

# Qur'an and History – a Disputed Relationship

## Some Reflections on Qur'anic History and History in the Qur'an

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### 1. The Topic

It is hardly an exaggeration to state that the relationship between Qur'an and history currently occupies the centre of scholarly interest in Qur'anic studies. The controversy about the Qur'an – held to be the genuine document of the Prophet's communications to his listeners or considered as a later compilation from diverse traditions emanating from a monotheistic sectarian milieu – permeates the entire field of Qur'anic studies, forcing each individual researcher to state his or her particular vantage point from the 'holistic' or from the 'atomistic' hypotheses. This controversy over the history of the Qur'an threatens to grow into a kind of ideological schism between partisans of 'revisionism' and partisans of 'traditionalism', a dangerous polarisation within the academic world that should not go unchallenged.<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between Qur'an and history is disputed in more than one respect. One important field of debate is the problem of canonicity. The Qur'an as a canonical text, as the Islamic Scripture, locates itself outside, beyond history. Aziz al-Azmeh has made the general observation that 'it is of course in the historical nature of the canonical text as a genealogical charter of rectitude to demand a status beyond history, figuring as a vantage point from which chronometric time becomes neutralized and in which the holy text places itself along a prior continuum of eternity instantiated in the rhythms of a Heilsgeschichte'. But this perception is in itself the result of a historical process, whose necessary condition 'is that the actual historical nature of the canon should devolve to an incontestable assertion of an internal unity and homogeneity, a unity and homogeneity which are in fact virtual. This presumption of unity, again, works towards ... a conception of textual closure, *clôture livresque*'<sup>2</sup> which is upheld through the authority of the exegetes. The Qur'an viewed from this – traditional Islamic – perspective, appears as a meta-historical text constructed and preserved by tradition.

Still, the Qur'an, in Islamic tradition, is realised to convey a historical course – thanks to a source external to the text, namely the *sīra*, that provides a social and historical context for individual text units within the corpus. The Qur'an thus has been subject to a re-historicisation that for a long time was taken for granted in Western Qur'anic

scholarship as well. Only more recently, more sceptical research, particularly the socio-historical, hermeneutic and anthropological works of John Wansbrough and Mohamed Arkoun but also literary studies, have acknowledged the impact of canonisation as a momentous factor of change that initiated a new hermeneutical approach to the Qur'an. But what does canonisation, in the Qur'anic case, really mean? This, again, is controversial.

Certainly, the first publication of the corpus was a momentous step in the canonisation process, although perhaps not yet in itself a full-fledged 'canonisation' which would include the endorsement of the Qur'anic legal and societal ordinances – a situation that was reached only later. We should, therefore, distinguish between a process of canonisation which took place successively and the act of the collection and redaction of the text, which was intended as *ne varietur*, 'not to be changed'. However the detailed circumstances of that latter venture, which in Islamic tradition is associated with the third caliph ʿUthmān, the initiative to publish an authoritative corpus, a *mushaf*, marks the dividing line between the new *textus receptus*, a text claiming to be the definite corpus of the Prophet's recitations, and those textual forms that preceded it, texts that were transmitted orally and/or in writing by diverse transmitters, and thus had taken different shapes as to the sequence of the individual suras, and perhaps in terms of quantity as well. The 'pre-canonical text' thus would appear as a highly conjectural construct, could we not assume a strong oral tradition to have warranted a faithful transmission of the texts, however little is known about its agents.<sup>3</sup> From this perspective, it is less the material text that is different before and after the publication than the social rank and thus the hermeneutical reading of the text that has changed with the event of the publication.

In most of current Qur'anic studies, however, the redaction of the text is viewed as identical with canonisation, the whole endeavour being dated usually some 150 years after the death of the Prophet. Canonisation is, therefore, in these studies considered as having far more crucial consequences than were hitherto attached to the collection of the Qur'an: canonisation in current scholarship figures as a dividing line between 'what we can know about the genesis of the Qur'an' and 'what we cannot know', the pre-canonical text being considered as completely veiled. By focusing exclusively on the final, canonised form of the Qur'an, by ranking the achievement of its fixation as the crucial event in Qur'anic genesis, a momentous epistemic course has been set: the stages of the emergence of the Qur'an preceding the canonisation fade into a kind of pre-history; something no longer possible to reconstruct. Once the scenario of the Prophet's recitation to his listeners as the original setting of the Qur'an is dismissed, for lack of contemporary written sources, the Qur'anic text, that documents that recitation, dissolves into a heap of fragments, or, to clad it in positive terms: 'Indeed as with the Bible, the matter rests with questioning the notion of an author: once the

notion of an author is abandoned, textual unities of different kinds will emerge'.<sup>4</sup> This analogy which is frequently drawn is, in my view, not quite appropriate: compared to the Biblical texts that go back to various authors from various periods, the Qur'anic origin is not as complex. It not only took place during a much shorter period, but also appears to be due – as the results of literary research suggest – to a far less complicated transmission process.

The point I wish to make in the following presentation is that – thanks to the striking extent of self-referentiality – the microstructure of the canonical text reflects an extended process of communication, clearly indicating the stages of its pre-canonical emergence that have been called into question in recent scholarship. Limiting the investigation to the post-canonical evidence would mean disregarding the traces of the communication process, one might say of intra-Qur'anic history, and thus blocking the view onto the complex relationship between Qur'an and history. This self-imposed deficiency is clearly reflected in some of the major attempts in current Qur'anic scholarship to construct counter-models of pre-canonical Qur'anic history, attempts that completely dispense with a consideration of the microstructural form of the Qur'an. These hypotheses about the history of the Qur'an will be discussed briefly in the following. They will be confronted with the evidence of pre-canonical history, encoded in the Qur'anic form and composition itself. A concluding section will finally present some reflections about history *in* the Qur'an, reflections that might be helpful in determining some of the Qur'an's intrinsic historical dimensions, providing arguments in favour of the reality of the Qur'an's pre-canonical history.

## **2. Approaches and Problems of Recent Qur'anic Scholarship**

### *2.1 The Situation*

It is often lamented that Qur'anic studies in terms of methodology lag far behind Biblical studies. Close textual analysis as was applied to the Jewish and Christian scriptures, particularly in the last century, has no serious counterpart in Qur'anic scholarship. No critical text has as yet been established<sup>5</sup> nor have the variant readings – transmitted in Islamic tradition or recently discovered – received systematic scholarly evaluation. This delay is, regarding the reluctance within the Muslim community to embark on such a venture, not surprising. Introducing real, chronological time into a past that is understood as a pattern or model for the present, a storehouse and repository of experience, wisdom and moral precept, is, as Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out, a socially disturbing process and a symptom of social transformation.<sup>6</sup> Biblical scholarship in Europe was not to remain an academic task but came to play a pivotal role in loosening the Church's domination of the intellectual and cultural life of Europe and paving the way for unfettered secular thought. Things have not developed in Islam that far, but, there is no doubt, that questioning tradition which is an integral part of global

modern thought started among Islamic theoreticians long ago and is today vigorously pursued by intellectuals in spite of disturbing repercussions from fundamentalist circles. The fact that this kind of criticism was in Western scholarship not as rigorously applied to the Qur'an as it was to the Bible is explained in different ways: Aziz al-Azmeh relates it to the matter of exoticism 'which regards Muslim materials as somewhat radically other and incommensurable',<sup>7</sup> it might, in my view, also stem from the fact that Islamic tradition deriving the genesis of the Qur'an from a scenario of communication is in many respects extremely plausible, and does not immediately raise questions as fundamental as those arising from Biblical tradition.

The problem, thus, is not *if* but *how* should tradition be reassessed within Qur'anic studies. What does it mean to analyse the Qur'an by the methods of modern historical scholarship? I am aware that this endeavour is not a matter of mere textual or literary criticism, the field that I am most familiar with, but a task to involve diverse disciplines: history, including archeology, history of religions, theology. To project the event of the Qur'an onto its broader framework of Ancient and Hellenistic Near Eastern culture is not possible without the tools developed in those disciplines. The focus, however, should never be out of sight: it is in my view not the circumstances of the event of the Qur'an, but the text itself. This does not mean a new quest for the 'Urtext', but a quest for a deeper insight into the transmitted text that constitutes the most important source for an investigation into Qur'anic history. The reverse priorities are set, I feel, in most contemporary work on the origin and the development of the Qur'an, where the Qur'anic text as a literary phenomenon is given only scant attention.

To demand such a readjustment of what I consider the centre of gravity in Qur'anic studies means to question the premises first of all of revisionist approaches. It is well-known that the consensus of scholarly opinion on the origins of Islam underwent what has been called 'a seismic shift'<sup>8</sup> in the last quarter of the past century. This change of view was initiated by John Wansbrough in his *Quranic Studies*, published in 1977, and by his colleagues Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, who published their work *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* in the same year. These two books made a radical break with the traditional picture of the origins of Islam. The shift is one of both place and time, in that the location for that origin is no longer the Hijāz in the lifetime traditionally attributed to the Prophet, but the Fertile Crescent some time after his death and subsequent to the Arab conquests. Their hypothesis thus implies a total dismissal of the Qur'an in its hitherto assumed understanding as a literary unit. It is rather looked upon as a later compilation.

## 2.2 Hermeneutic Problems

Wansbrough, who comes from a theological background, argues hermeneutically.<sup>9</sup> He does not accept the Qur'an as a comprehensive corpus of texts going back to one and

the same communication process between a charismatic speaker and his audience. The text, in his view, is on the one hand typologically too diverse, and betrays too distinct 'topoi of revelation' familiar from Jewish and Christian scriptures to allow for a 'spontaneous genesis', its transmitted shape in his view rather points to the participation of representatives of different cultural groups than to the speech of one person. Wansbrough therefore applies the model of the historical criticism of the New Testament to the Qur'an, reading the corpus as made up by logia of the Prophet framed by excerpts from later polemico-apologetical debates. The compilation of these materials is explained by the later community's need for a liturgical text.

The genesis of the new faith is staged by Wansbrough in a sectarian community that emerged in the fertile crescent, far north of the Ḥijāz, and that at a later stage, after the conquests, invented the scenario of the Prophet preaching to pagan Arabs in Mecca. To quote the summary of Ibn Rawandī: 'Staging the narrative of the genesis of Islam in the Arab homeland regions of the Ḥijāz this community achieved to set Islam apart, both geographically and theologically, from Judaism and Christianity with which it obviously had so much in common'.<sup>10</sup> The agency behind these developments, the 'redactors' of the Qur'an, are assumed to be part of the intellectual elite of the later community, those learned men to whom the vast corpus of Islamic tradition, the *sīra*, the diverse corpora of *ḥadīth*-literature and *tafsīr* works that emerged in the 8th and 9th centuries are due. Andrew Rippin has unfolded the implication of Wansbrough's theory: 'The genius of Muslim interpretational strategies in dealing with the Qur'an, probably starting with the redaction of the text itself, has been to provide a consistent and coherent picture of Muḥammad as a background to the text. Through this process, an opaque text was rendered intelligible (...) to the living Muslim community. This was likely done by both creating a *sīra* based upon imaginative readings of the Qur'an and grafting a pre-existent and emerging *sīra* onto the Qur'an. The process also created a unified text of the Qur'an'.<sup>11</sup>

Fred Donner has convincingly demonstrated that for ideological and terminological reasons the Qur'an cannot have evolved from the milieu that produced *ḥadīth*-literature and *sīra*. The main point in my view is, however, hermeneutic: looking at the Qur'an itself one is confronted with a uniquely complex scenario that would be extremely difficult to 'invent' – the process of a successive communication of the speaker's often highly personal encounters with the Divine to a group of listeners. One could describe some Qur'anic suras as communications of experienced *mysterium tremendum*, to use the term introduced by Rudolf Otto. The short early texts in particular attest the interaction between a charismatic leader and his community, portraying him so to say 'in action'. Since the texts are not narratives about him or sayings uttered by him, but speech that presents itself as addressed to him that at the same time reflects scenarios of communication between the reciter and his listeners, they do not fit the

concept of *logia*, isolated sayings, at all. The transmitted literary units within the Qur'an, the suras, are made up of discursive elements intrinsically connected to each other. Once recognised as the reflections of individual processes of communication they present a completely new literary genre, whose striking self-referentiality allows for insights into the texts' *Sitz im Leben*, into their historical and social setting. At the same time they reflect a social interaction, presenting the recitation of the Prophet and the reaction it aroused in the listeners. The Qur'anic texts read not as an amorphous heap of 'materials', but, with a view of its pre-canonic existence within a communication process, can be realised as presenting lively scenes from the emergence of a community. It is only through their post-canonical reading that they appear as meta-historical recollections or constructions of remote or even merely imaginary events.

### 2.3 Historical Problems

But revisionism is primarily rewriting of history. To quote Ibn Rawandi once more, 'the only fact about which there can be no doubt is that in the second quarter of the seventh century there was a large-scale occupation of the Hellenic Middle East by Arabs. The crucial point at issue is the exact nature of this event. Was it simply an act of political opportunism, taking advantage of an exhausted opponent, or was it driven by some kind of religious zeal? Wansbrough views the development of Islam as wholly subsequent to the establishment of a religiously unspecific polity. Both the Muslim and Christian accounts of "what happened" are read as indicating "the persistence of Judaeo-Christian sectarianism in the Fertile crescent under Arab political hegemony, the establishment of a *modus vivendi* between the new authority and the indigenous communities, and the distillation of a doctrinal common denominator acceptable initially to an academic elite, eventually an emblem of submission (*islām*) to political authority".<sup>12</sup>

As against Wansbrough, who holds that 'what really happened' was not known, 'that the traditional picture of the origin of Islam was not a massive rewriting of events that were common knowledge, but the pious filling of an embarrassing void',<sup>13</sup> Crone and Cook put forward a positive thesis, a counter-narrative to the traditional account. In view of the fact that there are no Arab chronicles from the first century of Islam, they turn to several non-Muslim, seventh-century accounts suggesting a new image of the Prophet. He is perceived not as the founder of a new religion but as a preacher in the Old Testament tradition, hailing the coming of a Messiah. Early documents refer to the followers of Muḥammad as 'hagarenes', as descendants of Hagar – Crone and Cook thus assume that the followers of Muḥammad may have seen themselves as retaking their place in the Holy Land alongside with the Jews.

A basic objection to this, as well as to Wansbrough's hypothesis, has been put forward by Josef van Ess and later by Fred Donner:<sup>14</sup> the two theories alike imply that a massive *amnesia* should have been imposed on early Muslims as to the origins of the

Qur'an, banning any existing memory of that history the revisionist scholarship assumes to have actually occurred in a place and at a time different from what existing sources transmit to us. Another objection would be that the question of the agencies behind that invention of tradition has not been answered satisfactorily. The crucial shortcoming, however, in my view, is the total neglect of the Qur'an itself as a literary text and thus as a source that has to be de-coded and evaluated historically.

#### 2.4 Linguistic Problems

It was linguistic and stylistic evidence, however, that led Günter Lüling and recently Christoph Luxenberg to the reconstruction of a pre-canonical text. Let us briefly look at the scenario. The Qur'an is traditionally held to reflect pure Arabic language, attesting its close relation to the cultural and linguistic orbit of Arabia. But since the monotheist tradition that the Qur'an continues is based on scripture codified in Hebrew and Greek, and circulating predominantly in Syriac which was also the language of a host of liturgical texts, it is hard to believe that the Qur'an should be devoid of traces of that tradition either spiritually or linguistically. It is not surprising to find a large number of loan words, mostly Syriac, in the Qur'an, as was noted by the earliest Islamic philologists. The orthography that underlies the Qur'an, originally not more than a deficiently represented consonantal basic layer, the *rasm*, though going back to Nabatean precedents was strongly imprinted by Syriac models.<sup>15</sup> It was only during the eighth and ninth century that Qur'anic orthography was fully developed to unequivocally represent the sound structure of the texts. The final orthography whose implementation was supervised by linguistic specialists served to unify the still inconsistent writing of the text and to preserve it in the shape demanded by the newly standardised grammar of classical Arabic which was derived from the structure underlying the language of ancient Arabic poetry. Thus, questions arise as to the earlier shape of the Qur'anic text veiled by the standardised normative orthography. Was the Qur'an from the beginning a text in the poetical *koinē*, as the high language using *i'rab* is labelled, while the spoken language was different, there being a kind of *diglossia* similar to that currently observed? Or was the Qur'an originally held in the language of Mecca, the vernacular of the first listeners, and only subsequently 'normalised' to fit the rules of *'arabiyya*? What about the Syriac interferences? Were they more perspicuous than they appear in the *textus receptus*?

The question is important not least since it touches on the reliability of the oral transmission of the Qur'an. Tradition holds that oral transmission played a momentous role in preserving the integral shape of the Qur'an – was it eclipsed at a later stage by a predominantly written transmission? What significance does the written transmission have? Do certain obscure expressions in the Qur'an point to a deficient understanding of text units that was perhaps caused by a mistaken writing?

Questions like these have been tackled by Ignaz Goldziher,<sup>16</sup> Theodor Nöldeke and Friedrich Schwally,<sup>17</sup> Gotthelf Bergsträsser,<sup>18</sup> Arthur Jeffery<sup>19</sup> and many others in the first half of the last century, usually without challenging Islamic tradition in principle, scholars rather trying to situate their findings within the traditional image. Others, however, like Karl Vollers<sup>20</sup> who advocated a vernacular form for the Qur'an and charged the Arab grammarians with having transformed that linguistic shape into classical 'arabiyya, did contradict Islamic tradition. Alphonse Mingana,<sup>21</sup> moreover, who claimed a strongly Syriac imprinted form of the Qur'an text, constructed an agency of exterior influence by crediting the redactor with stylistic copy-editing of the Qur'an. This redactor, who is sometimes called 'author', would have integrated a host of foreign – Syriac – loan words into the Qur'anic language and thus brought about the linguistic revolution that the Qur'an – viewed within the ancient Arab context – reflects. Thus, the vision of the Qur'an's novelty, its non-identity with the poetical *koinē*, veiled by the later standardised orthography, aroused questions long before the appearance of the contemporary revisionists.

But it was not before Lüling – and more recently Luxenberg – that a revisionist construction of early Islamic history was designed on a linguistic basis. Günter Lüling published his *Der Ur-Qoran* three years before the books of Wansbrough and Crone and Cook appeared.<sup>22</sup> He considers about one third of the Qur'an – the shorter suras that reflect a particularly succinct and highly poetical style and thus are often perceived as difficult, even mysterious – to be the outcome of a rewriting of originally Christian hymns. Gerald Hawting has stressed the arbitrariness of this study: 'It seems to me that the argument is essentially circular and that since there is no way of controlling or checking the recomposed ur-Qur'an, there is a danger that it will be recomposed to suit one's own preconceptions about what one will find in it'.<sup>23</sup>

Lüling's claim of the pre-canonical Christian text that had fallen into total oblivion is, however, revived, though his work is nowhere explicitly acknowledged, by a new investigation with the pretentious title: *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Qur'an – A Contribution to the Deciphering of Qur'anic Language*, by Christoph Luxenberg, which appeared in 2000.<sup>24</sup>

Luxenberg seeks to re-animate the debate about the Qur'anic language as either poetical 'arabiyya or vernacular, advocating the vernacular option. The original Qur'anic language is, as he tries to prove on the basis of Qur'anic orthography, lexicon and syntax, an Arabic–Syriac linguistic blend. His aim is to trace not only overt but also 'hidden' syriacisms – be they Syriac spellings assumed to have been blurred through the later arabicisation of Qur'anic orthography or be they earlier Syriac understandings divergent from those suggested by the exegetes who – in his view – no longer understood the original language of the Qur'an and thus had to resort to the later developed

Arabic etymology for their analysis. Luxenberg discusses some 75 cases, but these in his view are only 'symptoms' of a linguistic reality that covers much larger strata of the Qur'an. There is an entire Syriac code to the Qur'an, a Syriac reading, a *syro-aramäische Lesart*.

In view of the popularity gained by Luxenberg's book it is perhaps worthwhile to present briefly his method: starting from 'obscure' lexemes or expressions in the Qur'an, Luxenberg first (1) consults Ṭabarī and *Lisān al-ʿarab*, looking for explanations that might point to an underlying Aramaic reading or interpretation. If none is found he looks (2) for a root in Syriac, homonym to that in Arabic, but whose meaning 'fits better' into the context. If no result is achieved, Luxenberg tries (3) to sound out a Syriac root for the Arab lexeme in question by deleting the transmitted dots and vocalisation strokes and guessing a substitute that could be mirroring a Syriac word. The last step (4) in Luxenberg's method is to translate the Arabic expression into Syriac and to sound out its original Syriac meaning.

The method presupposes its very results: the facticity of a Syriac layer underlying the Arabic text. Much of his material relies on obvious circular argument. One has to keep in mind that principally Syriac, which is linguistically closely related to Arabic, will offer in innumerable cases etymological parallels for individual words or expressions of the Qur'an; particularly since religious vocabulary is abounding in Syriac. These parallels in many cases are simply due to the close linguistic relation between the two Semitic languages and do not necessarily reflect a cultural contact. With Luxenberg, however, the tracing of Syriac 'origins' for Arabic words grows into an obsession. It culminates in the re-formulation of entire Qur'anic discourses such as the eschatological recompense of the rightful in Paradise which, according to Luxenberg, is devoid of erotic elements, what was taken for paradisiacal wide-eyed virgins, *al-ḥūr al-ʿīn*, being in fact nothing more than white raisins.

Luxenberg's approach implies that the Arabic pronunciation of many words in the Qur'an is not genuine, but has replaced a Syriac. Therefore, the evidence of Syriac/Arabic homonyms or Syriac words bearing some similarity to Qur'anic Arabic words but sounding slightly different from their Arabic counterparts points to an originally Syriac wording of the Qur'anic text that has been wrongly arabicised. These instances therefore can be used as arguments against the validity of oral tradition as such. The Arabic form in question is understood as due to a textual corruption of its Syriac original made possible by a deficient written tradition, thus allowing the conclusion that oral tradition was non-existent: 'Should such an oral transmission have existed at all, it has to be considered as disrupted rather early'.<sup>25</sup> Adducing a large number of cases – though, in my view, few of them seriously worth considering – Luxenberg claims that the entire scholarly edifice of Islam, largely based on the

reliability of oral tradition, is unfounded. This conclusion provides him with the premise for his project of a totally new interpretation of the Qur'an.

Syriac/Arabic parallels, in Luxenberg's view – one has to note – indicate Syriac origin not only linguistically but theologically as well. Thus, the Syriac word *qeryānā* which matches the Arabic *qur'ān* meaning 'recitation', 'lectionary', in Luxenberg's imagination is not only a linguistic loan, but the very proof of Syriac cultural origin: not only did the Syriac word *qeryānā* become the Arabic word *qur'ān*, but a real Syriac lectionary became, via translation into Arabic, the Arabic Islamic scripture. A linguistic observation is thus pressed to support a theological hypothesis. By re-interpreting the entire semantic field of reading, reciting, inspiring, 'à la Syriaque', Luxenberg shifts the understanding of the Islamic scripture from the communication of a divine message to a work of translation or exegetical teaching, probably achieved by Syriac religious scholars. The general thesis underlying his entire book thus is that the Qur'an is a corpus of translations and paraphrases of original Syriac texts recited in church services as elements of a lectionary.<sup>26</sup>

It is striking that the alleged extent of hybridity in Qur'anic language as such does not interest Luxenberg seriously – he nowhere reflects about the actual use of that language, as limited to cultic purposes or as vernacular – hybridity merely serves as a means to de-construct the Qur'an as genuine scripture, or, phenomenologically speaking, to de-construct Islamic scripture as the transmitter's faithful rendering of what he felt to have received from a supernatural source. The Qur'an thus is presented as the translation of a Syriac text. This is an extremely pretentious hypothesis which is unfortunately relying on rather modest foundations. Luxenberg does not consider previous work in the diverse disciplines of Qur'anic studies – neither concerning the pagan heritage, nor the poetical Arabian background, nor the Jewish contacts. He takes interest neither in religio-historical nor in literary approaches to the Qur'an although his assumptions touch substantially on all these discourses. Luxenberg limits himself to a very mechanistic, positivist linguistic method without caring for theoretical considerations developed in modern linguistics. Luxenberg has the merit to have raised anew the old question of the Syriac stratum of Qur'anic textual history that had – since Mingana – been marginalised. But the task of a profound and reliable study of the Syriac elements of the Qur'an is still waiting to be fulfilled.

### 3. Looking for a Corrective

#### 3.1 *The Qur'anic Composition and its Historical Implications*

Let us shift the focus from the circumstances of the Qur'anic event back to the Qur'an itself as the centre of the query, and consider the historical implications implied in the Qur'anic composition.

The Qur'anic text as we have it, the *textus receptus*, betrays a peculiar composition. The sequence of the single text units does not follow any logical let alone theological principle, yet the division into suras, most of them evidently genuine literary units, is maintained. This is at once a conservative and a theologically disinterested arrangement of the text which suggests that the redaction was carried out without elaborate planning, perhaps in a hurry, anyway before prophetic conceptions like that underlying the *sīra* had emerged. For technical reasons, the fixation of the text should also have occurred not later than the early conquests, coinciding with the extension of the community beyond the circle of the first listeners. The traditional scenario of the ʿuthmānic redaction, the hypothesis that the remnants of the Prophet's recitations were collected soon after his death to form the corpus we have before us, is thus plausible though not possible to prove.

But, however preliminary the redaction may be considered, with the consonantal fixation of the text a decisive course had been set with regard to its literary character. It is evident that the joint codification of loosely composed texts made of diverse, often conceptually isolated communications – so characteristic of the Medinan 'long suras' – together with the complex poly-thematic structures and mnemonic, technically sophisticated short and middle-sized suras, resulted in a most heterogeneous ensemble, a fact that did not remain without consequences. Once these elements mingled to form a closed corpus, a codex, *muṣḥaf*, they became neutralised as to their communicational context in the emergence of the community. Previously defined text-units distinguishable through reliable devices such as introductory formulas and markers of closure were, it is true, retained by the redaction process and labelled 'sura'. They lost much of their significance as units, however, for in the same codex they were juxtaposed with other units also labelled 'suras', but whose constituent passages had not come to form a coherent literary structure and thus invalidated the structural claim raised by those that were neatly composed.

As a consequence, suras eventually ceased to be considered integral literary units conveying messages of their own and mirroring individual stages of a process of communication. On the contrary, once all parts had become equal in rank, arbitrarily selected texts could be extracted from their sura context and used to explain other arbitrarily selected texts. Textual sections thus became virtually de-contextualised, stripped of the tension that had characterised them within their original units. The literary elements of the suras, once part of a discourse,<sup>27</sup> became de-functionalised and could be mistaken for mere repetitions of each other. The literary text stripped of the tension created by its history, turned into a canon, a sacred text exclusively, or – viewed from an orientalist perspective – into a heap of materials.

### 3.2 Orality

To reclaim the pre-canonical history of the Qur'an, let us first turn to a substantial characteristic of the text whose impact on Qur'anic narrative representations is crucial: the fact that the Qur'an is not meant as a book to study but as a text to recite. Kristina Nelson has stressed that 'the transmission of the Qur'an and its social existence are essentially oral. Qur'anic rhythm and assonance alone confirm that it is meant to be heard ... the significance of the revelation is carried as much by the sound as by its semantic information'. There are significant implications to this fact. If the Qur'an was meant to be recited, the objective of an oral performance should be perspicuous in the composition of the text itself. Let us briefly turn to the Qur'an's intrinsic orality, focusing on one single stylistic phenomenon viewed from a simple philological vantage point.

As is well known the early – and densely structured – parts of the Qur'an reflect an ancient Arabic linguistic ductus, termed *saj*<sup>c</sup>, marked by very short and concise sentences with frequently changing patterns of particularly clear-cut rhymes. Once this style has given way to a more loose flow of prose, with verses exceeding two sentences, the rhyme end takes the form of a simple —*ūn* or —*īn* pattern which in most cases is achieved through a morpheme denoting masculine plural. One wonders how this inconspicuous ending should suffice to fulfill the listeners' anticipation of a resounding end marker of the verse. But looking closer, it turns out that the rhyme is no longer charged with this function, but there is now another device to mark the end. It is a syntactically stereotypical rhymed phrase, concluding the verse, which I am tempted to term *cadenza* – in analogy to the well-known final part of speech units in Gregorian chant which through their particular sound pattern arouse the expectation of an ending. In the Qur'an, it is less an identical musical sound than a widely stereotypical phrasing. Still, the *cadenza* is easily identified since it is semantically distinguished from its context, inasmuch as it does not partake in the main strain of the discourse, but adds a moral comment to it. Let us consider an example.

Q. 12:88 expounds an episode of a narrative culminating in an address directed to the protagonist. The brothers of Joseph approach him: 'When they entered unto him, they said, "O mighty prince, affliction has visited us and our people. We come with merchandise of scant worth. Fill up to us the measure and be charitable to us".' Then, in the end of the verse, the text turns from the immediate addressee, Joseph, to a collective of addressees, including the first listeners and the later readers of the Qur'an. The verse continues: 'Surely God recompenses the charitable' (*inna'llāha yajzi'l-mutaṣaddiqīn*). The *cadenza* thus transcends the main – narrative – discourse of the sura, introducing a meta-narrative discourse: a moral argument, conveying divine approval. It may also present divine disapproval like Q. 12:29: 'Surely, you were among the sinners' (*innaki kunti min al-khāṭi'īn*). Or it may refer to one of God's attributes, e.g. Q. 17:1: 'Surely, God is the hearing, the seeing' (*inna'llāha samī'un*

*baṣīr*), which in the later stages of Qur'anic development have become parameters of ideal human behaviour. Although it is true that not all multipartite verses bear such formulaic endings, cadenzas may be considered to be characteristic for the later Meccan and all the Medinan Qur'anic texts. The resounding cadenza, thus, marks a new and irreversible development in the emergence of the text and of the new faith.

On a social level, cadenzas betray a novel narrative pact between the speaker and his audience, the consciousness that there is a basic consensus not only on human moral behaviour but as well on the image of God as a powerful co-agent ever present in human interaction. But cadenzas achieve even more in terms of constructing a new identity. They provide markers of the sacred that transform narrative events into stages of salvation history, changing the ordinary chronometric time of the narratives into significant time. In the recited text, the double-edged style of the long verses, consisting of naturally flowing 'narrative' prose merging into artificial, 'communicational' sacred speech in the formulaic conclusion, powerfully reflects the bi-dimensionality of Qur'anic speech, which evokes simultaneously world and hereafter, time and eternity. The very stylistic character of the Qur'an indicates its orality, which points to a momentous characteristic of its pre-canonical existence: the Qur'an emerges from a communication process.

### 3.3 Reflections of a Canonical Process

On the basis of these insights into the pre-canonical text we can look at the problem of canonisation from a new angle. The publication of a *textus ne varietur*, as we saw, does not necessarily coincide with canonisation. It has often been noted and indeed adduced as an argument against the historicity of the 'uthmānic redaction that some crucial implications of the concept of canonisation such as the immediate endorsement of the norms established in the canon are not realised in the Qur'anic case until much later. Canonisation of the Qur'an in this strict sense appears to have been delayed for some time. This however does not necessarily imply that the text was floating to become fixed only with the time of the emergence of Islamic law. The fixation of a *textus ne varietur* may have been due to needs different from legal concerns. Canonisation can still be observed from the early stages onward, although of a kind different from that usually associated with the term. The older suras in particular seem to mirror a development which in its essential traits reflects a canonisation from below, as characterised by Aleida and Jan Assmann.<sup>28</sup>

The Assmanns distinguish between a canon described as power-oriented and one that relies on a particular source of meaning, not least on the charisma of the transmitter of a message. According to their theory, 'whenever the message is preserved to survive beyond the situation in which the original group was directly interacting, it will usually undergo a profound change in structure. The message gains a new appearance

through scripturalization and moreover through institutionalization'.<sup>29</sup> In the case of the Qur'an, then, a canon from below certainly precedes the canon from above. The latter comes about only with the authoritative final redaction which became necessary to counteract the pressure of a reactionary tendency towards provincialisation and fragmentation. The canon from below has thereby changed into a canon from above, a development comparable to that in early Christianity when the official Church contracted a pact with political power.

### 3.4 *Qur'anic Scripture and Story-Telling*

As a conclusion, let us finally turn from Qur'anic history to history in the Qur'an. The Qur'an has usually been denied any serious interest in history. Biblical narrative is acknowledged as historical narrative. The Qur'anic presentation of narrative has hitherto usually been considered as a continuum. Its repeated treatment of prophetic dispatchments with similar, sometimes identical messages led scholars to the conclusion that there is something like 'the Qur'anic narrative', attesting not a linear, but a cyclical concept of revelation. Although Horowitz in his seminal study on Qur'anic narrative strictly committed himself to Nöldeke's periodisation,<sup>30</sup> scholars after him have usually failed or even refused to acknowledge a substantial development in the Qur'anic representation of prophets and messengers except in terms of increasing detail. The Qur'an in general has been denied any serious interest in history.

Fred Donner has recently underscored the prevailing moral dimension of Qur'anic narrative: 'The purpose of stories in the Qur'an ... is profoundly different from their purpose in the Old Testament; the latter uses stories to explain particular chapters in Israel's history, the former to illustrate – again and again – how the true Believer acts in certain situations. In line with this purpose, Qur'anic characters are portrayed as moral paradigms, emblematic of all who are good or evil ...'. But his final judgement, '[The Qur'an] is simply not concerned with history in the sense of development and change, either of the prophets or peoples before Muḥammad, or of Muḥammad himself, because in the Qur'anic view the identity of the community to which Muḥammad was sent is not historically determined, but morally determined',<sup>31</sup> deserves to be slightly modified.

To do justice to Qur'anic narrative one has to discern different discourses with fundamentally diverse historical perspectives.<sup>32</sup> Given the fact that the early suras display a linguistic and stylistic character very close to the enunciations of pre-Islamic soothsayers (*kahāna*), these texts should be acknowledged as still in the tradition of the highly emphatic, succinct and sometimes enigmatic presentation current in ancient Arabian *saj' al-kahāna*. The discourse of these early texts is about the imminent catastrophe prefigured in the tales of the 'doomed communities' (*al-umam al-khāliya*), accounts about the dispatchment of messengers to earlier communities who

called their people to worship and obey one God but failed to convert their communities, tales that end in catastrophic situations of divine punishment. The predicament of the ancient messengers is shared by the Prophet himself. The *umam khāliya* discourse thus is less interested in history than in a contextualisation of the disturbing experience of the speaker and his community.

This discourse should, however, be differentiated from a great narrative that constitutes itself at a later stage in the Qur'an when the focus switches from the deserted sites of the real homeland to the orbit of the messengers known to the other monotheist religions, the *ahl al-kitāb*. This turn in terms of *topographia sacra* coincides with a re-orientation of religious performance: the axis of the entire cult of the early community is re-located from the local shrine to a remote sanctuary, to Jerusalem, which has become the place where the relevant memory of both the previous communities and the new community converge. In the orbit of the Holy Land, messengers are prophets, *anbiyā'*, related to each other since belonging to a common prophetic succession. Their communications and actions exert a formative impact on the self-understanding of the emerging community itself providing an example for the Prophet's and his community's behaviour in situations of crisis. Moses appears in this context as the most prominent figure, indeed the mentor of the Prophet.<sup>33</sup>

Consequently, it is little surprising to find a particular hermeneutic trait familiar from the Bible and especially the Gospels prominent again in Qur'anic narrative: typology.<sup>34</sup> 'Types' are exemplary representations in scripture of more momentous events or more significant figures still expected to come. Thus the divine trials of the past are to be considered 'types' of the Last Judgement that will supersede everything preceding it, the dispatchment of earlier prophets in a way 'prefigure' Muḥammad's activities.

This again bears on the rhetoric structure of the Qur'an. It is true that Qur'anic storytelling does not allow an auctorial stance such as is realisable in Biblical narrating characterised by Robert Alter: 'In the Bible ... the narrator's work is almost all *recit*, straight narration of actions and speech, and only exceptionally and very briefly *discours*, disquisition on and around the narrated facts and their implications'.<sup>35</sup> As against the meticulous shaping of personages and the sophisticated coding and decoding of their motives which characterises Biblical narrative, Qur'anic narrating pursues complex 'para-narrative' aims. Qur'anic stories known from Biblical literature are presented as excerpts or messages from the Book (*al-kitāb*) which is obviously taken to be a corpus ranking beyond all other stories known through oral tradition.

This remoteness of '*kitāb-generated*' narrative from mundane communication has a strong bearing on the style of the stories presented as readings from the Book. It forces on them a distinct linguistic code which on the one hand infers on the diction a highly stylised form, serving to distinguish it from profane narrative. It on the other hand

implants into the narratives the new message of the imminent eschatological catastrophe. It is exactly the discursive elements so marginal in Biblical narrative that primarily matter in the Qur'anic narrative: the explicit moral or theological edification of the community, their integration into the history of divine-human communication that is achieved through the merging of narrated facts or speeches with reflections of the experience of the community. A particularly efficient means to fulfill this purpose is the stylistic device of the cadenza which instills the narrative with a continuous appeal to the listeners, thus turning the narrative into a medially complex communication, addressing listeners present and readers still to be expected, not as passive receivers of narrative information but as active partners of the speaker in a joint covenant.

Kenneth Cragg states: 'Existence is poised, so to speak, between prophecy and eschatology, in that the prophetic address to humanity must have, in token and in fact, that writ of success which eschatology brings to final authenticity in the last judgment. The utter unambiguity of the eschatological must belong suitably and surely with the interim evidence of prophetic standing in time and in power'.<sup>36</sup>

History experienced in the Qur'an, thus, is not least re-presentation, *Vergegenwärtigung*, of significant past evoked to shed light on the lived present and to make it partake in the aura of salvation history. The pre-canonical Qur'an being the communication between a speaker and his audience presents itself at the same time, by self-testimony and through its form, as a communication between the human and the superhuman. The Qur'an thus, not only in its later communal use but from its very genesis, is a liturgical text. The suras constitute complex genres that set them apart from Biblical story-telling and even more distinctly from profane speech – new genres, whose particular generic characteristics still await to be literarily and hermeneutically explored.

The relationship between Qur'an and history is complex. A promising approach – as I hope to have shown – is the literary, the microstructural reading of the Qur'an itself. The history of the Qur'an does not start with canonisation but is inherent in the text itself where not only contents but also form and structure can be read as traces of a historical or a canonical process, attesting both the emergence of a scripture and the emergence of a community.

#### NOTES

1 Ibn Warraq has lately contributed meritoriously to Qur'anic Studies by reprinting a number of relevant essays throwing light on textual *crucis* and presenting proposals of solution worked out by earlier scholars: *What the Koran Really Says. Language, Text, & Commentary Edited with Translations* (Amherst/New York, 2002). He has also indulged in much preliminary work, expounding to his readers' linguistic and historical basic knowledge, to make sure that they will benefit from the essays presented, obviously with the good intention to pave the way for a secular approach to the Qur'an. It is therefore sad to notice that in his introduction his own credulity outweighs his methodological demands. It seems to be primarily the results that count, less the arguments – thus only attempts at deconstruction of the 'Qur'anic narrative' are considered. He

therefore risks – certainly unintentionally – to foster cultural polarisation rather than supporting objective and unbiased scholarship.

2 Aziz al-Azmeh, 'Chronophagous Discourse. A Study of the Clerico-Legal Appropriation of the World in Islamic Tradition' in Frank E. Reynolds and David Tracy (eds), *Religion and Practical Reason in the Comparative Philosophy of Religions* (Albany, 1994), pp. 193ff.

3 Oral tradition is taken for granted in Islamic tradition, it has been assumed as an important agency in critical scholarship as well in view of the nature of the *variae lectiones* transmitted to us, see Ignaz Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung*, reprint of the 1920 edn (Leiden, 1970). See also Arthur Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'an. The Old Codices* (Cairo, 1936).

4 Aziz Al-Azmeh, 'The Muslim Canon from Late Antiquity to the Era of Modernism', unpublished paper presented at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, March 1997, p. 7.

5 See Gotthelf Bergsträsser, 'Plan eines Apparatus criticus zum Koran' in *Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 1930 (7).

6 Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London, 1997), p. 137.

7 Al-Azmeh, 'The Muslim Canon from Late Antiquity to the Era of Modernism', p. 2.

8 Alexander Stille, 'A Language Mystery. "White raisins" instead of "virgins"?' in *International Herald Tribune* 3/4/2002.

9 See the review of John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, by Josef van Ess, *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 35 (1978), pp. 350–3.

10 Ibn Rawandi, 'On Pre-Islamic Christian Strophic Poetical Texts in the Koran. A Critical Look at the Work of Günter Lüling' in Ibn Warraq (ed.), *What the Koran really says*, pp. 653–710; p. 691.

11 Andrew Rippin, 'Muhammad in the Qur'an. Reading Scripture in the 21st Century' in Harald Motzki (ed.), *The Biography of Muhammad. The Issue of the Sources* (Leiden, 2000), pp. 298–310; p. 308.

12 John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* (Oxford, 1977), p. 124; adduced by Ibn Rawandi, 'On Pre-Islamic Christian Strophic Poetical Texts', p. 693.

13 John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 179, adduced by Ibn Rawandi, 'On Pre-Islamic Christian Strophic Poetical Texts', p. 691.

14 I do not find this counter-narrative very convincing. Remaining with the traditional sequence of events – were not the exegetes indeed several generations remote from the events? Did they not – the traditional narrative presupposed – often come from different cultural traditions and thus approach the Qur'an with different educational and cultural expectations than the immediate witnesses of the events did? And did they not – since not remembering the events from personal experience – necessarily lack the tools to locate particular sayings or facts in their original scenario? A dissertation thesis lately completed at FU Berlin has shown that in the earliest legal discussions individual Qur'anic rulings are treated in early tradition as restricted to the Qur'anic agents and not being applicable to later ones. This particular memory ceased to play a role with the classical commentators. As to their exegesis, it would also, in my view, be difficult to prove that attempts to vindicate the Hijāzī framework of the Qur'anic origin played a predominant role.

15 Gerhard Endress, 'Die Arabische Schrift' in Wolf-Dietrich Fischer (ed.), *Grundriss der arabischen Philologie I. Sprachwissenschaften* (Wiesbaden, 1982), pp. 165–97.

16 Goldziher, *Richtungen*.

- 17 GdQ I/II: Theodor Nöldeke & Friedrich Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorans I: Über den Ursprung des Qorans, II: Die Sammlung des Qorans* (Leipzig, 1919).
- 18 GdQ III: Gotthelf Bergsträsser & Otto Pretzl, *Die Geschichte des Korantextes* (Leipzig, 1938).
- 19 Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* (Baroda, 1938).
- 20 Karl Vollers, *Volkssprache und Schriftsprache im alten Arabien* (Straßburg, 1906).
- 21 Alphonse Mingana, 'Syriac Influences on the Style of the Kur'an', *Bulletin of John Rylands Library, Manchester* 1927, pp. 77–98. Reprinted in Ibn Warraq, *What the Koran really says*, pp. 171–92.
- 22 Lüling initiated his project with *Über den Ur-Quran* (Erlangen, 1972). English: *On the Pre-Islamic Poetic Christian Texts in the Koran*. See for his methodology Gerald Hawting's review of his *Die Wiederentdeckung des Propheten Muhammad* in *Journal of Semitic Studies* 27 (1982), pp. 100–9, and Ibn Rawandi, 'On Pre-Islamic Christian Strophic Poetical Texts'.
- 23 Gerald Hawting, review of Lüling in *Journal of Semitic Studies* 27 (1982), p. 111.
- 24 It was presented on the internet by Ibn Warraq, 'Virgins? What virgins?' in *Guardian Archive* 12/1/2002, and by Alexander Stille, 'A Language Mystery. "White raisins" instead of "virgins"?' in *International Herald Tribune* 3/4/2002. An interview by Christoph Burgmer with Christoph Luxenberg from 2/9/2002 appeared in: <http://www.dradio.de/cgi-bin/es/neu-lit-pol/5999.html>. The panegyric appraisal published by Karl-Heinz Ohlig, director of the Arbeitsstelle für Religionswissenschaft at the Universität des Saarlands, a close cooperater of Luxenberg's, in <http://perlentaucher.de/autoren/10021.html>, cannot be taken as a critical evaluation. Rainer Nabielek, 'Weintrauben statt Jungfrauen: Zu einer neuen Lesart des Korans' in *INAMO* 23/24 (2000), pp. 66–75, presents an appraisal in the context of Qur'anic scholarship without a detailed evaluation.
- 25 'Cristoph Luxenberg', *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2000), p. 299.
- 26 Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart*, pp. 95–100.
- 27 Angelika Neuwirth, 'Form and Structure of the Qur'an' in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* (Leiden, 2002), Vol. 2, pp. 245–66.
- 28 See Angelika Neuwirth, 'Referentiality and Textuality in Sūrat al-Hijr. Some Observations on the Qur'anic "Canonical Process" and the Emergence of a Community' in Issa J. Boullata (ed.), *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an* (Richmond, 2000), pp. 143–72, and 'Negotiating Justice. A Pre-Canonical Reading of the Qur'anic Creation Accounts', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 2:1 (2000), pp. 25–41; 2:2 (2000), pp. 1–18.
- 29 Aleida Assmann & Jan Assmann, 'Kanon und Zensur als Kultursoziologische Kategorien' in A. Assmann & J. Assmann (eds), *Kanon und Zensur. Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation II* (Munich, 1987), pp. 2–27.
- 30 Josef Horowitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen* (Berlin, 1926).
- 31 Fred Donner, *Narratives of Origin*, p. 84.
- 32 Angelika Neuwirth, 'Form and Structure of the Qur'an'.
- 33 Tarif Khalidi, *Arab Historical Thought*, p. 8.
- 34 Heribert Busse, 'Herrschartypen im Koran' in Ulrich Haarmann & Peter Bachmann (eds), *Die Islamische Welt zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit. Festschrift für Hans Robert Römer zum 65. Geburtstag* (Beirut/Wiesbaden, 1979), pp. 56–80.
- 35 Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981), p. 184.
- 36 Kenneth Cragg, *The Event of the Qur'an*, pp. 171f.



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