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IMPLAUSIBILITY AND PROBABILITY IN STUDIES OF
QUR'ANIC ORIGINS

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Abstract

On the assumption that an answer is only as good as the question posed, the lecture will address trends in the present state of studies of the origins and composition of the received Qur'anic text, by challenging questionable assumptions and exploring promising avenues for future research. It will consider certain physical—textual and codicological—features of the Paleo-Muslim Qur'anic text alongside a number of historical reports, in order to propose a model for the process of its constitution, composition, and circulation prior to the constitution of the literary canon. In so doing, the lecture will adopt a perspective more attentive to historical and sociolinguistic processes than purely philological considerations.

The lecture given on 22 November was in fact a shortened version of the following paper, but this longer version nevertheless preserves some of the flavour of oral delivery.

The thematic parameters of my lecture are implausibility and probability in the study of Qur'anic origins, within the constraints of which I propose to discuss some recent trends in Qur'anic studies—very much a vigorous growth area in recent years—in so far as, in my judgement, they contribute to the development and cumulative growth of explanatory models for Qur'anic genesis that might contribute to an historical and verisimilar understanding (hence: probability); or that might, for all the charm of their erudition, inhibit such an understanding (hence: implausibility). I propose to scrutinise two contrasting lines of research: one, in various distinctive ways ardent in its adherence to the unwarranted assumptions of certain interpretative traditions, at once scholarly and religious; and the other, the more promising one, unencumbered by the weight of such traditions. The former is especially salient today, at the convergence of postmodern scepticism and relativism on the one hand, and much older polemical motifs and scholarly habits on the other.

The divergence between these two lines of research became apparent with the *Methodenstreit* involving the reclamation, indeed the resurrection, after a long period of abeyance, of the views of Ignaz Goldziher and Josef Schacht concerning the reliability of Arabic literary sources for Paleo-Islam, heavily overlaid, in the case of Goldziher, by the concerns of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*—of which this great scholar's *Der Mythos bei den Hebraeern* (1876) and his polemical pamphlet against Ernest Renan (Goldziher 2000) are excellent examples. The *Wissenschaft des Judentums* sought—among other things and in terms of conditions prevailing in the nineteenth century—both apologetically to Aryanise the ancient Hebrews by construing their religion in a rationalising and moralising, incipiently disenchanting way, as an ethical template of universal salience very much in the spirit of Protestantism; and at the same time to establish a fit with Islam by construing this latter, in its origins, as an outgrowth of a perennial wisdom best encapsulated by Judaism. In this regard, the Qur'an and the Muslim religion in general are presented as an outgrowth, ultimately epigonic, of the Jewish religion as expressed in the Bible and rabbinical literature; the work of Abraham Geiger is emblematic in this respect. Needless to say, this matter was energetically contested by scholars seeking another origin, as the New Testament, apocryphal Christian texts, and much else vied for interpretative predominance, and had done so since St. John of Damascus's (d. 749) contention that Islam be the hundredth Christian heresy.

Returning to the *Methodenstreit*: this arose following the works of Cook, Crone, and Wansbrough, the importance of whose work lies in that they made us all aware that Islam could not have come out of nothing, and that it was best seen in terms of movements and texts in many different places and languages already in place. What they unleashed was the conjugation of much older motifs, with a return to the more elementary forms of historical criticism of texts prevalent in the nineteenth century. This was a search for origins understood according to the botanical metaphor of roots and branches: first in Linnean taxonomy, later, in the early part of the nineteenth century, transposed to languages and language families, to the filiations of texts and the stemmae of manuscripts, to ideas and to words understood in terms of etymologies rather than the pragmatics of usage. This is at once a classification and a genetic model in which the earlier elements are seen to generate the later without mediation, constituting their genetic programme and primary mode of explanation.

The conjunction of genetic and diffusionist explanations and tradition criticism yielded an apparently unbounded hyperscepticism with regard to the reliability of Arabic literary sources, including the Qur'an as an historical source—the complement being that non-Arabic sources (for reasons still obscure to me) are to be treated differently as to reliability and explanatory power. I need to conclude what might appear now as a digression

by stating that—though I am personally, by temperament and disposition, partial to scepticism—having looked at the sources quite closely and deliberately, I find that I am now more in sympathy with the claim of Johann Fück long ago, with reference to Schacht, that such was in fact rather *Zweifelsucht* (Fück 1953, 199) with overtones of wilfulness and addiction, than historical research; or, to quote van Ess, a search for a vicarious *Fortschrittspathos* (Van Ess 1989, 391).

More specifically: how does what I have said so far about the *Methodenstreit* relate to Qur'anic studies, especially to studies of the formation of the Qur'anic text as we have it? I think it is simply this, that we have a situation in which there are colleagues who hold uncompromisingly to scepticism and hyperscepticism, and others who hold that the undoubted difficulty of source material—including its final redaction at some temporal remove from the occurrences narrated and related within them—is a common and by no means intractable occurrence in historical research. Studies of Byzantium in the seventh century, for instance, are legion and in an advanced state of development, although the sources that we have are a couple of centuries later. Ultimately, historical sources need to be judged on intrinsic criteria, plausibility, and verisimilitude relating to what they seek to establish; rather than hold up one's arms in despair and adopt a boundless hermeneutic of suspicion, one might rather work from a reasonable judgement of overall verisimilitude in a number of well-defined domains, and then pursue the cumulative compulsion of detail confirmed directly or indirectly. I do appreciate that the existence of the world outside the text may present a serious problem to colleagues trained in a particular style of philology; historians, for their part, are usually enjoined to seek out and deal with difficult sources productively.

I hold the view that scholars who generally contest the utility of Arabic sources by scoffing at them in effect create a *tabula rasa*, which they proceed to fill in with all manner of unlikely conjectures with little attention to the crucial matter of evidence. From asserting that Arabic literary sources are not self-evidently veracious, an imperceptible leap is made to the assertion of all matters that might fill in the gap thus opened—often arbitrary, on occasion flippant. Such reconstructions seeking out filiation with distant origins effectively cause Paleo-Muslim Arabia, and Arabia in the century prior to Paleo-Islam, to recede into the dust of the desert blown by the winds of reverie, at the end of which lies '*alā qābi qawsayni aw adnā*, the Holy Grail of intertextual origins. Such is the certainty and determination with which some of our colleagues partial to intertextuality (which, I must say, does have the occasional salience), that they bring to mind the perplexity of Alice in Wonderland, where she said, "Things should not be as they seem, and turn out to be as they cannot possibly be."

There is of course some very estimable work on intertextual possibilities. But determined concentration on this matter hardly seems to address the necessity of identifying one possible text over another, thereby begging the question of the intertexts of intertexts. What in fact transpires is that hyperscepticism acts within an institutional habitus—a sprightly, in-group '*asabiyya* which divides itself off, as a scholarly habitus acting almost by automatic reflex, by claims to a wisdom superior to that of the credulous outsiders; after all, doubt without end is no longer doubt, but rather robust conviction. Prioritising intertextuality analytically and interpretatively in effect de-contextualises Qur'anic emergence and extrudes history from the picture. It is thus that—and I beg your indulgence for the use of another literary reference—we have scenarios for the emergence of Paleo-Islam, and of the Qur'an as well, seeming to lend credence to the situation wonderfully described by Paul Valéry as he spoke of "an Orient of the mind": "a state between waking and dreaming where there is no logic nor chronology to keep the elements of our memory from attracting each other in their natural combination" (Valéry 1962, 381).

Let me be more specific as I take up these two sides of the *Methodenstreit* in turn, starting with the hypersceptical. Antecedence as a preferential form of explanation is a common academic topos, going far beyond the confines of Qur'anic studies where such habits seem to persist. Think, for instance, of Aramaeism in studies of Arabic or Ancient North Arabian epigraphy: there we find that in reading the word for “father of” certain alphabetical strokes in inscriptions rendering the letter “n” are, for no intrinsic reason, read as “r”, thus reading *bar* by default instead of reading *bin*, including the famous epitaph of Mar' al-Qays at al-Namāra in southern Syria, dated 328 and written in Nabatean script, now at the Louvre. This is a default reading which stretches to other famous inscriptions at Ḥarrān, Zabad and Jabal Usays (*RCEA*, # 1; Robin 2006, 331–32; Robin and Gorea 2002, 508)—this despite the fact that *bin* is old, common in Safaitic (Harding 1971, 118–22), in a region not far from al-Namāra. Similarly, in the large published collections of Semitic epigraphy, we often find that old forms of Arabic written in a variety of alphabets appear alongside Hebrew—rather than Arabic.

This unnecessary transposition of explanatory registers essentially acts as an interpretative template, in the sense that, whatever denials courtesy may be seen to require, chronological priority is compounded with normative priority operating as an interpretative key, as is the case with transliterating Arabic into Hebrew. As contrasts between the normative and the derivative are no longer presentable in these times given to inclusiveness, intertextuality comes in to perform this contrastive role. Analogously, in Qur'anic studies, what are now called intertexts are in effect regarded to be primary and therefore the proper terms of interpretation.

Thus, for instance, one scholar holds, in the confines of a single article, that early Islam as expressed in the Qur'an (and this is a questionable identification) carries a Nazarean, Judaeo-Christian tradition to which another common ground, one between Manicheism and Elkasaism, was relevant; to which might be added a dash of prophecy identified as a Pseudo-Clementine notion (de Blois 2004; 32, 34 f., 44 ff.). This multiplication of explanatory templates is not quite unusual. In conceptual terms, it transposes a tradition or notion found in the Qur'an to a register of interpretation that belongs to another order and context. In historical terms, content with chronological precedence, this approach seeks to identify incongruous lines of linear filiation that have not been historically justified, in preference to better grounded antecedents and conditions contemporary with the Qur'an itself and reflected in the Qur'anic text.

As with traditions and notions, so also with single words and phrases. In the case of the latter, the general approach has been one which regards cognates in other languages, without further consideration, to be origins – and therefore interpretative keys – for Arabic words, thus operating with the “etymological fallacy” that has long been cleared away from studies of the Old Testament (Barr 1961; 100 ff., 158 and ch. 6, passim) and one that Wansbrough (1986, 203) described as a “seductive pastime”—one that seems to efface the fact that the infinitive in language is different to the infinitive in lexicographical metalanguages, where it is rather conventional than morphological (Benveniste 1997, 220).

Thus also, with reference to single words, the Qur'anic *al-ṣamad*, on which there is an ample literature (Notably: Ambros 1986; Köbert, 1961; Rosenthal 2002; Rubin 1981; Schedl 1981; van Ess 1989, 4). This is an Arabic word that has no attested cognates in other Semitic languages (Zammit 2002, 258). According to Muslim exegesis, the term conveys, among other things, solidity and compactness but also the sense of heights, or a combination of the preceding semantic fields—a meaning so well established from an early date that it was used by the earliest Greek translations of the Qur'an (Simelidis 2011). Much the same semantic field is conveyed by the Hebrew *tsur*, used in the OT with reference to God, to Abraham, to a great mountain, possibly also used as a theonym just as it had been with

reference to Enlil and Ashūr (Gruenwald 1996). Yet, all uncertainties notwithstanding—including the fact that *tsur* makes a Qur'anic appearance as *tūr* along with olives and figs—there have been elaborately contrived attempts to derive the Qur'anic use of this word from the biblical notion of a rock where worshippers might obtain succour, based on Hebrew usage in Psalms and in Arabic Targums whose existence is entirely hypothetical (Schedl 1981, 2-4; Köbert 1961, 204). Further still, one interpretation has it that the Dome of the Rock might well be identified as the specific reference of this Qur'anic term, with the consequence that *Sūrah* 112, where this term occurs, needs to be seen as having arisen in conjunction with the construction of this structure (Cuypers 2004; 168–69, 171–74).

This is of course all conjectural, and unnecessarily so, as there are more proximate and attestable contexts that allow us to come to a more plausible understanding of *al-ṣamad*. It was used as a pagan epiclesis and a term of exultation, like *Allāhumma*, by the B. Asad appealing to their deities (Kister 1980, # 35), and it occurs in Arabic poetry—a matter already noted in the seventeenth century by Edward Pococke (1650, 108–9). Its use in the context of heave offerings allotted to polytheistic deities is attested (al-Suyūṭī 1990, 3:47); and, quite straightforwardly, it had been used in the Qur'an as a transferred name, *ism manqūl*, as has long been recognised (Khan 1994, 215; Abū Raḥma 1987, 119–21); it may also have had an appropriate rhyming function.

Similarly, we have the word *al-furqān*. This is quite commonly thought to be derived from the Jewish Aramaic *purqān* or the Syriac *purqānā* (for instance, Donner 2007, 286 ff.; Horowitz 1925, 216 ff.; Jeffery 1938, 225). In this context, it seems an unnecessary contrivance likewise to mystify and over-interpret the morphologically related term *al-Fāriq*, applied to 'Umar I and others, in light of certain Syriac associations of the term, and to endow it with mysterious soteriological association, (Bashear 1990; 48 ff., 57; see also de Prémare 2009, 180 ff.). The term is related to an act of separation (Bell 1968, 101; Watt 1970, 139 f., 145 ff.; noted also by Jeffery 1938, ad loc.) and is associated with the aftermath of the battle of Badr. Commenting on the meaning attributed to *al-furqān* with reference to Geiger's partiality to Aramaic origins, Heinrich Fleischer (1841; 102, 104, 134) had already in 1841 deemed it unlikely that a language—Arabic, like others—would accept new morphological forms with odd meanings when a perfectly straightforward sense was available already. In short, like many other Arabic words subject to unnecessary conjecture, *furqān* is no more Syriac than the English word “origin” is Latin (cf. Griffith 1999). The use of Syriacisms and other instances of what linguists call lexical contamination is of course unsurprising and has been fully recognised by scholars in the classical period. Fifty-four percent of the Arabic lexicon is shared with Aramaic (Zammit 2002, 25). Syriac cognates are used by the Qur'an in an Arabic matrix. One example of a demonstrable lexical contamination is *al-fulk*, occurring some two dozen times in the Qur'an, meaning a ship. This derives ultimately from the Greek *efólkion*, referring to a small boat towed to a ship in mariners' jargon of the Red Sea region, and appearing also in *Ḥijāzī* (but not in other) poetry. The implication would be that it was in dialectal use (Donner 1998, 57 ff.), which is perhaps unsurprising as the Quraysh had originated from a region close to the Red Sea coast.

A few words are called for on one postulate that is well-received as fact, or at least probability, in some quarters. This is the postulation of a Syriac lectionary rendered into an uncertain and in-between linguistic register, which is the Qur'an. Much has been said about this, which I shall not repeat; rather I shall confine myself to the following remark. If this line of research is to be pursued profitably or to be persuasive, the matter needs to be related to its generic sociolinguistic type. This is the well-known and amply studied phenomenon called pidginisation. In this case, one would have expected relevant research to use the technical desiderata of this kind of analysis. One would expect here more than uncontrolled philological exercises, with attention paid primarily to pidginisation as a sociolinguistic

phenomenon, leading on to the formation of more stable languages called creole generically (in this case, Arabic creole). This is not a textual phenomenon. Pidginisation is a process of linguistic accommodation in which a language is simplified for purposes of communication with outsiders, and simplified through a number of standard, well-established linguistic features: grammatical (fixed word order, little or no inflection, a simple system of negation, no irregular nouns or verbs, no passive forms), and lexical (a restricted vocabulary in which words become multifunctional by dilated semantic fields). In addition, one encounters in this phenomenon the lexical rather than grammatical expression of tenses, the absence of grammatical expressions of gender, number, tense, and mood.

None of this obtains in the Qur'an. Reconstitution of meaning in terms of etymologies is virtually all that remains. Ultimately, we have a procedure that compels language to operate in a way that is at variance with the nature of language. Yet such unnecessary contrivances proceed with an automatic air of self-evidence, in line with an institutional habitus of interpretation against the background of a specific kind of philological training, described a few moments ago. It is interesting to note that one often encounters the interpretative use of Syriacisms as an initiation into a higher order of reality, uncovering obscure beginnings, sometimes almost as a cloak-and-dagger operation complete with pseudonyms, studied reticence, the intimation of adventures in dusty faraway places—all of which seems to lend the air of a sectarian milieu. A certain air of compact, of invisible cabals composing the Qur'an surreptitiously, fabricating histories while obliterating others, or at least of an ingenuous collective, seems to work as a communal reinforcement mechanism for the sectarian milieu where scenarios of sectarian milieux are cultivated—curiously, leaving no trace in St. John of Damascus, the Maronite Chronicle, the pseudonymous 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī, and others, or in the Arabic literary sources, which do retain plentiful unedifying material.

Be that as it may, let me go back to *Sūrah* 112, *al-ikhhlāṣ*, and the statement in the first verse: *qul huwa l-lāhu aḥad* preceding *allāhu ṣ-ṣamad*. It has been held that this is a free translation of Deut 6:4 (Neuwirth 2010, 202) with *qul* instead of “Hear, O Israel” (taken, it is alleged, from Targumic Syrian versions of Ps 18:32 = 2 Sam 22:32), and *Allāh* in place of the Tetragrammaton (Schedl 1981, 2). Why this should be the case remains a mystery to me. In line with many statements affirming deliberate allusions for a public familiar with them (for instance: Sinai 2012, 72-3; Reynolds 2010, 232 ff.), one scholar would have it that Muhammad must have known this exclamation (Köbert 1961, 205). How we come to know this is unclear, and why it is that, if he did, he will have used it by default to assert the uniqueness of his Deity, is equally unclear. Why the Bible is used in preference to, say, the Pseudo-Clementine Homily (16.7.9) declaring God to be one and that, apart from him, there is no God (*heis estin ho theós, kai pln autou ouk estin theós*), I do not know; but the matter does bring out the question of the intertexts of intertexts and the indeterminacy of attribution. As a default explanation, one can only think of the sheer will to make certain types of assertion.

Yet such proclamations are the commonest of statements in all worship, including polytheistic worship. They are well attested in Arab *talbiya* invocations and elsewhere. These, far from indicating an incipient monolatry or even, according to some, monotheism, let alone using biblical quotations, belong to a generic, intensified, and superlative affirmation of devotion, used for a variety of deities and for any deity in a way that was context-dependent and one that has analogues in, for instance, acclamations of *heis theos* and other epithetic names in many parts of the polytheistic late Roman empire (Belayche 2010; 147 ff., 160 f.; Chanotis 2010; 127, 128, and 21 ff.). This affirmation of oneness and uniqueness of one Deity among many was a relative superlative in a setting of social and divine competition, and might be assumed to have carried validity at particular ritual

moments only. Addressing a deity as one in a situation such as this, as *heis*, *wāḥid* or *aḥad*, employs the term in relation to number at the concrete point of worship, not as a definite article that might have a theological interpretation. Similarly, the pre-Muhammadan epicleris Allāhumma was a generic appellation in the vocative mode, as al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad noted (Sībawayh 1966–1977, 2:196). It is a cultic invocation applied to a multiplicity of deities and has no necessary theological presuppositions or implications (Al-Azmeh 2013, chs. 2, 4, and 5). The connection of the imperative *qul* with the Hebrew Bible is not attested, and an unnecessary assumption.

And indeed, many scholars who work with this mode of interpretation aver that the historical scenarios they propose are hypothetical: hypotheses are without doubt necessary instruments for interpretation, but would not hold if they were implausible. Before concluding the argument for implausibility I have been proposing, I will refer to a final body of writing relating to the nativity of Mary. There has been some useful philological detective work on Mary in the Qur'an, seeking to reconstruct the sequence of Qur'anic statements that together form what we identify today as a pericope, and to identify interpolations (Dye 2012; Pohlmann 2012, §§ 6.3.1 ff.; van der Velden 2007).

I cannot dwell upon the philology involved in some very interesting recent studies of the nativities of Mary and Jesus, and of the relation between the Qur'an and the Gospel of Mark or of the various Protoevangelia—and indeed of Armenian and Georgian texts (Dye 2012, 95 ff.) that some deem to be relevant. This is, moreover, not strictly relevant to my argument. What I should like to comment upon briefly before I conclude the present argument concerns the circumstances under which the relevant Qur'anic pericopes were composed. It has been proposed, with a number of individual variations, that the veneration of Mary in the Qur'an is the result not only of interpolations in the process of further composition and redaction, but that such interpolation emerged from scribal or even monastic milieus at some remove from the original Qur'an, whatever this might be—but always on the assumption that we have an Ur-text which had undergone changes before it reached us. One scholar proposed a “text of convergence” between Christians and Muslims, with the possibility of a textual prototype, a *Vorlage*, or perhaps of liturgical traditions, ultimately producing a *confessio arabica* based upon knowledge and texts employing the procedures of Syriac exegesis (van der Velden 2007; 164, 166, 173, 175, 194 ff.). Correlatively, and building upon the idea of a text of convergence, it has been proposed that Marian texts in the Qur'an emerged from a milieu involved in popular Marian piety associated with homiletic, liturgical and popular traditions connected with the church of the Káthisma or the Seat of the God-Bearing Theotokos near Bethlehem, recently excavated (in general: Avner 2010). Further, relevant Qur'anic texts, it is proposed as a hypothesis (consigned to a footnote), were composed after the Arab conquest of Palestine, with 692 as the *terminus ad quem* (Dye 2012; 84, 90, 116, 117 n. 132), without excluding the possibility that the author belonged to “Muhammad's secretariat” (ibid., 113). Whatever the truth of the matter, what we have, it is suggested, is the use of the Syriac genre of *sogitha*, indeed, the composition of a Qur'anic *sogitha* (ibid., 64) or alternatively the work of literati with specialist knowledge of biblical and para-biblical literature, probably Jewish converts (Pohlmann 2012; 141, 143).

There is an extreme uncertainty pertaining to the relation between original and derivative texts proposed (Neuwirth 2010, 484 ff.), and to the extremely involved textual situation, if texts are indeed to be indicated, especially as there is evidence that Greek and other Marian texts might themselves have a Qur'anic Arabic *Vorlage* (Horn 2006; idem. 2007; idem. 2008)—ultimately, the Qur'an is a surer guide to religious currents of its time than other sources are guides to understanding the Qur'an. Quite apart from this, what I should like to highlight is that we have here an excellent case illustrating points made earlier: the willingness, indeed the will *ab initio* to allow things to fall into natural combinations.

These natural combinations devolve to a firm belief that the key to understanding and interpreting Qur'anic composition lies not so much in the Arabian *Sitz im Leben*, but in what has been called vaguely and indistinctly the Near Eastern “theological landscape,” (Crone 2011, 326, and passim), the “larger literary tradition,” (Reynolds 2010, 24), and so forth—ultimately, we have the question of biblical, apocryphal, midrashic, exegetical, and other origins of the Qur'an as an interpretative template with normative priority, and as such, explanatory power.

Yet on closer and freer consideration the question seems not to be one of intertextuality, but of Qur'anic biblicism broadly conceived, which is of course an undeniable but distinct issue that is more interesting than what might or might not emerge from intertextual study. We have a body of Qur'anic allusions to the Bible and related literature, but only one specific echo seems to be attested, at Q 7:40 echoing Mark 10:25, with reference to a camel passing through the eye of a needle, which might well be a common proverb used equally in both texts. We do have motifemic use in the Qur'an of texts, culled from what one colleague described as a freewheeling “*savoir sauvage*” deriving from Judaeo-Christian sources, intertexts separated by significant linguistic and chronological gaps, but subordinated to a consistent Qur'anic outlook (Sinai 2011; 414, 397). We have assonances, not literary dependence; affinities, similarities encompassing analogy, transference and metonymy, not a subtext. Biblical themes have little self-sufficiency in the Qur'an, which deploys both biblical and polytheistic doxological and mythemetic motifs and topoi—narrative, propositional and figural—as secondary narratives with an importance and incidence that increased in frequency and extent with the chronological development of the text to a measure that is still to be determined. This rendered, for example, retribution pericopes referring to the annihilation of peoples and nations as a result of betylic wrath (let us remember that the destruction of Thamūd resulted from the cultic infraction of hamstringing a consecrated camel), with typical Arabian destruction scenarios delivered by the yet pagan *nadhur*, attested in poetry and epigraphy, then moving from annihilation of specific peoples in this world to the annihilation of time and of mortal humanity altogether (Al-Azmeh 2013, ch. 5). Otherwise, these motifs and topoi are dispersed and fragmented, far removed from the semantic motivations they may have had in biblical and para-biblical material (cf. Chabbi 1997; 214, 540–41 n. 310). Whatever the case, use of the Bible is not in itself necessarily biblical reference.

Two final remarks on biblicising intertexts. First, there is a serious problem of comparability arising, and this has hardly been addressed, except in a recent discussion in somewhat systematic compass (Neuwirth 2010, 567 ff.); we have typologies, neologisms, exempla, obscurities and mystifications associated with vatic language, and possibly allegories too—although I am not persuaded that Q 100:1-59 (*wa'l 'ādiyāti ḍabḥāl fa'l-mūriyāti qadhā/ fa'l-mughūrāti ṣubḥā*) recalls the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Neuwirth 2010, 581–83). But ultimately, the undeniable allure of broad erudition seems to terminate with superficial description and the listing of alleged concordances (classically, in purest form: Ahrens 1930, with some discursive mitigation; Speyer 1971) and simplifies the Arabic text unduly by arguments that are, in the final analysis, circular. But to propose that the Meccan *sūrah*s might best be interpreted as Psalmic, and the Medinan are midrashic, does little to get us closer to understanding Qur'anic composition.

The Qur'an needs no defensive denial that it did not arise “from the desert” (Sinai 2012, 37), for it did “arise from the desert,” if by desert we mean Western Arabia. Clearly, scholarly preference for the more distant over the more proximate is not particularly helpful. If intertextuality is to be demonstrated, we shall need a definite impression of texts in circulation and an idea of the agents and networks of such circulation. Little can be said about this except to note that available theologies in the relevant time and place were at best

minimal, indeterminate as to their very porous boundaries. Recent research on Syria—and one may be able to extrapolate Arabian conditions as well— show that Christianity was insufficiently catechised, and underserved by clergy at a time of serious manpower crisis on the part of the various churches. The faith was in all probability confined to infant baptism and worship of Jesus and of the Cross and perhaps a sense of distinctiveness as well, of being neither Jews nor polytheists. Holy men were miracle makers, and the distant bishops could do little to enforce Christological preferences (Tannous 2010; 389 ff., 402 ff.). That crosses and images of Jesus or of Madonna and Child might be incorporated into polytheistic temples, including the Ka'ba at Mecca or the Ka'ba of Najrān, as they still are in India today, is telling of the nature of this Christianity (Al-Azmeh 2013, ch. 4). Our knowledge of Judaism at the time is especially meagre.

The second point has two aspects. One is that the approach I am discussing is much too bookish, presuming that the authors of the Qur'an sat in a seminar room but failed to footnote their text, to the supply of which our colleagues apply themselves with exemplary energy; the image of the solitary scribbler arising from both romantic and formalist studies of literature has an enduring appeal (see Long 1993). The other is the presumption that the Qur'an is a work of theology: though it contains theologemes and taxonomies of the preternatural, such a view seems to misconstrue the Qur'an as it was being composed. It was primarily a Beatific Audition and only collaterally and inconsistently a book of instruction and indoctrination. This approach also misconstrues the impulses of Paleo-Islam which was, above all, a cult for a new deity with doctrinal elements supplied here and there in specific settings, and only with the fulness of time acquiring the exegetical and philosophical character of a theology with many possible interpretative directions. Only later were we to have the distinction between the Qur'an as a literary phenomenon and as a scriptural phenomenon, corresponding to the distinction between a study Bible and a liturgical Bible (Stern 2003, 231 f.; and cf. Brock 2006, 14 f.). The Protestant idea of a scripture being a stand-alone object containing a *Leittheologie* (most notably, Grimme, Watt and Neuwirth) and a doctrinal *Primärbotschaft* of radical moralism and eschatology (Sinai 2012, 78 ff.), is anachronistic and does not apply. That Qur'anic biblicisms exist can, but should not, in my view, be taken as the opportunity to overcode the text.

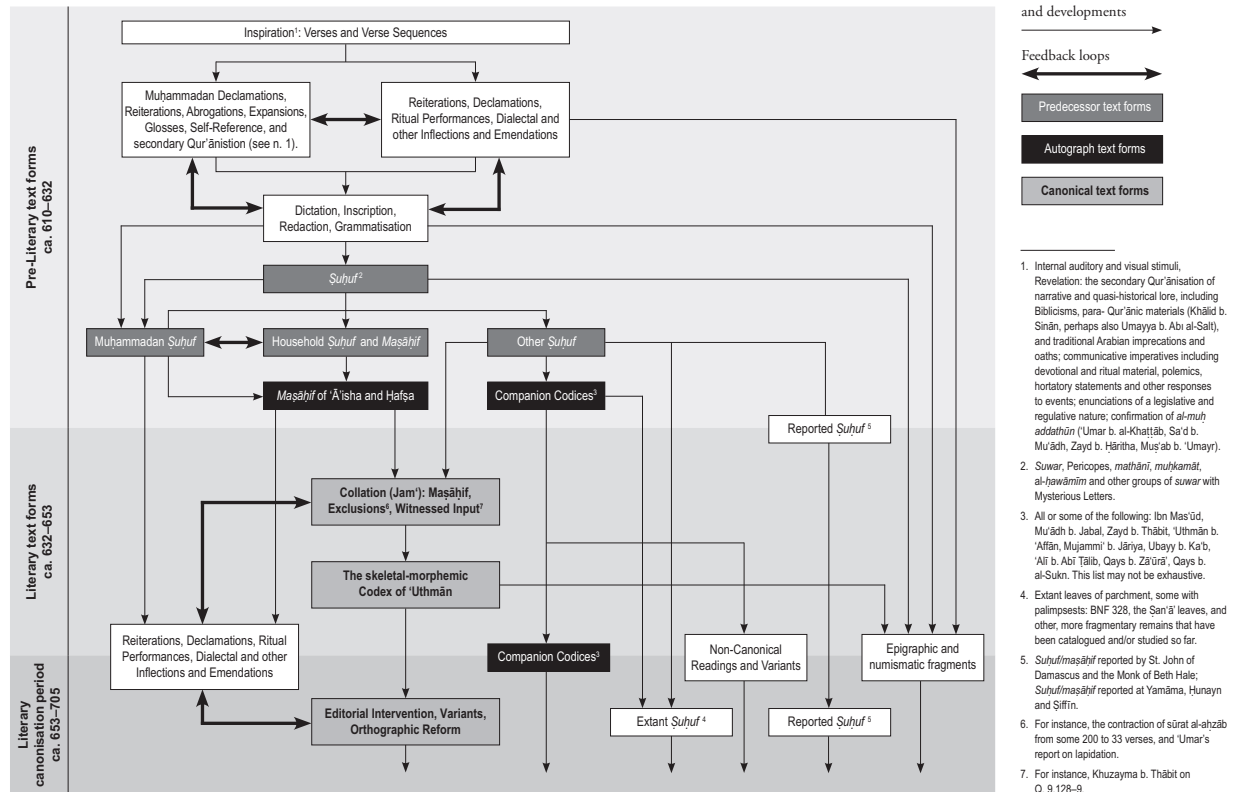
In the little time left, I wish to propose that we reset the terms of the discussion and the research agendas in a way that might maximise the advantages of attainable matters and mitigate the diversion of energies to less productive ends. I shall now move on to a consideration of probability in the study of Qur'anic origins, by which I mean the actual composition and redaction of the text, without directly addressing the multitude of para-Qur'anic material, written and oral, which includes homiletic and apotropaic texts and proclamations, dispersed wisdom literature, litanies reflecting polytheistic Arab worship, poems of Umayya b. Abī s-Salt and others, the Bible, and much else. Most derive from generic modules of locutions, images, metaphors, sentiments, expressions of subordination and of awe before the terrible sublime, expressions of devotion, exultation and praise, contrition and self-abasement, and turns of phrase which found their way into Bible and Qur'an, but which abound most plentifully in devotions overall. Their occurrence in the Psalms is one among many instantiations, and there seems to be no compelling need to refer devotional commonplaces to a specific text. What I should like to emphasise is the *Sitz im Leben* of Qur'anic composition, which cannot be accounted for by general and vague appeal to “communicative settings” and so forth. Communicative settings there certainly were, intensely. But these are, in my view, best accessed through the Qur'an itself, and primarily through physical features of the received text in the context of sociolinguistic plausibility, these being indices of the process of composition: thus, with stress on process and on concrete actors, not of a free-floating *savoir sauvage* stress, not primarily on philology, but

on history—history of religions and historical ethnography, especially the ethnography of religious language, written as well as oral.

Codicological and paleographic work on variants—by (in alphabetical order) Déroche, Fedeli, Hilali, E. Puin, Sadeghi and Goudarzi, and Small—is most revealing. To my mind, forensic inference from small variations, emendations, corrections, para-textual notations and other changes is most enlightening and suggests elements crucial to reconstituting textual development and the process of Qur'anic redaction—and I defer to Carlo Ginzburg for the value and use of clues in historical research. This research is closely correlated to material in the literary sources (see, most recently, Comerro 2012) and to the physical features of the Qur'anic text as we have it, particularly the distribution of textual material within it. Closely related to this is the chronology of the text, where we find useful recent refinements to the scheme of Nöldeke (Sinai 2012; Sadeghi 2011). But I must say that these improvements retain far too much of the great man's linear schematism and do not account concretely for the *Sitz im Leben* of the various verses of the Book as had been done, with limitations characteristic of his own time, by the much underused and underestimated Richard Bell in his Commentary and his Translation. Ultimately, these new insights do not account sufficiently for the way in which different styles, motifs, tonalities, and genres; and the feedbacks between them. are interspersed throughout the history of the Qur'an by way of what I shall term “reiteration.”

I shall now suggest a schematic representation of the process of Qur'anic composition based on a number of assumptions, arising from the physical features of the received text itself, complemented and given more concrete shape by Arabic literary sources (Al-Azmeh 2013, ch. 7).

Model for the Composition of the Paleo-Muslim Qur'an



(Image © A. Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.)

First, the Qur'anic canon has no ultimate Ur-text, but that it is a collation, *jam'*, of previous collations implemented during the reign of 'Uthmān. There were prototypes in varying degrees of amplitude, inscribed upon various types of material (mainly parchment) or embedded in imperfect memories. The model of a stenographic Qur'an as a *Vorlage*, recorded in chronological succession and as a serial composition (if differently arranged in the canon) as it was revealed, to which work of various kinds, various textual transformations—self-reference, amplification, abrogation, commentary and so forth—were put in subsequently, the model used both as an assumption and as an interpretative template, does not hold. What might originally have been early Meccan could well have entered the canon under a Medinan signature, and I am not only speaking of *Einschube* or interpolations, but of a constitutive and structural feature of the text's constitution. The final redaction of the *vox dei* cannot be seen as having invariably been that of Muhammad's original *ipsissima verba*. The relation between the two was the result of all manners of transfer and collation between oral performances and entextualisation, related by multiple and successive feedback loops.

Second, the Qur'an was composed and recomposed through multiple processes of reiteration. These included reformulations (paraphrase, correction, emendation, addition, interpolation, expansion and dialectal or formalising turns). They also included recourse to

ready enunciative patterns: dialectal, sociolectal (including oaths, *saj'* and litanies), idiolectal, stock phrases, allusions, and references. They involved recall, modification, amplification, adaptation, self-reflection and self-reference (starting from the point where the Book swears by itself), and abrogation. There has been some important work on this recently (Sinai 2009), and these are all instances of reiterating vatic pronouncements or reported vatic pronouncements of Muhammad, or confirmations by him, with divine sanction, of the sayings of others (*al-muḥaddathūn*, including 'Umar), performed by Muhammad and by many others, in a variety of settings and at many removes from the original pronouncements, and in the media both of oral delivery and of written storage. The relation between oral and written is such that the one cannot be seen apart from the other: related by the feedback-loops of reiteration, entextualisation, oral performance, secondary, tertiary, and further performances and entextualisations, all productive of variation, dialectisation, formalisation and grammatisation, updating, references to contemporary affairs, self-reflection and reference, and a whole array of other changes and textual developments. There need not be an assumption of deliberate, centrally-directed theological development here; there is much contradiction remaining in narratives, including narratives of the Creation. Different layers of the text reflect linguistic change as well as various usages (including some relating to *i'rāb*), scribal conventions and inventions that have become clearer from recent codicological studies, and erasures and orthographic corrections – two have been commented upon recently (*kalāla* and *tuwā*—Powers 2009, *passim*; and Fedeli 2012, 5 f.), and more will undoubtedly be discovered. But there is little need to draw melodramatic and over-interpretative conclusions.

Third, the atom of Qur'anic entextualisation is the verse, but arrangements into textual group, eventually chapters, understood as ongoing compositions into which newer revelations were inserted, is likely to have been very early—indeed, contemporary with Muhammad. The fragmentary nature of the material—which also reflects the scarcity of writing material—is indicated by a number of morphological features, such as pronominal shifts; this physical feature makes it difficult to distinguish prophetic from divine pronouncements, and this is a common feature of prophetic speech overall, including that reported in the OT (Westermann 1967, 94 f.). The Qur'an has quite a number of implied speakers and hearers; on evidence of one palimpsest studied recently, editorial intervention in this respect is indicated where the third person plural is substituted for the second (Fedeli 2012, 413 ff.): all these are instances of reiterating vatic pronouncements or reported vatic pronouncements of Muhammad, or confirmations by him with divine sanction of the sayings of others (*al-muḥaddathūn*), performed by Muhammad and by many others, in a variety of settings and media and at many removes from the original pronouncements.

Further, we have, as another physical index displayed in the arrangement of textual material in the Qur'an, the frequent occurrence of parataxis between the sequences of verses, and parataxis belongs to the genre of lists and is in this regard a phenomenon associated with writing (Mainberger 2003; 5 f., 108, 178 ff.). Rhyming was inserted between groups of verses connected by the collation of groups of verses related by the simple textual sequence of parataxis which is thereby modulated: this produces an acoustic and tonal continuity in performance. This kind of rhyming, with use of what came to be called *fāṣila* and *waqf* (Spitaler, *Verzählung*). This indicates reiteration at a number of removes from the initial enunciation. With few exceptions, the end-product was a collation of previous collations of texts, and whatever evidence we have for editorial intervention reflects an attempt to lend some form of enunciative continuity to textual elements which are not often in themselves serially or otherwise textually continuous. Although an argument for a certain compositional structuring of longer chapters might be made, the edition of the Qur'an was evidently very conservative, and the detection of chiasmic or other structures, including the elaboration of

what one scholar described as a symphonic structure of polymetric chapters (Crapon 1981, 486 f.), are difficult to sustain.

Fourth, from sequences of verses and chapters were composed groups of chapters that were circulated, in writing and by oral performance, in a variety of settings (Renan, hyperbolically but most perceptively called parts of the Qur'an Muhammad's 'ordres du jour' (Renan 1897, 174), including the devotional setting of prayer as it developed. Generically referred to as *ṣuḥuf*, it would be anachronistic to suggest that the integral text of the Qur'an was in circulation to any significant extent; well into Umayyad times, integral codices were rare. The Qur'an was rather circulated in a variety of fragments and parts, written but also memorised to the extent and in the way possible. It is well worth considering closely a number of terms that occur in the Qur'an itself and elsewhere: *mumtaḥināt*, *musabbihāt*, *al-sab' al-ṭiwāl*, *al-mathānī*, *umm al-kitāb*, and, of course, *suwar*, avoiding anachronistic interpretations in light of meanings and interpretations acquired later, in order to investigate whether these were not in fact names given to separate sections of what later became the Muslim canon, as they circulated initially. Groups of chapters starting with the so-called Mysterious Letters, the *muqatta'āt* or *fawātih*, were such, the indicative sign of this being that they are placed as groups within the canonical collation in a way that broke the order of length, the *ḥawāmim* being the most distinctive in this regard (Dayeh, 'al-ḥawāmim') and probably being the earliest to achieve recognition as a group: Ibn Mas'ūd preserved the unity of this group, while he distributed others according to length (see overall Bauer 1921). Early witnesses, St. John of Damascus and the Monk of Bêth Hālê, ascribe to Muhammad a variety of separate books in circulation, with a variety of titles, including the Qur'an, the she-camel of God, another referring to the Spider, and so forth (Sahas 1972, 90 ff.; Hoyland 1997; 465 ff., 480 ff., 489; Griffith 1999; 206 n. 8) which would reflect continuous circulation of earlier redactions or of separate chapters. This manner of circulation is not unusual, characterising the Muslim canon until today, and the Bible until well after the Reformation.

Matters being such, all portions of the Qur'an are equally Qur'an, every part a synecdoche of the whole, on the pragmatic principle of *pars pro toto*—for pragmatic purposes, *mushaf*, which at that time still meant a codex in general, and *ṣaḥīfa* were equivalent. All were instances of Beatific Audition, the announcement of Muhammadan authority, as well as protective amulets.

What ultimately results is the picture of intersections between (1) textual types, predecessor and autograph text forms that led to the final canonical product cumulatively and to parallel textual developments as well, which ultimately became apocryphal; and (2) the chronological development of each according to the rules of reiteration and reproduction—and we do know that different redactions have different histories of transmission. At one point of confluence the 'Uthmānic canon was produced, leading later to Umayyad formal refinements, and post Umayyad work as well, to include the full complement of diacritical and other notation. This canonical redaction utilised what codices might have been available in addition to fragments, duly witnessed, the whole process being negotiated in the Caliph's entourage, with deletions as well as additions, and with some change in literary structure—such as the shortening or amalgamation of chapters or parts of chapters, although it might well be the case that references to shortening and amalgamation might have compared the canonical scripture with versions either no longer available, or that had been destroyed.

For two or three centuries, it was understood that the text was within limits open to a variety of readings. The ideas that the original text was bereft of diacritical notations that had been, in some measure, available (witness papyri and epigraphy) may well have been deliberate, and one saying attributed to 'Uthmān fully expected the declamation of scripture in a variety of linguistic registers (Ibn Shabba 1996, §§ 1962–63; and cf. Small 2011; and

Nasser 2013, 18 ff.). Some of these, including the redaction of Ḥafṣ, realised the pronunciation of median *hamza* dropped from the *rasm*, a specifically Ḥijāzī feature.

I will now close by suggesting that we reset by dealing with facts, not only with texts, and that before making judgements or even hypotheses in order to reconstruct relevant historical settings, we might prefer to look into the likelihood of verisimilitude before judging probability and implausibility, before moving on to other kinds of assertions. To apply oneself to matters that cannot pass the test of verisimilitude would be work memorably described by Marcel Proust as “truth deaf to the appeals of reflection but docile to the exercise of influence” (Proust 2008, 77). I cannot resist revisiting Alice’s Queen, who owned up to her being prepared to believe six impossible things before breakfast.

All that has been said is of course the perspective of a participant observer of Qur’anic studies, one on the edge of the parish who is not quite an interloper, but not quite a parishioner either.

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