment (Q 78:10: *wa-ja'alnā l-layla libāsā*, "and have we not made the night as a garment")—a metaphor that will not re-appear except once, as a reminiscence of Q 78:10, in Q 25:47. In the psalm, on the other hand, a similarly cosmic metaphor is applied, not to man, but in order to praise the divine majesty (Ps 104:1.2: *hōd we-hādār lābhāshṭā*, 'ōṭēh ōr *kas-samlāh*, "you have donned majesty and splendor, covering yourself with light as with a garment"). The Qur'an also mentions the seven planetary spheres that are not present in the psalm.

Perhaps the principal and most noteworthy difference between the two texts is the kind of worlds they outline: The psalm sketches an extensive mythic tableau, presenting the divine *persona* in rather anthropomorphic shape as holding court, all of this being expressed in the present tense as if occurring under the eyes of the Psalmist himself. The divine *persona* moves along in a heavenly chariot, personally shapes the living conditions of his creation, and takes care of their subsistence. Creation is dynamically affected, set in motion by his presence; wild beasts come forward and retreat, and ask God for their food (Ps 104:20–22). One might trace in this text the topos of the *locus amoenus*,<sup>35</sup> the "pleasant space," a prevailing motif of descriptions of nature, including that of the beyond, in visual art and literature from Greek antiquity until the Renaissance. The term *locus amoenus* refers to an idealized place of safety or comfort. Elementary features of the *locus amoenus* are, according to E. R. Curtius, who has coined the term, a shady lawn or open woodland, trees, and rivers or fountains. In the psalm, the description of nature is put in the service of a theological purpose, the praise of God, without however losing its aesthetic attractiveness: The world is—particularly because of the presence of the divine *persona* who shapes and reigns it—a "pleasant

<sup>35</sup> Curtius, *European Literature*, 195.

space,” marked, not unlike its classical correlates, by a plethora of idyllic components and by a vivid interaction between them. This observation does not hold true for the Qur’anic surah. Although the human habitat is described there as most harmonious, it does not form a coherent scenario, the single elements rather remaining isolated, each of them—instead of serving as components of a larger image—being charged with meaning in itself. As the parenetic form of the rhetoric question demonstrates, these individual components are meant to point to a theological message. The achievement of the divine creation, in this text, is no longer in progress, but appears as having been concluded a long time ago. God is no longer present as the agent of creation, but has become a speaker who recounts his own acts of creation in the first person plural. All the divine precautions for his creation are presented as frozen into timeless divine speech. The image in motion that is presented in the psalm has become static in the Qur’an. It is the field of eschatological tension created by the new Qur’anic context that has re-configured the narrative account of creation: creation becomes part of a meta-discourse, a controversy about the end of time, thus tying in with the beginning of the surah where the topic of the Last Day had been raised. Creation accounts serve to dissolve doubts about the divine omnipotence, thus encouraging the listeners to make the right decision. The Qur’anic section is not a hymn like the psalm, it is not the expression of spontaneous emotion, but a reminder, an *argument* towards a definite conclusion.

As such it is, nevertheless, a textual treatment of the psalm, and perhaps even a kind of exegesis. From the perspective of the pious observer who looks up in amazement to the heavens, the divine self-manifestation in the psalm has been changed to the perspective of the divine speaker himself, who looks down on the earthly scenario and on the humans that he has taken care of. Monumental scopes are reduced to human size and measures: not transcendent glory but daily needs are underscored, anthropomorphisms are abolished. The psalm re-stages divine creation, whereas in the Qur’anic text, God in his own voice recalls (*dhikr*) his acts of creation, which are but the prelude of his ultimate reclaiming of his pledge of knowledge from his creatures. Creation in the Qur’an, unlike in the case of the psalm, is not an on-going event, but has been converted into speech, into a “text” that is to be “read” as a divine self-manifestation, as an *āya*, as a “writing.”

*Re-reading a Complete Psalm: Surah 55 and Ps 136*

Things are different with the relation between Q 55 and Ps 136. A number of common characteristics, primarily the striking phenomenon of antiphonal speech, the employment of a refrain that is continued through almost the entire surah, suggest that Q 55 is not just a text replete with references to Ps 136, but a re-reading of it, a counterpart to the psalm intended as such. Of special importance are the refrains: in the psalm, the refrain consists in the hymnic *ki le-‘olām ḥasdō*, “for his kindness endures forever,” whereas in the Qur’an the refrain is an address to the mythic groups of men and demons: *fa-bi-ayyi ālā’i rabbikumā tukadhdhibān*, “so which of your Lord’s bounties do you both deny?” Both refrains, although not identical, serve as reminders of the truth that there are divine self-manifestations, “signs,” accessible to human perception, in the real world that must be heeded. The text of Sūrat ar-Raḥmān, given here in an English-Arabic synopsis, runs as follows:

I Hymn without explicit addressees	
1 The compassionate	الرَّحْمَنُ
2 Has taught the recitation	عَلَّمَ الْقُرْآنَ
3 He created man	خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ
4 And taught him clear speech.	عَلَّمَهُ الْبَيَانَ
5 The sun and the moon are according to reckoning,	الشَّمْسُ وَالْقَمَرُ بِحُسْبَانٍ
6 The star and the tree prostrate themselves.	وَالنَّجْمُ وَالشَّجَرُ يَسْجُدَانِ
7 And the sky he raised and he set up the balance,	وَالسَّمَاءَ رَفَعَهَا وَوَضَعَ الْمِيزَانَ
8 That you may not transgress in the balance.	أَلَّا تَطْغَوْا فِي الْمِيزَانِ
9 Conduct your weighing with equity and do not stint the balance.	وَأَقِيمُوا الْوَزْنَ بِالْقِسْطِ وَلَا تُخْسِرُوا الْمِيزَانَ
10 And the earth he set up for all mankind,	وَالْأَرْضَ وَضَعَهَا لِلْأَنَامِ

- 11 In it are fruit and palm trees in buds  
 12 And grain in blades and fragrant plants.  
 13 So which of your Lord's bounties do you both deny?

فِيهَا فَاكِهَةٌ وَالنَّخْلُ ذَاتُ الْأَكْمَامِ

وَالْحَبُّ ذُو الْعَصْفِ وَالرَّيْحَانُ

فَبِأَيِّ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ

II Hymn to God, with addressees mentioned

- 14 He created man from hard clay like pottery  
 15 And created the jinn from tongues of fire.  
 16 So which of your Lord's bounties do you both deny?  
 17 The Lord of the two sites of sunrise and sunset  
 18 So which of your Lord's bounties do you both deny?  
 19 They unleashed the two seas so as to merge together,  
 20 Between them is a barrier which they do not overstep  
 21 So which of your Lord's bounties do you both deny?  
 22 From them both come out pearls and coral.  
 23 So which of your Lord's bounties do you both deny?  
 24 To him belong the seagoing ships towering upon the sea like mountains.  
 25 So which of your Lord's bounties do you both deny?  
 26 Everyone upon it is perishing  
 27 But the face of your Lord, full of majesty and grace shall abide

خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ صَلْصَالٍ كَالْفَخَّارِ

وَخَلَقَ الْجَانَّ مِنْ مَّارِجٍ مِّن نَّارٍ

فَبِأَيِّ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ

رَبُّ الْمَشْرِقَيْنِ وَرَبُّ الْمَغْرِبَيْنِ

فَبِأَيِّ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ

مَرَجَ الْبَحْرَيْنِ يَلْتَقِيَانِ

بَيْنَهُمَا بَرْزَخٌ لَا يَبْغِيَانِ

فَبِأَيِّ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ

يَخْرُجُ مِنْهُمَا اللُّؤْلُؤُ وَالْمَرْجَانُ

فَبِأَيِّ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ

وَلَهُ الْجَوَارِ الْمُنشَآتُ فِي الْبَحْرِ  
 كَالْأَعْلَامِ

فَبِأَيِّ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ

كُلُّ مَنْ عَلَيْهَا فَانٍ

وَبَقِيَ وَجْهُ رَبِّكَ ذُو الْجَلَالِ  
 وَالْإِكْرَامِ

- 28 So which of your Lord's bounties  
do you both deny? فَيَا أَيُّهَا رَبَّكُمَا نَكَذِّبَانِ

*Polemic*

- 29 Whatever is in the heavens or on  
the earth petitions him, and every-  
day He is attending to some  
matter. يَسْأَلُهُ مَنْ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ  
كُلَّ يَوْمٍ هُوَ فِي شَأْنٍ

- 30 So which of your Lord's bounties  
do you both deny? فَيَا أَيُّهَا رَبَّكُمَا نَكَذِّبَانِ

- 31 We shall attend to you, you heavy  
and you light ones! سَنَفْعُ لَكُمْ أَثْقَالَهُمَا الثَّقَلَانِ

- 32 So which of your Lord's bounties  
do you both deny? فَيَا أَيُّهَا رَبَّكُمَا نَكَذِّبَانِ

- O Jinn and human folk, if you can  
pass through the bounds of the  
heavens and the earth, pass  
33 through them, you will not pass  
without authority! يَا مَعْشَرَ الْجِنِّ وَالْإِنسِ  
إِنْ اسْتَطَعْتُمْ أَنْ تَنْفُذُوا مِنْ أَقْطَارِ  
السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ  
فَانْفُذُوا وَلَا تَنْفُذُوا إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ

- 34 So which of your Lord's bounties  
do you both deny? فَيَا أَيُّهَا رَبَّكُمَا نَكَذِّبَانِ

- A flame of fire and brass will be  
loosed upon you, so that you will  
not receive any support. يُرْسَلُ عَلَيْكُمَا شَوْاظٌ مِّنْ نَّارٍ وَنُحَاسٌ  
فَلَا تَنْتَصِرَانِ

- 36 So which of your Lord's bounties do  
you both deny? فَيَا أَيُّهَا رَبَّكُمَا نَكَذِّبَانِ

III *Eschatological scenario*

- 37 When the heaven shall be rent  
asunder and turned red like  
pigment, فَإِذَا انشَقَّتِ السَّمَاءُ فَكَانَتْ وَرْدَةً  
كَالدِّهَانِ

- 38 So which of your Lord's bounties  
do you both deny? فَيَا أَيُّهَا رَبَّكُمَا نَكَذِّبَانِ

*Judgment: the condemned*

- 39 On that day no one shall be ques-  
tioned about his sin, whether a  
man or a jinn فَيَوْمَئِذٍ لَا يُسْأَلُ عَنْ ذَنْبِهِ إِنْسٌ وَلَا  
جَانٌ



- 40 So which of your Lord's bounties  
do you both deny? فَيَايَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ
- 41 The evildoers shall be known by  
their marks, then they shall be يُعْرِفُ الْمُجْرِمُونَ بِسِيمَاهُمْ فُؤُودُ  
seized by their forelocks and their  
feet. بِالنَّوَاصِي وَالْأَقْدَامِ
- 42 So which of your Lord's bounties  
do you both deny? فَيَايَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ

*Diptych: the condemned*

- 43 This is Gehenna, which the evildo-  
ers deny هَذِهِ جَهَنَّمُ الَّتِي يُكَذِّبُ بِهَا  
الْمُجْرِمُونَ
- 44 They circle between it and  
between a hot water cauldron. يَطُوفُونَ بَيْنَهَا وَبَيْنَ حَمِيمٍ آِنٍ
- 45 So which of your Lord's bounties  
do you both deny? فَيَايَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ

*The blessed: first ensemble of gardens*

- 46 But for those who fear their Lord,  
two gardens are reserved. وَلِمَنْ خَافَ مَقَامَ رَبِّهِ جَنَّاتٍ
- 47 So which of your Lord's bounties  
do you both deny? فَيَايَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ
- 48 They have numerous kinds of  
fruit. ذَوَاتَا أَفْنَانٍ
- 49 So which of your Lord's bounties  
do you both deny? فَيَايَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ
- 50 And there are therein two flowing  
springs فِيهِمَا عَيْنَانِ تَجْرِيَانِ
- 51 So which of your Lord's bounties  
do you both deny? فَيَايَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ
- 52 Therein is a pair of every fruit. فِيهِمَا مِنْ كُلِّ فَاكِهَةٍ زَوْجَانِ
- 53 So which of your Lord's bounties  
do you both deny? فَيَايَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ
- 54 Reclining upon couches whose  
linings are of brocade and the مُتَّكِئِينَ عَلَى فُرُشٍ بَطَائِنُهَا مِنْ إِسْتَبْرَقٍ  
fruits of the two gardens are near  
at hand. وَجَى الْجَنَّتَيْنِ دَانٍ

55 So which of your Lord's bounties  
do you both deny?

فَيَايَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ

Therein are maidens lowering  
56 their glances and they have not  
been touched before by any man  
or jinn.

فِيهِنَّ قَاصِرَاتُ الطَّرْفِ لَمْ يَطْمِثْهُنَّ  
إِنْسٌ قَبْلَهُمْ وَلَا جَانٌ

57 So which of your Lord's bounties  
do you both deny?

فَيَايَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ

58 They are like rubies and coral.

كَأَنَّهُنَّ الْيَاقُوتُ وَالْمَرْجَانُ

59 So which of your Lord's bounties  
do you both deny?

فَيَايَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ

60 Shall the reward of beneficence be  
other than beneficence?

هَلْ جَزَاءُ الْإِحْسَانِ إِلَّا الْإِحْسَانُ

So which of your Lord's bounties  
61 do you both deny?

فَيَايَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ

*The blessed: second ensemble of  
gardens*

62 And beyond them are two other  
gardens.

وَمِنْ دُونِهِمَا جَنَّتَانِ

63 So which of your Lord's bounties  
do you both deny?

فَيَايَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ

64 Of dark green color,

مُدَّ هَامَتَانِ

65 So which of your Lord's bounties  
do you both deny?

فَيَايَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ

66 Therein are two gushing springs.

فِيهِمَا عَيْنَانِ نَضَّاخَتَانِ

67 So which of your Lord's bounties  
do you both deny?

فَيَايَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ

68 Therein are fruits, palm trees and  
pomegranates.

فِيهِمَا فَاكِهَةٌ وَنَخْلٌ وَرُمَّانٌ

69 So which of your Lord's bounties  
do you both deny?

فَيَايَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ

70 Therein are beautiful virtuous  
maidens.

فِيهِنَّ خَيْرَاتٌ حِسَانٌ

71 So which of your Lord's bounties  
do you both deny?

فَيَايَ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ

- |    |   |   |
|----|---|---|
| 72 | Wide-eyed, cloistered in pavilions                              | حُورٌ مَّقْصُورَاتٌ فِي الْخِيَامِ                          |
| 73 | So which of your Lord's bounties<br>do you both deny?           | فَيَايَ الْآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ                      |
| 74 | No man or jinn touched them<br>before.                          | لَمْ يَطْمِثْهُنَّ إِنْسٌ قَبْلَهُمْ وَلَا جَانٌّ           |
| 75 | So which of your Lord's bounties<br>do you both deny?           | فَيَايَ الْآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ                      |
| 76 | Reclining upon green cushions<br>and superb rugs.               | مُتَكِينِينَ عَلَى رَفْرَفٍ خُضْرٍ وَعَبْقَرِيٍّ<br>حِسَانٍ |
| 77 | So which of your Lord's bounties<br>do you both deny?           | فَيَايَ الْآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ                      |
| 78 | Blessed be the name of your Lord,<br>full of majesty and grace! | تَبَارَكَ اسْمُ رَبِّكَ ذِي الْجَلَالِ<br>وَالْإِكْرَامِ    |

While the psalm has been extensively studied,<sup>36</sup> Q 55 still ranges in Western scholarship as “difficult to understand,” its literary merit being highly controversial. The dual forms of Q 55 in particular have since Nöldeke’s path-breaking work from 1860 been considered as an example of the alleged artificiality of Qur’anic speech, which in this case can only be explained by the constraints of rhyme.<sup>37</sup> Nor have subsequent scholars been able to free themselves from this mechanistic way of explanation, as the judgments of Josef Horovitz,<sup>38</sup> Rudi Paret,<sup>39</sup> and Friedrun Müller<sup>40</sup> show. The purely mechanistic

<sup>36</sup> Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, 445–456; cf. Kroll, *Psalms*, 402–404, Dahood, *The Anchor Bible*, 264–267, Auffret, “Psaume CXXXVI,” 1–12, Kraus, *Biblischer Kommentar*, 1076–1080, Lamparter, *Buch der Psalmen*, 529–531.

<sup>37</sup> Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorans*, vol. 1, 30: “Wenn z.B. in der 55. Sure von zwei himmlischen Gärten die Rede ist mit je zwei Quellen und zwei Arten von Früchten und noch zwei anderen ähnlichen Gärten so sieht man deutlich, daß die Duale dem Reime zuliebe gebraucht sind”—a comment that was literally taken over by Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorans II*, 40. Nöldeke later repeated his verdict in *Neue Beiträge*, 9: “Der Reim bedingt den massenhaften Gebrauch des Duals in Sure 55.”

<sup>38</sup> Horovitz, “Das koranische Paradies,” 55: “So wird man die Zahlenangabe auf den Zwang des Reimes zurückführen dürfen.”

<sup>39</sup> Paret, *Der Koran*, uses a plural form in his translation, “[...] werden Gärten zuteil,” and comments briefly in a footnote: “Dual (auch im folgenden).” In his commentary, no further explanation is found except for a short note on v. 13, where the refrain first appears: “Ebenfalls in V.13 setzt die Verwendung des Dual ein, er steht hier und im Folgenden anscheinend des Reimes wegen.”

<sup>40</sup> Equally apodictically, Müller, *Reimprosa*, 132 comments: “Aus den parallelen Koranstellen wird schlüssig, daß der Dual *ḡannatān* in Sure 55:46 dem Reimschema

interpretation is still repeated by John Wansbrough,<sup>41</sup> who applies this interpretation to the final part of the surah with its double descriptions of the gardens, to underfeed his postulate of the surah's secondary composition from diverse traditions put together only by later redactors—all these being examples of the pejorative valorization of the Qur'anic style in Western scholarship. In view of the absence of literary studies<sup>42</sup> on the surah, the text will be submitted in what follows to a semantically and formally microstructural analysis, before an attempt at a comparison with Ps 136 will be made.

### *Analysis of Q 55*

Q 55<sup>43</sup> differs in more than one regard from all earlier Qur'anic texts: the surah not only displays a continuous refrain (from vv. 13 onward) that consists in a rhetorical interrogative address to a mythic double group, men and jinn together.<sup>44</sup> The surah's narrative main strand does not refer to earthly reality either. Part I (vv. 1–13) presents a summary of the primordial act of creation; Part II (vv. 14–36), which starts employing the refrain that had been introduced shortly before (v. 13) regularly, also remains in the mythic realm, presenting rebels among men and *jinn* who might try to defy the order of creation yet are powerlessly tied to their limited spaces in the cosmos. Though the eschatological final part (vv. 37–78) in passing recalls the “historical” Meccan opponents (v. 43), it is generally focused on the ensemble of men and *jinn*, who—as is demonstrated in other eschatological surahs exclusively with regard to humans—will be condemned and led away to the place of their punishment. Whereas the space of the

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-ān gemäß für *al-ğannatu* = das Paradies steht. Analog zu V.46 steht auch V.62 der Dual *ğannatān*, doch liegt hier dem Dual der indeterminierte Plural *ğannātun* zugrunde.” Her commentary on v. 13 is equally dismissive, see *Reimprosa*, 134: “Eindeutig vertritt hier der Dual den Plural *tukaḏḏibūn*, der im Koran an folgenden Stellen vorkommt [...]” Though it is certainly useful to adduce parallels from other surahs, they can hardly replace the analysis of the immediate context, i.e., the function of an individual verse within its surah. Cf. the criticism of Müller's approach by Wansbrough, “Review of Friedrun R. Müller,” 389–391.

<sup>41</sup> Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, 25: “[...] the dual form *jannatān* was demanded by the scheme obtaining there for verse juncture, but in fact represented the singular *janna*.”

<sup>42</sup> The analysis by Neuwirth, “Symmetrie und Paarbildung,” does not focus on the development of the argument in the surah.

<sup>43</sup> For a literary-critical evaluation see Neuwirth, *Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*, 23–24.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Neuwirth, “Qur'anic literary structures revisited.”

condemned is described only in passing, the space of beatification destined for the blessed is depicted not only in an otherwise unknown extensiveness, but also supported by a unique arsenal of stylistic devices. This final part, the double description of paradise, obviously forms the climax of the surah. Several questions arise: What is the function of the refrain? Why such an exclusively mythic scenario? What about the obsession of the text—as some critics have put it—with the dual forms and with dualistic phenomena?

The surah has been analyzed in detail by both the present writer (1981) and by Muhammad Abdelhaleem (1994). Both interpretations will be re-considered in the following.<sup>45</sup> Abdelhaleem's approach, who considers diction (*maqāl*) as a function of context (*maqām*), is fully in accord with the approach followed here, although the concept of *maqām* is differently understood in this paper. While Abdelhaleem's approach rests on the canonized codex, the *muṣḥaf*, a historical-critical approach that relies on the Qur'anic communication process, *qur'ān*, does not allow for consideration of all Qur'anic parallels found in the corpus, but demands that only those that chronologically precede the text be considered. Even these earlier parallels again have to be checked as to their corresponding function in their respective contexts before being classified as relevant parallels for the text in question.

The hymnic prelude (vv. 1–4), made up of short verses and introducing the divine name of *ar-raḥmān* as the first rhyming word, announces the two main topics of the surah: creation (*khalq*, v. 2) and clear speech (*bayān*, v. 4, and also *qur'ān*, v. 1). By mentioning the decisive divine attribute *ar-raḥmān*, the Merciful, the first verse, in both semantic and phonetic terms, sets the tune—as Abdelhaleem rightly stresses—for the entire surah. The composition—analyzed on the basis of structural criteria—can be viewed as tri-partite<sup>46</sup>:

I: hymn to the divine *persona*, without further addressees mentioned explicitly (vv. 1–13),

<sup>45</sup> Abdelhaleem, "Context and internal relationships"; his observations often intersect with those made by the present author, *Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*. References to Abdelhaleem will therefore be limited to those observations that have not been discussed before his article appeared.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. for details Neuwirth, *Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*; Abdelhaleem, "Context and internal relationships," 75, divides the surah into three differently defined parts: 1–30; 31–45; 46–77.

II: hymn to the divine *persona*, with addressees: demons, *jinn*, and men (vv. 14–36) mentioned,

III: eschatological issues (vv. 37–78).<sup>47</sup>

While creation is represented throughout the text—the two hymns (except for vv. 31–36) and the eschatological part (except for vv. 37–45) being concerned with the entelechy of creation in paradise—the second theme, clear speech, is not unfolded through discursive argument. It is presented exclusively through the medium of rhetoric.

The surah is one of the most poetic texts in the Qur'an and exemplifies a central *theologoumenon*: the symmetry of the divine order of creation, not only on the semantic level, but equally in grammatical and phonetic terms. Symmetry is thus not only pointed out to the listener as part of the content of divine speech, it is equally displayed in terms of structure, a procedure made possible by a unique device offered by Arabic morphology, i.e., the dual form. The excessive use of the dual, by virtue of its prominent position in pre-Islamic poetic compositions, implies an aesthetic claim that is unfamiliar to most Jewish and Christian scriptural texts: a claim to poeticity. The poetic character of the Qur'an has often been dismissed as merely "ornamental," constituting an obstacle to the reader's immediate grasp of the message. In the case of Q 55, the poetic form is clearly part of the message itself. Symmetry in this text is as much a characteristic of the signified as it is of the sign itself. In view of the fact that the *qur'ān*, the recitation of the Qur'an itself, is considered as the most sublime speech act, *bayān* can be understood as an evocation, first and foremost, of Qur'anic language. Thus, two phenomena that are inherent in the world since the act of creation itself—namely, the harmonious order of beings, and the distinctness and clarity of speech as a medium of communication—thematically permeate the entire surah. Furthermore, the text can be read as an exposition of the interaction of the primordial ensemble evoked in the beginning—*khalq*, creation, and *qur'ān*, divine instruction—which, according to the Qur'anic paradigm, in a linear fashion leads up to the dissolution of both at the end of time. The duality thus constitutes an intrinsic part of the Qur'an's natural theology: that God has created the world as a manifestation of his presence, as a "text" no less than his verbal manifestation in revelation, and that he has created man in order that he may

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<sup>47</sup> Neuwirth, *Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*, 209–210.

understand both his verbal and his "creational" self-expression. Both readings gain their urgency from their eschatological objective. Q 55, with its insistence on symmetry and dualistic structures, is the poetic orchestration of a theological claim.

On the basis of these observations, the sophisticated linguistic shape of the text proves highly significant, and indeed functional, something that the surah has been continuously denied in Western scholarship that has consistently found fault with the dual forms. Their dismissive assessment as merely resulting from rhyme constraints<sup>48</sup> is equally unwarranted from a formal point of view: the refrain starts with v. 13, i.e., immediately before the first mention of the creation of the two groups of *ins/jinn*, and it is clearly a reference to them.<sup>49</sup> The ensemble of the *ins/jinn* reappears in the course of the surah another five times: at the end of the hymn (vv. 14–15), in the threats uttered by the divine voice (vv. 31.33), in the section on the cosmic dissolution (v. 39), and in both descriptions of the gardens of paradise (vv. 56 and 74). The two groups, who are continuously addressed in the refrain, are thus equally present throughout the main body of the text. Although the presence of demons in the festive context of the surah may come as a surprise to later readers, they should be regarded as part of the ancient Arab cosmos;<sup>50</sup> they constitute the counterpart to men in a world that is perceived by the transmitter and his community as both ambivalent and harmoniously balanced.

Part I (vv. 1–14): The Qur'anic "play" with paired phenomena by far exceeds the combination of *ins/jinn*. In fact, it imprints the entire surah. Already the short rhythmical introduction of the first four verses is, in both syntactical and semantic terms, composed of two *pairs* of verses: the first *pair* evoking God and his revelation, the second focusing on man, recalling his creation (v. 3) and his instruction through revelation (v. 4, cf. Q 96:3–4). The ensemble of creation and divine instruction is a central aspect of the early Qur'anic texts: by positioning these issues as primordial beginnings, the ancient Arabian perception of cyclical time can be refuted, cyclical time starting with the birth of man and coming to an end with his death, while creation and instruction reach their final end only with the Day of

<sup>48</sup> For details, see above and Neuwirth, "Symmetrie und Paarbildung."

<sup>49</sup> Abdelhaleem's critique in "Context and internal relationships," 80, of Richard Bell's hypothesis that the refrain is a later insertion is fully justified.

<sup>50</sup> Chabbi, "Jinn."

Judgment. Human existence in Qur'anic terms is embedded in a vision of time that extends from one eternity to another. Divine communication of knowledge in Q 55 is mentioned (Q 55:1–2: *ar-raḥmān* / *'allama l-qur'ān*, “the Merciful / he taught the Qur'an”) before moving on to creation (Q 55:3: *khalaqa l-insān*, “he created man”). God's revelation of knowledge precedes the creation of man. Creation is in turn connected to the divine imparting of the ability to communicate, both of expressing oneself clearly and of perceiving clarity, *bayān* (Q 55:4: *'allamahu l-bayān*, “he taught him clarity”). This hermeneutical quality is exemplified throughout Q 55, firstly by means of the structures of creation (cf. Q 90), which are presented with unerring consistency in symmetrical pairing, and secondly by utilizing a linguistic means of expression of the Arabic language for pairings characteristic, the morphological dual, which appears in particular ostentation and with great frequency in the rhyme. A refrain continues to generate and maintain the impression of order and regularity. The surah can thus be regarded as a prime example of the perception of a hermeneutics residing in creation itself, an analogy *by means of language* juxtaposed with the *linguistic* quality of the divine word.

There follows a presentation of the cosmic creation, starting with a *pair* of verses, each of which names *two* objects: v. 5 *shams/qamar*, v. 6 *najm/shajar*, with v. 6 thus legitimizing the introduction of the first dual form for the rhyme. The connection of the sun and the moon to the idea of measuring time (v. 5) has a direct analogy in Ps 104:19, a text<sup>51</sup> of which dispersed elements are found mirrored in several sections of the surah: *'āsāh yārēaḥ le-mō'adīm*, *shemesh yāda' mebhō'ō*, “He made the moon for measuring time, the sun knows its destinations.” The endowing of inanimate beings with the capacity to worship God (v. 6), as well, also has counterparts in the Psalms (Ps 104:4, Ps 65:9) and is not unusual in the early stratum of the Qur'an (see Q 99:4–5).

The group of six verses that follow (v. 7–12) consists of an *anti-thetical pair*: heavens and earth, each represented in three verses. Here, the verse group related to the heavens with its mention of the balance epitomizes the idea of a balanced creation that permeates the surah as such. The instrument of the balance as a warrant of justice is not limited to a primordial mythic context, but is also indispensable

<sup>51</sup> For the prominence of Psalm 104 in Jewish and Christian tradition, see above, note 26.



in earthly life, and is thus well in place in this context (v. 7–8). The attempt of some scholars to eliminate it as a later insertion<sup>52</sup> attests to their neglect of the subtext underlying the surah, which is the balanced harmony of creation. As against that, in the verse group about the earth, symmetry is expressed again in structural terms: the last two verses (vv. 11–12) again name *two* objects, *fīhā fākihātun wa-n-nakhlu dhātu l-akmām* and *wa-l-ḥabbu dhū l-ʿaṣfi wa-r-rayḥān* (“in it are fruit and palm trees in buds/and grain in blades and fragrant plants”), with a chiasmatically positioned extension of one item in each verse by a *dhāt/dhū*-phrase. Ps 104, too, combines the idea of a cosmic indication of time with the creation of nature, focusing however on pragmatic aspects, on the one hand, and on miraculous ones, on the other: *maṣmīaḥ ḥāṣīr lab-behemāh we-ʿēsebh la-ʿabhōdat hā-ādām, le-hōṣī leḥem min hā-āreṣ [...] yishbeʿū ʿaṣē YHWH, arzē Lebḥānōn asher nāṭāʿ*, “he causes vegetation to sprout for the cattle and plants through man’s labor [...] the trees of the Lord are sated, the cedars of Lebanon that he has planted.” The refrain *fa-bi-ayyi ālāʾi rabbikumā tukadhdhibān* (“so which of your Lord’s bounties do you both deny?”) already presupposes the attitude of denial (*takdhib*) of the divine acts of charity as a fixed topos, this idea having been presented earlier, e.g., in Q 67:18, 85:32, 79:21, 92:9.16, 96:13, 54:9.18.23.33, 69:4, 91:11.

Part II (hymn, vv. 15–28, and polemic, vv. 29–36): The second hymn is interspersed with the refrain and thus can be understood as an address to the double group of man/*jinn*. The *pair* of verses vv. 14–15 about the generic *pair* of men and *jinn* thus does not appear unexpected, but has been preluded by several paired phenomena of creation, without any interference of rhyme constraints. While other early Meccan surahs put the accent on the miraculous inherent in the physical genesis of man (cf. Q 86:5–7), in the mythic context of Q 55 it is creation from clay that is foregrounded and contrasted with the creation of the *jinn* from fire.<sup>53</sup>—Structures relying on *pairs* remain predominant in the text: the predication of God in v. 17 displays a peculiar form of *paired* conception: both extremes of the cosmic antithesis *maghrib/mashriq* (sunset/sunrise) are differentiated in themselves and designated with a dual form to denote their seasonally

<sup>52</sup> Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorans*, vol. 1, 42. See also Bell, *Translation*, vol. 2, 548; Abdelhaleem justly refers to the parallel in Q 83:1–3.

<sup>53</sup> See Speyer, *Biblische Erzählungen*, 449.

conditioned final points, the summer/winter solstice. The evocation of “the ends of the world” known from other Qur’anic verses (cf. Q 73:9, recalling Ps 50:1), in Q 55 is thus poetically de-familiarized. The myth about the separation of the waters (vv. 19–20) is unfolded in detail in Ps 104:5–9: *yasad ereṣ ‘al mekhōnehā bal timmōṭ ‘ōlām wā-‘ed/ tehōm kal-lebhūsh kissītō, ‘al hārīm ya‘amdū māyim/ min ga‘arātkhā yenūsūn, min qōl ra‘amkhā yēhāphēzūn. / ya‘alū hārīm yēredū bheqā‘ōt el meqōm zeh yāsadtā lāhem. / gebhūl samtā bal ya‘abhōrūn, bal yashubhūn le-khassōt hā-āreṣ.* “He established the earth upon its pillars, that it falter not forever and ever. / The watery deep as with a garment you covered it; upon the mountains water would stand. / From your rebuke they flee, from the sound of your thunder they rush away. / They ascend mountains, they descend to the valleys, to the special place you founded for them. / You set a boundary they cannot overstep; they cannot return to cover the earth.” This is reflected in Q 55:19–20: *maraja l-baḥrayni yaltiqiyān/ baynahumā barzakhun lā yabghiyān*, “He unleashed the two seas so as to merge together. Between them is a barrier that they cannot overstep.”<sup>54</sup>

A striking aspect of the rhetorical shape of v. 22 is again a *paired* phenomenon, the *pair* of products of the sea, which is in addition contrasted in terms of color. Another expression of amazement vis-à-vis the majestic presence of the sea is found both in the Qur’an and in Psalm 104, in both cases also invoking navigation: Q 55: *wa-lahu l-jawāri l-munsha’ātu fī l-baḥri ka-l-a‘lām*, “To him belong the seagoing ships towering upon the sea like mountains,” cf. Ps 104:25/26, *zeh hay-yām, gādōl ū-reḥabh yādāyīm, shām remesh we-ēn mispār, ḥayyōt qeṭannōt ‘im gedōlōt/ shām oniyōt yehallēkhūn*, “Behold this sea—great and of broad measure; there are creeping things without number, small creatures and great ones. / There ships travel [...]” Both the Psalmist and the Qur’anic description of the greatness and bounty of the sea, followed by life’s perishing and withering away before God’s permanence, mirrors the antithetical relationship between finiteness and eternity, which in the Qur’an is so dramatically phrased in the verse pair 26–27: *kullu man ‘alayhā fān / wa-yabqā wajhu rabbika dhū l-jalālī wa-l-ikrām*, “everyone upon it is perishing

<sup>54</sup> For the entire discourse about the sea in vv. 19–24, see Barthold, “Der Koran und das Meer,” Grotzfeld, “Die beiden Meere im Koran,” and Zaki, “Barzakh,” who do not take into account the psalm intertexts.

/ but the face of your Lord, full of majesty and grace shall abide"); in Ps 104:27–31, it is *tōsēf rūḥām yigwā'ūn we-el 'aphārām yeshūbhūn, tesallāḥ rūḥakhā yibbārē'ūn ū-teḥaddēsh penē adāmāh/ yehī khebhōd YHWH le-'ōlām*, “you retrieve their spirit and they perish to dust they return, / when you send forth your breath they are created, and you renew the surface of the earth / may the glory of the Lord endure forever.” The Qur'anic version exhibits a surplus concern for the linguistic form of this idea: The stylistic shape of the hymnal predications of God by means of *two* nouns (v. 27, and slightly modified in the final proclamation of the surah v. 78), *dhū l-jalāli wa-l-ikrām*, is in no way a current expression in the Qur'an, where adjective predications usually prevail. It again underlines the balanced manifestation of divine order.

The polemical section (vv. 29–36) that concludes Part II presents God as the addressee of requests proffered by *both* heavenly and earthly creatures (v. 29):<sup>55</sup> *yas'aluhu man fī s-samawāti wa-l-arḍi*, a reflection, though more general in scope, of Ps 104:27, *kullām ēlēkhā yesabbērūn, lātēt okhlām be-'ittō*, “All of them look to you with hope, to provide their food in its proper time.” The section merges into a threatening speech directed at *both* men and jinn, who are addressed in v. 31 as *ayyuhā th-thaqalān* (literally: “you heavy ones”), which is to be understood according to vv. 14 and 15 as a dual form *a potiori* covering both the “light ones,” i.e., the jinn created from fire, and the “heavy ones,” i.e. men created from clay. There follows an evocation of the “myth of the meteors”: the jinn, according to ancient Arabian lore, are the transmitters of knowledge of the hidden (*al-ghayb*, cf. Q 68:47), which they learn by eavesdropping at the borders of the heavens to confer it on privileged individuals like the poets. With the coming of the divine revelation they are disempowered, they have lost their authority (*sulṭān*, Q 55:33) to cross the borders between heaven and earth<sup>56</sup> and are chased away by being pelted with meteors. In v. 35 the defiance of potential rebels against this order is again expressed by *two* objects, *shuwāẓun min nārīn wa-nuḥāsun* (“a flame of fire and brass”). The idea of God's having contained the cosmic forces by preventing them from transgressing the borders he has set again reflects Ps 104:9, *gebhūl samtā bal ya'abhōrūn*, “you set a boundary they cannot overstep.” It is striking that even in this polemical

<sup>55</sup> See Grotzfeld, “Gott und die Welt.”

<sup>56</sup> See Chabbi, “Jinn.”

part of the surah, the refrain—which until then had been commenting on the enumeration of divine acts of charity—is maintained in order to orchestrate a series of threats. The narrative assertion and the parenetic refrain, which elsewhere in the surah converge, here create a field of tension.

Part IIIa (vv. 37–45), eschatological scenario and presentation of the condemned): In the eschatological part, the dialectic between the recollection of the divine deeds of charity in the refrain and the horrible aspects of the narrative account becomes fully obvious. This part is dominated by *antitheses*, symmetrical structures and pairs. In this section, the speech in the dual form is temporarily interrupted (vv. 41.43), since the group of the condemned includes evildoers in general, among them those known from everyday social experience. Peculiar to the structure of v. 41 is the double expression for the mode of seizing the evildoers, which is unique in this surah: *fa-yu'khadhu bi-n-nawāṣi wa-l-aqdām*. Elsewhere, the same event is expressed by a singular reference to the *nāṣiyah*, (“forelock”), perhaps a meristic expression with intensifying intent (Q 96:15–16).

Part IIIb (vv. 46–78, the gardens): Creation and its consummate perfection in the paradise scenario dominate the surah. Even more so than creation, paradise in its perfection is incontrovertible, forming in Q 55 a binary, symmetrically structured text. It is therefore all the more surprising that the two paradise sections—like the preceding polemical text sections—are infused with the refrain which, as a counterpoint, invokes the possibility of denial: *fa-bi-ayyi alā'i rabbikumā tukadhdhibān*, “So which of your lord’s bounties do you both deny?”. Repeated thirty times, the rhetorical question is, however, rebuffed with dramatic pathos: not only by virtue of the presence of the virtual disbelievers appearing in the very same style of pairing who thus submit to the symmetrical structure of creation, but even more so by the evidential readability of the signs of creation in nature presented here, and by their balanced, structured mirroring in the text’s language.

After creation and judgment with their binary juxtapositions, there is the promise (v. 46) *li-man khāfa maqāma rabbihi jannatān* (“but for those who fear their Lord two gardens are reserved”), the only verse where the dual form can not be explained in terms of any of the paired phenomena mentioned earlier. This calls for an explanation. A parallel case appears in the second description of paradise, where again two gardens are mentioned (v. 62), *wa-min dūnihilimā*

*jannatān* (“and beyond them are two other gardens”). *Jannatān* (literally, “two gardens”) is best interpreted with reference to the conventions of ancient Arabic poetry, which often uses dual forms in topographic contexts to denote only one place, or—even more probably—with reference to the understanding of some classical Arabic philologists as an expression of infiniteness: “garden after garden, infinite gardens.”<sup>57</sup> In both descriptions, the verse following the introduction of the gardens squeezes the substance of the description, the “greenness” and lushness of paradise, into one single word, or into two words, in order to constitute a verse: *mudhāmmatān* (“of dark green color”) in v. 64 and *dhawātā afnān* (“they have numerous kinds of fruit”) in v. 48. Subsequently fountains (vv. 50.66) and fruit (vv. 52.68) are mentioned. In the first garden scenario (vv. 46–60), one might understand *‘aynāni tajriyān* (“two flowing springs”) as a mechanistic concession to congruence with *jannatān*; however, this is clearly impossible in the case of the phrase *min kulli fākihātīn zawjān* (“therein is a pair of every fruit”) that immediately follows v. 52, since in this case a basic Qur’anic perception is evoked that is expressed in various texts, cf. Q 51:49: *min kulli shay’in khalaqnā zawjayni, la’allakum tadhakkarūn* (“and of everything we have created a pair, that perchance you might remember”). In this surah there is for the first time mention of young women present in paradise (v. 56.58.70.72). While elsewhere these virgins or stunts of paradise are compared to white pearls (Q 56:23) or well-preserved eggs (Q 52:24<sup>58</sup>), they are

<sup>57</sup> The understanding of the dual form *jannatān* (Q 55:46–76) proposed in Western scholarship as due to constraints of rhyme is found already with al-Farrā’, *Ma’ānī al-qur’ān*, vol. 3, 118 and as-Suyūfī, *Itqān*, vol. 3, 299; the latter instance is quoted by Wansbrough, *Qur’anic Studies*, 25. Wansbrough however fails to mention that the use of dual forms for a singular *metri causa* is a most frequent phenomenon in ancient Arabic poetry, where even fixed conventions emerged like the poet’s stereotypical address of two friends in the *nasīb* (see e.g. Nöldeke, *Delectus*, 8.5, 12.14 and often) or the phenomenon of two slanderers (ibid., 8.8); see the additional examples collected by Gandz, “Die Mu’allaqa des Imrūlqais,” and Goldziher, “Ijādat al- mariḍ,” 185–200. Dual forms without numerical value are particularly frequent in toponyms; once these dual forms are transferred into extra-poetical contexts, they continue to convey their poeticity. This fact has been noted by a number of Arab classical philologists, see Neuwirth, “Symmetrie und Paarbildung.” The apparent doubling of the gardens is less extraordinary than it may look. The play with the possibilities of Arabic morphology, familiar from poetry, should have caused far less problems to contemporary listeners than to the later readers, who were pre-disposed and limited by the positivist approaches of Islamic exegesis.

<sup>58</sup> Horowitz, “Das koranische Paradies”; Jarrar, “Houris”; Saleh, “Etymological Fallacy.”

compared here to two complementary objects, in the one case presenting a variation of an observation expressed in the hymnal part, v. 58: *ka-annahunna l-yāqūtu wa-l-marjān* (cf. v. 22: *yakhruju minhumā l-lu'lu'u wa-l-marjān*), in the other case being described by two qualifications (v. 72). In spite of the prominence of the maidens' virginity (vv. 56.74), no erotic dynamics is perceivable between them and the blessed, who remain as unmoved as the maidens themselves, fixed to their luxurious seats. The last verse of the second description again introduces a binary juxtaposition: v. 76, *muttaki'īna 'alā raḫḫafin khuḍrin wa-'abqariyin ḥisān* ("reclining upon green cushions and superb rugs").

The final proclamation introduces a last contrasting pair: the antithetical manifestations *jalāl* ("majesty," comparable to the rabbinic *middat had-dīn*, the power of exerting judgment and thus punishment) and *ikrām* ("generosity," comparable to the rabbinic *middat ha-raḥamīm*, the power that manifests itself in the generous forgiveness). The text closes with a doxology.<sup>59</sup>

### *The Problem of the Surah's Sitz im Leben*

The surah can be read as a poetic summa of early Meccan descriptions of creation and paradise. With its structural subtext mirroring the symmetry of creation, it culminates in the two descriptions of paradise that again reflect symmetry as a principle of order. By virtue of the refrain that pervades the entire text, the surah appears as an integral liturgical text. As to its scenario, so strikingly remote from social reality and replete with mythic—cosmic, primordial, and eschatological—references, it becomes more familiar once it is identified as an echo of Psalm 104, another monotheist core text that in its textual corpus equally stands out as a unique mythic tableau. The surah is obviously not a "poetic invention," but a text-referential composition.—But what about the *Sitz im Leben*, what about the situatedness of this text that seems unconnected to any particular social situation of the community? The text itself does not offer a clue. Nor are there any parallels to Q 55 in the Qur'an that would facilitate a determination of its social or exact liturgical purpose. With its refrain—which in the entire Qur'anic corpus is found only in one further surah,

<sup>59</sup> Baumstark, "Gebetstypus."

where it however bears a different function<sup>60</sup>—the text points to an extra-textual reference. It may be helpful to make use of the theory developed by Michael Riffaterre, who has coined the term of *ungrammaticality*, and more specifically that of the *dual sign*,<sup>61</sup> a linguistic sign that by virtue of its anomaly within its context points to another text in which the striking phenomenon is “normal.” The significance of that “other text” here exceeds that of a usual literary subtext, since it is only through the reference to that text that the complete decoding of the text under investigation is possible. For Q 55, this “other text” is Psalm 136, a text that on close examination is found to be re-read in the surah. This psalm, celebrated since Talmudic times as *he-hallēl hag-gādōl*, the Great Hallel<sup>62</sup>—in contrast to the simple Hallel, Ps 115–118, i.e. Ps 136<sup>63</sup>—also plays an important role as a prayer. Sections of the psalm are also used in the Jewish prayer at meals (*birkat ham-māzōn*),<sup>64</sup> as well as in its Christian counterpart.

<sup>60</sup> In Q 77, ten times.—Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, 226, has drawn attention to the unique use of the refrain in Q 55: “I should like here to insist upon the term litany rather than refrain. The role of the latter in the Qur'an and elsewhere is that of concluding formula, which does not adequately describe employment of the device in this passage.” Cf. Abdelhaleem, “Context and internal relationships,” 80, and see below.

<sup>61</sup> Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, 92: “[...] the dual sign works like a pun. [...] It is first apprehended as a mere ungrammaticality, until the discovery is made that there is another text in which the word is grammatical; the moment the other text is identified, the dual sign becomes significant purely because of its shape, which alone alludes to that other code.”

<sup>62</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim, 118. The text is recited as the morning psalms on the seventh day of Passover, see Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 115, who mentions the reception of Ps 136 only in passing. The text is, however, equally recited in the morning service (*shaharit*) on Shabbat and festivals (during the beginning part of the morning service, called *Pesūqē de-Zimrā*); it is also recited at the Passover seder (kind information from Tobie Strauss, Hebrew University). Although these liturgical functions do not necessarily date back to Late Antiquity, they are apt to throw light on the status of the Psalm in Jewish tradition.

<sup>63</sup> An earlier attempt at a comparison has been presented by Neuwirth in “Qur'anic literary structures revisited.”

<sup>64</sup> It is noteworthy that the blessing of the meal on Sabbath days that starts with a reminiscence of Ps 134 entails a litany that anaphorically starts six times with the emphatic incipit of *hā-rahmān*. This litany is, however, primarily concerned with human subsistence, with the electedness of Israel, and the coming of the Messiah. It begins: *Bārūkh attā YHWH elōhēnū melek hā-'ōlām, haz-zān et hā-'ōlām kullō be-ṭūbhō be-hēn be-hesed ū-bhe-rahmīm hū nōtēn lehem le-khōl bāsār kī le-'ōlām ḥasdō*, “Praised be you, our Lord, our God, king of the world, who sates the entire world with charity, grace and mercy, and gives subsistence to every creature, your kindness endures forever!” A hymn on *ar-rahmān / hā-rahmān*, then, was already current before the promulgation of the Qur'anic text.



Its liturgical presence, by virtue of which it should have been familiar to pious individuals in the milieu of the Qur'anic community, may be assumed as the background of the surah. In view of the divine name *ar-raḥmān*, the text anyhow has to be associated with that phase of intensified cultic practice of the community to which other liturgical basic texts such as the *Fātiḥa*<sup>65</sup> are also related to.

What is striking on first view is that Q 55, although containing addresses to a plurality of addressees in vv. 8–9 and vv. 31–35, does not seem to address “real” listeners. There are only two such addresses in the text, vv. 31–35 being set in a mythical context, while v. 8–9 is no more than an association triggered by the name of a zodiacal sign. The text can thus best be imagined—in contrast to the other Qur'anic texts that are recited *to* the listeners—as a text to be recited *by* the community, who evoke for themselves the divine acts of creation and his promise of paradise in a kind of litany, i.e., an antiphonal text based on repeated structural elements. Litany in this context should not be understood in its strict sense of the genre as a penitential prayer involving a further performer, or group of performers, who articulate the refrain.<sup>66</sup> The text would thus fit well into the period of the genesis of a cult within the early community, which is also when the central cultic text, the communal prayer *al-Fātiḥa*, emerged.<sup>67</sup>

### *Q 55 and Ps 136 in Comparison*

Three of the most striking characteristics of the surah—the antiphonal structure, the frequency of the refrain, and the subsequently changing

<sup>65</sup> See Neuwirth, “*Sūrat al-Fātiḥa*.”

<sup>66</sup> A definition of the concept of litany is quoted by Abdelhaleem, “Context and internal relationships,” 80 from the Shorter Oxford Dictionary: “A form of public prayer, usually penitential, consisting of a series of petitions, in which the clergy leads and the public responds.” Wansbrough, who first applied the idea of a litany to Q 55, used the observation to corroborate his hypothesis of the text’s emergence from a later, post-Muhammadan phase of genesis. He presumed Q 55 to be a litany in the sense of a *responsorium*, which is indeed problematic when applied to the Qur’anic text, since surah 55—in contrast to “real” litanies and in contrast to Ps 136—is part of a communication paradigm that involves an authoritative speaker and an audience. Nor does the surah contain supplications, but is almost entirely a hymn.

<sup>67</sup> Neuwirth, “Referentiality.”



relation between the narrative account and the refrain that oscillates between harmony and tension—recur as the main characteristics in Ps 136, which reads as follows:<sup>68</sup>

- |    |  |  |
|----|--|--|
| 1  | Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his kindness endures forever.           | הודו ליהוה כי טוב: כי לעולם חסדו.              |
| 2  | Give thanks to God of the gods, for his kindness endures forever.                    | הודו, לאלהי האלהים: כי לעולם חסדו.             |
| 3  | Give thanks to the Lord of the lords for his kindness endures forever.               | הודו, לאדני האדנים: כי לעולם חסדו.             |
| 4  | To him who performs great wonders, for his kindness endures forever.                 | לעשה נפלאות גדולות לבדו: כי לעולם חסדו.        |
| 5  | To him who made the heavens with understanding for his kindness endures forever.     | לעשה השמים, בתבונה: כי לעולם חסדו.             |
| 6  | To him who spread out the earth upon the waters, for his kindness endures forever.   | לרקע הארץ, על-המים: כי לעולם חסדו.             |
| 7  | To him who made the great lights, for his kindness endures forever.                  | לעשה, אורים גדלים: כי לעולם חסדו.              |
| 8  | The sun for the reign of the day, for his kindness endures forever.                  | את-השמש, לממשלת ביום: כי לעולם חסדו.           |
| 9  | The moon and the stars for the reign of the night, for his kindness endures forever. | את-הירח וכוכבים, לממשלות בלילה: כי לעולם חסדו. |
| 10 | To him who smote Egypt through their first born, for his kindness endures forever.   | למכה מצרים, בבכוריהם: כי לעולם חסדו.           |
| 11 | And brought Israel forth from their midst, for his kindness endures forever.         | ויצא ישראל, מתוכם: כי לעולם חסדו.              |

<sup>68</sup> The translation is that of Danziger (slightly modified).

- 12 With strong hand and out-      בְּיָד חֲזָקָה, וּבְזְרוּעַ נְטוּיָה: כִּי  
stretched arm, for his kindness      לְעוֹלָם חֲסֵדוֹ.
- 13 To him who divided the sea of      לַגִּזְרֵי יַם-סוּף, לַגִּזְרִים: כִּי  
reeds into parts, for his kindness      לְעוֹלָם חֲסֵדוֹ.
- 14 And caused Israel to pass through      וַהֲעֵבִיר יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹכוֹ: כִּי  
it, for his kindness endures      לְעוֹלָם חֲסֵדוֹ.
- 15 And threw Pharaoh and his army      וְנָגַע פַּרְעֹה וְחִילוֹ בַיָּם-סוּף:  
into the sea of reeds, for his kind-      כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסֵדוֹ.
- 16 To him who led his people      לְמוֹלִיד עַמּוֹ, בְּמַדְבָּר: כִּי  
through the wilderness, for his      לְעוֹלָם חֲסֵדוֹ.
- 17 To him who smote great kings,      לְמַכָּה, מְלָכִים גְּדֹלִים: כִּי  
for his kindness endures forever.      לְעוֹלָם חֲסֵדוֹ.
- 18 And slew mighty kings, for his      וַיַּהַרְג, מְלָכִים אַדִּירִים: כִּי  
kindness endures forever.      לְעוֹלָם חֲסֵדוֹ.
- 19 Sihon, King of the Emorites, for      לְסִיחוֹן, מֶלֶךְ הָאֱמֹרִי: כִּי  
his kindness endures forever.      לְעוֹלָם חֲסֵדוֹ.
- 20 And Og, King of Bashan, for his      וּלְעוֹג, מֶלֶךְ הַבָּשָׁן: כִּי לְעוֹלָם  
kindness endures forever.      חֲסֵדוֹ.
- 21 And presented their land as a her-      וְנָתַן אֶרֶצָם לְנַחֲלָה: כִּי לְעוֹלָם  
itage, for his kindness endures      חֲסֵדוֹ.
- 22 A heritage for Israel, his servant,      נַחֲלָה, לְיִשְׂרָאֵל עֶבְדּוֹ: כִּי  
for his kindness endures forever.      לְעוֹלָם חֲסֵדוֹ.
- 23 In our lowliness he remembered      שֶׁבִשְׁפָּלָנוּ, זָכַר לָנוּ: כִּי  
us, for his kindness endures      לְעוֹלָם חֲסֵדוֹ.
- 24 And released us from our torme-      וַיַּפְּרֵקֵנוּ מִצָּרֵינוּ: כִּי לְעוֹלָם  
tors, for his kindness endures      חֲסֵדוֹ.
- 25 He gives nourishment to all flesh,      נָתַן לֶחֶם, לְכָל-בָּשָׂר: כִּי  
for his kindness endures forever.      לְעוֹלָם חֲסֵדוֹ.
- 26 Give thanks to the God of the      הוֹדוּ, לֵאלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם: כִּי לְעוֹלָם  
heavens, for his kindness endures      חֲסֵדוֹ.
- forever.

This psalm in its beginning is semantically close to the beginning of the surah; it starts with an invitation to praise God (vv. 1–3): *hōdū la-YHWH kī tōbh kī le-‘ōlām ḥasdō/ hōdū le-lōhē hā-elōhīm kī le-‘ōlām ḥasdō / hōdū la-adōnē hā-adōnīm kī le-‘ōlām ḥasdō/ le-‘ōsēh niphlē’ōt gedōlōt levaddō kī le-‘ōlām ḥasdō*, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his kindness endures forever / give thanks to God of the gods, for his kindness endures forever / give thanks to the Lord of the lords for his kindness endures forever.” The psalm thus displays the refrain *kī le-‘ōlām ḥasdō* from the very beginning. It continues with a reminiscence of the creation of the heavens (v. 6), *le-‘ōsēh ha-shāmayim bi-tebhūnāh kī le-‘ōlām ḥasdō*, “To him who made the heavens with understanding, for his kindness endures forever,” which corresponds to Q 55:7 (*wa-s-samā’a rafa’ahā wa-waḍa’a l-mizān*), where the idea of the divine understanding (*tebhūnāh*) is apparently replaced by the symbol of reason, the balance.<sup>69</sup> The verse about the creation of the earth (v. 6)—*le-rōqa’ hā-āreṣ ‘al ham-māyīm kī le-‘ōlām ḥasdō*, “To him who spread out the earth upon the waters, for his kindness endures forever”—also has a Qur’anic correlate, Q 55:10 (*wa-l-arḍa waḍa’ahā li-l-anām*), though there is a shift of focus from the cosmological realm to that of human subsistence. Also, the ensuing verses of the psalm on the creation of the heavenly bodies have been anticipated in the Qur’an. Thus, verses 7 and 8—*le-‘ōsēh ōrīm gedōlīm kī le-‘ōlām ḥasdō, et hash-shemesh le-memshelet bal-lāylāh kī le-‘ōlām ḥasdō*, “To him who made the great lights, for his kindness endures forever / the sun for the reign of the day, for his kindness endures forever”—are matched by Q 55:5, *ash-shamsu wa-l-qamaru bi-ḥusbān*, “the sun and the moon move according to a reckoning”: just like in the psalm, the heavenly bodies serve the function of determining the phases of day and night. V. 9—*et hay-yārēaḥ we-khōkhābhīm le-memshelōt bal-lāylāh kī le-‘ōlām ḥasdō*, “The moon and the stars for the reign of the night, for his kindness endures forever”—is matched by Q 55:6: *wa-n-najmu wa-sh-shajaru yasjudān*, “the star and the tree prostrate themselves.” At this point, the Qur’anic argument, however, shifts to a different direction: not the moon and the stars, but the star and the tree are combined; the star moreover—instead of reigning the night—is presented as in adoration.

<sup>69</sup> Theodor Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorans*, vol. 1, 106f. considers vv. 8–9, which refer to Q 83:1–3, to be a later addition; this is, however not convincing, since the surah, which is excessively language-related, as a whole involves massive references to earlier communications.

In what follows, the divergences between the two texts increase: Even though the psalm's refrain *kī le-ʿōlām ḥasdō*, "for his kindness endures forever," just like the Qur'anic *fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukadhdhibān*, refers to the evident truth of divine charity, it is clearly different from the Qur'anic: it does not conjure up a mythic duality of creatures, viewed as holding an ambivalent stance vis-à-vis the truth of divine omnipotence, but recalls the unambiguous and infinite divine charity. The act of *kadhdhaba*, which projects a dialectic between truth and untruth, is in itself an offense against divine unity; furthermore, the supposed object of *kadhdhaba*, the signs, *ālā'*,<sup>70</sup> remain—in contrast to the unambiguous *ḥesed*, kindness—rather undetermined. But what is most striking is that in v. 10, the argument of the psalm shifts and turns to divine acts of salvation in history: *le-makkēh Miṣrayim bi-bhekhōrēhem kī le-ʿōlām ḥasdō*, "to him who smote Egypt through their first born, for his kindness endures forever." Then follow further historical references, which are presented under the twofold aspect of the salvation of Israel and that of the vengeance directed against the enemies of Israel (Ps 136:11–22). Yet in spite of its focus on history, which contrasts with the Qur'an's mythic scenario, this part of the psalm—due to the tension it produces between God's acts of annihilation recorded in the text and his charity conjured in the refrain—is an instance of the same general problematic that is also present in the polemic part of the surah (Q 55:31–35), where the threatening addresses to men and *jinn* are interwoven with a refrain that until then had carried a positive connotation. The incongruity is felt even more strongly in the part dealing with the judgment, Q 55:37–45, where the positively connoted signs, *ālā'*, of the refrain, are juxtaposed with acts of annihilation.

The similarity between the two sections Q 55:31–45 and Ps 136:10–20 is, however, limited to this intrinsic tension between God's acts of charity of the refrain and annihilation expressed in the main strand of the narration. These sections, though both introducing ambivalence, do not match each other. Whereas the psalm's section on history (Ps 136:10–20), which portrays God in his redeeming power and faithfulness towards his people, is the core part of the psalm, the polemic debate with the double group of men and *jinn* in the Qur'an

<sup>70</sup> The lexeme *ālā'*, plural of *ily*, occurs in early Meccan texts only once: in Q 53:55, where it is embedded in a phraselogically similar context: *fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbika tatamārā*. It is "quoted" from Q 55 in a later surah, Q 69:74.

(Q 55:31–35) is not more than the prelude to the real climax of the surah, which is the description of paradise. The psalm's particular mode of remembering history has no correlate in the early Qur'anic texts, where history is usually a history of annihilation; the position that history occupies in the psalm is occupied in the Qur'an by the idea of God's power to resurrect the dead and to complete his creation in paradise. The historical part of the psalm is thus replaced by an eschatological part in the surah. Only in the end do the two texts converge again. In the psalm the idea of subsistence that had been unfolded in Q 55 in the first hymn, is taken up again (Ps 104:27): *nōtēn leḥem le-khōl bāsār kī le-'ōlām ḥasdō*, "He gives nourishment to all flesh, for his kindness endures forever." The final part of the surah, too, promises the blessed kindness and hospitality, and a redeemed life in an idyllic and paradisiacal atmosphere.

Like the surah, the psalm closes with a final praise of God, Ps 136:35: *borkhī nafshī et- YHWH, halelūyāh*, "Bless thou the Lord oh my soul. Halleluyah," which has a parallel in the Qur'anic doxology *tabāraka smu rabbika dhī l-jalāli wa-l-ikrām* ("Blessed be the name of your Lord, full of majesty and grace"), although this wording again expresses the ambivalence of the divine manifestation of power (Q 55:78).

### *Two Different Manifestations of the Divine: History Versus Eschatology*

Two texts about divine power and divine care for creation have been juxtaposed. The psalm, for the most part in the voice of the community, speaks about divine creation and sustenance and the election of God's people through history; the surah speaks about divine creation, and about God's subjugation and eschatological retribution of his creatures. Whereas the psalm seeks the proof of divine presence in the drama of historical acts of salvation, on the one hand, and divine bestowals, on the other, in the Qur'an it is the order of creation that encompasses everything, human and extra-human; it occupies the center of interest, and its linguistic representation is itself proof of this very order.<sup>71</sup> For the harmoniously balanced order is manifest in binary linguistic structures exhibited in the "clear speech" of the Qur'an itself. Drama is thus replaced by linguistic mimesis of the

<sup>71</sup> Neuwirth, "Form and Structure"; "Rhetoric and the Qur'an."

balanced order of creation, since the creatures evoked and addressed in the surah are removed from the real world and projected into a timeless-mythic world. Concrete persons are not named—in contrast to the psalm, which conjures a plethora of historical persons and events, each of them evoking narrative memories. In the Qur'an, neither the transmitter, nor individual listeners appear on the scene. This absence of listeners and of “real” *dramatis personae* is responsible for a somewhat static quality of the presentation. Like the virtual rebels and the collective, non-individual transgressors in the eschatological section, the virgins of paradise in the two descriptions of the gardens, too, remain aloof and distant, appearing just as static and icon-like as the blessed who are portrayed as motionlessly reclining on their cushions (vv. 54f., and v. 76).<sup>72</sup> Is the Qur'anic paradise a *locus amoenus*, such as designed in many psalms? Moshe Barasch, who has alerted to the peculiarity of visual representations of apocalyptic visions,<sup>73</sup> states that in this particular kind of images, the single components do not combine to form a coherent picture—in contrast to the classical and Late Antique representations of a *locus amoenus*, which form a lively backdrop to diverse interactions. Accordingly, the Qur'anic landscape of paradise remains atomistic; in its fragmentation it is without parallel, even in the descriptions of nature in Ancient Arabic poetry. The difference to the animated description of nature in Ps 104 in particular is evident. The Qur'anic descriptions of paradise, as we saw already in Q 78, are “apocalyptic representations” in the sense established by Barasch, which for their understanding need a central sacred figure. This central figure, though not involved as a *dramatis persona*, is certainly present as a speaker and as a referee in Q 55. One has to keep in mind the presence of the *rabb*, explicitly mentioned in the refrain, as the center of the image and as a factor in creating coherence, in order to understand the coherence of the image. What is made visible through iconic means in extra-Islamic representations, in the Qur'anic text is present in linguistic guise: the figure of the sacred, without whom the image would dissipate into a mass of fragments. To quote Barasch: “We notice that sacred space, when detached from the holy figure or object,

<sup>72</sup> Al-Azmeh, “Rhetoric for the senses,” 215–231.

<sup>73</sup> Barasch, “Apocalyptic Space,” 305–326.

has no structure of its own. It clusters around the sacred centre, it is its aura."<sup>74</sup>

This critical re-reading of a prominent liturgical text—which goes far beyond the positive appropriation of single ideas and images like those from Ps 104 in Q 78—is best explained as an intentional venture: the attempt to respond to, indeed to eclipse, a powerful older text that was particularly cherished in both the Jewish and the Christian tradition. Ps 136 was perceived not as an unproblematic part of monotheist legacy to be immediately adopted and integrated in the newly emerging canon of the Qur'anic community but, on the contrary, proved to be provoking and irritating, thus necessitating a new reading in Qur'anic terms. This re-reading is consequently in no way a faithful paraphrase of the psalm like that of the sequence of verses from Ps 104, but rather marks a shift in theme and, implicitly, also in theological scope, namely, from history to eschatology. Eschatology in the emerging Qur'an is the most significant discourse and thus parallels the importance that history enjoys in Jewish contexts. Divine-human interaction is not primarily divine intervention in social-political life, but much more a matter of signs: God's "handwriting" reflected in creation.

#### *The Surah's Surplus Dimension: Referentiality*

Another trait of the Qur'anic re-reading of the psalm may however be even more important: the self-referential focus on clear language that is claimed as one of the surah's main topics right from the beginning, and which is positioned on the same level as creation itself in Q 55:1–3. This text can be regarded as an exemplar for perceiving a hermeneutics residing in creation itself, an analogy created by language being set on a par with the linguistic quality of the divine word. Assuming that the surah is a re-reading of Psalm 136 would seem to suggest that *bayān* echoes *tebhūnah*, wisdom, in the sense of insight/understanding, mentioned in the creation of the heavens (Ps 104:5), a view supported by their etymological affiliation. However, whereas in the psalm, *tebhūnah* characterizes a divine disposition, in the Qur'an *bayān* appears as a human faculty. Along with physical existence, man is endowed with the power of understanding from the beginning of creation.

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<sup>74</sup> Barasch, *ibid.*, 318.

Thus, the surah's seemingly playful employment of the morphological tools of Arabic grammar proves, on closer look, to be theologically functional and significant. On the one hand, it serves to demonstrate the duality of divinely intended harmony, and thus of order and intelligibility, which underlies physical creation no less than language. The rhetorical sophistication of the surah that is thus attained informs the discourse with a highly significant epistemic dimension. God, although unknowable in his essence, bridges the ontological and epistemological chasm between himself and man through various modes of self-revelation, first and foremost by his word, but also by diverse signs, *āyāt*, that he has erected throughout nature. The two Qur'anic manifestations of God in *āyat*, one creational, the other one linguistic, thus entail a hermeneutic message, the exhortation to realize their "textual" structure, i.e., to practice exegesis.

The surah's excessive use of the dual also serves another function. It reconnects the text to the already existing literary canon of the Arabic-speaking listeners, i.e., to ancient Arabic poetry. This kind of self-referentiality is alien to the psalm, which presents itself as a pure hymn in praise of God's work of creation and salvation. Although the Qur'anic text also constitutes a hymn and does not name any addressees that might serve to reconnect it to social reality, it does imply an indirect praise of the Qur'anic community, who, due to their linguistic receptivity, are credited with the capability to appreciate the multi-layered text that surah 55 is. It is a text that presents not only a theological message, the discourse of creation and eschatology, but equally a meta-discourse: the immanence of language in creation and the readability of the harmonious order of creation. In a sense, language and creation reflect one another. Surah 55 is a text in praise of divine creation and instruction as well as a celebration of the noblest medium of both: the Arabic language.

### *The Challenge of Ancient Arabic Poetry*

Reflecting on the surah's eschatological priority over the historical, one should, however, not rashly dismiss the central image of paradise as apolitical or asocial. The political, or at least the historical, dimension implicit in the descriptions of paradise clearly transpires once the Qur'an is contextualized with its non-biblical literary precursor, i.e., ancient Arabic poetry, the medium of the pre-Islamic master-



narrative of the hero's confrontation with a world devoid of meaning. The Qur'anic response to that poetry is manifest in the description of paradise that is amazing in several aspects. The fact that paradise is presented as multiple, that several "pairs of paradises" connect with each other to form a sort of park landscape, that trees and fountains also appear as double, can be explained as being due to the principle of symmetry that underlies the text as a whole. Yet what is in striking contradiction with the anticipated integrity of primordial space are the traces of civilization like tents (v. 72), the presence of luxurious textiles like carpets and cushions (vv. 54 and 76), and last but not least the participation of beautiful young women, who are, again, portrayed as behaving according to a social *decorum* (v. 56 and 72). Josef Horowitz assumed that the Qur'anic paradise scenarios reflect banquet scenes from ancient Arabic poetry. Looking closely at the descriptions we do not, however, find a banquet, but rather a static tableau portraying groups of men and women in a place of lush nature that is at once furnished with aesthetically refined artefacts. This is not a reference to a particular episode of ancient poetry but a response to the more general outlook expressed in the ancient Arabic *qaṣīda*. It is an inversion of the image presented in its initial part, the elegiac-philosophical *nasīb*, which depicts nature as a wasteland, a landscape of ruins, stripped of its civilization, relinquished by its inhabitants and inaccessible to communication. "Effaced (literally: extinguished) are the abodes," *'afati d-diyāru*—these words, or similar uses of the cultural metaphor of writing form the stereotypical beginning of a large number of poems, all of which conjure up the emptiness of space and a loss of communication. Not infrequently do descriptions of deserted campsites culminate in the image of an inscription on the body, as the traces of the abodes resemble the lines of a tattoo engraved on a wrist, or—which is even more revealing—they culminate in the evocation of a writing on a rock, *waḥy*, which forces itself on the beholder without, however, disclosing its meaning to him. There is, then, a meaningful message immanent in the writing and thus in the empty space, which is however hidden from the beholder. To the poet-hero, both the extinguished abodes and the lost beloved, who constitutes the second main topic of the *nasīb*, are negations: allegories of irreversible time, irretrievable meaning, and unrecoverable emotional fulfillment.<sup>75</sup> The place is perceived as desolate since the

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<sup>75</sup> Cf. Hamori, *Medieval Arabic Literature*.

procession of the luxuriously furnished litters has taken the women, and with them the poet's beloved, away to be swallowed by a mirage—in other words: since culture has merged with nature. The *nasīb* thus serves to express an aporia.

For nature defies the poet, not responding to his ever repeated question of *ubi sunt*<sup>76</sup> about the whereabouts of the formerly pulsating social life, the reliable social structures, the aesthetic equipment of the living space with its promise of erotic pleasure. Nature is no more than a mute mirror reflecting the bleak truth of his mortality. All culture, all human achievements fall prey to time or are obscured by nature, that alone is capable of cyclically renewing itself—a topos familiar from Hellenistic popular philosophy. In the perception of the ancient Arabic poets, it is nature's eternity that underscores the transitoriness of man and his achievements. Labīd says:

*Balīnā wa-lā tablā n-nujūmu ṭ-ṭawālī'u, wa-tabqā l-jibālu ba'danā wa-l-maṣānī'u.*

We vanish but the rising stars do not, mountains remain when we are gone and fortresses.<sup>77</sup>

Time does not affect nature, which is eternal, *khālīd*, allowing forever repeated recurrences. Man as against that is “consumed” by time, which itself is personified as *dahr*, fate.

It is this perception of nature as overwhelming man and his culture that the Qur'an has come to refute: God himself takes over the role of fate and re-shapes the time of man which now ranges from the primordial creation of the world and the coincidental creation of the *logos*—i.e., divine instruction and man's innate faculty of understanding, *bayān*—to the end of the world on Judgment Day, when man will redeem his pledge of divine instruction; it even extends into a beyond that the Qur'an clothes into the spatial image of paradise. The Qur'anic description of paradise not only provides a reversal of the erstwhile bleak and threatening nature as ever-green and fruit-bearing, but also a retrieval of civilization: cushions and carpets, and moreover the presence of beautiful young women, known from the *nasīb* as icons of meaningful and enjoyable life. Paradise is a space where man is reinvested with his cultural paraphernalia.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Becker, “Ubi sunt qui ante nos in mundo fuere.”

<sup>77</sup> Translation by Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 19.

The Qur'anic re-reading of the psalm thus in the very place where it deviates from the Psalmist paradigm of history, reinstalls reflections on history, by rewriting ancient Arabic poetry. Biblical imagination, "God's grace lasts forever," connects with an inversion of ancient Arabic imagination, "God disempowers devastating time."

This topical change in focus from history to eschatology is accompanied by the already mentioned meta-discourse: the hermeneutical accessibility of the cosmos, God's presence in language. Self-referentiality of this kind is alien to the Psalm. The Qur'an, however, a document of the exegesis-oriented culture of debate of Late Antiquity has a hermeneutical agenda. It attempts nothing less than to render the undecipherable understood, to decode the message of the enigmatic writing, *wahy*, that haunted the ancient poet. The very enigma *wahy* re-appears in the Qur'an to introduce hermeneutics *par excellence*, revelation. With this turn of paradigm, the Qur'an offers its listeners a new promise: Not divine faithfulness to be derived from biblical salvation history, but God's liberation of man from the aporetic crisis that is so expressively pronounced in ancient Arabic poetry: his perception of cultural bereavement, of being cut off from a meaningful history, of being exposed to irreversible time.

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THE CODIFICATION OF THE QUR'AN:  
A COMMENT ON THE HYPOTHESES OF BURTON  
AND WANSBROUGH

Gregor Schoeler

*Introduction*

Christoph Luxenberg's proposed Syro-Aramaic reading of the Qur'an, which has figured prominently during the conference from which the present volume has emerged, can be classed together with two other very well-known theories, those of Patricia Crone/Michael Cook and John Wansbrough.<sup>1</sup> All three approaches either mistrust or completely reject the Arabic accounts concerning the early Islamic period. Crone/Cook do so with regard to historical traditions about early Islam in general, while Wansbrough argues against the traditional account of how the Qur'anic text has come into being, and Luxenberg casts doubt on the traditional reading of the Qur'an. John Burton's theory that it was the Prophet himself who was responsible for the "final edition" of the Qur'an should also be mentioned in this context, since it also dismisses the respective Islamic account as fictitious.<sup>2</sup> All of these scholars show a tendency to continue the pattern set by Ignaz Goldziher with his well-known criticism of prophetic traditions (in particular legal ḥadīth),<sup>3</sup> an approach that was developed further by Joseph Schacht, who also extended it to the transmission of historical traditions.<sup>4</sup> The rejection of the authenticity of pre-Islamic poetry by David Margoliouth and (following him) Tāḥā Ḥusayn may be seen as pointing in the same direction.<sup>5</sup>

A certain degree of skepticism towards traditions concerning early Islam is justified by the circumstance that all the relevant accounts, tales, and poems are extant only in works written or published in their present form 150 to 200 years after the events occurred (i.e., not before 800 CE). Thus, we possess neither contemporary Islamic records

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<sup>1</sup> Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*; Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*.

<sup>2</sup> Burton, *Collection*.

<sup>3</sup> Goldziher, *Entwicklung*.

<sup>4</sup> Schacht, *Origins*.

<sup>5</sup> Ḥusayn, *Fī l-adab al-jāhili*.

of the acts and sayings of the Prophet, nor contemporary reports of the redaction and compilation of the Qur'an (which tradition places before 650 CE), nor yet contemporary collections of pre-Islamic or early Islamic poems that would have reached us through written transmission. We are similarly unaware of how the Qur'an was read in the Prophet's lifetime. What we do have are later generations' accounts of events from the early period, accounts which are frequently widely divergent. Given these circumstances, it is only understandable that Western scholarship did not content itself with the analysis and comparison of the various traditions, but very early on began to scrutinize the process of transmission itself, which in turn led the scholars referred to above to conclude that the respective traditions ought to be rejected. The question facing us today, however, is whether this criticism, and in particular its most recent formulations, has not gone too far.

In examining, as I plan to do, a number of questions surrounding the written compilation and transmission of the Qur'an (the Ḥadīth will be addressed towards the end), I will also have to rely on traditions written down by later generations. I cannot prove that all of them are accurate—indeed, I am certain that many of them have been poorly transmitted and distorted, and that some are false or even downright inventions. Nevertheless, I do believe that these traditions have a genuine core and that they provide a consistent general picture of the history of the Qur'an's compilation. I take this to be justified on the grounds that this core is confirmed by what we know from other contexts about the use of writing in early Islam, as well as by our knowledge about later periods (for example, contemporary records). To avoid repeating what I have said about this issue elsewhere,<sup>6</sup> I shall concentrate on attempting to discover how credible the “genuine core” of the relevant reports about the collection of the Qur'an in fact is—that is, credible in the light of our wider knowledge about the use of writing in early Islam.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Schoeler, “Frage”; id., “Weiteres”; id., “Mündliche Thora”; id., “Schreiben und Veröffentlichen”; id., *Charakter und Authentie*; id., *Ecrire et transmettre*, 15–41.



*The State of the Qur'anic Text During Muhammad's Lifetime*

Let us first turn to Mecca and Medina at the time of Muhammad. Soon after receiving the first revelations, the Prophet is said to have repeated them to trusted individuals whom he regarded as suitable, so that they might memorize them and be able to repeat them in his absence.<sup>7</sup> These persons were known as *qurrā'*, "reciters." Although this procedure may have been a spontaneous decision, a model for it already existed, namely, the figure of the "transmitter" (*rāwī*) of contemporary Arabic poetry. Whether Muhammad's procedure was a parallel development or merely followed established practice, it is certain that the activities of *qārī'* and *rāwī* were closely related to one another. Probably the first who recognized this was Edmund Beck: "Both pronounce the words of a predecessor, the *rāwī* those of his poet, the *qārī'* the revelations given to Muhammad."<sup>8</sup>

It may be that in the earliest period the Prophet did not regard it as necessary that the revelations be written down. When, however, they became more frequent and longer (probably several years before the Hijra),<sup>9</sup> it was only natural that they would be committed to writing. Muhammad began to dictate the revelations to literate persons (*kuttāb al-wahy*), either to those he designated as scribes ad hoc (such as 'Uthmān, Mu'āwiya, Ubayy b. Ka'b, Zayd b. Thābit, 'Abdallāh b. abī Sarḥ), or to the secretaries responsible for his correspondence.<sup>10</sup> A number of these *kuttāb al-wahy* must also have been reciters (*qurrā'*), for they occasionally recited what had been dictated to them. This is true of Ubayy b. Ka'b, who later came to possess a complete copy of the Qur'an.<sup>11</sup>

Doubts have frequently been expressed concerning the reports that allege that at the time of the Prophet's death, Qur'anic passages and surahs were written on very disparate materials,<sup>12</sup> namely, slips (*riqā'*) made of papyrus or parchment, smooth stones (*liḥāf*), palm stalks (*'usub*), shoulder blades from camels (*aktāf*), ribs (*adlā'*), pieces of leather (*qita' adīm*), and wooden boards (*alwāḥ*).<sup>13</sup> The fact that the

<sup>7</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 1, 45.

<sup>8</sup> Beck, "Arabiyya," 209 (cf. Schoeler, "Schreiben und Veröffentlichen," 23ff.).

<sup>9</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 1, 45.

<sup>10</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 1, 46 (and n. 5).

<sup>11</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 2, 28.

<sup>12</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 2, 23–24; Neuwirth, "Koran," 101.

<sup>13</sup> Ibn abī Dāwūd, *Maṣāḥif*, 10. *GdQ*, vol. 2, 13.

Prophet appointed scribes on an ad hoc basis does indicate that very probably they made use of such writing material as came to hand. What is noteworthy, however, is that some traditions mention not only the materials listed above, but also sheets or booklets (*suḥuf*).<sup>14</sup> As regards writing materials, it should also be noted that the above-mentioned palm stalks might be similar to or even identical with wooden sticks of the type used for writing in ancient Yemen.<sup>15</sup> Among other things, these were used for letters, legal documents, and religious texts, in other words, for texts which are to some extent comparable with the Qur'an. The Prophet is said to have written a letter to the Banū 'Udhra on palm stalks.<sup>16</sup> However, most of Muhammad's epistles are said to have been written on parchment.<sup>17</sup> Paper did not yet exist in the seventh-century Islamic world, as the technique of paper production only became known from Chinese prisoners of war who were captured in 751 and taken to Samarkand after the battle of Aṭlakh near Tālās.<sup>18</sup> Before this, the only real writing material available was papyrus (*bardī*, *qirṭās*) and parchment (*raqq*), or leather (*jild*).

To conclude, the traditional reports about the state of the Qur'an at the time of the Prophet's death are not unbelievable if one assumes that part of it—perhaps the greater part of it—had already been written down on sheets of the same format and material, while another, and possibly smaller, part had not yet been committed to writing in this form. This latter part, perhaps consisting of the more recent revelations, may have been written on disparate materials and not yet been transferred to sheets of the same format.

It must have been about this time that writing came into use as an *aide-mémoire* for the preservation of poetry and proverbs. We can demonstrate this to have been the case a few decades later. In one of the poems from the *Naqā'id*, which is often cited in this context and whose authenticity is certain and undisputed, the great Umayyad poet and transmitter al-Farazdaq (born ca. 20/640) says:

Of al-Ja'afarī (i.e., Labīd) and Bishr (b. abī Khāzim) (who lived) before him, I own the booklet (*kitāb*) compiled of their verses. [...]

<sup>14</sup> Ibn abī Dāwūd, *Maṣāḥif*, 7 (line 1), 10 (line 19).

<sup>15</sup> See Peter Stein's contribution to this volume.

<sup>16</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 2, 13, n. 3.

<sup>17</sup> *EP*, s.v. *raqq*.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *EP*, s.v. *kāghad*.

They (i.e., several poets/transmitters mentioned earlier) left me their booklet (*kitābahum*) as a bequest.<sup>19</sup>

A few verses earlier in the same *qaṣīda* (verse 33) the “booklet” (*ṣaḥīfa*) of the well-known genealogist Daghfal b. Ḥanzala<sup>20</sup> is mentioned.

From this it can be concluded with certainty that transmitters and genealogists of the generation before al-Farazdaq already used pages or booklets as *aide-mémoires*. Since the poet was born around 640, it may be supposed that more recent *mukhaḍramūn* (poets and transmitters contemporary with the Prophet) owned such writings as well. The genealogist Daghfal, who owned such a *ṣaḥīfa*, also belongs to this period, since he is said to have outlived the Prophet and to have died around 685 CE.

In the context of our knowledge about how literary texts came to be written, it would appear consistent that at some point the Prophet had the surahs recorded in written form. Given the special nature of the revelations and the circumstance that Muhammad very quickly came to regard a book such as those possessed by the “people of the book” as the ultimate aim (*Zielvorstellung*) of the Qur'an's textual growth,<sup>21</sup> the process of committing the revelations to writing must have been viewed as far more important and necessary than would have been the case for poetry. This brings up the question of whether it was Muhammad himself who was responsible for the final version of the Qur'an, as Burton has claimed. In order to assess his hypothesis, it is helpful to examine how other early Islamic works received their final shape.

Generally speaking, it is quite inconceivable that an author or transmitter of a work of literature from the early Islamic period would have redacted or published his own work, since even centuries later, Arab poets did not do so. Neither Abū Nuwās (d. ca. 815), nor Abū Tammām (d. ca. 845), or al-Buḥturī (d. 897) published their works themselves. This only became common practice in the eleventh century: Abū l-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī (d. 1058) and al-Ḥarīrī (d. 1122) both established “final” versions of their own works. Although prose authors had established definitive versions of their text since the first

<sup>19</sup> *Naqā'id* 39:51ff. (vol. 1, 200–201). For the genuineness of the *Dīwāns* of the Umayyad poets al-Farazdaq and Jarīr see the view of the “skeptical” Régis Blachère, *Histoire*, 463–464, 494, and especially 504.

<sup>20</sup> GAS, vol. 1, 265–266.

<sup>21</sup> Neuwirth, “Koran,” 103.

half of the eighth century (such as the writings of Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib, who died in 750), these works were all *rasā'il*, letters, and thus belong to the tradition of epistolary writing that was already extant during the Prophet's lifetime.

One might of course contend that the Qur'an's being a very particular kind of work, the Prophet might have treated it in a very particular way and might have himself redacted it. This argument is, however, countered by the fact that the revelations remained in a state of flux throughout the Prophet's lifetime: verses and surahs were added, while others were "abrogated." It is thus hardly conceivable that before his death the Prophet established a final edition of the revealed text, or that he constantly brought one version of it up to date. As has been shown, this would have been in complete contrast with the methods employed by ancient Arabic poets.

*Arguments for the Historicity of the Collection of the Qur'an under  
Abū Bakr / 'Umar and its Official Edition under 'Uthmān*

We come now to the reports concerning the so-called first compilation of the Qur'anic text, which the dominant tradition describes as having been carried out by Zayd b. Thābit for the caliph Abū Bakr or 'Uthmān. The traditional version of this event is notorious for its contradictions, and I shall restrict my examination to the "genuine core" of the traditions as determined by Friedrich Schwally.<sup>22</sup> According to him, the copy of the Qur'an produced on this occasion cannot have been an official version, but was rather a private copy for 'Umar that remained in his family after his death and was inherited by his daughter Ḥafṣa. It later came to be used as the basis for 'Uthmān's official version. In this copy, the surahs must already have been arranged according to the principle of decreasing length.<sup>23</sup>

When viewed in this reduced form, the traditions are completely credible and fit in smoothly with the overall picture. The report that the more prominent Companions of the Prophet and those of his wives who could read owned private copies of the Qur'an soon after his death<sup>24</sup> is consistent with what might be expected: after all, it is completely improbable that 'Umar made do without a written Qur'an

<sup>22</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 2, 11–27.

<sup>23</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 2, 43.

<sup>24</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 2, 27ff., 46–47.

throughout his ten-year reign (634–644). The traditions according to which Zayd wrote the text on *ṣuḥuf*—sheets with a smooth surface that were all made from the same material (probably parchment) and had the same format—in order to create a collection “between two covers” (*bayna lawḥayn*), i.e., a codex,<sup>25</sup> are absolutely credible given that a task as great as the complete compilation of the Qur'an must have influenced the choice of materials used, and that only a codex could have met the practical requirements which must have existed for such a copy, such as ease of use. After all, it was only a few decades later that a *ṣaḥīfa* was used for much less important writings such as those of the genealogist Dagħfal. What is uncertain, however, is whether 'Umar's and Ḥaḥṣa's copy was the first systematic collection of the Qur'anic text (and not just one of the first), since we are told of a number of complete copies owned by other Companions of the Prophet<sup>26</sup> that must have been written at the same time or very soon afterwards.<sup>27</sup> In either case, these compilations must all have been purely private writings intended to assist their owner's memory and were not claimed to be the sole valid version. Correspondingly, we hear nothing of any opposition towards these compilations.

The fact that the codices of the other Companions used the same criterion as Zayd for arranging the surahs (namely, that of decreasing length) does not present a problem.<sup>28</sup> Once found, a practicable principle such as this would not have remained unknown, even if several private compilations were made at approximately the same time.<sup>29</sup>

Yet the most important question still remains unanswered. How credible are the traditions concerning the official edition of the Qur'an

<sup>25</sup> Ibn abī Dāwūd, *Maṣāḥif*, 5; *GdQ*, vol. 2, 14–15, 24–25.

<sup>26</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 2, 27ff.

<sup>27</sup> However, not all the written documents that were in the possession of the *kuttāb* or the *qurrā'* were complete versions of the text. The battle cry “O you people of Sūrat al-Baqara” makes it likely that the men addressed by it were only responsible for reciting this one surah (cf. Sayed, *Revolte*). Transmitters of poetry, too, did not always dispose of the complete works of their respective poet.

<sup>28</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 2, 43.

<sup>29</sup> A similarly mechanical and at the same time practical principle of arrangement later occurs with respect to the collection of poetic *dīwāns*: the arrangement of the poems according to their rhyme, which remains the same throughout the entire poem.—The organization by chapter length, with the longest chapters coming first, is a principle that was applied already by Jewish scholars in the organization of the Mishna; cf. Geiger, “Plan und Anordnung,” 480 (I am indebted for this information to Professor Talya Fishman).

under ‘Uthmān?<sup>30</sup> A few years ago, a much older source for this event than those available to Wansbrough was made accessible: a number of long fragments from Sayf b. ‘Umar’s *Kitāb ar-ridda wa-l-futūḥ al-kabīr*.<sup>31</sup> Since Sayf died at around 800 CE and must have composed his work in the second half of the eighth century, his report cannot date from later than ca. 120 years after the traditional date for the redaction of the Qur’an (around 650 A.D.)—according to Wansbrough, the final version of the Qur’an would not even have existed in Sayf’s lifetime!

Since no generally binding version or official copy existed before the time of ‘Uthmān, the *qurrā’* had a monopoly on the “publication” of the holy book for about two decades, just as the *ruwāt* enjoyed a monopoly for the transmission of poetic works. The “publication” of the Qur’an by the *qurrā’* was purely oral, although many of them did own written texts, and some even owned complete copies of the Qur’an (e.g. Ubayy b. Ka‘b). This situation could not but lead to dispute, since different versions contained not only different readings of the text but even included different surahs,<sup>32</sup> and each Qur’an reader naturally insisted that his was the best or sole authentic copy. This situation highlights a contrast to the transmission of poetry. While the fluidity of poems was regarded as being normal and to a certain extent desirable (transmitters were expected to improve their texts as far as possible<sup>33</sup>), to treat the revealed word of God in the same way must have sooner or later resulted in outrage. It is alleged that it was a quarrel between different groups of *qurrā’* about the true shape of the Qur’anic text that led ‘Uthmān to order an official edition of the text to be produced.<sup>34</sup> The traditions are in accordance that it was Zayd b. Thābit who was entrusted with this task. According to the dominant tradition, a number of leading Quraysh were brought in to assist him, and the commission was able to base its work on Zayd’s earlier compilation that was still in Ḥaḥṣa’s possession. The official, binding character of ‘Uthmān’s version was enforced by dispatching copies to the provincial capitals, where they were to serve as exemplar copies, and by ordering the destruction of all other compilations.

<sup>30</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 2, 47ff.

<sup>31</sup> Sayf b. ‘Umar, *Kitāb ar-ridda*, 48–50.

<sup>32</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 2, 30ff.

<sup>33</sup> Schoeler, “Schreiben und Veröffentlichen,” 8ff. (English trans., 427f.); id., *Ecrire et transmettre*, 20–21.

<sup>34</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 2, 47ff.

I have demonstrated elsewhere that the deposition of exemplar copies was a form of publication, and indeed the only form of *written* publication, that was known in pre-Islamic times, where it is attested for important contracts.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to the internal evidence—after a certain time, circumstances must have rendered it necessary to produce a single and generally binding version of the holy book—there are two additional criteria that establish the authenticity of the reports concerning 'Uthmān's collection of the Qur'an: Firstly, these reports are all concentrated on the person of 'Uthmān, and secondly, these traditions reflect substantially different evaluations of his orders. To dwell but briefly on the first point: While there is uncertainty as to whether it was 'Umar or Abū Bakr who commissioned the first compilation of the Qur'an,<sup>36</sup> it is agreed that it was 'Uthmān who ordered its official publication.

As regards the second point, the Qur'an readers and their supporters, who had until then enjoyed a monopoly on the "publication" of the Qur'an, were understandably unwilling to recognize the sole validity of 'Uthmān's version, which they regarded as being but one among many. The reluctance of these circles is reflected in the reproaches later leveled at 'Uthmān by rebels: "The Qur'an was (many) books. You have given them up except for one."<sup>37</sup> According to another report, the rebels are reported to have said:

"You have burned the book of God." He replied: "People read (the Qur'an) in different ways. One would say: 'My Qur'an is better than yours.' The other would say: 'No, mine is better.'" [...] They said: "But why did you burn the (other) collections?" [...] He replied: "I wanted nothing else to exist except what had been written in front of the Messenger of God, and was contained in the pages (*ṣuḥuf*) of Ḥaḥṣa."<sup>38</sup>

On the other hand, however, a number of traditions praise 'Uthmān for his compilation, as can be seen in a statement attributed to 'Alī: "If 'Uthmān had not done this, I would have done it."<sup>39</sup> Another tradition that praises 'Uthmān states:

<sup>35</sup> Schoeler, "Schreiben und Veröffentlichen," 1ff., 24 (English trans., 424ff.).

<sup>36</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 2, 15ff.

<sup>37</sup> Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 1, 2952.

<sup>38</sup> Al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, vol. 4.1, 550ff.

<sup>39</sup> Ibn abī Dāwūd, *Maṣāḥif*, 12.

If ‘Uthmān would not have caused the Qur’an to be written down, you would have found people reciting poetry (when they were in fact reciting the Qur’an).<sup>40</sup>

Thus, the Qur’an would have come to be treated as freely as the poets and *ruwāt* treated their texts.

I would like at this point to say something about my analysis of traditions. As remarked at the outset, I do not believe in the authenticity of every single tradition, yet I do believe in something like the authenticity of the overall picture that tradition conveys of the codification of the Qur’an. The statement attributed to ‘Alī quoted above may well be based on a forgery intended to provide support for ‘Uthmān. I would however rule out the hypothesis that ‘Uthmān’s order to publish the Qur’an was an invention followed in turn by the forgery and dissemination of traditions lauding his actions and of traditions criticizing him. In my opinion, the event itself must be genuine, and the individual traditions, although themselves not necessarily authentic, reflect the different attitudes of those affected by the event (in the present example, the negative attitude of the Qur’an readers).

I would regard the numerous traditions according to which variants of the Qur’an text continued to exist even after ‘Uthmān’s redaction as being important evidence for authenticity. I have in mind not so much the non-‘Uthmānic compilations (Ibn Mas‘ūd, Ubayy b. Ka‘b, etc.) as the differing versions of ‘Uthmān’s codex deposited in the various provincial capitals.<sup>41</sup> The existence of these and other variants was an unwelcome but inevitable by-product of ‘Uthmān’s project, and it seems absurd to assume that these variations were invented by forgers merely in order to support another forgery, namely, the (allegedly baseless) report of ‘Uthmān’s official edition. Differences between the codices are no more than consistent with the fundamental observation of textual analysis that lengthy writings cannot be copied without any errors.

A further indication of the fact that by the middle of the second/eighth century the Qur’an had long since acquired a fixed, unalterable consonant structure is provided by the observation that dialectal forms were preserved in the codex, for instance *wa-inna hādhāni* instead of *wa-inna hādhayni* in Q 20:63. Even though the Qur’an

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Beck, “Kodizesvarianten.”



reader and linguist Abū 'Amr b. al-'Alā' wished to correct this as late as the mid-second/eighth century, he was unable to gain support for this.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Sībawayh (d. ca. 796) quotes 'Uthmān's codex precisely as it exists today, without any variations at all.<sup>43</sup>

The examples given above appear to me sufficient to warrant the view that the compilation and redaction of the Qur'an under 'Uthmān (unanimously supported by tradition) is, if not proven, then at least extremely probable. At this point I will therefore not enter into a refutation of Wansbrough's thesis that the final text of the Qur'an was established only towards the end of the second/eighth century, perhaps even as late as the beginning of the third/ninth century. I shall return to this theory at the end of this paper, however.

### *Some Remarks on the Codification of the Ḥadīth*

Finally, and by way of contrast to my presentation of the history of the redaction of the Qur'anic text, I should like to turn to the process whereby the Ḥadīth was put into writing.<sup>44</sup> While the necessity of a codification of the Qur'an arose very early on, from the outset, and in complete contrast to the Qur'an, many scholars insisted that the sayings of Muhammad should not be compiled as a book, but that they should exist as an "oral teaching" alongside the written Qur'an.

I have elsewhere pointed out the similarity of this notion with Judaism,<sup>45</sup> where it was also maintained that the Talmud (i.e., the Mishnah and the Gemarah) should not be written down and exist as oral teachings alongside the Hebrew Bible. In the end, both cultures did come to establish more or less definitive written versions of their respective oral teachings. In Islam, this took place mainly in the third/ninth century, when the canonical ḥadīth collections were established by scholars such as al-Bukhārī (d. 870), Muslim (d. 875), and at-Tirmidhī (d. 892). Yet in spite of the fact that the Ḥadīth finally came to be written down, an oral component was still maintained

<sup>42</sup> Al-Farrā', *Ma'ānī*, vol. 2, 183–184. Cf. Beck, "Uṭmānische Kodex," 360.

<sup>43</sup> Beck, "Uṭmānische Kodex," 360.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Schoeler, "Mündliche Thora," and Cook, "Opponents."

<sup>45</sup> Schoeler, "Mündliche Thora," 215–218; cf. Cook, "Opponents," 498ff.

through the demand that such traditions not be simply copied out but be heard from an authorized reciter.<sup>46</sup>

Throughout the second Islamic century, a quarrel raged between scholars of Muslim traditions as to whether it was permissible to write down ḥadīth or not.<sup>47</sup> As was the case among Jewish scholars, there were many who maintained that one might not write the traditions down at all, even if for the purpose of assisting memory. The reason often given was that no second book similar to the Qur'an should exist and that the words of the Prophet should not be mixed or confused with the word of God. The Companion Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī (d. 683 in Medina) is thus said to have replied to a request that he dictate ḥadīth:

Do you want to make Qur'an copies out of them and (then) recite them? Your Prophet was wont to speak to us, and we then kept his words in our memories; let you, too, keep our words in your memories as we have remembered those of your Prophet!<sup>48</sup>

Thus, the Qur'an was to be and remain the only true book of Islam. Yet independently of this theoretical discussion, students did in practice write down the traditions they heard in order to assist their memories.<sup>49</sup> Since writing material was scarce, expensive, and not always available, students sometimes wrote on their hands and on their sandals,<sup>50</sup> and even on walls.<sup>51</sup> More usually, the writing material took the form of tablets (*alwāḥ*, *sabbūr[aj]āt*)<sup>52</sup> from which the writing could readily be erased, and booklets (or folded sheets) (*karārīs*).<sup>53</sup> Objections were frequently raised against the use of the latter on the grounds that they resembled copies of the Qur'an: "Do not use booklets (or folded sheets) for the Ḥadīth as you do for copies of the Qur'an (*lā tattakhidhū li-l-ḥadīth karārīs ka-karārīs al-maṣāḥif*)!"<sup>54</sup>

In contrast to copies of the Qur'an, the notes in the booklets were not intended to be permanent records: "Do not write my words down

<sup>46</sup> Schoeler, "Mündliche Thora," 237; id., *Ecrire et transmettre*, 119, 125, 129 ff.

<sup>47</sup> Schoeler, "Mündliche Thora," 217–218, 231–237; Cook, "Opponents."

<sup>48</sup> *Taqyīd*, 36b; cf. Schoeler, "Mündliche Thora," 221, 231, 239 (diagram 2.1). The *isnād* is: Abū Naḍra al-Mundhir b. Mālik 'an Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī.

<sup>49</sup> Schoeler, "Mündliche Thora," 216–217.

<sup>50</sup> *Taqyīd*, 100a and b (hands); Ibn abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*, vol. 9, 51 (no. 6489) (hands); Ibn Ḥanbal, *ʿIlal*, 50 (sandals).

<sup>51</sup> *Jāmi'*, vol. 1, 72.

<sup>52</sup> *Taqyīd*, 109b and c.

<sup>53</sup> *Taqyīd*, 47d and 48b; *Jāmi'*, vol. 1, 67.

<sup>54</sup> *Taqyīd*, 47d; *Jāmi'*, vol. 1, 67.

in lasting form (*lā tukhallidunna 'annī kitāban*)!"<sup>55</sup> For this reason, some erased or burned their writing after having memorized it<sup>56</sup>; others destroyed their notes shortly before death,<sup>57</sup> or ordered in their wills that they be destroyed after their death.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, many opponents of writing did not object to so-called *aṭrāf*, that is, notes containing just the beginning and the end of each ḥadīth, as these did not bring about the risk of confusion with the Qur'an.<sup>59</sup>

As we have seen, the main objection of Islamic scholars towards writing down the traditions was that no second book should be allowed to exist alongside the Qur'an. Thus the Prophet himself is said to have protested when someone attempted to write down his words: "Do you want another book besides the Book of God? Devote yourselves entirely to the Book of God!"<sup>60</sup>

The historicity of this dispute between scholars of tradition is undisputed, and it is accepted even by Michael Cook.<sup>61</sup> The debate began at the outset of the second/eighth century, and continued throughout that century.<sup>62</sup> The strongest and most widespread opposition to writing existed in the first half of the century, whereas in Basra and Kufa it continued into the second half as well. Although it waned during the third/ninth century, it had considerable effect even then. Ibn abī Shayba (d. 849) opens a number of chapters in his huge *Muṣannaf* with the words "This is what I know by heart of the Prophet's words,"<sup>63</sup> thus presenting his monumental collection of ḥadīth not as a book, but rather as a written compilation of orally transmitted sayings that he had memorized. In general, however, the opposition to writing is an "archaic" characteristic (Cook) of Islamic traditionalism.

At this point, I would like to return to Wansbrough's theory. Does not such a debate as to whether it was permitted to write down Muhammad's sayings *alongside the Qur'an* presuppose the existence of the Qur'an as an already complete and published book? Even if the prophetic saying "Do you want another book besides the book of

<sup>55</sup> *Taqyīd*, 46e, 47a; b. Ḥanbal, *ʿIlal*, 42; *Jāmiʿ*, vol. 1, 67.

<sup>56</sup> *Taqyīd*, 53b, 54a, 59a, b, c, d, 60a; *Jāmiʿ*, vol. 1, 66.

<sup>57</sup> *Taqyīd*, 61d; *Jāmiʿ*, vol. 1, 67.

<sup>58</sup> *Taqyīd*, 62.

<sup>59</sup> Ibn abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*, vol. 9, 51 (no. 6484); *Jāmiʿ*, vol. 1, 72.

<sup>60</sup> *Taqyīd*, 34b.

<sup>61</sup> Cook, "Opponents," 450ff.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 450ff., 476: "[...] the Kufan material points strongly to the first half of the second century, and the rest of the regional evidence goes fairly well with them."

<sup>63</sup> For example, *Muṣannaf*, vol. 10, 154.

God?” does not really go back to Muhammad, it was certainly used by opponents of writing in the second century AH who attributed it to the Prophet. This would appear to confirm and illustrate Goldziher’s theory that the sayings ascribed to the Prophet frequently reflect later developments in jurisprudence and theology. Older than the ḥadīth just mentioned, is the saying ascribed to the Companion Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī (d. 683) quoted above, “Do you want to make *maṣāḥif* out of them?”<sup>64</sup> If it does not date back to Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī, then it must have originated at least at the beginning of the second century when Abū Naḍra al-Mundhir b. Mālik (d. 727 in Basra) ascribed it to him.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, the tradition confirms that the Qurʾān was a book with a defined text (*muṣṣḥaf*) by the beginning of the second century AH at the latest, and thus convincingly disproves Wansbrough’s theory. Even if the Qurʾān was not compiled under ʿUthmān (d. 656), then the compilation must have taken place no more than a few decades later.<sup>66</sup> In any case, as von Bothmer has shown, we possess the fragments of a Qurʾānic manuscript from Sanaa that dates back to the second half of the first century AH and contains the ʿUthmānic text, without any variants as far as we know, and even includes the first and last surahs, typically absent from non-ʿUthmānic codices.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> In Schoeler, “Mündliche Thora,” 245–246, I have shown that the prophetic ḥadīth is most likely a later “back-projection” of the tradition ascribed to Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī to the Prophet (this position has also been adopted by Cook, “Opponents,” 449, 464). This is an illustration of Schacht’s thesis that the chains of transmitters can grow backwards.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Schoeler, “Mündliche Thora,” 246, and diagram 2.1 on page 239.

<sup>66</sup> It has been suggested by Casanova that the collection of the Qurʾān was ordered by ʿAbdalmalik and that the ʿUthmānic edition is in fact a myth (*Mohammed*, 127). Cf. the criticism by Pretzl in *GdQ*, vol. 3, 104, n. 1. Even the “skeptical” Blachère has rejected this position (*Introduction*, 68).

<sup>67</sup> “Neue Wege,” 45–46.

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THE SECOND MAṢĀḤĪF PROJECT:  
A STEP TOWARDS THE CANONIZATION OF THE  
QUR'ANIC TEXT\*

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*Introduction*

Although the official redaction of the Qur'an as a codex (*muṣḥaf*) that was initiated by the third caliph, 'Uthmān b. 'Affān (d. 35/655), has been discussed by scholars at great length, it should be noted that around some fifty years later, i.e., in the years between 84 and 86 AH (703–705 CE), another project was accomplished with a similar objective.<sup>1</sup> This latter project, which I would like to designate here as “the second *maṣāḥif* project,” has scarcely been dealt with in the scholarship on the Qur'an. In what follows, I argue that this initiative was an important step toward the canonization of the Qur'an.

The aim of this paper is to examine this project systematically. I will trace the role and contribution of Umayyad rulers as well as the participation of the contemporaneous '*ulamā'* in this project. Moreover, the fate of the orthographically reformed codices (*maṣāḥif*) that were put into circulation by al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf ath-Thaqafī (d. 95/713) will be discussed. The latter, who was governor of Iraq from 75/694 until 95/713,<sup>2</sup> took the responsibility for the orthographical reform of the 'Uthmānic text. It is worth mentioning that al-Ḥajjāj's reforms have rarely been dealt with by scholars,<sup>3</sup> and even when they are mentioned, no systematic approach is pursued.<sup>4</sup> Gerhard Endress notices the likelihood “that a group of Qur'anic experts around

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\* I am grateful to Islam Dayeh for translating this text.

<sup>1</sup> Previous scholarship on the early textual history of the Qur'an includes Mingana, “Transmission”; *GdQ*, vol. 2, 1–121; az-Zanjānī, *Tārīkh*, 43–46; Jeffery, *Materials*, 4–10; Shihāta, *Tārīkh*, 47–58; Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*; Burton, *Collection*; al-Ḥamad, *Rasm*, 100–128; Jones, “Qur'an”; Neuwirth, “Koran,” 101–104; Motzki, “Collection”; Neuwirth, “Form.”

<sup>2</sup> *EP*, vol. 3, 39–43.

<sup>3</sup> Casanova, *Mohammed*, vol. 2/1, 110, 112, 114; Mingana, “Transmission,” 41–42; al-Ḥamad, *Rasm*, 541.

<sup>4</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 3, 260–261 (§ 4); Grohmann, “Entstehung,” 33; *EP*, vol. 5, 408.

al-Ḥajjāj (likely, in continuation with previous attempts) sought a way to rightly comprehend the holy scripture through the introduction of a standard system of reading signs for proper pronunciation.”<sup>5</sup> In this contribution, I would like to pursue this matter further and identify the participants of the group that carried out the *maṣāḥif* project of al-Ḥajjāj.

### Background

Let us begin with the government of al-Ḥajjāj’s predecessor, ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād (d. 67/686).<sup>6</sup> The renowned Ḥadīth and Qur’an scholar Ibn abī Dāwūd (d. 316/928) ascribes to him the introduction of the *scriptio plena* of the Qur’anic text, quoting a tradition that goes back to Yazīd al-Fārisī,<sup>7</sup> the scribe of ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād,<sup>8</sup> which states: *zāda ‘Ubaydu llāhi bnu Ziyādin fī l-muṣḥafi alfay ḥarfin* (“‘Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād inserted two thousand letters in the *muṣḥaf*”).<sup>9</sup> In another passage by Ibn abī Dāwūd it becomes clear that the tradition deals according to his own interpretation with the separating *alifs* as well as the lengthened *alifs* in *qlw* and *knw*, of which the complete spelling follows: *qālū* and *kānū*.<sup>10</sup>

Bergsträsser and Pretzl have, however, doubted the authenticity of this report, on grounds that “even if the disconnected *alif* were inserted by ‘Ubaidallāh, the number 2000 would not have been enough for the multiplication [*Vermehrung*] of the letters.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, they believed it possible to discern traces “of a strong reformation of orthography that took place in Iraq.”<sup>12</sup> Yet this objection is misleading. The tradition of Yazīd al-Fārisī is, in fact, authentic: it was misread by Ibn abī Dāwūd and consequently misinterpreted. The tradition does not deal with the insertion of two thousands *alifs*, but rather with

<sup>5</sup> GAP, vol. 2, 178 (§ 5.1.2.).

<sup>6</sup> He was the governor of Basra (55–67/675–686) and Kufa (60–67/680–686). See *EF*, vol. 10, 763–764.

<sup>7</sup> *TT*, vol. 11, 374 (§ 721).

<sup>8</sup> Active as a scribe of Ibn ‘Abbās (d. between 68 and 70/687 and 689) during his government of Basra in the Caliphate of Yazīd (r. 35–40/655–660). See al-Fasawī, *Ma’rifā*, 371: *Kāna kātiban li-bni ‘Abbāsin*. For the government of Ibn ‘Abbās see Khalīfa, *Tārīkh*, vol. 1, 233, ll. 1–4.

<sup>9</sup> *IAD*, 117, ll. 5–7.

<sup>10</sup> *IAD*, 117, ll. 11–19.

<sup>11</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 3, 256.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*.



two *alifs* of a particular word. The passage in question should be read *alifay ḥarfīn* and thus *ḥarf* should be conceived of as “word.”

My claim is supported by two traditions in which the orthography of the passage *sa-yaqūlūna li-llāhi* which occurs in three places in the Qur’an (Q 23:85.87.89) is discussed. In these traditions the Basran *maṣāḥif* differ from the ‘Uthmānic *muṣḥaf* as well as the remaining *maṣāḥif*.

The first of these traditions is narrated by ‘Amr b. ‘Ubayd (d. 143/760) on the authority of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), who is reported to have said: “The reprobate [*al-fāsiq*], ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād, inserted an *alif* in both places (Q 23:87.89).”<sup>13</sup> In fact, two contradictory readings related to this passage go back to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī: *sa-yaqūlūna li-llāhi*<sup>14</sup> and *sa-yaqūlūna llāhu* (Q 23:87.89).<sup>15</sup> More clarity can be gained from another tradition. ‘Abd b. Ḥumayd (d. 249/863) transmitted on the authority of Yaḥyā b. ‘Atīq, a student of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī,<sup>16</sup> that he said: “I saw in al-Ḥasan’s *muṣḥaf*: *li-llāhi, li-llāhi* without an *alif* in three places (Q 23:85.87.89).”<sup>17</sup>

The second one of the two traditions mentioned above is narrated by Ya‘qūb al-Ḥaḍramī, one of the ten Qur’an readers: “‘Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād ordered that in both places (Q 23:87.89) an *alif* should be inserted.”<sup>18</sup>

The tradition of Ya‘qūb al-Ḥaḍramī evidently alludes to Yazīd al-Fārisī who carried out the orders of ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād. This was drawn from the tradition of Yazīd al-Fārisī who narrates “that al-Ḥajjāj, upon his arrival to Basra [as governor] heard this, and asked: ‘Who commissioned ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād with this task?’ They [the people] said: ‘Yazīd al-Fārisī was commissioned with this task.’ Then

<sup>13</sup> Ad-Dānī, *Muqni’*, 109, vol. 2, 5–6: *Qāla ‘Amrun: Kāna l-Ḥasanu yaqūlu: (a) l-fāsiqu ‘Ubaydu llāhi bnu Ziyādin zāda fihimā alifan*. Also as-Sakhāwī, *Wasīla*, 191.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Ahwāzī, *Mufrada*, 401; al-Bannā, *Ithāf*, vol. 2, 287.

<sup>15</sup> *BM*, vol. 6, 416. So read Ibn Mas‘ūd, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, ‘Āṣim al-Jahḍarī, Naṣr b. ‘Āṣim, Yaḥyā b. Waththāb, Abū l-Ashhab, Abū ‘Amr and al-Yazīdī (al-Bannā, *Ithāf*, vol. 2, 287). This corresponds to the Syrian, Meccan and Medinan *maṣāḥif*.

<sup>16</sup> About Yaḥyā see the al-Bukhārī, *Tārīkh*, vol. 8, 176 (§ 12395/3057); Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Jarḥ*, vol. 9, 216–217 (§ 16385/730).

<sup>17</sup> *DM*, vol. 5, 14. The reason why in this tradition the word in question appears not three times, but twice, is that the first occurrence of the word (23:85) is written without an *alif* in all ‘Uthmānic Qur’an exemplars. The last two places are however disputed, since they were written in all the Qur’an exemplars without an *alif*, except for the Basran exemplars which were written with an *alif*. See ad-Dānī, *Muqni’*, 108–109; cf. also Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, vol. 2, 329.

<sup>18</sup> Ad-Dānī, *Muqni’*, 109, II. 6–7; also as-Sakhāwī, *Wasīla*, 191.

he sent for me. Then I hurried to him having no doubt that he would have me executed. When I arrived to him, he asked me: 'How is it that Ibn Ziyād inserted two *alifs* in the *muṣḥaf*?' I answered: 'God give the Amīr prosperity. He [Ibn Ziyād] was born in Kallā' al-Baṣra.'<sup>19</sup> This fact escaped my notice. He [al-Ḥajjāj] said: 'You are right.' Then he let me go."<sup>20</sup>

This aforementioned tradition informs us that not only the words (*kalimāt*) in the *muṣḥaf* were counted, but also the consonants (*ḥurūf*), in order to prevent any insertion into or deletion of the Qur'anic text. It was precisely this enumeration that was the first contribution to the *maṣāḥif* project. Nevertheless, this event alone does not suffice as background for the *maṣāḥif* project. Had the elimination of both *alifs* inserted by Ibn Ziyād been the reason, the matter would have been accomplished and there would have been no need for the *maṣāḥif* project. The real motive, therefore, should be sought in the political conflicts between the Shi'ites in Kufa and the ruling Umayyads which had escalated since the rule of Ibn Ziyād (r. 55–66/675–685).

Moreover, 'Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād provoked the Kufans by reciting, for the first time in public prayers, the two invocative surahs (surah no. 113 and 114)—the so-called *mu'awwidhatān*<sup>21</sup>—because these two surahs were missing from the codex of Ibn Mas'ūd which was read by the Kufans at that time.<sup>22</sup>

Al-Ḥajjāj himself followed Ibn Ziyād's tactic of provocation and implemented it with more force. He ordered that no one be allowed to lead the public prayers in Kufa unless he was an Arab.<sup>23</sup> He even mocked Ibn Mas'ūd (d. 32/652) and his Qur'anic reading. It is reported that he said: "How I wonder about Ibn Mas'ūd! He claimed to have read the [original] Qur'an of God. I swear by God that it is just a piece of *rajaz* poetry of the Bedouins."<sup>24</sup> Aṣ-Ṣalt b. Dīnār reported: "I heard al-Ḥajjāj saying: 'Ibn Mas'ūd is the chief of hypocrites [*ra's al-munāfiqīn*]. If I had lived in the same time as his, I would have soaked the ground with his blood.'"<sup>25</sup> In addition, the well-known

<sup>19</sup> A quarter in Basra where the bazaar and the seaport were. See al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan at-taqāsīm*, 117; al-Bakrī, *Mu'jam*, vol. 4, 1133; Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu'jam*, vol. 4, 472.

<sup>20</sup> *IAD*, 117.

<sup>21</sup> *KM*, vol. 14, 74 (§ 17608); al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, 379–380 (§ 1009).

<sup>22</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 2, 39 ff.

<sup>23</sup> *MQK*, vol. 1, 63 (§ 20); also *GhN*, vol. 2, 380 (§ 3871).

<sup>24</sup> Ibn Abī d-Dunyā, *Ishrāf*, 85 (§ 58); *TI*, T. 10, 320, l. 4–5.

<sup>25</sup> *TI*, T. 10, 320, l. 15–16.

Kufan Qur'an reader, 'Āṣim b. Bahdala (d. 127/745), reports that al-Ḥajjāj would often threaten to kill the people of Kufa should they not cease following the reading of Ibn Mas'ūd. Al-Ḥajjāj swore that he would erase this reading from the *muṣḥaf* even if it would be with a rib of a swine.<sup>26</sup>

After al-Ḥajjāj had strictly forbidden the reading of Ibn Mas'ūd, he took upon himself the objective of producing a standard text of the Qur'an. For the authorities, this initiative was a very meaningful attempt to restore the shattered prestige of the Umayyads and to win back the trust and the loyalty of the subjects. This happened after twenty years of political conflict and civil war between the Umayyads and their opponents. It was a period which was marked by a general spirit of dissatisfaction. For this reason, the initiative of al-Ḥajjāj was fondly supported by the central government in Damascus.

In the opinion of A. Dietrich, al-Ḥajjāj's aim was on the one hand to end the theological dispute over the different readings and, on the other hand, to purify the text of all possible anti-Umayyad allusions.<sup>27</sup> To my mind, it was not the objective of al-Ḥajjāj for his project to rid the Qur'an of variant readings. The main aim was rather to improve the political image of the Umayyads. Apart from this, the main cause for the diversity of Qur'anic readings lies not in the written text of the Qur'an, but rather in its orality.

Neither is the second aim that Dietrich observes in al-Ḥajjāj's initiative plausible. The Kufans (i.e., the opponents of al-Ḥajjāj) accused him of changing the eleven Qur'anic citations quoted by Ibn abī Dāwūd<sup>28</sup> in the context of the *maṣāḥif* project. Had "an elimination of all possible anti-Umayyad allusions from the text" occurred it would certainly not have taken place without any mention from his opponents. If one were to follow a similar approach, then one would need to bear in mind that al-Ḥajjāj could have aimed at ridding the text from possible Shi'ite allusions as much as Umayyad allusions. But again, the eleven Qur'anic citations do not have the slightest connection to Shi'ism. Moreover, it is not certain that al-Ḥajjāj had changed them at all. We should not forget that those who accused him were his opponents from Kufa. Apart from that, any textual

<sup>26</sup> Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil*, vol. 4, 586; also *TI*, T. 10, 320, 11–13.

<sup>27</sup> *EP*, vol. 3, 41. These ideas have already been brought up by Mingana, "Transmission," 41–42.

<sup>28</sup> *IAD*, 49–50 under *Bābu mā kataba l-Ḥajjāju bnu Yūsufā fī l-muṣḥafī* and *IAD*, 117–118 under *Bābu mā ghayyara l-Ḥajjāju fī muṣḥafī 'Uthmāna*.

alteration or tampering with the Qur'an from al-Ḥajjāj, or anyone else for that matter, even if minimal, such as the above-mentioned case of the two *alifs*, cannot have taken place without any reaction from the contemporary 'ulamā'.

With this short overview of the political background of the *maṣāḥif* project, we shall now look at some specific questions in the context of the realization and execution of the *maṣāḥif* project.

### *Who Was the Initiator?*

One must certainly regard al-Ḥajjāj as the main initiator. This is supported by two reports. Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī (d. around 360/971) writes that "due to the spread of writing mistakes in Iraq, al-Ḥajjāj appealed to his scribes to differentiate the similar looking consonants from each other by inserting diacritical signs."<sup>29</sup> A second similar report is given by Abū Aḥmad al-'Askarī (d.382/992 ).<sup>30</sup> In apparent contrast to this, Ibn 'Aṭīyya (d. 546/1152) reports that 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān embarked on this plan and that it was finally completed on the hands of al-Ḥajjāj. He writes: "Concerning the vocalisation of the *muṣḥaf* and its punctuation, it is reported that 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān ordered for it to be carried out. Al-Ḥajjāj attended to its completion."<sup>31</sup> In fact, the two reports do not contradict each other. Al-Ḥajjāj could not have undertaken the project without the consent of the Umayyad authorities; he certainly required the patronage of the caliph. This explains the appearance of the caliph in the official sources.

### *Where and When Did the Maṣāḥif Project Take Place?*

The question of where this project took place was first raised by Ibn 'Aṭīyya (d. 546/1152). He wrote: "So al-Ḥajjāj attended to this task in Wāsiṭ and exerted much effort into it."<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the reports mention that al-Ḥajjāj sent for Basran *qurrā'* and scribes because al-Ḥajjāj was in Wāsiṭ during this period and he ordered the *qurrā'*

<sup>29</sup> Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī, *Tanbīh*, 73. For linguistic errors after the *Futūḥ* see Fück, *Arabiya*, 8–10, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Al-'Askarī, *Sharḥ*, 13.

<sup>31</sup> *MW*, vol. 1, 66–67.

<sup>32</sup> *MW*, vol. 1, 67; also Ibn Kathīr, *Faḍā'il*, 43.

of Basra to come to Wāsiṭ.<sup>33</sup> Upon their arrival, he personally selected the members of the project.

Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī's reported journey to Wāsiṭ to meet al-Ḥajjāj should be understood in this context.<sup>34</sup> Out of all the traditions in question, only this single point is authentic. The remaining traditions that speak about al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī's conflict with al-Ḥajjāj are obviously legendary.<sup>35</sup> Al-Ḥajjāj's invitation and assemblage of the *qurrā'*, *ḥuffāz*, and the scribes from Basra for the *maṣāḥif* project was actually the reason behind al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī's visit to Wāsiṭ.

Determining the location will also help us find a clearer answer to when this project took place. We know that the city of Wāsiṭ was built between the years 83 and 86 (702–705).<sup>36</sup> We also know that al-Ḥajjāj lived in the new city as early as 84 AH (703 CE).<sup>37</sup> In order to determine a fairly closer date, we need to keep in mind that this project commenced and also ended during the caliphate of 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (r. 65–85/684–704). This terminus *ante quem* is due to the fact that his brother 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Marwān who was the governor of Egypt between the years 65 and 85 (684–704), refused to accept the *maṣāḥif* sent to him by al-Ḥajjāj.<sup>38</sup> We may thus conclude that the *maṣāḥif* project took place between 84 and 85 (703–704), a year after the suppression of the revolt of Ibn al-Ash'ath (d. 83/702).

<sup>33</sup> IAD, 119; al-Bāqillānī, *Nukat*, 396; az-Zarkashī, *Burhān*, vol. 1, 249, ll. 4–6.

<sup>34</sup> Schaeder, "Ḥasan al-Baṣrī," 60.

<sup>35</sup> The complete tradition by at-Tanūkhī, *Faraḥ*, vol. 1, 189–190; also Ibn Bashkuwāl, *Mustaghithīn*, 44 (§ 39); cf. Schaeder, "Ḥasan al-Baṣrī," 60; Meier, *Bausteine*, vol. 2, 843.

<sup>36</sup> See the article about Wāsiṭ by M. Streck in *EP*, vol. 11, 165–171.

<sup>37</sup> *EP*, vol. 11, 166.

<sup>38</sup> Ibn Duqmāq, *Intiṣār*, vol. 4, 72 (on the authority of the Egyptian historian Ibn Yūnus, d. 347/958): *Dhikru muṣḥafi Asmā'a: kāna s-sababu fī katbi hādihā l-muṣḥafi anna l-Ḥajjāja bna Yūsufa th-Thaqafiyya kataba maṣāḥifa wa-ba'atha bihā ilā l-amṣāri wa-wajjaha bi-muṣḥafin minhā ilā Miṣra, fa-ghaḍiba 'Abdu l-'Azīzi bnu Marwāna min dhālika wa-kāna wāliya Miṣra yauma'idhin min qibali akhihi 'Abdi l-Maliki; wa-qāla: yab'athu ilā jundin anā fihī! Fa-amara, fa-kutiba lahu hādihā l-muṣḥafu.*

*The Participants in the Project*

A precise number of the selected persons is not given in the sources. Ibn Mihrān (d. 381/991) mentions five persons: al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), Abū l-ʿĀliya (d. 90 or 93/709 or 711), Naṣr b. ʿĀṣim (d. 89 or 90/708 or 709), ʿĀṣim al-Jaḥdarī (d. 128/746), and finally Mālik b. Dīnār (d. 127/745).<sup>39</sup> However, al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013) mentions six persons: Abū l-ʿĀliya, Naṣr b. ʿĀṣim, al-Jaḥdarī, Ibn Aṣmaʿ, Mālik b. Dīnār, and finally al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī.<sup>40</sup> The appearance of a new person, Ibn Aṣmaʿ, is due to the merging of two different traditions—one of which counts the selected members of the commission, while the other mentions another group of people (to which Ibn Aṣmaʿ belonged), whose task did not begin until the finishing of the *maṣāḥif* project. I shall come back to this point at the end of this section. Ibn ʿAtīyya (d. 546/1152) only reported that al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and Yaḥyā b. Yaʿmur were appointed by al-Ḥajjāj.<sup>41</sup> It is clear from this that both of them were the most important and prominent members of the project.

A seventh person, Abū Muḥammad Rāshid al-Ḥimmānī,<sup>42</sup> a Basran<sup>43</sup> *tābiʿī*,<sup>44</sup> reports about himself that he was with the Basran *qurrāʾ* commissioned in Wāsiṭ.<sup>45</sup> That he was a Qurʾan reader is evident by his title Rāshid al-Qārī.<sup>46</sup> But since he is not mentioned in any of the

<sup>39</sup> Az-Zarkashī, *Burhān*, vol. 1, 249.

<sup>40</sup> Al-Bāqillānī, *Nukat*, 396.

<sup>41</sup> MW, vol. 1, 67: *Amara wa-huwa wālī l-ʿIrāqī l-Ḥasana wa-Yaḥyā bna Yaʿmura bi-dhālīka*. Also Ibn Kathīr, *Faḍāʾil*, 43: *Fa-amara l-Ḥasana wa-Yaḥyā bna Yaʿmura, fa-faʿalā dhālīka*.

<sup>42</sup> His name is usually given this way, but sometimes only his *nisba* “al-Ḥimmānī.” Ḥimmān were a subtribe of Tamīm (Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 78). He was even considered identical to the person with the name “Rāshid b. Najīḥ” (adh-Dhahabī, *Mizān*, vol. 2, 36). His name is sometimes spelled in a different way and even falsely given. Sometimes his name is Sālim, other times Sallām (see IAD, 119; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 8). Ibn abī Dāwūd, there, refuses both names (Sālim and Sallām) and holds Rāshid as the proper name. The variant in the printed text of *Funūn*, 73 of Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) is totally false.

<sup>43</sup> According to Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 78 and TT, vol. 3, 228. According to Ibn Ḥibbān (d. 354/965) he is counted among the Kufans (Ibn Ḥibbān, *Thiqāt*, vol. 4, 234: *ʿidāduhu fī ahli l-Kūfatī*).

<sup>44</sup> ShQ, 391: *Wa-huwa mina t-tābiʿīna*. And BM, vol. 7, 283: *Hādḥā mina t-tābiʿīna*.

<sup>45</sup> IAD, 119: *Fa-kuntu maʿahum*.

<sup>46</sup> ShQ, 391 and DM, vol. 9, 191, l. 11.

biographical works about the Qur'an readers<sup>47</sup> and only one single reading is attributed to him,<sup>48</sup> it is fair to assume that he did not succeed in establishing a reputation for himself among the Qur'an readers. He was, however, known as an expert of the orthography of the *maṣāḥif*.<sup>49</sup> This is the reason why al-Ḥajjāj appointed him to proofread the Qur'an copies.<sup>50</sup> This is without a doubt related to the *maṣāḥif* project, since he was particularly responsible for the enumeration and the dividing process. Apparently, he continued this task during al-Ḥajjāj's lifetime and also after the completion of the project.<sup>51</sup>

What these selected members all shared is that they were Basran and *mawālī*. We can also be certain that they were the most famous Qur'an readers in Basra. Moreover, their appointment appears to have served an additional purpose. They formed a diverse yet cooperative group of Qur'an readers, grammarians, and scribes. Due to his reputation, Ḥasan was assigned leadership of the commission.<sup>52</sup> Al-Ḥajjāj entrusted him with the authority of making the final absolute judgment in cases of conflict over the different readings.<sup>53</sup>

The fact that Naṣr b. 'Āṣim al-Laythī al-Baṣrī<sup>54</sup> was a Qadarite according to Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889),<sup>55</sup> and a Khārijīte according to Abū Dāwūd (d. 275/888)<sup>56</sup> apparently constituted no obstacle to

<sup>47</sup> But see the *rijāl*-literature about the traditionists and ḥadīth-transmitters, for example by al-Bukhārī, *Tārīkh*, vol. 3, 254 (§ 3895/1001); ad-Dūlābī, *Kunā*, vol. 2, 189, 190 (§ 1648); Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Jarḥ*, vol. 3, 439 (§ 4480/2187) and *TT*, vol. 2, 228 (§ 436).

<sup>48</sup> He read *bal makarra l-layli wa-n-nahāri* instead of [...] *makru* [...] (Q 34:33); see *IKh*, 122; *IJ*, vol. 2, 193 (on the authority of Abū Ḥātim, d. 248/862); *ShQ*, 391–392; *BM*, vol. 7, 283; *DM*, vol. 9, 191.

<sup>49</sup> *MW*, vol. 2, 36: *Kāna 'arīfan bi-rasmi l-maṣāḥifi*.

<sup>50</sup> *IKh*, 122.

<sup>51</sup> *ShQ*, 391: *Mimman yuṣaḥḥiḥu l-maṣāḥifa bi-amri l-Ḥajjāji*. And *DM*, vol. 9, 191, ll. 11–12: *Huwa lladhī kāna yuṣaḥḥiḥu l-maṣāḥifa ayyāma l-Ḥajjāji bi-amrihi*.

<sup>52</sup> Al-Bāqillānī reports that the *rāwī* who reported this project asked Mālik b. Dīnār: "What role did al-Ḥasan play compared to you [the selected members of the project]?" Mālik answered: "He was their leader [i.e., the leader of the project-commission]." The Arabic text says: *Qultu: (a)l-Ḥasanu fihim? Qāla: Kāna shaykhaḥum*. Al-Bāqillānī, *Nukat*, 396.

<sup>53</sup> Al-Bāqillānī, *Nukat*, 396: *Ṣayyirū mā khtalaftum fihi ilā qawli ḥadhā sh-shaykhi! Ya'nī l-Ḥasana!*

<sup>54</sup> The date of his death is uncertain; those given are after 80, 90, 81–90, and before 100. See Khalifa, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. 1, 492 (§ 1675) (after 80); Khalifa, *Tārīkh*, vol. 1, 401, l. 7 (81–90); *MQK*, vol. 1, 71, l. 14; *GhN*, vol. 2, 336, l. 12; *TT*, vol. 10, 427, l. 11.

<sup>55</sup> Ibn Qutayba, *Ma'ārif*, 625, l. 11.

<sup>56</sup> *TIT*, vol. 9, 211, l. 6; *MQK*, vol. 1, 71, l. 12; also *TT*, vol. 10, 427, l. 6.



selecting him as a member of the commission.<sup>57</sup> His special capacities were obviously what decided everything: he was a famous reader,<sup>58</sup> a grammarian,<sup>59</sup> as well as a punctuator.<sup>60</sup>

These same capacities<sup>61</sup> were possessed by Yaḥyā b. Yaʿmur al-Baṣrī,<sup>62</sup> who was for some time a *qāḍī* in Marw and other cities in Khurāsān.<sup>63</sup> Both of them followed the grammar and punctuation method of their teacher, Abū al-Aswad ad-Duʿalī (d. 69/688).<sup>64</sup> Their chief task was to distinguish, by the use of diacritical marks similar looking consonants in the written text.

Abū (I-)Mujashshir ʿĀṣim b. abī ṣ-Ṣabbāḥ al-Jahḍarī al-Baṣrī, one of the famous Basran readers,<sup>65</sup> studied under Naṣr b. ʿĀṣim, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, and Ibn Yaʿmur.<sup>66</sup> He had his own *ikhtiyār*.<sup>67</sup> Although it was not accepted as canonical,<sup>68</sup> it is preserved in the *Ittiḍāḥ* of al-Ahwāzī (d. 446/1054) and in the *Kitāb al-kāmil fī l-qirāʾat al-khamsīn* of al-Hudhalī (d. 465/1073).<sup>69</sup> The fact that he was a scribe

<sup>57</sup> He is held trustworthy (*thiqa*) by an-Nasāʾī, Ibn Ḥibbān and other ḥadīth-critics. See MQK, vol. 1, 71, l. 14; GhN, vol. 2, 336, l. 10; TT, vol. 10, 427, ll. 6–7.

<sup>58</sup> Khalifa, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. 1, 411, l. 11; see also al-Qifṭī, *Inbāḥ*, vol. 3, 344, ll. 1.6; MQK, vol. 1, 71 (§ 27); GhN, vol. 2, 336 (§ 3728); TT, vol. 10, 427, ll. 5–6.

<sup>59</sup> Al-Qifṭī, *Inbāḥ*, vol. 3, 343, ll. 11–12; also TI, T. 9, 210, l. 8; MQK, vol. 1, 71, ll. 5/11; GhN, vol. 2, 336, ll. 2/6–7.

<sup>60</sup> MQK, vol. 1, 71, ll. 9–10; also GhN, vol. 2, 336.

<sup>61</sup> KṬK, vol. 7.2, 101, ll. 18–19; also al-Qifṭī, *Inbāḥ*, vol. 4, 19, ll. 3–4; and TT, vol. 11, 305, ll. 9 ff.

<sup>62</sup> The date of his death is uncertain: after 80, 89, 81–90, before 90, around 120 and 129. See Khalifa, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. 1, 484 (§ 1649) (after 80); Khalifa, *Tārīkh*, vol. 1, 401, l. 8 (81–90); MQK, vol. 1, 68, ll. 6–7; GhN, vol. 2, 381, l. 6 (§ 3873) (both before 90 on the authority of Khalifa); TT, vol. 11, 306, ll. 2–5 (129 according to Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil*, around 120 according to others, and 89 according to Ibn al-Jawzī). In his detailed study, R. Sellheim came to the conclusion that he could not have died between 80 and 90, but rather later (not before 129). See Sellheim, *Arabische Handschriften*, vol. 1, 43–44 (No. 13).

<sup>63</sup> KṬK, vol. 7.2, 101, l. 19; Wakīʿ, *Akḥbār*, vol. 3, 305–306; also al-Qifṭī, *Inbāḥ*, vol. 4, 19, ll. 3–4; TT, vol. 11, 305, l. 2, 306, ll. 1–2.

<sup>64</sup> About Naṣr see al-Qifṭī, *Inbāḥ*, vol. 3, 343, ll. 12–13; TI, T. 9, 211, l. 7; MQK, vol. 1, 71, l. 5. He had a strong relationship with Abū l-Aswad ad-Duʿalī (d. 69/688) and was therefore called “ad-Duʿalī.” As for Ibn Yaʿmur see al-Qifṭī, *Inbāḥ*, vol. 4, 19, l. 5ff; MQK, vol. 1, 68, ll. 1–2; TT, vol. 11, 306, l. -1.

<sup>65</sup> Ibn an-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 52, l. 8; also TI, T. 13, 140; GhN, vol. 1, 349 (§ 1498).

<sup>66</sup> TI, T. 13, 141, l. 1; GhN, vol. 1, 349, ll. 10–11.

<sup>67</sup> Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 52, l. 8; also TI, T. 13, 141, l. 9 (on the authority of Ibn Maʿīn, d. 233/848).

<sup>68</sup> TI, T. 13, 141, l. 10 (cf. n. 1); GhN, vol. 1, 349, l. 15.

<sup>69</sup> On this encyclopedia of *qirāʾāt* see my article “Können die verschollenen Koran-texte,” 30–34; see also GhN, vol. 1, 349, ll. 14–15.



of *maṣāḥif* is rarely reported.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, as little has been mentioned about him being a commentator of the Qur'an.<sup>71</sup> In the *maṣāḥif* project his duty was to collate the completed copies with the original. He died in 128/746 (according to al-Madā'inī) or before 130/748 (according to Khalifa<sup>72</sup> and others).<sup>73</sup>

Abū Yaḥyā Mālik b. Dīnār, a *mawlā* of a woman from Banū Sāma b. Lu'ayy,<sup>74</sup> was a known ascetic<sup>75</sup> and one of the well known *maṣāḥif* copyists in Basra.<sup>76</sup> Copying *maṣāḥif* was his chief occupation.<sup>77</sup> He used to undertake his work at home and did not stipulate a fee in advance (*mushārāṭa*).<sup>78</sup> His task in the project consisted primarily of the copying of the *maṣāḥif*. It is worth mentioning that Mālik b. Dīnār was known as one of the *qurrā'* who participated in the revolt of Ibn al-Ash'ath.<sup>79</sup> He himself reports that five hundred *qurrā'* fought on Ibn al-Ash'ath's side; they all vowed to fight in the revolt.<sup>80</sup> He survived the revolt; his death is dated to 127, 130, or 131 AH (745, 748, and 749 CE, respectively); in any case it is certain that he died before the epidemic in Basra, which raged in 131/749.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Al-Madā'inī (d. 225/840) narrated that 'Āṣim al-Jahḍarī said: "The report about the homage for Yazid occurred in Basra, although I wrote in a *muṣḥaf* the Qur'ānic verse *idhā s-samā'u nshaqqat* [Q 84:1]." See al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, vol. 4/1, 296 (§ 789).

<sup>71</sup> *TI*, T. 13, 140.

<sup>72</sup> Khalifa, *Tārīkh*, vol. 2, 589, l. 8.

<sup>73</sup> *TI*, T. 13, 141, l. 5; *GhN*, vol. 1, 349, ll. 16–17. According to Khalifa, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. 1, 513 (§ 1774) it is stated that he died after al-Walid. Therefore, what is meant is al-Walid b. Yazid b. 'Abd al-Malik, known as Walid II, who was killed in 126/743.

<sup>74</sup> *KṬK*, vol. 7.2, 11, l. 21; Khalifa, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. 1, 518 (§ 1792); Ibn Qutayba, *Ma'ārif*, 470, ll. 12–13. For this reason he was called "as-Sāmī" (*TT*, vol. 10, 14, l. -3).

<sup>75</sup> *TI*, T. 9, 211, l. 4: "az-Zāhid"; *TT*, vol. 10, 14, l. -2, 15, ll. 7–8.

<sup>76</sup> *KṬK*, vol. 7.2, 11, l. 22: *Kāna yaktubu l-maṣāḥifa*. Also Ibn Qutayba, *Ma'ārif*, 470, l. 13, 577, l. 5; *TT*, vol. 10, 15, l. 7.

<sup>77</sup> About this, Ibn Abī Dāwūd (d. 316/929) reports three traditions in which an encounter between him and Jābir b. Zayd took place (*IAD*, 131, l. 9–20).

<sup>78</sup> Ibn Qutayba, *Ma'ārif*, 470, l. 13; *IAD*, 132, ll. 3–5; Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilya*, vol. 2, 368; Ibn an-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 16.

<sup>79</sup> Khalifa, *Tārīkh*, vol. 1, 371, l. 11.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 373, ll. 5–6.

<sup>81</sup> *KṬK*, vol. 7.2, 11, ll. 22–23; Khalifa, *Tārīkh*, vol. 2, 598, l. 11; Khalifa, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. 1, 158 (§ 1792); Ibn Qutayba, *Ma'ārif*, 470, ll. 12–14; *TT*, vol. 10, 14, ll. 8–11.

*Which Version of the Qur'an Was Available for the Maṣāḥif Project?*

Al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013) reports that al-Ḥajjāj gave orders to fetch the private *muṣḥaf* of 'Uthmān, which was then in the possession of the family of 'Uthmān.<sup>82</sup> I would like to argue for the authenticity of this information and present three pieces of evidence to support it. A tradition related to the *maṣāḥif* project runs as follows: *'an 'Awfi bni abī Jamīlata anna l-Ḥajjāja bna Yūsufa ghayyara fī muṣḥafi 'Uthmāna aḥada 'ashara ḥarfan.*<sup>83</sup> 'Awf al-A'rābī (d. 146 or 147/763 or 764)<sup>84</sup> here clearly speaks of the *muṣḥaf* of 'Uthmān. In addition, a great scholar of *qirā'āt* like ad-Dānī (d. 444/1053) regarded 'Āṣim al-Jaḥḍarī as the authoritative expert on the 'Uthmānic text, the so-called *imām*,<sup>85</sup> which naturally makes one suppose that he had in the course of the *maṣāḥif* project acquired a thorough knowledge of the text. The third verification is the aforementioned tradition of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī concerning the *maṣāḥif* project. In this tradition, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī uses the word *al-imām* which of course refers to the *muṣḥaf* of 'Uthmān. The tradition runs: *Kāna l-Ḥasanu yaqūlu: (u)ktubū fī awwali l-imāmi bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi wa-j'alū bayna kulli sūratayni khaṭṭan!*<sup>86</sup> According to this tradition, 'Uthmān's *muṣḥaf* only consisted of the consonants. It contained neither the *basmala* at the beginning of either the *muṣḥaf* or of each individual surah, nor did it contain the names of the surahs. It also lacked any labeling of the surahs as Meccan or Medinan. Had the *basmala* already been written in the *muṣḥaf* of 'Uthmān,

<sup>82</sup> Al-Bāqillānī, *Nukat*, 396.

<sup>83</sup> *IAD*, 49, 117.

<sup>84</sup> About 'Awf see the al-Bukhārī, *Tārīkh*, vol. 6, 368–369 (§ 9602/264); Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Jarḥ*, vol. 7, 21–22 (§ 11615/71); *TT*, vol. 8, 166–167 (§ 301).

<sup>85</sup> See ad-Dānī, *Muqni'*, 24, l. 14: *Huwa fī l-imāmi muṣḥafi 'Uthmāna* (also 109, l. 4: *Kānat fī l-imāmi*), 41, l. 19: *kadhā wujida fī l-imāmi* (also 96, ll. 13–14: *Ka-dhālika wujida fī l-imāmi*), 47, ll. 4–5: *Fī l-imāmi muṣḥafi 'Uthmāna*, 48, ll. 4–5: *Kullu shay'in fī l-imāmi muṣḥafi 'Uthmāna*, 51, l. 13: *Fī l-imāmi*, 54, ll. 16: *Fī l-imāmi*, 60, l. 12: *Fī l-imāmi*, 63, l. 2: *Anna l-arba'ata fī l-imāmi bi-l-wāwi*, 63, l. 11: *Fī l-imāmi*, 71, l. 16: *Ra'aytu fī muṣḥafi 'Uthmāna*, 102, l. 15: *Huwa fī l-imāmi*. See also similar cases by Ibn al-Anbārī, *Marsūm*, 5, ll. 3–4, 30, ll. 13–14, 44, ll. 4–5.

<sup>86</sup> Ibn aḍ-Ḍurays, *Faḍā'il*, 42 (§ 43).

al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī would not have ordered its insertion there. Also, had some kind of separation between any two surahs existed, he would not have called for the insertion of a line between them. Aside from this, the insertion of such a line suggests that the surahs were not arranged in paragraphs and clear-cut segments. For this reason, a solution was required that, on the one hand was noticeable and, on the other, required no extra space. The best solution for this was a separating line.

*Distinguishing Similar-looking Consonants by Means of Diacritical Points*

From the aforementioned traditions it follows that in the context of this project four objectives were intended. To what extent these original objectives were achieved or whether other objectives also existed is uncertain. In the following sections, these aims will be discussed in detail.

According to Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī (d. around 360/971), al-Ḥajjāj requested from his scribes in Iraq to differentiate between similar looking consonants like *bā'*, *tā'*, and *thā'*, due to the spread of miswriting (*taṣḥīf*). Moreover, they differentiated between the cases in which points would be inserted either over the consonant or under it with single dots or double dots.<sup>87</sup> A number of traditions attest to this fact. In a tradition that goes back to Yaḥyā b. abī Kathīr (d. 129/747) and deals with the *maṣāḥif* project, it is reported that the distinction between the *yā'* and the *tā'* by means of dots was the first step in the introduction of diacritical points: "The Qur'an was bare [of all diacritics] in the *maṣāḥif*. The points on the *yā'* and *tā'* were the first points to have been introduced [by the participants in the *maṣāḥif* project]. They said: 'It does not go against the Qur'an. It will make the text of the Qur'an clearer.'"<sup>88</sup>

An additional tradition that supports this innovation and reflects the course of the work of the *maṣāḥif* project is the dispute among the committee members on whether one should read Q 12:45 as *anā unabbi'ukum bi-ta'wīlihī* or as *anā ātikum bi-ta'wīlihī*. Some opted for reading it *unabbi'ukum*, while others, among them al-Ḥasan

<sup>87</sup> Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī, *Tanbīh*, 73–74.

<sup>88</sup> Ad-Dānī, *Muḥkam*, 2, 17.

al-Baṣrī, read it *ātikum*. It is thus no coincidence that according to Ibn Khālawayh (d. 370/980) three committee members were known to have read it *ātikum*, namely al-Ḥajjāj, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, and Yaḥyā b. Ya‘mur.<sup>89</sup> It is interesting to note the rational argumentation al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī advanced in support of his reading. According to a tradition, he is reported to have said: “How can a fool interpret it [i.e., the dream]?”<sup>90</sup> And in another tradition, he is reported to have said: “The correct reading is *unabbi’ukum*,” and to have justified this by asking: “Is he in a position to interpret it [i.e., the dream]?”<sup>91</sup>

Distinguishing letters by means of diacritical points was not only related to the differentiation between *tā’* and *yā’*, but also to that between *bā’* and *nūn* in contrast to *tā’* and *yā’*. Similarly, Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī reports that all consonants written with identical letters were distinguished through diacritical points.<sup>92</sup>

As for the initiator of this innovation, reports are not in agreement. On one occasion, it is reported that Naṣr b. ‘Āṣim al-Laythī was commissioned to carry it out.<sup>93</sup> But Yaḥyā b. Ya‘mur and al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī are also mentioned.<sup>94</sup> These traditions, which at first glance seem to contradict each other, are authentic and affirm that the three persons named participated in the *maṣāḥif* project. In addition, they support the fact that Naṣr b. ‘Āṣim al-Laythī and Yaḥyā b. Ya‘mur were “punctuators.” The fact that Naṣr b. ‘Āṣim was named *Naṣr al-ḥurūf* (“Naṣr of the consonants”),<sup>95</sup> alludes, on the one hand, to his participation in the *maṣāḥif* project, and on the other hand, to his chief role in this respect. As for Yaḥyā b. Ya‘mur, it is reported that he completed a diacritically punctuated copy of the Qur‘an for Muḥammad b. Sīrīn

<sup>89</sup> *IKh*, 64: (*Anā ātikum*) *al-Ḥajjāju wa-l-Ḥasanu wa-Yaḥyā bnu Ya‘mura*. Accordingly, they should have been two tenths, while according to (*unabbi’ukum*) they could be also two tenths without the carrier of the *ḥamza* or three tenths as in the official edition.

<sup>90</sup> Al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmi‘*, vol. 9, 202.

<sup>91</sup> Al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ*, vol. 12, 253 (on the authority of Ibn abī Ḥātim, d. 327/938, and Abū sh-Shaykh, d. 369/979).

<sup>92</sup> Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī, *Tanbīh*, 73–74.

<sup>93</sup> Al-‘Askarī, *Sharḥ*, 13: *Fa-yuqālu: inna Naṣra bna ‘Āṣimin qāma bi-dhālika*. Also ad-Dānī, *Muḥkam*, 6; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, vol. 2, 32; as-Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 2, 482.

<sup>94</sup> Ad-Dānī, *Muḥkam*, 5 (two traditions about Yaḥyā b. Ya‘mur) and as-Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 2, 482: *Qāla: (a)l-Ḥasanu l-Baṣriyyu wa-Yaḥyā bnu Ya‘mura*.

<sup>95</sup> *MW*, vol. 1, 68 (on the authority of *Kitāb al-anṣār* of Jāḥiẓ, d. 255/869).

(d. 110/728).<sup>96</sup> While al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī is mentioned in some traditions mistakenly as *Nāqīṭ*, this can be accounted for by supposing that the transmitters were not aware that he was in fact the head of the *maṣāhif* project, of which Naṣr was a member.

The problem in such traditions lies in that they repeatedly attempt to present individual persons as initiators (*awā'il*) of a certain innovation. As a result of this, slightly opposing traditions emerge. In our case, the *awā'il* topos has no significance, since the matter pertains to a collective work, the *maṣāhif* project, in which a number of persons participated.

The question that poses itself now is whether the introduction of diacritical points itself was an innovation. The answer is positive as much as it is negative. That the diacritical points were introduced in the text for the first time is certainly an innovation. But on the other hand, diacritical points had already been known for some time, “their origins go back to pre-Islamic times.”<sup>97</sup>

### *The Counting of Consonants, Words, and Verses of the Qur'an*

As we shall see, not only were the verses counted but also the words and consonants. The aim of this enumeration was to guarantee the completeness and integrity of the consonants. In other words, it was to simplify its examination and to establish a division of the text into recitation sections.<sup>98</sup>

As far as the consonants are concerned, three figures are common. According to Ibn abī Dāwūd (d. 316/929)<sup>99</sup> and as-Sakhāwī (d. 643/1243),<sup>100</sup> who both rely on the tradition that goes back to Rāshid al-Ḥimmānī, the consonants amount to 340740+,<sup>101</sup> while according to Ibn Mihrān (d. 381/991)<sup>102</sup> and al-Fīrūzābādī (d. 817/

<sup>96</sup> Az-Zubaydī, *Ṭabaqāt* 29; ad-Dānī, *Naqṭ*, 129; MW, vol. 1, 67 (on the authority of *Ṭabaqāt* of az-Zubaydī); az-Zarkashī, *Burhān*, vol. 1, 250. For more on his *muṣḥaf* see Abū 'Ubayd, *Faḍā'il*, 240 (§ 6–63); IAD, 143; ad-Dānī, *Muḥkam*, 13.

<sup>97</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 3, 257.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. *ibid.*; *GdQ*, vol. 3, 261; Paret, “Besonderheiten,” 315.

<sup>99</sup> IAD, 119.

<sup>100</sup> As-Sakhāwī, *Jamāl*, vol. 1, 126.

<sup>101</sup> The same figure (without +) is to be found in the tradition attributed to Ibn Mas'ūd, however the figure is incorrectly written, that is 304740. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 77.

<sup>102</sup> Az-Zarkashī, *Burhān*, vol. 1, 249.

1415),<sup>103</sup> they amount to 323000. In the *Kitāb al-mabānī* of Ḥāmid b. Aḥmad b. Jaʿfar b. Biṣṭām (d. 5th/11th century), the figure is given as 325072.<sup>104</sup> In addition to the traditions related to the project, we find two other figures that have been transmitted by members of the project, namely, ʿĀṣim al-Jaḥdarī and Rāshid al-Ḥimmānī. To al-Ḥimmānī three figures are attributed: 360023,<sup>105</sup> 340700+,<sup>106</sup> and 321188.<sup>107</sup> ʿĀṣim al-Jaḥdarī gives the figure 363300.<sup>108</sup>

The question “Which figure is most exact?” will have to remain unanswered. What is certain, however, is that the difference in figures arises according to whether the *scriptio plena* was included in the counting or not; the higher figures thus result from the fact that all letters of the *scriptio plena* were counted. This means that the committee paid attention to the divergences between the written and the recited text and counted both.

It is remarkable that the counting of the consonants according to the *maṣāḥif* project was continued in other major cities. According to Ibn Abī Dāwūd (d. 316/929) Ḥumayd b. Qays al-Aʿraj (d. 130/748) is to have counted the consonants in Mecca,<sup>109</sup> and Ḥamza az-Zayyāt (d. 156/773) even composed a *kitāb* in Kufa in which the figures were cited.<sup>110</sup> In order to flesh this out a bit, I will here present the figures from Basra and the other cities:

Basra	321188 according to Rāshid al-Ḥimmānī <sup>111</sup>
Basra	323000 according to Mālik b. Dinār, Rāshid al-Ḥimmānī, and others in the context of the <i>maṣāḥif</i> project <sup>112</sup>
Basra	323015 according to the <i>maṣāḥif</i> project <sup>113</sup>

<sup>103</sup> *BDhT*, vol. 1, 562 (on the authority of Mālik b. Dinār, Rāshid and others): *Ajmaʿnā ʿalā annahu thalāthu miʿati alfi ḥarfin wa-thalāthatun wa-ʿishrūna ḥarfan*. The wording of the figure is imprecise. Accordingly, the figure is 300023, although the figure 323000 is actually meant.

<sup>104</sup> Ḥāmid, *Mabānī*, 250.

<sup>105</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 78.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*; *BDhT*, vol. 1, 562. This is also stated by Ibn Kathīr al-Makkī (d. 120/738).

<sup>108</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 77–78.

<sup>109</sup> *IAD*, 125: *Annahu ḥasaba ḥurūfa l-Qurʿāni, fa-wajada [...]* (according to Ismāʿīl al-Qusṭ, d. 170/786); also as-Sakhāwī, *Jamāl*, vol. 1, 129.

<sup>110</sup> *IAD*, 122; ad-Dānī, *Bayān*, 73.

<sup>111</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 78; *BDhT*, vol. 1, 562.

<sup>112</sup> *BDhT*, vol. 1, 562.

<sup>113</sup> Az-Zarkashī, *Burhān*, vol. 1, 249.

Basra	325072 according to the <i>maṣāḥif</i> project <sup>114</sup>
Basra	340700+ according to Rāshid al-Ḥimmānī <sup>115</sup>
Basra	340740 according to Rāshid al-Ḥimmānī in the context of the project <sup>116</sup>
Basra	340740+ according to Rāshid al-Ḥimmānī in the context of the project <sup>117</sup>
Basra	360023 according to Rāshid al-Ḥimmānī in the context of the project <sup>118</sup>
Basra	363300 according to ‘Āṣim al-Jaḥḍarī <sup>119</sup>
Kufa	300690 according to Ibn Mas‘ūd (d. 32/652) <sup>120</sup>
Kufa	304740 according to Ibn Mas‘ūd (d. 32/652) <sup>121</sup>
Kufa	321250 in <i>Kitāb al-‘adad</i> of Ḥamza az-Zayyāt (d. 156/773) <sup>122</sup>
Kufa	325250 according to some Kufans ( <i>ba‘ḍ al-Kūfiyyīn</i> ) <sup>123</sup>
Kufa	373250 according to Ḥamza az-Zayyāt (d. 156/773) <sup>124</sup>
Damascus	321250 according to Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥārith adh-Dhimārī (d. 145/762) <sup>125</sup>
Damascus	321530 according to Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥārith adh-Dhimārī (d. 145/762) <sup>126</sup>
Damascus	321533 according to Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥārith adh-Dhimārī (d. 145/762) <sup>127</sup>
Medina	312000 according to Muḥammad b. Ishāq (d. 151/768) <sup>128</sup>
Medina	323015 according to “the people of Medina” ( <i>ahl al-</i>

<sup>114</sup> Ḥāmid, *Mabānī*, 250.

<sup>115</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 78.

<sup>116</sup> Az-Zarkashī, *Burhān*, vol. 1, 249.

<sup>117</sup> *IAD*, 119; ad-Dānī, *Bayān*, 74.

<sup>118</sup> Ad-Dānī, *Bayān*, 74; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 78.

<sup>119</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 77–78.

<sup>120</sup> Ḥāmid, *Mabānī*, 246.

<sup>121</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 77.

<sup>122</sup> *IAD*, 122; ad-Dānī, *Bayān*, 73.

<sup>123</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 78.

<sup>124</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 77; *BDhT*, vol. 1, 562.

<sup>125</sup> This is also stated by Abū l-Mu‘āfā Burayd b. ‘Abd al-Wāhid aḍ-Ḍarīr (d. 353/964), author of *Kitāb al-‘adad*. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 78, and *BDhT*, vol. 1, 562. For more on him see *GhN*, vol. 1, 176 (§ 818). For his work *Kitāb al-‘adad* see Ibn an-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 62, l. 15.

<sup>126</sup> Ibn an-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 47, ll. 11–12.

<sup>127</sup> Ad-Dānī, *Bayān*, 73.

<sup>128</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 78.

	<i>Madīna</i> ) <sup>129</sup> and ‘Aṭā’ b. Yasār (d. 102 or 103/720 or 721) <sup>130</sup>
Medina	325250 according to “the people of Medina” ( <i>ahl al-Madīna</i> ) <sup>131</sup>
Mecca	300690 according to Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68/687) <sup>132</sup>
Mecca	321000 according to Mujāhid (d. 104/723) <sup>133</sup>
Mecca	321188 according to Ibn Kathīr (d. 120/738) <sup>134</sup> and Mujāhid (d. 104/723) <sup>135</sup>
Mecca	323671 according to Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68/687) <sup>136</sup> and Ḥumayd b. Qays al-A‘raj (d. 130/748) <sup>137</sup>
Unidentified	320211 according to an anonymous counter ( <i>ba‘ḍ al-‘āddīn</i> ) <sup>138</sup>

Again, the discrepancy in these figures can be explained by supposing that the high figures included the *scriptio plena*, while the low numbers did not. Remaining discrepancies in figures probably reflect the diversity of readings.

### *The Counting of Words*

The sources for the counting of the words are Ibn Mihrān (d. 381/991) and the *Kitāb al-mabānī*.<sup>139</sup> Ibn Mihrān reports that the committee realized that the number of words in the entire Qur’an amounts to 77439.<sup>140</sup> However, the *Kitāb al-mabānī* gives 77434. Thus, the difference is five words. In other sources we find the following figures:

77277 according to ‘Aṭā’ b. Yasār<sup>141</sup>

<sup>129</sup> Ḥāmid, *Mabānī*, 246.

<sup>130</sup> Ad-Dānī, *Bayān*, 73.

<sup>131</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 78.

<sup>132</sup> Ḥāmid, *Mabānī*, 246.

<sup>133</sup> Az-Zarkashī, *Burhān*, vol. 1, 249.

<sup>134</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 77–78.

<sup>135</sup> Ad-Dānī, *Bayān*, 75; Ḥāmid, *Mabānī*, 246.

<sup>136</sup> Ad-Dānī, *Bayān*, 74; as-Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 1, 88.

<sup>137</sup> Ad-Dānī, *Bayān*, 73.

<sup>138</sup> Ḥāmid, *Mabānī*, 248.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>140</sup> Az-Zarkashī, *Burhān*, vol. 1, 249: *Fa-ajma’ū ‘alā anna kalimātihi sab’un wa-sab’ūna alfi kalimatin wa-arba’u mi’atin wa-tis’un wa-thalāthūna.*

<sup>141</sup> *BDhT*, vol. 1, 561/562; As-Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 1, 195 (anonymous).



- 77436 according to an anonymous counter (*baʿd al-ʿāddīn*)<sup>142</sup>  
 77437 according to Mujāhid (d. 104/723), Saʿīd b. Jubayr (d. 94 or 95/712 or 713),<sup>143</sup> and ʿAṭāʾ b. Yāsār (d. 102 or 103/720 or 721)<sup>144</sup>  
 77439 according to the “people of Medina”<sup>145</sup> and ʿAṭāʾ b. Yāsār<sup>146</sup>  
 77460 according to others<sup>147</sup>  
 77701 (anonymous)<sup>148</sup>  
 77934 according to Ibn Masʿūd (d. 32/652)<sup>149</sup>

Here, the number 77439, which is ascribed to the people of Medina and to ʿAṭāʾ, and the figures 77434, 77436, and 77437 are all relatively close. As for the number ascribed to Ibn Masʿūd, 77934, it is perhaps best explained by supposing a slip of a pen where two digits were unwittingly mixed up (77439). This type of miswriting also appears to have taken place in connection with the counting of the consonants, the different results of which were listed above, like 340740 as compared with 304740. Interestingly, both incorrect figures (77934 for words and 304740 for consonants) were ascribed to Ibn Masʿūd. This could mean that the figures that were ascribed to him were originally taken from the *maṣāḥif* project and then misascribed. Possibly, the Kufans were behind this. In so doing, they may have aimed to prove that the establishment of these figures went back to them and not to the Basrans. In other words, the rivalry between the two cities might have been a factor. In any case, the manipulated figures indirectly confirm the figures of the committee.

As for the time needed for completing the project, Ibn Mihrān (d. 381/991) reports that the counting itself demanded four months of work and that barley corn was used to assist the counting process.<sup>150</sup> In view of this estimation, the question of how long the entire project took arises. Unfortunately, a clear answer to this is not available in the sources. However, when one takes into account the four months needed for the enumeration process plus another four months

<sup>142</sup> Ḥāmid, *Mabānī*, 248.

<sup>143</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 76.

<sup>144</sup> *BDhT*, vol. 1, 561.

<sup>145</sup> Ḥāmid, *Mabānī*, 246.

<sup>146</sup> Ad-Dānī, *Bayān*, 73; Ibn an-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 47, l. 8.

<sup>147</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 76.

<sup>148</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 76.

<sup>149</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 76; As-Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 1, 195.

<sup>150</sup> Az-Zarkashī, *Burhān*, vol. 1, 249: *Fa-baqaw arbaʿata ashhurin yaʿuddūna bi-sh-shaʿīri*. Cf. Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 73: *Fa-ʿaddūhu bi-sh-shaʿīri wa-ḥasabūhu*.

required according to a tradition in which Mālik b. Dīnār required four months to complete the writing of an entire copy,<sup>151</sup> one could assume the entire time period being at least eight months.

### *The Counting of Verses*

Although Ibn Abī Dāwūd (d. 316/929) and as-Sakhāwī (d. 643/1243) provide no figures for the number of verses in the Qur'an in the context of the *maṣāḥif* project, ad-Dānī (d. 444/1053) provides the figure 6204 on the authority of Rāshid al-Ḥimmānī as follows: '*an Rāshidin abī Muḥammadini l-Ḥimmāniyyi annahu kāna mimman 'araḍa li-l-Ḥajjāji bni Yūsufa sma 'adadi āyi l-Qur'āni, fa-wajadahu sittata ālāfin wa-mi'atayni wa-arba'a āyātīn ma'a fātiḥati l-kitābi*'.<sup>152</sup> According to the *Kitāb al-mabānī*,<sup>153</sup> two figures are given—6220, and 6204. As we can see, the number 6204 is common between ad-Dānī and the *Kitāb al-mabānī*, and it is a reliable figure since it later became the official Basran count. It is certainly no accident that the figure 6204 would be taken over by the Basrans since it refers to 'Āṣim al-Jahḍarī, who played a significant role in the project.

Moreover, it is also reported that the counting of verses, words, and consonants for each individual surah was accomplished in this project, albeit the evidence is scant.<sup>154</sup> For this reason, no figures of verses, words, and consonants of all the surahs are available in the sources. There is, however, a tradition on the verses of one surah, namely, surah 17, about which as-Sakhāwī (d. 643/1243) reports as follows: "'Aṭā' b. Yasār (d. 102 or 103/720 or 721) [Medina], 'Āṣim al-Jahḍarī (d. 128/746) [Basra], Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥārith adh-Dhimārī (d. 145/762) [Syria], Ubayy b. Ka'b (d. 21/642) and the Meccans all counted 110 verses in surah 17. This has also been stated by 'Ikrima (d. 104/723), Qatāda (d. 118/736), al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) and al-Kalbī (d. 146/763). According to the Kufan count it is 111 verses, while it is 110 verses according to the Medinan, Basran, Meccan, and Syrian verse-counting."<sup>155</sup>

<sup>151</sup> Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Hilya*, vol. 2, 368: *Kāna yaktubu l-muṣḥafa fi arba'ati ashhurin*.

<sup>152</sup> Ad-Dānī, *Bayān*, 81.

<sup>153</sup> Ḥāmid, *Mabānī*, 250.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.: *Wa-wajadū kalāmahu [...] wa-ḥurūfahu [...] wa-'adada āyāti kullī sūratīn wa-kalāmihā wa-ḥurūfihā sūratān bi-mā yaṭūlu dhikruhā muḥaṣṣalatan*.

<sup>155</sup> As-Sakhāwī, *Jamāl*, vol. 1, 205–206.

Although al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and ‘Āṣim al-Jahḍarī are separately cited, they actually worked together in the *maṣāḥif* project. The emphasis on ‘Āṣim al-Jahḍarī has however a plausible reason; he was counted among a group of persons to which the regional traditions of verse-counting were attributed.<sup>156</sup>

With respect to the *basmala*, like later Basran countings, it was not considered as a separate verse and was therefore not included in the count of the *maṣāḥif* project.<sup>157</sup> This is based on two traditions that refer to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī directly and are related to the *maṣāḥif* project. The first of the two is transmitted by al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870): ‘*ani l-Ḥasani qāla: (u)ktub fī l-muṣḥafi fī awwali l-imāmi bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi wa-j’al bayna s-sūratayni khaṭṭan!*’<sup>158</sup> Ibn aḍ-Ḍurays (d. 294/906), on the other hand, reports: *Kāna l-Ḥasanu yaqūlu: (u)ktubū fī awwali l-imāmi bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi wa-j’alū bayna kulli sūratayni khaṭṭan!*<sup>159</sup> (“Ḥasan used to say: ‘Write the *basmala* in the beginning of the text and make a dividing line between every two surahs!’”) These two traditions carrying the imperative form are to be understood in the context of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī’s leadership of the project. The evidence clearly shows that the Qur’anic codices which were made in the *maṣāḥif* project did not have any titles or names for the surahs, i.e., every surah began directly with its Qur’anic text.

A second significant tradition reads as follows: *Su’ila l-Ḥasanu ‘an bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi, qāla: fī ṣudūri r-rasā’ili; wa-qāla l-Ḥasanu ayḍan: lam tanzil bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi fī shay’in mina l-Qur’āni illā fī ṭāsīn: innahu min Sulaymāna wa-innahu bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi.*<sup>160</sup> (“Ḥasan was asked about the *basmala*. He answered: ‘[It is to be written] at the beginnings of letters.’ He also said: ‘The *basmala* was revealed nowhere in the Qur’an except in Q 27:30.’”)

<sup>156</sup> Ad-Dānī, *Bayān*, 67–70; as-Sakhāwī, *Jamāl*, vol. 1, 189–190.

<sup>157</sup> On whether the *basmala* is to be counted as the first verse, see *GdQ*, vol. 2, 79–81.

<sup>158</sup> Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 3, pt. 6, 105 (*Kitāb tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, Surah 96).

<sup>159</sup> Ibn aḍ-Ḍurays, *Faḍā’il*, 42 (§ 43).

<sup>160</sup> Al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmi’*, vol. 1, 95.

## Takhmīs and ta'shīr

Bergsträsser and Pretzl have cast doubt on the tradition that ascribes the introduction of signs indicating the division of the text into fifths and tenths to Naṣr b. 'Āṣim al-Laythī (d. 89 or 90/707 or 708).<sup>161</sup> On the other hand, Sezgin saw no reason to doubt the authenticity of the report and considered it reliable.<sup>162</sup> Its authenticity is substantiated by the following reports. The notions of *takhmīs* and *ta'shīr* most likely originate with the didactic method practiced by Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī (d. 44/664) in his teaching circles. In a tradition that goes back to Abū Rajā' al-'Uṭaridī (d. 105/723), it is reported: "Abū Mūsā used to teach us five verses of the Qur'an at a time."<sup>163</sup> This teaching method was continued in Kufa, where Abū 'Abd ar-Raḥmān as-Sulamī (d. between 73 and 75/692 and 694) taught the Qur'an for forty years in the Great Mosque.<sup>164</sup>

As for the application of the *ta'shīr*-method, a number of traditions are extant. One of them reports that both Medinan Qur'an readers Abū Ja'far (d. 128/746) and Shayba b. Niṣāḥ (d. 130 or 138/748 or 755) used to teach ten verses of the Qur'an each time.<sup>165</sup> The method of *ta'shīr* originally developed in accordance with the way the Qur'anic revelations were believed to have been studied by the very first Muslims.<sup>166</sup> According to Islamic tradition, the Qur'an as early as the time of the Prophet was learned in portions of ten verses. In this context, it is reported that Ibn Mas'ūd said: "We used to learn ten verses from the Prophet. The next ten verses were learned only after learning what God revealed in the first ten."<sup>167</sup>

It is possible to assume that Naṣr, as a member of the *maṣāḥif* project, carried out the insertion of signs indicating the dividing of

<sup>161</sup> The tradition is contained in *GhN*, vol. 2, 366 (§ 3728): *Khammasahā wa-'ashsharahā*. See *GdQ*, vol. 3, 258.

<sup>162</sup> *GAS*, 4.

<sup>163</sup> *MQK*, vol. 1, 59 (§ 17); also as-Sakhāwī, *Jamāl*, vol. 2, 446; *GhN*, vol. 1, 604 (§ 2469).

<sup>164</sup> *MQK*, vol. 1, 55 (§ 15).

<sup>165</sup> *GhN*, vol. 1, 616 (§ 2510).

<sup>166</sup> For example, Q 23:1–10 by Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 1, 263–265 (§ 223); Q 9:112–121, Q 23:1–9, Q 33:35–44, and Q 70:1–10 by al-Marwazī, *Ṣalāt*, 138 (§ 431) (the aforementioned traditions follow the Kufan counting of the Cairo edition of the Qur'an); also as-Samarqandī, *Baḥr*, vol. 2, 33 (Q 9:1–10), and vol. 2, 407–408 (Q 23:1–10) and al-Biqā'ī, *Nazm*, vol. 5, 185 (Q 23:1–10), and vol. 5, 242 (Q 24:11–20).

<sup>167</sup> *GhN*, vol. 1, 459, ll. 9–11 (§ 1914).

the Qur'an into fifths and tenths, for outside the *maṣāḥif* project he would have had no adequate legitimization to do so.

According to an isolated and falsely interpreted tradition that goes back to Qatāda, not only were the *takhmīs* and *ta'shīr* introduced, but also individual verses within the fifths and tenths were marked off. The tradition reads: *Bada'ū fa-naqaṭū thumma khammasū thumma 'ashsharū*.<sup>168</sup> For the commentators of this tradition it was unclear what is to be considered as the subject of the sentence.<sup>169</sup> In addition, the verb *fa-naqaṭū* has been wrongly understood as meaning that they “punctuated” the text, i.e., inserted diacritical marks. As for the subject of the sentence, it refers to the members of the *maṣāḥif* project. The three verbs used in the report, when read in the second verbal (*naqqaṭū*, *khammasū*, *ashsharū*), all indicate the separation of verses. The first verb, *naqqaṭū*, thus ought to be understood in the sense that they (i.e., the members) separated every single verse from the following one with a sign that consisted of three points. Then the fifths and tenths were indicated.

The fact that the verse separator consisted of three points is indicated by a tradition preserved by Ibn Abī Dāwūd (d. 316/929) on the authority of Yaḥyā b. abī Kathīr (d. 129/747): *Kānū lā yuqirrūna shay'an mimmā fī hādhihi l-maṣāḥifi illā hādhihi n-nuqaṭa th-thalātha llatī 'inda ra'si l-āyi*.<sup>170</sup> Additionally, ad-Dānī (d. 444/1053) reports: *Mā kānū ya'rīfūna shay'an mimmā uḥditha fī hādhihi l-maṣāḥifi illā hādhihi n-nuqaṭa th-thalātha 'inda ru'ūsi l-āyāti*.<sup>171</sup> Both variations should be translated as follows: “They acknowledged nothing from what was newly introduced into the *maṣāḥif* apart from these three points which are at the beginning of the verses.”

The fact that *maṣāḥif* existed in which fifths and tenths were marked<sup>172</sup> implies that the method of *takhmīs* and *ta'shīr* was indeed practiced. This method was the first one used to divide the Qur'anic verses into separate sections. The divisions were marked iteratively,

<sup>168</sup> Ad-Dānī, *Bayān*, 130; ad-Dānī, *Muḥkam*, 2, 15; also Ibn Kathīr, *Faḍā'il*, 43 and as-Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 2, 482.

<sup>169</sup> Cf. the interpretation of ad-Dānī, *Bayān*, 131 and ad-Dānī, *Muḥkam*, 2.

<sup>170</sup> *IAD*, 143.

<sup>171</sup> Ad-Dānī, *Bayān*, 131; ad-Dānī, *Muḥkam*, 17; also as-Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 2, 482; cf. *GdQ*, vol. 3, 258 and n. 1, where Bergsträsser and Pretzl base themselves on the *Kitāb al-bayān* of ad-Dānī. They read *y'rfwn* in the second verbal form, i.e., *yu'arrifūna*. This variant is unnecessary and even false.

<sup>172</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 3, 258–259.

i.e., as 5, 10, 5, 10, etc.; a continuous division (5, 10, 15, 20, 25 etc.) was not practiced in the *maṣāḥif* project.

Dividing off verses and groups of verses was simple and corresponded to the needs of the time. Significant remains of this method are to be found in a tradition that goes back to Rāshid al-Ḥimmānī about the dividing of the Qur'anic text. He marks the end of the first thirds of the Qur'anic text with the words *ra'su mi'ati āyatin min barā'ata* ("end of a hundred verses of surah 9"), and the second third with *ra'su iḥdā wa-mi'atin min ash-shu'arā'* ("end of the 101 verses of surah 26"). The former reflects the division into groups of ten verses, while the latter also reflects the separation of individual verses by means of three points.

The earliest trace of this way of counting in tenths allegedly goes back to Ibn 'Abbās, according to a tradition in which he says: *Fa-qra' mā fawqa th-thalāthina wa-mi'atin fī sūрати l-an'āmi (qad khasira lladhina qatalū awlādahum) ilā qawlihi: (wa-mā kānū muhtadina) (Q 6:140).*<sup>173</sup> The term *ashr* is used by Qatāda (d. 117 or 118/735 or 736) when he talks about the Medinan surahs, and in particular in relation to surah 66. Surah 66 consists of twelve verses. According to Qatāda, the first ten verses are Medinan. He says: *Yā ayyuhā n-nabiyyu li-mā tuḥarrimu ilā ra'si l-'ashri* ("... the surah *yā ayyuhā n-nabiyyu li-mā tuḥarrimu* until the end of the tenth").<sup>174</sup> In later sources there still remain traces of the division in tenths. For example, al-Ahwāzī (d. 446/1055) describes the al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī's reading of Q 4:114 (*fa-sawfa nu'tihi*) in the following way: (*fa-sawfa nu'tihi*) *ba'da l-mi'ati bi-n-nūni (fa-sawfa nu'tihi* after the hundred with the *nūn*).<sup>175</sup> Although al-Ahwāzī was in the position of giving the exact number of this verse, here he uses the expression *ba'da l-mi'ati* and refers to separation into tenths. Through this, he differentiated between the places which consist of the same wording before verse hundred

<sup>173</sup> Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 2, pt. 4, 194 (§ 3524) (*K. al-manāqib, Bābu qīṣṣati Zamzama wa-jahli l-'arabi*); also al-Biqā'ī, *Naẓm*, vol. 2, 726 (Q 6:140) (on the authority of aṣ-Ṣaḥīḥ of al-Bukhārī, d. 256/870) and ash-Shawkānī (1250/1834), *Fath*, vol. 2, 236 (on the authority of 'Abd b. Ḥumayd, d. 249/863, al-Bukhārī, d. 256/870, Abū sh-Shaykh, d. 369/979, and Ibn Mardawayh, d. 410/1019).

<sup>174</sup> Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 8, where he refers to Ibn al-Anbārī (d. 328/940); also as-Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 1, 48. In *Kitāb an-nāsikh wa-l-mansūkh* of Qatāda (d. 117 or 118/735 or 736) according to the tradition of Hammām b. Yaḥyā (d. 163/780) additional expressions exist with exactly the same meaning, such as *'ashr mutawāliyyāt*. See Qatāda, *Nāsikh*, 55, l. 5.

<sup>175</sup> Al-Ahwāzī, *Mufrada* 260.

(i.e., Q 4:74: *fa-sawfa nu'tihi*) from those after verse hundred. An additional example of this in the later sources is produced by Abū l-‘Alā’ al-Hamadhānī (d. 569/1174), who gathers all the instances in the Qur’an where *hā-antum* occurs. He writes: *Jumlatuhu arba‘atun: hādhā wa-ākharu qabla l-mi’ati wa-l-‘ishrīna min hādhihi s-sūratī wa-mawḍi’un fī n-nisā’i wa-mithluhu fī l-qitāli*. (“The total number of places where this has occurred is four: this [Q 3:66], another before verse 120 in this surah [Q 3:119] and one other place in *an-Nisā’* [Q 4:109] as well as *al-Qitāl* [Q 47:38].”) <sup>176</sup>

Counting verses according to the *ta’shīr* method was also practiced when reciting the Qur’an in the course of prayers. Ad-Dānī (d. 444/1053) mentions four *ṣaḥāba* and twenty-four *tābi’un* from different places (Medina, Mecca, Kufa, Basra, and Syria) who practiced this method. <sup>177</sup> To describe this practice, the expression ‘*aqd al-āy fī ṣ-ṣalāt*’ was used. Here, fingers of both hands were used for counting. <sup>178</sup> The verb ‘*aqada*’ in the first verbal form means (among other things) “to count.” <sup>179</sup> From this verb, the word ‘*iqd*’ (pl. ‘*uqūd*’) meaning “ten” is derived. <sup>180</sup>

Wahb b. Jarīr al-Baṣrī transmitted on the authority of his father Jarīr b. Ḥāzim al-Baṣrī (d. 170/786) <sup>181</sup> the following: *Ra’aytu Yazīda bna Rūmāna wa-Muḥammada bna Sīrīna ya’qidāni l-āya fī ṣ-ṣalāti*. <sup>182</sup> (“I saw Yazīd b. Rūmān [d. 120, or 129, or 130 AH, i.e., 738, or 747, or 748 CE; Medinan] and Muḥammad b. Sīrīn [d. 110/728; Basran] reading the verses in the prayers following the separation into groups of tenths.”) The practice of dividing the verses into groups of tenths was also followed by Abū ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān as-Sulamī (d. between 73 and 75/692 and 694), ‘Āsim b. abī n-Najūd (d. 127/745), and Ḥabīb b. ash-Shahīd al-Baṣrī (d. 145/762). In a tradition that goes back to the known traditionist Ḥammād b. Salama (d. 167/783) it is reported: *Qāla Ḥammādu bnu Salamata: ra’aytu Ḥabība bna sh-Shahīdī ya’qīdu l-āya fī ṣ-ṣalāti; wa-ra’aytu ‘Āšima bna Bahdalata ya’qīdu wa-yaṣna’u*

<sup>176</sup> GhN, vol. 2, 450, ll. 3–4.

<sup>177</sup> Ad-Dānī, *Bayān*, 41–47, 66.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 61–65 (*dhikru s-sunani l-wāridati fil-‘aqdi bi-l-aṣābi’i wa-kayfiyyatihi*) and ibid., 66 (*dhikru man ra’ā l-‘aqda bi-l-yaṣāri*).

<sup>179</sup> Al-Azhārī, *Tahdhīb*, vol. 1, 198b (article: ‘*qd*’): *Wa-l-ḥāsibu ya’qīdu bi-aṣābi’ihi, idhā ḥasaba*.

<sup>180</sup> Al-Firūzābādī, *Qāmūs*, 277, l. 1b (Article: ‘*shr*’): *Al-‘ashratu awwalu l-‘uqūdi*.

<sup>181</sup> For the father and his son see adh-Dhahabī, *Mizān*, vol. 1, 392 (§ 1461), vol. 4, 350 (§ 9424).

<sup>182</sup> Ad-Dānī, *Bayān*, 44; also MQK, vol. 1, 77 (§ 29); GhN, vol. 2, 381 (§ 3876).



*mithla ṣanī'i 'Abd Allāhi bni Ḥabībīn* [i.e., like Abū 'Abd ar-Raḥmān as-Sulamī].<sup>183</sup>

Besides the expression *'aqd al-āy fī ṣ-ṣalāt*, the expression *'add al-āy fī ṣ-ṣalāt* can also be found. Ismā'il b. 'Abd al-Malik al-Makkī reports the following about the Meccan traditionist Ibn abī Mulayka (d. 117/735): *Ra'aytu Bna abī Mulaykata ya'uddu l-āya fī ṣ-ṣalāti; fa-lammā nṣarafa, qultu lahu. Qāla: innahu aḥfaẓu lī*.<sup>184</sup> In another tradition, the Basran Abū 'Ubayda 'Imrān b. Ḥudayr as-Sadūsī (d. 149/766) reports from the Basran Abū Mijlaz Lāḥiq b. Ḥumayd (d. 100 or 101/719) that the latter used to count the verses in tenths in his prayers.<sup>185</sup>

### *The Dividing of the Qur'anic Text into Sections*

Ibn Abī Dāwūd transmits a report on the authority of Rāshid al-Ḥimmānī in which the separation of the Qur'anic text into two halves, seven sevenths, three thirds and lastly four fourths is stated.<sup>186</sup> The dividing of the text into four parts is also mentioned by as-Sakhāwī (d. 643/1243)<sup>187</sup> and Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1371).<sup>188</sup> Is this tradition complete? What about the division of the text into five fifths, six sixths, eight eighths, nine ninths, and ten tenths? Were they not treated?

In fact, Ibn Abī Dāwūd's text is not complete. The complete tradition of Rāshid al-Ḥimmānī can be found in the *Kitāb al-mabānī*. There, the text is divided in thirds, fourths, fifths, sixths, sevenths, ninths, and finally tenths. Nothing is reported about it being divided into halves and eighths. Like the aforementioned tradition about the text's division into two halves, seven sevenths, three thirds, and four fourths, it is identical with the tradition mentioned by Ibn Abī Dāwūd (d. 316/929) in his *Kitāb al-maṣāḥif*. Thus, the division of the Qur'anic

<sup>183</sup> GhN, vol. 1, 347, ll. 8–10; also ad-Dānī, *Bayān*, 46–47 (in two separated traditions).

<sup>184</sup> Ad-Dānī, *Bayān*, 46; also GhN, vol. 1, 430, ll. 17–18, (§ 1806); cf. additionally GhN, vol. 1, 347, ll. 11–12 (§ 1496): *Qāla Ḥafṣun: kāna 'Aṣimūn, idhā qurī'a 'alayhi, akhrajā yadahū, fa-'adda*.

<sup>185</sup> Ad-Dānī, *Bayān*, 46: *'an abī Mijlazin annahu kāna ya'uddu l-āya fī ṣ-ṣalāti*. Also GhN, vol. 1, 363, ll. 1–4 (§ 3816) on the authority of ad-Dānī (d. 444/1053).

<sup>186</sup> IAD, 119–120.

<sup>187</sup> This was already known to Bergträsser and Pretzl; they were of the opinion that this separation with all probability went back to al-Ḥajjāj (GdQ, vol. 3, 260, § 4).

As-Sakhāwī, *Jamāl*, vol. 1, 126.

<sup>188</sup> Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 8.



text consisted of the following types: two parts,<sup>189</sup> three parts,<sup>190</sup> four parts,<sup>191</sup> five parts,<sup>192</sup> six parts,<sup>193</sup> seven parts,<sup>194</sup> nine parts,<sup>195</sup> and ten parts.<sup>196</sup>

The dividing of the Qurʾanic text into parts is one of the important contributions achieved in the *maṣāḥif* project. However, to give al-Ḥajjāj credit for this contribution, as Sezgin does,<sup>197</sup> is not accurate. The words of Ibn ʿAṭiyya *wa-zāda taḥzībahu*<sup>198</sup> appear to have confused Sezgin, who took the subject of *zāda* to be al-Ḥajjāj. Equally inaccurate is Sezgin's statement that the indication of fifths and tenths was introduced by Naṣr b. ʿĀsim.<sup>199</sup>

### *The Composition of Works about qirāʾāt*

Sezgin makes a case for the existence of an early treatise about the Qurʾanic readings from the first century of the Hijra, about which he writes: "The oldest title known to us is *K. fī l-qirāʾa* of Yaḥyā b. Yaʿmur (d.89/707), a student of Abū l-Aswad ad-Duʿalī. It was written in Wāsiṭ and contained the variants of the famous Qurʾanic readers. It is supposed to have remained an authoritative reference book until the fourth century of the Hijra."<sup>200</sup>

The question that poses itself is: Which source did Sezgin depend on when claiming that Yaḥyā b. Yaʿmur had written a work about the *qirāʾāt*? He in fact refers to Ibn ʿAṭiyya (d. 546/1152), who writes: *Amara l-Ḥajjāju wa-huwa wālī l-ʿIrāqī l-Ḥasana wa-Yaḥyā bna Yaʿmura bi-dhālika wa-allafa ithra dhālika bi-Wāsiṭin kitāban fī*

<sup>189</sup> IAD, 119; also Ḥāmid, *Mabānī*, 246; as-Sakhāwī, *Jamāl*, vol. 1, 126; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 8.

<sup>190</sup> IAD, 120; also Ḥāmid, *Mabānī*, 236; as-Sakhāwī, *Jamāl*, vol. 1, 126; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 8.

<sup>191</sup> IAD, 120; also Ḥāmid, *Mabānī*, 237; as-Sakhāwī, *Jamāl*, vol. 1, 126–127; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 8.

<sup>192</sup> Ḥāmid, *Mabānī*, 238.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 238–239.

<sup>194</sup> IAD, 119–120; also as-Sakhāwī, *Jamāl*, vol. 1, 126; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 8. Cf. the completely alternative separation of seven sevenths of Qatāda in: Qatāda, *Nāsikh*, 53, ll. 4–8.

<sup>195</sup> Ḥāmid, *Mabānī*, 244.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>197</sup> GAS, 4.

<sup>198</sup> MW, vol. 1, 67, l. 1.

<sup>199</sup> GAS, 4.

<sup>200</sup> GAS, 5.

*l-qirā'āti, jama'a fihī mā ruwiya mini khtilāfi n-nāsi fī-mā wāfaqa l-khaṭṭa. Wa-mashā n-nāsu 'alā dhālika zamānan ṭawīlan ilā an allafa bnu Mujāhidin kitābahu fī l-qirā'āti.* ("Al-Ḥajjāj, while governor of Iraq, commissioned al-Ḥasan and Yaḥyā b. Ya'mur with this task. And directly afterwards [after the completion of the project], he [subject unclear] wrote in Wāsiṭ a work about all the Qur'anic readings which corresponded to Qur'anic orthography. And the people followed this for a while until Ibn Mujāhid (d. 324/936) wrote his book about the *qirā'āt*." )<sup>201</sup>

To my mind, Sezgin commits two mistakes here. Firstly, he does not consider the report in the light of the *maṣāḥif* project. Secondly, he interprets Yaḥyā b. Ya'mur as the subject of *allafa*. By contrast, R. Sellheim states: "From this text it is clear that the 'author' of this *Kitāb* is not Yaḥyā, but rather al-Ḥajjāj."<sup>202</sup> His criticism is accurate, but the verb *allafa* is not to be understood here as "writing," but rather as "to cause something to be written, to have something written." Thus, the passage ought to be rendered: "And he [al-Ḥajjāj] ordered directly afterwards [i.e., after the completion of the project] the writing of a book about the *qirā'āt*, in which all the different readings consistent with the ('Uthmānic) consonant text be brought together." Ibn 'Aṭiyya's (d. 546/1152) reduction of the members of the committee to simply three persons should be understood in that they were the most important figures in the project. In my opinion, then, the *qirā'āt* book in question has no specific author and is to be regarded therefore as one of the collective contributions of the *maṣāḥif* project.

### *The Composition of Works about Verse Counting ('adad)*

Under the title *Al-Kutubu l-mu'allafatu fī 'adadi āyi l-Qur'āni*, Ibn an-Nadīm mentions in his *Fihrist* the three following Basran works: the *Kitāb al-'adad* of Abū l-Mu'āfā [Burayd b. 'Abd al-Wāḥid aḍ-Ḍarīr (d. 353/964)],<sup>203</sup> the *Kitāb al-'adad* based on 'Āṣim al-Jaḥḍarī (d. 128/746), and al-Ḥasan b. Abī l-Ḥasan's (d. 110/728) book on verse counting.<sup>204</sup> Ibn an-Nadīm's choice of words here is noteworthy: *Kitāb*

<sup>201</sup> MW, vol. 1, 67.

<sup>202</sup> Sellheim, *Arabische Handschriften*, vol. 1, 34.

<sup>203</sup> On him as a reader see GhN, vol. 1, 176 (§ 818).

<sup>204</sup> Ibn an-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 62.

*al-‘adad ‘an ‘Āṣim al-Jahḍarī*. The work was thus not written by ‘Āṣim himself, but was rather composed on his authority. As previously mentioned, the official Basran counting goes back to him. We also know that al-Mu‘allā b. ‘Īsā al-Warrāq an-Nāqīṭ transmitted from ‘Āṣim al-Jahḍarī the counting of verses and sections (*‘add al-āy wa-l-ajzā*),<sup>205</sup> and that Salīm b. ‘Īsā and ‘Ubayd b. ‘Aqīl transmitted it from al-Mu‘allā.<sup>206</sup>

Ibn an-Nadīm’s mention of a work belonging to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī is exceptional. Even if we were to accept a work written by al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, it would not have been dedicated to the issue of verse-counting. What does this report tell us then? Does it deal with a falsely attributed book to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī? Again, this question must be answered in the light of the *maṣāḥif* project. As leader of the committee, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī was entitled to act as author of collectively accomplished contributions. *Kitāb al-‘adad* should be understood in this light. Perhaps this refers to the reports of the committee after the completion of the counting. In this case, the *Kitāb al-‘adad* would include not only the verse-counting (for every surah and the entire Qur’an) as it is understood by Ibn an-Nadīm’s title, but also the counting of consonants, words, and the aforementioned division of the Qur’anic text into sections.

### *Spreading the Recension of the Qur’an Produced by the maṣāḥif Project*

As the work of the project approached its end, al-Ḥajjāj brought together a group of three persons, namely, ‘Āṣim al-Jahḍarī (d. 128/746), Nājiya b. Rumḥ, and ‘Alī b. Aṣma‘ al-Bāhili. He assigned to them the duty of inspecting all the *maṣāḥif* that were in private ownership, and to tear up every *muṣḥaf* that differed from the ‘Uthmānic text. As compensation, the possessor was to be paid 60 *dirham*.<sup>207</sup> With this, al-Ḥajjāj followed, as it were, ‘Uthmān’s tactic of destroying conflicting Qur’anic recensions.<sup>208</sup> Both ‘Uthmān and al-Ḥajjāj shared an interest in the standardization of the Qur’anic text. There is no doubt that inspections first took place in Kufa where they were

<sup>205</sup> *GhN*, vol. 2, 304, l. 15 (§ 3630).

<sup>206</sup> *GhN*, vol. 2, 304, l. 16 (§ 3630).

<sup>207</sup> Ibn Muṭarrif, *Qurṭayn*, pt. 2, 11.

<sup>208</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 3, 103–104.

rigorously exercised. One of its results was the destroying of the *muṣḥaf* of Ibn Masʿūd. As noted above, al-Ḥajjāj banned his reading.<sup>209</sup> Additionally, it is reported that the *muṣḥaf* of Ibn Masʿūd was even buried.<sup>210</sup> After destroying all differing codices, the new *maṣāḥif* based on the project were sent to the major cities, as reported by Ibn Zabāla (d. 199/814–5)<sup>211</sup> on the authority of Mālik b. Anas (d. 175/791),<sup>212</sup> who gives detailed information about the Medinan codex.<sup>213</sup>

In addition to this, Ibn Shabba (d. 262/876) has preserved a tradition which goes back to Muḥriz b. Thābit, the *mawlā* of Maslama b. ʿAbd al-Malik (d. 121/739).<sup>214</sup> Muḥriz reports directly from his father, Thābit, who was a guard in the palace of al-Ḥajjāj.<sup>215</sup> He recounts the angry reaction of the family of ʿUthmān towards the new Medinan Qurʾan recension. The *muṣḥaf* of ʿUthmān itself—which had been handed down in the family after the assassination of ʿUthmān and was at that time in the possession of the latter’s grandson, Khālid b. ʿAmr b. ʿUthmān—was no longer actually used due to its fragility. This was also the reason why the family of ʿUthmān did not want to place the ʿUthmānic codex at anyone’s disposal when al-Ḥajjāj ordered the sending of the new codices to Medina.

In both traditions from Ibn Zabāla (d. 199/814–5) and Ibn Shabba (d. 262/876), it is striking to notice that no further details are provided about the rest of the codices. An exception to this is the tradition about the Egyptian codex. Ibn Duqmāq (d. 809/1407) reported that the reason behind the writing of the so-called *muṣḥaf Asmāʿ* (bint abī Bakr b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Marwān) was that ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Marwān (r. 60–85/680–704 in Egypt) refused to accept the codex that was sent to him by al-Ḥajjāj. On this occasion ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ordered the writing of another *muṣḥaf*.<sup>216</sup> From this it appears that in Egypt not one ʿUthmānic Qurʾan codex existed, in other words, ʿUthmān had not sent a copy to Egypt.

<sup>209</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 3, 104, n. 1.

<sup>210</sup> Al-Farrāʾ, *Maʿānī*, vol. 3, 68; also *IKh*, 142.

<sup>211</sup> See *GAS*, 343 (§ 2).

<sup>212</sup> The well-known founder of the Mālikite legal school.

<sup>213</sup> As-Samhūdī, *Wafāʾ*, vol. 2, 668.

<sup>214</sup> A son of the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān. See *EP*, vol. 6, 740.

<sup>215</sup> Ibn Shabba, *Tārīkh al-Madīna*, vol. 1, 7–8.

<sup>216</sup> Ibn Duqmāq, *Intiṣār*, vol. 4, 72 (on the authority of the Egyptian historian Ibn Yūnus, d. 347/958). The same is found in Maqrīzī, *Mawāʿiz*, vol. 2, 254 (on the authority of the Egyptian historian al-Quḍāʾī, d. 454/1062).

*Results of the maṣāḥif Project*

Al-Ḥajjāj exerted great effort in order to replace the previous Qurʾanic codices with the new codices. It is reported that he officially decreed that in the mosques of the major cities one was only allowed to read from the new codices. According to a statement attributed to Mālik b. Anas (d. 175/791), it is reported that he said: *Lam takuni l-qirāʾatu fi l-muṣḥafi bi-l-maṣjidi min amri n-nāsi l-qadīmi. Wa-awwalu man aḥdathahu l-Ḥajjāju bnu Yūsuf.*<sup>217</sup> (“The recitation of the Qurʾan from the *muṣḥaf* was not an old tradition among the people.<sup>218</sup> The first to introduce it was al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf.”) By doing this, al-Ḥajjāj aimed at making the “new edition” of the text known and consequently to gain legitimacy.

However, this type of propagation was unsuccessful. We know of a number of people who took some interest in the new edition of the text and reproduced private codices for themselves. For example, Muḥammad b. Sīrīn acquired a copy with diacritical marks from Yaḥyā b. Yaʿmur.<sup>219</sup> Perhaps these Qurʾanic codices were those referred to by ad-Dānī when he speaks of the *maṣāḥif ahl al-Baṣra al-uwal*<sup>220</sup> and *ʿutuq maṣāḥif ahl al-Baṣra*.<sup>221</sup> Here also belong the *maṣāḥif ahl al-ʿIrāq al-qadīma*,<sup>222</sup> *baʿd maṣāḥif ahl al-ʿIrāq al-aṣliyya al-qadīma*<sup>223</sup> and *al-ʿirāqīyya al-ʿutuq al-qadīma*.<sup>224</sup> Another peculiar description for the Qurʾan codices of that time is *akthar al-kūfiyya wa-l-baṣriyya allatī katabahā at-tābiʿūn wa-ghayruhum*.<sup>225</sup>

At the same time the local reading traditions needed to be corrected. The goal of al-Ḥajjāj was not only a standardization of the *rasm*, but also of the oral tradition of the *qirāʾāt*. However, he was not able to achieve the latter. An example of this is provided by a tradition transmitted by Abān b. Taghlib on the authority of al-Aʿmash (d. 148/765): “Al-Ḥajjāj said: ‘If I hear someone read *wa-kāna lahū thumurun* [Q 18:34], I shall cut his tongue off!’ I [Abān b. Taghlib]

<sup>217</sup> As-Samhūdī, *Wafāʾ*, vol. 2, 667.

<sup>218</sup> I.e., the *ṣaḥāba*.

<sup>219</sup> Az-Zubaydī, *Ṭabaqāt* 29; ad-Dānī, *Naqt*, 129; *MW*, vol. 1, 67 (on the authority of *Ṭabaqāt* of az-Zubaydī); az-Zarkashī, *Burhān*, vol. 1, 250. For more on his *Muṣḥaf* see Abū ʿUbayd, *Faḍāʾil*, 240 (§ 6–63); *IAD*, 143; ad-Dānī, *Muḥkam*, 13.

<sup>220</sup> Ad-Dānī, *Muqniʾ*, 46, ll. 1–2.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 46, l. 5.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 31, l. 3.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 46, ll. 18–19; 58, l. 14.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 30, l. 13.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 69, ll. 13–14.

said to al-A'mash: 'Do you abide by this restriction?' He said: 'No, never!' And so he used to read *thumurun*.<sup>226</sup>

As for the language of the Qur'anic recitation, Arabic was enhanced and fortified through two measures. One was carried out by the Umayyad authorities, the other by Muslim jurists. In Iraq, for example, al-Ḥajjāj declared that only Arabs were allowed to lead public prayers, except for recognized Qur'an readers.<sup>227</sup> This was implemented by him in Kufa. Parallel to this, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, who then occupied the highest authority in Iraq, issued a legal ruling according to which, if a prayer leader (*imām*) commits a linguistic mistake (*lahn*) while reciting in public prayers, he would no longer be permitted to carry out his public services.<sup>228</sup>

Not long after the completion of the *maṣāḥif* project, a number of juristic problems and discussions arouse. Is it permitted to sell and purchase the *maṣāḥif*?<sup>229</sup> Could the writing of the *maṣāḥif* be paid

<sup>226</sup> An-Naḥḥās, *Ma'ānī*, vol. 4, 240: *Abānu bnu Taghliba 'ani l-A'mashi anna l-Ḥajjāja qāla: law sami'tu aḥadan yaqra'u (wa-kāna laḥū thumurun), la-qāta'tu lisānahu; fa-qultu li-l-A'mashi a-ta'khudhu bi-dhālika? Fa-qāla: lā wa-lā nu'mata 'aynin; fa-kāna yaqra'u (thumurun).*

<sup>227</sup> Al-Balādhurī, *Jumal*, vol. 13, 378: *Nādā l-Ḥajjāju bi-l-Kūfati allā ya'umma mawlan lahum; fa-atā 'Anbasatu bnu Sa'īdin maṣjida Banī Kāhilin wa-Yahyā bnu Waththābin Imāmuhum wa-huwa mawlan lahum, fa-arāda an yataqaddama fī ṣalāti l-'ishā'i l-ākhirati, fa-qāla rajulun mina l-'arabi: wa-llāhi lā ta'ummunā; fa-qāla wa-llāhi la-aḥalanna. Wa-taqaddama; fa-wa-llāhi mā sami'tu qārī'an qaṭṭu 'arabiyyan wa-lā mawlan aqwā minhu; fa-lammā kānat ṣalātu l-ghadāti, ḥaḍartu li-anzura mā yakūnu min amrihim, fa-akhadha kaffa ḥaṣan thumma qāla: wa-llāhi lā yalijju aḥadun minkum illā ḍarabtu bi-hādhā l-ḥaṣā ra'sahu; fa-aḥjamū wa-qaddamūhu, fa-ṣallā; fa-ataytu l-Ḥajjāja, fa-akhbartuhu, fa-a'āda munāḍihi: innā lam nuridi l-qara'ata, innamā aradnā kulla mawlan, lā yuḥsinu l-qirā'ata. (Al-Ḥajjāj announced in Kufa that a mawlā was no longer allowed to lead public prayers. So 'Anbasa b. Sa'īd went to the mosque of Banū Kāhil, whose imām was Yahyā b. Waththāb, a mawlā of Banū Kāhil. As he was approaching to lead the 'ishā'-prayers, an Arab said: "By God! You will not be our Imam!" Thereupon, Yahyā replied: "By God! I will always continue [as Imam]." And he continued. Then 'Anbasa swore: "By God, I have never seen a Qur'an reader neither Arab nor non-Arab as courageous as him!" And when the time for dawn prayers came, I attended the prayers as to see what would happen. Then Yahyā took a handful of small stones and said: "Whoever goes against this, his head will be stoned with these stones!" So they moved back and let him lead them. Then he performed the prayer. Afterwards 'Anbasa came to al-Ḥajjāj and informed him of this. Consequently, he [al-Ḥajjāj] let it be announced, once again, that: We did not mean every Qur'an reader willy-nilly, rather those mawālī who are not competent in the recitation of the Qur'an.)*

<sup>228</sup> Ibn al-Anbārī, *Idāh*, vol. 1, 29: *Qīla li-l-Ḥasani: inna lanā imāman yalḥanu. Qāla: akhkhirūhu!* (It was said to al-Ḥasan: "Our imām makes language mistakes." He answered: "Dismiss him!")

<sup>229</sup> *IAD*, 157ff.

for?<sup>230</sup> It is little wonder that the jurists disagreed and took divergent stances, backing up their positions with statements attributed to the *ṣaḥāba*. It is also little wonder that in the anti-Umayyad city of Kufa the second *maṣāḥif* project was strongly resisted. This is clear from a statement attributed to Ibn Masʿūd: *Jarridū l-Qurʾāna!*<sup>231</sup> (“Keep the Qurʾan as it originally was!”) There have also been reports indicating resistance against the *taʿshīr* and marking final vowels.<sup>232</sup>

*The Fate of the maṣāḥif of al-Ḥajjāj in the amṣār*

With the end of the Umayyad dynasty in 132 AH/750 CE the new Abbasid caliphs tried to erase the achievements of the Umayyads in many fields. This, however, was not always successful, as the following two examples demonstrate: The first Umayyad caliph Muʿāwīya b. Abī Sufyān had added four steps to the already existing three steps<sup>233</sup> of the *minbar* in the Prophet’s mosque in Medina.<sup>234</sup> The Abbasid caliph al-Mahdī (r. 158–169/775–786)<sup>235</sup> wanted to reduce the steps back to three. However, he was unable to do so when the jurist Mālik b. Anas issued an opposing ruling. Mālik argued that if al-Mahdī’s intention were carried out, the whole *minbar* would collapse.<sup>236</sup> The second example is the Abbasid caliph al-Maʾmūn (r. 198–218/813–833)<sup>237</sup> who was not able to remove the inscriptions of ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān (r. 65–86/685–705) inside the Dome of the Rock. Only

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 130–133.

<sup>231</sup> KM, vol. 6, 150 (§ 30252–30257, subchapter on *man qāla jarridū l-Qurʾāna*) and vol. 4, 322 (§ 7944): *Qāla Bnu Masʿūdīn: jarridū l-Qurʾāna! yaqūlu: lā talbisū bihi mā laysa fihi!* (Ibn Masʿūd said: “Keep the Qurʾan intact as it originally was!” With this he meant: Do not insert in it what is not part of it!)

<sup>232</sup> ʿAbd ar-Razzāq, *Muṣannaf*, vol. 4, 322 (§ 7941): *ʿan Ibrāhīma annahu kāna yakrahu fī l-muṣḥafi n-naqṭa wa-t-taʿshīra*. (It has been transmitted by Ibrāhīm [an-Nakhaʿī, d. 96/715] that he objected to the punctuation of the final vowels and the separation of the Qurʾan into groups of ten verses). Ibid., 322 (§ 7942): *Anna Bna Masʿūdīn kāna yakrahu t-taʿshīra fī l-muṣḥafi*. (It has been transmitted that Ibn Masʿūd used to object to the separation of the Qurʾanic codices in groups of ten verses.)

<sup>233</sup> On this *minbar* see Meier, *Bausteine*, vol. 2, 672ff.: “Der Prediger auf der Kanzel (*minbar*).”

<sup>234</sup> *EP*<sup>2</sup>, vol. 7, 74b; also Meier, *Bausteine*, vol. 2, 673.

<sup>235</sup> See *EP*<sup>2</sup>, vol. 5, 1238–1239.

<sup>236</sup> Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, vol. 4, 558; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 5, pt. 10, 132; also Meier, *Bausteine*, vol. 2, 673–674.

<sup>237</sup> See *EP*<sup>2</sup>, vol. 6, 331–339.



the name of ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān was erased, while the original inscription of the date (72 AH/691 CE) remained.

As regards the *maṣāḥif* of al-Ḥajjāj, the Abbasid similarly attempted to replace them. Detailed information on the fate of the *maṣāḥif* of al-Ḥajjāj is contained in reports about the codices sent to Medina. In one such tradition, the third Abbasid caliph al-Mahdī (r. 158–169/775–785) permitted the sending of more *maṣāḥif* to Medina<sup>238</sup> after the *muṣḥaf* of al-Ḥajjāj had been replaced. It was not destroyed, but rather put in a box on the side. It is also likely that the other codices in the major cities were no longer in use.

Still, it is interesting to observe that all the measures that had been initiated were continued. For it is reported on the authority of Ibn ‘Aṭiyya (d. 546/1152) that the dividing of the Qur’an into ten tenths was done with approval of the Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mūn (r. 198–218/813–833).<sup>239</sup> Although the innovation of the *a’shār* was counted among the contributions of the *maṣāḥif* project, al-Ma’mūn aimed to give the impression that all Umayyad achievements were actually his.

### Summary

The *maṣāḥif* project with all its innovations and contributions was decisive for the consolidation of the ‘Uthmānic text and its implementation, not only in Basra and Kufa, but also in the other cultural centers of early Islam. Since the aim of destroying all pre-‘Uthmānic

<sup>238</sup> As-Samhūdī, *Wafā’*, vol. 2, 668 (on the authority of Ibn Zabāla, d. 199/814–5): *Fa-ba’atha l-Mahdiyyu bi-maṣāḥifa, lahā athmānun, fa-ju’ilat fī ṣundūqin wa-nuḥḥiya ‘anhā muṣḥafu l-Ḥajjāji, fa-wuḍi’at ‘an yasāri s-sāriyati wa-wuḍi’at manābiru lahā, kānat tuqra’u ‘alayhā, wa-ḥumila muṣḥafu l-Ḥajjāji fī ṣundūqihī, fa-ju’ila ‘inda l-iṣṭiwānati llati ‘an yamīni l-minbari*. (Al-Mahdī ordered the sending of Qur’anic codices which were divided into eight parts that were kept separately in a chest, while the codex of al-Ḥajjāj was put aside. They were placed on the left side of the pillar, and a *minbar* was prepared to facilitate its reading. And the Qur’anic codex of al-Ḥajjāj was put in another chest placed near the pillar on the right side of the *minbar*.) Also Ibn Shabba, *Tārīkh al-Madīna*, vol. 1, 7–8: *Fa-lammā stukhlifa l-Mahdiyyu, ba’atha bi-muṣḥafin ilā l-Madīnati; fa-huwa lladhī yuqra’u fihī l-yawma. wa-‘uzila muṣḥafu l-Ḥajjāji, fa-huwa fī ṣ-ṣundūqi lladhī dūna l-minbari*. (Al-Mahdī ordered the sending of a codex of the Qur’an to Medina when he became caliph [in 158/775]. This is the codex according to which we read today whereas the codex of al-Ḥajjāj was put aside [i.e., no longer in use]. It remains in the chest that is under the *minbar*.)

<sup>239</sup> MW, vol. 1, 68, ll. 3–4: *Ammā wad’u l-a’shāri fihī, fa-marra bi fī ba’ḍi t-tawārikhi anna l-Ma’mūna l-abbāsiyya amara bi-dhālīka. Wa-qīla: inna l-Ḥajjāja fa’ala dhālīka*. Also az-Zarkashī, *Burhān*, vol. 1, 251, ll. 3–4.



Qur'anic recensions was not completely achieved,<sup>240</sup> those varying recensions which had not, for whatever reason, been destroyed from the time of 'Uthmān onwards, were intended to be superseded by the second *maṣāḥif* project.

The measures taken to ensure this objective consisted of two steps. First of all, the search for and destruction of differing recensions was not limited to public property like in the case of 'Uthmān, but rather included both public and private property. Secondly, al-Ḥajjāj's request that the 'Uthmānic text in its new edition be publicly and regularly read in the mosques on Thursdays and Fridays was implemented. In this, al-Ḥajjāj had no precedent.

The results were so extensive that one could only wonder in disbelief if after the second *maṣāḥif* project any remnant of a differing recension were to come to light. Much evidence supports this. As for the fate of the codex of Ubayy b. Ka'b,<sup>241</sup> the well-known Qur'an reader Khalaf b. Hishām (d. 229/844) speaks about the existing codex with skepticism. He uses the common expression *yunsabu*, "is ascribed to": *Qāla Khalafun: wa-ka-dhālika ra'aytu fī muṣḥafin yunsabu ilā qirā'ati Ubayyi bni Ka'bin 'inda āli Anasi bni Mālikin.*<sup>242</sup> A similar tradition runs: *Qāla Khalafun: ra'aytu fī muṣḥafin yunsabu ilā qirā'ati Ubayyi bni Ka'bin [...].*<sup>243</sup> Regarding the codex of Ibn Mas'ūd (d. 32/652), Khalaf was similarly circumspect: *Qāla Khalafun: ra'aytu fī muṣḥafin yunsabu ilā qirā'ati Bni Mas'ūdin [...].*<sup>244</sup> In these traditions there is no longer any mention of previous codices. Rather, there is mention of a certain Qur'anic codex which supposedly *corresponds to* the alleged reading of Ubayy or Ibn Mas'ūd. In other words, codices containing older recensions ceased to exist at that time.

Astonishingly, the result of the second *maṣāḥif* project, the new edition of the Qur'anic text, was implemented so thoroughly (especially at the expense of the 'Uthmānic recension which was gradually falling out of use), that by the end of the second century AH any mention of an 'Uthmānic codex was strongly distrusted. The great Qur'an expert Abū 'Ubayd (d. 224/838), whose scholarship concen-

<sup>240</sup> *GdQ*, vol. 2, 117.

<sup>241</sup> The date of his death is uncertain: 19/640, 20/641, 23/644, 30/651, 32/653, 33/654, 35/655. See *MQK*, vol. 1, 31 (§ 3); *GhN*, vol. 1, 31–32 (§ 131).

<sup>242</sup> Ibn al-Anbārī, *Īḍāḥ*, vol. 1, 368.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 377 (Q 33:10.66–67).

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 371 (Q 76:15–16).

trated on Qur'anic codices, frequently said in such cases: *Ra'aytu anā fi lladhī yuqālu innahu l-imāmu muṣṣhafu 'Uthmāna*<sup>245</sup> or *ta'ammadtun-naẓara ilayhi fi lladhī yuqālu innahu l-imāmu muṣṣhafu 'Uthmāna*<sup>246</sup> and *ra'aytu fi lladhī yuqālu innahu l-imāmu muṣṣhafu 'Uthmāna bni 'Affāna*.<sup>247</sup>

### Abbreviations

<i>BdhT</i>	Firūzābādī, <i>Baṣā'ir dhawī t-tamyīz</i>
<i>BM</i>	Abū Ḥayyān al-Andalusī, <i>Al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ</i>
<i>DM</i>	as-Samīn al-Ḥalabī, <i>Ad-Durr al-maṣūn</i>
<i>EF</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>The Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> , new edition
<i>GAP</i>	Gätje, <i>Grundriß der arabischen Philologie</i>
<i>GAS</i>	Sezgin, <i>Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums</i>
<i>GdQ</i>	Nöldeke et al., <i>Geschichte des Qorāns</i>
<i>GhN</i>	Ibn al-Jazarī, <i>Ghāyat an-nihāya</i>
<i>IAD</i>	Ibn abī Dāwūd, <i>Kitāb al-maṣāḥif</i>
<i>IJ</i>	Ibn Jinnī, <i>Al-Muḥtasab</i>
<i>IKh</i>	Ibn Khālawayh, <i>Mukhtaṣar fi shawādh al-Qur'ān</i>
<i>KTK</i>	Ibn Sa'd, <i>Kitāb at-ṭabaqāt al-kabīr</i>
<i>KM</i>	Ibn abī Shayba, <i>Al-Kitāb al-muṣannaḥ</i>
<i>MQK</i>	adh-Dhahabī, <i>Ma'rifat al-qurrā' al-kibār</i>
<i>MW</i>	Ibn 'Aṭīyya, <i>Al-Muḥarrar al-wajīz</i>
<i>ShQ</i>	al-Kirmānī, <i>Shawādh al-qirā'āt</i>
<i>TI</i>	adh-Dhahabī, <i>Tārikh al-Islām</i> (Ṭ.= Ṭabaqa)
<i>TT</i>	Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, <i>Tahdhīb at-tahdhīb</i>

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 265 (Q 11:105).

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 295 (Q 38:3); also as-Sakhāwī, *Wasīla*, 440.

<sup>247</sup> Ibn al-Anbārī, *Īdāh*, vol. 1, 377 (Q 33:10/66–67); also as-Sakhāwī, *Wasīla*, 250. For more examples see again as-Sakhāwī, *Wasīla*, 115, 118 (Q 2:132), 134 (Q 5:54), 164 (Q 12:7), 168 (Q 21:88), 168 (Q 12:10), 178 (Q 23:72), 322 (Q 15:78, 26:176, 38:13, 50:14).

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