Roberto Tottoli
The Qur'an: A Guidebook

The European Qur'an

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Volume 2

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Foreword

Today, readers who want to learn about the Qur'an can find a considerable number of manuals and essays. There are even more works of the same genre available in English and in other languages, not to mention all the studies on Islam and on the prophet Muḥammad that also discuss this sacred text. Works of an introductory nature and specialized studies of the Qur'an are successful nowadays, and each of these offers its own approach or its own specific interpretation in terms of the contents, the form, and the history of the text, as well as its common use during over one thousand four hundred years of history of religion and of Islamic communities.

This book, in part, follows the introductory attempts of this literature as a whole, but favors the analysis of Western critical and academic production on the Qur'an. Its reader of choice is, consequently, the scholar, researcher, or student who is already familiar with the sacred text, and who would like an instrument with which to find her/his bearings in the immense and continuous production that has characterized the last thirty years of Qur'anic studies. This body of scholarship is rarely in dialogue with the innumerable works and analyses that hail from the Islamic world; more often, it reflects the internal dynamics of research in the West in which more and more Muslims, working in European, American, and Australian universities, actively participate.

In line with this tradition of studies, in the pages of this volume, the reader will find a presentation of and an introduction to the Qur'an and to its study that, differently from most manuals of the same type, aims to offer a balanced view amongst the diverse and contrasting lines of Western research and features of Muslim viewpoints, examining the Qur'an as a text that continuously questions both the former and the latter.

The text highlights the different evaluations of both Muslim believers, who consider the text the word of God, and non-believers. Attention is focused on these evaluations in order to understand the meaning that the sacred text has for the Muslim community and the definitions that this community offers to underscore its uniqueness and truth. In this sense, a privileged source is the *Itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* by Jalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī (d. 1505). Reference to this compendium of the Qur'anic sciences is constant in this book and allows the reader to understand more than dense cross-references to countless Islamic exegetical works. More frequent, inevitably, are references to non-confessional and Western studies which accompany and guide the reader through the set of problems that are present in research on the Qur'an during these years, presenting a variety of viewpoints that range from confessional or sympathetic studies to more skeptical, revisionist ones, in a polarization that is, too often, unyielding.

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Passages of the Qur'an accompany the work and offer a rapid reference to the themes that are discussed. The Qur'an, in these parts of the text, is cited according to the translation by Alan Jones (*The Qur'ān*, [Cambridge]: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2007). A number of the passages cited have prompted me to modify the translation, something I tried to do as little as possible, since the coherence of a complete translation of the Qur'an must take precedence, in my opinion, over possible choices for specific passages. To distinguish the second person singular and plural in his English translation, Jones adds a superscript "s" or "p" to second person pronouns and imperatives (e.g., you^{s}; your^{p}, recite^{s}, etc.; cf. Jones, *The Qur'ān*, pp. 21–22). For the sake of simplicity these additional notations have not been used in the passages cited in this book.

The bibliography at the end of the volume is just a limited choice amongst the countless studies on the Qur'an that have appeared and continue to appear. Vaster and more exhaustive bibliographies on various themes can be found in several more extensive works, such as the six volumes of the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001–2006), or the more comprehensive versions of the companions or handbooks on the Qur'an that have been produced in recent years (*The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, edited by Andrew Rippin, Malden, MA–Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006, 2017^{2}; *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, edited by Jane D. McAuliffe, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; and most recently *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, edited by Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, and *The Routledge Companion to the Qur'an*, edited by George Archer, Maria M. Dakake, and Daniel A. Madigan, London–New York: Routledge, 2022).

It is impossible not to mention the origin and the story of this book, which was supposed to be a brief introduction to the Qur'an, and then became something else. The original Italian edition appeared in the historical series of the Istituto per l'Oriente Carlo Alfonso Nallino. An initial collection of materials and a draft was completed in 2016–17 during my year as a member of the Institute for Advanced Study of Princeton, at the same institute as a Visiting scholar during the summer of 2019, and at the Hebrew Union College, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, during the spring of 2019. These last two fruitful periods of research were carried out within the project ERC-Synergy 810141 EuQu "The European Qur'an," which began in April of the same year. The need to work on various aspects of the history of the Qur'an for this European project was fundamental in guiding my choices as to the final outcome of this study.

As regards the Italian original version (*Leggere e studiare il Corano: una guida*, Roma: Istituto per l'Oriente C. A. Nallino, 2021), I thank the President of the Istituto per l'Oriente Carlo Alfonso Nallino, Claudio Lo Jacono, for the opportunity to have this book published, after the introductory one on Islam that appeared in the

educational series not long ago (*Introduzione all'Islam*, Roma: Istituto per l'Oriente C. A. Nallino-Aseq, 2018; engl. ed.: *Islam: an Advanced Introduction*, London-New York: Routledge, 2021). I also thank him for having read the first and the revised drafts, for his unfailing suggestions, and for his keen eye in every direction. Many other colleagues and friends did not fail to offer notes and advice that allowed me to avoid mistakes, or to suggest modifications that have improved this text. I deeply thank them, all of them, and, as always, if any inaccuracies remain, it is only my responsibility. Thanks, first and foremost, to my wife, Francesca Bellino, who puts up with her sentence, I hope for life, of reading everything I write, never failing to make suggestions that are always useful, and the patience and help of Giovanni Canova, Alba Fedeli, Francesco Alfonso Leccese, Giovanni Maria Martini, Antonella Straface, and Ida Zilio-Grandi.

This English edition is a revised translation of *Leggere e studiare il Corano: una guida*. For this English translation I am indebted to Angela Pitassi, who translated the work and, with patience and generous advice, discussed with me passages and doubts. All this was further helped by the advice and meticulous checking of Giovanni Maria Martini who helped us in this and took care of the final version for the publisher. Thanks are also due to those friends who read the English version and suggested further revisions: Michael Pregill, Walid Saleh and, above all, Devin J. Stewart, who has suggested many improvements to the text.

Contents

Introduction

Today, Qur'anic studies are thriving, and there is not a year in which introductory or specialist essays do not appear, motivated by the desire to add something new to the ongoing debate on the Qur'an, not to mention the immense and constant literary production that preserves and celebrates all aspects of the sacred text of Islam. Not even this book, which has introductory aims, can avoid the need to clarify, according to the intentions of the author, how this umpteenth work on the Qur'an should be positioned within the production and the continuous debate that it fuels.

The bibliographical references show how remarkable the number of books and articles on the Qur'an has become in recent decades. The revolution induced by the publication of *Quranic Studies* by John Wansbrough (d. 2002) in 1977 added to this, with the reactions that followed that, overall, served the purpose of bringing the conversation on the origins of Islam and of the Qur'an back into the center of research, determining strongly (and sometimes polemically) contrasting lines of interpretation. These have stimulated research that has radically changed Qur'anic studies in the West.[1]

1 John E. Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). Detailed bibliographies of the Western studies on the Qur'an can be found in Morteza Karimi-Nia, *Bibliography of Qur'ānic Studies in European Languages* (Qom: The Centre for Translation of the Holy Qur'ān, 2012); Mohammad A. Amir-Moezzi and Guillaume Dye, eds., *Le Coran des historiens* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2019), especially the third volume. On the problems and the different lines of analysis of contemporary studies on the Qur'an, see, above all, Devin J. Stewart, "Reflections on the State of Art in Western Qur'ānic Studies," in *Islam and Its Past. Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an*, ed. Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 4–68; also Angelika Neuwirth, "Orientalism in Oriental Studies? Qur'anic Studies as a Case in Point," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 9 (2007): 115–27; Lawrence I. Conrad, "Qur'ānic Studies: A Historian's Perspective," in *Results of Contemporary Research on the Qur'ān. The Question of a Historio-Critical Text of the Qur'ān*, ed. Manfred S. Kropp (Beirut–Würzburg: Orient-Institut-Ergon in Kommission, 2007), 9–15; and also the introductory chapter by Gabriel S. Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (London-New York: Routledge, 2010) significantly entitled "The Crisis of Qur'ānic Studies," 1–36. Reynolds has also returned to the same themes in *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context 2* (London-New York, Routledge 2011), 1–21. Some useful general considerations on approaches and problems can also be found in Guillaume Dye, "Le corpus coranique: contexte et composition," in *Le Coran des historiens*, ed. Amir-Moezzi and Dye, 748–60. On contemporary studies from the Islamic side, see Majid Daneshgar, *Studying the Qur'ān in the Muslim Academy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020) which is mainly dedicated to studies on Islam in general, more than to the Qur'an itself.

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Before Wansbrough's work, the panorama of Qur'anic studies had been fundamentally stable. The interpretative paradigm was based on the history of the Qur'an written by Theodor Nöldeke (d. 1930) and completed by his students before World War II. Specialized studies counted, with full confidence, on the *Introduction to the Qur'an* (1st ed. 1953) by Richard Bell (d. 1952), later revised and published in 1970 by William Montgomery Watt (d. 2006), or on the introduction by Régis Blachère (d. 1973), written in 1947, when the French production still had a role and a pervasiveness comparable to that of Anglo-Saxon production.[2]

In this situation, the Islamic historical narrative was fundamentally accepted: the Qur'anic text was ascribable to Muḥammad (570 circa–632), a prophet hailing from the Arabian Peninsula, and this was also so for those who spoke of the Qur'an in explicit terms as a book produced by Muḥammad, the man. Differences in approach, in terms of greater sympathy, as in the case of Watt's studies on Muḥammad, differently modulated the relationship between the Prophet's sincerity or responsibility in terms of the revelation, without altering the framework of formation and fixation of the text, as substantially accepted in the work by Nöldeke and by his students.

Said vision, more sympathetic and less prejudicially averse to Islam and Muslims, must have appeared to be an important novelty when it was put forth more and more frequently during the mid-20th century, in contrast with a previously critical attitude that had often been prejudicially negative towards Islam and the Qur'an. However, though the ecumenical attitude of Watt is appealing to our contemporary sensibilities, we can today recognize that his work and others like it are merely variations on a single theme: rehearsing the classical Islamic approach of imposing the biography of Muḥammad upon the Qur'an to make it more comprehensible.[3]

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2 Theodor Nöldeke, Friedrich Schwally, Gotthelf Bergsträßer and Otto Pretzl, eds., *The History of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Richard Bell and W. Montgomery Watt, eds., *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P, 1970); Régis Blachère, *Le Coran. Traduction selon un essai de reclassement des sourates* (Paris, G. P. Maisonneuve, 1947). The analysis on the influence of Nöldeke's work is also interesting in terms of studies on the history of the Qur'an in the Islamic world, outlined by Morteza Karimi-Nia, "The Historiography of the Qur'an in the Muslim World: The Influence of Theodor Nöldeke," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 15/1 (2013): 46–68.

3 On these topics, see Roberto Tottoli, "Alessandro Bausani e gli studi coranici del XX secolo: l'introduzione alla traduzione del Corano," in *Il retaggio culturale di Alessando Bausani a un trentennio dalla sua morte*, ed. Claudio Lo Jacono, (Roma: Bardi Edizioni, 2021), 213–26; and also Dye, "Le corpus coranique," 744–48, who discusses an attitude of "secularization" and "naturalization" of the narrations of Islamic tradition, that is, their substantial reception by a certain criticism, once they are stripped of the religious outcome and explained in positivistic terms, for example, removing the supernatural contents.

Wansbrough's studies, and the studies of those who came after him, have changed this interpretative paradigm and have brought the theme of the origins of Islam and the Qur'an to the center of critical analysis with new lines of investigation.

The most recent production on the Qur'an, along these lines, in the wake of these novelties, has completely changed approach and perspective; additionally, the appearance of a growing number of Muslim scholars in the area of Islamic studies in the West has brought another novel element. The latter have often tried, together with non-Muslim colleagues, to follow a different course in the study of the Qur'an. Consequently, over the last fifty years, previous certainties have been swept away by new areas of Qur'anic studies or by the repositioning of old questions discussed with new methodologies.

On the one hand, with Wansbrough, and claiming to take inspiration from investigative techniques honed in other disciplines (in the case of Wansbrough, the methods of the *Formgeschichte* and the demythologization of the Scripture carried out by Rudolf Bultmann),[4] a fundamentally skeptical approach considers the Islamic tradition unusable, because of its late dating and because it has been invalidated by various contingencies which arose at the height of the Islamic era. In accordance with this interpretation, external, coeval evidence and consonance with the surrounding religious environment of late antiquity is the preferred key to a correct interpretation of the origins of Islam and, therefore, of the Qur'an.

The strengths of such a viewpoint derive from the problematic nature and the late and apologetic character of Islamic literature overall. Today, though, the dating and the geographical position of the fixation of the Qur'an and of the tradition on Muḥammad proposed by Wansbrough (200 years after the death of the Prophet and in the Mesopotamian region) are untenable because they are refuted by the surviving manuscript evidence.[5] This critical stance, cultivated by an increasingly reduced number of scholars, is accompanied by the skepticism derived from the

4 From his *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1931) and in his later works (for example, *Offenbarung und Heilsgeschehen*, München, A. Lempp, 1941).

5 The most significant study on the methodology adopted by Wansbrough is that of Devin J. Stewart, "Wansbrough, Bultmann, and the Theory of Variant Traditions in the Qur'ān," in *Qur'ānic Studies Today*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth and Michael A. Sells (London: Routledge, 2016), 17–51. According to Angelika Neuwirth, "Qur'ānic Studies and Historical-Critical Philology: The Qur'ān's Staging, Penetrating and Eclipsing of Biblical Tradition," *Philological Encounters* 1 (2016): 31–60, said situation should also be connected to the greater emphasis on the historical aspect, rather than the literary one of the Qur'an in the area of Western studies. On this topic, also see Travis Zadeh, "Qur'ānic Studies and the Literary Turn," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 135/2 (2015): 329–42; Joseph Witztum, "Variant Traditions, Relative Chronology, and the Study of Intra-Qur'anic Parallels," in *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts. Essays in Honor of*

old and traditional attitudes of Islamic studies that live on in certain philologic analyses or through some textual issues or phenomena that cannot be traced back to the Islamic confessional viewpoint. The religious attitude of the nineteenth-century authors, often of Christian or Jewish faith, is no longer so notably represented, but it is still evident in certain, more critical approaches and, in some cases, even deliberately anti-Muslim ones.

On the other hand, even in the area of Islamic studies, a confessional attitude, or in any case a quasi-confessional one, has gained ground. This attitude considers the Qur'an an exceptional theological and literary event, to a certain extent singular, and believes that many of its features can be explained utilizing, with some discernment, what is recorded in the Islamic tradition. Non-Muslim sympathetic scholars who deliberately want to expiate the old, negative, and preconceived judgements of more dated scholarship in Islamic and Oriental studies do not fail to make themselves heard, and they aim towards a relationship, or at least a dialogue with Muslims. Muslim scholars who study or teach in Western universities and who generally focus on literary aspects of the Qur'anic text to defend its originality and, in a less direct manner, its unique, if not sacred, character, may have different goals but a similar attitude.

Between these two extremes, many other intermediate positions uphold less clear-cut and more articulated viewpoints, and they contend with the identification of specific problems or characteristics. They avoid a polarization that determines positions that do not dialogue with each other and that struggle to find a common ground and, accordingly, fail in their attempt, in historical research, to move ahead and to build, piece by piece, shared knowledge.

The vast bibliography, with often centripetal directives, which aims towards segmented lines of research, often in contrast with others, is an inherent and almost inevitable problem in humanistic research, also in relation to the Qur'an. More than extreme specialization, it is the inability to move away from preconceived positions and the circularity of an investigation that believes it already has all the answers in its premises that represent the greatest pitfalls that preclude the possibility of reaching shared conclusions.

In writing this extensive introduction, my intention was to offer a non-confessional key to understanding the Qur'an, which took this polarization into consideration and aimed to assess the state of the research, highlighting the limits of various approaches and points upon which to build other avenues of research. The Qur'an, both because of its contents and because of its form,

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Professor Patricia Crone, ed. Benham Sadeghi, Asad Q. Ahmed, Robert Hoyland and Adam Silverstein (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 1–50.

challenges each analysis and displays unique characteristics and aspects that continuously interrogate Muslim exegetes and critical Western analyses. The certain and sound answers that can be offered will not be many. Nonetheless, some major points can be anticipated.

I believe that few doubts can remain as to the fact that in the formative environment described by the Islamic tradition, in the Arabian Peninsula, a religious message connected to a prophet like Muḥammad did emerge which displayed many elements of continuity with the religious character of the region in late antiquity, and with novel and original elements connected to the formative environment and inherent to the creation of a new religious message. This message was recorded in writing in a sufficiently stable manner toward the middle of the seventh century in a form that roughly corresponds to the Qur'an we possess today. In contrast to the traditional Muslim approach to the canonization of the Qur'an, the text contains many elements that are susceptible to other interpretations. Among scholars, there is a diversity of opinion about the combination of oral and written processes that ultimately produced the text that was eventually promulgated as the official version.

A sound, critical point of view that is hopefully not disturbed by other factors cannot directly engage with the confessional viewpoint. These are, after all, doubts that concern the human sphere of preserving the divine message, and that which the first community of believers heard and then attributed to its Prophet. This introduction, therefore, does not aim to analyze the ideal text of the Qur'an that the believer considers perfect and concluded, but the Qur'an as a product entrusted to the Muslim community and to Muslims in a specific historical moment; subsequently reconstructed by them and handed down in a specific form, with specific contents and a textual history, as well as an essential impact on the fate of this community.

Except for the respect for a core of faith that refers to a celestial archetype that guarantees the divine nature of the sacred text, in that it is preserved in the heart and recited (*qur'ān*), the history of the Qur'an in the form we present and discuss here pertains completely to human vicissitudes, which are anything but perfect, to the complex and non-uniform memory of the Companions of the Prophet, and to the troubled history of the materiality of the text (*muṣḥaf*).

This history is the object of a book such as this one, which examines those Islamic traditions that preserve its memory with due caution – but with admiration for the immense library built throughout the centuries, which is one of the most significant products of Islamic civilization – and examines studies of various types, from Islamic literature or Western Islamic studies, or from other fields, which have offered a contribution in order to comprehend the various mysterious aspects that surround the Qur'an.

1 Contents

The Qur'an is a book divided in one hundred fourteen suras (Ar. *sūra*, pl. *suwar*) or chapters, within which the flow of the words is organized in numbered verses of variable length. Only a few translations attempt to present a graphic presentation in strophic form, evoking its poetic nature, whereas the versions in Arabic have pages that do not include, in general, any interruptions. The Qur'an does not have an introduction that explains the contexts and the structure of the book: it immediately enters into dialogue with the reader through the contents of the first chapter (the "Opening" sura), which functions as an introduction.

This initial chapter of the Qur'an is made up of seven verses that are the most recited in Islamic religiosity and devotion, through their cadenced repetition by each believer during daily prayers.

Text no. 1: The Opening

1. In the name of the Merciful and Compassionate God.
2. Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Beings,
3. The Merciful, the Compassionate,
4. Master of the Day of Reckoning.
5. You we serve;
   to You we turn for help.
6. Guide us on the straight path,
7. The path of those You have blessed,
   not of those against whom there is anger
   nor of those who go astray.

The nature of the text is immediately clear to the reader. It is an invocation that leads the reader into a well-defined religious imaginary. On account of these contents and its liturgical use, the Opening was placed at the beginning of the Qur'an and has represented a place of practice to fully explore any possible meaning regarding the topics explicitly recalled: God is powerful and compassionate, He dominates time and its end; it is He that humankind (we) must address to be guided along the righteous path, differently from those who enrage him or who make mistakes; God is also just, which is why the Day of Reckoning, or of Judgment, belongs to Him. Because of its being a microcosm of the entire Qur'an, the Opening sura is also called *Umm al-Qurʾān* (The Mother of the Qur'an).

This is how the Qur'an begins and so, accordingly, do the encyclopedic Medieval commentaries and volumes of all those who, throughout the history of

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Islamic civilization or Qur'anic and Islamic studies, have sought to understand the form of the sacred text.[6]

1.1 Prelude

With the second chapter, the Sura of the "Cow," the tone and the topics change radically, and the reader is captivated by a text with different tone and contents. The Sura of the Cow, with its almost three hundred long verses, is the longest chapter of the Qur'an, and its themes and tones alternate in a sometimes cryptic and unclear manner. The text needs a different approach with respect to the Opening sura. This condition evokes what various types of scholars, including Muslims, have frequently pointed out: the complex nature of this difficult text needs mediation that allows its nature, originality, contents, and form to be better appreciated.

From the first verses of the Sura of the Cow, the voice of God pronounces His discourse, addressing humankind and, in particular, recalcitrant unbelievers and believers who do good (Qur. 2:1–29), before a paragraph dedicated to the creation of Adam (Qur. 2:30–37). Afterwards, God presses the children of Israel and invites them to believe; the children of Israel resist, also evoking Pharaoh and Moses (Qur. 2:38–98), and the invitation continues, bringing into play (Muslim) believers, Christian, and Jews, through the figures of the prophets (Qur. 2:99–141). In the second half of the sura, there is a succession of prescriptions regarding, for example, the direction towards which to face during prayer (*qibla*) (Qur. 2:142–50, and others in Qur. 2:172–200, 216–44, 270–86), together

6 Amongst the studies in European languages dedicated to the Opening sura (*Fātiḥa*), we particularly recommend Paul Neuenkirchen, "La Fātiḥa: une introduction liturgique à la prière commune?" *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 166 (2016): 81–100; Mahmoud Ayoub, "The Prayer of Islam. A Presentation of Sūrat al-Fātiḥa in Muslim Exegesis," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion. Thematic Studies* 47/4 S (1979): 635–47; Simonetta Calderini, "*Tafsīr* of *ʿĀlamīn* in *Rabb al-ʿĀlamīn* in Qur'ān 1:2," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 57/1 (1994): 52–58; Raymond K. Farrin, *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation: A Study in Symmetry and Coherence in Islam's Holy Text* (Ashland, Oregon: White Cloud Press, 2014), 1–8, underlines the relationship with the final sura, no.114; Michel Cuypers, "Une analyse rhétorique du début et de la fin du Coran," in *al-Kitāb. La sacralité du texte dans le monde de l'Islam*, ed. Daniel de Smet, Godefroid De Callataÿ and J.M.F. van Reeth (Bruxelles-Leuven-Louvaine-la-Neuve: Société Belge d'Études Orientales, 2004), 235–49, proposes a comparison between the Opening sura and Psalms, especially Psalm no. 1. The Islamic publications are innumerable, see, for example, M. Fethullah Gülen, *The Opening. Al-Fatiha. Commentary on the First Chapter of the Qur'an* (Rutherford: Tughra Books, 2016).

with injunctions regarding divine will directed towards believers (Qur. 2:151–71), or towards believers, unbelievers, and the children of Israel (Qur. 2:201–15), as well as others for various reasons (Qur. 2:245–69).

The alternation of themes and certain peremptoriness in presenting the contents or in listing many elements render the first extended chapter of the Qur'an a sort of programmatic manifesto of what it contains and the way to recount it or evoke it. Not coincidentally, the Sura of the Cow, along with the Opening, has been fittingly defined a sort of compendium of the entire Qur'an. This is specifically due to its richness, to the peculiarities of its style in presenting the various themes that it discusses, along with its urgent tone that draws the reader into a vivid and direct reality, bringing him or her into play directly, without mediation.

Many themes are included in the Sura of the Cow. The Qur'an is defined a "book devoid of doubts" (Qur. 2:2) that has the function of a guide (Qur. 2:2, cf. 2:16, 2:38), that addresses believers but also, especially early on the sura, unbelievers, the unruly (Qur. 2:6), and the corrupters (Qur. 2:11–12). Eschatology already has a precise role, and it refers to the final destiny that will strike humankind, since there is an Afterlife (Qur. 2:4) and a Day of Resurrection (Qur. 2:174) that will serve to reward the believers: "that they will have gardens through which rivers flow . . . there they will have pure spouses" (Qur. 2:25), and a punishment (Qur. 2:162), to punish the unbelievers: "protect yourselves against the Fire, whose fuel is men and stones, which has been prepared for the unbelievers" (Qur. 2:24), with the fire that is Gehenna (Qur. 2:207). God often speaks directly in the sura, though there is no lack of precise definitions of His prerogatives and of His role (see. Text no. 2).

Text no. 2: Prerogatives and role of God

[God] who made the earth a resting-place for you
and the sky a canopy,
and who sent down water from the sky,
and through it brought forth a provision of fruits for you. (Qur. 2:22)
[It is] He who created for you all that is on earth.
Then He rose to heaven
and turned it into seven heavens.
He is aware of everything. (Qur. 2:29)

God is One and only (Qur. 2:163), He acts through his "signs" (Ar. *āyāt*, Qur. 2:38),[7] He guides those he wills along the straight path (Qur. 2:216), and He is powerful above all things (Qur. 2:106). Less significant is the role of Muḥammad, whose

7 *Āya* (pl. *āyāt*) means, besides "sign," "verse" (of the Qur'an), see p. 97–101.

name does not appear, while he is indicated in several passages as "our servant" (Qur. 2:23), as a messenger of God (Qur. 2:101), or as "your (i.e., of the believers) envoy" (Qur. 2:108).

The confines of an already shaped religious imaginary are established in this long chapter through the names of figures and locations of various types, which recall the religious history of the Near East, including patriarchs and prophets like Adam (Qur. 2:30) and Moses (Qur. 2:51). These are also connected to the mention of Calf (Qur. 2:54, 92), Manna (Qur. 2:57), Egypt (2:61), and of a short story involving a Cow that provides the title of the sura (Text no. 3).

Text no. 3: The tale of the Cow

And [recall] when Moses said to his people,
'God commands you to sacrifice a cow.'
They said, 'Are you making fun of us?'
He said, 'I take refuge with God from being among the ignorant.'
They said, 'Call to your Lord for us,
and let Him make clear to us what she is to be.'
He said, 'He says, "She is to be a cow
that is neither old nor immature,
but one whose age is between these."
Do as you are commanded.'
They said, 'Call to your Lord,
and let Him make clear to us
what her colour is to be.'
He said, 'He says, "She is to be a yellow cow
of bright colour,
pleasing to those who look [at her]".'
(...)
So they slew her – though they almost did not. (Qur. 2:67–73)

This sura also includes Jesus, the son of Mary (Qur. 2:87), Solomon (Qur. 2:102), Abraham and Ishmael (Qur. 2:124–25) who lay the foundation of a house (the Ka'ba), a temple devoted to God (Qur. 2:126), Jacob (Qur. 2:132), Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac (Qur. 2:133), Saul (Qur. 2:247), Moses and Aaron (2:248), and Goliath (2:249). Other figures recall the same imaginary or introduce less explicit references, such as the case of the angels and the demon Iblīs (Satan) (Qur. 2:34), Pharaoh (Qur. 2:49), and Gabriel (2:97) as well as Gabriel and Michael (Qur. 2:98), the angels Hārūt and Mārūt in Babylon (Qur. 2:102). It is God who sent all of these prophets (Qur. 2:213). These names and the events or stories to which they allude refer to other religious communities that are directly mentioned, such as, for example, the Sons of Israel with their books (Qur. 2:40–41), Jews, Christians, and Sabians (Qur. 2:62); Christians and Jews (Qur. 2:101–3) and the People of the Book (Qur. 2:109). Also included in the Sura of

the Cow is the Qur'anic affirmation that "there is no compulsion in religion" (Qur. 2:256), which, as can be easily imagined, holds important theological implications.

If these citations, and the contents of the relative verses, act as definitions and identifying references, there is no lack of injunctions and actual prescriptions for the recipients of this divine message. In the Sura of the Cow, we encounter dietary injunctions: "He has forbidden for you carrion; blood; the flesh of the pig; and anything that has been dedicated to any other than God" (Qur. 2:173), the prescription regarding the law of retaliation in terms of homicide (Qur. 2:178, 181), fighting on God's path (Qur. 2:190), an explicit pronouncement against usury (Qur. 2:275), another one against the consumption of wine and the practice of gambling (Text no. 4), and the injunction against marrying idolatrous women, together with other prescriptions regarding women, for example on repudiation (Qur. 2:228), or, finally, one dedicated to debts and debtors (Qur. 2:282).

Text no. 4: Wine and *maysir*

They ask you about wine and *maysir* (gambling).
Say, 'In both these is great sin,
but some benefits to the people;
but the sin in them is greater than the benefit.' (Qur. 2:219)

Another injunction regards worship more specifically, such as fasting during Ramadan and its relative prescriptions (Qur. 2:183–85, 187), the institution or existence of a sacred month (Qur. 2:194), of a pilgrimage (2:158, 197) and, together with this, charity (Qur. 2:270), the prayers with which to be consistent (Qur. 2:238) and about which it is peremptorily ordered: "Perform prayer and pay the *zakāt*, and bow with those who bow." (Qur. 2:43).

The Sura of the Cow, more than the Opening sura, constitutes the ideal prelude of the Qur'an and already foreshadows the characteristics and the originality of the Qur'anic text. It reveals themes, registers, and even tones in a sort of introductory summary of what the believer, the reader, and the listener can find in the text in its entirety. The Sura of the Cow has not failed to stimulate Qur'anic studies and to intrigue believers and scholars, also in relation to one of the most debated themes as to the nature of the Qur'an: the unity or lack thereof of the individual suras in relation to the process of inspiration, diffusion, and writing of the entire Qur'an and, specifically, for the longer suras, such as the Sura of the Cow.

Further discussion of the chronology and unity of the suras has been left to a specific chapter (pp. 60–77); here, it is useful to underscore the exemplary character of the Sura of the Cow, since there has been no lack of discussions of its unity or lack thereof by the Islamic exegetical tradition and by Western

scholars: their efforts aim to explain some of the specificities of its content or form, through various hypotheses and proposals that are often divergent. The Sura of the Cow, like the entire Qur'an, is characterized by a style that is composite and apparently disorderly but, at the same time, thorough, with frequent references; it is further characterized by sudden and unexpected variations in tone, accompanied by symmetries that go beyond the individual verses, and by an explosive, evocative capacity.

Some more recent studies have underscored the exemplary character of the Sura of the Cow, highlighting thematic unity, symmetrical structure, or its character, inclusive and representative of the Qur'an in its entirety. These are all useful and interesting keys, even though, overall, they have not imposed a singular vision. It can be said that exegetical and other studies of the Sura of the Cow are, themselves, emblematic of the current problems in the study of the form and the contents of the Qur'an, and of how fascinating and interesting suggestions have not imposed singular evaluations or established interpretations, both in terms of the form and the nature of the sura, and in terms of the Qur'an in its entirety.[8]

8 Amongst the readings and interpretations of the Sura of the Cow, we particularly refer to Marianna Klar, "Text-Critical Approaches to Sura Structure: Combining Synchronicity with Diachronicity in *Sūrat al-Baqara*. Part One," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 19/1 (2017): 1–38; Marianna Klar, "Text-Critical Approaches to Sura Structure: Combining Synchronicity with Diachronicity in *Sūrat al-Baqara*. Part Two," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 19/2 (2017): 64–105; Marianna Klar, "Through the Lens of the Adam Narrative: A Re-consideration of *Sūrat al-Baqara*," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 17/2 (2015): 24–46; David E. Smith, "The Structure of *al-Baqarah*," *The Muslim World* 91 (2001): 121–36, on the unity of the sura; A. H. Mathias Zahniser, "Major Transitions and thematic Borders in Two Long Sūras: al-Baqara and al-Nisā'," in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'ān*, ed. Issa J. Boullata (London; Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000), 27–42; Jean-Louis Déclais, "Lecture de la deuxième Sourate du Coran," *Chemins du Dialogue* 24 (2004): 13–91; Nevin Reda, *The al-Baqara Crescendo. Understanding the Qur'an's Style, Narrative Structure, and Running Themes* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017); Raymond K. Farrin, "Surat al-Baqara: A Structural Analysis," *The Muslim World* 100 (2010): 17–32; Farrin, *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation*, 9–21; Bertram Schmitz, *Der Koran: Sure 2 "Die Kuh". Ein religionhistorischer Kommentar* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 2009), on the overall equilibrated and emblematic structure. In his study of the commentary on the Sura of the Cow by Bāb Sayyid ʿAlī Muḥammad Shīrāzī, Todd Lawson, *Tafsīr as Mystical Experience: Intimacy and Ecstasy in Quran Commentary. Tafsīr Sūrat al-Baqara of Sayyid ʿAlī Muḥammad Shīrāzī, The Bàb (1819–1850)* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2018), 1, the author speaks of the "Qur'an in miniature"; on the unity and structure of the Sura of the Cow, see also Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an. A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003), 201–23. Ziauddin Sardar, *Reading the Qur'an. The Contemporary Relevance of the Sacred Text of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), after a general part, specifically discusses the Opening sura and the Sura of the

1.2 Themes of the Qur'an

If the previously summarized Sura of the Cow is a useful epitome of the Qur'an, and a sort of Qur'an in miniature, this chapter does not exhaust all of the themes addressed in the sacred book. The unique importance of every single word or verse renders the entire revelation a collection of milestones of normative and evocative importance, able to open a myriad of meanings in various directions. This establishes that a quantitative evaluation of the arguments most frequently occurring in the chapters of the Qur'an does not entail a consequent judgment of religious relevance: even a point touched upon in just one word can be as important as a theme or formula that recurs many times. The role of the repetitions and the prevalence of certain themes is, without a doubt, indicative of that which constitutes a fundamental part of Islam preached by the Prophet Muḥammad, or that which the revelation considered central. However, each word has the same normative value, independent of the frequency and constancy with which it appears in the sacred text.

The one hundred fourteen suras that make up the Qur'an contain a variety of themes, expressed in different styles and modalities. Themes previously discussed in connection with the Sura of the Cow return in other chapters, in the same, similar, or even profoundly different manners. In the Islamic conception, according to which the Qur'an is the word of God, uncreated or created but always perfect in its literal expression, every aspect of the believer's life, both individual and communal, in the unfolding of history, before and after the advent of Islam, finds correspondence in the Qur'an. The Qur'anic word includes everything, even if it does not describe it, does not recount it, and does not present it in a narrative sequence that has an explanatory function. Instead, there are specific themes and topics which are recalled constantly, evoked, and implicitly alluded to; this is carried out through literary techniques that absolve the need to conceive them as a word revealed directly to a prophet and messenger (Muḥammad) in a certain historical period, with the function of converting the humanity that surrounded him and listened to him.

Cow, dealing with themes and concepts as an example for the rest of the text. For a discussion of Bell's thesis that, also in this case, divides the sura in multiple sequences, identifying additional passages or those not attributable to a precise unit, see Klar, "Text-Critical Approaches to Sura Structure. Part two," 89–96. More bibliographical information about single Qur'anic suras, in this case the first and the second, can be found in Amir-Moezzi and Dye, *Le Coran des historiens*, vol. 3 (*Bibliographie des études sur le Coran*), 13–18. Islamic literature on the Sura of the Cow is considerable; amongst what is available in a European language, see Irfan A. Khan, *Reflections on the Qur'an. Understanding Sūrahs Al-Fātiḥah & Al-Baqarah* (Markfield: Islamic Foundation, 2006).

Books of various dimensions have traversed Islamic history to analyze concepts and contents that appear in the Qur'an. The confessional approaches have chosen the exegetical path, also to unearth, in the Qur'anic text, that which was most hidden. However, what was clear and evident did not receive less attention in theological and traditional discussions. In the history of non-confessional Qur'anic studies in the West, thematic analyses, summarizing compendia, or more detailed studies that put the Qur'anic verses in chronological order or analyze them as to various themes, have always existed and are still numerous.

The choice of the themes analyzed is dictated, first, by what the Qur'an contains, but also by cultural agendas and trends that accompany the times in which these studies were written. Endless research is dedicated to what the Qur'an states regarding specific themes, indirectly highlighting what the scholars were looking for in the Qur'an and, therefore, in Islam, in various eras, and particularly in contemporary times. The analysis of the concept of *jihād*, or the mention of women and issues regarding gender in the Qur'an reflect different perceptions and, to some extent, new ones. At the same time, they show the capacity of the Qur'anic word to question believers and unbelievers who aim to obtain meaning based on the historical and cultural interests of the present and who look to the Qur'an to better understand Islam and Muslims.

1.2.1 God

The protagonist of the Qur'an is God, *Allāh*. Faith in a God, one and only, creator and sovereign, omnipotent and merciful, is at the heart of Islamic faith. This centrality emerges with great clarity and evocative force in the Qur'an, which is constantly pervaded by the urgency to proclaim as absolute truth the uniqueness and unity of this God. He, the protagonist of the Qur'an, unfurls into a plurality of voices. He speaks in the first person, and evokes, recounts, describes, or recalls His Messenger or humankind, both non-believers or believers, in the second person. The Qur'an also speaks of God in the third person, giving Him some implicit definitions, adding other elements to His voice that, with often vibrant tones, mark the contents and the style of the Qur'an from the first to the last chapter.

First, the Qur'an represents God's urgent summons of humankind to this faith in Him alone and to communicate to them, contextually, His contrariety in the face of humankind's reluctance to believe. There is no need to proclaim God's existence, which is presumed; rather, the Qur'an does not spare repeated references to His immeasurable qualities, which are spread through His continuous work of creation that He has made available to humankind and through the

signs from which humankind can obtain full and incontrovertible awareness of divine Omnipotence.[9]

The theme develops through a variety of contents, voices, and styles. In fact, the Qur'an says many things about God, mentioning Him in many ways, evoking Him with different names, and describing his Omnipotence in various forms; this begins with the prodigy of creation and the prefiguration of the ultimate destiny of the end of times that, in the shorter suras, becomes imminent, while in the longer ones, at the beginning of the Qur'an, is less compelling. God is the creator, He who punishes and forgives, He who comforts and warns, He who stands beside Muḥammad and spurs him on, He who sets out righteous conduct for humanity, to comply with the duty to respect the privilege given to humankind in creation. God is sovereign. He commands and is the judge, the best of judges, a confident leader, and a bearer of a pact. Above all, He spreads His mercy, even though this does not preclude the possibility of giving voice to His anger, which can be volatile.[10] God, more than a protagonist, is, in the end, the only reality that overflows from the word of the revelation — nothing can compete with Him.

Said truth is constantly repeated in the Qur'an, with an insistence that exegetical and historical Islamic literature finds in conflict with the divinities of pre-Islamic, Arab paganism. The Qur'an names some of these divinities in passages that seek to underscore their falsity and inefficacy. It is a grave and terrible sin to associate (*shirk*) others, persons or things, to God, thereby corrupting the divine alterity of the Omnipotent, and surrendering to polytheism.

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9 On the theme of God in the Qur'an, in various senses, see Stefan Wild, *Mensch, Prophet und Gott im Koran. Muslimische Exegeten des 20. Jahrhunderts und das Menschenbild der Moderne* (Münster: Rhema, 2001); Rosalind W. Gwynne "Sign, Analogy, and the *Via Negativa*: Approaching the Transcendent God of the Qur'an," in *Sacred Tropes: Tanakh, New Testament, and the Qur'an as Literature and Culture*, ed. Roberta S. Sabbath (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 53–63; Bell and Watt, *Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 148–53; see also Christian J. Robin, "Allāh avant Muhammad", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 49 (2020): 1–145.

10 In the studies on the figure of God in the Qur'an, the weight and the role of mercifulness is underlined. According to Bruce B. Lawrence, *Who Is Allah?* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), God in the Qur'an is merciful above all, while according to Gabriel S. Reynolds, *Allah. God in the Qur'an* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 4–7, the Qur'anic God's sense of justice implies that, alongside mercifulness, anger is not less present. As to the role and the centrality of mercifulness, see Thomas J. O'Shaughnessy, *The Koranic Concept of the Word of God* (Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1948); Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'ān* (Montreal: McGill University, Institute of Islamic Studies: McGill University Press, 1966). On the rebelliousness of humans that makes God's initiative in sending prophets merciful, see Gabriel S. Reynolds, "'The Human Was Created Out of Haste.' On Prophecy and the Problem of Human Nature in the Qur'an," *Religions* 12/8 (2021): 589, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080589.

Text no. 5: God (*Allāh*)

Say, 'He is God, One,
God, the Eternal,
Who has not begotten nor has been begotten.
There is no equal to Him.' (Qur. 112:1–4)
Your God is One God;
there is no god except Him,
the Merciful and Compassionate. (Qur. 2:163)
To God belongs the sovereignty of heaven and earth.
He gives life and He brings death.
Apart from God you have no protector or helper. (Qur. 9:116)
God is the Creator of everything.
He is Guardian over everything.
He owns the keys of the heavens and the earth,
and those who disbelieve in the signs of God
– those are the losers. (Qur. 39:62–63)
The originator of the heavens and the earth.
Whenever He decrees a thing,
He says to it only 'Be', and it is. (Qur. 2:117)
Your Lord is well aware of those who stray from His way
and He is well aware of those who are rightly guided. (Qur. 6:117)
Your Lord is God
who created the heavens and the earth in six days,
then set himself on the Throne,
covering the day with the night,
which seeks it swiftly,
with the sun and the moon and the stars subject to His command.
His indeed is the creation and the command.
Blessed be God, Lord of all beings. (Qur. 7:54)

The prerogatives of the Qur'anic God are communicated through themes and arguments that recur with great frequency and aim to draw a particular type of attention. Though not made explicit in a systematic manner, one of the purposes of creation, it can be inferred, is to test man in his relationships with other creatures in view of the Judgment at the end of time. Nature is the place where the signs of God and His favor are expressed, and in which His signs unfold, and a visible and irrefutable representation of His sovereignty is shown.[11] The Omnipotence of God manifests itself in many forms, so much so that it appears in many passages as a pre-ordainer of every single fact or action in the world and, therefore, of humankind itself. Everything that happens to humankind is determined by God (Text no. 5).

11 Thomas J. O'Shaughnessy, *Creation and Teaching of the Qur'ān* (Roma: Biblical Institute Press, 1985).

Nevertheless, amongst all the signs, that of creation, of the world and of humankind, is the most evident, because it exemplifies His Omnipotence to the greatest degree, that is, the unique, divine ability to create everything that is in the universe from nothing. Nothing can be more prodigious and illustrative, in it, than the creation of the human being from clay and then from semen, in which God determined the creation of the first man and his descendants (Text no. 6).

Text no. 6: The creation of humankind

[He is the one] Who has made well everything that He has created.
He began the creation of man from clay;
Then He made his seed from an extract of base fluid;
Then He fashioned him and breathed some of His spirit into him;
and He made for you hearing and sight and hearts. (Qur. 32:7–9)
He has created man from a drop of sperm. (Qur. 16:4)
[It is] God [who] created you from dust,
then from fluid;
then He made you pairs.
No female conceives or brings forth,
save with His knowledge.
No one is given a long life or has his life cut short,
but it is in a record. (Qur. 35:11)
He created man from clay like potter's clay. (Qur. 55:14)

Humankind is, however, only one of the signs of divine Omnipotence, since He created all the wonders of the universe, such as the skies and the earth, the alternation of day and night, all the animals and the plants, rain, every living being, winds and clouds. Nothing escapes this principle, and every thing can only be a sign of the Creator (see, for example: Qur. 21:30–33; 30:19–27).

The most prominent term used to designate God in the Qur'an is *Allāh*, a term that was already known to pagans, Jews, and Christians of the time; therefore, it expresses the idea of God, without a specific confessional connotation.[12] The Qur'an includes, though, other names that are used to qualify some specific characteristics of the Qur'anic God. The term *rabb* (Lord, with or without an article) recurs with great frequency, almost a thousand times, sometimes used by God to mention Himself, and to highlight God's qualities as a master, guardian, and possessor.

Another significant Qur'anic term, which seems to take on the characteristics of an alternative name of the divinity, is *ar-Raḥmān* (The Merciful). *Ar-*

12 Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran. Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung* (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistics Studies, 1964), 95–119; Andrew Rippin, "God," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, 223–33; Massimo Campanini, *Il Corano e la sua interpretazione* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2004), 39–46.

Raḥmān appears at the beginning of every sura, except for sura no. 9, in the introductory formula termed the *Basmala* (pp. 99–100) and another fifty-six times within the text proper of the suras, as an epithet for God. Sixteen of these occurrences are found in just one sura, the Sura of Mary (no. 19).

Text no. 7: *ar-Raḥmān*

Say, 'Call to God or call to the Merciful.
Whichever you call to is possessed of the fairest names'. (Qur. 17:110)
Then We shall pluck out from every party
whichever of them has been most stubborn against the Merciful. (Qur. 19:69)

The passages that use *ar-Raḥmān* as a privileged name to indicate the divinity are traditionally identified in the chronology of the revelation as dating back to the Meccan period of Muḥammad's life, before his definitive affirmation in Medina after the Hegira (622).

The presence of this name is significant for various reasons. In certain passages, the term is actually a substitute for *Allāh* and almost seems to suggest a personification or a different identity. This suggestion is made even more relevant by historical attestations, independent from the Qur'an, which tell us that *ar-Raḥmān* was used as God's name in the cultural and religious context, not exclusively connected to only one confession, in Yemen. Epigraphic evidence highlights the use of the term (for example, in the similar form *RḤMNN*) in connection to divine prerogatives, and suggests that it could be a name of God that circulated in southern Arabia.

This data has sometimes been used by some to hypothesize possible references to an alternative divine name and, therefore, to a coeval religious reality of the prophet Muḥammad's mission.[13] Not less important, in this context and in this respect, is certain material evidence connected to the Qur'anic text in the first two centuries, in which *ar-Raḥmān* substitutes for the name of *Allāh* in para-Qur'anic passages or verses. This is a sign of the importance of the epithet,

13 See Andreas Kaplony, "Comparing Qur'ānic Suras with Pre-800 Documents (with an Appendix on Subtypes of Pre-800 Kitāb Documents)," *Der Islam* 95 (2018): 321–23, with a list of bibliographical references on the topic; Andrew Rippin, "RḤMNN and the Ḥanīfs," in *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adams*, ed. Wael B. Hallaq and Donald P. Little (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 153–68; Jacques Jomier, "Le nom divin 'al-Raḥmān' dans le Coran," in *Mélanges Louis Massignon*, vol. 2 (Damas: Institut Français de Damas, 1957), 361–81; Theodor Nöldeke, Friedrich Schwally, Gotthelf Bergsträßer and Otto Pretzl, *The History of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 99 (or. ed. Theodor Nöldeke and Friedrich Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorāns*, 2nd. ed., 3 vols., Leipzig: T. Weicher, 1909–1938, vol. 1, 121): *ar-Raḥmān* is introduced in the second Meccan period to then disappear in the revelations of the third Meccan period and in the Medinan one.

also due to the pervasiveness of the *Basmala* and to the significantly distinctive Qur'anic occurrences.[14]

The Islamic conception of "the names of God" refers to divine epithets, to those verses that affirm that "Whichever you call to is possessed of the fairest names" (see, for example, Qur. 17:110, Text no. 7), but is not directly connected to the names used for God in the Qur'an. The successive exegetical traditions that enumerate a total of ninety-nine names actually include attributes that can be ascribed to God, or that refer to Him, and that occur or are evoked in Qur'anic verses in the numerous passages that speak of God, His behavior, and His prerogatives.[15]

1.2.2 Muḥammad

If God is the protagonist of the Qur'an or, rather, the speaker, the Prophet Muḥammad is the one who is called to accept the first divine message. Muḥammad is God's interlocutor; he is the one who receives and then communicates the revelation to others, but is above all the one to whom a considerable part of the message is addressed. However, God did not speak only once in a sort of closed dialogue; rather, He literally accompanied His prophet in his vicissitudes and throughout his life, the life of his community, and that of humankind overall.

Muḥammad is also an implicit co-protagonist because, differently from God, he is almost never called by his name nor described in an univocal manner. His identification is clear in the successive Islamic historiography, but not in the Qur'an, where God appears continuously, while His interlocutor often remains undefined.

Text no. 8: The name Muḥammad

Muḥammad is only a messenger.
[There have been] messengers who have passed away before him. (Qur. 3:144)
Muḥammad is not the father of any of your men,
but the messenger of God and the seal of the prophets. (Qur. 33:40)

14 Frédéric Imbert, "Le Coran des pierres: statistiques et premières analyses," in *Le Coran: Nouvelles Approches*, ed. Mehdi Azaiez, with the collaboration of Sabrina Mervin (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2013), 118–19. Another very mysterious name included in one of the short suras (Qur. 112:2) is *aṣ-Ṣamad* (the Eternal), about which see Uri Rubin, "*Al-Ṣamad* and the High God. An Interpretation of *Sūra* CXII," *Der Islam* 61 (1984): 197–217; Arne A. Ambros, "Die Analyse von Sure 112," *Der Islam* 63 (1986): 219–47.

15 Devin J. Stewart, "Divine Epithets and the *Dibacchius*: *Clausulae* and Qur'anic Rhythm," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 15/2 (2013): 22–64.

[T]hose who believe and do righteous deeds
and believe in what has been sent down to Muḥammad. (Qur. 47:2)
Muḥammad is the messenger of God.
Those who are with him
are hard on the unbelievers,
merciful among themselves. (Qur. 48:29)

There is no lack of descriptions and mentions of the prophet and messenger, unnamed recipient of the divine word. The Qur'an makes constant reference to a prophet (*nabī*) and messenger (*rasūl*) who receives it, and who undoubtedly constitutes the first recipient of the divine message, but the name Muḥammad is mentioned only four times in the Qur'an (Text no. 8, to which it may be possible to add Qur. 61:6)[16] and, in addition, in a way that does not allow access to other information. The urgency to communicate, which inspires a dramatic style, made up of an intense dialogue or characterized by a direct relationship, without interest in narrative framework, is the first factor most likely at the root of this condition.

If the name Muḥammad appears sparingly, other verses do explain some of the prerogatives of this prophet and messenger. God, for example, made him His instrument in that "[it is] He who has sent among the common people a messenger from among themselves, to recite His signs to them and to purify them and to teach them the Scripture and the Wisdom" (Qur. 62:2). He is the object of repeated injunctions that admonish, warn, and announce the truths brought by the word to humankind (evidently to his own contemporaries): "O messenger, proclaim what has been sent down to you from your Lord. If you do not do that, you are not delivering His message." (Qur. 5:67). Elsewhere, it is specified that this prophet does not belong to the line of Jewish prophecy, since he is evoked as "the messenger, the prophet of the Gentiles" (Qur. 7:157). Other definitions of his role and duty are not lacking, such as when God orders him to affirm: "I am a warner and a bringer of good tidings to you from Him" (Qur. 11:2), or "O prophet, We have sent you as a witness and a bringer of good tidings and a warner, and as a summoner to God, by His permission, and as an illuminating lamp. And give the believers the good tidings that they will have a great bounty from God" (Qur. 33:45–47). God is alongside His messenger (Qur. 3:172), and the prophet "believes in God and believes the believers and is a

16 Qur. 61:6 includes the name Aḥmad, which, according to the Qur'anic exegesis refers to Muḥammad, a name that shares the verbal root with Aḥmad: "And [recall] when Jesus, the son of Mary said, 'O Children of Israel, I am God's messenger to you, confirming the Torah that was [revealed] before me, and giving you good tidings of a messenger who will come after me, whose name will be Aḥmad' " (Qur. 61:6).

mercy for those of you who believe. Those of you who vex the messenger of God will have a painful torment" (Qur. 9:61).

This divine consideration and God's constant spurring do not prevent the reluctance of contemporaries from generating accusations of various types towards the messenger: the unbelievers, according to the Qur'an, accuse him of being a wizard (Qur. 10:1) or of being a poet, asking him, challenging him: "Are we to abandon our gods for the sake of a poet, a man possessed?" (Qur. 37:36; cf. 52:29–30). In other passages they accuse him of not being an angel: if that had been the case, they would have believed his divine message (cf. Qur. 41:14). They almost force him to escape, given their persistence in not believing what he communicated as a revelation that came from God: "They almost scared you from the land, to drive you from it. In that case they would have stayed after you only a short time." (Qur. 17:76).[17]

The Qur'an dedicates more space to the modes of communication and to clarifying in which manner the Omnipotent God conveys His revelation than to the precise identity of the receiver of the message. The word is a divine prerogative, which permits its communication, but there are many ways to convey the Qur'anic revelation to Muḥammad and to humanity. This can occur through a

17 On these topics, see Denis Gril, "The Prophet in the Qur'ān," in *The Presence of the Prophet in Early Modern and Contemporary Islam. Volume I. The Prophet between Doctrine, Literature and Arts: Historical Legacies and Their Unfolding*, ed. Denis Gril, Stephan Reichmuth and Dilek Sarmis (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2022), 37–78; Willem A. Bijlefeld, "A Prophet or More than a Prophet? Some Observations on the Qur'ānic Use of the Terms 'Prophet' and 'Apostle'," *The Muslim World* 59/1 (1969): 1–28. Arthur Jeffery, *The Qur'ān as Scripture* (New York: R.F. Moore Co, 1952), 18–46; Walid A. Saleh, "The Preacher of the Meccan Qur'an: Deuteronomistic History and Confessionalism in Muḥammad's Early Preaching," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 20/2 (2018): 74–111; for a comparative analysis, actually not very supported in Islamic studies, see Jarl E. Fossum, "The Apostle Concept in the Qur'ān and Pre-Islamic Near Eastern Literature," in *Literary Heritage of Classical Islam: Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of James A. Bellamy*, ed. Mustansir Mir and Jarl E. Fossum (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1993), 149–67; Bell and Watt, *Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 17–39. On the theme of the revelation to angels or messengers and similar questions, see Patricia Crone, "Angels versus Humans as Messengers of God," in *Revelation, Literature, and Community in Late Antiquity*, ed. Philippa L. Townsend and Moulie Vidas (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 315–36; Kevin van Bladel, "Heavenly Cords and Prophetic Authority in the Quran and Its Late Antique Context," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 70 (2007): 223–46. On the theme of the non-angelic nature of the prophet and messenger and its possible origins or historical and religious references, see Gerald R. Hawting, "Has God Sent a Mortal as a Messenger? (Q 17:95). Messengers and Angels in the Qur'ān," in *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context 2*, ed. Gabriel S. Reynolds (London-New York: Routledge, 2011), 372–89.

word or a book, or through signs, inspiration, prayer, and many other forms (see, for example, Text no. 9).

Text no. 9: The Revelation

We have sent down to you the Scripture with the truth. (Qur. 4:105)
Thus God, [who is] Mighty and Wise reveals to you and to those before you. (Qur. 42:3)
Then he inspired his servant with his inspiration. His heart has not lied [about] what he saw. (Qur. 53:10–11)

The functions of divine communication are clarified by the various terms that introduce and define it, such as *tanzīl* (descent), *āya* (sign), *kalām* (word), *waḥy* (revelation), *kitāb* (book), *Qur'ān* (recitation/Qur'an), and many others. The keyword seems to be *tanzīl*, which actually means "to make [something] descend," and which becomes a synonym of revelation. This implies a precise movement from above, and the centrality of the concept is expressed in the frequency of this verbal root in correspondence to mentions of the book, of the Qur'an and its parts, which underscores a relationship between an above and a below, from God towards the man and prophet.

His word is descent (from the heavens); this is the central point. His word cannot be confused with human words, given that it is not influenced by relations amongst men, but descends, in its perfection, reaching the messenger who has to communicate it to other men, the prophet. An instrument of communication *par excellence*, for the descent (*tanzīl*) of the divine message, beyond the word, is revelation (*waḥy*), a consequence of the divine ability to touch hearts and inspire.[18]

A particularly significant passage, also in terms of the relevant theological concepts that it conveys, is that in which the prophet is defined as *ummī* (Text no. 10). The exegetical Islamic tradition preferably understands *ummī* as "illiterate" even though, most likely, its original meaning should be investigated in relation to the Jews and their opposition to Muḥammad and, accordingly, as a reference to the prophet's non-Jewishness, that is, his being a "Gentile."

The Qur'anic occurrences, though, are not univocal, especially when the term is not used in connection with Muḥammad; even the context in which they appear most frequently is the comparison, precisely, with the Jews.

18 On these topics, see Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran*, 133–97; Stefan Wild, "'We Have Sent Down to Thee the Book with the Truth': Spatial and Temporal Implications of the Qur'anic Concepts of *Nuzūl*, *Tanzīl* and *ʾInzāl*," in *The Qur'an as Text*, ed. Stefan Wild (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 137–53; Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même. Vocabulaire et argumentation du discours coranique autoréférentiel* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2013), 107–13. On *waḥy* in the Qur'an and on the concept of inspiration, see Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même*, 113–32.

Text no. 10: *Ummī*

Those who follow the messenger, the prophet of the Gentiles (*an-nabī al-ummī*), whom they will find mentioned in the Torah and the Gospel in their possession. (Qur. 7:157)
Believe in God and His messenger,
the prophet of the Gentiles (*an-nabī al-ummī*),
who believes in God and His words. (Qur. 7:158)

The expression became important when Muḥammad's uniqueness and excellence and his sincerity in communicating the perfection of the Qur'anic revelation had to be defined fully. Addressing believers of other religions, or during the later internal Islamic debate, the Prophet, founder of Islam, was the bearer of a Qur'an that he could not have created himself, since he was illiterate and unable to produce a text of that type. Islamic interpretations are not, however, univocal, and there is no lack of varied interpretations that attest to the problematic comprehension of the term. Not even in Western Qur'anic studies has there been a lack of different interpretations, even though there is a preference for the interpretation of *ummī* as referring to Muḥammad's non-Jewish origin. The definition of the *ummī* prophet should mean "of the Gentiles" and would establish, with the advent of the Arab prophet, Muḥammad's unrelatedness to the descendants of Jewish prophets.[19]

1.2.3 Angels, *jinn*, and demons

Passages and verses of the Qur'an include other figures that populate creation, though they have a different and liminal condition between the visible world and the reality hidden from human eyes. Angels, *jinn*, and demons represent

19 All of the introductions and the array of manuals on the Qur'an or on prophecy in Islam cannot do without discussing or mentioning the meaning of *ummī*; on the topic, amongst the more recent specific studies, we mainly refer to Mehdi Shaddel, "Qur'ānic *Ummī*: Genealogy, Ethnicity, and the Foundation of a New Community," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 43 (2016): 1–60, where the most important previous bibliography on the topic is found; in particular, we consider important to mention Isaiah Goldfeld, "The Illiterate Prophet (*Nabī Ummī*): An Inquiry into the Development of a Dogma in Islamic Tradition," *Der Islam* 57 (1980): 58–67; Norman Calder, "The *Ummī* in Early Islamic Juristic Literature," *Der Islam* 67 (1990): 111–23; Khalil ʿAthamina, "Al-Nabiyy al-Umiyy: An Inquiry into the Meaning of a Qur'anic Verse," *Der Islam* 69 (1992): 61–80; Sebastian Günther, "Muḥammad, the Illiterate Prophet: An Islamic Creed in the Qur'an and Qur'anic Exegesis," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 4/1 (2002): 1–26; see also the still useful Carlo A. Nallino, "Il significato del vocabolo coranico 'Ummī' applicato a Maometto e quello di 'al-Ummiyūn'," in *Raccolta di scritti editi ed inediti*, vol. 2, ed. Maria Nallino (Roma: Istituto per l'Oriente, 1940), 60–65; and Seyyed H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam. New Revised Edition* (Chicago: ABC International Group, Inc., 2000), 67–68.

the concealed forces that operate in the world, only sometimes showing themselves to humankind, with roles and duties given to them, obviously, by God. Their presence is not at all sporadic, but constant and consistent, and it fills the universe with the absolute and all-encompassing will of God in doing good and allowing evil.

In such a setting, the angels make up the innumerable army of God, which operates for the good of creation and that of humankind, according to the orders willed by the Omnipotent. They are a continuous presence in the Qur'an, and many verses make reference to them in different manners, for example, as an object of worship by the pagans, when they ask why the message brought by Muḥammad was not delivered by an angel, so they could follow it without any doubts.

There is no lack of more specific details and indications. The angels are omnipresent, like God's troops that act swiftly, based on his will, in a position of privilege for their many functions and their hovering presence during every event. However, their role prohibits them from making any decisions, which are, first, all up to God, and second to the prophets, as mediators between God and humanity. The angels have various functions: they are reciters, guardians, warners, and many other things and they appear in the foreground, for example, during the creation of Adam. From creation to the end of days, the angels will always be protagonists until the eschatological time.[20]

20 On these topics, see Paul Arno Eichler, *Die Dschinn, Teufel und Engel im Koran* (Dissertation, Leipzig University, 1928); Toufic Fahd, "Anges, démons et djinns en Islam," in G*énies, anges et démons: Égypte, Babylone, Israël, Islam, Peuples altaïques, Inde, Birmanie, Asie du sud-est, Tibet, Chine*, ed. Dimitri Meeks et al. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971), 115–214; and the following more recent studies, with further bibliographical references: *The Intermediate Worlds of Angels. Islamic Representations of Celestial Beings in Transcultural Contexts*, ed. Sara Kuehn, Stefan Leder and Hans-Peter Pökel, (Beirut: Orient-Institut, 2019); Stephen R. Burge, *Angels in Islam. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī's al-Ḥabā'ik fī Akhbār al-Malā'ik* (London-New York: Routledge, 2012); Olga L. Lizzini and Samuela Pagani, "Islam," in *Angeli: ebraismo, cristianesimo, islam*, ed. Giorgio Agamben and Emanuele Coccia (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2009), 1453–2012; Stephen R. Burge, "The Angels in *Sūrat al-Malā'ika*: Exegeses of Q. 5:1," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 10/1 (2008): 50–70, in which Burge discusses some problems relative to the Qur'anic terminology connected to angels and verses that speak of them. On demons, see Tobias Nünlist, *Dämonenglaube im Islam* (Berlin: De Gruyter 2015); also, in particular regarding the Qur'an, Krzysztof Kościelniak, "Les éléments apocryphes dans la démonologie coranique. Les nouvelles découvertes," in *Authority, privacy and public order in Islam: proceedings of the 22nd Congress of L'union européenne des arabisants et islamisants*, ed. Barbara Michalak-Pikulska and Andrzej Pikulski (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 41–49.

Text no. 11: Angels

Praise belongs to God,
the Creator of the heavens and the earth,
who has appointed as messengers the angels
with wings, two, three or four each,
and who gives increase to whatever He wishes in creation. (Qur. 35:1)
He is the One with power over His servants.
He sends angels over you. (Qur. 6:61)
al-Masīḥ does not disdain to be a servant to God,
nor do the angels who are stationed near Him. (Qur. 4:172)
Who is an enemy to God and His angels
and His messengers and Gabriel and Michael? (Qur. 2:98)
Those (scil. the angels) who bear the throne and those around it
glorify their Lord with praise
and believe in Him
and seek forgiveness for those who believe. (Qur. 40:7)

Amongst all the angels, Gabriel, the messenger who, according to tradition, delivers the message of the revelation to Muḥammad, is named explicitly three times and alluded to in other passages. Michael is also mentioned in the Qur'an, where he is defined as being of the same rank as Gabriel, just like the Angel of Death and the angels who carry the divine Throne. Other figures with specific functions appear. Iblīs, the devil, is a fallen angel and is named in the passages that mention God's ordering the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam, the first man created (Text no. 13).

The presence of the angels is such that it influenced the entire imaginary of the successive Islamic tradition, rendering the Islamic cosmology a reality that is marked everywhere by the unfaltering presence of an array of angelic multitudes, from the moment of creation until the end of days.

The angels carry out God's orders for good; they regulate the universe and intervene in all moments of the life of the world and of the individual. The Qur'an confirms the existence of homologous figures, opposed to the angels, the demons, which we will discuss below, as well as beings of a hybrid type, the *jinn* (genii), which are also spiritual beings of a fantastic and superhuman nature. Comparable to angels and demons, they populate the hidden world and can participate in the events of the created and visible world, taking various forms and thus confusing humankind.

The *jinn* have already been documented in pre-Islamic traditions and folklore: they represent a sort of personification of intermediary forces, which are able to intervene in both positive and negative forms in a liminal boundary with the concept of possession and madness, conveyed by the term *majnūn* ("possessed by *jinn*," hence "mad"). The *jinn* are invisible to humans; they are endowed with

intelligence and can take on human or animal features. They represent a defined category of creation; they were created out of blazing fire and they are expected, together with humankind, to adore and give thanks to God. These *jinn* differ from humans in that they have the prerogative to take on either a demonic or an angelic appearance, on account of their mimetic ability when participating in the hidden work for any action or with any appearance they prefer.

Text no. 12: *Jinn*

I created *jinn* and men only so that they might serve Me. (Qur. 51:56)
We created the *jinn* before from the fire of the scorching wind. (Qur. 15:27)
O assembly of *jinn* and men,
did not messengers come to you from among you,
who recounted My signs to you,
and warned of the meeting of this day of yours? (Qur. 6:130)
We have created many *jinn* and men for Gehenna. (Qur. 7:179)
The hosts of Solomon were rounded up for him:
jinn, men and birds;
and they were urged on. (Qur. 27:17)
Say, 'It has been revealed to me that a group of *jinn* listened and said,
"We have heard a marvellous recitation,
Which guides to righteousness.
We believe in it,
and we shall not associate anyone with our Lord." ' (Qur. 72:1–2)

People are often cited alongside *jinn* in the Qur'an. The proximity of the *jinn* to the human world is underscored by the Qur'anic passages that affirm that the *jinn* even had their own prophets and, depending on their behavior, some would be destined to paradise and others to hell, while Muḥammad had the privilege of being sent, as a prophet, both to humankind and to the *jinn* (Text no. 12).

As the sura that takes its name from the *jinn* reports extensively (Qur. 72), one group of them listened to Muḥammad, and some of them even converted to Islam. It follows that there are both Muslim *jinn* and others that belong to other religious faiths. Interaction with humans entails the possibility of having relations with *jinn*, even though the latter prefer to live in isolated areas. They have special powers that go beyond human capabilities, as it is possible to deduce from the Qur'anic verses that discuss the armies of Solomon (Text no. 12). Belief in *jinn* represents the proximity and the possibility of interacting with the invisible world, as well as the privileged gateway to access magical-type practices.

The angels represent the faithful executors of God's will, which moves the world forward at His command, unceasingly and in full positive capacity. The *jinn* are part of an intermediary spiritual world between the human one and the angelic one, with the possibility to act as either negative or positive forces. Alongside them,

in the liminal space between visible and invisible, negative and tempting forces also exist, as they personify evil and the demonic and also interact with sensible reality.[21]

This role is attributed to the devil, who appears with the name *Iblīs*, generally considered to derive from the Greek *diábolos*. In the Qur'an, Iblīs is sometimes described as an angel, and other times as a *jinn*, and is cited eleven times in relation to the creation of Adam. Iblīs refused to obey the order to prostrate himself before the man created by God, contrary to the other angels, and God cursed him and banished him.

Text no. 13: Iblīs

And [recall] when We said to the angels,
'Prostrate yourselves to Adam';
and they [all] prostrated themselves,
apart from Iblīs.
He refused and was haughty and was one of the unbelievers. (Qur. 2:34)
And [recall] when We said to the angels,
'Prostrate yourself to Adam.'
So they prostrated themselves, save Iblīs.
He was one of the *jinn*,
and he committed ungodliness against the command of his Lord. (Qur. 18:50)

Homologous and practically synonymous to Iblīs is the more frequent *ash-shayṭān* (Demon), who appears more than fifty times in the Qur'an. It refers to the action of the devil on Earth, because of his ability and function in tempting and deceiving, sowing discord amongst men. Despite its clear affinity with the name Satan, of which it is evidently a calque, this term in the Qur'an is not used as a proper name, or at least it does not seem to be in all cases, also because the term, in its plural form (*shayāṭīn*), appears various times in the Qur'an and refers to demons in a generic sense.[22]

21 See Ida Zilio-Grandi, *Il Corano e il male* (Torino: Einaudi 2002); Gabriel S. Reynolds, "A Reflection on Two Qur'ānic Words (*Iblīs* and *Jūdī*) with Attention to the Theories of A. Mingana," *Journal of American Oriental Society* 124 (2004): 675–89.

22 See, in particular regarding *ash-shayṭān*, Adam Silverstein, "On the Original Meaning of the Qur'anic Term *al-Shayṭān al-Rajīm*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 133 (2013): 21–33; Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext*, 54–64. On Iblis and Adam in the Qur'an, see Angelika Neuwirth and Dirk Hartwig, "Beyond Reception History: The Qur'anic Intervention into the Late Antique Discourse about the Origin of Evil," *Religions* 12/8 (2021): 606, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080606. For a different approach and interpretation of the same question, see Guillaume Dye, "Concepts and Methods in the Study of the Qur'ān," *Religions* 12/8 (2021): 599, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080599.

Text no. 14: Satan and Demons

Whenever We sent a messenger or a prophet before you,
and he had the desire [to recite],
Satan tampered with his desire.
But God annuls Satan's tamperings. (Qur. 22:52)
And when you recite the Recitation,
seek refuge in God from the accursed Satan
He has no authority over those who believe
and put their trust in their Lord. (Qur. 16:98–99)
And when a messenger comes to them from their Lord,
confirming what they have,
a part of those who have been given the Scripture
throw the Scripture of God behind their backs,
as if they did not know.
They follow what the devils recited over the kingdom of Solomon.
Solomon did not disbelieve,
But the demons disbelieved,
teaching the people sorcery. (Qur. 2:101–2)

The demonic world is, itself, a liminal world with evil *jinn*. The multitudes that follow Iblīs's attitude and behavior are made up of demons who are often considered to be just like *jinn*, enemies of men. This wickedness is not always blatant and made evident. The demons, for example, can be subdued, as happened in the case of Solomon, who had power over them and over the *jinn*. Finally, more closely connected to the imaginary of the *jinn* is the meaning that seems to emerge from the Qur'anic verses in which Muḥammad is accused by his pagan compatriots of bringing a message under the influence of the demons (Qur. 26:110, 221).

Overall, even with the partial overlapping with the figures of the *jinn*, Qur'anic demons and devils oppose the angelic presence and restore balance to a relationship within reality, in which evil principles and hidden dangers do not prevail, even though they are present and active and have had an effect on humankind since the act of creation of Adam.

1.2.4 Patriarchs and prophets

In the story of creation and of the world, some men, analogously to Muḥammad, have had a particular and unique role. These are messengers (sing. *rasūl*, pl. *rusul*) and prophets (sing. *nabī*, pl. *anbiyāʾ*) who have had access to the will of the Omnipotent to be able to guide their communities in a righteous faith and a behavior resulting from it. A considerable part of the Qur'an contains

constant references and extensive passages about the events involving these prophets and messengers who preceded Muḥammad's mission.

The analogy is pursued by the Qur'anic word itself, which is explicit: just as the Arab prophet is evoked as a prophet and messenger in terms of his role, action, and, lastly, outcome, the Qur'an constantly mentions those analogous figures who, through history, have accompanied and guided the fate of humanity from its creation, from Adam, who was the first man and prophet, until Jesus and the advent of Muḥammad.

Numerous studies have investigated the narrative parts of the Qur'an to explain certain themes, or to highlight its specific literary characteristics.[23] Many Qur'anic passages specify the prerogatives of the prophets sent by God in succession, their virtues, their rank, the way in which they received the revelations, the scriptures they could write, and the miracles they could carry out thanks to the will of God. The conceptual reference of what the prophecy and the prophetic mission are is given in relation to Muḥammad. He is the interlocutor that the Qur'an addresses, who is defined a prophet and messenger of God, just as others in the past had been for their respective communities. Actually, Muḥammad is the seal of the prophets, implicitly of those prophets to whom the Qur'an dedicates significant space (Text no. 15).[24]

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23 A consistent part of the rich bibliography focusing on these arguments analyzes possible sources or comparisons with the contents of the Qur'an (pp. 134–52). Among the studies that exclusively analyze the narrative parts of the Qur'an, and not the later exegetical elaborations, we refer to Iyas Hassan, *Le religieux, le narratif et le littéraire. Coran et exégèse coranique dans l'histoire de la litterature arabe* (Paris: Geuthner-Presses de l'IFPO, 2019); Alfred-Louis De Prémare, *Joseph et Muhammad: le chapiter 12 du Coran: étude textuelle* (Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'Université de Provence, 1989); Karl Prenner, *Muhammad und Musa. Strukturanalytische und theologiegeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu den mekkanischen Musa-Perikopen des Qur'ān* (Altenberge: Christlich-Islamisches Schrifttum, 1986); Brannon M. Wheeler, *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002); Hosn Abboud, *Mary in the Qur'ān: A Literary Reading* (London: Routledge, 2014). The question regarding the narrative parts in the Qur'an, sometimes repeated with some differences in parts of the lexicon and in the contents, have been arguments in Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafallāh's controversial analysis *al-Fann al-qaṣaṣī fī al-Qurʾān al-karīm* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍa al-Miṣriyya, 1957) who, in the middle of the last century, proposed a new approach in which he supported the prevalence of literary and psychological aspects in the communication of the message more than the historical truth of each one. On the controversies generated from said interpretation in the context of the exegetical discussion in Egypt in the years following World War II, see Jacques Jomier, "Quelques positions actuelles de l'exégèse coranique en Egypte," *MIDEO* 1 (1954): 39–72; Rotraud Wielandt, *Offenbarung und Geschichte in Denken moderner Muslime* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1971), 134–52.

24 On prophets in the Qur'an, see Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'ān and Muslim Literature* (Richmond: Curzon, 2002); Uri Rubin, "Prophets and Prophethood," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin, 234–47; Uri Rubin, "The Seal of the Prophets and

Text no. 15: The prophetic mission

Muḥammad is not the father of any of your men,
but the messenger of God and the seal of the prophets.
God is aware of everything. (Qur. 33:40)
Then God sent the prophets as bringers of good tidings and as warners;
and He sent down with them the Scripture with the truth,
to give decisions between the people about that on which they differed. (Qur. 2:213)

Prophets and messengers are not cited in the Qur'an simply in order to narrate a historical account, but rather with an evocative and emblematic function in relation to Muḥammad; their function is principally paraenetic, not narrative. It is this function that determines the contents and styles that are utilized. The stories are, in fact, evoked with moral intentions, rather than being recreated in detail, because they must communicate, above all, the meaning of what occurred in the past: a prophet (like Muḥammad) must follow the example of the final triumph of the prophetic figures that preceded him, while his people should be forewarned of the end met by those populations who did not want to believe their prophets.

In this imaginary that, in its meaning, evokes the situation that Muḥammad was said to have experienced when he began preaching in Mecca, we find what have been termed "punishment stories." In these stories, the events regarding figures like Noah, Lot, and others become stereotyped examples of the vicissitudes of rejected prophets and of peoples punished and annihilated by God. The main purpose of these narrations is to comfort Muḥammad and to warn his contemporaries and the people close to him: punishment will arrive for those who do not accept the truth of his preaching and for those who stubbornly refuse to believe in his divine message, that is, in the Qur'an (Text no. 16).[25]

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the Finality of Prophecy. On the Interpretation of Qur'ānic Sūrat al-Aḥzāb (33)," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 164 (2014): 65–96; Angelika Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 379–417; Josef Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen* (Berlin–Leipzig: W. de Gruyter, 1926), 44–53; Jeffery, *The Qur'ān as Scripture*, 18–51; Bijlefeld, "A Prophet or More than a Prophet?"; Bell and Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 25–30; on God and humanity, in its various manifestations, including the prophets, see Johan Bouman, *Gott und Mensch im Koran. Eine Strukturform religiöser Anthropologie anhand des Beispiels Allah und Muhammad* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977), on prophets in particular 16–38. The infallibility of the prophets is established in the later exegetical literature and is not at all mentioned in the Qur'an, see Gerald R. Hawting, "The Development of the Doctrine of the Infallibility (*ʿIṣma*) of Prophets and the Interpretation of Qur'ān 8:67–69," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 39 (2012): 141–64.

25 On such themes, see Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*, 3–16; on the stories of punishment, see Alford T. Welch, "Formulaic Features of the Punishment Stories," in *Literary Structures of*

Text no. 16: Stories of the prophets

Alas for the servants!
Whenever a messenger comes to them,
they mock him.
Have they not seen how many generations We have destroyed before them
[and] that they do not return to them? (Qur. 36:30–31)
Then after them We sent Moses to Pharaoh and his nobles with Our signs,
but they acted wrongfully towards them.
See how was the consequence for those who wrought mischief. (Qur. 7:103)
When Our command came,
We saved Hūd and those who believed with him through mercy from Us;
and We saved them from a harsh punishment.
That was ʿĀd who denied the signs of their Lord
and rebelled against His messengers
and followed the command of every obstinate tyrant. (Qur. 11:58–59)

Another thematic group of Qur'anic passages that mention prophets and messengers has a precise function: it affirms that Muḥammad is the legitimate continuator of the biblical tradition and the deliverer of that which is communicated to the prophet himself to those who surround him. Lists of prophets' names aim to reiterate the concept and define the role of the Arab prophet in this lineage and charismatic line.

Abraham has a central meaning in this imaginary. God commands Muḥammad: "Follow the religion of Abraham (*millat Ibrāhīm*)" (Qur. 16:123). He must do this because he has to proclaim the profound meaning of the new religion revealed to him, which is none other than the religion of the patriarch Abraham who preceded him and that had been conveyed earlier to Jews and Christians, and that is now brought again to its purity and essence through the last of the prophets, Muḥammad.

A similar affirmation is part of a climate that is easily recognizable in terms of what we know about the last years of Muḥammad's life: a discussion that became a direct conflict with the Jews. The Prophet initially preached to the Jews with hopes of their conversion, but they did not convert and later opposed him. It was decided to appropriate the role of Abraham and to define, consequently,

Religious Meaning, ed. Issa J. Boullata, (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), 77–116; David Marshall, *God, Muhammad and the Unbelievers. A Qur'anic Study* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1999); Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 10–26. On concepts of tribulation, suffering, or ordeals to which God subjects his prophets and the respective populations in the Qur'an and in the later exegetical interpretations, see Nasrin Rouzati, *Trial and Tribulation in the Qur'an: A Mystical Theodicy* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2015); and Wheeler, *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis*.

the Islamic community as the community that possesses a pact with God, in place of the previous privileged role held by the Jews (Text no. 17).[26]

Text no. 17: The role of Abraham

Who is better in religion than those who surrender their faces to God
and do good and follow the religion of Abraham as a true believer?
God chose Abraham as a friend. (Qur. 4:125)
They say, 'Be Jews or Christians and you will be guided.'
Say, 'No. [Be of] the religion of Abraham,
a man of pure faith (*ḥanīf*). He was not one of those who associate others with God.'
Say, 'We believe in God and in what was revealed to us
and in what was revealed to Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob and the tribes,
and in what was given to Moses and Jesus
and in what was given to the prophets from their Lord. (Qur. 2:135–36)

With this multiplicity of meaning and in the manner dictated by the ends of the revelation, the Qur'an names twenty-four prophets besides Muḥammad. Only nine prophets are further qualified as messengers, without an explicit specification as to what the difference between prophet and messenger consists in: Noah, Lot, Ishmael, Moses, Jesus, Shuʿayb, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ and Muḥammad.

The prophet most often evoked is the patriarch Moses, whose short biography from his birth to his death is outlined in different passages, often repeating the same events. His discussion with Pharaoh is one of the themes that most often recurs, in a more or less extensive form, in about twenty suras.[27]

The Qur'an also assigns important roles to Adam, Noah, Joseph, Lot, David, and Solomon, as well as to Mary and Jesus. Other figures mentioned by name are Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Aaron, Elisha, Jonah, Elijah, Job, Zechariah, and John the Baptist; the majority of them pertain to the Jewish and Christian tradition. Three figures, named Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, and Shuʿayb, along with their vicissitudes, do not refer to stories known from the Biblical tradition and are considered 'Arab' prophets, while two other names, Idrīs and Dhū al-Kifl, have disputed identifications.

The relevance of the prophetic stories in the Qur'an is such that most of the other names included refer to the prophets' trials and tribulations, such as with the aforementioned Pharaoh, Hāmān, Goliath, Dhū al-Qarnayn, identified with Alexander the Great, Amram, Mary, Sara and Hagar, the mother and sister of Moses, and the Queen of Sheba.[28]

26 See Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 8–12; Jeffery, *The Qur'ān as Scripture*, 32–39.

27 Qur. 2:49–93, 7:103–66, 10:75–93, 11:96–99, 20:9–98, 23:45–49, 25:35, 26:10–68, 28:3–50, 40:23–34, 43:46–56, 44:17–33, 51:38–40, 54:41–43, 69:9–10, 73:15–16, 79:15–26.

28 The bibliography on the prophetic figures in the Qur'an is extensive, see, for example, Amir-Moezzi, *Le Coran des historiens. Bibliographie*; in general we refer to Tottoli, *Biblical*

The frequent references to prophets and messengers define the contours of an Islamic community that has ancient roots, and that takes shape with the preaching of the prophet who receives the Qur'anic message.

The Qur'an, though, repeatedly affirms, rendering it a fundamental theme, that humankind is reluctant to believe. Muḥammad is surrounded by those who belong to other religious communities, as well as non-believers, hypocrites, and a number of believers and worshippers that does not make up the majority.

Even with evocative tones and scattered citations, the prophetic history from Adam to Jesus represents the sacred history, rather, the history *tout court*, which preceded the advent of Islam. The time from the creation to the advent of Muḥammad is, definitively, marked by the transmission of the prophecy, which occurred principally amongst the Israelites but is perceived to be at the same time fully and originally Islamic, thus confirming in its essence the profound meaning of Muḥammad's mission.

1.2.5 Islam: faith and community

The religion revealed to Muḥammad is, in its essence, that of the community of prophets who preceded him, to be restored in the fullness of God's will, but there is also something new. This new religion preached by Muḥammad, through the revelations later collected in the Qur'an, is *islām* (literally "submission [to God]"). The active participle *muslim* is the term that designates a member of the Islamic community. The two terms and the verbal form from which they derive (*aslama*, "to submit") appear about forty times in the Qur'an, although its use to designate a specific religion is not immediate and must be viewed in relation to the Qur'anic text and not mediated by later exegetical discussions.[29]

The Qur'an utilizes the concept of "submission [to God]" above all in a polemical dialogue of opposition to pagans and followers of other religions; the latter are accused of sinfully not following faith in one God, although not necessarily in an

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Prophets; Brannon M. Wheeler, *Prophets in the Quran. An Introduction to the Quran and Muslim Exegesis* (London: Continuum, 2002); Heribert Busse, *Die theologischen Beziehungen des Islams zu Judentum und Christentum. Grundlagen des Dialogs im Koran und die gegenwärtige Situation* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988). On Arab prophets, see Brannon M. Wheeler, "Arab Prophets in the Qur'an and Bible," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 8 (2006): 24–57.

29 See, in fact, Qur. 2:112 e 4:125: *aslama wajhahu li-Llāh*, literally "submitting one's face to God" understood as giving all of one's self, wholly, abandoning one's self trustfully without constraints to God.

exclusivist logic, but rather a pluralistic one. The Qur'anic passages seem, in this manner, not to conform to a single meaning, but to denote, as a whole, a variety that does not allow the term to coincide with its meaning that later became definitive: *islām* as specific religion, the one preached by Muḥammad.

The meaning of the term *islām* that coincides with the former sense, is rather that of the essence of the new religion in its founding principle of putting oneself in the hands of faith in one God, which is not exclusive to the new community, but is rather within reach of everyone, even followers of other communities. Designating the religion of Muḥammad's community with the term Islam in exclusivist terms is, therefore, fruit of an exegetical elaboration of the Qur'anic concept and it is not expressed in the Qur'an itself in such an explicit and univocal manner.[30]

Text no. 18: *Dīn*

Religion (*ad-dīn*) with God is Submission (*al-islām*) (Qur. 3:19).
Do they desire some religion other than God's (*dīn Allāh*),
when all those who are in the heavens and on earth
have surrendered (*aslama*) to him,
voluntarily or involuntarily,
and will be returned to Him? (Qur. 3:83).
Say, 'God has guided me to a straight path, a right religion (*dīn*),
the community (*milla*) of Abraham, a man of pure faith,
who was not one of those who associated others with God' (Qur. 6:161).
When God's help and victory comes,
When you see men entering God's religion (*dīn*) in throngs,
Glorify your Lord by praising Him and seek His forgiveness.
He is always ready to relent (Qur. 110:1–3).
The believers are those who believe in God and His messenger
and then do not doubt (Qur. 49:15).

Other terms in the Qur'an have a distinctive connotation in terms of religious or community belonging. The word *dīn* is present ninety-two times in the Qur'an,

30 See, above all, Cyrille Moreno, "Analyse littérale des termes dîn et islâm dans le Coran: dépassement spirituel du religieux et nouvelles perspectives exégétiques" (PhD diss., Université de Strasbourg, 2016); and, also, Meïr M. Bravmann, *The Spiritual Background of Early Islam: Studies in Early Arab Concepts* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 1–38; Helmer Ringgren, *Islam, 'Aslama and Muslim* (Uppsala: C. W. K. Gleerup, Lund, i distribution, 1949); Fred M. Donner, "*Dīn*, *Islām* und *Muslim* im Koran," in *Die Koranhermeneutik von Günter Lüling*, ed. Georges Tamer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 141–58; on the meaning of Islam, especially in exegetical literature, see Jane I. Smith, *An Historical and Semantic Study of the Term "Islām" as Seen in a Sequence of Qur'ān Commentaries* (Missoula, Montana: Published by Scholars Press for Harvard Theological Review, 1975).

and means at the height of the Islamic period, and, amongst other things, religion, while it holds different meanings in the Qur'anic passages that include it. The meaning of judgment seems to be the prevalent one in the expression *yawm* (day) *ad-dīn*, which occurs with a certain frequency and indicates the Day of Judgment.

In other cases, it refers to laws, customs, or means to a righteous life that bring it closer to the religious concept of following the will of God. Hence, the correspondence with Abraham's religion (*millat Ibrāhīm*, Text no. 18), based on the respect of prescriptions and customs which make up the essence of the Islamic religion. It is also difficult not to acknowledge the beginning of an evolution of the meaning of *dīn* in a diachronic sense, as well as a multiplicity of meaning that cannot fully be traced to later uses of the term.[31]

The Qur'an includes a specific term to indicate faith, which must be placed alongside the term *islām*; the term is *īmān*, which indicates intimate and personal faith, and a term that recurs with significant frequency to designate the believer (*muʾmin*). In many passages of the Qur'an, *muʾmin* (pl. *muʾminūn*) generically designates those who believe in one God and follow His precepts, identifying itself, in this manner, with the Muslims.

Sura 23 (of the Believers) begins by mentioning these *muʾminūn* and bears their name, further supporting the centrality of a concept that tends to overlap and better characterize the nature of those who adhere to the contents of the revelation received by Muḥammad. The believers or Muslims are, therefore, those who abandon their alliance with those who associate others with God (*mushrikūn*), or with those who remain within other religious communities.

A separation along community lines is still not clear, as in the cases of the terms discussed above, since, in this case, the word seems to express a condition of faith, or a way of being, rather than marking a category of people that is defined in a stable and precise manner in terms of identity.[32]

Text no. 19: *umma*

'This is your community, one community.
I am your Lord. Serve Me.' (Qur. 21:92)

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31 Besides the works cited in the previous footnote, see Yvonne Y. Haddad, "The Conception of the Term *Dīn* in the Qur'ān," *The Muslim World* 64 (1974): 114–23.

32 According to Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.-London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), in part. 39–89, the term designates, instead, the initial nature of Islam, a community based on the faith in one God and inclusive of those who pertain to other religious groups, all included in the definition of *al-muʾminūn*.

Thus We have made you a moderate community
for you to be witnesses to the people. (Qur. 2:143)
You are the best community brought forth for the people.
You enjoin what is reputable
and you forbid the disreputable
and you believe in God. (Qur. 3:110)

In the same area, another Qur'anic term, strongly connoted in exegetical literature and in successive uses, is *umma* ("community"). Having become a sort of synonym of "Muslim community," in the Qur'an, *umma* has a much wider usage and designates all communities in history that have received a prophet or a messenger. These communities precede the advent of the last and definitive *umma*, the one brought by the divine message received by Muḥammad and that includes those who "give themselves to God completely," and who follow laws and instructions of conduct, profoundly believing in God.

Another meaning of *umma*, which more closely identifies with the Islamic community, emerges in a series of attestations of the term that are generally identified with revelations from the final phase of Muḥammad's life.[33]

Qur'anic terminology regarding the Islamic religion and the Muslim community displays an unstable reality, varied meanings, and an emphasis on personal commitment to the faith in one God that does not ignore the other religious communities. God, the invisible world, and the prophetic figures are part of the concepts of a clear-cut faith, without doubts, but that does not seem to find its definition in a novel, previously unknown community, nor is it out of reach for individuals of other faiths.[34]

1.2.6 Other religious communities

As seen, the Qur'an draws a firm line of continuity with the communities that historically preceded it, in particular Judaism and Christianity, through the frequent

33 Hamza M. Zafer, *Ecumenical Community. Language and Politics of the Ummah in the Qur'ān* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2020); George C. Decasa, *The Qur'ānic Concept of* Umma *and Its Function in Philippine Muslim Society* (Roma: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1999), is a vast analysis of the occurrences of *umma* in the Qur'an, as well as other terms that express similar concepts of community; see also Frederick M. Denny, "The Meaning of *Ummah* in the Qur'ān," *History of Religions* 15 (1975): 34–70.

34 In the Qur'anic imaginary also animals are communities for all intents and purposes, as it is affirmed in Qur. 6:38: "There is no beast in the earth nor bird that flies with its wings but they are communities like you. We have neglected nothing in the record. Then they will be rounded up to their Lord."

mention of episodes from salvation history involving patriarchs and prophets, from Adam to Jesus. The Qur'an also explicitly and repeatedly mentions historic communities of Jews and Christians in some passages, with different assessments and considerations. The mention of these religious communities is in line with the discussion above regarding the use of terms that refer to Islam as a non-exclusive credo. The Qur'an contemplates and clarifies religious plurality. While the frame of reference is often polemical, it is not so because of religious and identitary confines, but rather because of the need to conform one's own faith and one's own actions in the fullness of a monotheistic faith as the unique reality of a religious community that aims to be devoted to the truth.[35]

The Qur'an speaks explicitly about Jews, Christians, and the mysterious Sabians (pp. 38 and 141) as three communities or groups of followers of religions that are different from believers and Muslims. It also uses other terms to define some particular aspects relative and pertaining to these religions, terms of which it is not always simple to understand the exact meaning. In general, there is no lack, for either group, of different pronouncements and attitudes, although only in regard to Christians are there significant positive judgements.

One must not forget that this lies within the context of the Qur'anic style in which the construction of arguments occurs through the rhetoric of contrast or polemical counter-discourse, overcoming the "other" in a position that must allow, on the contrary, for the principles of the true faith to be affirmed. For this reason, which is eminently rhetorical, the Qur'anic data must be prudently evaluated in order to serve as evidence of the concrete manifestations of these religious communities that the recipient of the Qur'anic message or the authors of the texts may have encountered. It must be highlighted that the polemic predominates over neutral or positive judgements.[36]

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35 This is, moreover, the sense of the Qur'anic passages that mention *ḥanīf*, that is, the pure monotheist, neither Jewish nor Christian, whose essence fully corresponds to Islam. As to the meaning and the use of this term, which is much debated, see, in particular, Claude Gilliot, "Muḥammad, le Coran et les «contraintes de l'histoire»," in *The Qur'an as Text*, ed. Stefan Wild (Leiden, Brill 1996), 3–26. Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), 111–12; Rippin, "RḤMNN and the Ḥanīfs"; Uri Rubin, "Ḥanīfiyya and Kaʿba. An Inquiry into the Arabian Pre-Islamic Background of *Dīn Ibrāhīm*." *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13 (1990): 85–112; François De Blois, "*Naṣrānī* (Ναζωραιος) and *Ḥanīf* (Ἐθνικός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65 (2002): 1–30; Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*, 25–26.

36 On this topic, see Mun'im Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics: The Qur'ān and Other Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 33–64; on the Sabians, François De Blois, "The 'Sabians' (Ṣabiʾūn) in Pre-Islamic Arabia," *Acta Orientalia* 56 (1995): 39–61. On Qur. 2:256 ("there is no compulsion in religion") see Patricia Crone, "'No Compulsion in Religion':

The Jews are named in the Qur'an, using the terms *Yahūd* (nine times) and *Banū Isrāʾīl* (forty times). The Qur'an criticizes Judaism, with regard to its laws and practices, as well with regard to its scriptures and its tradition. This is closely linked to the fact that the Qur'an conveys the idea that the Muslim community is now the community chosen by God and the privileged seat of the pact, while the Jews are no longer chosen, although they are part of a very complex vision of the concept of said pact. The Jews received countless favors, but they violated the nature of this pact (Text no. 20), hence the construction of an image more often negative in terms of antagonism and polemical conflict towards a community perceived as very close, and that sinfully does not conform to the faith preached by the Qur'anic revelation.

Consequently, negative judgements abound: in the past, the Jews did not fail to kill their prophets; they hid part of their scriptures; otherwise they corrupted the scriptures deliberately. The use of different terms may correspond to different realities: when the Qur'an cites the *Banū Isrāʾīl*, it refers to the Jews in history with an almost ethnic identification, that is, those who have received the divine message through patriarchs and prophets and, therefore, historical counterparts of the Islamic community, including the Christians of the past; the *Yahūd* are the Jews who are contemporaries of the Prophet, identified by their faith, with whom debate becomes increasingly more intense from a theological and political point of view.[37]

Text no. 20: Jews and Christians

In times past We took a covenant from the Children of Israel
and We sent messengers to them.
Whenever a messenger came to them
with what their souls did not desire,
a number they denied,
a number they killed. (Qur. 5:70)
Because they (the Jews) broke their covenant

Q. 2:256 in Medieval and Modern Interpretation," in *Le shīʿisme imāmite quarante ans après. Hommage à Etan Kohlberg*, ed. Mohammed Amir-Moezzi, Meir M. Bar-Asher and Simon Hopkins (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 131–78.

37 On the Jewish people in the Qur'an, see Meir M. Bar-Asher, *Les juifs dans le Coran* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2019); Johan Bouman, *Der Koran und die Juden: die Geschichte einer Tragödie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaft Buchgesellschaft, 1990); Adam Silverstein, "Unmasking *Maskh*: The Transformation of Jews into 'Apes, Driven Away' (Qur'ān 7:166) in Near Eastern Context," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 49 (2020): 177–216; on the concept of pact in the Qur'an, see Joseph E. B. Lumbard, "Covenant and Covenants in the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 17/2 (2015): 1–23; Andrew J. O'Connor, "Qur'anic Covenants Reconsidered: *Mīthāq* and *ʿAhd* in Polemical Context," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 30 (2019): 1–22.

and did not believe in God's signs
and killed the prophets without right. (Qur. 4:155)
The Jews and the Christians say,
'We are the children of God, the ones He loves.'
Say, 'Then why does He punish you for your sins? (Qur. 5:18)
You will certainly find that the people most hostile to those who believe
are the Jews and those who associate others with God;
and you will find that those of them who are most friendly to those who believe
are those who say, 'We are Christians.' (Qur. 5:82)

The term that designates Christians from Muḥammad's times is *Naṣārā*, which recurs eleven times in the Qur'an, and refers to the Nazarenes. Many studies have debated the origin of the term, based on the hypothesis that it refers to a specific Christian or Judeo-Christian confession.

Not least, the Qur'anic spelling of the name Jesus (Ar. *ʿĪsā*) is at the center of various debates of the same nature, because it is different from the one in use in the historically known Christian communities (*Yasūʿ*). The Qur'anic passages that mention Christians are divided equally between positive evaluations of what the *Naṣārā* were in relation to the community of believers and a few negative evaluations relative, above all, to the credo of this community with regard to the divinity of Jesus Christ that represents, inevitably, a controversial challenge to the concept of the oneness of God.[38] Essentially, the Christians seem to be much less the target of debate and disputation as compared to the Jews.

The same thing, in a lesser measure, occurs with the other religious communities which are explicitly mentioned. Three passages (Qur. 2:62, 5:69, 22:17) mention the mysterious Sabians, for which it is not possible to identify precisely which religious community is being alluded to, while in only one passage

38 On Christians and *Naṣārā* in the Qur'an, see Holger M. Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum as a Point of Departure* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 181–99; De Blois, "*Naṣrānī* (Ναζωραιος) and *Ḥanīf* (Ἐθνικός)"; Sidney H. Griffith, "The Qur'ān's 'Nazarenes' and Other Late Antique Christians: Arabic-Speaking 'Gospel People' in Qur'ānic Perspective," in *Christsein in der Islamischen Welt. Festschrift für Martin Tamcke zum 60. Geburtsdatum*, ed. Sidney H. Griffith and Sven Grebenstein (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2015), 81–106. Sidney H. Griffith, "*Al-Naṣārā* in the Qur'ān. A Hermeneutical Reflection," in *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān*, ed. by Gabriel S. Reynolds (London–New York, Routledge, 2011), 301–22; Jane D. McAuliffe, "Christians in the Qur'ān and *Tafsīr*," in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, ed. by Jacques Waardenburg (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 105–21; Mahmoud Ayoub, "Nearest in Amity: Christians in the Qur'ān and Contemporary Exegetical Tradition," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 8/2 (1997): 145–64; Haggai Mazuz, "Christians in the Qur'ān: Some Insights Derived from the Classical Exegetical Approach," *Studia Orientalia* 112 (2012): 41–53.

the Zoroastrians are mentioned (*Majūs*) (Qur. 22:17), without adding any description of any kind.

Jews and Christians are the communities of reference and, to some extent, the only ones that have a substantial relationship with the believers and Muslims. One sign of this is the terms that, in the Qur'an, indicate the religious leaders of Jews and Christians (*aḥbār*, rabbis and *ruhbān*, monks), who appear in passages strongly characterized by the rhetoric of polemical conflict. The term *aḥbār* (sing. *ḥibr*) is recognized as deriving from the rabbinic tradition by scholarly consensus. The term *ruhbān* is, however, subject to several different evaluations, since it could indicate both monastic figures and bishops from the Christian communities. A rather extensive literature has proposed different assessments of its etymology and meaning in the Qur'an. The other Qur'anic term, *qissīsīn* (cf. Qur. 5:82), instead, means, without a doubt, Christian clergymen in a broad sense.[39] Overall, the Qur'an demonstrates a significant familiarity with various religious communities, even in a polemical frame that tends to simplify and stereotype the terminology.

Another Qur'anic expression of particular significance and great fortune for the successive developments of the Islamic community is that of the People of the Book (*Ahl al-kitāb*), which defines and identifies Jews and Christians as holders of a sacred scripture and that appears about thirty times alongside the expression "those to whom We have given the Scripture," which occurs in fifteen passages.[40] The expression fulfills multiple functions: it indicates the affinity between the new religion preached by Muḥammad and those that preceded it, in particular Judaism and Christianity, and ties this affinity to the centrality of a revealed book, elevating the Qur'an in relation to Jewish and Christian scriptures.

This dynamic of consistency in the diversity between Islam and the other communities also returns in the Qur'anic references to the other sacred scriptures. The book and the Qur'an (see pp. 78–85) fully define the meaning of the new message brought by Muḥammad, though other religious communities that

39 See, above all, Holger M. Zellentin, "*Aḥbār* and *Ruḥbān*: Religious Leaders in the Qur'ān in Dialogue with Christian and Rabbinic Literature," in *Qur'ānic Studies Today*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth and Michael A. Sells (London: Routledge, 2016), 262–93, and the bibliography cited and discussed within.

40 Richard L. Kimball, *The People of the Book, Ahl al-Kitāb: A Comparative Theological Exploration* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019); Ismail Albayrak, "The People of Book in the Qur'ān," *Islamic Studies* 47/3 (2008): 301–25; Hakan Çoruh, "Friendship between Muslims and People of the Book in the Qur'an with Special Reference to Q 5:51," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23/4 (2012): 505–13; Sahaja Carimokam, *Muhammad and the People of the Book* (Bloomington, Ind.: Xlibris Corporation, 2010).

arrived earlier have their own scriptures. In this light, the Qur'an contains passages that identify previous scriptures by name, such as the Torah (*Tawrāt*), the Gospel (*Injīl*), and the Psalms (*Zabūr*).[41] These scriptures were sent, and made to descend, as in the case of the Torah (Qur. 5:45), or were entrusted, as in the case of the Psalms, to a prophet, in this case, David (Text no. 21).

Text no. 21: The other scriptures

And [I have come] to confirm the Torah that there was before me
and to make lawful to you some of that which was forbidden to you.
I bring you a sign from your Lord;
so fear God and obey me. (Qur. 3:50)
Then We caused Our messengers to follow in their footsteps.
We caused Jesus, the son of Mary, to follow
and We gave him the Gospel;
and We placed compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who followed him. (Qur. 57:27)
And We gave David Psalms. (Qur. 4:163)
We have written in the Psalms after the Reminder:
'The earth will be inherited by My righteous servants.' (Qur. 21:105)

To these citations, more generic mentions of "books" or other scriptures must be added, and these, in some cases, presumably refer to these scriptures. For example, there are passages in which a generic book is mentioned in relation to Moses, and it is possible to conclude that it is an allusion to the Torah (Qur. 2:87, 6:154, 11:110, 17:2, 24:35, 32:23, 41:45).

Among the other expressions that seem to refer to sacred scriptures, the most significant one is *suḥuf* (sheets, pages, scrolls) (Text no. 22). This term alludes to a transcription of a revelation received by previous prophets, not yet in book form, though already in written and not only oral form. The initial transcriptions of the passages regarding the Qur'anic revelation pronounced by Muḥammad were probably on unbound sheets (see pp. 153–57).

Text no. 22: The scrolls (*ṣuḥuf*)

Or has he not been told
of what is in the scrolls of Moses
and Abraham, who paid his debt in full? (Qur. 53:36–37)
This is in the ancient scrolls,
The scrolls of Abraham and Moses. (Qur. 87:18)

41 Gordon Nickel, *Narratives of Tampering in the Earliest Commentaries on the Qur'ān* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2011), 39–40: the term *Tawrāt* appears eighteen times in the Qur'an, the term *Injīl* twelve times, while *Zabūr* appears only three times.

The Qur'an cites these scriptures of previous religious communities in a positive and respectful manner. Every evaluation regarding their explicit alteration seems absent from the contents of the Qur'an. However, there are a number of more generic affirmations of alteration, manipulation, or omission in relation to what was revealed and prescribed to others, especially in the initial suras (suras 2–7), but this never occurs in the passages that mention said communities directly.[42] The coherent elaboration of a principle of deliberate alteration of the scripture on the part of the historical religious communities in possession of these texts and, therefore, the relationship with the scriptures they possessed during their times, would be better defined by subsequent exegetical and theological speculation. In keeping with the contents of the Qur'an, these are sacred scriptures to be respected, and they, originally, contained the principles of the true faith.

1.2.7 Eschatology, the future

Concepts and images regarding the ultimate destiny of humankind are one of the central themes in the Qur'an. Together with the theme of the oneness of God and the stories of the patriarchs and prophets, eschatology can be considered the third great topic. This is due to the space it occupies in the revelation and the frequency with which it occurs throughout the entire Qur'an, sometimes with similar images, but even more often with the transmission of a plurality of meanings. In the revelations that are most likely the earliest ones, that is, those contained in the final suras of the text, the reference to the upheaval that will accompany the end of times is one of the central themes.

The Qur'an does not offer a chronology of the events of the end times, although it affirms that there will be an end to existence, both individual and collective, followed by a second creation in afterlife (Qur. 29:20). In this imaginary, the compensation in the Garden, that is, Paradise, and the punishments in the Fire, or Hell, in the Afterlife (*al-ākhira*) are part of these final events. These are the two constantly evoked realms, to which men will be destined based on their acceptance or refusal of the divine message that Muḥammad brought to this world (*ad-dunyā*). References to the realms of the end of times are the most significant and repeated among the eschatological themes (Text no. 23).

42 Nickel, *Narratives of Tampering*, 50–66; on this topic, see also Gabriel S. Reynolds, "On the Qur'anic Accusation of Scriptural Falsification (*Taḥrīf*) and Christian Anti-Jewish Polemic," *Journal of American Oriental Society* 130/2 (2010): 189–202.

Text no. 23: Paradise and Hell

Those who do good works, whether male or female,
and are believers
– they will enter the Garden
and will not be wronged one speck. (Qur. 4:124)
The likeness of the Garden which the god-fearing have been promised:
in it there are rivers of water whose taste remains pure;
and rivers of milk whose taste does not go sour;
and rivers of wine, a pleasure for those who drink;
and rivers of purest honey;
in it they will have some of every kind of fruit
and forgiveness from their Lord.
Are they like those who remain for ever in the Fire
and are given boiling water to drink
that tears apart their bowels? (Qur. 47:15)
Those who are ungrateful will have the fire of Jahannam.
They will not be done with and die,
and there will be no alleviation for them of its punishment. (Qur. 35:36)
Those who are ungrateful will be driven into Jahannam in troops;
and then, when they reach it,
its doors will be opened,
and its keepers will say to them,
'Did not messengers from among you come to you
reciting to you the signs of your Lord
and warning you of the meeting of this day of yours?' (Qur. 39:71)

There are numerous Qur'anic terms that refer to paradise (*janna*, garden, *firdaws*, paradise – from the Persian) and to hell (*nār*, fire, *jahannam*, Gehenna), as well as the highly imaginative visions that evoke, in an extremely concrete manner, the nature of the rewards or punishments. The primary meanings of the two main names, *janna* (garden) and *nār* (fire) directly express the concrete nature of the reward or the punishment, since the Islamic paradise is a luxuriant garden of vegetation, water, and much more, while the fire evokes the torment of the atrocious punitive practices in the unbearable heat of the fire, populated by serpents, scorpions, and putrefying liquids.

What counts is the enticing character of the reward and that of the terrifying punishment. The same words are often repeated, and so are the rewards or the torments which make the eternal realms a physical place, together with several other details regarding castles, houses, tents, gates, levels, or other unspecified places. In paradise, there is no labor, faces will be glowing thanks to the sight of God, while fruits, food, drink, women (the Houris), and young servants attend to the blessed inhabitants. Even more details can be read about hell: boiling water, infected liquids, terrifying angels that keep guard, and bodies that are mutilated, burnt, and

exhausted in different ways return in many verses. The Qur'an aims to explain the details of the future destiny that believers have earned during their lives.[43]

The Qur'an also frequently recalls that which precedes destiny in the eternal realms, that is, events that will take place at the end of times and before the final judgment of humankind. There are frequent references to the Hour (*as-sāʿa*) or the Day of Resurrection or of Judgment (*yawm al-qiyāma*, *yawm ad-dīn*), evoked with different expressions, which aim to make a powerful announcement that this world will reach its end, that God will be the only Living One, and that what humankind believes to be their world is destined to end.

From this point of view, only a few details are offered as to what will really occur from that point forward, without particular interest in resolving several questions that will regard the collective fate between the end of times and the beginning of eschatological time. Creation will perish, and then humankind will rise again by the will of God, and when the Trumpet sounds, humankind will be gathered together, and their actions will be reckoned. There are record books that contain the deeds of humankind. The book will be placed in the right hand for those who are good, while those who are evil will have the book placed behind them or in their left hand, and the counting or weighing out of these deeds will be carried out with a Scale. After the Judgment, people will be sent either to paradise or to hell, after crossing a Bridge, as the final Judgment has established (Text no. 24).

Text no. 24: Events of the End of Times

The agony of death comes in truth.
That is what you have been avoiding.
There will be a blast on the trumpet.
That is the day of the threat.
Each soul will come accompanied by a driver and a witness. (Qur. 50:19–21)
And because the Hour is coming
– there is no doubt about it –
and because God will raise those in the graves. (Qur. 22:7)
when the earth in its entirety will be His handful
on the Day of Resurrection,
and the heavens will be rolled up in His right hand. (Qur. 39:67)
No. I swear by the Day of Resurrection.

43 Ghassan El Masri, *The Semantics of Qur'anic Language. Al-Āḫira* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2021); Christian Lange, *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 37–70; Heidi Toelle, *Le Coran revisité: le feu, l'eau, l'air et la terre* (Damas: Institut Français de Damas, 1999), 23–69; Ṣubḥī El-Ṣaleḥ, *La vie future selon le Coran*, 2nd ed. (Paris: J. Vrin, 1986), despite the title, is mainly dedicated to exegetical literature; Bell and Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 158–62; see also Reynolds, *Allah*, 114–33 on the eschatological destiny of sinning believers.

No. I swear by the reproaching soul.
Does man think that We shall not gather together his bones? (Qur. 75:1–3)
The weighing on that day is the true [weighing].
Those whose balances are heavy
– they are the ones who will prosper;
And those whose balances are light
– they are the ones who will lose their souls,
because they have wronged Our signs. (Qur. 7:8–9)
To-day each soul is recompensed with what it has amassed.
There is no wrong to-day.
God is swift in reckoning. (Qur. 40:17)

The Qur'an also contains several important references to individual eschatology and the fate of humankind at the end of their life on Earth, unequivocally establishing that every soul will taste death, and that it will be the Angel of Death who brings news of the end of life to each person. Moreover, it is God who lets people live or die, who establishes the limits for everyone, and who orders everyone's death, without humans being able to decide or influence anything that falls outside their capability. Actually, this is not only true for people and for the beings of the visible world, but for everyone, including angels and *jinn*. Death is fully and exclusively part of divine power, just like life, and creating either one is the prerogative of God almighty.[44] Humankind must accept God's will and act accordingly, so that God might be merciful and not hostile, as in the case of those who do not believe.

If all humans will taste death, not all of them will wait for the day of Resurrection and the final Judgment. The Qur'an mentions, as a category of special destiny, those who are killed on the "path of God" (*fī sabīl Allāh*), such as martyrs, who are not actually dead, but truly alive with God (Text no. 25).

Text no. 25: Death

Every soul will taste death
– and you will be paid your reward in full on the Day of Resurrection. (Qur. 3:185)
Say, 'The angel of death, who has been given charge of you,
will gather you, and then you will be returned to your Lord.' (Qur. 32:11)
Do not reckon those who were killed in God's way as dead:
No! [They are] alive with their Lord.
They have provision [from Him]. (Qur. 3:169)

44 Thomas J. O'Shaughnessy, *Muḥammad's Thoughts on Death. A Thematic Study of the Qur'ānic Data* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969); Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes in the Qur'ān*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1989), 106–20; On the urban and commercial context of certain eschatological terminology, see Andrew Rippin, "The Commerce of Eschatology," in *The Qur'an as Text*, ed. Stefan Wild (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 125–35.

So much space is dedicated to the various themes connected to eschatology that there are many details on other aspects, even if, in the Qur'an, there are not exhaustive descriptions either regarding the process of individual death, or about what will happen when the advent of the end of times is proclaimed. More than articulate narrations, they are evoked images, as in the case of prophetic stories, in which the objective is a moral appeal.

With this urgency, there is no space for history or for a defined sequence, for example on the phases following the advent of the Hour and what will lead to the Judgment, the Scale that will weight the acts of humankind, the Bridge to be crossed on the path towards the eternal realms, or what will happen to an individual after his soul is ripped away. Much of this would be fully defined by the later exegetical tradition. For example, later Islamic texts develop the concept of the punishment of the grave (*ʿadhāb al-qabr*), which became a central point in the Sunni credo, no less than other eschatological themes, despite the fact that it is never cited explicitly in the Qur'an.

1.2.8 Rituals and injunctions

The Qur'an is not a book of law, nor is it a collection of normative pronouncements on the proper conduct on specific occasions. However, while they do not make up a very consistent part of it, the text does contain, as the description of the contents of the Sura of the Cow has shown, injunctions that regulate rituals and behaviors required from the believers. These partially normalize aspects of religious life, of individual behavior, and of relationships between peoples, although without detailed treatment.

The enormous value and the meaning attributed to the Qur'anic word by Muslim believers determines its absolute relevance to Islamic law, even in the presence of a lesser number of references that are in no way detailed. Later, the subsequent exegetical tradition, starting with the Prophet's accounts and the first generations, will collect the other necessary information regarding what the Qur'an includes regarding rituals, personal conduct, and the obligations that fall on the community. Like every cultural sphere, law (*fiqh*) is a human product that has a complex relationship with established scriptural data, thanks to interpretation and its evolution in all directions. The course of history and the practice of legal interpretation, however, do not at all undermine the ideal and concrete centrality of the Qur'anic prescription and, closely connected to this, the concept of divine law (*sharīʿa*). As in all religious communities the problem was and is what to do with passages where the scripture is not unequivocal or for questions which are not even touched by it.

The identification of the number of prescriptive verses is subject to different assessments. This occurs because in addition to the explicit verses, the identification of other allusive verses that might contain legal references is subject to different assessments by Muslim scholars. Such a situation is closely connected to the fact that the Qur'an does not give even one precise definition of law or norm, nor does it make specific distinctions for the successive themes in the one hundred fourteen suras.

Scholars speak of hundreds of verses of legislative significance — usually 500 or 600 — that, compared with more than six thousand in the entire Qur'an, demonstrate that the sacred Islamic book is not a legislative text. Furthermore, in general, there is a distinction between prescriptions regarding rituals, behaviors that affect community life, and questions relative to rules regarding aspects that can be defined as secular in modern legal systems.[45] The elusive character of the prescriptions and injunctions included in the Qur'an can be best deduced by how the duties relative to rituals are mentioned, starting with what have been termed the pillars of Islam, so important for community religious practices.

The most articulated legal verse, richest in details, is the one related to alms (*zakāt*), in which its requirements and the categories of recipients are specified (Qur. 9:60, see Text no. 26). Daily prayer, possibly the most complex and meaningful ritual as a community practice for its pervasiveness and frequency, is mentioned in some Qur'anic passages, from which it can be inferred that daily prayers are three and not five in number. Other verses cite the Friday communal prayer, the call to prayer (Qur. 5:58, 62:9), and acts such as prostration that make up its central moment. In other passages, purification rituals are mentioned. Prayer and alms return in a few other passages that name them together, considering them as fundamental for all the religions of the book (Qur. 2:43, 5:12; 21:73).

An important passage refers to the practice of praying towards Jerusalem, revoked by a specific verse that affirms to have "reoriented" the direction towards the temple in Mecca (Qur. 2:142–50). The Qur'an also contains prescriptions regarding the ritual conditions that must precede prayer: ablutions and other

45 All well-structured manuals and essays on Islamic law generally discuss, at the beginning, verses on legal topics in the Qur'an, enumerating in different manners, varying approximately from two-hundred to one thousand as an overall calculation according to very different meanings and methods (for example, if only explicitly normative verses are considered, or also those that imply or allude to injunctions of various types). For example, David S. Powers enumerates them in 500 verses: "Le Coran et son environment legal," in *Le Coran des Historiens*, 617. Other experts propose different calculations. On various aspects regarding the relationship between the Qur'an and injunctions of a legal type, see Joseph E. Lowry, "Law and the Qur'an," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, ed. Mustafa A. A. Shah and Muhammad A. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 445–63.

procedures are defined here for the first time, marking the boundaries between believers and other religious communities, which is at the foundation of the detailed discussions established in later traditions (see Text no. 26).

The injunction regarding the obligation to fast during the month of Ramadan, the only month named in the Qur'an (Qur. 2:185, Text no. 26), is established in a passage that overtly celebrates introduction of this fast, exactly parallel to the pilgrimage to Mecca that accompanies the recognition, in brief passages, of the profound Islamic significance of the foundation and construction of the Kaʿba by Abraham. The rich traditional elaboration of the purification practices, or the acts performed to carry out the more or less complex rituals of the pilgrimage, are not part of the Qur'an, but do find their initial, foundational sanction in the Qur'an.[46]

Text no. 26: Rituals

Order your people to pray and be steadfast in [prayer]. (Qur. 20:132)
The alms are for the poor and the destitute,
for those who work to collect them
and those whose hearts are to be reconciled,
to free slaves and debtors,
in God's way and for the traveller. (Qur. 9:60)
We see you turning your face about in the sky,
and so We make you turn
to a *qibla* that will please you.
Turn your face towards the Sacred Mosque.
Wherever you may be,
turn your faces towards it. (Qur. 2:144)
[It is] the month of Ramadan,
in which the Qur'an was sent down
as a guidance to the people
and as clear proofs of the guidance and of the salvation.
Let those of you who witness the month
fast during it.

46 On the various rituals, see Yasin Dutton, "The Qur'ān as a Sources of Law: The Case of *Zakāt* (Alms-Tax)," in *Islamic Reflections. Arabic Musings. Studies in Honour of Professor Alan Jones*, ed. Robert G. Hoyland and Philip F. Kennedy (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2004), 201–16; Marion H. Katz, *Prayer in Islamic Thought and Practice* (Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), in particular 10–20; Marion H. Katz, *Body of Text. The Emergence of the Sunnī Law of Ritual Purity* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2002); John Burton, "The Qur'ān and the Islamic Practice of *Wuḍū'*," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51/1 (1988): 21–58; Denis Gril, "De l'usage sanctifiant des biens en Islam," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 215/1 (1998): 59–89; Kees Wagtendonk, *Fasting in the Koran* (Leiden: Brill, 1968).

Those of you who are sick or on a journey,
a number of other days. (Qur. 2:185)
[Recall] when We found lodging for Abraham at the place of the House,
saying, 'Do not associate anything with Me,
and purify My house for those who go round it and those who stand
and those who bow and those who prostrate themselves. (Qur. 22:26)

The injunctions concerning dietary law and that discuss precise prescriptions are also to be considered of a ritualistic nature, as are those that regard animal slaughter and sacrifice. Muslims must only eat lawful food (*ḥalāl*), which is established in various verses that determine it through prohibition, or affirming that certain previous prohibitions have been revoked. The general Qur'anic conception aims to bring God's munificence to light: it renders every edible thing available to humankind, excluding little, and this differs from the bothersome and much more limiting dietary laws imposed on the Jews, which are conceived as a punishment. The most significant prohibitions explicitly expressed in the Qur'an regard the consumption of non-ritually slaughtered meat, pork, or fermented and intoxicating drink (*khamr*). Other passages mention problems regarding sacrifice, affirming the legitimacy of fishing and regulating hunting and game within the sacred territory of Mecca.

The Qur'an is less explicit when it comments on behavior regarding clothing. Besides general prescriptions and the implicit message that clothing should cover private parts, we do not find an injunction stating that men should not wear silk clothing or gold jewelry: in this case, the later prohibition derives from an exegetical interpretation of a passage that simply states that these will be the clothing and jewelry worn in paradise (Text no. 27).[47]

Text no. 27: Prescriptions

O you who believe,
wine, gambling (*maysir*), idols and divining arrows
are an abomination that is of the work of Satan.
Avoid it, so that you may prosper. (Qur. 5:90)

47 On the *khamr* in the Qur'an, see Leonardo Capezzone, "La colpa del bevitore: *iṯm* e *riğs* nelle interpretazioni classiche e moderne dei passi relativi al *ḫamr* nel Corano e nella Sunna," *Oriente Moderno* 100/3 (2020): 277–321; Claudio Lo Jacono, "On the Prohibition of Fermented Drinks in Islam," *Studi Magrebini* 26 (1998–2002): 133–45; on clothing and dress, see Roberto Tottoli, "Tradizioni islamiche sull'uso di tessuti e vestiti," in *Tejer y vestir: de la Antigüedad al islam*, ed. Manuela Marín (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas, 2001), 43–72; on dietary laws, see Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum as a Point of Departure*; Nicolai Sinai, "The Qur'ān's Dietary Tetralogue: A Diachronic Reconstruction," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 46 (2019): 113–46.

Do not eat of that over which God's name has not been mentioned,
for it is abomination. (Qur. 6:121)
O you who believe,
do not forbid the good things
which God has made lawful for you. (Qur. 5:87).
He has forbidden you only carrion, blood, the flesh of the pig,
and what has been hallowed to other than God. (Qur. 16:115)
Those will have the gardens of Eden,
through which rivers flow.
There they will be adorned with bracelets of gold,
and will wear green garments made of silk and brocade,
reclining there on couches. (Qur. 18:31)

Few Qur'anic words or verses are inevitably able to condition and define the social and historical life of Islam. Some themes return with a certain frequency to underscore their relevance in the religious imaginary, including, for example, charity and alms, prescriptions regarding the family, slavery, and war.

Besides the injunction for ritual charity, voluntary charity (*ṣadaqa*) is also an imperative and a highly defining act of the believer. Norms regarding the family include matrimony, its dissolution through repudiation (*ṭalāq*), and the attention paid to the treatment of orphans. The Qur'an enters into some details, even minute ones in these areas, in passages with a very different tone in comparison to those that have to do with eschatology or prophetic stories of punishment: matrimonial relations that are permitted and those that are not, nuptial gifts, how divorce can occur, the role of mothers, and child protection are also discussed, even when there is no space for more complex cases.

Another Qur'anic passage with contents that are clearly normative is the one that defines right of succession and inheritance, in some verses that contain affirmations that were destined to have a profound impact on the history of Islamic civilization (Text no. 28).[48]

Text no. 28: Normative contents

Men have a share of what parents and kinsmen leave,
and so too do women,

48 David S. Powers, *Studies in Qur'ān and Ḥadīth: The Formation of the Islamic Law of Inheritance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Richard Kimber, "The Qur'anic Law of Inheritance," *Islamic Law and Society* 5 (1998): 291–325; see also Agostino Cilardo, *The Qur'ānic Term Kalāla: Studies in Arabic Language and Poetry, Ḥadīṯ, Tafsīr, and Fiqh. Notes on the Origins of Islamic Law* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005); and David S. Powers, *Muḥammad is not the Father of Any of Your Men. The Making of the Last Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

whether it is little or much
– a share laid down.
When the kinsmen and the orphans and the destitute are present at the division,
provide for them out of it
and speak to them properly. (. . .)
God charges you concerning your children:
to the male the equivalent of the portion of two females;
if there are more women than two,
they get two-thirds of what he leaves;
[but] if there is only one she gets half.
To each of his parents one sixth of what he leaves,
if he has a child;
but if he does not have a child
and his heir is his father,
his mother gets a third;
but if he has brothers,
his mother gets a sixth
after any bequest he may have made or any debt. (Qur. 4:7–8,11)
O you who believe,
retaliation is prescribed for you concerning the slain:
the free man for the free man;
the slave for the slave;
the female for the female. (Qur. 2:178)
Those of your women who commit indecency
– call four of you as witnesses against them.
If [the four] give their testimony,
confine them in their houses
until death takes them
or God appoints a way for them. (Qur. 4:15)
O you who believe,
do not live on usury,
[receiving the sum lent] multiplied many times.
Fear God so that you may prosper. (Qur. 3:130)

The Qur'an includes injunctions on how to act in order to defend oneself in war, and how to lighten religious duties in these circumstances. Crimes and torts against persons are mentioned in passages that aim to regulate conduct in the case of homicide or intentional or incidental injury. The law of retaliation (*lex talionis*) is cited explicitly, as are other specific injunctions relative to crimes such as theft or adultery (*zinā*, literally 'fornication', Text no. 28), an illicit act for which, once the infraction is verified by four witnesses, one hundred lashes are prescribed, and not stoning, a punishment which is not included in the Qur'anic text (Qur. 24:2).

The treatment of slaves appears in many chapters indicating the significant attention paid to the topic of slavery, especially in domestic environments. One

gambling game, *maysir*, is prohibited in a verse that also cites the prohibition of drinking wine (Text no. 27).[49] The commercial vocation that emerges in many aspects of the Qur'anic lexicon, and also from the practices evident in Muḥammad's learning environment, also resurfaces in the prohibition of usury or lending with interest, which is explicitly mentioned in a couple of passages. This clear affirmation did not hinder the various commercial and economic activities in the Islamic sphere. Rather, it without a doubt determined a traditional need to respect a religious obligation so clearly explained in the Qur'an, which was tempered with various types of expedients.

Overall, Qur'anic injunctions reflect the *sharīʿa* ideal of demanding certain behavior from humankind for a limited number of cases, and to alleviate duties and difficulties. In the case of rituals, these are practices that identify Muslims with daily prayers, the annual fast of Ramadan, the ninth lunar month of the Islamic calendar, and, if one is able to do so, performance of the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in one's lifetime. In the case of individual conduct and social life, the same general principle applies: once some precise limitations regarding crimes or incontrovertible offenses are established, everything is to be considered lawful except for those cases in which humans must demonstrate their gratitude and obedience to Almighty God and creator or follow rules that have the function of normalizing social practices, to facilitate and not complicate relations amongst humankind.[50]

1.2.9 History and the Prophet

The prophetic lineage that precedes the advent of Muḥammad and that is contained in the Qur'an represents the sacred history of the human societies of the past. It is a theological vision that defines, first, the existence and nature of a divine message, always equal to itself, though connected to different events. This vision has passed through the history of humanity from creation until Muḥammad, and, therefore, conveys an idea of the past that is formulated on the meaning of the present and the meaning that the new revelation aims to give to previous prophecies. It is, in the end, an a-historical past, whose function is to better define for the Prophet

49 The *maysir* was a particularly widespread pre-Islamic Arab gambling game that was prohibited by the Qur'an. On these practices, see Franz Rosenthal, *Gambling in Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 67–112.

50 On methodological questions for analyzing the contents of a legal type in the Qur'an and on a specific case, see Joseph E. Lowry, "When Less is More: Law and Commandment in *Sūrat al-Anʿām*," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 9/2 (2007): 22–42.

himself, and then for all humankind, the nature of the revelation in a present time that conditions themes, forms, and profound meanings. Amongst these meanings, history, understood as the course of events that have led to an unfolding present and an imminent eschatological future, is restricted to its sacred function.

From Adam to Muḥammad, time is marked by the relationship between a series of prophets and peoples that have followed one another. Apart from this, there is very little in the Qur'an.[51] From this point of view and with these aims, apart from a few references that are difficult to interpret, or the unclear allusions to events that are said to refer to the story of Muḥammad, the Qur'an contains scarce historical references or references to the time in which it was revealed. The paucity of mentions of the name of the Prophet has already been discussed (pp. 18–19), and there are not very many more passages, more or less concrete and explicit, that can even be considered to describe definable historical episodes. The identifiability of Qur'anic passages with events related to Muḥammad is a central issue for the biographical reconstruction of Islamic historiography with the revelation and, therefore, the possibility of historicizing the former and the latter. The late and complex character of the Islamic tradition has given rise to two diverging tendencies, either reading these passages only as an exegetical reconstruction and identification, unacceptable from a historical viewpoint, or considering the Qur'anic passages as the only contemporary evidence of the life of the Prophet.

The mentions of contemporary episodes of Muḥammad's life are quite problematic in that they lack a context defined by other sources that can corroborate the Qur'anic data, without considering later exegetical interpretations. The Qur'an names, in particular, one of Muḥammad's adversaries, Abū Lahab, and the place in which, according to Islamic historiography, the first decisive battle between Meccans and Muslims occurred (624 A.D.), Badr, in the wake of their emigration to Medina. The passages in question not only do not report any other information, but are also difficult to relate to the historical description in subsequent exegetical Islamic interpretations. The same can be said of the passage that mentions the "People of the Elephant," or that which includes a presumed reference to the Christian martyrs of Najrān in short verses that make mention of a Ditch (*ukhdūd*) (Text no. 29).

51 On the Qur'anic concept of history, see, for example, Mazheruddin Siddiqi, *The Qur'ānic Concept of History* (Karachi: Central Institute of Islamic Research, 1965); Christian J. Robin, "L'Arabie préislamique," in *Le Coran des historiens*, ed. Mohammad A. Amir-Moezzi and Guillaume Dye (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2019), vol. 1, 54–55: the Qur'an has very few historical and geographical references. On the relationship between the Qur'an and history, see also Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity*, 105–38.

Alongside these last examples and the references to Muḥammad's life, another passage seems to allude to a precise historical event, or at least was interpreted that way by the later exegetical reading and by those studies that addressed it. The beginning of the Sura of the Romans (*ar-Rūm*, no. 30) is said to contain the premonition of a victory regarding the "Romans," that is, the Byzantines. The reference could be, as the later interpretation explains, to the conflict between Byzantines and Persians in the vast Near Eastern region at the beginning of the seventh century, in the years immediately preceding the prophetic mission of Muḥammad. The passage, in the form of a future prediction, is not lacking in interpretative issues that can be connected to different readings and vocalizations or to conflicts that marked the confrontation between two empires in Palestine and Jerusalem, between the Byzantine defeat in 613–614 and the Persian one in 628. The dating of the text, in the case of its insertion in the sura in the process of being collected and officially recognized, has been the subject of different assessments. The passage is enigmatic at the very least and it is difficult to consider it an unequivocal historical reference (see Text no. 29).[52]

Text no. 29: Historical references

God had already helped you at Badr,
when you were humble.
So fear God, that you may be thankful. (Qur. 3:123)
The hands of Abū Lahab will perish and he will perish.
His possessions and gains will be of no avail to him.
He will roast in a flaming fire,
And his wife, the carrier of firewood,
With a rope of palm-fibre on her neck. (Qur. 111:1–4)
Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the men with the elephants?
Did He not cause their mischief to go astray? (Qur. 105:1–2).
Slain were the men of the Ditch,
– the fire fed with fuel –
When they sat over it,

52 On Abū Lahab, see Uri Rubin, "Abū Lahab and Sūra CXI," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 42/1 (1979): 13–28; Theodor Lohmann, "Abū Lahab. Übersetzung und Erklärung von Sure 111," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 18/4 (1966): 326–48; on sura 30, see the studies by Edmund Beck, "Die Sure *ar-Rūm* (30)," *Orientalia* 13 (1944): 334–55 and 14 (1945): 118–42; and Jan van Reeth, "Sourate 30," in *Le Coran des historiens*, ed. Mohammad A. Amir-Moezzi and Guillaume Dye (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2019), vol. 2, 1073–78; Angelika Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren: die literarische Form des Koran - ein Zeugnis seiner Historizität?*, 2nd. ed. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007), 256. Cf. also Tommaso Tesei, "'The Romans Will Win!' Q 30:2–7 in Light of 7th c. Political Eschatology," *Der Islam* 95/1 (2018): 1–29.

And they were witnesses of what they did with the believers. (Qur. 85:4–7)
The Romans have been defeated
in the nearest part of the land;
but after their being vanquished
they will be victorious,
in a few years. (Qur. 30:2–4)

An aspect of the Qur'anic text that is just as problematic is, without a doubt, its onomastics. The most frequently cited names are those of the prophets, and almost all of them can be traced to their counterparts in the Judaic and Christian tradition, except for Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, and Shuʿayb (see pp. 27–32). The Qur'an, though, also includes other names in a discourse that is lacking explicit, precise references and that tends not to historicize and define the spatial and temporal contours of the narrations. The allusive character and the problematic absence of concrete references have often made the definition of details, through later exegetical speculation, necessary. A dramatized, homiletic, and allusive posture, with an urgency to communicate, can only resort to names that are inserted without any sort of concomitant evidence that aids in their identification.

In such a situation, historical or geographical references, useful for a precise contextualization of what the Qur'an discusses, are extremely limited. For example in the case of the passages that discuss idols, their identification with the pre-Islamic pagan reality is anything but simple. For example, that the term *Ṭāghūt* refers to idols or idolatrous cults can be inferred from the text (Qur. 4:51, 60, 76; 16:36; 39:17), but we know little else. The same considerations apply to another term, *Jibt*, that appears together with *Ṭāghūt*, and to other Qur'anic terms that refer to the relationship that the Qur'anic revelation aims to emphasize with pagan idolatry and with the religious reality of the time when it was revealed (pp. 142–47). From an essentially historical point of view, however, very little remains, even though the Qur'anic message seems to take direct responsibility for the need of those who receive it to understand fully the terms to which it refers. The present, in the form of comprehensibility in the moment of communication, prevails over past and future.

The same can be affirmed for the names of places or geographic entities, even when they appear difficult to identify, even by the initial recipients and exegetes of the divine message. The rare toponyms that the Qur'an includes, especially those that refer to geographic locations in Arabia, are difficult to identify. Speculations in various directions are not lacking, both on the part of Muslims and in the history of Western Qur'anic studies, as in the case of al-Aḥqāf (Qur. 46:21), al-Ayka (Qur. 15:78–79, etc.), or Iram (Qur. 89:7). Bakka (Qur. 3:96) is usually considered a variant name for Mecca, which is never cited

in the Qur'an.[53] These names, not less than the other onomastics, cast some shadows on the comprehensibility, in concrete and identifiable terms, of the Arabic Qur'anic message (see Text no. 30).

Text no. 30: Names in the Qur'an

Have you not seen those who were given a portion of the Scripture
believing in false gods (*al-Jibt*) and idols (*aṭ-Ṭāghūt*)
and saying to those who do not believe,
'These are more rightly guided on the way than those who believe'?(Qur. 4:51).
And they have plotted a very great plot,
And said,
"Do not forsake your gods
and do not forsake Wadd nor Suwāʿ
nor Yaghūth nor Yaʿūq nor Nasr." (Qur. 71:22–23)
The men of al-Ayka were wrong-doers.
So We took vengeance on them.
These two are on a clear road.
And the men of al-Ḥijr denied the truth of those who were sent [to them]. (Qur. 15:78–80)
Mention the brother of ʿĀd
when he warned his people of al-Aḥqāf (the sand-dunes)
– and warners have passed away [both] before and after him. (Qur. 46:21)
Are they better or the people of Tubbaʿ and those before them,
whom We destroyed?
They were sinners. (Qur. 44:37)
There was a sign for Sabaʾ in their dwelling-place
– two gardens,
[one] on the right and [one] on the left (. . .)
But they turned away and so we loosed on them a devastating flood,
and in exchange for their two gardens
we gave them two gardens which produced bitter fruit
and tamarisks and a few sidr-trees.
This We gave them as recompense for their ingratitude. (Qur. 34:15–17)

Recent progress in epigraphy and archaeology has discovered a reality that seems to confirm, in part, the Qur'anic allusions in their later traditional Islamic identifications. This is the case, for example, of discoveries that corroborate and clarify references to the kings of Sabaʾ and the rupture of the Maʾrib Dam, which refer back to the pre-Islamic historical events in Yemen (Qur. 34:15–17, see Text no. 30).

53 Gerd-Rüdiger Puin, "Leuke Kome/Layka, die Arser/Aṣḥāb al-Rass und andere vorislamische Namen im Koran: ein Weg aus dem 'Dickicht'," in *Die dunklen Anfänge: neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islams*, ed. Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Gerd-Rüdiger Puin (Berlin: Hans Schiler, 2007), 317–40; Paul Neuenkirchen, "Biblical Elements in Koran 89, 6–8 and Its Exegeses: A New Interpretation of 'Iram of the Pillars'," *Arabica* 60/6 (2013): 651–700.

This is not the only such example. The dynamics of production of epigraphical writings and analyses of the context of production, which was established more by logics of power and political patronage than by literary reasons, call for prudence. However, there is no doubt that epigraphy is a type of primary source of great importance, even when the inscriptions in question do not aid in explaining the Qur'an and are not in line with later exegetical interpretations.[54]

1.2.10 Other topics

The Qur'an mentions many other topics regarding various aspects of religious life of the Muslims, of the other local community, and beyond. Some of these are discussed fairly frequently or are meaningful for other reasons. By way of example of the Qur'anic contents regarding other issues that are not the principal themes discussed thus far, we have chosen to present briefly what the Qur'an states regarding women and *jihād*, two themes that, for many reasons, are of constant interest for Muslim exegetes and scholars.

The theme of women in the Qur'an is a specific topic of increasing relevance. Many passages describe women or relations with women — often from a male point of view — within the structure of a revelation that insists upon the complementarity between male and female spheres on all levels of creation. The Qur'an confirms the moral role and responsibility of women as equal to those of men (Qur. 9:71).

In the Qur'an, many of the references to women occur in stories of patriarchs and prophets, or in other Qur'anic topics, some of which have a normative and legal function. Women are involved, for example, in the injunctions discussed above regarding inheritance law (pp. 49–50): they are entitled to half of what a man receives for every part of the estate. These verses establish a disparity in treatment but also recognize women as subjects of individual, inalienable rights, stipulated by the revelation. The Qur'an also touches upon the topic of the veil, commanding Muslim women to preserve their private parts from the eyes of strangers, in two passages that are anything but clear (Qur. 24:31, 33:59, Text no. 31).

The chapter entitled "Sura of Women" (no. 4) contains pronouncements of a certain importance, albeit conflicting. One verse (Qur. 4:19) orders that women be treated kindly, while another (Qur. 4:34) in the same sura explicitly affirms, in the same way, the superiority of men and also includes the possibility of beating/correcting one's own wife, with an expression that is subject to continuous attention and about which there are continual contemporary attempts at reinterpretation.

54 Robin, "L'Arabie préislamique," 126–30.

These aim to reevaluate or correct it, or to interpret the meaning of the root *ḍaraba* (to hit) in a different manner in the verse in question, drawing on the many meanings attested in Arabic dictionaries.[55]

Text no. 31: Women

Tell the believing women to lower their gaze
and to guard their private parts
and to show only those of their ornaments that normally appear
and to draw their coverings over the openings in their garments
and to reveal their ornaments only to their husbands
or their fathers or the fathers of their husbands
or their sons or their step-sons
or their brothers or the sons of their brothers or sisters
or their women or what their right hands possess
or their male attendants who have no desire
or children who have no knowledge of women's nakedness. (Qur. 24:31)
Consort with them (the wives) properly.
If you dislike them,
perhaps you dislike something when God has put much good into it. (Qur. 4:19)
Men are overseers of women
because God has granted some of them bounty in preference to others
and because of the possessions which they spend.
Righteous women are obedient,
guarding the invisible

55 Barbara F. Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Muhammad Iqbal, *Women in Qur'an* (Lahore: Aziz Publishing, 1985); Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, *La sexualité en Islam* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1975); Amina Wadud, *Qur'ān and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Bouchra Qorchi, "On the Mistranslation of Daraba in the Holy Quran," *Advances in Language and Literature Studies* 8/1 (2017): 176–80; Laleh Bakhtiar, "The Sublime Quran: The Misinterpretation of Chapter 4 Verse 43," *European Journal of Women Studies* 18/4 (2011): 431–39; a review of the numerous and most recent works on the interpretation of this verse appears in Nafiseh Ghafournia, "Towards a New Interpretation of Quran 4:34," *Hawwa: Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World* 15/3 (2017): 279–92. More generally, for innovative interpretations on the contents of the Qur'an regarding gender issues, see Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002); Asma Barlas, "The Qur'an and Hermeneutics: Reading the Qur'an's Opposition to Patriarchy," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 3/2 (2001): 15–38. Naim Dib, *D'un islam textuel vers un islam contextual. La traduction du Coran et la costruction de l'image de la femme* (Ottawa: Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, 2009), asserts, after having analyzed and criticized translations into French and English, that there is not gender discrimination in the Qur'an. For a general overview on feminist exegesis, see Amina Wadud, "Reflections on Islamic Feminist Exegesis of the Qur'an," *Religions* 12/7 (2021): 497, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070497.

because God has guarded [them].
Admonish those women whose rebelliousness you fear,
shun them in [their] resting-places
and hit them.
If they obey you, do not seek a [further] way against them. (Qur. 4:34)

Women, and relationships between men and women, recur with some frequency and take up significant space in the Qur'an, even in the passages that discuss marriage and repudiation. The legal import of these verses has already been discussed (pp. 49–50), but social and behavioral aspects of the role of women and the female sphere are a no less significant topic. This is certainly the case for the injunctions regarding the obligation to support wives and children, and the permission granted to Muslim men to marry up to four wives or to marry women of the People of the Book, or passages stressing the reproductive aim of matrimonial unions. Many verses further specify the central character of matrimony and its norms in the organization of society, on account of which single men are explicitly urged to marry (Text no. 32).[56]

Text no. 32: Marriage

If you fear that you will not act fairly towards those orphans,
marry such of the women as it seems good to you:
two, three or four each;
But if you fear that you will not be fair,
one [only] or what your right hands possess.
That is more likely [to ensure] that you will not be unfair. (Qur. 4:3)
Marry off the unmarried among you and the righteous among your male and female slaves. (Qur. 24:32)

Another theme that is relevant in the history of Islam and also finds significant space in the Qur'an is the question of *jihād*. The verbal root from which the term derives appears forty-one times, and in almost half of these instances, it expresses the concept of "combatting for God," while in the others, it expresses "making an effort," "striving" toward some sort of specific end, therefore reflecting the primary meaning of the root. Hence, *jihād* includes any type of effort but also carries a violent connotation, which seems to be imposed, first of all, by defensive aims and does not hide the other, broader meanings.

A diachronic interpretation of the revelations that accepts the standard chronology of the Qur'an followed both in the Islamic interpretation and in Western Islamic studies (pp. 60–77) highlights an evolution of the concept of *jihād* that may have taken on an increasingly clear connotation with the rise in

56 Sara Kohn, *Die Eheschliessung im Koran* (Diss., Leiden University, 1934).

power of the Islamic community, especially in Medina. One fundamental piece of information must be specified in this type of interpretation: the most militant verses of the sacred text, Qur. 9:29, 9:5 (Text no. 32), do not employ *jihād*, or any word of that root, but rather terms that derive from *qatala* (to kill, and in the derived form *qātala*, to combat).[57]

These, in turn, are defined by a series of precise conditions that limit their peremptory and absolute character. Also closely connected to *jihād* are passages in which it is claimed that Muslims must be resolute and combat alongside the Prophet and against the enemy, which means against hypocrites and those who undermine the community of believers. Also relevant to this topic are verses that mention martyrdom and the special status of martyrs, that is, those who fight on God's path, who are alive with God (Text no. 33, see also Text no. 25).

Text no. 33: *Jihād* and Martyrs

And strive for God with the truest endeavour. (Qur. 22:78)
Those who strive for Our sake
– We shall indeed guide them to Our ways.
God is with those who do good. (Qur. 29:69)
Fight (*qātilū*) from among the people who have been given the Scripture
those who do not believe in God and the Last Day
and who do not forbid that which God and His messenger have forbidden
and who do not follow the religion of truth,
until they pay the tribute readily, having been humbled. (Qur. 9:29–31)
Then, when the sacred months have passed,
kill (*uqtulū*) the polytheists wherever you find them. (Qur. 9:5)
Those who hoard gold and silver
and do not spend it in God's way
– give them the tidings of a painful torment. (Qur. 9:34)
Those who obey God and the messenger
– they are with those whom God has blessed:
the prophets and the loyal ones
and the martyrs and the righteous. (Qur. 4:69)

57 On the theme of the *jihād* and related themes in the Qur'an, the secondary literature is particularly extensive. In particular, see Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann, *Militanz und Antimilitanz im Koran: Historisch-kritische Untersuchungen zur Koranexegese und zu den Ursprüngen des militanten Islam* (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2018), and, among the numerous studies dedicated to *jihād*, see the beginning parts on Qur'anic data in Reuven Firestone, *Jihad. The Origin of Holy War in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999); Asma Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God. Jihād and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); David Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley-London: University of California Press, 2005); Muhammad A. Abdel Haleem, "Qur'anic '*Jihād*': A Linguistic and Contextual Analysis," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 12/1–2 (2010): 147–66.

Many other concepts besides those described here are addressed by the Qur'an. The salience that some of these have had in Islamic history is connected to social dynamics or specific interests, or even to the dialectics between foreign customs and traditions later "recognized" in the text. Alternatively, in the opposite manner, a Qur'anic term may have originated specific attention towards a particular topic. On account of the nature of the revelation, every word in the text established norms, standpoints, or even just interest in a topic. At the same time, the Islamic community continually searched the Qur'an for references, even implicit ones, for the interests and needs that were taking shape in the course of history. In both directions, the boundary between the original meaning of the Qur'anic text and its exegetical interpretation is complex and varies from case to case.[58]

1.3 Chronology of the Qur'an

The various topics addressed and passages cited highlight a distinctive characteristic of the Qur'an: that the many arguments, couched in different or similar words, are scattered throughout the one hundred and fourteen suras, which differ widely from each other in terms of length, style, and features (pp. 86–97). The longer suras at the beginning of the Qur'an, such as the Sura of the Cow analyzed above (pp. 7–11), contain passages of various length regarding various topics. This characteristic has raised many questions regarding the composition and compilation of the Qur'an, as well as the manner in which it was revealed.

From this point of view, two of the most significant and most debated questions, both in the Islamic world and in the West, are the chronology of the

58 The scholarship on the various terms, topics, and themes addressed in the Qur'an is quite extensive. As an example, see Karen Bauer, "Emotion in the Qur'an: An Overview," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 19/2 (2017): 1–30; Kenneth Cragg, "The Meaning of Zulm in the Qur'ān," *The Muslim World* 49/3 (1959): 196–212; Muhammad A. Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an. Themes and Style* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999); Rouzati, *Trial and Tribulation in the Qur'an*; Colin Turner, "Wealth as an Immortality Symbol in the Qur'an: A Reconsideration of the *Māl*/*Amwāl* Verses," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 8/2 (2006): 58–83; Mohammed Rustom, "Notes on the Semantic Range of 'Deliverance' in the Quran," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 138/2 (2018): 361–67; George F. Hourani, "Ethical Presuppositions in the Qur'ān," *The Muslim World* 70/1 (1980): 1–28; Anwar Hekmat, *Women and the Koran. The Status of Women in Islam* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1997); Karl Opitz, *Die Medizin im Koran* (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1906). Many other articles on various themes in the Qur'an can be found in the *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, Edinburgh University Press, 1999–.

revelations and the possibility of establishing the historical development of the prophet Muḥammad's mission in relation to the surviving text. In the investigation of this topic, two issues arise. Investigators strive to determine the order of the revelation of the suras and to describe the composition of the suras, especially the longer ones, in relation to a more or less reconstructible sequence of the revelation and its communication to the audience.

The current arrangement of suras in the Qur'an does not seem to follow a principle of progression of the revelation or reflect an order of this type that can be obtained by examining the contents of the suras themselves. The structure of the longer suras and the approximate decreasing order based on length, which is actually not respected in a systematic manner, suggests that a disposition of the chapters based on the diachronic sequence of the revelations was not followed at all. Nor does what we know about the first collection and edition of the Qur'an according to the Islamic sources ever suggest something of this sort.

The confessional point of departure is, in any case, the hypothesis that the Qur'an, as it is conserved today, was revealed to and faithfully transmitted by the Prophet over a span of more than twenty years (610–632 AD). According to the skeptics, however, this occurred with different timing and in different manners, and the text was not put in chronological order, but in an order based on other criteria. Questioning the possibility of dating the revelation based on the hypothesis of an evolution of thought or of concepts that it contains is a sensitive topic because it clashes with the perfection of the sacred text that is theologically and dogmatically defined by the creed.

On the other hand, the issue cannot only be resolved in these terms. The relationship of the sacred text to Muḥammad and to the men of his times is historically accepted by the Islamic exegetical literature, when it introduces, as we will see, the concept of abrogation (pp. 74–77). A historical approach is also seen when Qur'anic commentators revisit the revelation, not only in great consonance with legal hermeneutical goals but also to determine on what occasions of Muḥammad's life and those of the community were certain verses revealed. The chronology, at least for single verses or paragraphs, became part of the exegetical discourse and was not perceived as contradicting the concept of the absolute perfection of the Qur'anic text.

The Qur'an itself seems to give voice to a communication over time in one of its passages. The meaning of this passage, however, has been circumscribed and delimited by numerous subsequent exegetical traditions, which talk of a revelation of the Qur'an that would follow two modalities (see Text no. 34). The Qur'an was sent down in one step in the heavenly stage, during the Night of Power (the

27th day of Ramadan, according to the majority), and was subsequently revealed to Muḥammad piecemeal over the next twenty years in the second, earthly stage.

This story evidently has the purpose of sacralizing the moment of the initial communication and, above all, of sanctioning the divine nature of composition of the Qur'an, just as it was transmitted.

Text no. 34: When the Qur'an was sent down

We sent it down on the Night of Power.
And what can give you knowledge of what the Night of Power is?
The Night of Power is better than a thousand months;
The angels and the Spirit descend during it,
by permission of their Lord in every matter.
Peace it is until the rising of the dawn. (Qur. 97:1–5)
Those who disbelieve say,
'Why has the Recitation not been sent down to him all at once?'
[We have sent it down] thus that We may strengthen your heart by it,
and We have sent it down distinctly. (Qur. 25:32)

Such a later exegetical tradition did not preclude the Muslim exegetes from the possibility of combining the divine nature of the *textus receptus* with the knowledge of the order of revelation, which is important for a series of reasons. First of all, there is the evolution of a revelation that goes alongside its prophet and renders the call he received and the warning for his contemporaries a primary task to carry out. For this reason it is logical to assume that the historical vicissitudes encountered by Muḥammad must have influenced the manner in which the Qur'anic word was formulated. The starting point must necessarily be that of tracing the profound meaning of the Qur'an's 'occurrence' in history. This must also be considered against the backdrop of the precise history of Muḥammad's human existence, and in a defined historical moment, a necessity that is perceived first of all by Muslims. A chronology of the revelation must take as its starting point the story of Muḥammad's human existence and reflect it in its various moments.

The issue of chronology, thus established, touches directly upon the historical authenticity of Muḥammad's life, as it is affirmed in the Islamic sources and as it has been developed in non-confessional Western studies. It draws on one (Muḥammad's biography) in order to date another (the Qur'anic revelation) and vice versa, corroborating them reciprocally. It is an inevitable risk, on account of the condition of the historical testimonies regarding the Prophet, and if one accepts the hypothesis that the Qur'an contains revelations received progressively and communicated over time.

In the case of Muḥammad's prophetic mission, Islamic historiography reconstructs chronological stages that are extremely different, even from the

outcomes of his preaching and communication of the divine message. The Meccan period (610–622) is marked by a slight initial success and by a progressive worsening of the hostility of his fellow citizens, so much so that the migration (*hijra*) to Medina became inevitable. After the migration, Muḥammad became, in the space of ten intense years (622–632), an unparalleled military and political leader in Medina, after having progressively attracted an increasing number of followers with surprisingly rapid success, thanks to the appeal that the new faith had for the pagans of Medina and the liquidation of three Jewish clans present in Medina. Finally, the conquest of Mecca (630) introduced a hegemony that extended to most Arab tribes of the Peninsula and appeared to be expanding north shortly before the Prophet's death.

1.3.1 Islamic interpretations

Muslim interpretations reconstruct the chronology of the Qur'anic revelation starting from the life of Muḥammad, as defined by Islamic historiography, a procedure that differs little from that adopted in the Western tradition of Qur'anic studies. Differences in the style and content of the Qur'anic suras are analyzed in order to find evidence of the changed conditions in which Muḥammad operated and, therefore, the different needs that the revelation had to meet for Muḥammad and the Islamic community over time.

A specific branch of Islamic literature, beginning with a work attributed to Ibn Shihāb az-Zuhrī (d. 742), listed the suras in the presumed order of their revelation, introducing a procedure that was included in all of successive literature of this type: distinguishing the suras revealed in Mecca from those revealed in Medina and identifying, for each single verse or passage, the place of revelation and the public that listened to it, and who could attest to its communication. The order of revelation of the suras is preserved in several lists transmitted with the usual guaranteed, personal, lines of transmission, often traced back to the father of Qur'anic exegesis, ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbbās (d. 687), a cousin of the prophet Muḥammad.[59]

59 The work of az-Zuhrī was entitled *Tanzīl al-Qurʾān bi-Makka wa-l-Madīna*. For a summary of the Islamic positions see Jalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*, ed. Markaz ad-Dirāsāt al-Qurʾāniyya, 7 vols. (Riyadh: Wizārat al-Shuʾūn al-Islāmiyya wa-l-Awqāf wa-d-Daʿwa wa-l-Irshād–Majmaʿ al-Malik Fahd li-Ṭibāʿat al-Muṣḥaf ash-Sharīf, 1426/2005), vol. 1, 268–85; French translation: Michel Lagarde, *Le parfait manuel des sciences coraniques al-Itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qur'ān de Ǧalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī (849/1445–911/1505)*, 2 vols. (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2018), vol. 1, 161–69); see also Ibn Ḥabīb, "Kitāb at-tanbīh ʿalā faḍl ʿulūm al-Qurʾān," ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Karīm Kāẓim ar-Rāḍī, *al-Mawrid* 17/4 (1988): 305–22. The most important analysis of Qur'anic chronology

A significant piece of information in these lists is that the Muslim exegetes and experts on the Qur'an implicitly consider the unit of text subject to being fixed in time as the entire sura, even if revelations reached Muḥammad in pericopes or short passages that, especially in the longer suras, correspond to different thematic units. As stated, the founding principle of all of the lists is to make a substantial division between the suras revealed in Mecca and in Medina and, therefore, to define an order of revelation that can vary in the details of some sequences or in the positioning of a sura between the end of the Meccan period and the beginning of one in Medina, such as the Sura of the Skimpers (no. 83), the placing of which has been subject to controversy.

Another peculiarity is the controversial chronological place of the Opening sura (no. 1), which is absent in most of the lists, while in others it appears as fifth. The suras that are positioned differently by the various lists as either Meccan or Medinan are the Sura of the Heights (no. 7), the Sura of Thunder (no. 13), the Sura of the Star (no. 53), the Sura of the Merciful (no. 55), and the Suras of Daybreak (no. 113) and of Men (no. 114). The Islamic tradition also preserves diverging opinions on the first sura revealed, which is variably identified as the Sura of the Blood-clot (no. 96), as the first verses (nos. 1–2) of the Sura of the Wrapped in a Cloak (no. 74), or as the Opening sura.[60]

A list that responds to the same criteria, but that does not adhere to any of the proposals made by Muslim exegetes, while not differing from these in a significant manner, is the one that was published at the end of the suras of the Cairo edition of 1924 (see pp. 189–90). In this edition, each sura displays the title, a note whether the sura is Meccan or Medinan, notes on possible interpolations (see below), and

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in the area of Islamic exegesis is, without a doubt, that of Emmanuelle Stefanidis, "Du texte à l'histoire: la question de la chronologie coranique" (PhD Diss., Sorbonne, 2019); see also Peter Riddell, "Reading the Qur'ān Chronologically. An Aid to Discourse Coherence and Thematic Development," in *Islamic Studies Today. Essays in Honor of Andrew Rippin*, ed. Majid Daneshgar and Walid A. Saleh (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2017), 297–316.

60 Stefanidis, "Du texte à l'histoire: la question de la chronologie coranique," 20–131; Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, 60–75; see Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 48–53 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. 1, 59–65), on the divergences between the Muslim lists; a concise account, receptive of the previous tradition, was carried out by as-Suyūṭī in his compendium of Qur'anic sciences: Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 1, 43–113 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 1, 55–90). On some examples of contemporary exegesis, approaching the Qur'an according to the order of revelation, see Johanna Pink, *Muslim Qur'ānic Interpretation Today: Media, Genealogies and Interpretive Communities* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2019), 134–41. On the first sura revealed, see Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 1, 158–75 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 1, 108–17); after the pages cited here, in Suyūṭī a chapter that specularly discusses the last verses follows: Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 1, 176–88 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 1, 118–23).

after which sura it was revealed, data that is often repeated in many Western translations. These data reflect, in part, a different practice that had already come to be employed in the manuscript transmission of the Qur'an, such as displaying the total number of verses at the beginning of each sura so that some data accompanied the title and signaled the beginning of a new chapter.[61]

Text no. 35: Order according to the Cairo edition of 1924

Meccan suras in order of revelation (86):
96, 68, 73, 74, 1, 111, 81, 87, 92, 89, 93, 94, 103, 100, 108, 102, 107, 109, 105, 113, 114, 112, 53, 80, 97, 91, 85, 95, 106, 101, 75, 104, 77, 50, 90, 86, 54, 38, 7, 72, 36, 25, 35, 19, 20, 56, 26, 27, 28, 17, 10, 11, 12, 15, 6, 37, 31, 34, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 51, 88, 18, 16, 71, 14, 21, 23, 32, 52, 67, 69, 70, 78, 79, 82, 84, 30, 29, 83

Medinan suras (28):
2, 8, 3, 33, 60, 4, 99, 57, 47, 13, 55, 76, 65, 98, 59, 24, 22, 63, 58, 49, 66, 64, 61, 62, 48, 5, 9, 110.

However, the situation is much more complex that we have made it out to be so far. The diversity of the lists and the composite nature of the longer suras, above all, render a chronology based on the unity of the suras quite problematic. One must trace the question back to the ways in which the revelations were preserved and to the complex process of their collection and redaction after the death of the Prophet, which will be discussed extensively below (pp. 153–57).

There is also another problematic element. Qur'anic commentaries and Islamic literature themselves testify to and affirm the presence of interpolations in some of the suras. It consists, in practice, of the interpolation, in Meccan suras, of some brief passages, often single verses, considered Medinan, as well as the less frequent case of Meccan verses interpolated in Medinan suras. Interpolations are recorded, for example, after the title of the sura and after the designation of suras as Meccan or Medinan, in the Cairo edition of 1924, generally introduced by the exceptional clause, "Meccan, with the exception of verses X and Y, which are Medinan." Such statements, recognizing the presence of interpolations in the suras that date from different periods, raise more than one issue from a logistical point of view, make the general evaluation of the unity of each single sura more complex, and they are at the root of various interpretations by Muslim commentators. In any case, it is a precious testimony of an

61 Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, 72–73. Introductions to the Qur'an frequently put forward the topics addressed following a chronological reconstruction, see for example Farid Esack, *The Qur'an. A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002), 30–55. See also a comprehensive study such as that of Neuwirth, which presents the topics in a chronological progression: Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity*, 277–345.

editorial intervention dictated, in all likelihood, by an evaluation of the contents or the style, and it considerably undermines the concept of the unity of the suras.[62]

These evaluations, various solutions, and even contradictions bring to light the problems faced by exegetical literature regarding chronology. Overall, however, it is a theme that is not very developed and that receives relatively little attention in Qur'anic commentaries. Many lists of suras in chronological order may be found in Islamic literature, but we never find them at the center of the major medieval authors' and experts' discussion of the Qur'an, almost as if the presence of disagreements and problems connected to a different order as compared to the *textus receptus* of the ʿUthmān edition (see pp. 153–62) created some type of problem or, in any case, touched upon a series of unresolvable questions.

These sometimes embarrassing questions also include the unity of the suras in relation to the fragmentary nature of the revelation, dating the suras between Mecca and Medina, abrogation (on which see below) and, last but not least important, the authority of the Vulgate of ʿUthmān, as compared to the codex attributed to ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 661), which is said to have been put in order according to the original temporal sequence of the revelations (pp. 170–74). Furthermore, it should not be underestimated that underneath the exegetes' ambivalence regarding the chronology of the suras, it is possible to perceive the theological difficulty of reconciling a fragmented and fragmentary oral revelation with a text that is ordered and written. For these reasons, the chronological lists have been accepted with great caution and often with suspicion. Despite their general concurrence, they have played a limited role in the elaboration both of exegesis (*tafsīr*) and of Islamic law (*fiqh*).

1.3.2 Western interpretations

The situation in the history of Western Qur'anic studies is another thing altogether. Unlike the case within the Islamic tradition, since the beginning of serious research in the 19th century, the chronological reconstruction and predominant historical interest have guided approaches to the Qur'an in European Qur'anic studies. Emphasis on the chronology and dating of the Qur'anic revelation reflected, first, the need

62 On interpolations, see Tilman Nagel, *Medinensische Einschübe in mekkanischen Suren* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995); Nicolai Sinai, "Processes of Literary Growth and Editorial Expansion in Two Medinan Surahs," in *Islam and Its Past. Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an*, ed. Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 69–119.

to define the role and the activity of Muḥammad historically and, therefore, to connect the progressive stages of the revelation with his biography. In essays published up until the mid-20th century, this was combined with the ascription of the text to Muḥammad, which served to treat the Qur'an and Islam with the desacralization of the origins of religions, using the same critical methods that had been applied to other fields and to other traditions in the new field of the history of religions.

At the same time, the vision of European Qur'anic studies reflected the tendency, popular in the 19th century, to connect the author directly to his or her work and, therefore, to observe an almost romantic evolution of Muḥammad's attitude and personality in the Qur'an, starting with an a priori recognition of the portrait offered by Islamic historiography. European cultural trends were inevitably present in the research spanning the 19th and 20th century, for example when emphasis, devoid of all confessional evaluation and quite suspicious of said trends, was placed on the man Muḥammad, who founded the religion, searching in the text for elements that could reflect the evolution of his action, conviction, and even sincerity.[63]

The first Western attempts to reconstruct a chronology of the Qur'an were born from the profound belief that the text was fragmented, but that it included evidence and traces that would facilitate its reconstruction in a chronological manner. The responses were the fruit of a combination of close reading of the Qur'anic text by the early experts and attention to and re-elaboration of the Islamic chronological lists of suras. The key to each evaluation was essentially literary and based on stylistic considerations, as well as on the premise that the short and "poetic" suras were more ancient than the longer, and more narrative ones. The reference for this point of view was the biography of Muḥammad, no less than a vision of authorship during the times in which Muḥammad was considered, without hesitation, the author of the Qur'an. The short suras were held

63 On Western interpretations on Qur'anic chronology, see Stefanidis, "Du texte à l'histoire: la question de la chronologie coranique"; Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, 76–96. On the problems regarding arguments used in studies to define the Meccan or Medinan origin of a sura, see Samia Locate, *Makkan and Madinan Revelations. A Comparative Study* (Munich: Lincom, 2009). The habit of beginning introductions to the Qur'an with profiles of the life and prophetic career of Muḥammad is connected to this point of view. See, for example, Bell and Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an*, 1–16; McAuliffe, *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*. According to Sir William Muir, *The Corân. Its Composition and Teaching; and the Testimony It Bears to the Holy Scriptures*, new and revised ed. (London-New York: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, E. & J.B. Young & Co., 1896), the Qur'an should only be studied in connection with the life of Muḥammad. For a critical vision of this approach, with a historical review of the studies with such perspectives, see Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext*, 1–22.

to have been produced by a poetic impulse, before the mature, narrative, and normative disposition of the longer suras was established.

Gustav Weil (d. 1889) founded his interpretations on a list contained in the late historical compendium *Kitāb al-khamīs* by ad-Diyārbakrī (d. 1574) in order to make his own, which appeared in 1844. Later, other authors either re-elaborated this list or the sequence proposed by Nöldeke (see below), such as William Muir (d. 1905), who proposed his recomposition of the Qur'an in a different order that contemplated a division into six sub-periods, or Hartwing Hirschfeld (d. 1934) or, finally, Herbert Grimme (d. 1942), who based his proposed chronology on a doctrinal analysis.[64]

The most renowned study on the topic is that of Theodor Nöldeke (d. 1930), who formulated a chronology based on progressive stylistic changes in the Qur'anic vocabulary, as well as a progressive increase in the length of the verses. From the quasi-poetic, more ancient revelations of the suras that appear at end of the Qur'an, there was a shift to the longer Medinan ones that were likely the most recent. The first edition of his *Geschichte des Qorāns* appeared in 1860, with the later edition including reworked sections by his students Frederich Schwally, Gotthelf Bergsträßer, and Otto Pretzl.[65] There, Nöldeke took up and modified what Weil had proposed. Following the same logic and well aware of analogous exegetical Muslim approaches, Nöldeke asserted that the stylistic differences in the Qur'anic text derived from differences dictated by the historical context of the revelation and that it was possible to trace a rather precise line — while not without some problematic cases — between Meccan revelations and Medinan ones.

In both approach and results, Nöldeke's chronology is not very far from those proposed by Muslim experts and from the classical identifications of Meccan and

64 Gustav Weil, *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in den Koran* (Bielefeld: Velhagen & Klasing, 1844); Sir William Muir, *The Life of Mahomet: With Introductory Chapters on the Original Sources for the Biography of Mahomet, and on the Pre-Islamite History of Arabia*, 4 vols. (London: Smith, Elder and co., 1858–61); Hartwig Hirschfeld, *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qoran* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1902). For a summary of the Western positions, see Bell and Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an*, 108–20.

65 Theodor Nöldeke, Friedrich Schwally, Gotthelf Bergsträßer and Otto Pretzl, *The History of the Qur'ān*, Leiden: Brill, 2013 (or. ed. Theodor Nöldeke et al., *Geschichte des Qorāns*, 2nd. ed., 3 vols., Leipzig: T. Weicher, 1909–1938). On the method and the problems in the chronological reconstruction by Nöldeke and Schwally, see Emmanuelle Stefanidis, "The Qur'an Made Linear: A Study of the *Geschichte des Qorâns*' Chronological Reordering," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 10/2 (2009): 1–22. On the centrality of the criteria of the verse length, see François Déroche, *Le Coran. Une histoire plurielle. Essai sur la formation du texte coranique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2019), 56.

Medinan suras. Nöldeke did introduce a further division of the Meccan period into three sub-periods, early, middle, and late, also for reasons regarding style and content. The early Meccan period is characterized by short verses and oaths, the middle Meccan period by longer suras and by emphasis on the signs of God with the introduction of some doctrinal points and narratives about other prophets and, finally, in the late Meccan period, the characteristics of the middle Meccan period continue and the prophetic narratives are further emphasized. The Medinan period is marked by a style that is closer to prose and by attention to regulations and community prescriptions. In his chronological analysis, Nöldeke accepted the unity of the suras. Accordingly, at the beginning of the discussion regarding the suras of the early Meccan period, he affirmed that, although with a certain degree of prudence (*glaube ich mit einiger Sicherheit* "I believe with some certainty"), the suras from this period could be identified precisely based on their style, which was made up of formulas of invocation.

The stylistic question goes hand in hand with that of content or theme that, together, in a more or less explicit manner, are connected to the intention of an author who, from the Orientalistic viewpoint, was Muḥammad himself. In this manner, for example, the change from a certain initial urgency and enthusiasm to a greater calmness and serenity characterizes the shift to the middle Meccan period, while the late Meccan period is marked by a more disjointed, repetitive, and prosaic style, which fully develops the topics mentioned in the middle Meccan period.

Not coincidentally, Nöldeke's discussion of the Medinan suras is preceded by a discussion of the political and religious conditions of Yathrib (Medina) and the historical situation that led to the relocation of the Prophet and the first Muslims, according to the reconstruction in Islamic historical accounts. By adopting this approach, Nöldeke did not avoid the question of how the contents of the Qur'an were related to specific episodes of Muḥammad's life, most of which are grounded on allusive references in the Qur'an. For example, a generic and problematic allusion in Qur. 17:1 is taken as the basis for the story of the Prophet's night journey and ascension into heaven.[66]

Text no. 36: Chronology according to T. Nöldeke

Suras from the 1st Meccan period (48, ca. 610–617): 96, 74, 111, 106, 108, 104, 107, 102, 105, 92, 90, 94, 93, 97, 86, 91, 80, 68, 87, 95, 103, 85, 73, 101, 99, 82, 81, 53, 84, 100, 79, 77, 78, 88, 89, 75, 83, 69, 51, 52, 56, 70, 55, 112, 109, 113, 114, 1.

66 Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 47–188 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. 1, 58–233).

Suras from the 2nd Meccan period (21, ca. 617–619): 54, 37, 71, 76, 44, 50, 20, 26, 15, 19, 38, 36, 43, 72, 67, 23, 21, 25, 17, 27, 18.

Suras from the 3rd Meccan period (21, 619–622): 32, 41, 45, 16, 30, 11, 14, 12, 40, 28, 39, 29, 31, 42, 10, 34, 35, 7, 46, 6, 13.

Suras from the Medinan period (24, 622–632): 2, 98, 64, 62, 8, 47, 3, 61, 57, 4, 65, 59, 33, 63, 24, 58, 22, 48, 66, 60, 110, 49, 9, 5.

Some suras considered Medinan by Muslim exegetes become Meccan in Nöldeke's proposed chronology, including nos. 53, 55, 76, and 99, as well as the Sura of Thunder, no. 13, which he considered to be the last Meccan sura. He accepted the Islamic tradition's identification of the first revealed text of the Qur'an, the passage Qur. 96:1–5.

The differences between Nöldeke's chronology and the lists from the Islamic exegetical tradition are not numerous and are essentially of little importance, since the underlying logic appears to be quite similar. Nöldeke dedicated ample space to the chronological reconstruction, and his proposal and vision itself, derived from Weil, is that which has continued in Qur'anic studies today and that which, in its principles, persists despite limitations, problems, and suppositions that are essentially conjectural. Even more than the hypotheses and the approach, its most significant and enduring legacy is the centrality itself of a chronological vision of the Qur'anic revelation.

Even Richard Bell (1876–1952), who, in the past, profoundly reconsidered the traditional principle of a chronology of the suras, put the problem of chronology at the center of his interpretative project, reconstructing it in an original manner in brief pericopes or single verses, without considering the suras as units. Bell divided up the longer suras and rebuilt his own sequence of the paragraphs of revelation, basing his critical assessments on a stylistic premise. In this reconstruction, besides internal logic, reference is made to Muḥammad's biography and to the revelations that accompanied his mission, reproducing motivations and needs directly.[67]

67 Richard Bell, *The Qur'an. Translated with a Critical Re-arrangement of the Surahs* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937–1939); on his commentary that appeared posthumously and in general on his approach, see Andrew Rippin, "Reading the Qur'ān with Richard Bell," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 112/4 (1992): 639–47. Klar, "Text-Critical Approaches to Sura Structure. Part Two," 65: Bell's hypothesis was simply that the passages of the Qur'an, registered with various means, even with wooden tablets or other support, were then juxtaposed during the redaction of the suras. See also Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 1, 286–88 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 1, 169–70) on the revelation that is defined as fragmentary, in units from two to ten verses, of various length, but of substantially reduced dimensions. On this topic, see

More recent Qur'anic studies, even when they critically assess Nöldeke's hypotheses and propose different interpretations, always dedicate central space to the discussion of chronology, recognizing that it is a fundamental key to the comprehension of the Qur'an itself. The question is relevant both for confessional and non-confessional approaches when they want to recognize a unity in the Qur'an that also involves differences, and this is almost inevitably explained by invoking an evolution of content and style over time. Compared to Nöldeke and to previous studies, the approach in these studies is based on the analysis of an evolution of topics more than of style, while nevertheless recognizing that style is an unequivocal marker of diversity and, therefore, temporal in collocation.

Angelika Neuwirth and Nicolai Sinai have been the most active scholars in innovative terms, using chronology to assert the fundamental unity of the Qur'an and its internal evolution. They state that this fundamental unity is much more evident in the revelations that regard the same topics and in which even minimal variations denote a construction that finds its justification in a diachronic progression. Throughout Muḥammad's mission, Angelika Neuwirth affirms, the Qur'an is a text that speaks to the Prophet and, therefore, intervenes "during the process" and distinguishes itself for this reason. The Qur'an, in the course of its revelation, that is, in its reconstructible chronology, is different from a text that ended and was defined by the death of the Prophet. After the end of the revelations and with the beginning of the Islamic era, everything was established in the final outcome and, above all, the initial revelations must speak to a different condition, in its becoming and being progressively identified in different moments of the Prophet's life. Nicolai Sinai, similarly, examines the progression of ten characteristic themes, five in the Meccan revelations, and then five in the Medinan ones.[68]

Jean-Jacques Walter, *Le Coran révélé par la théorie des codes* (Versailles: Éditions de Paris, 2014), according to which the Meccan/Medinan distinction has no textual basis.

68 Neuwirth. *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity*, in particular p. 19 on the indispensability of the chronology. See also the thematic progression according to Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 161: Mecca: 1. eschatological kerygma and the Christian background; 2. historical signs, cosmic signs; 3. transition to an explicit monotheism; 4. debate on later Meccan suras; 5. leaving Mecca. Medina: 6. militancy and biblical references; 7. symbiosis between the first believers and Judaism; 8. distinction between Jews and Christians; 9. Qur'anic law; 10. "sacred" Mecca, Muḥammad the prophet; see also p. 120, on the length of the verses as a criterion for dating, and p. 124, on the division Mecca/Medina. On another specific case, see Nicolai Sinai, *Fortschreibung und Auslegung: Studien zur frühen Koraninterpretation* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 81–96 (on the evolution of the Qur'anic passages regarding Adam), and, 97–151 (on Abraham); and, more recently, Sinai, "The Qur'ān's Dietary Tetralogue: A Diachronic Reconstruction."

Their assessments of Qur'anic chronology, however, are not starkly different from the earlier proposed chronologies. They recognize the validity of the foundational division between Meccan and Medinan revelations, even amid some reconsiderations and unresolved issues that bring to light problems and the absence of objective, shared criteria. The line that emerges in more recent studies is an example, directing its attention towards an evaluation that is more thematic than stylistic in order to put forth hypotheses regarding chronology. Examples include the investigation of the evolution of the figure of Abraham, prayer, the presence of the so-called "mysterious letters" (pp. 101–7), or other topics. Along with this, there are different stances that reject the possibility of chronological reconstruction based on content or formal aspects because it would be vitiated by prejudicial evaluations. These stances, adopting a more critical approach that connects to revisionist views, have served to highlight the conjectural nature and the limits of any possible identification between the allusive contents of the Qur'an and the Islamic reconstruction of the life of Muḥammad.[69]

1.3.3 Uses and meaning of a chronology

The principle of defining a chronology of the revelation, or even just establishing a sequence of some revelations has areas of application defined in the Islamic tradition, sometimes for exegetical or jurisprudential needs that lie outside the Qur'anic contents themselves. In these cases, the driving force that determines interest in this topic is not historical reconstruction; rather, it is a need dictated by the use and application of the Qur'an in the history of Islamic civilization. Chronology has historically been used to establish the connection between certain specific revelations and, accordingly, to determine the concrete implications of certain passages, without invalidating or limiting their universal meaning, or resolving the normative character and priority to be given to different revelations on the same topic.

69 On these topics, see Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, 80–96; Behnam Sadeghi, "The Chronology of the Qur'ān: A Stylometric Research Program," *Arabica* 58/3 (2011): 210–99, speaks in terms of stylistic coherence and chronological evolution in an authorial (divine) logic; see also Nicolai Sinai, "The Unknown Known: Some Groundwork for Interpreting the Medinan Qur'an," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 66 (2015–2016): 47–96; Witztum, "Variant Traditions, Relative Chronology, and the Study of Intra-Qur'anic Parallels." Gabriel S. Reynolds, "Le problème de la chronologie du Coran," *Arabica* 58/6 (2011): 477–502, expressed the most clear-cut position against this type of chronological reconstruction. See also the themes considered by Riddell, "Reading the Qur'ān Chronologically."

To observe the first function, a specialistic exegetical interpretation that is based on the traditional Islamic biographies of Muḥammad (*Sīra*), and that has, in turn, contributed to it, connects episodes of Muḥammad's life to the revelation of certain verses. It is an identification and a positioning that is based on an exegetical type of literature that eventually gave rise to an actual literary genre, termed "the occasions of revelation" (*asbāb an-nuzūl*), the best-known exemplar of which is that of the exegete al-Wāḥidī (d. 1075). The historical value of these statements and of the literature that collects them is object of significantly varied evaluations in the field of Qur'anic studies and is connected to the prejudicial and polarized attitude towards the Islamic tradition on the life of Muḥammad, that is, whether it is completely rejected or if it is considered credible, either broadly or in terms of specific details. Beyond all evaluations of the historicity of these testimonies and the factors that may have altered their formulation in terms of significant traditions from a legal viewpoint, it is an exegetical production that is extraneous to the Qur'an as such and that, therefore, aims to fill a void that cannot be inferred in any manner from the Qur'anic text itself.[70]

Not many passages are identified and placed in chronological order by this literature. As can be deduced from the most important books written on this topic by al-Wāḥidī and by the Egyptian polymath as-Suyūṭī (d. 1505), the texts addressed are single verses or short paragraphs, and the reports about them do not resolve the issue regarding the unity of the single suras of the Qur'an. As-Suyūṭī does not fail to report the doubts of the same Muslims who, in some cases, have underscored the historical groundlessness of the literature on the causes of the revelation, contrary to what as-Suyūṭī himself upholds regarding its utility in certain areas, especially in the legal sphere. With the exception of rare concrete references explicitly attributable to Muḥammad's time (see pp. 51–56), the exegetical identification of Qur'anic passages with historical events is problematic and dubious, even in a specific case that would be difficult to explain outside of Muḥammad's human experience.

The passage in question is the one that supposedly alludes to the thorny episode of the Zaynab's divorce from Zayd, Muḥammad's adoptive son, which

70 The most important studies on this exegetical literature are those of Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 141–42, 177–85; Andrew Rippin, "The Exegetical Genre *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*: A Bibliographical and Terminological Survey," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 48 (1985): 1–15; Andrew Rippin, "The Function of *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* in Qur'ānic Exegesis," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51 (1988): 1–20; and, above all, Hans-Thomas Tillschneider, *Typen historisch-exegetischer Überlieferung. Formen, Funktionen und Genese des asbāb an-nuzūl-Materials* (Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 2011).

becomes comprehensible through the traditional explanation and seems to be difficult to ascribe to anything else. Muslims historians would have had no reason to invent the story of Muḥammad's desire for the wife of Zayd, his adopted son, and the communication of a revelation that allowed the Prophet, once she was divorced, to marry her, correcting the prohibition of marrying women who were previous married to one's own children or parents. Its dating, with respect to the rest of the revelation, is still a topic of speculation and can only be derived from exegetical interpretation based on the biographies of Muḥammad.[71]

Text no. 37: Zayd

[Recall] when you said to the one on whom God and you yourself have bestowed favour,
'Keep your wife to yourself and fear God',
and you hid within yourself what God would reveal,
and you feared the people
when God had better right to be feared by you.
When Zayd had finished with her,
We gave her to you in marriage,
so that there should be no difficulty for the believers
concerning the wives of their adopted sons,
when they have finished with them.
God's command was fulfilled. (Qur. 33:37)

Another area of application of the chronology by exegetical literature regards the problem inherent to certain Qur'anic revelations that deal with the same themes in a different manner. For narrative passages or generic religious themes, this condition does not create any particular problems, since it can be explained as resulting from compositional differences in register and in the progressive construction of the Qur'anic imaginary.

The situation differs when the passages in question contain injunctions regarding rituals or practices to which the believer or the community must adhere. Establishing which verse is binding and therefore definitive in its prescription becomes necessary. Needs of a legal type and traditional, jurisprudential necessity, as well as the exegetical necessity of defining precepts, have established a principle of abrogation, according to which the latest verse revealed is considered to have normative validity. This introduced the need for dating and for a chronology to establish the order of revelation and thereby to determine which text represented the last binding pronouncement on an issue. Thus was created

71 Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī, *Asbāb nuzūl al-Qurʾān*, ed. Aḥmad Ṣaqr (al-Qāhira: Dār al-Kutub al-Jadīd, Lajnat Iḥyāʾ at-Turāth al-Islāmī, 1969); Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 1, 189–227 (French translation *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 1, 124–41).

the exegetical genre of "the abrogating and the abrogated" (*an-nāsikh wa-l-mansūkh*).

The legal hermeneutical imperative to combine and reduce different pronouncements on the same issues contained in the Qur'an to a norm, raised a series of questions on the part of the same Muslim exegetes. These include an ill-concealed embarrassment due to the implications of the historicity and evolution of a sacred text that should be perfect: why correct it over time and not include only the definitive pronouncement, and why not highlight it in a tangible form in the canonized text? Additionally, are the personal events of the Prophet's life enough to correct and weaken Qur'anic passages that, by virtue of their inclusion in the sacred text, have eternal value and are re-evaluated only on account of human intervention, that is, the imposition of a chronology obtained by humankind?

Actually, some Qur'anic verses are interpreted as explicitly validating the practice of abrogation, even though they seem to refer to processes of abrogation and substitution during the life of Muḥammad and, therefore, to a removal of what would later be defined by subsequent revelations from the Qur'an (Text no. 38).

Text no. 38: Abrogation

Whatever signs (or verses) We annul or cause to be forgotten,
We bring better or the like.
Do you not know that God has power over everything? (Qur. 2:106)
God effaces and establishes what He wishes.
With Him is the matrix of the Scripture. (Qur. 13:39)
When We exchange one sign (verse) for another
– and God is well aware of what He sends down –
they say, 'You are simply inventing it.'
But most of them do not know. (Qur. 16:101)

Muslim scholars devoted constant attention and different yet complex assessments to respond to doubts that emerged regarding the exact meaning of the concept of abrogation and the disagreements that arose in that regard. Lastly, attention was also given to enumerating those verses subject to abrogation and, therefore, identified as abrogated by just as many verses, although not in an unequivocal manner and usually admitting the existence of varying, and precisely documented, viewpoints.

The ultimate product of this trend in exegetical production was a specific field of scholarship devoted to abrogating and abrogated verses, that, like the field devoted to the causes of revelation, fostered a specific literary genre of works titled *an-Nāsikh wa-l-mansūkh*. This science developed a cycle of traditions

that we later find in encyclopedic Qur'anic commentaries for which the legal repercussions of the revealed verses were a delicate yet unavoidable topic.[72]

The most famous and most significant case of passages that were later abrogated has to do with the Qur'anic pronouncements on wine and fermented substances, which proceeded from an initial permissiveness to a later negative judgement, and then became forbidden outright (Text no. 39).

Text no. 39: The prohibition of wine

And from the fruits of the palm-trees and grapes,
from which you take intoxicants and good nourishment.
In this there is a sign for people who understand. (Qur. 16:67)
O you who believe,
do not draw near to prayer when you are intoxicated,
until you know what you say. (Qur. 4:43)
They ask you about wine and gambling (*maysir*).
Say, 'In both these is great sin,
but some benefits to the people;
but the sin in them is greater than the benefit.' (Cor 2:219)
O you who believe,
wine, gambling (*maysir*), idols and divining arrows
are an abomination that is of the work of Satan.
Avoid it, so that you may prosper. (Qur. 5:90)

Often broadening the normative meaning to other less explicit areas, it is possible to consider that the Qur'an contains dissimilar pronouncements regarding many topics. The Qur'anic verses that discuss Jews, Christians, and the adherents of other religions, or those that speak of *jihād* (pp. 58–59) can hardly be considered to present unified assessments. In another, more circumscribed case, such as the punishments for illicit sexual relations (*zinā*), the Qur'an seems to indicate two different solutions (Qur. 4:15–16, 24:2–3), while the later extra-Qur'anic tradition would define a third, based on "the verse of stoning," a verse

72 Among the earliest sources, see Abū ʿUbayd al-Qāsim b. Sallām, *an-Nāsikh wa-l-mansūkh* (Riyāḍ: Maktabat ar-Rushd, 1990); Aḥmad b. Muḥammad an-Naḥḥās, *Kitāb an-nāsikh wa-l-mansūkh fī al-Qurʾān al-karīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1989). On abrogation in general, see, above all, Koby Josef, "Between al-Zuhrī (d. 124/742) and Qatāda (d. 118/736): Two Early Treatises on the Abrogation in the Qur'ān," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 42 (2015): 73–128, and the vast literature cited here; we recommend, in particular, John Burton, *The Sources of Islamic Law. Islamic Theories of Abrogation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990); Andrew Rippin, "Al-Zuhrī, *Naskh al-Qur'ān* and the Problem of Early *Tafsīr* Texts," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 47 (1984): 22–43. See also the summary of the exegetical Islamic viewpoint in Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 4, 1435–65 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 2, 768–86).

that supposedly had been recited but that was later expunged from the final redaction of the Qur'an. This presumed Qur'anic verse, excluded from the Qur'an and testified to only by a saying attributed to ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 644), in essence has been treated by jurists as an abrogating verse with respect to the Qur'anic passages that, instead, contain different sanctions.[73]

This testimony complicates things: a pronouncement considered abrogating and definitive was ostensibly excluded from the final redaction of the text, while other injunctions, later considered abrogated, were kept. The topic has not seldom raised some questions by the Muslims on the practice of abrogating the content while keeping the text, even if the Islamic tradition enumerates other episodes of abrogation and deletion of passages from the text, as in the case of what have been termed the Satanic verses. The usual exegetical explanation is that the gradual quality of the communication was made necessary because of the historical reality encountered by Muḥammad, linking the contents even more closely to the historical reality of his first communication.

In any case, there is no agreement on which verses are abrogated and which are abrogating. Their identification pertains more to later exegetical developments and, accordingly, this literature cannot always be considered useful from the viewpoint of a chronology of the revelation, precisely because the order of revelation of certain passages and the choice of the conclusive pronouncement may have been determined by extra-Qur'anic legal or exegetical concepts.[74]

73 Cf. Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 4, 1466–69 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 2, 786–88).

74 Claude Gilliot, "Un verset manquant du Coran ou réputé tel," in *En hommage au Père Jacques Jomier, O.P.*, ed. Marie-Thérèse Urvoy (Paris: Cerf, 2002), 73–100; John Burton, "Those Are the High-flying Cranes," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 15/2 (1970): 246–65; Shahab Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017).

2 Form

The Qur'an is a text made up of words in the Arabic language, collected in more extensive units called verses, then organized in chapters called suras. One hundred and fourteen suras in all make up the Qur'an, a collection that conveys its contents with specific formal and stylistic characteristics. What pertains to the structure and the form, even in physical terms, of the Qur'an, such as how it is divided and literarily organized, must be distinguished from the style and linguistic forms of the Qur'anic text as a literary product. These elements, although different, still contribute to the instruments and the means of communication of the contents discussed in the preceding chapter, and they play a fundamental role in the characterization of those concepts and understandings that the Qur'anic revelation conveys.

The means of communication and of the formation of the text have undoubtedly influenced, in various manners, the Qur'an, in terms of how it is divided or organized, in the variety of styles and the multiple registers that are woven into a particular textual organization that affects, in a pronounced manner, the transmission of meanings and contents of the text. On the whole, the aspects and formal factors that make up the text, which we will analyze here, as in all literary products, besides making up an aspect of the sacred Islamic text, have peculiar characteristics that are not always univocal and are open to varied evaluations and even interpretations, though they make up an aspect of the sacred Islamic text that is of extreme interest.

Each definition of the formal elements that characterize the Qur'an has an inevitable effect on the chronology or the history of the text. The variety of concepts and solutions, together with aspects that are difficult to comprehend, may suggest a diachronic evolution, in close relation with the problems regarding chronology discussed above. It is difficult to avoid this interpretative paradigm, even if the analysis must, in our opinion, be carried out using only the Qur'anic data, with minimal resort to later exegetical testimony. In this manner, it is possible to aim to avoid the temptation of reading into the complex formal characteristics an evolution that offers a key to elements in the text that emerge as variegated, not univocal, and sometimes contradictory.

2.1 The book, recited and written

The Qur'an we possess today is, first, both a recited text and a written book. In its tangible form, in the Arabic original or in any translation, it is a single

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volume that is not very long. A peculiarity to some extent amongst sacred books, the Qur'an repeatedly designates itself with the name *Qurʾān*, with the Arabic term that means book (*kitāb*), or in other ways (pp. 79–85), highlighting a viewpoint that aims to communicate and affirm its own meaning as a collection of texts that is definable as a whole.

The Qur'anic verses that offer a definition of the Qur'an itself, and of the revelations it contains, are not always univocal. The terms used seem, at times, to refer to the entirety of the revelations received by Muḥammad, in a significant fluctuation between a written, sole text toward which believers must look, or an assembly of revelations, though collected in a precise order, that represent an essentially recited text. This twofold nature of the Qur'an is closely linked to the polysemy of the word *Qurʾān*, which captures the multifaceted nature of the revelation from the Islamic viewpoint. Said viewpoint is further enriched by Qur'anic verses that define the revelation in many passages, repeatedly adding terms and senses to describe it as a whole entity.[75]

2.1.1 al-Qurʾān, the Qur'an

The Arabic term that corresponds to Qur'an and to its various forms in other languages is *al-Qurʾān*, which in Arabic means the Recitation or the Reading. It is the name given to the divine revelation received by Muḥammad. The Islamic tradition distinguishes the text in itself, even if it is only pronounced and recited, which is *Qurʾān*, from the material support of the book/manuscript that contains this text, called *al-muṣḥaf* (literally "the codex," a collection of sheets), a term that does not appear in the sacred text. The aura of sacredness invests both aspects of the text, the immaterial and the physical, but is of a profoundly different nature in each of the two cases. In the first case, it derives from the immanent character of the word of God, while in the second case it is of a contingent nature, since alongside the Qur'an in its materiality, there is the special care regarding the faith and purity of its condition that must be taken into consideration in order to safeguard records that bear the divine word (see pp. 221–24).

The term *Qurʾān* derives from a root that means to recite or to read out loud, expressing the initial circumstance of the revelation and its communication by Muḥammad to his first followers. The Qur'an was, first, a word pronounced and

75 On the various names of the Qur'an in accordance with the Islamic tradition, see Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 1, 336–45 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 1, 192–97); Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity*, 65–103.

recited orally before becoming a concrete book, in a concluded form that could have been such only at the end of over twenty years of preaching and revelation. In this sense, therefore, the meaning of recitation cannot indicate, as to the usages of the term *Qurʾān* in the sacred text, only the nature and final fruition of the Qur'an overall, but also the modality of the first channel of oral communication of the Qur'an and its progressive circulation through the voice of the prophet Muḥammad during his lifetime. The reference to a process of communication, rather than to a book, can be inferred from most of the Qur'anic passages, and seems to refer to a conscious consideration of the customs regarding pronunciation or reading out loud more than an anachronistic fruition of the silent reading of a text. From this point of view, its closed nature or its becoming so hardly changes the text or the various texts that were communicated, preserved, and repeated in a recited form and only later defined and closed in a written canon that took on the name *Qurʾān*.[76]

Text no. 40: *al-Qurʾān* (Qur'an/recitation)

It is a noble recitation
In a hidden Scripture,
Which only the purified will touch,
A revelation from the Lord of all beings. (Qur. 56:77–80)
Do they not ponder on the Recitation?
Had it been from any other than God,
they would have found much contradiction in it. (Qur. 4:82)
This Recitation is not such as could have been invented
by any but God.
It is a confirmation of what was before it
and a detailing of the Scripture,
in which there is no doubt,
from the Lord of created beings. (Qur. 10:37)
By the clear Scripture

76 See William A. Graham, "The Earliest Meaning of 'Qur'ān'," *Die Welt des Islams* 23/1–4 (1984): 361–77; William A. Graham, "Qur'ān as Spoken Word: An Islamic Contribution to the Understanding of Scripture," in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard C. Martin (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), 23–40, 206–15; Angelika Neuwirth, "Two Faces of the Qur'ān: *Qur'ān* and *Muṣḥaf*," *Oral Tradition* 25/1 (2010): 141–56; Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même*, 40–58; Bell and Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 135–41; Josef Horovitz, "Qurān," *Der Islam* 13 (1923): 66–69; Tilman Nagel, "Von 'Qur'ān' zur 'Schrift' – Bells Hypothese aus religionsgeschichtlicher Sicht," *Der Islam* 60 (1983), 143–65. According to Bell, *The Qur'an. Translated with a Critical Re-arrangement of the Surahs*, the alternation of the terms *al-Qurʾān*/*al-Kitāb* (see below for more information) is useful and important, in account of its relevance to the chronological reconstruction of the revelation; see also Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 26–27 (original edition *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. 1, 31–32).

– We have made it a Recitation in Arabic,
so that you may understand.
It is in the Mother of the Book, with Us, lofty and wise. (43:2–4)

Many studies have suggested a non-Arabic origin of the term *Qurʾān*, which is documented in Arabic for the first time in the Qur'an itself, as far as is known. A possible Christian Syriac influence, from the term *qeryānā*, could be connected to the sense of liturgical reading, even if in the early revelations of the Qur'an the term probably referred to a single unit of revelation received by Muḥammad. The meaning conveyed by the calque could be dual: in relation not only to the concrete mode of communication but also to the concept of the sacred word in general, as a word, first of all, to be read aloud, as was done in other religious traditions.

The passages that include the term *Qurʾān* define it as something that was revealed and made to descend from God that must be recited by Muḥammad, to which humankind must listen with respect. It was made to descend in separate parts (Qur. 17:106), and it is glorious (Qur. 50:1), powerful (Qur. 15:87), noble (Qur. 56:77), and clear (Qur. 36:69). Translating it as Qur'an or Recitation greatly changes the perception of the meaning of the passages that include it, since they implicitly refer to the concept of a defined text or a generic text that was orally communicated and not yet stable (see Text no. 40). The later exegetical literature and the confessional viewpoint inevitably tend to interpret a continuous reference to the Qur'an as a closed text, constraining, in many cases, the contents of the sacred text.

However, there can be no doubt that *Qurʾān* defines, in the Qur'an, something that must always be held in great consideration and that represents, in the entirety of its uses, the revelation received by Muḥammad. Sometimes, reference is made to the individual passage recited, a concrete revelation; at other times it is possible to sense that it refers to the entirety of the word that had reached, up until that moment, Muḥammad, and that he then communicated to the people around him, first in a recited and resounding oral form, and subsequently, in reiterated and liturgical usage. Once the Prophet died, uses of the term *Qurʾān* were inevitably perceived as references to the text as a canonized unit, given these characteristics, but the Qur'anic occurrences indicate otherwise, with a plurality of senses that do not always emerge fully in translations of the sacred text.

2.1.2 The Book and other names

The Qur'an, however, is not an exclusively recited text. Throughout its history, it has also been a written book. The Qur'an itself offers a precise indication in this sense. Many passages include the Arabic term *kitāb*, which means book, or

scripture, and some of these occurrences seem to refer to the Qur'an itself in its entirety. Also in this case, the situation is not univocal, and the Qur'anic uses of the term *kitāb* or of words deriving from the cognate verb *kataba* (to write), which appear with a certain frequency, offer a complex idea of how the sense of the Scripture has to be understood in broader fashion, without considering the passages in which these terms refer more generically to documents, contracts, letters, or prescribed acts. *Kitāb* and other terms do not necessarily have to be interpreted as counter to that of the *Qurʾān*, but rather as additional qualifications.

Analysis of the occurrences of *kitāb* in the Qur'an demonstrates, moreover, that the term neither designates a defined text nor a book, but rather the divine revelation conceived in a dynamic sense, not yet a closed corpus, nor a materially fixed document or a physical, concrete book for the community of believers. Complicating things and enriching the array of meanings, other passages highlight that the term indicates a book in relation to other revelations and religious communities as in the expression *Ahl al-kitāb* (People of the Book), which we have discussed above (p. 39). Not even this Qur'anic expression, though, is necessarily and indissolubly connected with scripture, since it refers to something that has an effect over time, subject to change, and therefore not given and stable. *Kitāb* is, rather, a symbol of the ultimate knowledge and divine sovereignty that are clarified in a "book" recorded in the ideal realm, established and fixed in divine principles and foundations, and not because it is a physical book. Muḥammad is, from such a viewpoint, the bearer of a document, that is, of complete instructions regarding how to act, and not a closed book, neither at the end of his life and nor, consequently, at the beginning of his prophetic mission.[77]

77 On this topic, see Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur'ān's Self-Image. Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture* (Princeton, N.J.-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 53–105; Matthias Radscheit, *Die koranische Herausforderung. Die Taḥaddī-Verse in Rahmen der Polemikpassagen des Korans* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1996), 79–94; Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même*, 25–39; Jeffery, *The Qur'ān as Scripture*, 9–16; David Künstlinger, "*Kitāb* und *ahlu l-kitābi* im Kuran," *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 4 (1926): 238–47; Herbert Berg, "Ṭabarī's Exegesis of the Qur'ānic Term *al-Kitāb*," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63/4 (1995): 761–74; Bell and Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 141–44. On the problems of the Qur'anic passages that cite the root *kataba* in relation to the first Islamic written testimonies, see also Alan Jones, "The Word Made Visible: Arabic Script and the Committing of the Qur'ān to Writing," in *Texts, Documents, and Artefacts: Islamic Studies in Honour of D.S. Richards*, ed. Chase F. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 1–16. The Qur'anic expression "a part of the book" (Qur. 3:23) can be traced back to the relationship of the Book to earlier writings, as historical manifestations of just one word.

Text no. 41: *Kitāb*

God has sent down to you the Scripture and the Wisdom. (4:113)
Praise belongs to God,
who has sent down the Scripture to his servant
and has not set in it any crookedness
– Straight,
to give warning of a stern might from Him,
and to bring good tidings
to the believers who do righteous deeds
that they will have a fair reward. (Qur. 18:1–2)
These are the signs of the Scripture that makes things clear. (28:2)
A Scripture, whose signs have been established
and then made distinct,
coming from One [who is] Wise and Informed. (Qur. 11:1)

The occurrences of the term *kitāb*, also in connection with the label *Ahl al-kitāb*, highlight that said term emerges in the more direct meaning of Book/Scripture, in revelations that are traditionally assigned to the late Medinan period, when the term *Qurʾān* became much less frequent, and later disappeared. These later occurrences testify to a shift from the idea of a recited text, in an evolving form and occurring in shorter pericopes, to the idea of a single sacred text, even though it was still fluid and not yet considered a closed entity. An interpretative reading of the Qur'anic passages of this type is obviously based on the acceptance of a chronological reconstruction of the Qur'an, as we discussed earlier (pp. 60–72).

Finally, the Qur'an contains other terms, even generic ones, which seem to designate the sacred text, referring to some of its peculiarities and labeling the entire body of revelation. The most important and possibly most problematic name is *Furqān*, which appears in seven different passages and gives the title to Sura al-Furqān (no. 25) (see Text no. 42).

Text no. 42: *Furqān*

Blessed is He who has sent down the salvation (*al-Furqān*) to His slave,
for him to be a warner to all created beings. (Qur. 25:1)
O you who believe,
if you fear God,
He will assign a salvation (*Furqān*) to you
and will absolve you of your evil deeds
and will forgive you. (Qur. 8.29)
And He sent down the Torah and the Gospel,
Previously,
as a guidance for the people;
and He sent down the Salvation (*al-Furqān*). (Qur. 3:3–4)

The Arabic root from which *Furqān* derives, *faraqa*. means "to separate" and, as a consequence, the term has been understood to mean "discriminating factor," "discernment," or "separation," and, therefore, not a book or something related to writing but, according to the exegetical interpretation, revelation in generic terms. In Western Qur'anic studies, the hypothesis that *Furqān* may derive from the Syriac *purqān*, meaning "salvation," has historically been very credible; hence, with an analogous meaning, the word could have entered into the Arabic Qur'anic vocabulary. According to other hypotheses, the meaning should be investigated in the Arabic, pre-Islamic tradition, again bringing to the fore the usual polarization regarding problematic Qur'anic terms and concepts that characterizes analyses of the origins of the sacred text (see pp. 134–52). The identification of *Furqān* as another proper name for the Qur'an seems to be the result of later exegetical speculation. Given that *Furqān* appears in the Qur'an, it appears to be another qualification of the Qur'an, even though the features of its meaning are not completely clear. This explains the interpretative uncertainties on account of which *Furqān* has been variously argued to signify salvation, divine commandment, or even chapter of the Scripture.[78]

Other terms lend themselves to interpretation as qualifying references to the Qur'an overall. In certain passages, for example, the Qur'an seems to be identified as *dhikr* "reminder" or "remembrance"; that is, the revelation is cited as a mention or memory, something that is near to the concept of good memory, honor, or celebrity. Also in this case, it is a qualification of the revelation rather than an actual name.[79] The term *tanzīl* (see the beginning of suras 32, 39, 40, 41, 45, 46), from the verb *nazzala* ("to make [something] descend") contains a clear reference to the communication of the revelation in a vertical sense, since it was made to descend from God in the heavens to the Earth, to His prophet and messenger.

Another term that has given rise to many discussions and interpretations, both in traditional Islamic commentaries and in Western Qur'anic studies, is *Mathānī*, from *thanā*, which means "to repeat," "to double", or "to fold (over)," and that appears in only one passage (Text no. 43).

78 Walid A. Saleh, "A Piecemeal Qur'ān: *Furqān* and Its Meaning in Classical Islam and Modern Qur'ānic Studies," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 42 (2015): 31–71; Fred M. Donner "Qur'ānic *Furqān*," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 52/2 (2007): 279–300; Uri Rubin, "On the Arabian Origins of the Qur'ān: The Case of *al-Furqān*," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 54/2 (2009): 421–33; see also Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même*, 91f. According to Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 27 (original edition *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. 1, 34): *Furqān* does not mean "a book" but is a more generic expression for revelation.

79 Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même*, 59–68.

Text no. 43: *al-Mathānī*

We have given you seven *mathānī* and the great Recitation. (Qur. 15:87)

William Montgomery Watt, in his revision of *Introduction to the Qur'an* by Richard Bell, accompanies the discussion of the meaning of the term with a list of the stories regarding punishment connected to the specific Arab stories, or to the mission of prophets who preceded Muḥammad, to whom the Qur'an dedicates significant space, frequently re-proposing the same events in different chapters (pp. 27–32).[80] In this manner, the sense of the term would be that of "repeated," in that the stories return in more than one chapter of the Qur'an. The insertion of the number seven before the word *Mathānī* has generated further questions that have influenced the Islamic interpretation that sees in them a reference to the seven verses of the Opening sura (no. 1), which is often repeated in ritual prayer. There is no lack of other interpretations that consider it a reference to the entire Qur'an or to the seven longest suras.[81]

Investigations and evaluations regarding the most ancient interpretation do not take anything away from the complexity of the original Qur'anic expression, even in the eyes of the first generations of Muslims. This evidence, in the case of *Furqān*, exists as well for all the other terms that refer to the Qur'an and its multiple meanings that cannot be traced to later exegetical viewpoints. These tend to convey the principle that the text itself already contains explicit references to the Qur'an, as it was canonized but, at the same time, in the cases of multiple interpretations, they inevitably shed light on the problematic nature of certain Qur'anic passages with respect to the idea of the revelation as being a defined and closed text.

80 Bell and Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an*, 127–35.

81 Some recent studies have examined this term: Uri Rubin, "Exegesis and *Ḥadīth*: The Case of the Seven *Mathānī*," in *Approaches to the Qur'ān*, ed. Gerald R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (London: Routledge, 1993), 141–56; Tammam Hassan, "Al-Sabʿ al-Mathānī (Q. 15:87)," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 6/2 (2004): 184–88; Farrin, *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation*, 59: the seven *mathānī* may be suras 50–56, which make up a thematic unit unto itself, regarding themes of eschatology (resurrection, judgment, heaven, and hell). See also Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 93–94 (original edition *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. 1, 114), in which he expresses the doubt that "the seven of the *mathānī*" refers to the verses of the Opening sura, and it is hypothesized that the term is connected to the Hebrew *mishnā*, or tradition, an interpretation that has not been followed up on in Islamic studies.

2.2 The suras and the verses

The Qur'an, so defined or described in its complexity, is concretely divided into smaller units, suras or chapters (*sūra*, pl. *suwar*) and by verses (*āya*, pl. *āyāt*), which are the minimal units that constitute the revelations. Besides these, as we will see, other divisions of the texts, of a liturgical type, are employed.

Though present since the first handwritten records and despite being mentioned in the Qur'an, the concrete divisions into verses, but also formal aspects such as the titles of the suras, are not to be considered part of the divine revelation. These are the product of an organization, recommended and even necessary, but later, and the work of human redactional intervention. It follows that it is the single text of the revelation that is divine and perfect, not the division in verses or the consequent organization in suras, which can legitimately vary and can include differences produced by fallible human intervention.

2.2.1 Suras, sequences, units, and titles

The first evident division of the Qur'an is made up of the one hundred and fourteen chapters into which it is subdivided. The name unanimously attributed to these constitutive units of the text is "sura" (*sūra*, pl. *suwar*), which appears in the Qur'an itself (Text no. 44) and has gained wide acceptance as the standard term in European languages as well. Its meaning cannot be traced to that of "chapter," but it has the same functions and characteristics, since it designates a unit constituted by a certain number of verses and accompanied, in today's printed versions of the Qur'an, by a title and some explanatory notes regarding the chronology of the sura or the number of its verses.

Text no. 44: Sura

Whenever a *sūra* is sent down,
there are some of them who say,
'Which of you has been increased in faith by this?' (Qur. 9:124)
A *sūra* which We have sent down and prescribed.
We have sent down clear signs,
so that you may be reminded. (Qur. 24:1)
And [We have sent] a Recitation,
which We have divided
so that you may recite it to mankind at intervals,
and We have sent it down. (Qur. 17:106)

The organization of a text in units is logical as ever in terms of rational structure in its final form or as the product of redaction. However, the logic behind the structure and the ordering of chapters seen in the Qur'an that we possess today are still not clear. First, the chronology of the revelation seems to have had no influence on this order. Nor, in the Islamic vision, has there been recourse to interpolations or to a redactional framework. With the exception of the Opening sura and the last two suras of the Qur'an, the remaining chapters appear in approximate decreasing order by length, with only vague indications that some shorter sequences of chapters are, instead, placed in an order connected to content or formal aspects.

The approximate decreasing order, based on the actual length of the text and not on the strict number of verses, is evident from a cursory reading, but it is not at all faithfully carried out, even if one considers it the most likely factor to have determined the order of the collection since the first editions. The rule is not followed absolutely, given that the order based strictly on decreasing length would include the sequences of suras 2, 4, 3, 7, 6, and 5. In addition, suras 106, 112, 103, and 108 should be placed at the end. Some criteria connected to thematic contiguity can be deduced for a few sequences of suras. A certain thematic proximity may have caused suras 73–74 and 81–82 to be placed together. In addition, suras 26–28 and 40–46 may have been placed together on account of the fact that they begin with the same mysterious letters (see pp. 101–7) and exhibit thematic similarity. The first sura and the last two, as previously stated, seem to be intentionally placed in their current positions in the collection for liturgical reasons.

Exegetical debate and Western Qur'anic writings on the arrangement of the suras also highlight the impossibility of reaching a univocal conclusion. A mixed criterion starting with length, mediated by theological considerations of thematic proximity, may have determined a result of this type. In any case, the question of the order of the suras, whether they were dictated by the will of Muḥammad, by God, or by interpretative effort, is a problem that is further stressed by the testimony of the Qur'anic manuscripts and by an exegetical tradition that presents divergences in this respect.[82] These divergences, however, are substantiated in

82 On the suras in general, see Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity*, 163–99; Hans Bauer, "Über die Anordnung der Suren und über die geheimnisvollen Buchstaben im Qoran," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 75 (1921): 1–20; on the reasons for the current order, see Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, 30, and compare p. 26, which states that the order based on the decreasing size may have a parallel in the New Testament and in the sequencing of the Pauline letters. See also the discussion and the bibliography in Raoul Villano, *La struttura binaria del Corano* (Roma: Istituto per l'Oriente, 2018), 38–55;

solutions that are not too distant from each other, with the function of preserving the current form of the Qur'an and, therefore, of underscoring the coherence of the non-chronological order attested to in the Vulgate by ʿUthmān (see below, pp. 153–62).[83]

As to the suras themselves, an initial question that is a subject of debate, besides their sequence in the *textus receptus*, is that which relates to their unity. Does each sura express a unity or temporal continuity in the revelation? Or is it the product of a redactional construction determined by other criteria? Different answers may be given to this question depending on whether one is considering short suras or longer ones. Islamic exegesis, especially in its contemporary form, rejects such an issue, emphasizing the concept of *tanāsub*, that is, the thematic and structural coherence of the verses and the suras, upholding the substantial unity and continuity of the single units given by the division into suras.

Historically, though, the Islamic exegetical tradition does not ignore the various means, including preservation in memory or in transcriptions, by which the revelations were collected and gathered together in the *textus receptus*, even if the traditions are not univocal in the ways in which they explain how the chapters of the revelation themselves were preserved. One way to guarantee the unity of the longer suras was to consider them proof that a coherent sequence of units had been revealed consecutively during a certain period. This would efficiently explain the sudden changes in theme in the long suras, but not the insertion of interpolations from other periods (pp. 65–66). These interpolations complicate each solution offered by Islamic speculation and encourage the hypothesis that an ancient material practice could have been influenced or could have coexisted with an order that was based on rhyme and similar assonances.

The issue is even more intensified by the different interpretations and evaluations in Islamic studies, for which assessment of the unity of the suras has become a central point from which to evaluate the origin of the Qur'an in a precise and completed form, or in a composite and fragmentary one, in the framework of

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Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, 256–70; Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 263–67 (original edition *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. 2, 63–68). According to Kaplony, "Comparing Qur'ānic Suras with Pre-800 Documents," the suras were independent units. Salwa M. El-Awa, *Textual Relations in the Qur'ān. Relevance, Coherence and Structure* (London–New York: Routledge, 2006), supports the general coherence of the Qur'anic message, applying relevance theory to it and referring to az-Zarkashī's and other exegetes' use of the principle of coherence (*munāsaba*).

83 Their sequence in the Qur'an as it is preserved today and their relation to questions regarding the chronology of the revelation are also discussed in other parts of this book.

a difficult redactional process (see pp. 152–58). For this reason, debate regarding the unity of each single sura, which took shape in the past, still continues and has a direct influence on the will to demonstrate the completeness of the Qur'an, or the lack thereof, as we know it today.

Richard Bell, the expert who has posed the question regarding the unity of the suras in the most direct manner and, accepting a tendency that had already been clarified in previous Qur'anic studies, has staunchly upheld the fragmentary character of the Qur'an and the composite nature of the longer suras especially. From Bell's viewpoint, which is reflected in his translation, the Qur'an was originally made up of brief pericopes, later strung together. Consequently, the suras, except for the shorter and monothematic ones, do not represent original units, but are instead the products of the redactional process. The choice of order and the final composition of the suras must have been, therefore, connected with the modality of material collection of the shortest sequences and their collation without a criterion connected to the chronology of their revelation. Other Orientalist analyses, for example that of Theodor Nöldeke, focus less on the material factor and more on a correlation between contents and parts of the revelation that is always recognizable, especially in cases that are more easily demonstrable, such as the affirmation that the Sura of Joseph (no. 12), basically a single story from beginning to end, was plausibly revealed in its entirety at once.[84] Many later studies, including the most recent ones, take for granted the fragmentary character of the Qur'an, though not in such a pronounced manner.

The most recent developments of Western studies have taken different routes and have generally avoided making peremptory, generalized judgments on the fragmentation of the Qur'an. Alongside a viewpoint in continuity with what was described above, or based on doubts of the same tenor, the opposite tendency has emerged forcefully, aiming to recognize that at least some longer suras are unitary compositions that are unified structurally and thematically, and with a precise aim in the order itself, dictated by literary motives that are

84 Bell, *The Qur'an. Translated with a Critical Re-arrangement of the Surahs*; Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 25 (original edition *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. 1, 29). Klar, "Text-Critical Approaches to Sura Structure. Part One," 2, affirms that also some *ḥadīth*s demonstrate that some suras were assembled when they were being drafted. There is no lack of different interpretations from Muslims; see, for example, Klar, "Text-Critical Approaches to Sura Structure. Part Two," 65–66, where she cites works by Mehdi Bazargan including *Sayr-i taḥawwul-i Qurʾān* (Teheran: Shirkat-i Sahāmī-i Intishār, 1981), who considered 59 intact units, while the other suras made up of 2–5 different units that were then united, for a total of 194 blocks, mainly defined on the basis of verse length and other factors.

just as strong as those of a theological nature. Angelika Neuwirth, since her first studies on the Meccan suras, is amongst the most important advocates of the literary unity of the suras, in which the challenge consists in explaining the form of certain suras that include various arguments with an apparent lack of organic unity. This characteristic is evident, for example, in our brief initial summary of the Sura of the Cow (pp. 7–11). Neuwirth's studies laid the most significant groundwork for a literary approach to the forms and genres of the Qur'an, in order to substantiate the affirmed unity of intent of the single suras and of the Qur'an itself. From her point of view, the suras have a structure that has to be evaluated by analyzing the modalities of the discourse in order to recognize the coherence and peculiarity of the single suras and of the entirety of the Meccan suras. Their function was fundamentally liturgical and accompanied the process of formation of the first community of believers. Along the same lines, other research such as that of Nicolai Sinai, followed in these footsteps with significant results.[85]

This concept has a solid tradition in Islamic exegesis, such as in the works of az-Zarkashī (d. 1392) and as-Suyūṭī (d. 1505), and it also characterizes the work of two modern Indian or Pakistani exegetes who influenced both Muslim and Western scholars precisely regarding the question of the unity of the suras: Ḥamīd ad-Dīn Farāḥī (d. 1930) and Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī (d. 1997). The former did not complete an entire commentary on account of his premature death, but his ideas were carried on by his student, Iṣlāḥī, who based his theses on endorsing the connection of each verse with the previous one and the following one, as other exegetes of the 20th century have argued (Sayyid Quṭb, d. 1966, Muḥammad ʿIzzat Darwaza, d. 1984). In particular, the most significant aspects of Iṣlāḥī's interpretation are the hypothesis that each sura has a distinctive central theme, which he terms *ʿamūd*, "pillar," that unites it coherently, and the close correlation between pairs of suras, emphasizing the presence of thematic connections between verses and chapters. There is an evident polemical intent in this contemporary attitude, confirmed in other cases as well, regarding those commentators from the classic period who broke up the analysis into single words, single verses, or smaller sections of suras, with the inevitable result of

85 Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*. During the same years of Neuwirth's studies similar results on the same themes were also reached by Pierre Crapon de Caprona, *Le Coran: aux sources de la parole oraculaire. Structures rythmiques des sourates mecquoises* ([Paris]: Publications Orientalistes de France, 1981). See also Sinai, "Processes of Literary Growth and Editorial Expansion."

destroying the rhetorical unity of the text and impeding an overall understanding of the Qur'anic sura as a literary product.[86]

Among recent Western scholars, Michel Cuypers is without a doubt the author who most supports this viewpoint. Cuypers based his numerous studies of Qur'anic suras on the concept of Semitic rhetoric defined by Roland Meynet. This theory argues that the suras exhibit a symmetric and circular structure and a fundamental unity based on the presumed rhetorical function of the text. In his studies, Cuypers worked most efficiently on the shorter suras, attributed to the Meccan period, and then focused, as Neuwirth did, on the longer suras as well. Some critical responses to Cuypers' work have reinvigorated the debate by highlighting that the categories he defined are often very broad and tend to obscure differences. Furthermore, we add, the presence of undeniable thematic inner references could be themselves the result of later redactions or revisions.[87]

86 Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, *Exordium to Coherence in the Qur'ān. An English Translation of Muqaddamah Niẓām al-Qur'ān*, transl. by Tariq Mahmood Hashmi (Lahore: al-Mawrid, 2008). The Prophet himself must have put the suras inspired by God in order, and the suras can be divided into nine groups based on their theme. Along the lines of this interpretation, see the works by Mustansir Mir cited in the bibliography, in particular *Coherence in the Qur'ān: A Study of Iṣlāḥī's Concept of Naẓm in Tadabbur-i Qur'ān* (Indianapolis, IN: American Trust Publications, 1986); Mustansir Mir, "Islahi's Concept of Sura Groups," *Islamic Quarterly* 28/2 (1984): 73–86. On Iṣlāḥī and the application of his concept of *naẓm* (composition), see also Shafi Fazaluddin, *Conciliation in the Qur'an. The Qur'anic Ethics of Conflict Resolution* (Berlin–Boston: De Gruyter, 2022); Kamran Bashir, "Revisiting Modern *Naẓm* Approaches to the Qur'an: Iṣlāḥī's Interpretation of Q. 107 and Q. 108 in His *Tadabbur-i Qur'ān*," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 17/2 (2015): 47–74; Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, 271–83. On the use of this methodology, see Farrin, *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation*, 22–47 (on suras 2 and 3), 48–69 (on sura 12 and 13), and 59–69 (on suras 50–56). Many studies, too many to cite, analyze single suras, and consider the question regarding their unity and coherence. See, for example, Hussein Abdul-Raof, "Textual Progression and Presentation Technique in Qur'anic Discourse: An Investigation of Richard Bell's Claims of 'Disjointedness' with Especial Reference to Q. 17–20," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 7/2 (2005): 36–50; and various studies by Neal Robinson, amongst which we cite "Hands Outstretched: Towards a Re-reading of *Sūrat al-Mā'ida*," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 3/1 (2001): 1–19. Along with a specific analysis, a methodological definition is given in Nicolai Sinai, "An Interpretation of *Sūrat al-Najm* (Q. 56)," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 13/2 (2011): 1–28.

87 See, in particular, Michel Cuypers, *La composition du Coran. Nazm al-Qur'ān* (Pendé: Gabalda et C.ie, 2012); Michel Cuypers, *The Composition of the Qur'an. Rhetorical Analysis*, trans. by Jerry Ryan (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Michel Cuypers, *The Banquet. A Reading of the Fifth Sura of the Qur'an* (Miami: Convivium Press, 2009); Michel Cuypers, *A Qur'ānic Apocalypse. A Reading of the Thirty-Three Last Surahs of the Qur'ān* (Atlanta, GA: Lockwood Press, [2018]), where, at p. xv, he also cites Iṣlāḥī and his interpretation of the pairs of suras. Other bibliographical references from Cuypers are included in the bibliography. On Cuypers' methodology, see Guillaume Dye, "Réflexions méthodologiques sur la 'rhétorique coranique'," in *Controverses sur les*

Adopting different methodologies, other experts have taken on the more problematic Medinan suras and various specific cases, though they always begin with an analysis of the thematic sequences, aiming towards a hypothetical, symmetrical collocation of the structure of the sura. As stated, the general argument that refers to the entire Qur'an is central to the analysis in contemporary Islamic studies. Alongside the significant tendency to move beyond old views regarding the Qur'an's fragmentary nature, we find different positions of those who reaffirm them and see, especially in the longer suras, proof of the composite character of the Qur'an and of its complex history (see pp. 88–90).[88] One of the arguments used for this type of evaluation is given by the Islamic exegetical tradition itself, when it affirms that certain suras revealed in Medina include Meccan verses, or that Meccan suras include Medinan verses. Rhyme is usually the reason given to account for these interpolations, which open up more than one question regarding the criteria of redaction and also inevitably affect one's understanding of the unity of the suras. However, thematic reasons and the need to highlight, with additions, specific passages of the sacred Islamic text are, most probably, the main causes of this redactional process that affects the unity of the suras.[89]

Overall, even in the presence of conflicting viewpoints, the theory that highlights the unity of the suras seems more and more relevant in the academic study of the Qur'an. This theory, along with other analyses of aspects of the Qur'an, derives from the tendency to abandon a reductive viewpoint of a fragmentary Qur'an, the product of a process of collection and fixation in which few objective criteria can be recognized.

écritures canoniques de l'islam, ed. Daniel De Smet and Mohammad A. Amir-Moezzi (Paris: Cerf, 2014), 147–76; and also the criticisms of the circular structure of the suras by Nicolai Sinai, "Review Essay: Going Round in Circles," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 19/2 (2017): 106–22; as well as Cuypers' response, Michel Cuypers, "And Yet it Moves. Reflections on an Essay by Nicolai Sinai," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 22/2 (2020): 86–104; Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, 88–89, mentions, with prudence, a ring-like structure. See also El-Awa, *Textual Relations in the Qur'ān*. Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity*, 61–64, underscores that research based on the text as a unitary literary product has a counterpart among Muslims, who have worked along the same lines in the 20th century.

88 On this topic and on the three levels of composition: the pericope, the sura, and the codex, see Manfred Kropp, "Comment se fait un texte et son histoire? L'exemple du Coran," *Folia Orientalia* 53 (2016): 143–44; Dye, "Le corpus coranique," 800. Claude Gilliot, "Des indices d'un proto-lectionnaire dans le 'lectionnaire arabe' dit Coran," in *Les origines du Coran, le Coran des origines*, ed. François Déroche, Christian Julien Robin and Michel Zink (Paris: Fondation Del Duca-AIBL, 2015), 297–314, affirms that the liturgical characterization of the Meccan suras is acquired but proposes other hypotheses regarding the ultimate origin of said suras.

89 Nagel, *Medinensische Einschübe in mekkanischen Suren*.

Theses such as Bell's seem unacceptable today, although some of his ideas, or similar ones, may still be considered useful in certain cases. As a result, there is a growing and increasingly accentuated tendency in contemporary research to employ various methods to arrive at an interpretation that is more dialogic, sympathetic, and cognizant of Muslim points of view. Such interpretations consider the unity of suras a significant element in the theological assessment of the excellence of the Qur'an. These approaches, which are vaguely pseudo-confessional, occur in three main manners: methods elaborated for textual or rhetorical analysis in other disciplines are modified and then applied to the Qur'anic text; embracing trends and tendencies employed in contemporary Islamic exegesis; or cross-referenced statistical data are used to highlight details that no longer appear to be coincidental.[90]

It is not easy to arrive at an overall judgment on studies that are often very different from each other, though they share a new focus on the formal details of the Qur'anic text that are assumed not to be coincidental, demonstrate the unity of the suras, and attest to their complex and refined structures. In many cases, however, such analyses, which highlight certain details in relation to others and stress the text's tendency to refer to itself, are not always fully convincing. This explains the divergences among the experts and shows the Qur'an's constant ability to challenge readers and analyses in all directions.

Another theme connected to the suras regards their titles, which stands out in the manuscript and print versions of the Qur'an. The titles, as stated previously, do not make up part of the revelation, but they represent indications that allow for the rapid identification of the chapters that make up the Qur'an. The sura titles, which are subject to variants and traditions, can be more than one per sura. The titles refer to significant words contained within the suras, more often towards the beginning, or to themes discussed in the chapter itself,

90 See Mustansir Mir, "The *Sūra* as a Unity: A Twentieth Century Development in Qur'ān Exegesis," in *Approaches to the Qur'ān*, ed. Gerald R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (London: Routledge, 1993), 211–24; the essays collected in Marianna Klar, ed., *Structural Dividers in the Qur'an* (London–New York: Routledge, 2021); Farrin, *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation*; Zahniser, "Major Transitions and Thematic Borders in Two Long Sūras"; A. H. Mathias Zahniser, "Sūra as Guidance and Exhortation: The Composition of *Sūrat al-Nisāʾ*," in *Humanism, Culture, and Language in the Near East. Studies in Honor of Georg Krotkoff*, ed. Asma Afsaruddin and A.H.M. Zahniser (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 71–85; Neal Robinson, "The Structure and Interpretation of *Sūrat al-Mu'minūn*," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 2/1 (2000): 89–106; Reda, *The al-Baqara Crescendo*; Mary Knight, "Oral Features of the Qur'ān Detected in Public Recitation," *Oral Tradition* 32/1 (2018): 41–90. In some of these studies, the definition of a ring-structure to describe the circular and symmetrical structure was especially successful.

without an apparent universal criterion. Many documented titles of the suras are found in exegetical literature, but not all of them were actually used to entitle the suras in the manuscript diffusion of the Qur'an. Some variant titles, such as those that designate suras 9, 17, 40, and 41, are still used, while they have fallen into partial disuse in the case of other suras. Different regional traditions highlight the presence of a particular liberality in giving titles to the suras, like other data that is not part of the revelation, such as the Meccan or Medinan origin of the suras (pp. 63–66).[91]

Text no. 45: Titles of the suras (Cairo edition, 1924)

1 The Opening (*al-Fātiḥa*)
2. The Cow (*al-Baqara*)
3. The Family of Amram (*Āl ʿImrān*)
4. The Women (*an-Nisāʾ*)
5. The Table (*al-Māʾida*)
6. Livestock (*al-Anʿām*)
7. The Heights (*al-Aʿrāf*)
8. Spoils (*al-Anfāl*)
9. Repentance (*at-Tawba*)
10. Jonah (*Yūnus*)
11. Hūd (*Hūd*)
12. Joseph (*Yūsuf*)
13. Thunder (*ar-Raʿd*)
14. Abraham (*Ibrāhīm*)
15. Al-Ḥijr (*al-Ḥijr*)
16. The Bees (*an-Naḥl*)
17. The Night Journey (*al-Isrāʾ*)
18. The Cave (*al-Kahf*)
19. Mary (*Maryam*)
20. *Ṭāʾ Hāʾ* (*Ṭāʾ Hāʾ*)
21. The Prophets (*al-Anbiyāʾ*)
22. The Pilgrimage (*al-Ḥajj*)
23. The Believers (*al-Muʾminūn*)
24. Light (*an-Nūr*)
25. Salvation (*al-Furqān*)
26. The Poets (*ash-Shuʿarāʾ*)
27. The Ants (*an-Naml*)
28. The Story (*al-Qaṣaṣ*)

91 A list of the various names can be found in Lamya Kandil, "Die Surennamen in der offiziellen Kairiner Koranausgabe und ihre Varianten," *Der Islam* 69 (1992): 44–60; Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 1, 346–76 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 1, 197–215); Constant Hamés, "Sura Headings and Subdivisions in Qur'an Manuscripts from Sub-Saharan Africa: Variations and Historical Implications," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 15/3 (2013): 232–52.

29. The Spider (*al-ʿAnkabūt*)
30. The Romans (*ar-Rūm*)
31. Luqmān (*Luqmān*)
32. Prostration (*as-Sajda*)
33. The Confederates (*al-Aḥzāb*)
34. Sheba (*Sabaʾ*)
35. The Creator (*Fāṭir*)
36. *Yāʾ Sīn* (*Yāʾ Sīn*)
37. Those who draw up Ranks (*aṣ-Ṣāffāt*)
38. *Ṣād* (*Ṣād*)
39. The Troops (*az-Zumar*)
40. The Forgiver (*Ghāfir*)
41. Expounded (*Fuṣṣilat*)
42. Counsel (*ash-Shūrā*)
43. The Ornaments (*az-Zukhruf*)
44. Smoke (*ad-Dukhān*)
45. The Crouching (*al-Jāthiya*)
46. The Sand-Dunes (*al-Aḥqāf*)
47. Muḥammad (*Muḥammad*)
48. The Victory (*al-Fatḥ*)
49. The Apartments (*al-Ḥujurāt*)
50. *Qāf* (*Qāf*)
51. Those that scatter (*adh-Dhāriyāt*)
52. The Mountain (*aṭ-Ṭūr*)
53. The Star (*an-Najm*)
54. The Moon (*al-Qamar*)
55. The Merciful (*ar-Raḥmān*)
56. The Event (*al-Wāqiʿa*)
57. Iron (*al-Ḥadīd*)
58. The Woman who Argued her Case (*al-Mujādila*)
59. The Rounding Up (*al-Ḥashr*)
60. She who is to be Examined (*al-Mumtaḥana*)
61. The Ranks (*aṣ-Ṣaff*)
62. The Congregation (*al-Jumuʿa*)
63. The Hypocrites (*al-Munāfiqūn*)
64. Mutual Fraud (*at-Taghābun*)
65. Divorce (*aṭ-Ṭalāq*)
66. Prohibition (*at-Taḥrīm*)
67. Sovereignty (*al-Mulk*)
68. The Pen (*al-Qalam*)
69. The Reality (*al-Ḥāqqa*)
70. The Stairways (*al-Maʿārij*)
71. Noah (*Nūḥ*)
72. The *Jinn* (*al-Jinn*)
73. Wrapped in a robe (*al-Muzzammil*)
74. Wrapped in a Cloak (*al-Muddaththir*)
75. The Resurrection (*al-Qiyāma*)

76. Man (*al-Insān*)
77. Those that are sent (*al-Mursalāt*)
78. The Tidings (*an-Nabaʾ*)
79. The Pullers (*an-Nāziʿāt*)
80. He Frowned (*ʿAbasa*)
81. The Enveloping (*at-Takwīr*)
82. The Rending (*al-Infiṭār*)
83. The Skimpers (*al-Muṭaffifīn*)
84. The Splitting (*al-Inshiqāq*)
85. The Constellations (*al-Burūj*)
86. What comes in the night (*aṭ-Ṭāriq*)
87. The Most High (*al-Aʿlā*)
88. The Covering (*al-Ghāshiya*)
89. The Dawn (*al-Fajr*)
90. The Settlement (*al-Balad*)
91. The Sun (*ash-Shams*)
92. Night (*al-Layl*)
93. The Forenoon Brightness (*aḍ-Ḍuḥā*)
94. The Opening (*ash-Sharḥ*)
95. Figs (*at-Tīn*)
96. The Blood-clot (*al-ʿAlaq*)
97. Power (*al-Qadr*)
98. Clear Proof (*al-Bayyina*)
99. The Earthquake (*az-Zalzala*)
100. The Runners (*al-ʿĀdiyāt*)
101. The Smiter (*al-Qāriʿa*)
102. Rivalry in Worldly Gain (*at-Takāthur*)
103. The Afternoon (*al-ʿAṣr*)
104. The Backbiter (*al-Humaza*)
105. The Elephants (*al-Fīl*)
106. Quraysh (*Quraysh*)
107. Assistance (*al-Māʿūn*)
108. Abundance (*al-Kawthar*)
109. The Infidels (*al-Kāfirūn*)
110. Help (*an-Naṣr*)
111. Palm-fibre (*al-Masad*)
112. Sincerity (*al-Ikhlāṣ*)
113. Daybreak (*al-Falaq*)
114. Men (*an-Nās*)

The variants in the titles attributed to the Suras are yet another testimony of a tradition that brings to light the flexible nature of the exegetical discourse surrounding the text of the Qur'an, even within the clear distinction between that which can be traced back to God and that which pertains to humans' needs to define and use the sacred text. The titles of the suras, as stated above, are not part of the revelation and are the result of human intervention. The numerous types of titles of which

the exegetes offer evidence demonstrate the multiple possibilities in defining the word of God and, accordingly, the different emphasis given by different exegetical traditions over time and space regarding what was considered appropriate for the titling of a Qur'anic sura.

2.2.2 Verses, the *Basmala*, and other divisions

The verse (*āya*, pl. *āyāt*) represents the minimal unit of the Qur'an. In printed editions and in most manuscripts, the beginnings and ends of verses are indicated by a mark or a number within the suras that make up the text. The suras are divided into verses that vary in length, and they consist of a variable number of verses. The longest sura, that of the Cow, contains two hundred and eighty-six verses, while the shortest suras (Qur. 103, 108, 110) include just three verses each. They range from some of the shortest suras that include verses made up of just two words, such as Qur. 112, 114, to verses in the longest suras that are over fifty words long. One of the identifying marks of the verses is the rhyme that connects the sequences in most cases (see pp. 113–18). Another such feature, although not for all the verses, is a final clausula or concluding phrase that creates closure, especially at the end of a pericope.

While the division into verses is already an integral part of the written form of each Qur'an, the manuscripts from the first centuries show different practices and uses regarding how said division is indicated. Differences as to how the verses are divided are also asserted in the earliest surviving literary testimonies and continued throughout the medieval centuries. The Arabic term *āya* appears frequently in the Qur'an. It is used almost four hundred times, many of those in the plural form, and often in relation to the term *kitāb* (book). The word *āya* means "sign" or "miraculous sign" and refers, first, to natural phenomena that demonstrate God's power and generosity, events associated with the mission of a messenger of God, other events that he recounted, or signs that pertain to the revelation of the Qur'an. Only by extension does the term also take on the meaning of Qur'anic verse (Text no. 46).[92]

92 Déroche, *Le Coran, une histoire plurielle*, 45; Madigan, *The Qur'ān's Self-Image*, 96; Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même*, 68–82; Bell and Watt, *Introduction to the Qur'an*, 121–27. For a definition of verse, see Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 2, 431 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 1, 241). On the verses in general, see Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 2, 422–57, vol. 5, 1784–826 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 1, 237–53; vol. 2, 1015–42).

Text no. 46: Verses/signs

These are the signs of the clear Scripture.
We have sent it down as a recitation in Arabic,
so that you may understand. (Qur. 12:2–3)
And of His signs is that He has created you from dust.
Then, behold, you are mortals spreading abroad.
And of His signs is that He has created, from yourselves,
spouses that you may dwell with them. (Qur. 30:20–21)
These are the signs of the wise Scripture,
As a guidance and a mercy for those who do good. (Qur. 31:2–3)
Thus We have sent it down as clear signs,
and because God guides those whom He wishes. (Qur. 22:16)

Like the titles of the suras, the division into verses is not part of the revelation communicated by God to Muḥammad but part of the human conventions by which the text was organized. Hence, there are different traditions regarding the division into verses, of equal status from a formal point of view, which have emerged since the beginning of the history of the textual transmission of the Qur'an. Only recently, with the primacy of print distribution, have these various traditions given way to increasing standardization. Calculation of the numbers of the verses, suras, words, and letters of the Qur'an is not free from different evaluations. Islamic commentarial viewpoints aim to establish a divine or, at least, prophetic origin of the verse divisions, while others record and report traditional uses and trends that attest to various solutions.

The testimony of manuscripts complicates the scenario, since they attest to the diffusion of practices regarding the division of the text that are sometimes different from the variations that are meticulously established by exegetical speculation. The picture that emerges is that of a less stringent attitude regarding verse division in comparison to that found in the theoretical discussions. Therefore, there existed a certain freedom regarding the identification of the possible ends of verses in a sura, though they were certainly limited by constraints of sense and rhyme. Overall, verse divisions exhibit limited variability.[93]

In Islamic theory, the initial or final position of a verse is connected, in a more or less clear manner, to the identification of a sequence or a phrase that is understood to convey a satisfying, complete meaning, such that a consequent pause is required, allowed, or prohibited in recitation. The exegetical evaluations in this sense, dedicated to identifying such elements among the words of

93 See pp. 180–82; Yasin Dutton, "An Early *Muṣḥaf* According to the Reading of Ibn 'Āmir," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 3/1 (2001): 71–89.

the revelation, also play a role in the identification of the separations of the verses (*fawāṣil*). These separations find their definition and comprehensive discussion in an extensive literary genre, often termed *al-waqf wa-l-ibtidāʾ*,"Stopping and Starting," that analyzes the entire Qur'an to establish which pauses (*waqf*) are considered mandatory, permissible, or to be avoided.[94]

Islamic literature also demonstrates variety and discrepancies in the form of identifiable regional schools regarding the collocation of verse divisions. However, no surviving manuscripts from the first two centuries follow any one of these schools perfectly. The discrepancy between theory or ideal systematization and concrete reality stems from the fact that the meaning seems not always to have guided the division into verses. Additionally, the combination of different traditional divisions and a certain liberty connected to its psalmodic recitation (pp. 225–26) are probably the source of the substantial fluidity as to this topic.[95]

Among all the verses, the one that opens the Qur'an and is indicated as verse number one of the Opening (no. 1) has a special value in the text overall and in the history of the pious formulas used in Islamic societies. It is the verse that recites *Bi-smi 'Llāhi 'r-raḥmāni 'r-raḥīm* ("In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate"), a formula that has become known as the *Basmala*. With the exception of no. 9 ("Repentance"), every sura in the Qur'an begins with the

94 See, for example, Muḥammad b. al-Qāsim b. al-Anbārī, *Īḍāḥ al-waqf wa-l-ibtidāʾ fī kitāb Allāh ʿazza wa-jalla* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1428/2007); Abū ʿAmr ad-Dānī, *al-Muktafā fī al-waqf wa-l-ibtidāʾ* (Beirut: Muʾassasat ar-Risāla, 1984); Muḥammad b. Ṭayfūr as-Sajāwindī, *ʿIlal al-wuqūf* (Riyāḍ: Maktabat ar-Rushd, 1994). On the topic of the pauses in relation to the recitation and the redaction of the text, see Amr Osman, "Human Intervention in Divine Speech: *Waqf* Rules and the Redaction of the Qur'anic Text," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 14/2 (2012): 90–109; on the relationship between *rasm*, rhyme, and pauses in the Qur'anic verses, see the various passages in Pierre Larcher, *Sur le Coran. Nouvelles approches linguistiques* (Limoges: Editions Lambert-Lucas, 2020) 31–55.

95 In Islamic literature there are books specifically dedicated to the theme of the division of the Qur'an into verses; see, for example, Abū ʿAmr ad-Dānī, *al-Bayān fī ʿadd āy al-Qurʾān*, ed. Ghānim Qaddūrī al-Ḥamad (al-Kuwayt: Markaz al-Makhṭūṭāt wa-t-Turāth wa-l-Wathāʾiq, 1994); Abū al-Ḥasan at-Tamīmī, *Kitāb ʿadad āy al-Qurʾān/The Book of Quranic Verses' Number*, ed. Muḥammad aṭ-Ṭabarānī ([London]: Al Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation, 2011). The most important study on the various exegetical traditions that identify regional schools as to the variety of the division in verses is Anton Spitaler, *Die Verszählung des Koran nach islamischer Überlieferung* (München: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1935). It is now possible to place alongside it the most recent, complete work, with much data, by Raymond K. Farrin, "Verse Numbering Systems of the Qur'ān: A Statistical and Literary Comparison," *Journal of the International Qur'ānic Studies Association* 4 (2019): 3–58. See also Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 2, 539–75 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 1, 292–316); Éléonore Cellard, "Les manuscrits coraniques anciens," in *Le Coran des historiens*, ed. Amir-Moezzi and Dye, vol. 1, 697.

Basmala, even though it is only counted as the first verse in the Opening, while in the other chapters in which it is present, it is considered an introductory formula of a liturgical character that is not included in the enumeration of verses. The Islamic tradition affirms that it was introduced when it was redacted by ʿUthmān in his recension and, therefore, apart from the Opening, it is not part of the actual revelation in other chapters.[96] Just one passage (Qur. 27:30) places the *Basmala* within the Qur'anic text, at the beginning of the letter written by Solomon to the Queen of Sheba, demonstrating and sacralizing its use as an expression of Islamic faith in the production of documents (Text no. 47).

Text no. 47: The *Basmala*

She said, 'O notables,
a noble letter has been dropped before me.
It is from Solomon
and it is in the name of the Merciful, the Compassionate,
Saying, "Do not exalt yourselves against me,
but come to me in surrender".' (Qur. 27:29–31)

One significant question that has challenged Muslim exegetes and experts on the Qur'an is the absence of the *Basmala* at the beginning of only one of the Qur'anic suras, no. 9 or the Sura of Repentance. The most common hypothesis is that such anomalous condition could be attributed to the custom, testified to by the Companions of the Prophet, to consider it linked to the previous sura, the Sura of Spoils (Qur. 8), in one single chapter. This explanation does not clear up all doubts regarding a mysterious omission, which could date back to problems connected to the written transmission, then perpetuated out of reasons regarding devotion and preservation.[97]

The manuscript copies of the Qur'an from the medieval and the modern periods sometimes contain, besides the divisions in verses, together with these or in their stead, marks indicating every fifth or tenth verse. According to the Islamic tradition, said practice was introduced in rather ancient times by Naṣr

96 See Kaplony, "Comparing Qur'ānic Suras with Pre-800 Documents," 319–20: the *Basmala* is always present at the beginning of the first documents in Arabic; Cellard, "Les manuscrits coraniques anciens," 696 on the *Basmala*; Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 277–78 (original edition *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. 2, 79–80). A parallel to the *Basmala* in a graffito is mentioned in Shah and Haleem, *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, 123. On the problems relative to the translation of the terms *raḥmān* and *raḥīm*, which derive from the same root, see Reynolds, *Allah*, 94.

97 On the hypothesis that suras 8 and 9 were just one, see Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 2, 422–23 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 1, 237–38).

b. ʿĀṣim al-Laythī (d. ca. 708); the origin of this division, also in accordance with Islamic traditions, lies in a didactic principle that may have become a custom for practical reasons, including recitation during prayer. The use of these divisions and their significance during centuries of manuscript transmission of the Qur'an are still uncharted territory, since they have not been the object of systematic and comprehensive study.[98]

The divisions of the text into greater parts are different but have similar aims, such as the division of the entire text into thirty sections (*juzʾ*, pl. *ajzāʾ*), which are further divided into half-sections (*ḥizb*, pl. *aḥzāb*) or fourth-sections, the beginnings of which are often marked in the margins of the Qur'an. These divisions were created from the need to divide the Qur'an in similar units in terms of the number of words with respect to the overall text for liturgical uses such as recitation of the sacred text during the month of Ramadan and other similar devotional practices. Less frequent is the attestation of the division into seven parts (*manzil*, pl. *manāzil*) in order to facilitate recitation of the entire Qur'an weekly. The nature of these divisions is simply quantitative and the ways in which they align with the division in suras are not taken into account. These markings are not documented in ancient manuscripts; rather, they emerged in the medieval period, when they were sometimes indicated, but not systematically and never all together.[99]

2.2.3 The mysterious letters

The beginnings of some suras in the Qur'an include verses that challenged, and still today challenge, Muslim exegetes and experts on the Qur'an. These verses consist of a variable number of letters of the alphabet, which have no obvious significance. Their place in revelation and their *raison d'être* have not yet found a satisfactory, universally accepted answer. In this introduction, an overview of the Muslim and Western interpretation regarding these combinations of letters of

98 Omar Hamdan, "The Second *Maṣāḥif* Project: A Step towards the Canonization of the Qur'anic Text," in *The Qur'ān in Context. Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2010), 816–20; Cellard, "Les manuscrits coraniques anciens," 697–98: the division every ten verses could have appeared in the second half of the 8th century and then added, at times, to earlier manuscripts that did not have said division.

99 On the various divisions of the text, see Abū Dāwūd as-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-maṣāḥif* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1405/1985), 131–57, in which different opinions on the custom of dividing the Qur'an every ten verses are mentioned, a practice that Ibn Masʿūd is said to have opposed.

the alphabet, termed "the discrete or disjointed letters" (*al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭaʿa*), is inevitable in order to highlight their possible significance, which has been debated for centuries.

There are twenty-nine suras that begin with a letter or a series of letters that are not immediately ascribable to identifiable words or parts of words (Text no. 48). The number of letters varies from a minimum of one to a maximum of five. The letters, in some cases, are repeated, while in others, they appear just one time. The latter include the letter *Q* (*qāf*) with which sura 50 begins, *Ṣ* (*ṣād*) in sura 38, or *N* (*nūn*) in sura 68. The former include the five letters *K.H.Y.ʿ.Ṣ* with which the Sura of Mary begins (no. 19). Along with this, some identical series of letters recur in contiguous suras. The sequence of suras 10–15 all have the letters *A.L.R.* at the beginning, with the exception of sura 13, which begins with the letters *A.L.M.*, and suras 40–46 all begin with the letters *Ḥ.M.* Other shorter sequences also occur in suras 26–28 (*Ṭ.S.M.* except that Sura 27 begins with *Ṭ.S.*, without *M.*), and in suras 29–32 (*A.L.M.*), while the others do not offer data for comparison and do not seem to have any sort of affinity.

Other data emerge from the text of the suras in which these isolated letters appear, although with particular features that do not allow us to obtain precise rules. With five exceptions (*Ṭ.Ḥ*, *Ḥ.M.ʿ.S.Q*, *Ṭ.S.M* (twice), *K.H.Y.ʿ.Ṣ*), the sequences of letters are in alphabetical order. In addition, excluding suras 19, 29, 30, 42, all of the suras that contain the discrete letters mention the terms Scripture, Book, the clear Book, the Qur'an or Verses, immediately following the initial verse, suggesting that said letters should be connected to the affirmation of the sacred Scripture and therefore to passages, numerous also elsewhere, in which the Qur'an mentions its own message of revelation in various manners. While the relationship between the mysterious letters and the Book is not exclusive, since other suras without isolated letters at the beginning begin with references to book and scriptures (e.g., suras 18, 24, 25, 39, 52, 55, 97), the data are still significant.[100]

100 In sura 42 there is a mention of the inspiration received by Muḥammad, and for this reason it is generally excluded from evaluations in other studies. According to Bell and Watt, *Introduction to the Qur'an*, 64, sura 19 should also be excluded from this exception, since it contains numerous mentions of the Book, etc. On the data highlighted here, see Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 5, 1858 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 2, 1065). The connection of the letters to the Book or the Scripture had already been highlighted by Otto Loth, "Ṭabarī's Korancommentar," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 35 (1888): 603–10, who hypothesized an origin connected to a Jewish influence of Cabalistic background.

Text no. 48: The mysterious letters

1. A.L.M. This is the Scripture in which there is no doubt. (Qur. 2:1–2)
2. A.L.M. God. There is no god but Him, the Living, the Eternal. He has sent down to you the Scripture in truth, confirming what came before it. And He sent down the Torah and the Gospel, previously, as a guidance for the people; and He sent down the Salvation. (Qur. 3:1–4)
3. A.L.M.Ṣ. A Scripture which has been revealed to you. (Qur. 7:1–2)
4. A.L.R. These are the signs of the wise Scripture. (Qur. 10:1)
5. A.L.R. A Scripture, whose signs have been established and then made distinct, coming from One [who is] Wise and Informed. (Qur. 11:1)
6. A.L.R. These are the signs of the clear Scripture. We have sent it down as a recitation in Arabic, so that you may understand. (Qur. 12:1)
7. A.L.M.R. These are the signs of the Scripture. What has been sent down to you from your Lord is the truth. (Qur. 13:1)
8. A.L.R. Scripture which We have sent down to you. (Qur. 14:1)
9. A.L.R. These are the signs of the Scripture and of a clear Recitation. (Qur. 15:1)
10. K.H.Y.ʿ.Ṣ. Mention of the mercy of your Lord to His servant Zechariah. (Qur. 19:1–2)
11. Ṭ.H. We have not sent the Recitation down to you for you to be wretched. (Qur. 20:1–2)
12. Ṭ.S.M. These are the signs of the clear Scripture. (Qur. 26:1–2)
13. Ṭ.S. These are the revelations of the Recitation and a clear Scripture. (Qur. 27:1)
14. Ṭ.S.M. These are the signs of the Scripture that makes things clear. (Qur. 28:1–2)
15. A.L.M. Do men think that they will be left to say, 'We believe' without being tested? (Qur. 29:1–2)
16. A.L.M. The Greeks have been defeated in the nearest part of the land. (Qur. 30:1–3)
17. A.L.M. These are the signs of the wise Scripture. (Qur. 31:1–2)
18. A.L.M. The sending down of the Scripture, in which there is no doubt, from the Lord of created beings. (Qur. 32:1–2)
19. Y.S. By the decisive recitation. (Qur. 36:1–2)
20. Ṣ. By the recitation which contains a reminder. (Qur. 38:1)
21. Ḥ.M. The sending down of the Scripture from the Mighty and Knowing God. (Qur. 40:1–2).
22. Ḥ.M. Revelation from the Merciful and Compassionate, Scripture whose signs are expounded, as a recitation in Arabic for a people who have knowledge. (Qur. 41:1–3)
23. Ḥ.M.ʿ.S.Q. Thus God, [who is] Mighty and Wise reveals to you and to those before you. (Qur. 42:1–3)
24. Ḥ.M. By the clear Scripture – We have made it a Recitation in Arabic, so that you may understand. (Qur. 43:1–3)
25. Ḥ.M. By the Scripture that makes plain – We have revealed it on a blessed night. (Qur. 44:1–3)
26. Ḥ.M. The sending down of the Scripture from the Mighty and Wise God. (Qur. 45:1–2)
27. Ḥ.M. The sending down of the Scripture from the Mighty and Wise God. (Qur. 46:1–2)
28. Q. By the glorious recitation. (Qur. 50:1)
29. N. By the pen and by what they write! (Qur. 68:1)

Despite the limitations of the data highlighted and the lack of any precise indications regarding the significance of the letters, the enigmatic quality of the non-systematic occurrences has stimulated, throughout history, a variety of

interpretative hypotheses, both by Muslim commentators and in studies of a non-confessional nature. The exegetical Islamic tradition put forth various explanations with viewpoints that dated back to the traditional exegetical authorities and were then passed on and collected in medieval works.

An initial hypothesis holds that these alphabetic characters or logograms are abbreviations of words or phrases, generally identified by the exegetical literature. According to another interpretation, the letters have a numerical value connected to the suras themselves and to the verses of the Qur'an. Part of these are attempts made by the Islamic tradition, also taken up by some Islamic studies, to read them as abbreviations, parts of words to be compiled, (such as *A.L.R*, *Ḥ.M* and *N*, which may be combined to form *ar-Raḥmān*, "the Merciful"), or speculative readings, tracing meaning in some cases but not in others, leaving these open to conjecture. Other interpretations look to the Prophet: they are supposed to be mysterious names for the Prophet or formulas connected with him, while other hypotheses still highlight an alphabetical function related to Arabic, since the sum of the letters used in the formulas, fourteen of them, correspond to half of the twenty-eight letters in the Arabic alphabet. Not only that: for others, the mysterious letters mark the division of the suras. Interpretations such as those of Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) are not less meaningful, for they assign spiritual senses to the letters and to the suras to which they are connected.[101]

The Islamic exegetical hypotheses have only occasionally been included in Western studies, which have often preferred analyses that focus on internal Qur'anic evidence. The main and discriminating point, among all the Western interpretations, is whether the proponents of theories, on the one hand, consider the letters external to the revelation, and suggest that they have somehow come to be included in the final redaction, or, on the other hand, consider the letters to belong to revelation proper, in line with the Islamic viewpoint, and aim to give the letters complete meaning within the economy of the revelation.

For those who consider the letters external to the revelation, the mysterious letters are the most resounding demonstration of inconsistencies and traces of other texts that have unexpectedly survived in the final text redacted in ʿUthmān's Vulgate (pp. 153–62). One interpretation that goes back to Nöldeke and

101 See Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 4, 1372–92 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 2, 733–42); Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 268–71 (original edition *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. 2, 69–73); Loth, "Ṭabarī's Korancommentar," 588–610; on Islamic exegetical interpretations, see Martin Nguyen, "Exegesis of the *Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭaʿa*: Polyvalency in Sunni Traditions of Qur'anic Interpretation," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 14/2 (2012): 1–28. See also, on the different possibilities regarding interpretation, Pink, *Muslim Qur'ānic Interpretation Today*, 206: the Alevi Vaktidolu interprets *A.L.M.* as Allāh, ʿAlī and Muḥammad.

was later accepted by others states that the letters represent the initials or monograms of Companions of Muḥammad who possessed copies of those suras that were later used for the redaction of the Qur'an, in order to acknowledge them. In other elaborations of this theory, the sequences are not at all random, since the letters did not just mark the origin or ownership, but showed necessary documentation that would then have allowed for a choice amongst the versions by those who prepared the version of the Qur'an for ʿUthmān.[102] Or, the mysterious letters may represent references to other words that were no longer understood, at least not by the Islamic interpretations, such as abbreviations of key words contained in the suras or in the titles of the suras themselves – an interpretation that, however, does not work for all of the sequences of letters, especially the longer ones.

Another theory was proposed by James A. Bellamy, who suggested that the sequences of letters are corrupted forms of the *Basmala*. The idea comes from the Islamic exegetical interpretations that recognize, in some sequences, abbreviated forms of *ar-Raḥmān* (the Merciful) or *ar-Raḥīm* (the Compassionate). When, in the late Meccan period, the *Basmala* was supposedly introduced, the first scribes wrote it using abbreviations that were later not recognized as such. This hypothesis, which is logically plausible from some points of view, while much less from others, has not been met with much consent.[103]

The theme has captured and continues to capture the attention of experts on the Qur'an, as interpretations that consider the letters as fully belonging to the revelation demonstrate. If this is the case, then these letters must exercise a precise function within the scripture. For some, for example, they are a sort of representation of the Arabic alphabet, placed alongside the mention of book or scripture (see above, p. 102). Devin Stewart takes inspiration from

102 Keith Massey, "A New Investigation into the 'Mystery Letters' of the Qur'ān," *Arabica* 43 (1996): 497–501, highlights that such an interpretation appears in the first edition of the *Geschichte des Qorān* of 1860, but then, later, Nöldeke changed his mind. See below, n. 104, and Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 270–71 (original edition *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. 2, 72–73). On this position see Hirschfeld, *New Researches*, 141–43, who offers a hypothetical identification of the Companion of Muḥammad represented by each single letter. For another review of previous interpretations, see Arthur Jeffery, "The Mystic Letters of the Koran," *The Muslim World* 14 (1924): 247–60. Many experts have studied this, and have suggested various opinions in less recent works, such as in Bell and Watt, *Introduction to the Qur'an*, 61–65; James A. Bellamy, "The Mysterious Letters of the Koran: Old Abbreviations of the Basmalah," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 93 (1973): 267–69.

103 Bellamy, "The Mysterious Letters of the Koran." On the hypotheses regarding the letters as a form of reference to other things, see Bauer, "Über die Anordnung der Suren"; Eduard Goossens, "Ursprung und Bedeutung der koranischen Siglen," *Der Islam* 13/3–4 (1923): 191–226.

these suppositions, and has most recently returned to this topic, shifting attention to the Arabic roots of the revelation and finding, in the letters, the reflection of an oracular style of the scripture, with the function of affirming the mantic authority of the divine message, as well as that of the messenger. To this end, Stewart analyzes the presence or absence of letters (fourteen are present) and wonders whether this can be attributed to a logical explanation. His answer is that the letters are intentionally enigmatic in order to confirm a sacrality that is guaranteed on a different level. Assonance, and especially rhyme, connect the mysterious letters to the rest of the suras in which they appear, while references to the scripture refer to the celestial archetype (p. 200), to its authority in guaranteeing sacrality, and not to the concrete Qur'an defined in the revelation received by Muḥammad.[104]

Some conclusions can be drawn without claiming or presuming to contribute to the solution regarding the meaning of these letters. The incontrovertible data suggests that the connection to mentions of the scripture and of the book is intentional and goes back to the earliest manuscripts, even though some evidence on the pre-ʿUthmānic codices referred to in Islamic literature seems to indicate that some manuscripts could have contained different versions of the combinations of letters, or even omitted them in some sporadic cases.[105] Among all these hypotheses, the one that identifies these letters in alphabetical characters regarding the history of the text seems to be the most logical, as well as the one that also explains the fact that Islamic exegesis does not suggest a univocal solution. Nevertheless, Stewart's argument plausibly explains the connections with rhyme,

104 Devin J. Stewart, "The Mysterious Letters and Other Formal Features of the Qur'ān in Light of Greek and Babylonian Oracular Texts," in *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context. 2*, ed. Reynolds, 323–48, in part. 339–48. See also Islam Dayeh, "Al-Ḥawāmīm: Intertextuality and Coherence in Meccan Surahs," in *The Qur'ān in Context. Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, ed. A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai and M. Marx, 461–98, who supports a thematic interrelation between suras 40–46. See also Alford T. Welch, "al-Ḳurʾān," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., vol. 5, 400–429. Not very distant from this, although in a less sophisticated manner, was the latest interpretation offered by T. Nöldeke who, while starting from a very different viewpoint (see above), concluded by stating that the letters should be considered a mystical reference to the celestial archetype of the Qur'an: Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 272–73 (original edition *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. 2, 75–76). Other studies favor an indefinite mystical meaning, based on the Islamic exegesis that leans in the same direction: R. Marston Speight, "The Opening Verses of the Chapters of the Qur'an. An Attempt at Classification," *The Muslim World* 59 (1970): 205–9; Alan Jones, "The Mystical Letters of the Qur'ān," *Studia Islamica* 16 (1962): 5–11.

105 Cfr. Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 273 (original edition *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. 2, 76.)

alphabetical order, and the style of the Qur'anic text in the hypothetically oracular character of its pre-Islamic origin.

2.3 Modes of discourse

The communication of the meanings of a text, not only through the concrete structure of its organization, also depends on the modality of linguistic, stylistic, formal, and rhetorical orders. The modes in which these and other aspects unfold are never neutral; in the case of the Qur'an, because of the variety of registers that characterize it, this is even more prominent. The literary characteristics that make up the Qur'an have a fundamental effect and contribute to the characterization of the qualities that, from the confessional point of view, attest to its exceptional nature and uniqueness, while, from the viewpoint of Western analyses, attest to the complexity of the text overall.

2.3.1 The language of the Qur'an, Arabic

The Arabic language is, according to the Islamic viewpoint, the primary instrument in the communication of the Qur'anic message by God. The Qur'an is a recitation and a revelation "in clear Arabic language" (*lisān ʿarabī mubīn*), as stated in a well-known Qur'anic verse (Text no. 49). Qur'anic Arabic is, therefore, the language in which God expresses himself in his final message to humanity, with a choice that inevitably ascribes a unique and ahistorical role to this linguistic form. The unattainable supremacy of the Arabic original derives from this, dictating the liturgical uses of the Arabic language connected to the revelations and determining the lesser value of the use of the Qur'an in translation, which is always considered an exegetical interpretation and not the divine word as such, which can only be in Arabic.

Text no. 49: The language of the Qur'an

It is the message sent down by the Lord of all beings,
Which the faithful spirit has brought down
Upon your heart, that you may be one of the warners,
In a clear Arabic tongue. (Qur. 26:192–95)
The speech of the one at whom they hint is foreign,
whereas this is clear Arabic speech. (Qur. 16:103)
We have sent it down as a recitation in Arabic,
so that you may understand. (Qur. 12:2)

Evidence of the Qur'anic text itself and even the later interpretative tradition show, though, that assessing the nature of Qur'anic Arabic is not so simple. Much has been written on this topic, and hypotheses have historically oscillated between identifying it with the actual language spoken by the Prophet and his tribe that was later "classicized" by philologists, or identifying it with the intertribal koiné that served as a medium of communication understood by all of the Arab tribes in the Arabian Peninsula, each of which had their own dialect. In accordance with the latter interpretation, exegetical literature has in some cases identified Qur'anic words that originated in various dialects on the Arabian Peninsula but were then adopted by the Qur'an.[106]

This issue is greatly conditioned and complicated by lack of sufficient evidence regarding the nature of the Arabic language at the time of the advent of Islam. The reason for this is quite simple: besides sparse epigraphic evidence, the Qur'an is the first substantial document written in Arabic that has survived. It is known from various historical sources that Arab or Arabic was also an ethnonym applied to different tribal units that inhabited a vast geographical region, whose languages or dialects were inevitably different. It is possible, as the tradition affirms, that these were included in the single definition of "Arabic" – an

106 The debate on the nature of the Qur'anic Arabic was quite lively between the 19th and 20th centuries, and more or less complete bibliographies can be found in studies cited here. Among the most recent studies, see Marijn van Putten, *Quranic Arabic. From Its Hijazi Origins to Its Classical Reading Traditions* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2022); Larcher, *Sur le Coran. Nouvelles approches linguistiques*; Marijn van Putten and Phillip W. Stokes, "Case in the Qurʾānic Consonantal Text," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 108 (2018): 143–79; Ernst A. Knauf, "Arabo-Aramaic and ʿArabiyya: From Ancient Arabic to Early Standard Arabic, 200 CE–600 CE," in *The Qur'ān in Context. Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, ed. A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai and M. Marx, 197–254; Edmund Beck, "'*Arabiyya*, Sunna und '*Āmma* in der Koranlesung des zweiten Jahrhunderts," *Orientalia* 15 (1946): 180–224. As to Islamic evidence of the presence of lexicon of Arab tribes different from the Quraysh, see Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 3, 904–33 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 1, 469–83). On phonetic issues in the most ancient manuscripts, see Marijn van Putten, "Inferring the Phonetics of Quranic Arabic from the Quranic Consonantal Text," *International Journal of Arabic Linguistics* 5/1 (2019): 1–19; Ahmad Al-Jallad, "Was It *Sūrat al-Baqárah*? Evidence for Antepenultimate Stress in the Quranic Consonantal Text and Its Relevance for صلوه Type Nouns," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 167 (2017): 81–90. Ahmad Al-Jallad has published many works, some of which can be found on his academia.edu page, on the origin and initial development of Arabic, including a useful manual that is constantly updated (*A Manual of the Historical Grammar of Arabic*). On the relationship between the Qur'an and pre-Islamic inscriptions, see Christian J. Robin, "L'Arabie dans le Coran. Réexamen de quelques termes à la lumière des inscriptions préislamiques," in *Les origines du Coran, le Coran des origines*, ed. F. Déroche, C. J. Robin and M. Zink, 27–74. On various grammatical forms, such as verb tenses and modes or issues of syntax, see Wolfgang Reuschel, *Aspekt und Tempus in der Sprache des Korans* (Frankfurt a. M.: Lang, 1996).

artificial entity possibly stemming from a common language that may have been the medium used in the text of the Qur'an. It is significant that the Islamic tradition recognized the connection of Qur'anic language with a particular historical and geographical linguistic reality, tracing it back to Muḥammad, the Quraysh tribe to which he belonged, and, in a wider sense, to the region of Hijaz on the Arabian Peninsula, that was later incorporated into the Qur'an. Besides this issue, which is made even more complex by other factors, Qur'anic language contains signs of the influence of other tribes and different regions on the Peninsula, such as expressions and constructions of Yemenite origin, or specific dialectal forms associated with various tribal groups such as the Kināna and the Hudhayl tribes.

In the context of Western Islamic studies, the most common interpretations do not radically differ from those found in the Islamic tradition and they affirm that the Qur'an was written in the language of the Quraysh or in the *lingua franca* in use in the Arabian Peninsula, possibly coinciding, more or less, with the dialect of the Quraysh. The evaluation of the actual condition of the Qur'anic language during the time of Muḥammad, even without addressing later articulated Islamic linguistic discussions, is problematic because of the absence of other testimonies to which scholars may refer. If the manuscript evidence that has emerged in recent decades (pp. 174–81) has precluded a late dating of the Qur'an in the form that has reached us today, the scarcity of information and comparable texts renders the evaluation and historical identification of the language in which it has reached us very difficult.

Other factors add further layers of complexity. Both Muslim exegesis and Western critical analyses bring to light the foreign origin of some Qur'anic vocabulary. Items of Qur'anic lexicon have been identified of Greek, Persian, Syriac, Ethiopic, Coptic, or Nabataean origin, and the meanings of such words have been explained by recourse to the languages that were in use in the regions surrounding the Arabian Peninsula. Studies on this topic are numerous, and they are often connected to research on the supposed sources or parallels to the contents of the Qur'an (pp. 134–52). For the purposes of the study of the Arabic language in the Qur'an, these attestations bring to light the connections between population that spoke Arabic during the time of Muḥammad and the surrounding historical and religious reality, with which contact must have been anything but sporadic. At the same time, however, some prudence is necessary on the part of scholars who aim to connect language loans to the transposition of concepts that can be somehow datable. On the one hand, the two factors – linguistic and cultural – can function independently. On the other hand, the terms identified as being of foreign origin may have entered Arabic long before the 7th century, and

therefore their presence in the Qur'an does not necessarily provide evidence of the direct inclusion of religious concepts from other sources.[107]

Both Islamic and Western research have generated discussions regarding grammatical, lexical, and syntactic analysis of the Qur'an, both in relation to the later definition of rules regarding Arabic grammar in connection to the ideal of Classical Arabic (*fuṣḥā*) and regarding the principle of the intelligibility of the text. Discussing this in terms of grammatical norms vs. Qur'anic specificities is problematic, given the lack of contemporary evidence, with the exception of pre-Islamic poetry, which is only preserved in recensions from the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, a century or more later. Unique particularities of Qur'anic Arabic are not even denied by the confessional and apologetic approaches that aim to demonstrate the unique excellence of the sacred text. For example, the fact that the Qur'an contains "strange" (*gharīb*) expressions, or those that are unusual or peculiar in their linguistic form, has been documented since the earliest exegetical speculation. It derives from documentation regarding the first Companions of the Prophet, and it is not at all easy to evaluate from a historical point of view. Especially famous are affirmations that go back to an emblematic figure like the aforementioned ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbbās, who supposedly did not even know the meaning of some Qur'anic expressions, such as *al-ghislīn* (Qur. 69:36), which, as is evident from the context, refers to an unspecified fetid substance.

Studies of Qur'anic lexicon are polarized. Confessional studies tend to highlight the unique character of the particularities of Qur'anic Arabic, while Western studies are more interested in historical investigation, based on the analysis of particular aspects of Qur'anic language. Any intensive evaluation of Qur'anic vocabulary seems to reveal both significant absences in comparison to later Arabic and distinctive features that might serve to highlight the uniqueness of the Qur'an. However, that apparent originality is mitigated by the absence of incontrovertible, contemporary testimonies, as has been mentioned above, and this situation

107 There are many studies on this topic. For an overall view, Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary*, is still valid. See also the more recent Catherine Pennacchio, *Les emprunts à l'hébreu et au judéo-araméen dans le Coran* (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, 2014). For a comparison between Arabic lexemes and possibile parallels with other Semitic languages, see Martin R. Zammit, *A Comparative Lexical Study of Qur'ānic Arabic* (Leiden: Brill, 2002). The bibliography on specific terms or short passages of the text is much more ample; on the problems and risks regarding such an approach, see Walid A. Saleh, "The Etymological Fallacy and Qur'anic Studies: Muḥammad, Paradise, and Late Antiquity," in *The Qur'ān in Context. Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, ed. A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai and M. Marx, 649–98. On attestations of the same genre in Islamic exegetical literature, see Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 3, 934–74 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 1, 484–500).

regarding potential comparative sources conditions all discourse on the Qur'anic language.[108]

Questions also emerge regarding the grammatical fabric of Qur'anic Arabic. The Islamic exegetical tradition and the Arabic grammatical studies have relentlessly and meticulously discussed the presence of grammatical "errors" in the Qur'an, or uses that are not in line with the rules of Arabic grammar that were established at the beginning of Islamic civilization. In some cases, some of these particularities may be explained as stylistic and rhetorical figures that deviate from the norm, such as grammatical shift for rhetorical purposes (*iltifāt*). These testimonies come from the interpretation of the *ḥadīth* or from traditions of the first generations. Despite some exegetical efforts to force the structure of the sentences to justify established forms of case- or mood-endings (*iʿrāb*) or even of the syntactic structure, overall there is clear evidence that the Islamic tradition itself perceived, in the language of the Qur'an, usages that seemed to violate the rules of Classical Arabic grammar as they were later defined. Western Islamic studies often recognized these evaluations, adding other considerations of the same type to highlight the sometimes problematic particularities of certain grammatical forms found in the Qur'an.[109]

108 In general, see Gotthelf Bergsträsser, *Verneinungs- und Fragepartikeln und Verwandtes im Ḳurʾān. Ein Beitrag zur historischen Grammatik des Arabischen* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1914); Muhammad A. Abdel Haleem, "Grammatical Shift for Rhetorical Purpose. *Iltifāt* and Related Features in the Qur'ān," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 55/3 (1992): 407–32; Hussein Abdul-Raof, "The Linguistic Architecture of the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 2/2 (2000): 37–51; Larcher, *Sur le Coran. Nouvelles approches linguistiques*, esp. 59–103, where he analyzed various particularities and differences between Classical Arabic and Qur'anic language. On the relevant Islamic traditions, see Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 3, 728–846 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 1, 397–426). On the lexicon and missing concepts, see Robert Brunschvig, "Simple Negative Remarks on the Vocabulary of the Qur'ān," *Studia Islamica* 5 (1956): 19–32 (reprinted in *The Qur'an: Style and Content*, ed. Andrew Rippin (London: Routledge, 2001), 285–95). The most complete dictionary of Qur'anic vocabulary is El-Said M. Badawi and Muhammad A. Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage* (Leiden–Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2008), which follows the Sunni exegetical Islamic traditions and warns the reader about the problems connected with the use of words with complex meanings and often fully evocative only in the original Arabic. On *hapaxes* in the Qur'an, see Shawkat M. Toorawa, "Hapaxes in the Qur'ān: Identifying and Cataloguing Lone Words (and Loanwords)," in *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān*, ed. G.S. Reynolds, 193–246. For research on a specific area of the Qur'anic lexicon, see Francesco Grande, *Il lessico coranico di flora e fauna: aspetti strutturali e paleo-linguistici* (Venezia: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2016).

109 John Burton, "Linguistic Errors in the Qur'ān," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 33/2 (1988): 181–96; see also James A. Bellamy, "Some Proposed Emendations to the Text of the Koran," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113 (1993): 562–73; James A. Bellamy, "More Proposed Emendations to the Text of the Koran," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116/2 (1996):

An issue closely connected to these others, which has a mainly exegetical connotation, regards the presumed distinction the Qur'an itself draws between verses that are clear and immediate (*muḥkamāt*) and verses that are symbolic or allegorical in nature (*mutashābihāt*). The origin of this distinction lies in a specific verse, even though its contents are not at all explicit, and even though, moreover, it adds the expression *Umm al-kitāb* (Mother of the Book) to this twofold classification of verses, which complicates the situation even more (Text no. 50).

Text no. 50: Clear and allegorical verses

It is He who has sent down to you the Scripture,
in which are firm signs (*muḥkamāt*)
which are the Mother of the Book,
whilst there are others that are like one another (*mutashābihāt*).
(Qur. 3:7)

Diverse approaches have offered different solutions as to the meaning of this verse, especially regarding the words *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt*. The most frequent explanation is that they indicate clear/solid verses, on the one hand, and ambiguous/allegorical ones, on the other, opening the door to different interpretations that convey a plurality of meanings that embrace exegetical needs including the search for another meaning that goes beyond the literal sense. In this case, as well, there is no lack of multiple interpretations. In some cases, for example, the ambiguous/allegorical verses may refer to those that contain the mysterious letters (pp. 101–7), or, approaching a touchy topic in early Islamic theology, they may refer to the problematic interpretation of Qur'anic verses that include anthropomorphic details in the description of God, which have often been a central focus of debate. The meaning of the terms in verse Qur. 3:7 and its import regarding Qur'anic interpretation overall remain open to discussion.[110]

196–204; James A. Bellamy, "Ten Qur'ānic Emendations," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 31 (2006): 118–38. On the topic, see Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 4, 1470–85 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 2, 789–99).

110 On the Islamic interpretations, see Muḥammad b. Jarīr aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān*, ed. Ṣidqī J. ʿAṭṭār, 15 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2001), vol. 5, 188–202; Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 4, 1338 and 1358–92; vol. 5, 1865–72 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 2, 717, 726–42 and 1070–75); Villano, *La struttura binaria del Corano*, 219–58, contains an exegetical overview that discusses the concept. See Leah Kinberg, "*Muḥkamāt* and *Mutashābihāt* (Koran 3/7): Implications of a Koranic Pair of Terms in Medieval Exegesis," *Arabica* 35/2 (1988): 143–72; Michel Lagarde, "De l'ambiguïté (*mutašābih*) dans le Coran: tentatives d'explication des exégètes musulmans," *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 3 (1985): 45–62.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that the various arguments regarding the language of the Qur'an highlight particularities and matters of various types. Studies from different backgrounds have emphasized various aspects of language, lexicon, and grammar, all confronting the essential problem: the lack of a sufficient number of contemporary Arabic documents necessary to evaluate the particularities of the Arabic language in the Qur'an. Inevitably, said particularities tend to be considered, on the Muslim part, examples of the unique and divine character of the text, excluding any possible human intervention by Muḥammad. Qur'anic exegesis, though observing this confessional obligation, has never failed to bring these problems to light, and has always dedicated ample space to linguistic analyses. From the Western perspective, however, at least according to some lines of research, all of the Qur'an's particularities may denote critical points regarding the process of the final redaction of the complex sacred text of Islam.

2.3.2 Written *vs.* oral, rhyme and assonance

One of the central questions regarding the Qur'anic work, which also reflects the meanings connected to the term *Qurʾān*, is its oral and/or written nature. The twofold significance of the recited or read word also applies to the concept of the revelation overall and for the means of communication. Over time, this has encouraged reflection on the fact that some aspects of the Qur'anic text should be considered in relation to forms of oral communication. For example, oral composition may have influenced the articulation of the discourse and even the choice of themes, favoring informal, repetitive communication, which uses techniques that derive from recitation and orality. Along these lines, it is worth remembering the Islamic tradition that describes the progression of the revelation through the years and the interventions communicated through the Prophet in this manner.

There is, ultimately, a fundamental difference between the Qur'an possessed by Muslims during the lifetime of Muḥammad up until his death and the one used after the stabilization of the text as a codex carried out by ʿUthmān (pp. 153–62). While the latter was a recited book read more frequently with the support of the written form, the former was a communication that occurred more often in oral form and that, in its evolution, was first memorized, and progressively grew with the succession and accumulation of individual revelations.

In this regard, and to answer the questions that arose on account of this condition, some studies point out the elements in the text that demonstrate this fundamentally oral-formulaic character by examining the different versions of

similar stores that are repeated in the Qur'an. For example, in the case of the analysis of the story of Adam and Iblīs, also carried out with the aid of IT tools, Andrew G. Bannister applied the criteria and methods of analysis of formulas, cliches, and themes in the oral tradition that may be traced back to Milman Parry (d. 1935) and Albert B. Lord (d. 1991). His ultimate goal was to highlight the fundamentally oral nature of the Qur'anic message, demonstrated by the abundance of formulas that were repeated and only slightly modified, in a process of reutilization of similar materials in different contexts, which is at the base of oral communication. One of these hypotheses is a prelude to the concept of an oral Qur'an, initially of an almost oracular nature but then becoming more and more prophetic-mantic in nature.

This characteristic is bound to the evaluation, carried out by other studies, of the versions of stories and similar themes, in terms of an almost exegetical evolution within the Qur'an. That is, the sacred text could contain signs of a progressive construction, which gradually introduces novelties regarding what was revealed earlier and what was implicitly reflected, according to the typical modalities of oral communication. In this manner, the revelations could have fulfilled various functions of the communicative act: a liturgical function and a concomitant didactic objective through a text that is recited and aesthetically advanced. Even the supposed ring-like or circular structure of the suras, cited previously as a feature highlighted in connection with the unity of the suras (p. 91), may represent another characteristic of oral performance.[111]

A cultural fact that has been brought to light by the Islamic tradition in its entirety and that can be observed in the terminology itself is that of an indisputable primacy of the recited form, communicated orally, as compared to its written form. The sacred Islamic scripture is, in every respect, a word that is recited before being written, and its natural and authoritative preservation passes, first, through the oral form. This oral nature is expressed in the later disciplines connected to psalmodic interpretation and recitation (*tajwīd*, pp. 225–26) or, since

111 Andrew G. Bannister, *An Oral-Formulaic Study of the Qur'ān* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2014); on the theme of the oral and formulaic character of the Qur'an, see Alan Dundes, *Fables of the Ancients? Folklore in the Qur'an* (Lanham, MD-Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003). On the general question of the oral character of the revelation, see Andreas Kellermann, "Die 'mündlichkeit' des Koran. Eine forschungsgeschichtliches Problem der Arabistik," *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft* 5 (1955): 1–33; Knight, "Oral Features of the Qur'ān" is based on the analysis of the ring-like structure of the Sura of Joseph (no. 12); see also Richard C. Martin, "Understanding the Qur'an in Text and Context," *History of Religions* 21/4 (1982): 362–84; Alfred-Louis de Premare, "La constitution des écritures islamiques dans l'histoire," in *al-Kitāb. La sacralité du texte dans le monde de l'Islam*, ed. D. De Smet, G. De Callataÿ and J.M.F. van Reeth, 179.

the beginning, in piety and ritual practices, and in every expression of Islamic life in which the recited Qur'anic word plays an irreplaceable, unique role.

Text no. 51: The recitation

Those who disbelieve say,
'Why has the Recitation not been sent down to him all at once?'
[We have sent it down] thus that We may strengthen your heart by it,
and We have sent it down distinctly. (Qur. 25:32)

The character of the text, recited before being written down, alluded to in the text itself (Text no. 51), has direct implications because of factors related to the history of the formation and preservation of the Qur'an. Islamic tradition has preserved various narrations regarding the role of the first generation of compilers or memorizers (*ḥuffāẓ*) of the Qur'an, complexly related to the process of the first redaction (pp. 153–54). From this perspective, a technical apparatus has been defined and elaborated in order to establish the modalities and reliability of the transmission of the recollection of the Qur'anic verses, by analogy with the *ḥadīth* that, inevitably, reflect later needs of an exegetical and formal nature, rather than the need to describe faithfully the reality of Qur'anic transmission.[112]

Closely connected to its oral communication no less than to its literary characteristics, is the presence, in most of the texts, of rhyme that connects verses of the same sura in passages of different lengths. However, the long verses, consisting of dozens and dozens of words, from the suras at the beginning of the Qur'an are quite different from those at the end of it, which are much shorter, containing only a few words. Such a diversity is significantly emphasized by the call of the rhyme at the end of the verse, which keeps the beat and cadence of the recitation. The Qur'an is not poetry, and it does not resemble the known poetic forms from the pre-Islamic period or the early Islamic period.

112 Memorization (*ḥifẓ*) is a collective duty (*farḍ kifāya*). From this the traditional meaning is derived, which gives ample space to recitation and that defines, by a meticulous casuistry, the modalities of the pronunciation and recitation of each verse and therefore of the whole Qur'an. See Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 2, 632–56 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 1, 353–67). On the various lists regarding the Companions particularly well-versed in memorization, together with the experts from the second generation, see Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 2, 458–82 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 1, 254–62). On the value of sound and its influence on the style and usage of the text, see Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, 162–95.

The same Qur'anic text expresses, more than once, an aversion to poetry, with the specific intent to warn those who hear the revelation received by Muḥammad against associating it in any way with the poetic word (Text no. 52).[113]

Text no. 52: On poets and poetry

We have not taught him poetry.
That is not proper for him.
This is only a reminder and a recitation that is clear. (Qur. 36:69)
And there are the poets,
who are followed by those who go astray.
Have you not seen [how] they wander in every valley,
And [how] they say what they do not do? (Qur. 26:224–226)

The Arab tradition, while it has only been affirmed and attested to since the Islamic period, demonstrates the use of rhyme and assonance in a literary form called *sajʿ*, used by soothsayers and diviners in pre-Islamic Arabia. The Islamic exegetical tradition has debated, at length, whether or not the Qur'an was revealed in *sajʿ*. This evaluation has fluctuated on the basis of markedly theological considerations between the God's confirmed, unlimited, omnipotent capacity to create what He wants in whatever form He wishes, and the dogma of infallibility that sees the limitation of the divine message to an established human form, historically ascertained, as a limit to this possibility.

113 J. J. Gluck, "Is There Poetry in the Qur'an?" *Semitics* 8 (1982): 43–89; Klar, "Text-Critical Approaches to Sura Structure. Part One," 16–17: the impact of rhyme in the Qur'an in the study of the text must still be fully evaluated and discussed. According to Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*, a change in rhyme corresponds to a change in theme. While the Qur'an distances itself from this, there are definitions of the Qur'anic style as "poetic," examining, to corroborate such a definition, correlated disciplines such as linguistics and comparative literature. Finally, with particular attention to the recent success of cognitive studies, see Thomas Hoffmann, *The Poetic Qur'ān. Studies on Qur'ānic Poeticity* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007); Thomas Hoffmann, "Ritual Poeticity in the Qur'an: Family Resemblances, Features, Functions and Appraisals," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 6/2 (2004): 35–55. The relationship between the Qur'an and Arabic poetry in the Sura of the Poets (no. 26) has been subject to various, even polemical, interventions, with contrasting points of view by Irfan Shahid and Michael Zwettler on which see, above all, Irfan Shahid, "Another Contribution to Koranic Exegesis. The Sūra of the Poets (XXVI)," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 14/1 (1983): 1–21; Michael Zwettler, "The Sūra of the Poets: Final Conclusions?" *Journal of Arabic Literature* 38/2 (2007): 111–66. On the theme of the relationship between poetry and the Qur'an, see also the less convincing Richard Serrano, *Qur'ān and the Lyric Imperative* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), which aims, in its intent, to demonstrate the constructive tension regarding the relationship between poetry and the Qur'anic word. The use of poetry for exegetical interpretation is also a subject of debate. See Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 3, 847–903 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 1, 426–68).

Saj' is defined as prose (*nathr*) divided into phrases that end with a rhyme, and whose rhythmic component is not absent. In light of this, the equivalence between the verses of the Qur'anic revelation and *saj'* is not always simple to assess, given their differences and varieties. According to some studies, only part of the Qur'an can be connected with *saj'*, especially in the case of short verses, below a set number of words, that circumscribe *saj'* units determined by rhythm and subject matter.

The actual connection between *saj'* and the Qur'an is further complicated by the fact that only 86% of more than six thousand verses ends in a rhyme, and not everything that rhymes corresponds to *saj'* as defined by the Arab tradition. In contrast, only suras no. 106 and no. 110 do not contain any proper rhymes, while all the others have easily recognizable rhyming sections in which the rhyme is a distinctive characteristic of their form, in accordance with specific features and slips between assonance and acceptable recurring forms in the Arabic language. All of this determines and influences, in a stringent and constant manner, the literary form of the Qur'an. It is an aspect that must be considered central in connection with the expression and the modalities of communication of the contents, as well as for the influence that these have on the lexicon.[114]

Later Islamic historiography reveals that Muḥammad's contemporaries accused him of reciting and diffusing texts, the Qur'anic verses, that had to do with poetry, even though the juxtaposition was actually incorrect. The affinity of the text of the Qur'an with rhymed prose like *saj'* was not less problematic,

114 See, above all, Devin J. Stewart, "*Saj'* in the Qur'ān. Prosody and Structure," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 21/2 (1990): 101–39. The reference to the rhyme may have, in some cases, determined the use of poetic license and also influenced the lexicon, see Devin J. Stewart, "Poetic Licence and the Qur'anic Names of Hell: The Treatment of Cognate Substitution in al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī's Qur'anic Lexicon," in *The Meaning of the Word. Lexicology and Qur'anic Exegesis*, ed. Stephen R. Burge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 195–253; Friedrun R. Müller, *Untersuchungen zur Reimprosa im Koran* (Bonn: Selbstverlag des Orientalischen Seminars der Universität, 1969); David A. Cassels, "Near-Rhyme and Its Occurrence in the Qur'ān," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 28/2 (1983): 303–10; Soraya M. Hajjaji-Jarrah, "The Enchantment of Reading: Sound, Meaning, and Expression in *Sūrat al-'Ādiyāt*," in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning*, ed. Issa J. Boullata, 228–51. See the definition in Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 28 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. 1, 35): the Qur'an is more rhetoric than poetry. On the various rhymes encountered in the various suras, see Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 38–39 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. 1, 31–32). On the importance of the rhymes for the lexicon and for the form of the Qur'an, see, for example, Shawkat M. Toorawa, "*Sūrat Maryam* (Q. 19): Lexicon, Lexical Echoes, English Translation," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 13/1 (2011): 25–78; Shawkat M. Toorawa, "Hapless Hapaxes and Luckless Rhymes: The Qur'an as Literature," *Religion & Literature* 41 (2009): 221–27.

and was the object of criticism and different evaluations by the same Muslim commentators. These divergences reflect an evident fact, which is that not all the Qur'anic verses are rhymed, but that different exegetical needs aim to avoid recognition of any possible connection with human stylistic features, with the equally legitimate consideration that the perfection of the divine word and its capacity to attract interest also must pass through the recognizability of said perfection by the listeners.[115]

2.3.3 Literary forms

The pericopes that make up the suras, the suras themselves, and the Qur'anic text overall, contain literary forms that make the text heterogeneous and modulated on registers that are, among themselves, quite diverse. The Qur'anic text is made up of various types of discourse aimed at conveying the revelation in distinctive ways, differing from each other. Even in this case, the difference between the sequences of text originated not only from the variety stemming from longer and shorter suras, but also from the succession of different forms, with different functions, that spans the entire text. The actual interplay between the people involved in the discourse – God in the first person or in another manner, and the mirror of His privileged interlocutor, the Prophet Muḥammad, but also, figuratively, every person and all of humanity – builds a discourse that is often direct, which fully uses the rhetorical possibilities of a text that aims to be imperative, exhortative, and rarely descriptive, alternating registers often without interruption.

An initial integral survey of the literary forms of the Qur'an was only recently carried out. In particular, Karim Samji put the principles of form criticism (*Formgeschichte*) to the test, as they were defined first in relation to the Psalms, by Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932), and by his emulators. Samji analyzed the literary genres contained in the Qur'an through the identification of formulas, their collocation, and

115 Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 5, 1787–93 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 2, 1018–22). On the relationship with poetry and, at the same time, the aesthetic and poetic quality of the Qur'an, see Navid Kermani, *God Is Beautiful. The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran*, trans. Tony Crawford (Cambridge–Malden, MA: Polity, 2015; or. ed. *Gott ist schön. Das ästhetische Erleben des Koran*, München: C.H. Beck, 1999), 252–92. On the Qur'an, the (pre-Islamic) poetry, and poetic style, see, especially, Thomas Bauer, "The Relevance of Early Arabic Poetry for Qur'anic Studies Including Observations on *Kull* and on Q 22:27, 26:225, and 52:31," in *The Qur'ān in Context. Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, ed. A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai and M. Marx, 699–732; Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity*, 419–52.

the various forms they adopt in passages of the text. The genres he identified in the Qur'anic text are, in order: prayer, liturgy, wisdom, narration, proclamation and, finally, regulations. Overall, these categories identify and comprehensively outline the types of discourse without touching on considerations regarding the chronology of the text; therefore, they are devoid of the temptation to connect the succession of genres to different phases of Muḥammad's preaching.[116]

The identification of genres, although along different lines compared to the aforementioned one, is based on an analysis of the contents and, even more so, on the identification of formulas or markers, with the aim of identifying specific functions of the revealed word and, at the same time, the condition of those who receive the divine message. The genre of prayer, for example, directly recalls the function of the Opening sura (pp. 6–7), which is made up of a formula of divine glorification for liturgical use (vv. 1–4) followed by a prayer of invocation in verses 5–7. Other prayers introduced by invocations recur in other passages of the Qur'an and function as supplications, blessings, praises, or are of an apotropaic nature, as in the last two suras of the Qur'an (nos. 113, 114) (Text no. 53). In some cases, the prayers are uttered by prophetic figures in the Qur'anic narratives.

Various terms and expressions mark the beginning of a passage with these characteristics, such as *rabbanā* ("our Lord," Qur. 2:286, *passim*), *rabbi* ("my Lord," Qur. 2:126, *passim*) or *Allāhumma* ("O God," Qur. 3:26, *passim*). Some passages become actual hymns, such as the Throne Verse (Qur. 2:255) (Text no. 53), the entire Sura of the Merciful (no. 55), the passages introduced, for example, by *subḥāna* ("Glory," Qur. 2:32, *passim*) or, in other cases, the expressions cited previously with *rabb* "Lord," and so on. The overall result is a constant presence, in almost all the suras, of passages and paragraphs that convey messages of praise to God in the form of prayer.[117]

116 Karim Samji, *The Qur'ān. A Form-Critical History* (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2018); on other discussions regarding the literary forms in the Qur'an, see also Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity*, 163–99; Alfred-Louis De Prémare, *Aux origines du Coran; questions d'hier, approches d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Téraèdre, 2004), 35–46; Dye, "Le corpus coranique," 790–99; Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, 99–161. Adam Flowers, "Reconsidering Qur'anic Genre," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 20/2 (2018): 19–46, instead, analyzes the Qur'an and highlights the presumed literary genres that appear in the suras. On the use of methods of the *Formgeschichte* in other historical-religious areas as to the question of the redaction and dating of the Qur'an, such as in Wansbrough's studies, see Stewart's criticism in Devin Stewart, "Reflections on the State of Art in Western Qur'ānic Studies," 17–19.

117 On the hymns in the suras at the end of the Qur'an, see Michael A. Sells, "A Literary Approach to the Hymnic Sūras of the Qur'ān: Spirit, Gender, and Aural Intertextuality," in

Text no. 53: Sura 113, Sura 114, and The Throne Verse

In the name of the Merciful and Compassionate God.
Say, 'I seek refuge in the Lord of the daybreak
From the evil of what He has created,
From the evil of a darkness when it envelops,
From the evil of the women who blow on knots,
From the evil of an envious man when he is envious.' (sura 113)
In the name of the Merciful and Compassionate God.
Say, 'I seek refuge with the Lord of men
The King of men,
The God of men,
From the evil of a slinking whisperer,
Who whispers into the bosoms of men
– of *Jinn* and men.' (sura 114)
God.
There is no god but Him,
the Living, the Eternal.
Neither slumber nor sleep seize Him.
To Him belongs all that is in the heavens
and all that is on earth.
Who is there who intercedes with Him,
save by His permission?
He knows what is before them and what is after them,
while they encompass none of His knowledge
apart from that which He wishes.
His throne extends over the heavens and the earth,
and He is not tired by guarding them.
He is the Exalted and the Mighty. (Qur. 2:255)

Another important genre regards the narrations introduced by formulas such as *ya-sʾalūnaka* ("They will ask you," Qur. 18:83, passim), or paragraphs introduced by *(wa-)idh* ("And when," Qur. 2:30, 34, *passim*). These formulas mark the transition from a preceding section in a sura and the beginning of a story that supports the Prophet and exemplifies God's mercy and guidance. In these parts, we find the narrations that feature the Israelites and the prophets from Biblical tradition (pp. 27–32).

Other Qur'anic passages can be identified as sermons or instructional texts with various functions. In this case, the marker that introduces them, with a particular style, is the expression *yā-ayyuhā lladhīna āmanū* ("O you who believe," Qur. 2:153, 264, *passim*), which recalls the community of believers to

Literary Structures of Religious Meaning, ed. I.J. Boullata, 3–25. On the various literary styles in the Qur'an, see also Gustav Richter, *Der Sprachstil des Koran*, ed. by Otto Spies (Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1940).

whom injunctions regarding defined religious practices (for example, Qur. 4:43 on purity) are revealed, as well as more generic injunctions regarding faith (for example, Qur. 2:208). Other genres are just as closely connected to recognizable formulas that introduce said genres, such as proclamations of an oracular nature, which we find in the passages that include oaths (p. 123). The Qur'anic sequences introduced by *wayl*^{un} *li-* ("Woe to," Qur. 14:2, *passim*) are the mirror image of these formulas and oaths, curses of a polemical and contrastive character that serve to construct the discourse and convey its message.

The forms of the discourse and the literary genres do not necessarily overlap homogeneously with the contents that we discussed earlier (pp. 6–60), even though some genres are more characteristic of certain themes, as in the case of the narration of prophetic stories. Such a variety highlights the plurality of registers with which the authorial voice, in the different ways in which it is expressed (from the first to the third person), communicates contents using a variety of genres that is peculiar in a single text not great in size. Only a few more recent studies, cited previously, have begun to analyze these genres based on formulas and expressions used in order to have greater documentary support in the analysis of the Qur'an in its entirety.

The issue regarding the dating of the genres and the themes, in the overall structure of twenty-two years of prophetic mission is, however, the object of analysis closely linked to the assumptions regarding the acceptability or lack thereof of the narrative framework of Muḥammad's life and the Islamic exegesis and, therefore, a forum for radically different and contrasting responses.

2.3.4 Style, oaths, and dramatization

As we have already stated several times, the complex nature of the Qur'anic text is a peculiar matter. Alongside language, means of communication, and literary form, an element of no small importance is the style of the Qur'anic paragraphs. God, the absolute protagonist of the Qur'anic text, mainly speaks in the first person, while the Qur'an includes different styles and a variety of uses of its own text/pronouncements. God is evoked even in the third person, giving a completely different meaning to the Qur'anic text and to those who receive it. The variety of registers is connected to all of the aspects described up until this point, but also to varied stylistic choices that often, though not always, correspond to certain genres and topics addressed. Inevitably, the questions regard the differences between shorter suras placed at the end of the Qur'an, considered older by the classical chronologies, and those that are longer and more extensive, considered to have been revealed during the Medinan period of

Muḥammad's mission. The overlap of styles and the presumed chronology of the Qur'an is not, however, mechanical, and the Qur'an still conserves, within the same suras, a variety of registers that are one of its most evident characteristics. As is the case for the literary genres, each evaluation regarding style and chronology must be considered problematic and conjectural.[118]

The Qur'an itself already shows awareness of its own originality and even excellence in a more general inclination towards self-referentiality, a unique characteristic of the Qur'an that also emphasizes its style.[119] In this respect, the Qur'anic text already adopts a clear position to distinguish its own style and language from that which was evidently considered similar: it is affirmed in a peremptory and explicit manner that Muḥammad is absolutely not a soothsayer (*kāhin*) and that, consequently, the revelation has nothing to do with pre-Islamic divination. Along the same lines are the affirmations that Muḥammad was neither a poet nor a man possessed by *jinn* (Text no. 54).

Text no. 54: Muḥammad was neither a poet nor possessed

So give the reminder.
By the grace of your Lord you are not a soothsayer nor one possessed. (Qur. 52:29)
It is the speech of a noble messenger.
It is not the speech of a poet
– little you believe –
Nor is it the speech of a soothsayer
– little you are reminded –
[It is] a revelation from the Lord of all beings. (Qur. 69:40–43)

Starting from these assertions that qualify the Qur'anic text, the exegetical tradition has analyzed Qur'anic language and style, highlighting the characteristics and therefore the adherence to the stylistic elements that bring to light an Arabic prose of particular literary complexity and value. The function of this analysis is obviously that of highlighting the unique excellence of the Qur'anic text and, therefore, its perfection in this sphere as well. This theme is of direct

118 See Alan Jones, "The Qur'ān in the Light of Earlier Arabic Prose," *University Lectures in Islamic Studies* 1 (1997): 67–83, on the various parallel styles with literary evidence from the first Islamic period. On the peculiarities of the Qur'anic style and its analysis, see Flowers, "Reconsidering Qur'anic Genre"; Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, 224–55. Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity*, 347–78, discusses the difference in styles between the Qur'an and the Bible with a useful analysis on the peculiarity of Qur'anic styles.

119 The question has recently been the object of a profound and systematic analysis by Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau, who demonstrates that the Qur'an is, in terms of style and rhetoric, the sacred, self-referential text *par excellence*: Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même*. On this topic, see also the essays collected in Stefan Wild, ed., *Self-Referentiality in the Qur'ān* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006).

interest to apologetics, and is one of the foundations upon which the dogma of inimitability (*iʿjāz*) of the Qur'an was developed, for its literary excellence and unfathomable value as a divine utterance (pp. 196–200). The chapters of Suyūṭī's *Itqān* that are dedicated to *hysteron proteron*, or to texts of general or specific scope, for example, make evident, overall, the variety of Qur'anic language analyzed with this explicit aim.[120]

There are many presumed peculiarities regarding Qur'anic style. One of the most evident is the recurring presence of paragraphs introduced by or made up of oath formulas. The frequency of these formulas renders it one of the most prominent styles of the Qur'anic text, above all in shorter and more urgent revelations. Studies have highlighted the different modalities of these oaths, such as oaths sworn by places or objects, celestial phenomena, or day or night, as well as their function within the specific passages of the revelation in which they are included, as well as the oracular style that could be connected to practices of the same type that were known in the Arabian Peninsula before the advent of Islam (Text no. 55).

Text no. 55: Oaths

By the figs and olives,
By Mount Sinai,
By this secure territory. (Qur. 95:1–3)
By the night when it spreads its cover,
By the day when it shines in splendour,
And that which has created male and female. (Qur. 92:1–3)
No! I swear by the sites of the stars
– and it is a mighty oath if only you knew. (Qur. 56:75–76)
By God, I shall outwit your idols after you turn your backs and depart.' (Qur. 21:57)

The function of these oath formulas is the object of various interpretations, which regard their use at the beginning of many early suras. The possibility of parallel pre-Islamic cultures is one of the most frequent hypotheses, although of problematic historical accuracy. The frequency of the use of formulas of oath with a connection to natural phenomena, for example, may highlight a condition of urgency that emerges from certain short, Qur'anic suras and that reinforces the attempt to communicate the imminence of dramatic events. The same Qur'anic exegesis has also underscored the frequency and complexity of the Qur'anic oaths, identifying different types according to the purposes and images utilized.[121]

120 Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 4, 1399–434 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 2, 745–67).

121 See G.R. Smith, "Oaths in the Qur'ān," *Semitics* 1 (1970): 126–56; Zakyi M. Ibrahim, "Oaths in the Qur'ān: Bint al-Shāṭiʾ's Literary Contribution," *Islamic Culture* 48/4 (2009): 475–98; Angelika Neuwirth, "Images and Metaphors in the Introductory Sections of the Makkan *Sūras*," in

The assertive power of the Qur'anic text, which emerges from the direct voice of God and from the Prophet's voice in the second person, is made even more clear by the often dramatised construction of the contents that the revelation communicates. The most frequent dialogues are those that occur in narrative passages that describe events involving patriarchs and prophets, especially between the prophet and the people, and therefore between God and the prophets. The dramatic construction of many of these stories determines that the meaning is communicated through the direct discourse of the protagonists in a crescendo that affects the plot of the stories that are not narrated, but, at most, evoked. This has decisively influenced the contents of the text, in that complete descriptions of what is mentioned or told are lacking, and, if details are given, they are not organized in an organic manner. The direct discourse, in many narrative passages, inspires, first, the homiletic and moral meaning rather than the historical one. Furthermore, the continuously polemical tone that emerges from all these passages, and from those dramatically constructed, determines a climate of debate and tension that rarely diminishes (see text no. 56).[122]

Text no. 56: From the Sura of Joseph (n. 12)

They said, 'Father, how is it that you do not trust us with Joseph?
We really are his sincere well-wishers.
Send him with us tomorrow,
and he can enjoy himself and play.
We shall watch over him.'
He said, 'It grieves me that you should take him out.
I fear that a wolf may eat him
whilst you are paying him no attention.'
They said, 'If a wolf can eat him
when there is a group of us,
in that case we are losers.'

Approaches to the Qur'ān, ed. G.R. Hawting and A.A. Shareef, 3–36; Angelika Neuwirth, "Der Horizont der Offenbarung: Zur Relevanz der einleitenden Schwurserien für die Suren der frühmekkanischen Zeit," in *Gottes ist der Orient, Gottes ist der Okzident. Festchrift für Abdoljavad Falaturi*, ed. Udo Tworuschka (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1991), 3–39. Stewart, "Mysterious Letters," 326–27, highlights that the oaths in the Qur'an pertain to the oracular genre, referring to the pronouncements of pre-Islamic diviners, which include references to natural phenomena; Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 5, 1945–53 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 2, 1121–26).

122 Mustansir Mir, "Dialogue in the Qur'an," *Religion and Literature* 24/1 (1992): 1–22; cf. Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an,* chapter "The Dynamic of the Qur'anic Discourse"; on the importance of the dialogue in the organization of the Qur'anic style, see Anthony H. Johns, "The Quranic Presentation of the Joseph Story: Naturalistic or Formulaic Language?" in *Approaches to the Qur'ān*, ed. G.R. Hawting and A.-K. A. Shareef, 37–70.

So when they had taken him off
and agreed to put him in the bottom of a pit;
and We revealed to him,
'You will tell them about this affair of theirs
when they are unaware [of who you are].'
And [when] they came to their father in the evening, weeping,
They said, 'Father, we were racing against one another,
and we left Joseph with our things;
and the wolf ate him.
But you will not believe us,
even though we are telling the truth.' (Qur. 12:11–17)

Directly connected to dramatization is the diversified use of pronouns and person in the divine message. In most cases, the second-person singular address, more or less clarified, represents God's direct discourse with his receiver, that is, the Prophet, in the first person, or the believer, or humankind in general. As previously mentioned, however, there is no lack of different forms in which the third or first person, either singular or plural, subverts the situation and paints a different picture of the contents transmitted. Everything is rendered even more opaque by the systematic absence of explicit indications as to the recipients of the revelation.

Emblematic of this situation is the use of imperatives in the singular form (the use of the imperative *qul* "say" is typical), which the later exegetical literature interprets as commands addressed to the Prophet but which are not unequivocally so. These imperatives generally introduce maxims that are limited and well-defined by the scripture itself when, for example, God instructs the messenger and prophet to converse with his contemporaries. There are over three hundred passages of this type in the Qur'an, which sometimes appear alone and other times in lengthy sequences (Text no. 57).[123]

Text no. 57: Imperatives introducing verses

Say, 'Call to God or call to the Merciful.
Whichever you call to is possessed of the fairest names.

123 Madigan, *The Qur'ān's Self-Image*, 64: *qul* appears 323 times and another 23 in other forms of the same verb. Stewart, "Mysterious Letters," 329: this use of *qul* should be interpreted in relation, he hypothesizes, to pre-Islamic conventions of poets and soothsayers to introduce and refer to texts and words as inspired by genies and spirits, and presented in this manner as a sign of mantic authority. On the use of various persons in the discourse, see the considerations by De Prémare, *Aux origines du Coran*, 104–6, according to whom the use of pronouns is disarming and complicated. It must be added that one of the most frequent types of variants found in the manuscripts and in the variant readings (*qirāʾāt*) is the change in person between you (plural) and they or between your (plural) and their.

Do not be loud in your prayer, nor hushed in it.
Seek a way between that.'
And say, 'Praise belongs to God,
who has not taken to himself a son
and who has no partner in sovereignty
nor any protector because He is humble.'
Magnify him. (Qur. 17:110–11)
Say, 'I am only a mortal like you.
It has been revealed to me
that your god is One God.
Take the straight path to Him
and seek His forgiveness.
Woe to those who associate partners with God. (Qur. 41:6)
Say, 'We believe in God and in what was revealed to us
and in what was revealed to Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob and the tribes,
and in what was given to Moses and Jesus
and in what was given to the prophets from their Lord. (Qur. 2:136)

The frequency of the first person that gives narrative voice to God and the sudden slip into other persons and other modes and styles of addressing his interlocutor, Muḥammad, contribute to a heightened feeling of tension and communicative urgency that emerges especially in the shorter suras but also permeates the entire text. Much of Qur'anic discourse is, moreover, counter-discourse. It builds and affirms through the negation of adversaries and the affirmation of that which they themselves would like to negate, constructing power relations based on a polemical confrontation created both by content as well as by modes of discourse. From this point of view, it should not be underestimated that in the variety of registers and of dramatic construction there is also a tendency towards lighter tones that are even ironic and not easily understood but that enhance the stylistic variety of the Qur'anic text.[124]

124 Mehdi Azaiez, *Le contre-discours coranique* (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2015); on the polemical in the Qur'an, see Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 5, 1954–62 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 2, 1127–33). Alongside this, the presence of various registers should not be underestimated. This is discussed by Mustansir Mir ("Humor in the Qur'ān," *The Muslim World* 81/3–4 (1991): 179–93; "Irony in the Qur'ān. A Study of the Story of Joseph," in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning*, ed. I.J. Boullata, 173–87), who stresses that many passages of stories and narrations contained in the Qur'an can be interpreted as humorous or ironic, something that may be deduced or inferred from the situations described in the narratives.

2.3.5 Rhetorical forms

The evaluation of all the particularities of language and the use of certain literary forms, as previously stated, touches directly on the confessional approach to the Qur'an as a unitary text and one of unique status. The Islamic analyses affirm, for this purpose, that the passages of the revelation are bound in a composite and complex form, even regarding the use of certain figures of speech to communicate the divine message. The use of certain figures of speech is the subject of speculation that highlights the complexity of a text that presents questions to Muslims and experts of all orientations, similarly to and possibly more than the variety of language, form, and style. Analysis of the Qur'an's rhetorical qualities and characteristics is inevitably conditioned by centuries of Qur'anic exegesis and of the cult of the Qur'anic text. Furthermore, speaking of the Qur'an in terms of excellence or the lack thereof has, unfortunately, little to do with the initial reception in the moment when it was revealed and, therefore, with the evaluation that contemporaries could have made regarding the Qur'an's richness of language and rhetorical excellence.

One of the most evident aspects in this area regards the frequent use of similes and metaphors in the Qur'an, which actually constitute a regular approach in the Qur'anic text in constructing all types of discourse. The use of metaphors (*istiʿāra*) invigorates the modalities of a dramatization based on direct discourse with imaginative references. The metaphors in particular are even more frequent than the similes. There are hundreds, and they can be connected, for the most part, to common usages of the language more than being the product of a novelty introduced by the Qur'an.

Significant and noteworthy, in this regard, is the prevalence of commercial terminology and images used to describe the religious sphere, especially in the realm of eschatology (pp. 41–45). References to the sense organs to describe the condition of those who do not have faith is frequent: the non-believers are deaf, unable to hear, blind, unable to see; they cannot discern the truth; they have veils over their hearts, their ears are heavy; they live in darkness since, by contrast, the revelation is a guide and a light, and the task of the messenger is to lead man from darkness towards the light (Text no. 58).

Text no. 58: Metaphors

The parallel to them is that of those who light a fire,
and when it lights up all around them
God takes away their light and leaves them in darkness, unable to see –
Deaf, dumb and blind, they do not return. (Qur. 2:17–18)
Say, 'If the sea were ink for the words of my Lord,

the sea would be exhausted
before the Words of my Lord are exhausted,
even if We were to bring its like as a [further] supply. (Qur. 18:109)
On the day on which men are like scattered moths,
And the mountains are like carded wool. (Qur. 101:4–5)
Those who take for themselves patrons
to the exclusion of God
are like the spider that takes for itself a house.
The frailest of [all] houses is that of the spider,
if they did but know. (Qur. 29:41)

Analogical references or similitudes invoking concrete elements that refer to the realia of the Arabian Peninsula permeate the text of the Qur'an, which aims to make itself understandable through a collection of direct and not abstract cultural references. Many of these reflect the experience of life in the desert, either realistically or ideally, which recalls the settings of pre-Islamic poetry. Only when a simile expands into allegory or a parable does it tend to distance itself from actual experience.[125]

Another theme that has generated a consistent exegetical discussion regards the use of figurative expressions (*majāz*) in the Qur'an. The contents of the Qur'an present expressions of this type in an unequivocal manner, and this has generated a later exegetical discussion that attempted to distinguish, for various reasons and also on account of their Islamic legal implications, between passages and expressions that express a literal sense and others that should be interpreted in a non-literal sense instead. This issue recalls the one mentioned in Qur. 3:7, regarding the division between literal and figurative or allegorical verses (p. 112), but in this case, it touches more directly on the rhetorical qualities and excellence of Qur'anic language than on the nature of the meanings conveyed.

125 Moses Sister, "Metaphern und Vergleiche im Koran" (PhD diss., Berlin 1931); Toufic Sabbagh, *La Métaphore dans le Coran* (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1943); Thomas Hoffmann, "*Taste my Punishment and My Warnings* (Q. 54:39): On the Torments of Tantalus and Other Painful Metaphors of Taste in the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 21/1 (2019): 1–20; Theodor Lohmann, "Die Gleichnisreden Mohammeds im Koran," *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientforschung* 12 (1966): 75–118 and 241–87; Andrew Rippin, "The Poetics of Qur'ānic Punning," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 57 (1994): 193–207. Also see the exegetical Muslim definitions collected in Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 4, 1535–55, 1358–92 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 2, 835–50); Esad Duraković, *The Poetics of Ancient and Classical Arabic Literature: Orientology*, trans. Amila Karahasanović (London–New York: Routledge, 2015), 118–48, on the Qur'anic metaphor within a literary study. On the utility of the theory of speech genres for interpretation of the Qur'an, see Devin Stewart, "Speech Genres and Interpretation of the Qur'an," *Religions* 12/7 (2021): 529, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070529.

The problem of the possible consequent ambiguity that such a distinction generates did not escape the Muslim interpreters and accordingly created much more limited views, in the name of the theological principle that the divine word, by definition, could not lead to ambiguities. In response to this comprehensible affirmation, a certain Islamic exegetical tradition, including as-Suyūṭī and many other scholars before him, argued that it was a false problem, since denying the use of words in a figurative sense or with a plurality of meanings was tantamount to denying a foundational aspect of the beauty and grandeur of the Qur'anic text. They thus recognized the full legitimacy and inclusion among the exegetical disciplines of works dedicated to *Majāz al-Qurʾān*, whose meaning in the earliest works in the genre is, however, controversial and debated in Western studies which acknowledge that the term *majāz* can take on the more generic sense of an exegetical explanation or a gloss rather than the meaning it later acquired, that of a figurative expression.[126]

Even the theme of the repetitions contained in the Qur'an has been the subject of the most varied interpretations and a central point from which diametrically opposed viewpoints arose. For some, the presence of identical or very similar passages indicated the likelihood of a subsequent redaction that included, because of a commitment to the preservation of documents, several similar versions of what had originally been a single revelation. The explanation of those who defend the substantial unity of the Qur'anic text is different and considers, from a literary or historical viewpoint, the presence of very similar passages as the product of progressive growth through different revelations on the same topics.

126 See Maʿmar b. al-Muthannā Abū ʿUbayda, *Majāz al-Qurʾān*, 2 vols., ed. Fuat Sezgin (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1954–62); Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 4, 1507–34 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 2, 816–34). Among the studies dedicated to the topic, see Nora Schmidt, *Philologische Kommentarkulturen. Abū ʿUbaidas Maǧāz al-Qur'ān im Licht spätantiken Exegesewissens* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016), which underscores the intercultural and inter-confessional breadth of the question of *Majāz al-Qurʾān* in the work of Abū ʿUbayda and, therefore, at the origin of the exegesis of a philological nature of the Qur'an. See also, above all in exegetical terms, John Wansbrough, "*Majāz al-Qur'ān*: Periphrastic Exegesis," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 33/2 (1970): 247–66; Ella Almagor, "The Early Meaning of *Majāz* and the Nature of Abû ʿUbayda's Exegesis," in *Studia Orientalia Memoriae D.H. Baneth Dedicata*, ed. Joshua Blau (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1979), 307–26; Wolfhart Heinrichs, "On the Genesis of the *Ḥaqīqa-Majāz* Dichotomy," *Studia Islamica* 59 (1984): 111–40; Kamal Abu-Deeb, "Studies in the *Majāz* and Metaphorical Language of the Qur'ān: Abū ʿUbayda and al-Sharīf al-Raḍī," in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning*, ed. I.J. Boullata, 310–53. The discussion of the peculiarities of the Qur'anic text also includes a definition of the passages that convey an explicit sense and those that convey an implicit sense.

According to a line of interpretation whose most important supporter is Angelika Neuwirth, similar passages, or those dedicated to the same arguments, may highlight a process of construction of the revelation based on the changing realities of Muḥammad's historical situation and on an exegetical relationship with the earlier revelations on the same topic, accordingly constituting an evolution in the scripture. Therefore, repeated themes are testimonies to the progressive growth of the community and should be evaluated as stages of a work in progress, having equal value, which make use of the same arguments in a slightly different form. According to this interpretation, there is an intra-textual relationship among the various passages, in which the repetitions have multiple functions: an exegetical function related to the previous versions with which it interfaces directly, varying in tone or detail on account of a different purpose that expresses a different moment in the history of the community, and a rhetorical function of confirmation and progressive growth.[127]

The questions discussed regarding form and style are relevant to the history of the Qur'an. Identifying or defining a Qur'anic style also represents a way either to establish or to disprove the unity of the text. Again, this is a factor in whether the Qur'an can be considered the result of a editorial process that continued after Muḥammad's death and involved multiple individuals, or a homogeneous product in which a single hand and a single inspirational motif can be discerned.

127 See the articles collected and re-introduced in Angelika Neuwirth, *Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community. Reading the Qur'an as a Literary Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press-The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2014). See also Angelika Neuwirth, "Qur'anic Readings of the Psalms," in *The Qur'ān in Context. Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, ed. A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai and M. Marx, 733–78; Sinai, *Fortschreibung und Auslegung. Studien zur frühen Koraninterpretation*; Nicolai Sinai, "The Qur'ān as a Process," in *The Qur'ān in Context. Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, ed. A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai and M. Marx, 407–39. In such interpretations, the central role played by the chronology of the text is evident (see pp. 60–77). On functional evolution with respect to the suras in which similar passages appear, see Stewart, "Wansbrough, Bultmann, and the Theory of Variant Traditions in the Qur'ān." On the different interpretations of the repetitions, evaluated as different evolutions, or parallel or progressive redactions of the same story, all then inserted in the canonized text, see Dye, "Le corpus coranique," 806–7. Dominique Urvoy and Marie-Thérèse Urvoy, *L'action psychologique dans le Coran* (Paris: Cerf, 2007), suggests the precedence of a pedagogical function in presenting the themes and also in the repetitions and the rhetoric connected to a schematic structure (binary, according to studies on Biblical rhetoric), which is not accidental but done on purpose. On the binary structure of the Qur'an, see Villano, *La struttura binaria*.

The argument does not necessarily divide confessional visions from those that are non-confessional, since it cuts across the various evaluations of its literary quality and the textual and redactional history of the Qur'an. In other words, a confessional version can consider the text homogeneous and highlight different types of inconsistencies based on issues regarding chronology, without straying from the path of Muslim exegetical history. If, instead, the fragmentary nature is the mark of the Qur'anic passages for some non-Muslim readers and critics, many analyses by the Muslims themselves highlight the complexity of the Qur'anic text in terms of linguistic and rhetorical manners of expression, precisely as proof of its excellence and divine nature. On the contrary, a non-confessional viewpoint, even a very critical one, can recognize the result of particularly profound editorial work in the homogeneity and repetitiveness of some textual features in the Qur'an.[128]

From the Muslim viewpoint, the entire discussion regarding the formal aspects of the Qur'an is, ultimately, the exemplification of a search for meaning in a text that is in dialogue with itself before interacting with those who received the divine message. The dogma of the perfection and inimitability of the Qur'an is the most evident outcome and exemplification of this confessional approach, but this is a fundamentally exegetical product (pp. 196–200). Discussions on the organization of the suras and verses, and the considerations regarding the chronology of the revelation do not encroach on the confessional viewpoint of a Qur'an that is substantially homogeneous from all points of view.

Also in the Western Qur'anic studies, especially recently, much research underscores the need for a literary analysis that points in this direction. For this purpose, an approach is proposed that wish to highlight, generally from sympathetic positions, how certain particularities of the Qur'anic word derive from specific and complex literary structures of Arabic or Semitic origin that aim at conveying meaning under certain conditions and with specific objectives. Hence, the use of hymnic structures, ellipses, metaphors, and various other

128 On these topics, see Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Qur'an Translation. Discourse, Texture and Exegesis* (Richmond: Curzon, 2001), 68–183; Hussein Abdul-Raof, "Conceptual and Textual Chaining in Qur'anic Discourse," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 5/2 (2003): 72–94; Kate Zebiri, "Towards a Rhetorical Criticism of the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 5/2 (2003): 95–120. For example, in this line of thought, the Islamic exegetical tradition describes those passages that entail imprecise identifications for various reasons, from stylistic ones to those due to the need for allusiveness, see Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 5, 2018–96 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, vol. 2, 1156–72).

figures of speech contribute to making the Qur'an a text that is coherent but not literarily simple. These are, overall, the studies that have contributed to highlighting new and significant aspects of the Qur'anic text, even if they do not explain in a definitive manner the many problems that the text presents and with which it continuously challenges its readers and commentators.[129]

129 Recently, some scholars have used computer processing to investigate the grammatical and lexical construction of the Qur'an and the contents diffused in different chapters through verbal and conceptual combinations, and they have discovered internal coherence or the signs of recognizable and identifiable logical processes. See Kai Borrmann, *Koran, logisch. Textverarbeitung in der Islamwissenschaft* (Würzburg: Ergon-Verl., 2014). On this topic, see also Dye, "Le corpus coranique," 824–25, where he discusses Behnam Sadeghi's hypothesis (Behnam Sadeghi, "The Chronology of the Qur'ān: A Stylometric Research Program," *Arabica* 58 (2011): 210–99), which aims to demonstrate that the Qur'an presents the characteristics of a work by a single author. See also Rosalind W. Gwynne, *Logic, Rhetoric, and Legal Reasoning in the Qur'ān. God's Arguments* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), which analyzes the internal logic of the Qur'an and aims to demonstrate its coherence and thereby refute opposing judgements.

3 The History of the Text

The theological ideal of perfection, alongside the high consideration that the Qur'anic text as it is preserved in its textual form holds, coexists with traditions that testify to the complex history of its preservation, collection, editing, and redaction. This topic should be addressed from a dual perspective, taking into account, on the one hand, the Islamic tradition and all of the controversies within the exegetical and confessional discourse that balance the evidence of complexity and variations with the need for an ideal, stable form over time and, on the other hand, the Western perspective, rooted in a profoundly skeptical critical approach, a forum for varied and contrasting points of view. If the starting and ending points are often different, an admirable effort to understand the completely human events that defined a text seen by the Muslim believer as divine is something that the two perspectives have in common.

The Islamic traditions tell of the complex events regarding the succession of the Prophet, testifying to the ways in which the legacy of the two founding aspects of Islam, the Qur'an and the role of Muḥammad, were heavily marked by his disappearance and by the inevitable imperfection of the human community that considered itself his successor. Besides the contents of the Qur'an itself and its self-definition, the history of the Qur'an ideally began at the moment of Muḥammad's death, when the dynamic process of revelation that intervened in the time and the evolution of the Islamic community definitively ceased. Just as occurred for the succession of the Prophet, the community split, and those who supported the rights of ʿAlī upheld, and still do uphold, that the Qur'an as it is disseminated today, is the product of a process of redaction that was begun, continued, and concluded by their indomitable adversaries, who had no scruples about altering it for their own ends.

On the Western side, from which we will begin, the text was initially considered a manual of law during the medieval and modern periods and was the object of a constantly negative and dismissive evaluation. The first version and analysis founded on a solid knowledge of the text and its exegetical history, by Ludovico Marracci (1612–1700), had a strongly polemical tone, out of necessity in the atmosphere of confrontation with the Ottoman Empire, which began to appear as a less insidious enemy only after the defeat of the Siege of Vienna in 1683.

The common thread from 19th-century Oriental Studies until the second World War, and in Western Islamic studies overall, is a generic critical approach to the text, considered the work of the historical Muḥammad or, with

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agnostic abstention, a product of his time inevitably influenced by the environment in which the Prophet operated.

From this perspective, the problems regarding comprehension of the text's contents and form should be resolved through a complex historical reconstruction, drawing on references that are anything but clear and recognizing a complexity based on concepts of source texts, parallel texts, and possible rearrangements. It follows that a consistent part of the European research on the origins of the Qur'an frequently became a hypothetical history of Qur'anic texts before the Qur'an reached its final form, a prehistory of the Qur'an, which began with questions regarding what information and knowledge Muḥammad and his contemporaries possessed. Adopting an approach that was less attentive to Muslim perception, said research, which was not necessarily prejudicial and anti-Muslim, but simply critical, aimed to identify texts that may have contributed to "forming" the Qur'an, shaping it in all aspects before its final redaction.

Today's Islamic and Qur'anic studies ask the same questions but privilege an abstention from judgment that, we add, raises such questions in a different manner without changing their essence. The implicit assumption that the Author, human or divine, had to speak a language that conveyed comprehensible themes and concepts decouples the text's explicit connection to an author (Muḥammad) and aims to connect the Qur'an to the cultural environment of Late Antiquity, which determined its contents and its form. At the same time, the history of research highlights that it is relatively easy to bring parallels and affinities to light but that building a plausible historical framework in order to identify possible lexical and thematic transfers and, along with this, a convincing model of influence from one tradition to another is much more difficult.

3.1 A Qur'an before the Qur'an

Western Qur'anic studies have a solid and deep-rooted tradition of research concerning the Qur'an's sources or, in a softer manner, the cultural influences that were echoing in the formative environment of the text, however one would like to situate it. This history can legitimately be defined as a prehistory (*Urgeschichte*) of the Qur'an because it precedes the process of redaction and establishment of the text as it is preserved today. We will discuss the issues related to this below.[130]

130 Aziz Al-Azmeh uses the definition of "Paleo-Qur'ān" in his critical analysis on studies of the origins of the Qur'an, see Aziz Al-Azmeh, "Implausibility and Probability in Studies of

All of this investigation occurred in a process of constant evolution of knowledge and ideas, along with an increasing number of sources made available through edition and publication that could be considered in light of the Qur'an overall or in light of specific, focused passages. Significantly diverse understandings, varied perceptions, and even cultural trends and attitudes have influenced this approach through a lengthy process marked by different academic histories, particularly in 19th- and 20th-century Europe.

Western studies on the sources of the Qur'an, from the 19th-century to the present, have had different motivations and have spanned the history of Europe and the West in very different phases, responding to multiple needs. On the one hand was the aim to provide an account and explanation of the Qur'an to a non-Muslim public by looking for references or parallels to something known and comparable. On the other hand, attitudes and perspectives have changed over time, by virtue of a progressive shift from prejudicial or anti-Islamic viewpoints to others that are more sympathetic or legitimately confessional, among a range of possibilities that do not always easily coexist in contemporary debate.

Overall, the studies that have looked for source texts or concordance with pre-Islamic Arab traditions and above all with concepts or literary references pertaining to Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian, Manichaean, and other traditions created a body of scholarship of significant dimensions that provides an example of the infinite possibilities of interpretation of the Qur'anic text and the enormous efforts made in order to understand it.

The history of the Qur'an, before its final redaction, may have been affected by countless references and possible sources that would have at least conditioned tone and content or would have informed Muḥammad and the community of the first believers. Going even further, according to some studies, these signs represent proof that texts of different origins were incorporated into the Qur'an and were connected to the revelations received by Muḥammad or to other material in circulation in the process of redaction.

Whatever the attitude of the studies that we will analyze below, the overall data that emerges can be described as the totality of signs and influences from other religious traditions that left their mark on the Qur'anic text and that it preserves and bears within itself today.

Paleo-Qur'ān Genesis," in *Islam in der Moderne, Moderne im Islam. Eine Festschrift für Reinhard Schulze zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Florian Zemmin, Johannes Stephan and Monica Corrado (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2018), 15–40.

3.1.1 Judaism, Christianity, and other religions

The Qur'an is significantly marked by the constant presence of figures, imagery, literary genres, and even lexicon that make evident references to Biblical culture in a broad sense. The precise nature of the references to this culture is the subject of various interpretations, but there can be no doubt that a consistent part of the Qur'an reflects the sphere of Biblical traditions, probably of the period when it was revealed, and to which the Qur'an itself refers in an explicit manner. An initial problem is the fact that it is not easy to distinguish Jewish from Christian influence on the content of the Qur'an, not to mention to distinguish among the various confessional varieties included in the broader categories of Judaism and Christianity, often because the Qur'an cites figures and concepts that belong to both traditions.

However, the Qur'anic text is clear: polemical allusions to Jewish and Christian communities are constant (pp. 35–41) and offer primary evidence of influence, no less than the mention of characters from Biblical and para-Biblical history, the presence of passages that resemble the Psalms, or liturgical formulas that echo analogous Jewish or Christian formulas. Accordingly, for some already dated interpretations, the Qur'an is simply a reorganization, even a confused one, of Biblical material. In general, the entire history of European and Western Islamic Studies is marked by the almost inevitable tendency to recognize, in the other religion and therefore in the sacred Islamic text above all, traces of consonance, dialogue, or opposition to the Jewish or Christian tradition, represented by the Biblical text and related literature.

In these avenues of research, at least until major changes occurred over the past few decades, it was customary to distinguish rather precisely between studies that aimed to demonstrate a greater affinity of the Qur'an to Jewish literature and those, instead, inclined towards a primacy of Christian traditions in a broad sense, perhaps specifying, in certain cases, one tradition or another among the various Eastern Churches.

The Jewish interpretation surely boasts a longer tradition and, in the nascent stage of Oriental Studies, it met with the greatest acceptance. Many factors contributed to this: a certain vision of Islam as a religion with strongly normative and legalistic connotations; the prevalence in the Qur'an of stories portraying characters from the Old Testament; constant references to the Jews; and the historical testimonies by Muslims to the presence of Jews in the Peninsula during Muḥammad's times.

The essay that ideally inaugurated modern research in Qur'anic studies is the work *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* (Bonn, 1833) by Abraham Geiger (d. 1874). It is a comprehensive study of the parallels between the

Qur'an and Biblical and Jewish literature and tradition, in which what Muḥammad had supposedly taken from Judaism is presented and discussed. Many other studies along the same lines followed, and in a more and more sophisticated and documented manner, producing extensive summaries and scattered contributions that have only analyzed some parts or verses of the Qur'an, seeking traces of Jewish influence.[131]

The collection of data on derivations and influences or, rather, as is preferred today, traces of Jewish origin, was also the fruit of European cultural history. It is not by chance that, in said operation, the Jewish roots of Islam were upheld and often discussed by experts on Jewish religion or Jewish scholars from a Germanic environment. The search for sources and parallels had the dual function of moving past earlier biased and anti-Islamic perspectives, leading the Qur'an back to a well-known religious tradition and at the same time elevating the Jewish tradition in an era of reform and during its first steps towards emancipation throughout Europe. The limits of such an approach and the various impulses that inspired them have been stressed by many sides, suggesting that the main issue was not simply the derivation and origin of Islam but rather defining the role of Islam vis-à-vis European, Christian religiosity and especially Jewish religiosity.

The study of Islam was introduced into 19th-century discourse also to affirm the "nobility" of the Jewish tradition, which was not only that of the subaltern condition of the pre-emancipation European reality, but also the one that had influenced the origins of Islamic imperial culture. Along these lines, countless studies focused on the recognition of signs, legacies, loans, or attitudes evident

131 Besides Geiger's volume, the classic works in this branch of studies, apart from various articles on specific arguments, are, first of all, Heinrich Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (Gräfenhainichen: C. Schulze, 1931); Max Grünbaum, *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sagenkunde* (Leiden: EJ. Brill, 1893); Israel Schapiro, "Die haggadischen Elemente im erzählenden Teil des Korans" (Diss., Leipzig, 1907); Josef Horovitz, "Jewish Proper Names and Derivates in the Koran," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 2 (1925): 145–227 (repr. *Jewish Proper Names and Derivates in the Koran*, Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1964); Hartwig Hirschfeld, *Jüdische Elemente im Koran: ein Beitrag zur Koranforschung* (Berlin: self-publishing, 1878); Hirschfeld, *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Koran*; Charles C. Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam* (New York: Jewish Institute of Religion Press, 1933); Abraham I. Katsh, *Judaism and Islām. Biblical and Talmudic Backgrounds of the Koran and Its Commentaries. Suras II and III* ([New York]: Published for New York University Press by Bloch Pub. Co, 1954). On this topic, see also Michael E. Pregill, "The Hebrew Bible and the Quran: The Problem of the Jewish 'Influence' on Islam," *Religion Compass* 1/6 (2007): 643–59. On the Jewish presence in the Arabian Peninsula, see Christian J. Robin, "Quel judaïsme en Arabie?" in *Le Judaïsme de l'Arabie antique*, ed. Christian J. Robin (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 15–295. A summary and profile of these studies are given in Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity*, 35–55.

in certain contents of the Qur'an that could be compared with Biblical texts or Jewish and Rabbinic literature.[132]

No less meaningful and important were studies that insisted that Christianity had exerted a greater influence than the Jewish tradition on nascent Islam and on the Qur'an. The cornerstone of this sort of interpretation derives from the role and standing of Jesus that is evident in the sacred text, as well as a certain positive propensity towards Christianity and Christians that is demonstrated in some verses.

However, even in this case, the incontrovertible parallels that have emerged from this research are accompanied by a vision that is mediated by a confessional Christian perspective. Without making it a strict rule, the number of Christian scholars who studied the Qur'an, often churchmen of different faiths who were active between the 19th and 20th-century, highlights that the search for consonance was born from approaches and preconditions dictated by their own faith, which often rested on a sense of superiority that was clearly expressed by colonial domination.

For many of these experts, the Qur'an could only be heavily influenced by Christian elements, that is, by that which, in their eyes, was the most evolved and represented the most advanced religion in the world, that with the most pervasive capacity, also thanks to the growing presence, guaranteed by colonial conquests, of missionaries in Islamic lands. These, in underscoring a certain consonance between the Qur'an and Christianity, could benefit from a channel of communication and set out on a path of proselytism or, in any case, fostered the illusion of appeal in this direction. From this point of view, the more recent scholarly trends that acknowledge consonance between the Qur'an and Syriac Christian literature are different and less confessionally biased (pp. 147–52).[133]

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132 On the function of Qur'anic and Islamic studies for Jewish scholars between the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, at least until the Holocaust, see Dirk Hartwig, "Die 'Wissenschaft des Judentums' und die Anfänge der kritischen Koranforschung. Perspektiven einer modernen Koranhermeneutik," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 61/3 (2009): 234–56; Dirk Hartwig et al., eds., *'Im vollen Licht der Geschichte': Die Wissenschaft des Judentums und die Anfänge der Koranforschung* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2008).

133 Among the extensive bibliography on the subject we limit ourselves to citing the classics John M. Arnold, *The Koran and the Bible, or, Islam and Christianity* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1866); Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment: The Gunning Lectures, Edinburgh University, 1925* (London: Macmillan, 1926); Wilhelm Rudolph, "Die Abhängigkeit des Qorāns von Judenthum und Christentum" (Diss., Tübingen, 1922); Tor Andrae, *Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1926); Karl Ahrens, "Christliches im Qoran. Eine Nachlese," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 84 (1930): 15–68; Joseph Henninger, "L'influence du christianisme oriental sur l'islam naissante," in *Atti del*

Obviously, not all studies are so clear-cut in terms of tracing, at all costs, a presumably prevalent and alternative influence of Judaism, on the one hand, or Christianity, on the other, on the culture of Islam from its beginnings and, particularly, on the Qur'an. Another area of research investigates signs of both Jewish and Christian influence in the Qur'anic text and even recognizes indistinct evidence of generically Jewish-Christian origin. Studies that fall into this category include those that highlight parallels with particular Rabbinic or Jewish traditions or derivations from Christian sectarian or Judaeo-Christian components. They also include lines of research that examine Islamic traditions that speak of Muḥammad's contacts and relationships with significant Jewish and Christian figures.

The question of Jewish and Christian influence on the Qur'an, especially when the sources available were limited, had the function of debating the differences in tone or purpose between Jewish and Christian literary testimonies and the Qur'anic data, which were rarely perfectly aligned. They strove to present a plausible interpretation that explained similarities and differences at the same time. Here, too, the contrary hypothesis of rejecting clear borrowing, and even of rejecting a milder relationship, has to take into account the fact that a Judaeo-Christian influence is confirmed by the Qur'an itself in explicit terms. Investigating what type of Judaism and Christianity the Qur'an alludes to is the inevitable result of taking the Qur'anic references seriously.[134]

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convegno internazionale sul tema L'oriente cristiano nella storia della civiltà: Roma 31 marzo–3 aprile 1963, Firenze 4 aprile 1963 (Roma: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1964), 379–410; Joseph Henninger, *Spuren christlischen Glaubenslehren im Koran* (Schöneck Beckenried: n.p., 1951). For more recent developments, see Jonathan M. Reck, "The Annunciation to Mary: A Christian Echo in the Qur'ān," *Vigiliae Christianae* 68 (2014): 355–83; Samir K. Samir, "The Theological Christian Influence on the Qur'ān: A Reflection," in *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context*, ed. G.S. Reynolds, 141–62; De Blois, "*Naṣrānī* (Ναζωραῖος) and *Ḥanīf* (Ἐθνικός)." See also the documentation discussed in Barbara Finster, "Arabia in Late Antiquity: An Outline of the Cultural Situation in the Peninsula at the time of Muḥammad," in *The Qur'ān in Context. Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, ed. A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai and M. Marx, 61–114; Sinai, "The Qur'ān's Dietary Tetralogue: A Diachronic Reconstruction." More recently, Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's Legal Culture*, analyzes legal questions in the Qur'an in the light of a comparison with the *Didascalia Apostolorum*. The picture of a Christian presence smaller than the Jewish one in the Peninsula is a judgment to be reconsidered in the light of the most recent findings that show that the emergence of Arabic writing was closely connected with Christian propaganda: Robin, "L'Arabie préislamique," 70.

134 See, for example, Anton Baumstark, "Jüdischer und christlicher Gebetstypus im Koran," *Der Islam* 16 (1927): 229–48; Haim Z. Hirschberg, *Jüdische und christliche Lehren im vor- und frühislamischen Arabien: ein Beitrag zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Islams. Żydowskie i chrześcijańskie nauki w Arabii pogańskiej i w pierwszym okresie islamu* (Kraków: Nakł. Polskiej

Judaism and Christianity do not exhaust the number of other religious cultures that have left traces in passages of the Qur'an. To a lesser extent, those studies that have investigated particular aspects of influence of the two Biblical religions on the Qur'an have also indicated other elements from other sources without interpreting the theme in terms of predominant influence, consonance, or textual calques.

The history of research based on a philological approach to the Qur'an is rich with examples in which authors indulge their whims and propose, for specific passages or limited parts of the text, possible parallels or sources from Coptic to the Dead Sea Scrolls, or relics of Ancient Egypt, by way of other investigations that have analyzed Qur'anic verses, or even single words from the Qur'an, in order to identify a possible echo that would offer a hint as to the religious history of the region.[135]

Akademii Umiejętności, 1939); Denise Masson, *Le Coran et la revelation judéo-chrétienne* (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1958); Busse, *Die theologischen Beziehungen des Islams zu Judentum und Christentum*; John C. Reeves, *Bible and Qur'ān. Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality* (Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); Holger M. Zellentin, ed., *The Qur'an's Reformation of Judaism and Christianity. Return to the Origins* (London–New York: Routledge, 2019); Francisco del Río Sánchez, ed., *Jewish Christianity and the Origins of Islam: Papers Presented at the Colloquium Held in Washington DC, October 29–31, 2015 (8th ASMEA conference)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018); Sidney H. Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the 'People of the Book' in the Language of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013). On the Jewish or Christian "informers," see Claude Gilliot, "Les 'informateurs' juifs et chretiens de Muḥammad. Reprise d'un probléme traité par Aloys Sprenger et Theodor Nöldeke," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 22 (1998): 84–126. On all these topics, see Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'ān and Muslim Literature*, 32–85 and the bibliography cited therein. Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann, *Die Entstehung des Korans. Neue Erkenntnisse aus Sicht der historisch-kritischen Bibelwissenschaft* (Darmstadt: WBG Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2012), although with various limits, cites the unity of the text and affirms that the Qur'an in its entirety is the product of an intertextual process and re-elaboration of Jewish and Christian tradition. A more recent and articulate approach to the subject is that of Mark Durie, *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Reflexes. Investigations into the Genesis of a Religion* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), according to which the relationship between Qur'an and Bible is similar to that of Creole with respect to its superstrate, such as Haitian Creole to French, i.e., Islam and Qur'an did not originate from a process of organic development from Christianity, Judaism, or Judeo-Christianity, but through a unique creative process. This wide range of different hypotheses has so far not generated a shared interpretive vision. See Dye, "Le corpus coranique," 772–85.

135 See Ibn Warraq, ed., *What the Koran Really Says. Language, Text, and Commentary* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), in part. 245–315, for an anthology of some of the studies on these themes. See also Ilse Lichtenstaedter, "And Become Ye Accursed Apes," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 14 (1991): 153–75; Patricia Crone, "Jewish Christianity and the Qur'ān," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 74 (2015): 225–53 and 75 (2016): 1–21, with an ample bibliography on earlier studies on hypotheses of Judeo-Christian derivation or influence

The Iranian religions have found some advocates in this area of interest. From Mazdaism to Manichaeism, some elements of Iranian origin have influenced aspects of the Islamic credo, in particular regarding eschatology and prophetology. The limited overall number of the advocates of this line of thought is influenced by the contents of the Qur'an, which are much more explicit in directly citing Jews and Christians, rather than the Iranian religions. We find only one reference in the Qur'an to Zoroastrians (Magi, Ar. *majūs*) in just one passage (Qur. 22:17).

In this same passage, we also find another group, that of the Sabians (pp. 36 and 38), a name that may recall a religion from the Mesopotamian region, like that of the Mandaeans. Attention to possible Iranian influences in many areas, including the historical one, has not been a much beaten path, in part because it is not stimulated by external factors such as those that have guided scholars' activities and approaches to the relationship of the Qur'an with Judaism and Christianity.[136]

One solution to the question regarding the influence or suggestions from other religious traditions, especially Jewish and Christian ones, is offered by Angelika Neuwirth's interpretative proposal, which preserves the unity of the Qur'anic text and aims to consider the cultural and religious environment of

regarding the Qur'an; Daniel J. Crowther, "Qumrān and the Qur'ān," *Journal of the Study of the Old Testament* 43/1 (2018): 109–29; Martiniano P. Roncaglia, "Eléments ebionites et elkésaïtes dans le Coran. Notes et hypothèses," *Proche-Orient chrétien* 21 (1971): 101–26; Yoram Erder, "The Origin of the Name Idrīs in the Qur'ān: A Study of the Influence of Qumran Literature on Early Islam," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 49 (1990): 339–50. Literature with very diverse hypotheses on the origin of the Qur'an is notable and is increasing. See, for example Daniel Beck, *Evolution of the Early Qur'ān. From Anonymous Apocalypse to Charismatic Prophet* (New York: Peter Lang, 2018).

136 See, for example, Evgenij E. Berthels, "Die paradiesischen Jungfrauen im Islam," *Islamica* 1 (1924): 263–87; Ali Akbar, "The Zoroastrian Provenance of Some Islamic Eschatological Doctrines," *Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses* 49 (2020): 86–108; Shaul Shaked, "From Iran to Islam: Notes on Some Themes in Transmission," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 4 (1984): 31–67; Shaul Shaked, "From Iran to Islam: On Some Symbols of Royalty," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 7 (1986): 75–91; Shaul Shaked, "'For the Sake of the Soul': A Zoroastrian Idea in Transmission to Islam," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13 (1990): 15–32; Róbert Simon, "Muhammad and Mani," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 21 (1997): 118–41; Guy G. Stroumsa, "'Seal of the Prophets': The Nature of a Manichean Metaphor," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 7 (1986): 61–74; François de Blois, "Elchasai – Manes – Muḥammad: Manichäismus und Islam in religionshistorischem Vergleich," *Der Islam* 81 (2004): 31–48; Jan M. F. van Reeth, "Les prophéties oraculaires dans le Coran et leurs antécédents: Montan et Mani," in *Controverses sur les écritures canoniques de l'islam*, ed. D. De Smet and M.A. Amir-Moezzi, 77–137.

Late Antiquity. From Neuwirth's perspective, progressively refined through decades of research, the Qur'an, as a text, represents a moment that fully participates in the literary and religious imaginary of the Near Eastern tradition of Late Antiquity. As such, the original text is also the fruit of a religious culture that shares its coordinates, breadth, and consonance with a West that has included the Jewish and Christian tradition.

In light of this, ultimately, neither contrasts nor clashes of civilization make sense, and there is even less sense in discussing borrowings and influences of other religious traditions, on account of the consequences of an overturned perspective. The Qur'an revealed to Muḥammad belongs to the Jewish and Christian tradition, and represents a specific evolutionary chapter and its re-elaboration, simultaneously new and indebted to its past. What distinguishes this approach from a more critical one, and what sees in the Qur'an direct derivation or calques from other traditions, is the evaluation of the meaning of the Qur'an *a priori* and an ultimately para-confessional attitude.[137]

3.1.2 Paganism and Arab culture

Alongside the history and culture of a Biblical origin, the other element that appears persistently, permeating the Qur'anic text, is the reference to a contemporary reality of the Prophet Muḥammad dominated by an Arab culture characterized by pagan terms. Many Qur'anic verses convey concepts and references to cultural practices that can be connected back to that which is known regarding the formative Arab environment of Islam.

The polemical nature of the Qur'anic counter-discourse in conveying the reality and the exiguity of coeval documentation creates problems surrounding the historical reconstruction of the concepts that emerge in many Qur'anic

137 Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity. A Shared Heritage*. Also see the collection of her re-proposed articles, translated into English in: Neuwirth, *Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community. Reading the Qur'an*; Angelika Neuwirth, *Koranforschung – Eine politische Philologie? Bibel, Koran, und Islamentstehung im Spiegel spätantiker Textpolitik und moderner Philologie* (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2014); Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx, eds., *The Qur'ān in Context. Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2010); Angelika Neuwirth and Michael A. Sells, eds., *Qur'ānic Studies Today* (London: Routledge, 2016). See Abboud, *Mary in the Qur'ān*, which follows an intertextual approach and the methodologies developed in the Biblical studies of Northrup Frye (e.g., *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982) and *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of "The Bible and Literature"* (San Diego-London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990).

passages, and that refer to an (even material) culture that can be connected to the conditions of the Arabian Peninsula.

Even less direct are the references to the religious reality of this same environment, and the reference to pre-Islamic cults that, in the Qur'anic imaginary, becomes a generic and vague reference to a reality that has abandoned or does not have faith in one God, and that must be brought back to this path, renouncing cults and practices to which there are rare allusions.

Religious information is inevitably strongly conditioned by polemics, which convey implications and distortions that make it difficult to understand the true substantiality of the culture that the Islamic tradition identifies with the term *Jāhiliyya*, which is cited four times in the Qur'an (Text no. 59).[138]

Text no. 59: *Jāhiliyya*

And stay in your apartments.
Do not adorn yourselves with the adornment of the age of ignorance (*Jāhiliyya*) of old. (Qur. 33:33).
When those who disbelieved set fierceness in their hearts,
the fierceness of the age of ignorance (*Jāhiliyya*),
and God sent down his reassurance to His messenger and to the believers. (Qur. 48:26)

In exegetical thought, the expression *Jāhiliyya* takes on the meaning of "age of ignorance" and contains, within itself, an explicit reference to a theological evaluation *a posteriori*, aimed at underscoring the novelty and the need for the advent of Islam, which would eradicate the different and "ignorant" condition of paganism in which the Arab tribes existed. Such necessity is traditionally connected to the paganism that was widespread in the Arabian Peninsula, where, alongside influences and knowledge more or less rooted in Judaism, Christianity, and Iranian religions, idols of various types were present and central in the culture of the Arab tribes that witnessed the rise of Muḥammad.[139]

138 See Peter Webb, "*Al-Jāhiliyya*: Uncertain Times of Uncertain Meanings," *Der Islam* 91 (2014): 69–94 and the bibliography cited and discussed within. On the *Jāhiliyya* in the Qur'an, see Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity*, 119–20, while on other issues inherent to pre-Islamic Arab culture and the Qur'an, see 201–38; Angelika Neuwirth, "A 'Religious Transformation in Late Antiquity'. Qur'ānic Refigurations of Pagan-Arab Ideals Based on Biblical Models," in *The Qur'an's Reformation of Judaism and Christianity. Return to the Origins*, ed. H. Zellentin, 63–91; Patricia Crone, "Pagan Arabs as God-Fearers," in *Islam and Its Past. Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an*, ed. C. Bakhos and M. Cook, 140–64.

139 On anti-pagan polemic in the Qur'an, see Richard Ettinghausen, *Antiheidnische Polemik im Koran* (Gelnhausen: Kalbfleisch, 1934). On aspects of the pre-Islamic Bedouin material culture reflected in the Qur'an, see Eleonore Haeuptner, "Koranische Hinweise auf die materielle Kultur der alten Araber" (Diss., Tübingen University, 1966). See Toshihiko Izutsu, *The*

Unlike the case of Judaism and Christianity, the case of pagan culture and religiosity suffers from a lack of data and texts that may serve for comparison. It is therefore necessary to halt at generic and conjectural evaluations regarding the possibility of the survival, in the Qur'an, of various texts or concepts coming from the pagan Arab environment.

A few passages have lent themselves to interpretations of this type, but, differently from the cases discussed above, it is not at all possible to clearly distinguish the re-proposal of Arab motifs and themes from a reception of passages or texts of the same origin. The case of the term *īlāf* (agreement, union, keeping) in the Sura of the Quraysh (no. 106) is possibly the most discussed and controversial example of a Qur'anic passage with an enigmatic meaning that, according to some hypotheses, could be the product of the reception of material of pagan origin in the canonized text (Text no. 60).[140]

Text no. 60: *Īlāf*

Because of the keeping (*īlāf*) by Quraysh,
Their keeping of the journey of winter and summer,
Let them serve the Lord of this house,
Who has fed them against hunger
and given them security against fear. (Qur. 106:1–4)

There are very few passages like this one. The nature of Qur'anic polemics against paganism determines that the Qur'an does not precisely acknowledge the pre-Islamic Arab reality. Consequently, this aspect has a different weight with respect to the Jewish and Christian tradition, with which the Qur'an conceptualizes itself as being in continuity. Thus, the names of the pagan gods are mentioned in the Qur'an in just one passage, referring to the idols of the people of Noah: "Wadd, Suwāʿ, Yaghūth, Yaʿūq and Nasr" (Qur. 71:23), without adding

Structure of the Ethical Terms in the Koran. A Study in Semantics (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Philological Studies, 1959), on ethical and ideal pagan concepts and the Qur'an. A critique of the traditional Islamic reconstruction of pre-Islamic idolatry and paganism is presented by Gerald R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Rise of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), according to which the Qur'anic allusiveness does not allow for the certain identification of pagan and idolatrous practices. Hawting actually proposed the interpretation of references to pagans as polemical barbs amongst monotheists, in which the accusation of paganism is merely structural to the denigration of the adversary of the Qur'anic voice and does not refer to real pagans. Accordingly, names and identifications from Islamic literature and from Ibn al-Kalbī (see below, n. 142) are the product of a later reality and an explanation of exegetical nature and theological origin.

140 On the meaning of the term *īlāf* in Qur. 106:1–2, see Uri Rubin, "The *Īlāf* of Quraysh. A Study of Sūra CVI," *Arabica* 31 (1984): 165–88 and the bibliography cited in the article.

anything besides the names themselves, which appear mysterious. The reference to the three divinities al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, and Manāt, connected to the well-known episode of the Satanic verses, later removed from the revelation, does not allude to any particular cult, and highlights the polemical effect of this single mention of divinities, which are described and elaborated on only in the later historiographical and exegetical testimony (Text no. 61).[141]

Text no. 61: Al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, and Manāt

Have you considered al-Lāt and al-ʿUzzā
And Manāt, the third, the other?
Do you have males, and He females?
That would then be an unjust division.
They are merely names
which you and your forefathers have bestowed. (Qur. 53:19–23)

In evaluating the consistency or lack thereof of these texts and their possible reference to a precise historical reality, the only contemporary documentation available today is epigraphic evidence. In the case of the three divinities in the episode of the Satanic verses cited above (Qur. 53:19–20), for example, the epigraphic attestations can at least partially corroborate the traditional idea that the Arab pantheon included "Daughters of Allāh" (Banāt Allāh). Extant inscriptions have been found that refer to the "daughters of Īl," which can be connected to the three divinities cited in the Qur'an, even if these are explicitly designated as "Daughters of God" only in traditional Islamic literature, and in particular in *The Book of Idols* (*Kitāb al-aṣnām*) by Ibn al-Kalbī (d. ca. 820).[142]

Different is the case of the presence of echoes of the Arab culture contemporary to Muḥammad and, therefore, the incorporation into the Qur'an of concepts and even typical manners of thinking from the time when the sacred text was revealed.

Even in this case the epigraphic evidence and the materials that have emerged, especially in recent years, make up a background of great utility against which to measure lexicon and Qur'anic concepts in order to interpret the continuity and novelties of Qur'anic discourse in reference to the cultural practices and the history of the Peninsula in its traditional Arab element. The epigraphic evidence demonstrates, for example, that many of the terms derived

141 On the Satanic verses, see Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam*; Sinai, "An Interpretation of *Sūrat al-Najm* (Q. 56)"; Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, "Qur. 53:19, the Prophetic Experience of the 'Satanic Verses' – A Reconsideration," *Acta Orientalia* 58 (1997): 24–34; see also Sean W. Anthony, "The Satanic Verses in Shiʿite Literature. A Minority Report on Shahab Ahmed's *Before Orthodoxy*," *Shii Studies Review* 3 (2019): 215–52.

142 Hishām b. al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-aṣnām* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1343/1924); cfr. Robin, "L'Arabie préislamique," 109–14.

from Aramaic or other languages in the Qur'an were already present in the Arabian Peninsula before the 7th century, in the Himyarite Kingdom in Yemen, in the Hejaz, and in Nabatean inscriptions that date back to al 300 AD, thus highlighting that these are not novelties introduced by Islam.

A fitting example in this regard is *ar-Raḥmān* ("The Merciful," pp. 16–18), one of the names of God that is of plausible Aramaic origin and is documented in Arabia from 420 AD on. This and other terms testify to the general currency in Arabia of certain significant terms and concepts that anticipate the Qur'an, more than was generally recognized until recently.[143] The testimonies that touch on other questions of a historic nature such as the relationship between the Qur'an and the historical vicissitudes of the Peninsula are of the same genre. The most notable episode in this regard is that, previously mentioned (Text no. 30), of the destruction of the Maʾrib Dam and the allusions to the kingdom of Sheba, which refers to a region of northern Yemen and that, it must be clearly stated, appears to be the narration of this episode according to standard Qur'anic style, rather than the product of direct influence of another textual or oral source.

If attention is broadened to include the central regions of the Peninsula or outlying regions, epigraphic testimony confirms a cultural context rich in religious influences of various types. In the case of Yemen, the attestation of terms based on Jewish Aramaic or Syriac in eras following the conversion and the Christian presence in the region, respectively ca. 380 CE and ca. 525 CE, is significant.

The Qur'an proves to be in dialogue with these realities and to be a witness whose provenance from the Arabian Peninsula cannot be questioned, at least regarding the data presented in some of its parts. Together with this, however, the problem regarding the later Islamic literature remains, for, in some cases, it reconstructs stories and events that do not always accord with what is indicated by the epigraphic evidence.[144]

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143 Robin, "L'Arabie préislamique," 85; Robert Hoyland, "Epigraphy and the Linguistic Background to the Qur'ān," in *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context*, ed. G.S. Reynolds, 51–69.

144 On this topic, see Andrew Rippin, "Epigraphical South Arabian and Qur'ānic Exegesis," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 12 (1990): 155–74; Peter Stein, "Literacy in Pre-Islamic Arabic: An Analysis of the Epigraphic Evidence," in *The Qur'ān in Context. Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, ed. A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai and M. Marx, 255–80; Ahmad Al-Jallad, *The Religion and Rituals of the Nomads of Pre-Islamic Arabia* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2022); Christian J. Robin: "À propos de la prière: emprunts lexicaux à l'hébreu et à l'araméen," in *Prières méditerranéennes hier et aujourd'hui: actes du colloque organisé par le Centre Paul-Albert Février, Université de Provence-C.N.R.S., à Aix-en-Provence les 2 et 3 avril 1998*,

Research on this topic is not at all simple. The data contained in the Qur'an and, even more so, historiographic and exegetical Islamic data, are problematic and complex, but they offer a detailed framework. It is difficult to consider the later literary attestations as historical, when they report some specific details. Nevertheless, the larger overall view can hardly be set aside, not before investigators attempt to overcome the problems that this traditional interpretation poses, including those of comprehension.

The Islamic testimony has its own logic and is invalidated by many factors that often impede moving beyond the rhetoric of the time when it was put in writing. However, it is hardly tenable at this point to consider the pagan background only the product of an exegetical interpretation. Epigraphy and traditions bring to light a situation of deeply rooted paganism and traditional Arab concepts that were then introduced into the Qur'anic lexicon and possibly reinterpreted in a new religious key, but with a rootedness that was already evident in the reality of the time when the revelation reached Muḥammad. If the Biblical origin is fundamental and undeniable, the more generic Arab origin is just as important and foundational for Islam.

3.1.3 Syriac substrates

Recent research in Qur'anic studies has more and more decisively revisited the relationship between the Qur'an and Christian literature. A growing number of studies aims to acknowledge the more or less clear reflection of the marked influence of Syriac literature on Qur'anic narratives, concepts, and terminology, or at least an affinity between the two. This is evident with regard to various aspects

ed. Gilles Dorival and Didier Pralon (Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'Université de Provence, 2000), 45–69; Christian J. Robin, "Matériaux pour une prosopographie de l'Arabie antique: les noblesses sabéenne et ḥimyarite avant et après l'Islam," in *Les préludes de l'islam. Ruptures et continuités dans les civilisations du proche-Orient, de l'Afrique orientale, de l'Arabie et de l'Inde à la veille de l'islam*, ed. Christian J. Robin and Jérémie Schiettecatte (Paris: De Boccard, 2012), 127–270; Christian J. Robin, "Les 'Filles de Dieu' de Saba' à La Mecque: réflexions sur l'agencement des panthéons dans l'Arabie ancienne," *Semitica* 50 (2011): 113–92; Christian J. Robin, "À propos des 'Filles d'Īl' (complemént à l'article publié dans *Semitica* 50, 2001, 113–192)," *Semitica* 52–53 (2007): 139–48; Christian J. Robin, "Arabia and Ethiopia," in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott F. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 247–332. While problematic, see some of the useful considerations, on the relationship between the Qur'an and pre-Islamic poetry in Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, "Al-Khansā''s Poem in -Ālahā and Its Qur'ānic Echoes. The Long and the Short of It," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* 29/1 (2019): 1–15.

of content, style, and even purpose of the parts inserted into the Qur'an. Studies within this trend have argued that the Qur'an draws on lectionaries, versions of biblical stories, and other aspects of the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition, but that it is most closely related to the versions elaborated in various genres of Christian Syriac religious literature, as compared to other Christian literatures.

The Qur'an therefore may be seen as resembling homilies and other types of literary texts used in the Syriac liturgy, rather than the rabbinic or patristic texts of various origins. The ongoing publication, translation, and study of Syriac literature seems to be expanding the relevant set of evidence and adding testimony to this scholarly trend.[145]

Studies of the Syriac influence on the Qur'an are increasing in number. Every study contributes to charting an interpretative course that is clarified in convincing terms, but that is, at the same time, an overall indicator of a cultural trend that is not different from those of the past. The problem regarding the limited historical evidence of Christian presence in the heart of the Arabian Peninsula is often overcome by privileging the Qur'anic passages dedicated to Jesus and to Christians in order to assess which type of Christianity the Qur'an drew upon with respect to imagery and to the doctrines that it critically opposes. Or, another strategy has been to look beyond the Arabian Peninsula, to Syria, Iraq, Ethiopia, and elsewhere, to search for direct contacts and relationships.

Given the allusive character of the Qur'anic revelation, this procedure is not at all simple, and many of the proposed solutions are decidedly conjectural, leaving the answer to the question about which forms of Christianity came into contact with the reality of the Arabian Peninsula up in the air. Overall, the most recent studies undeniably represent concrete progress and demonstrate that the

145 See, in particular, Joseph B. Witztum, "The Syriac Milieu of the Qur'ān: The Recasting of the Biblical Narratives," (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2011); Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext*; Zishan Ghaffa, "Kontrafaktische Intertextualität im Koran und die exegetische Tradition des syrischen Christentums," *Der Islam* 98 (2021): 313–58; Kevin van Bladel, "The *Alexander Legend* in the Qur'ān 18:83–102," in *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context*, ed. G.S. Reynolds, 175–203; Tommaso Tesei, "The Prophecy of Ḏū-l-Qarnayn (Q 18:83–102) and the Origins of the Qur'ānic Corpus," *Miscellanea arabica* (2013–2014): 273–90; Reynolds, *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context*; Reynolds, *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān*; Dye, "Le corpus coranique," 764–71; Guillame Dye and Fabien Nobilio, eds., *Figures bibliques en Islam* (Bruxelles: EME Editions, 2012); Emran I. El-Badawi, *The Qur'ān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions* (London–New York: Routledge, 2014); Sidney H. Griffith, "Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'ān: The "Companions of the Cave" in *Sūrat al-Kahf* and in Syriac Christian Tradition," in *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context*, ed. G.S. Reynolds, 109–37; Carlos A. Segovia, *The Quranic Jesus. A New Interpretation* (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2018); Gilliot, "Les 'informateurs' juifs et chrétiens."

heart of the region was familiar with the various forms of Christianity current during this period and that knowledge of these was anything but superficial.[146]

At one extreme limit of these interpretations, we find studies that have claimed to detect an ill-concealed substratum of Aramaic or Syriac literature in the current Qur'an. Such interpretations have some precedents in earlier scholarship from the beginning of the twentieth century, such as the studies of Alphonse Mingana (d. 1937), but in the last decades they have returned and are much discussed in current Qur'anic and Islamic studies. This course of research has included the attempt to identify Christian strata in the Qur'an by Günther Lüling (d. 2014) and the work of a scholar who has adopted the pseudonym of Christoph Luxenberg. Their books have put Islamic studies to the test, especially in Germany, and have resonated differently.

According to Lüling, some Qur'anic suras bear signs of a Christian subtext made up of Christian Ethiopic hymnology, later adapted, without being able to fully hide its traces, to the Arabic language. In his view, this serves as evidence of a unique form of Christianity particularly diffused in Mecca. This thesis, supported in a series of studies that have appeared since the 1970s, was quickly refuted or ignored, and has caused the academic marginalization of the author. Only recently have his studies been resumed or at least recalled by analogous hypotheses, even if the most recent critical analysis has, in a more balanced manner, highlighted the fact that no sources have corroborated such an eccentric interpretation. A certain renewed interest in Lüling's work is due exclusively to the most recent turn in the studies on the origins of the Qur'an towards Syriac literature, rather than to the substance of his interpretation.

Luxenberg's book, which upholds the Aramaic origin of many passages of the Qur'an, with the corollary of new and revolutionary meanings that these may take on, appeared at the beginning of the 21st century. It was met with unforeseen media coverage in European and American newspapers in relation to the post-September 11th and to the reinterpretation that it proposed regarding the paradisiacal rewards that await martyrs and the blessed. Also in his case, a unanimous chorus of criticism observed an excessively casual use of etymologies that may have produced imaginative and unfounded reinterpretations. The

146 See Sidney H. Griffith, "Late Antique Christology in Qur'ānic Perspective," in *Die Koranhermeneutik von Günter Lüling*, ed. Georges Tamer (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 33–68; see also the studies collected in Cornelia B. Horn, ed., *The Bible, the Qur'ān, & Their Interpretation: Syriac Perspectives* (Warwick, Rhode Island, USA: Abelian Academic, an imprint of The Abelian Group, 2013); Cornelia B. Horn and Sidney H. Griffith, eds., *Biblical & Qur'ānic Traditions in the Middle East* (Warwick, Rhode Island, USA: Abelian Academic, an imprint of The Abelian Group, 2016).

group Inārah (www.inarah.net) has followed in his footsteps, motivated by a number of scholars who shared extremely critical positions toward the traditional Islamic construction of early Islamic history and the textual history of the Qur'an and that has also produced several edited volumes devoted to Qur'anic topics, coordinated and edited by Markus Groß and Karl-Heinz Ohlig.[147]

The positions of these scholars are different, but they are driven by the same desire to reconstruct the true and original meaning of the Qur'an, against the Islamic and sympathetic confessional, if not quiescent, perspectives attributed to much of international research, supporting the critical value of demolishing the Arab and original character of the Qur'an as claimed by the Islamic tradition. This is a bold stance, especially nowadays, and touches on sensitive topics such as the freedom of research, but it does not lack, itself, a confessional prejudice determined by Christian faith or culture on the part of these

147 Alphonse Mingana, "Syriac Influence on the Style of the Ḳurʾān," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 2 (1927): 77–98; Günter Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qur'an. Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qur'an* (Erlangen: H. Lüling, 1974; Engl. ed. *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation. The Rediscovery and Reliable Reconstruction of a Comprehensive Pre-Islamic Christian Hymnal Hidden in the Koran under Earliest Islamic Reinterpretations*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2003); Christoph Luxenberg, *Die Syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2000; Engl. ed. *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran*. Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2007); Markus Groß and Karl-Heinz Ohlig, eds., *Die Entstehung einer Weltreligion I. Von der koranischen Bewegung zum Frühislam* (Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2010); Markus Groß and Karl-Heinz Ohlig, eds., *Die Entstehung einer Weltreligion II. Von der koranischen Bewegung zum Frühislam* (Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2012); Claude Gilliot, "Une reconstruction critique du Coran ou comment en finir avec les merveilles de la lampe d'Aladin," in *Results of Contemporary Research on the Qur'ān: The Question of a Historio-Critical Text of the Qur'ān*, ed. Manfred Kropp (Beirut–Würzburg: Orient-Institut-Ergon in Kommission, 2007), 33–137. Contributions on the Qur'an are also found in the other volumes dedicated to the origins of Islam of the same series "Inārah." On Lüling, his biography, and his studies, see Georges Tamer, ed., *Die Koranhermeneutik von Günter Lüling* (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2018). This volume is dedicated to a critical reassessment of the work of Günter Lüling, and in the introductory chapter ("Günter Lüling: Leben, Werk und Fall," 1–17) the Editor pieces together the events following the diffusion of his controversial theses. See also, in particular, Holger M. Zellentin, "Q 96 *Sūrat al-ʿAlaq* between Philology and Polemics: A (Very) Critical Assessment of Günter Lüling's Ur-Qur'ān," in *Die Koranhermeneutik von Günter Lüling*, ed. G. Tamer, 159–85. On the debate following the publication of Luxenberg's book, see Christoph Burgmer, ed., *Streit um den Koran. Die Luxenberg-Debatte: Standpunkte und Hintergründe* (Berlin: Hans Schiler, 2004). Some other studies adopt interpretations based on methods similar to Luling's. See, for example, amongst others, Gabriel Sawma, *The Qur'an: Misinterpreted, Mistranslated, and Misread. The Aramaic Language of the Qur'an* (Plainsboro, NJ: Adibooks.com, 2006); Eduard-Marie Gallez, *Le messie et son prophète. Aux origines de l'Islam*, 2 vols. (Paris: Éditions de Paris, 2005).

scholars; their critical effort seems to go hand in hand with an earlier attitude, established in Christian polemics against Islam, of giving meaning to Islam and to the Qur'an only as a Christian heresy, or as a deformation of Christianity.

The results of this type of research have not left any special impression on the studies of the Qur'an and have also been easily discredited within the areas of linguistic or stylistic analysis. They have little to do with the most recent wave of new attention to parallels coming from Syriac literature cited at the beginning of this chapter. Yet, the prudence of the latter is, in many cases, a stylistic and tonal choice more than a standpoint that is substantially different from those who hypothesize that parts of the Qur'an possibly originate in an Aramaic-Syriac lectionary, adapted and translated into Arabic during the time of Muḥammad. In both cases, the prehistory of the Qur'an could only be made up by a concrete, pre-existing text or texts originally in another language—Aramaic or Syriac—that was later incorporated into the Qur'an without establishing whether or not a figure like the Prophet Muḥammad played a role in an operation of this type. While the less explicit studies often did not go as far as making these last claims, they are still just as clear in suggesting that some material of Christian origin may have been inserted into the Qur'an we possess today.

In conclusion, numerous Qur'anic studies have discussed, starting from the contents of the Qur'an, eventual influences or even, in some cases, different origins of parts that were then incorporated into the Arabic text. Often they seem convincing in the analysis of several passages, for example, until they are surpassed by alternative interpretations that may highlight affinities that are just as difficult to negate. The overall view that emerges is that the Qur'an highlights a series of characteristics that recall the religious reality of Late Antiquity as a whole, and the intimate relationship, above all, with Jewish and Christian traditions, as the Qur'an itself affirms.

The difficulties and idiosyncrasies of the Arabic text of the Qur'an lend themselves to different interpretations, which bring to light its problematic nature, its enormous interpretative appeal, and, ultimately, its significant capacity to support different interpretative modes. These, however, often seem characterized by modern cultural trends and by the outcome of the various studies that claim to have discovered the key to understanding the Qur'an, deduced from their own cultural models, when not from their own religious faith, in order to explain the history of the formation of the Qur'anic text.

The contradictions that derive from these studies reflect the positions of the scholars who have written them more than the conclusions at which they have arrived, which too often demonstrate a circularity in reasoning that does not facilitate advances in Qur'anic studies overall. Here, as elsewhere, research risks constructing arguments in a polemical key to argue for predetermined positions rather

than building constant progress based on previous research. Many elements seem to suggest the possibility that the Qur'an we possess has traces or marks of other texts that have converged and were then combined with the revelations attributed to Muḥammad, even though neither internal analysis nor reference to external sources have corroborated this hypothesis in an indisputable manner.

3.2 Redaction and canonization

The Qur'an has been passed down orally and in manuscript form since the earliest generations of Muslims. The ambivalence regarding what is defined as *Qur'ān*, that is, recitation on the one hand or written text on the other, is embodied in this dual channel of expression and diffusion of the text that, in substance, continues today, since the Qur'an is still a written, printed text, but also a text that is learned by heart in Qur'anic schools. The diffusion of the Qur'anic text also continues through recitation, and we must never underestimate the role of oral transmission and the rules that substantiate it. This significance regarding the factor of recitation recalls the formal supremacy granted to this same mode of transmission of the prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) or of other forms of knowledge in which a bond between master and disciple plays a fundamental role in the communication and preservation of a text.

It is in this cultural context that the first testimony of the Qur'anic text's being recorded in writing is attested. It probably already occurred in some form during the lifetime of Muḥammad, and it continued in a more organized way after his death, through a process that later led to the first realizations of manuscript codices that included the entire sacred text. The history of these first collections and the nature of the text so transcribed are known to us mainly thanks to the Islamic exegetical tradition. In recent years, however, the results of the first investigations of some particularly early manuscripts, such as those discovered in Sanaa in 1972, along with more complex studies of other manuscripts scattered throughout libraries worldwide, have allowed the contents of the Islamic tradition to be tested against direct manuscript witnesses.

Consequently, the history of the redaction of the Qur'an and its establishment in a more or less stable form have been analyzed using evidence from Islamic exegetical discussions and from the earliest extant manuscript testimonies, which provide incontrovertible historical data. The first result of this investigation is that a form of the text very close to what we have today was already circulating in the 7th century. Therefore, any hypothesis that the Qur'an was first collected into codex form at a later date is to be discarded. The second result is that manuscript testimonies of the earliest versions of the Qur'an, even though

they featured a text that was already substantially stable in its foundational shape, do not, however, hand down a definitive and finalized text. Furthermore, the history of the Qur'an's first redaction, manuscript diffusion, first edition, and later print distribution, are the product of human activity. As often occurs with texts of any kind, these processes support different beliefs, follow innovative principles, and introduce errors of various types, so that even a text that is closed in essence may be subject to inevitable instability in terms of its details.

Some of these phenomena are confirmed and even made official by the exegetical tradition. Other phenomena, less evident, such as those that accompanied the early printing of the Qur'an, are important in order to measure the different results of a critical spirit and the definition of the sacred text in various situations and historical conditions.

3.2.1 ʿUthmān's Vulgate and the first versions

The Qur'an itself and the later Islamic traditions include variegated data on the nature of the revelation as a book and in written form, alongside its nature as a word recited out loud. The Qur'anic terminology connected to the concept of book (*kitāb*) has been discussed above (pp. 81–83). It has been rendered even more binding by later traditions that describe the entire Qur'an as having already been communicated to Muḥammad during Gabriel's first visit, while reporting that he was then made to forget the text. It is also supported by all of the attestations, not very numerous but still significant, that speak of scribes and partial transcriptions of the revelation during the life of Muḥammad.

Text no. 62: The Scripture

Thus We have sent down the Scripture to you.
Those to whom We have given the Scripture believe in it;
and among those people are some who believe in it.
Only the unbelievers deny Our signs.
You did not recite any Scripture before this
nor did you write it with your right hand.
In that case those who follow falsehood would have doubted. (Qur. 29:47–48)

For example, Qur. 29:48 (Text no. 62) refers to writing. In addition, some Islamic historical sources testify to or at least insinuate the real idea that a certain order to transcribe the sacred text was already inspired in or carried out by Muḥammad. An eventuality of this sort is generally refuted in favor of the plausibility of a partial intervention by the Prophet, rather than a complete redaction. Neither the Islamic exegetical tradition nor most Western scholars went so far

as to hypothesize that the Prophet himself had published the Qur'an in its current form to such an extent that he accordingly would become the protagonist of the revelation both in its reception and in its redaction.[148]

The Islamic tradition clarified how events developed in various testimonies that come together in the most authoritative collections of traditions. According to these traditions, numerous Companions of the prophet Muḥammad had memorized parts of the revelation, and some had even written fragments on different materials, including makeshift ones. Such conditions and the outcome of the battle of Yamāma (632 or 633), which caused the death of many reciters (*qurrāʾ*) of the Qur'an, may have pushed caliphs Abū Bakr (r. 632–634) and ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 634–644) – not after expressing some reluctance to do something that Muḥammad had not done – to designate a scribe of Muḥammad, Zayd b. Thābit, to copy the revelations collected on folios (*ṣuḥuf*) that, at the death of ʿUmar, were passed down to his daughter, Ḥafṣa.

During the second part of his reign, the third caliph, ʿUthmān (r. 644–656), in order to address the problem of different versions, decided to entrust several scribes, coordinated by Zayd b. Thābit himself, with the creation of a codex (*muṣḥaf*) that would serve as a single, official version. ʿUthmān nominated this commission and ordered that the folios in the possession of Ḥafṣa be copied, and then ordered that copies be prepared to be sent to the most important centers of the Caliphate, along with an order to destroy and burn the copies of the other versions, wherever they were present.

The work of ʿUthmān was, accordingly, a recension and not a collation, which had already been carried out. The same Islamic traditions attribute an active role to the military commander Hudhayfa b. al-Yamān, who was scandalized upon hearing the Qur'an recited in a different manner and who issued a specific injunction, in the presence of different interpretations and opinions, to make the established text conform to the Quraysh dialect of Arabic.[149]

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148 John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'ān* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 117–89, reviews these traditions to refute them and support his argument, not supported by others, that the Qur'an was finished and redacted while the Prophet was alive. The question is also posed at the beginning of Nöldeke's work: Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 209–10 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Vol. 2, 1–3). The criticisms and the doubts of earlier scholars as to this reconstruction and as to ʿUthmān's role are reviewed and analyzed by Bell and Watt, *Introduction to the Qur'an*, 40–50.

149 See Abū Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-maṣāḥif*, 11–34. On various aspects regarding this event, besides the more general works cited in this chapter: Claude Gilliot, "Les traditions sur la composition ou coordination du Coran (*taʾlīf al-Qurʾān*)," in *Das Prophetenḥadīṯ: Dimensionen einer islamischen Literaturgattung*, ed. Claude Gilliot and Tilman Nagel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 14–39. On the role of Ḥafṣa, particularly debated in recent times, see Ruqayya

Later exegetical and historiographic literature agree on these points and on the central and definitive role of ʿUthmān. The relationship of ʿUthmān's Vulgate to the previous attempts, such as that of Abū Bakr and ʿUmar and the other circulating versions, has not been clarified, also on account of the presence of alternative versions of the traditions regarding this sequence of events. The versions chosen by al-Bukhārī (d. 870) in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, the most prestigious collection of oral reports attribute to Muḥammad, did not erase the documented alternatives, but they have clearly guided the related concepts. The exclusion of the Prophet's wife ʿĀʾisha and his son-in-law ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, for example, from any precise role in this process is another significant element that provokes several considerations.

No less significant in the Islamic accounts of the redaction of the Qur'an are several elements that deserve to be further stressed, such as the problematic nature of the earliest attestations, the use of makeshift and even disorganized materials that accompanied the expansion of Muslim conquests, and the political role of the caliphs in the affirmation of the need for the preservation and imposition of one version. If one accepts this reconstruction, what follows is that the Qur'an became a written text on account of political intervention and not on account of the will of the Prophet.[150]

Y. Khan, "Did a Woman Edit the Qur'ān? Hafṣa (sic) and Her Famed 'Codex'," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84 (2014): 174–216; Sharon Silzell, "Ḥafṣa and *al-Muṣḥaf*: Women and the Written Qur'ān in the Early Centuries of Islam," *Hawwa: Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World* 13 (2015): 25–50; Sean W. Anthony and Catherine L. Bronson, "Did Ḥafṣah Edit the Qur'an? A Response with Notes on the Codices of the Prophet's Wives," *Journal of the International Qur'ānic Studies Association* 1 (2016): 93–125; and, in particular, Aisha Geissinger, "No, a Woman Did Not 'Edit the Qur'an': Towards a Methodologically Coherent Approach to a Tradition Portraying a Woman and Written Quranic Materials," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85/2 (2017): 416–45. It should be noted that the use, in certain traditions, of the verb *jamaʿa* ("to gather," "to collect") is anything but clear and could indicate knowing the entire Qur'an by heart. On Ḥudhayfa, see Abū Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-maṣāḥif*, 18f.; Gautier H. A. Juynboll, *Encyclopedia of Canonical Ḥadīth* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2007), 231–33; on the themes discussed here, see Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 213–15 and 223–34 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Vol. 2, 5–6 and 11–27); Blachère, *Introduction au Coran*, 1–22; Dye, "Le corpus coranique"; Sean W. Anthony, "Two 'Lost' Sūras of the Qur'ān: Sūrat al-Khalʿ and Sūrat al-Ḥafd between Textual and Ritual Canon (1st–3rd/7th–9th Centuries)," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 46 (2019): 67–112. On the role, relevance, and even meaning of the *qurrāʾ*, see the discussion and the sources cited in Mustafa Shah, "The Quest for the Origins of the *Qurrāʾ* in the Classical Islamic Tradition," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 7 (2005): 1–35.

150 See Abū Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-maṣāḥif*, 37–48. For an analysis of the Islamic traditions on the first phase of redaction of the Qur'an and of the questions discussed here, see Harald Motzki, "The Collection of the Qur'ān: A Reconsideration of Western Views in Light of Recent

The critical debate on the acceptability or plausibility of such a reconstruction in Western studies has given rise to various assessments. Many aspects of this reconstruction of events are not yet clear, especially regarding which form of the text is referred to in these accounts, that is, whether it was the basic text made up of the consonantal skeleton of the script (*rasm*) alone or a version that was more or less defined in its division into suras, as they essentially are today.

The late character of this testimony, once again, paves the way for further doubts, even though, in this case, the Islamic reconstruction is considered historically plausible based on the principle of discrepancy that does not find any reason for creating, *a posteriori*, such a problematic process.

Other evidence related to the history of the imposition of a single version of the Qur'anic text ca. 650 CE that is affirmed by the Islamic traditions is the embarrassing phenomenon of the circulation of alternative versions of the Qur'an attributed to specific transmitters (the codices of the Companions, *maṣāḥif aṣ-ṣaḥāba*) and to the locations of their diffusion (the codices of the Garrison Towns, *maṣāḥif al-amṣār*). These were found in the first centers affected by the conquests and by the consequent expansion of the nascent Islamic Caliphate, such as Kufa, Basra, Damascus, and so on.

The most important of these other pre-ʿUthmānic codices are attributed to ʿAbd Allāh b. Masʿūd (d. 653) in Kufa, to Ubayy b. Kaʿb (d. ca. 650) in Damascus,

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Methodological Developments," *Der Islam* 78 (2001): 1–34; Viviane Comerro, *Les traditions sur la constitution du muṣḥaf de ʿUthmān* (Beirut-Würzburg: Orient-Institut Beirut-Ergon Verlag, 2012); Nicolai Sinai, "When Did the Consonantal Skeleton of the Quran Reach Closure? Part I" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 77/2 (2014): 273–92; Nicolai Sinai, "When Did the Consonantal Skeleton of the Quran Reach Closure? Part II" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 77/3 (2014): 509–21; de Prémare, *Aux origines du Coran*; Gilliot, "Une reconstruction critique du Coran ou comment en finir avec les merveilles de la lampe d'Aladin"; Claude Gilliot, "Oralité et écriture dans la genèse, la transmission et la fixation du Coran," in *Oralité & écriture dans la Bible & le Coran*, ed. Philippe Cassuto and Pierre Larcher (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2014), 99–142; Alphonse Mingana, "The Transmission of the Kuran," *Muslim World* 7 (1917): 223–32; Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 251–78 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Vol. 2, 47–80); Muḥammad M. Al-Aʿẓamī, *The History of the Qur'ānic Text from Revelation to Compilation. A Comparative Study with the Old and New Testaments* (Leicester: UK Islamic Academy, 2003); Guillaume Dye, "Le corpus coranique: questions autour de sa canonisation," in *Le Coran des historiens*, ed. M.A. Amir-Moezzi and G. Dye, 868–82. See a summary of the Islamic theses in Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, Vol. 2, 377–421 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, Vol. 1, 216–36), according to whom it was a gradual process in terms of the preservation and organization of materials written in various forms, on various media, and possessed by several precise figures. See in particular Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, Vol. 2, 220 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, Vol. 1, 390), where it is reported that ʿUthmān gathered twelve men of the Quraysh and several *anṣār* when he wanted to fix the version of the Qur'an.

and to Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī (d. ca. 670) in Basra. Miqdād al-Aswad (d. 653) may have been the name of another collector/editor of a version of the text based on Ḥafṣa's folios diffused in Homs, as well as the one attributed to ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 661), at the origin of Shiʿi claims to possess a superior version of the sacred text (pp. 170–74). None of these editions survived, while indirect information on their form and on some of their contents, such as the different order of the suras they included and other particularities of certain suras and passages, excluding that of Miqdād, comes from later exegetical sources.

The versions of the Qur'an of Ibn Masʿūd in Kufa and of Ubayy b. Kaʿb in Syria are seen to be the most relevant and influential, and that of Ibn Masʿūd as the most resilient over time. This is despite the mandatory destruction ordered by ʿUthmān that evidently was not completely carried out, since, according to Islamic historical sources, Kufa was the site of the greatest resistance to adoption of the Vulgate and to destruction of the version most widely used locally. While none of the non-ʿUthmānic codices has survived, numerous variants attributed to these alternative codices and to the testimony of other Companions, in the order of thousands, are recorded in exegetical literature. They pertain, first, to vocalization, second, to a lesser extent, to the consonantal text, and third, to the organization of the text (Text no. 63).

Of all the variants indicated, Ibn Masʿūd's version seems to address ambiguities in the ʿUthmān's text as well as proposing convincing corrections to some particularities or errors. This is so even if scholars are unable to determine which version had priority or to define the relationship between these codices and the oral versions that preceded its being recorded in writing. Overall, the non-ʿUthmānic codices exhibit a certain unity and consonance with regard to the variants they propose. Ubayy's codex contains some passages that match those of Ibn Masʿūd, and often includes the same variants, even though he presents other passages that match those in ʿUthmān's Vulgate, while Ibn Masʿūd's has variants. Among the divergences indicated, the most evident is that Ibn Masʿūd's codex omitted the Opening (no. 1) and the last two suras (nos. 113 and 114), while Ubayy added two other suras that were absent in the Vulgate of ʿUthmān, Sūrat al-Ḥafd and Sūrat al-Khalʿ.[151]

Text no. 63: Variants attributed to Ibn Masʿūd's Codex

And [by] **that which has created** male and female. (Qur. 92:3 - ʿUthmān)

151 On the two suras added by Ubayy, see the analysis by Anthony, "Two 'Lost' Sūras of the Qur'ān: Sūrat al-Khalʿ and Sūrat al-Ḥafd between Textual and Ritual Canon (1st–3rd/7th–9th Centuries)." See the text in Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 241 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. 2, 34).

> And [by] male and female. (Qur. 92:3 - Ibn Masʿūd)
>
> Lodge them where you lodge, according to your means. (Qur. 65:6 - ʿUthmān)
> Lodge them where you lodge, **and provide for them** according to your means. (Qur.65:6 - Ibn Masʿūd)
>
> The thief, male and female:
> cut off their hands. (Qur. 5:38 - ʿUthmān)
>
> The **thieves**, male and female:
> cut off their **right** hands. (Qur. 5:38 - Ibn Masʿūd)

Despite these particularities, these codices as well confirm the logic of listing the suras in approximate decreasing order of length, highlighting, if their historical testimony is accepted, that an organization or defined order already existed, even though some rare traditions declare that the presumed codex of ʿAlī may have been organized differently and followed chronological order.

Concurrent versions, later destroyed, with particular resistance in the case of Ibn Masʿūd's version in Kufa, included variants in structure and also in the consonantal skeleton of a certain importance, though not distorting the entire contents of revelation. While the details are not always clarified by the tradition itself, it can be inferred that the units of the suras were more or less defined and that the variations were due to a different order of suras or to the differential exclusion or inclusion of few, brief suras.[152]

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152 On the various versions, see above all Hythem Sidky, "On the Regionality of Qur'ānic Codices," *Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association* 5 (2020): 133–210; and Edmund Beck, "Studien zur Geschichte der kufischen Koranlesung in den beiden ersten Jahrhunderten. I," *Orientalia* 17 (1948): 326–55; Edmund Beck, "Studien zur Geschichte der kufischen Koranlesung in den beiden ersten Jahrhunderten. II," *Orientalia* 19 (1950): 328–50; Edmund Beck, "Studien zur Geschichte der kufischen Koranlesung in den ersten zwei Jahrhunderten. III," *Orientalia* 20 (1951): 316–28; Edmund Beck, "Studien zur Geschichte der kufischen Koranlesung in den ersten zwei Jahrhunderten. IV," *Orientalia* 22 (1953): 59–78; Edmund Beck, "Die Kodizesvarianten der Amṣār," *Orientalia* 16 (1947): 353–76; Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 235–50 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Vol. 2, 27–47). On the differences between the various versions of the Qurʿan of the Companions and the first pre-ʿUthmanic versions, as well as later ones, see Abū Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-maṣāḥif*, 49–58 and 60–102, and on the codex of Ibn Masʿūd in particular, 64–82. On the critique of Ibn Masʿūd, see Ramon Harvey, "The Legal Epistemology of Qur'anic Variants: The Readings of Ibn Masʿūd in Kufan *Fiqh* and the Ḥanafī *Madhhab*," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 19/1 (2017): 72–101; Edmund Beck, "Die b. Masʿūdvarianten bei al-Farrāʾ. I," *Orientalia* 25/4 (1956): 353–83; Edmund Beck, "Die b. Masʿūdvarianten bei al-Farrāʾ. II," *Orientalia* 28/2 (1959): 186–205; Edmund Beck, "Die b. Masʿūdvarianten bei al-Farrāʾ. III," *Orientalia* 28/3 (1959): 230–56; Déroche, *Le Coran, une histoire plurielle*, 150–56; Edmund Beck, "Die Zuverlässigkeit der Überlieferung von ausserʿuṯmanischen Varianten bei al-Farrāʾ," *Orientalia* 23 (1954): 412–35; Al-Aʿẓamī, *The History of the Qur'ānic Text from Revelation to*

Once redacted, the version of the Qur'an sponsored by ʿUthmān was to be disseminated and sent to areas that had alternative or deviating versions. The Islamic traditions include, overall, the customary profusion of accounts regarding the number of copies sent by him with the aim of covering the Islamic polity, which was being expanded by conquest in those same years. These accounts show signs of evident interference due to the subsequent historical conditions, since the theme of important Qur'anic codices could be used by partisan sources to tout the role and significance of certain locations and regions.

According to some accounts, three copies were made, for Basra, Kufa, and Damascus. Other accounts claim that seven were made, adding Mecca, Yemen, and Bahrein or other locations, with particular attention to Arabian centers. They also report that a copy was kept in the capital, Medina, which does not clarify whether that copy consisted of Ḥafṣa's folios or was an initial copy produced from them.[153]

Once again, the political element is the most obvious factor in this process. ʿUthmān was trying to impose a single text from the capital in Medina, in the midst of a political reality radically changed by conquests outside the Arabian Peninsula. By doing so, he was trying to put a brake on the inevitable dilution of authority. From this perspective, the redaction of an official version of the Qur'an represented a significant, even symbolic act emphasizing the centrality of Medina as the capital of the Islamic polity before the crises and divisions that followed the murder of ʿUthmān (656), which ended with the advent of the Umayyad dynasty (661) and the shift of the capital to Damascus. The operation was, therefore, a success: the text we possess today is, in substance, ʿUthmān's Qur'an, and the variability confirmed and admitted in the Islamic exegetical tradition and in the *qirāʾāt* does not alter this view in its essentials. It merely affects the details, allowing for variation that is for the most part managed and circumscribed within the confines of the ʿUthmānic version.

Compilation. On all the different versions and their variants, and in particular a list of the variants in Ibn Masʿūd and Ubayy, see Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 431–57 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Vol. 3, 60–97). Ibn Masʿūd himself organized a resistance to the destruction of his codex, which cost him corporal punishments in Medina. See Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 307–8 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Vol. 2, 115–16). Behnam Sadeghi and Uwe Bergmann, "The Codex of a Companion of the Prophet and the Qur'ān of the Prophet," *Arabica* 57/4 (2010): 343–436, believe that Sanaa I is a non-ʿUthmānic codex of one of the Companions. On the variants in the *rasm*, see Dye, "Le corpus coranique: questions autour de sa canonisation," 858; also see, on these topics, Blachère, *Introduction au Coran*, 51–70.

153 A review of Islamic traditions on the practices of vocalization and punctuation of the consonantal text is given in Abū Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-maṣāḥif*, 158–67; Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 305–7 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Vol. 2, 112–14).

However, the turmoil of early Islam surrounding the preservation of the revelation did not verify one version unequivocally and eliminate all others. Some of these alternative codices were not destroyed, for various reasons, either exegetical or material ones, in an environment where rag or pulp paper had not yet been introduced and the use of parchment remained very costly. The Islamic tradition since the 8th century, and at least until the 10th century, explicitly affirmed that ʿUthmān's version was to be preferred over that of Ibn Masʿūd. These directives show that the Vulgate was gradually gaining validity but also, at the same time, that Ibn Masʿūd's version was still in circulation.

Moreover, the Islamic tradition reports that ʿUthmān's project did not resolve all of the problems connected to the stability of the Qur'anic text. Some significant questions remained open, in addition to the survival and circulation of alternative codices that should have been destroyed.

The most important issues stemmed from problems regarding the handwriting and the formal apparatus of the text that ʿUthmān's Qur'an did not definitively resolve. An ambiguous text based only on the *rasm*, possibly established as an *aide-mémoire* for those who already knew the content by heart or that derived from the primacy still given to oral preservation, did not represent an optimal and definitive solution for written transmission. In addition, the Islamic exegetical tradition pointed out alleged grammatical errors and erroneous expressions in ʿUthmān's Vulgate that even ʿUthmān himself would supposedly have noted, though defending, according to certain versions, its preservation, so as not to pave the way for revisions and so as not to attribute them to the incompetence of the scribes. The prevalent tendency throughout Islamic history would be to attenuate and explain away these supposed errors, attributing them to the uniqueness and originality of Qur'anic expressions. Another complex element is the variability, ascribable to the three or six copies disseminated in various directions as a result of the ʿUthmānic project.

Islamic literature recognizes some local variants in the textual forms ascribable to the ʿUthmānic codices of the Qur'an, and not to the different pre-ʿUthmānic revisions, even though only limited extra-exegetical documentation exists. A few lists detail divergences on a regional basis, engendering several well-founded doubts on the possible later commingling of variants of one or the other type.[154]

154 On errors in the Vulgate and proposals regarding corrections, see Devin J. Stewart, "Notes on Medieval and Modern Emendations of the Qur'ān," in *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context*, ed. G.S. Reynolds, 225–48; Behnam Sadeghi, "Criteria for Emending the Text of the Qur'ān," in *Law and Tradition in Classical Islamic Thought: Studies in Honor of Professor Hossein Modarressi*, ed. Michael Cook et al. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 21–41;

The most pressing problem regarded the insufficiency of the ʿUthmānic Vulgate for the purpose of stabilizing the text of the Qur'an. The dots that distinguish the letters such as *ṣād* and *ḍād* from each other, the vocalization, and the division into verses constituted ideal terrain for the proliferation of variant readings that insisted on a text that was substantially defined in broad terms. The Islamic tradition affirms that a subsequent intervention on the Qur'anic text of the Vulgate was again undertaken by the Caliph, since further steps towards the stabilization and canonization of the text were necessary.

During the caliphate of the Umayyad ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 685–705), the Caliph himself and, above all, his minister al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf (d. 714) – widely judged as one of the greatest experts on the Arabic language of his time – imposed revisions on the text. These steps must be considered as forming part of a more sweeping policy on the part of the Caliph. Once the "counter-caliph" ʿAbd Allāh b. az-Zubayr (d. 692) had been defeated, after the Siege of Mecca and following nine years of insidious and dangerous fracturing of the Empire, ʿAbd al-Malik adopted a policy of control and Islamization of a series of practices within his domain.

This policy included the use of Arabic exclusively in the inscriptions on coinage and in the imperial bureaucracy and the construction of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. The project to rectify certain problems in the Qur'anic text that required intervention, in his opinion, must be added to the other two better known reforms. This second project of definition and "normalization" of the text under the caliphal aegis of ʿAbd al-Malik took place between 703 and 705, and various people contributed to it under the guidance of his powerful general and minister al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf.

The actual extent of al-Ḥajjāj's interventions is not specified by the Islamic sources. Some of these sources discuss the *rasm* of eleven words, the order of the verses and suras, or other issues regarding orthography, but Christian sources and a few other testimonies allow us to deduce that it was a much more substantial intervention, almost implying a new edition.

The project also contemplated the counting of the words and letters in order to prevent variations in the consonantal skeleton and, above all, to close the door definitively on the circulation of Ibn Masʿūd's codex. The latter version

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Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 389–91 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Vol. 3, 1–3). On these topics, see also Sinai, "When Did the Consonantal Skeleton of the Quran Reach Closure?" On the variants of ʿUthmān's copies and resulting problems, see Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 394–402 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Vol. 3, 8–18). On the primacy of orality in the determination of ʿUthmān's *rasm*, see also Larcher, *Sur le Coran. Nouvelles approches linguistiques*, 31–55.

still had not disappeared, especially in Kufa, where the Shi'i community was strong and where, evidently, an alternative version to ʿUthmān's was considered preferable, both for ideological and for devotional reasons.

The stabilization of punctuation, vocalization, and even the division into verses was accompanied, in this case as well, by an order to destroy divergent codices during the reign of the Caliph. This order, like that of ʿUthmān, also met with substantial success, since no other contrary recension of the Qur'an exists. The Islamic traditions allow us to infer, besides the objective of standardization, another purpose of this project. Producing copies that were sent to the cities and deposited in the large mosques, al-Ḥajjāj would have introduced and favored the liturgical use of certain copies, produced in a uniform format of considerable size, suitable for use in places of worship.[155]

The historical record of ʿAbd al-Malik's and al-Ḥajjāj's interventions is significant, above all, because it attests to a fluidity of the text even after the promulgation of ʿUthmān's Vulgate, possibly desired or accepted in order to account for different interpretations. The consequence was a problematic lack of closure of the Qur'anic text, which was still open to intervention. The tradition lists these interventions, playing down their extent, since they would have involved the essential decision of adding dots to the consonantal skeleton in order to avoid ambiguities between similar letters — ambiguities that are, for example, documented by other variants demonstrated by other admissible readings (pp. 163–69). Even this choice, made explicitly in order to overcome existing ambiguities, aimed to consolidate the certain stability previously reached by the form of the consonantal skeleton officially promulgated by ʿUthmān, and it succeeded in doing so.

155 The presumed eleven passages revised by al-Ḥajjāj are listed in Abū Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-maṣāḥif*, 59 and 130; Déroche, *Le Coran, une histoire plurielle*, 156–167; Sinai, "When Did the Consonantal Skeleton of the Quran Reach Closure?"; Omar Hamdan, *Studien zur Kanonisierung des Korantextes. Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrīs Beiträge zur Geschichte des Korans* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006), 135–74; Hamdan, "The Second *Maṣāḥif* Project"; Alfred-Louis de Prémare, "ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān et le processus de constitution du Coran," in *Die dunklen Anfänge: neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islams*, ed. K.-H. Ohlig and G.-R. Puin, 178–210. See Estelle Whelan, "Forgotten Witness. Evidence of the Early Codification of the Qur'ān," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118/1 (1998): 1–14, on the antiquity of canonization and comparison with other testimonies of the Qur'anic text, like the inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock. See also Dye, "Le corpus coranique: questions autour de sa canonisation," 890–98, on the concrete modifications made to the *rasm* by al-Ḥajjāj according to Islamic literature and on Christian sources that overstate the nature of his interventions on the Qur'an.

3.2.2 Variants and readings

The operation undertaken by ʿUthmān and completed or further perfected by ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj established a definitive form of the text in broad terms in the consonantal skeleton founded on fifteen graphemes of the Arabic script, with which only the diacritic marks allowed the twenty-eight different letters that comprise the Arabic alphabet to be distinguished. A situation of this type was inevitably susceptible to generating different variants that bend this skeletal script to different probable interpretations, made possible by the differential dotting of letters or by different vocalizations, an aspect of further complexity, besides the dissemination of some variants that affect the consonantal skeleton of the ʿUthmānic recension.

The relationship between these different types of textual variants is not easily established from the Islamic literary sources, in which there is a sort of review or controlled study, examination and critical comparison of variant readings. These are enriched, in turn, by some divergences that contribute overall to creating significant stability of the text, more than the variation of details, which are, all in all, secondary. This does not diminish the historical relevance of this type of information, and it demonstrates the clear division between the idealization of the divine word and the problematic divergences of its final rendering by human communities after the death of the Prophet.

The variability of the Qur'anic text was not only generated by the issues connected to the imposition of the Vulgate promulgated by ʿUthmān and the resistance dictated by the presumed dissemination of other versions connected to early Islamic figures in various centers of the Empire. Yet other variations were brought about by the various possible interpretations of the consonantal skeleton of the text as it had been established by ʿUthmān and by the problematic and ambiguous nature of a text recorded in that fashion. Indeed, the later exegetical tradition affirms the existence of further possibilities of reception of the various versions of the Vulgate of ʿUthmān. In the Muslim imaginary, this can be explained by the passing of generations and the legitimate spaces left open in a textual form with possible and implicit further areas of reception of different interpretations, among a spectrum of possibilities, theologically perceived as already contained within the divine word.

The effect of oral recitation or written transmission in determining these alternative possibilities of interpretation of the text must be seen as complementary. In the beginning, the oral factor must have played a more meaningful role, both because of the proximity to the memory of the Prophet and the first reciters, but also because of the limited number of manuscripts. As time passed, although the oral recited communication of the Qur'an was maintained, and,

therefore, its being learned by heart was of special significance, the Qur'an came to be defined by the first generations as a text more often handed down in writing. With the advent of pulp paper in the 8th century, moreover, Islamic civilization became a civilization of the book and of written culture.

Copies of the Qur'an, no longer recorded exclusively on costly parchment, began to circulate in increasing numbers and in different formats. Even in the case of written dissemination, after the initial period, it is necessary to distinguish between the depiction that the Islamic tradition offers and what we know from the manuscript testimony that, after the first three centuries of Islam, became more and more consistent.

Starting in the 8th century, by virtue of this situation, Muslim historical sources and exegesis gather evidence and sometimes testimonies of possible different "readings," and of other variations determined by the interpretative spaces offered by the transmission of the text by later generations, although in accordance with some precise interpretive principles that were defined over time. A reading was admissible in the presence of identifiable lines of transmission, in accordance with the custom of traditional verification of sound transmission, following the ʿUthmānic consonantal skeleton, and provided that it accorded with proper Arabic linguistic usage. The traditional determination of the degree of acceptability of variant readings or recitations (*qirāʾāt*) was a distinctly exegetical operation. However, it is interesting that experts on grammar contributed to this process no less importantly in the 10th and 11th centuries, a period that was also notable for the simultaneously massive appearance of grammatical argumentation in exegetical literature and in the interpretative analysis of the Qur'anic text (pp. 202–12).

According to the Islamic tradition, these different possible interpretations and readings were preserved in precise lines of transmission that "recited" ʿUthmān's Qur'an in slightly different manners, inserting further spaces for variability that were inevitably subject to expansion with the passage of time and with the diffusion of lines of transmission in multiple directions.

These spaces of variability were, in practice, differences of various types related to cases of nouns, moods and persons of verbs, or the presence or absence of the letter *alif* (*ā*) (pp. 180–81). It was an *a posteriori* exegetical process that recognized some lines rather than others, such as those closer to an ideal, and then considered them acceptable. This occurred no earlier than the 10th century, when the same exegetical tradition and some particular authors defined a finite number of readings – seven, ten, or fourteen – as admissible "modalities" of the same ideal text represented by ʿUthmān's Vulgate. By virtue of this fact and as its consequence, the Vulgate is a text that does not exist in its own supposed, stable original form, but rather exists as a collection of the many historical

concretizations of these readings. It is, evidently, a product regarding which the recitation that is traditionally passed down begins to hold lesser weight at the expense of a mainly literary speculation, in an era that can already count on consistent exegetical production.

The sources attest to an uninterrupted practice of recitation and to the participation of numerous experts who undertook the functions of reciter/reader of the Qur'an, from which the choice and canonization of the seven most widely disseminated forms, or the ten or fourteen acceptable readings (*qirāʾāt*), are derived. The formalization of a fixed number of variant readings is mainly owed to Ibn Mujāhid's (d. 936) work, as he was the first to limit the number to seven, then to ad-Dānī (d. 1052), author of a considerable number of treatises focusing on various aspects of the Qur'anic text.[156] The readings that were considered admitted were themselves stabilized by at least two others who transmitted them, considered students of the primary readers, and this provided further

156 See, in particular, Abū Bakr b. Mujāhid, *Kitāb as-Sabʿa fī al-qirāʾāt*, ed. Shawqī Ḍayf (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1980). For ad-Dānī, see Otto Pretzl, ed., *Orthographie und Punktierung des Korans: Zwei Schriften von Abū ʿAmr ʿUthmān ibn Saʿīd ad-Dānī* (Istanbul-Leipzig: Staatsdruckerei-Brockhaus, 1932). His most important work in this area was Abū ʿAmr ad-Dānī, *at-Taysīr fī al-qirāʾāt as-sabʿ*, ed. Otto Pretzl (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1984). On his works, see Shady H. Nasser, "The Two-*Rāwī* Canon before and after ad-Dānī (d. 444/1052–3): The Role of Abū ṭ-Ṭayyib Ibn Ghalbūn (d. 389/998) and the Qayrawān/Andalus School in Creating the Two-*Rāwī* Canon," *Oriens* 41 (2013): 41–75. Other important authors were also Makkī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 437/1045), who wrote many works on these topics, and the later Abū al-Khayr Muḥammad b. al-Jazarī, *an-Nashr fī al-qirāʾāt al-ʿashr*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1998). On the Islamic literature that defines readings and aspects connected to the Qur'anic text, see Shady H. Nasser, *The Second Canonization of the Qur'ān (324/936). Ibn Mujāhid and the Founding of the Seven Readings* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2020); Muhammad A. Abdel Haleem, "Qur'ānic Orthography. The Written Representation of the Recited Text of the Qur'ān," *Islamic Quarterly* 34 (1994): 171–92. For a profile of this literature, see Otto Pretzl, "Die Wissenschaft der Koranlesung (*ʿilm al-qirāʾa*). Ihre literarischen Quellen und ihre Aussprachegrundlagen (*uṣūl*)," *Islamica* 6 (1935–36): 1–47 and 230–46; Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 545–83 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Vol. 3, 205–48); Michael Cook, "The Stemma of the Regional Codices of the Koran," *Graeco-Arabica* 9–10 (2004): 89–104. On the role played by Ibn Mujāhid, see Shady H. Nasser, *The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qur'ān. The Problem of* Tawātur *and the Emergence of* Shawādhdh (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2013), 35–78; Shady H. Nasser, "Revisiting Ibn Mujāhid's Position on the Seven Canonical Readings: Ibn ʿĀmir's Problematic Reading of *Kun fa-yakūna*," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 17/1 (2015): 85–113; Christopher Melchert, "Ibn Mujāhid and the establishment of the seven Qur'anic readings," *Studia Islamica* 91 (2000): 5–22; Okvath Csaba, "Ibn Mujāhid and Canonical Recitations," *Islamic Sciences* 12 (2014): 115–49; Mustafa Shah, "The Early Arabic Grammarians' Contribution to the Collection and Authentication of Qur'anic Readings: The Prelude to Ibn Mujāhid's *Kitāb al-Sabʿa*," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 6/1 (2004): 72–102.

traditional confirmation of a guaranteed and uninterrupted transmission (*mutawātir*), in which the people involved and the locations of transmission were specified and known.

Accordingly, the textual version, or "reading" of the Medinan Nāfiʿ b. ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān (d. 785) was transmitted by Warsh (d. 812) and Qālūn (d. 835); that of the Kufan ʿĀṣim (d. 745) was transmitted by Shuʿba (d. 809) and Ḥafṣ (d. 796). Similarly, the readings of the Meccan Ibn Kathīr (d. 737), the Damascene Ibn ʿĀmir (d. 736), the Basrian Abū ʿAmr (d. 770), and the Kufan Ḥamza (d. 773) and al-Kisāʾī (d. 804) were propagated by other pairs of successor transmitters. The first two transmissions are the ones that are still most widespread in the Islamic world: that of ʿĀṣim via Ḥafṣ is today the most important and present everywhere, thanks as well to the 1924 Cairo printed edition (pp. 189–90), while transmissions from Nāfiʿ, especially via Warsh, are traditionally present in the Maghreb and Africa.[157]

The identification of the ten or fourteen acceptable readings implies the addition of other names to the seven mentioned above. The three beyond the seven are Abū Jaʿfar b. al-Qaʿqāʿ (d. 747), from Medina, Yaʿqūb al-Ḥaḍramī (d. 821), from Basra, and Khalaf al-Bazzār (d. 844), from Kufa, while the other four that bring the list to fourteen are Ibn Muḥaysin (d. 740), from Mecca, al-Yazīdī (d. 817) and al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728), both from Basra, and al-Aʿmash (d. 765),

157 On the different readings, see Csaba, "Ibn Mujāhid and Canonical Recitations"; Adrian Brockett, "Qur'ān Readings in Kitāb Sībawayhi," *Occasional Papers of the School of Abbasid Studies* 2 (1988): 129–206; Christopher Melchert, "The Relation of the Ten Readings to One Another," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 10/2 (2008): 73–87; Adrian Brockett, "The Value of the Hafṣ and Warsh Transmissions for the Textual History of the Qur'ān," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford-New York: Clarendon Press-Oxford University Press, 1988), 31–45, which underscores the more exegetical nature of some variants; Blachère, *Introduction au Coran*, 102–35. On readings and grammar, see Mustafa Shah, "Exploring the Genesis of Early Arabic Linguistic Thought: Qur'anic Readers and Grammarians of the Kūfan Tradition (Part I)," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 5/1 (2003): 47–78; Mustafa Shah, "Exploring the Genesis of Early Arabic Linguistic Thought: Qur'anic Readers and Grammarians of the Basran Tradition (Part II)," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 5/2 (2003): 1–47; Arthur Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'ān: The Old Codices. The Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif of Ibn Abī Dawūd, together with a Collection of the Variant Readings from the Codices of Ibn Maʿsūd, Ubai, ʿAlī, Ibn ʿAbbās, Anas, Abū Mūsā and Other Early Qur'ānic Authorities Which Present a Type of Text Anterior to That of the Canonical Text of ʿUthmān* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1937); Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 471–583 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Vol. 3, 116–248), esp. 523–24 (or. ed., Vol. 3, 180) in which he argues that the prevalence and greater success of the line of transmission of Ḥafṣ from ʿĀṣim was due to its neutrality and greater conformity to the rules defined by classical Arabic. Dye, "Le corpus coranique: questions autour de sa canonisation," 904, stresses the central role of Iraq.

from Kufa. Their identification and selection obviously did not occur without discussion or the reconciliation of different opinions. Moreover, the Sunni perspective which derives from them is not free from problems, especially with regard to the dissemination and assessment of these traditions.

Besides the names and identities of the experts on recitation, the geographical data is the most significant aspect, in that it brings to light local traditions connected to Muslim centers (*amṣār*) of diffusion and to the form of their Qur'ans, with a predominant role being played by the Iraqi centers. The exegetical literature that reports the differences between the various readings also highlights a clear division between the readings from Kufa, on the one hand, and all of the others, on the other hand, with regard to their characteristics. Mecca, Medina, and Basra agreed more often themselves with respect to Damascus, just as the readings attested from Mecca and Medina were particularly close to each other, while those from the two Iraqi centers, Basra and Kufa, were quite distinct.

The number of seven readings, beyond the symbolic importance of the number itself, could make use of a traditional reference that served to guarantee the acceptability of the principle of seven possible different recited forms of the Qur'anic text. This reference is a saying attributed to Muḥammad and included in several of the more prestigious collections of *ḥadīth* that sanctioned that the Qur'an had been revealed according to seven equally legitimate "letters" (*aḥruf*) (Text no. 64).

Text no. 64: *Ḥadīth* on the seven *aḥruf*

I was told by Yaḥyā from Mālik, from Ibn Shihāb, from ʿUrwa b. az-Zubayr, that ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān b. ʿAbd al-Qāriʾ said that he heard ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb say: I heard Hishām b. Ḥakīm b. Ḥizām recite the Sura of Salvation (Qur. 25) differently from me and it was the Messenger of God, God bless him and grant him salvation, who recited it to me. I was almost on the point of throwing myself at him but I held back until he had finished, and then I dragged him by his cloak until I brought him before the Messenger of God, God bless him and grant him salvation. I said to him: "O Messenger of God, I heard him reciting the Sura of Salvation differently from the way you recited it to me" and the Messenger of God, God bless him and grant him salvation, replied: "Leave him!" and then turning to him he ordered: "Recite, O Hishām!". He recited what I had heard him recite and the Messenger of God, God bless him and grant him salvation, commented, "Thus has it been revealed," and then turning to me he ordered, "Recite," and I recited it. "Thus has it been revealed," commented Muḥammad, "for the Qur'an has been revealed in seven letters (*aḥruf*) and you recite as is most convenient for you."

Mālik b. Anas, *al-Muwaṭṭaʾ*, ed. Bashshār ʿAwwād Maʿrūf, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī 1997), Text no. 540

The relationship between this definition – seven "letters" – and the concrete data of the seven readings of the Qur'an is anything but unequivocal and is,

rather, the product of an exegetical process of recognition and affirmation of the variability that searched, in the saying itself, for a point of reference. The meaning of *aḥruf* is itself subject to different interpretations, not least by Muslim exegetes, for whom they may refer to the Qur'an's various themes, different meanings, different textual forms, the various languages or dialects represented in the sacred text, or, finally, the multiple possibilities of recitation, accentuating the oral and recited nature of the readings. Along these lines, and fulfilling the principle of preservation of the ʿUthmānic text, several commentators of the Qur'an maintain that the seven *aḥruf* all apply to the ʿUthmānic *rasm*. There is not unanimity on this point, however, given that according to others the ʿUthmānic text itself expresses only one of the seven *aḥruf*. The debate over the meaning that should be attributed to the term *aḥruf* in relation to the Qur'anic readings and the canonized Qur'anic text is in no way resolved in either sense. Moreover, the Shi'is do not recognize the tradition of the seven *aḥruf*, and have only gradually taken the variants attested in the readings into consideration.[158]

The traditionally attested variability according to the Sunni perspective is made even more complex by the opinions and recommendations of other variants attributed to the Companions of Muḥammad or other early figures in Islamic literature. They are other variants with respect to the early codices or those established in the readings. Interesting, in this regard, is the presence of textual differences with respect to the Vulgate ascribed to the figure of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, to whom one of the fourteen readings is attributed. This generates a series of further questions regarding the Qur'an's circulation during the

158 Yasin Dutton, "Orality, Literacy, and the 'Seven *Aḥruf*' *Ḥadīth*," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 23 (2012): 1–49; Claude Gilliot, "Les sept 'lectures': corps social et écriture révélé. I," *Studia Islamica* 61 (1985): 5–25; Claude Gilliot, "Les sept 'lectures': corps social et écriture révélé. II," *Studia Islamica* 63 (1986): 49–62; Nasser, *The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qur'ān*, 29, according to whom the tradition on the seven *aḥruf* circulated during the last quarter of the 7th century; Haggai Ben-Shammai, "'The Qur'ān Has Been Brought Down in Seven Modes of Articulation': On Possible Parallels (or Antecedents) to an Old Islamic Tradition," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 49 (2020): 147–76; Déroche, *Le Coran, une histoire plurielle*, 73–121. On the various meanings of *aḥruf*, see Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 40–42 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Vol. 1, 50–52); a summary of the Islamic interpretations is given in Suyūṭī, *Itqān*. Vol. 1, 306–35 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, Vol. 1, 177–91). On the Shi'i positions regarding the tradition on the *aḥruf*, see Nasser, *The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qur'ān*, 32–33; Hossein Modarresi, "Early Debates on the Integrity of the Qur'ān: A Brief Survey," *Studia Islamica* 77 (1993): 5–39; Abū al-Qāsim b. ʿAlī Akbar al-Khūʾī, *Prolegomena to the Qur'ān*, ed. Abdulaziz A. Sachedina (New York–Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 92–134, against the Sunni concept of the seven *aḥruf* and Sunni views of the redaction of the Qur'an.

first century of Islam in alternative, acceptable versions, at least regarding the interpretation of the consonantal text. Another prominent figure is the aforementioned ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbbās, whose fame as an interpreter of the Qur'an earned him a considerable number of textual variants ascribed to him by later authors.

After the first two Islamic centuries, the process becomes clearer and can be traced back to defined exegetical processes. The defense of ʿUthmān's consonantal skeleton was undertaken, distinguishing between acceptable and therefore canonical readings (*mashhūr*), and those that were not canonical and not acceptable (*shādhdh*), with a logic that goes beyond the consistency of the preserved Qur'anic text. Therefore, this process was part of an assessment designed to limit the recognized variability of the text. Along these lines, some scholars who promoted non-ʿUthmānic readings were marginalized. In 935 CE, Ibn Shannābūdh (d. 939) was condemned because he continued to transmit unacceptable readings, such as those of Ibn Masʿūd and Ubayy. Other figures are pointed out as the victims of similar condemnations until the end of the 10th century, after the work of Ibn Mujāhid, who opposed these practices. The non-canonical readings (*shawādhdh*) were excluded from a defined canon, and they were sometimes recorded in specific books titled *Kitāb al-shawādhdh* and dedicated to the topic, while the defense of admissible readings also occurred in the courts and in official pronouncements.

The ultimate determination of which readings were established as canonical and acceptable and which were excluded was the product of a mediation between exegetical choice and political concerns. The Islamic traditions, even regarding non-canonical readings, are especially rich and variegated, and they highlight problems and contradictory aspects in a framework that is anything but definitively settled and in which final solutions are inevitably the result of contrasting and different assessments. It was as much of an exegetical process as it was a hermeneutical one, and it was greatly conditioned by historical and religious factors. The canonization of different readings appears to have aimed not so much to guarantee an abstract principle of variability and flexibility of the text, but rather to consolidate and progressively standardize the consonantal text of the ʿUthmānic recension.[159]

159 Nasser, *The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qur'ān*, 117–64, on the *shawādhdh* that do not observe one of the following criteria: transmission, Arabic language, *rasm*. In the final part of the essay we find an analysis of the nature of the Qur'anic variants pointed out in this literature, listed according to type and followed by exhaustive lists of great utility. See also Nasser, *The Second Canonization of the Qur'ān*, 141f. on Ibn Shannābūdh; Ḥamdī Sulṭān al-ʿAdawī, *al-Qirāʾāt ash-shādhdha: Dirāsa sawṭiyya wa-dalāliyya* (Tanta, Egypt: Dār aṣ-Ṣaḥāba li-t-

3.2.3 A Shi‘i Qur’an and the Codex of ʿAlī

The elimination of uncontrolled variability and of the pre-ʿUthmānic codices was the main goal of the political and exegetical choices regarding the Qur’anic text that, starting with the interventions of ʿUthmān and ʿAbd al-Malik, led to the canonization of the seven readings. The other factor to which the Sunni construction of the Qur’anic form aimed to oppose itself, and which it aimed to marginalize and refute, was the Shi‘i perception of the Qur’an.

The Shi‘i vision of the Qur’anic text arose and was consolidated around two precise points. The first point was the idea that ʿUthmān had deliberately omitted from his version, which was destined to persist as the only attested and transmitted form of the Qur’an, passages or words in which the Alid and then Shi‘i points of view emerged, or in which the rights of ʿAlī and of Muḥammad’s family were established. The second point was that ʿAlī had in his possession his own personal copy of the *muṣḥaf* and that it differed considerably from the Vulgate. As is true of the Sunni version of the story of the Qur’an’s redaction, various problems exist in the historical reconstruction of the Shi‘i version, in which it is difficult to differentiate between reality and *a posteriori* apologetic construction.

Alid and philo-Shi‘i claims must first be positioned within a substantial literature that includes a series of criticisms regarding the form of the Qur’an sanctioned by ʿUthmān, raised from various sectarian viewpoints. The Kharijites, for example, believed that the 12th Sura of Joseph should have been excluded from the canonized text since it was a single narrative that was essentially eccentric with respect to the rest of the sacred text. According to other testimonies, some Muʿtazilites, had doubts regarding passages of the Qur’an that cursed the enemies of Muḥammad, considering it impossible that the original celestial archetype of the Qur’an contained references to specific earthly persons and events. Along the same lines, that is, regarding interpolations that the Qur’an formalized by ʿUthmān included, the most articulate and substantial criticism came from the Alid movements that culminated in the formation of various sects of Shi‘i Islam.

Turāth, 1426/2006); Déroche, *Le Coran, une histoire plurielle*, 117–21; Dutton, “Orality, Literacy, and the ‘Seven *Aḥruf*’ *Ḥadīth*”; Shah, “The Early Arabic Grammarians’ Contribution to the Collection and Authentication of Qur’anic Readings.” The meaning of *shādhdh* later became that of a variant deviating from the ʿUthmānic text but is still admissible as testimony, although it cannot be used in prayer: Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur’ān*, 487–88 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Vol. 3, 136–37). See also Abū ʿAmr ad-Dānī, *al-Muqniʿ fī maʿrifat marsūm maṣāḥif Ahl al-Amṣār* (Riyadh: Dār at-Tadmuriyya, 2010).

According to the supporters of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, the final redaction of the Qur'an had deliberately and willingly suppressed passages that expressed recognition of the rights of succession of ʿAlī and of the Prophet's family. The Shi'i tradition lists a variety of concrete omissions and interpolations, presenting reasons for the insertion of the names of ʿAlī and of the Family of Muḥammad in passages present in the Vulgate. In other cases, it points out gaps, even substantial omissions from certain suras and suggests revisions of the redaction or the substitution of words.

This accusation is well-documented in later Shi'i tradition, which makes it a central point in its claims, but does not have any confirmation in Sunni historiography, nor consistent evidence in the Qur'anic manuscripts that have survived (Text no. 65).[160]

Text no. 65: Shi'i versions of Qur'anic verses

But those who did wrong *concerning the rights of Muḥammad* substituted another saying for the one which had been told to them.
So We sent down wrath from heaven on those who had done wrong *concerning the rights of the descendants of Muḥammad*
because they were reprobates. (Qur. 2:59)
Those who obey God and His messenger *regarding the walāya (spiritual and political authority) of ʿAlī and that of the Imams after him* gain a great triumph. (Qur. 33:71)
From Amir-Moezzi, "Le Shi'isme et le Coran," 933–938.[161]

160 On this topic, see Etan Kohlberg, "Some Notes on the Imāmī Attitude to the Qur'ān," in *Islamic Philosophy and the Classical Tradition: Essays Presented by His Friends and Pupils to Richard Walzer on His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Samuel M. Stern, Albert Hourani and Vivian Brown (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1973), 209–24; Modarressi, "Early Debates on the Integrity of the Qur'ān"; Joseph Eliash, "'The Šīʿite Qur'ān': A Reconsideration of Goldziher's Interpretation," *Arabica* 16 (1969): 15–24; Todd B. Lawson, "Note for the Study of a Shīʿī Qur'ān," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 36/2 (1991): 279–95; Rainer Brunner, *Die Schia und die Koranfälschung* ([Stuttgart]-Würzberg: Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft-Ergon Verlag in Kommission, 2001). On Shi'i concepts related to ʿUthmān's Qur'an, see Etan Kohlberg and Mohammad A. Amir-Moezzi, eds., *Revelation and Falsification of the Kitāb al-Qirāʾāt of Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Sayyārī* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2009); Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 219–21 and 288–303 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Vol. 2, 8–11 and 93–111); Mohammad A. Amir-Moezzi, *Le Coran silencieux, le Coran parlant. Sources scripturaires de l'islam entre histoire et ferveur* (Paris: CNRS, 2011). On a presumably removed sura, the so-called Sura of the Two Lights, pointed out in the 19th century and surely a falsification, see the text, translation, and discussion in Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 293–303 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Vol. 2, 100–111).

161 In italics additions to the Qur'an by Shi'i exegesis.

A reconstruction of the text in these terms clashes with the paradox that the Shi'is, even now, resort to the Qur'an of the Sunnis and do not use an alternative codex, circumscribing its sacrality to its created character, looking, with great attention, to the testimonies that indicate variability and differences with respect to the ʿUthmānic recension. Even the version of the Qur'an dating back to Ibn Masʿūd, previously discussed, is defined by the Sunni exegetical tradition as being close to the views championed by the Alids; this was one of the reasons it was suppressed and abandoned. The variants that Sunni literature attribute to him move, effectively, in that direction, but have nothing in common with the proposed modifications found in Shi'i exegetical discourse.

This situation creates a substantially different relationship on the part of the Shi'is with the word of God, which they consider to be extant in an imperfect form, the product of the misdeeds of the Sunni majority. As a consequence of Sunni falsifications, the Qur'an became a "silent" book, a word unintelligible by virtue of its absolute transcendence. Given this condition, for the Shi'is the way to gain access to the divine word has been to privilege the interpretative result in order to obtain its essential meanings and to contend with the deliberate falsification *(taḥrīf)* of the text as it has come down to us. The Qur'an, accordingly, can "speak" through the authoritative exegetical function of the Imam. From this principle derived an interpretative path that was quite original and different from the scriptural hermeneutics of the Sunnis, at least until the Buyid period (ca. 945–1055), when the literature of the Imami Shi'a underwent a process of institutionalization and adopted more moderate positions.[162]

The other significant factor regarding the Alid and Shi'i claims derives from the presumed existence of a codex of ʿAlī, similar to the other personal and regional codices that later fell into disuse with the imposition of the ʿUthmānic Vulgate. It was a codex originally given or entrusted by Muḥammad to his daughter Fāṭima, and then by her to her husband ʿAlī, and, according to some Shi'i traditions, safeguarded by them and then entrusted to the successive Imams. Today, no textual proof of the existence of such a version exists, only various citations in later exegetical literature. Ibn an-Nadīm (d. 990), in *The Catalogue* (*al-Fihrist*), mentions a version ascribed to ʿAlī, affirming that he possessed a fragment of it. Other sufficiently early historical sources describe the

162 Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Le Shi'isme et le Coran," in *Le Coran des historiens*, ed. M. A. Amir-Moezzi and G. Dye, 929. In Ismaili circles, the problem regarding alteration is mentioned sporadically and in a limited manner. See Daniel De Smet, "Le Coran: son origine, sa nature et sa falsification. Positions ismaéliennes controversées," in *Controverses sur les écritures canoniques de l'islam*, ed. D. De Smet and M. A. Amir-Moezzi, 231–68. From the outset, the Ismailis affirm that the Qur'an is the final, universal, and eternal message to humanity.

sections into which this *muṣḥaf* was divided, as well as the different order of the suras contained within it, which were supposedly arranged according to chronology, in a manner very different from that in which the text we possess today was arranged. The fairly robust traditions that testify to its existence also affirm that it was longer than the ʿUthmānic Vulgate.[163]

The history of the transmission of the Qur'an attests, overall, to a path that is anything but simple and stable, and it is the Islamic tradition itself that affirms this. Some older traditions, constantly reported and never censured in exegetical literature, affirm that the process of redaction was caused by an increase in the variety of forms of the text that accompanied the Muslim armies of conquest, first in an oral form and then, possibly, in a written one.

These same traditions confirm the historical presence of variants or readings of a complex historical nature, marked by the first waves of interventions on the sacred text but lasting into later centuries. Of particular importance are the traditions that explicitly discuss omissions of passages of the revelations on account of various problems or even involuntarily. They also affirm that even the figures most involved in the preservation of the text, such as the scribe Zayd b. Thābit, were unsure about confusing what was stated by Muḥammad, the product of his thoughts or decision, with the divine revelation that was always communicated through the mouth of Muḥammad.

If the traditional reconstruction of this labor and the condition of the text as it was attested in the earliest manuscript testimonies is accepted, it is possible to hypothesize that the affirmations attributed to Muḥammad as divine revelations, and whatever of these were contained in the memory of his Companions

163 On this codex, see the sources cited above (n. 160) and Seyfeddin Kara, *In Search of ʿAlī Ibn Abī Ṭālib's Codex: History and Traditions on the Earliest Copy of the Qur'ān* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2018), which analyzes the traditions collected by Muḥammad Hādī Maʿrifat, *at-Tamhīd fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*, 10 vols. (Qom: Muʾassasat-i Tamhīd, 2011). Kara concludes that the versions ascribed to Ibn Sīrīn are datable to the same period that other scholars have suggested for the Sunni traditions. If that were the case, the hypothesis that the Shi'i claims had arisen *a posteriori* only for the exegetical justification of the Shi'is problems with the Vulgate would have to be dismissed. Attempts to date the Shi'i traditions do not aid in clearing up the relationship with the Sunni versions. Based on methods of formal analysis, it has been suggested that its circulation dates no later than the beginning of the 8th century, which is perfectly in line with and contemporary to the Sunni traditions. Nöldeke, however, rejects the historical significance of the attestation of a codex of ʿAlī that is arranged chronologically. See Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 249–50 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Vol. 2, 46–47). According to Comerro, *Les traditions sur la constitution du muṣḥaf de ʿUthmān*, 169–89, the very existence of a recension of ʿAlī is still hypothetical, and this is also Déroche's position in *Le Coran, une histoire plurielle*, 143.

and contemporaries, were put together and collected, in an initial phase, in a disordered manner. They included the inevitable differences that, finally, were resolved and circumscribed. A particular form was imposed, and the cases that were of a relatively limited significance or bearers of diametrically opposed viewpoints were excluded.

Accordingly, we can consider and evaluate the tradition and the Islamic reconstructions overall. We can evaluate the description of the progressive construction of a canon that, through history, had the implicit tasks of preserving and "domesticating" the variants attested by the Islamic historical memory and that progressively defined an acceptability of diversity within the consonantal skeleton established by ʿUthmān.

We are not able to evaluate fully that which was not included, on account of the paucity of documentation, but the fact that it was documented acts, in the past, as a guarantee of different viewpoints and, although they were attested only indirectly, they do implicitly confirm a form or state of the text. The suspicion that there could actually be something else and something more remains, even if one leaves aside pro-Alid claims, and is not resolvable with the historical evidence we have today. Assessing such possibilities also depends, according to the evaluation of scholars, on an *a priori* perspective on the reliability of the later Islamic traditions more than on the evidence to which it is possible to have access, which corroborates the general picture of a problematic closure of a canonized text, with all the subtle distinctions that have been made.

Ultimately, the principle of a variety due to historical contingencies does not go against but rather connects with the definition of a divine book in a unique and perfect form. The early Islamic tradition did not erase these types of "low-tension" variability and it aimed to connect them to a historical order that best explains the problems regarding the history of the text.

3.3 The written transmission of the Qur'an

The process we have described of the initial fixation of the Qur'an in writing, of the successive revisions, and of the circulation of different forms of the text, defined as readings or variants of another type is documented in the Islamic tradition and literature, and reflects a primary exegetical need. Methodological questions regarding the historical accuracy of their contents are as appropriate as ever, possibly also because of their extreme variety, both in the sectarian contrasts and in the immense wealth of texts of various types that should be evaluated with attention and placed within a logical framework to be reconstructed with great caution.

Alongside this and for these reasons, a testimony of fundamental importance, in order to obtain first-hand information and to test this Islamic literature, is made up of the earliest manuscript documents, which represent essential historical attestations. In recent decades, new findings and more focused analyses have allowed for the reconstruction of the initial fixation and written transmission of the Qur'an from preserved documents and, consequentially, for this data to be connected with the testimonies in later Islamic literature.

The reconstruction of all the phases of the history of the written transmission of the Qur'an, and not only the initial ones, also represents a fundamental chapter for the preservation and transmission of the Qur'anic text. Alongside the recited and oral component, the written component in the form of a codex, although not free from problems, as we have seen, was the heart of the project of canonization initiated by ʿUthmān. Subsequent phases of the history of the Qur'anic text are marked by a progressive and increasing dissemination of the Qur'an, above all in its written form, which was substantially stable and reproduced through the centuries.

With the introduction of pulp paper in the 8th century, the manuscript production of Qur'ans reached greater dimensions compared to the production of copies in parchment. This sufficed to fill the needs of a growing Islamic community, thanks to numerous conversions and the consolidation of the Empire. The Qur'an continues, in these phases, to be a text that is comprehended and learned by heart orally. Nevertheless, it is more and more a book in the form of a codex that contains a text fixed in writing and available in countless exemplars, or documented, also in written form, in other media such as inscriptions and epigraphs.

The history of the Qur'an's written transmission has also influenced the great fortune of ornamental calligraphy in Islamic culture. Manuscript reproduction continued uninterrupted until the 19th century, when lithographic printing and printing with movable type were introduced. This is another extremely fascinating chapter in the history of the Qur'an's transmission, traversed by specific dynamics with consequences regarding the written form of the Qur'an. It led to the contemporary dissemination of the Qur'an in various modalities and through different media, all with a significant impact on the production of the text and the concept of the integrity of the sacred text itself.

3.3.1 The manuscripts of the Qur'an

Studies of Qur'anic codicology and paleography, both confessional and non-confessional, have always shown awareness of the importance of Qur'anic

manuscripts and their contents for the history of the text, while recognizing that, in many cases, their context is difficult to date. Recourse to the oldest manuscript testimonies, when it is possible to date them in a precise manner, may provide answers regarding the history of the text, supplementing examination of the Islamic literature that narrates this same history.

Two factors must be added as a corollary of this more general, introductory evaluation. First, the last twenty years have witnessed significant progress in the study of the oldest extant manuscripts of the Qur'an. Many new documents have come to light, above all, the initial results of the analysis of some of the manuscripts found in the ceiling of the Great Mosque of Sanaa during the 1972 restoration have finally come to light.

This collection of thousands of scattered sheets and very old copies of the Qur'an has recently begun to fuel a debate and a succession of analyses that are definitively changing this field of research. Nevertheless, this body of research is still focused on a very circumscribed number of Qur'an manuscripts, especially early ones. Very few studies have addressed later developments in Qur'anic paleography, between the 10th century and the advent of printing in the Islamic world in the 19th century.

There is no doubt that the oldest manuscripts are of primary interest for their implications regarding the historical dating of the Qur'an and the development of its writing and, indirectly, its form. It is surprising, though, that later developments have been little studied, since the studies on manuscripts produced after the 10th century are limited to a few examples, generally chosen for reasons of artistic significance.[164]

Regarding the first steps of the written transmission of the Qur'an, as stated above, a growing number of old manuscripts has recently been the subject of many studies. The increased number of sources taken into account, advances in paleography and codicology, and the refinement of dating and other scientific

164 On the manuscripts discovered in Sana'a by Paolo Costa and reproduced in high definition (codex Sanaa 1) thanks to the work, today neglectfully unacknowledged, of Sergio Noja Noseda (see Sergio Noja Noseda "La mia visita a Sanaa e il Corano Palinsesto," *Istituto Lombardo. Accademia di scienze e lettere. Classe di lettere, scienze morali e storiche. Rendiconti* 137 (2003): 43–60, to which we hope that it will be possible to add the manuscripts found during Renzo Ravagnan's archaeological expedition), refer to Ursula Dreibholz, *Frühe Koranfragmente aus der Großen Moschee in Sanaa/Early Quran Fragments from the Great Mosque in Sanaa* (Sanaa: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Orient-Abteilung Aussenstelle, 2003). In general, Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity*, 139–62, highlights an excessive attention for the critical debate surrounding the manuscripts, given the oral primacy and that of the recited transmission for the history of the Qur'an.

methods allow for more informed evaluations of the historical evidence and thus help produce historical testimonies of primary importance.

The most interesting data that has come to light to date derives from manuscripts that date back to the first century of Islam, the era of ʿUthmān's Vulgate and the reforms of ʿAbd al-Malik. The information that has emerged from these few exemplars has significantly changed the perspective regarding every hypothesis that the text was fixed only at a late date, making them appear quite unlikely. In addition, though, they have also provided evidence of variants and textual problems that only partially overlap with those emphasized by the Islamic exegetical literature.

A central issue that has arisen is the scientific debate surrounding the palimpsest codex known as Sanaa 1, regarding the nature and dating of the undertext. Some scholars argue that it represents a version of the text as it existed prior to the creation of the ʿUthmānic Vulgate, while others are reluctant to make such a claim. No less important is the analysis of the variants that emerge from this text, which was washed off and copied over in order to produce another Qur'anic text.

The lower text of this palimpsest very probably dates to ca. 650. The debate is still open at present, but there are few doubts overall concerning its early date. It may be, in the attempted reconstructions, a distinct codex of one of Muḥammad's Companions, non-ʿUthmānic, more similar in the order of its chapters to what is known about the codices of Ibn Masʿūd or Ubayy, with variants that include additions, omissions, transpositions, and substitutions of entire words and of morphemes, with a consistent number of variants in prefixes, suffixes, prepositions, and pronouns. Studies have given different answers as to whether it must be considered a different form with respect to ʿUthmān's Vulgate or an early version of it, with a considerable number of variants.

Embracing one answer or the other is often the product of orientations that tend either to underscore the problems inherent in the text or to view this witness as very early and characterized by substantial homogeneity with the traditional account. On this topic, some scholars have even hypothesized that the reconstructible consonantal skeleton that emerges should not be considered a manuscript of the Qur'an in a strict sense, even though many other elements suggest otherwise, despite the relative fluidity of the text or the possibility of its paraphrastic and flexible use within the initial community.[165]

165 See Alba Fedeli, "I manoscritti di Sanaa: fogli sparsi che diventano Corani," in *Il mio cuore è a Oriente. Studi di linguistica storica, filologica e cultura ebraica dedicati a Maria Luisa Mayer Modena*, ed. Francesco Aspesi, Vermondo Brugnatelli, Anna Linda Callow and Claudia Rosenzweig (Milano: Cisalpino, 2008), 25–48; Behnam Sadeghi and Mohsen Goudarzi, "Ṣanʿāʾ

The Sanaa 1 manuscript is not the only manuscript witness, and other manuscripts from the first Islamic century, recently published as facsimiles or transcribed, broaden the circle of sources useful for evaluation of the development of the earliest manuscript copies of the Qur'an. The earliest documents available to date originate in four regions: besides Sanaa, the mosque of ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ in Fustat (Cairo) and the great mosques of Damascus and Kairouan. The manuscript termed the "parisino-petropolitanus," reconstructed by François Déroche, dates to the last quarter of the 7th century, still in the first Islamic century.

In other cases, the manuscript witnesses are fragments or sections of codices of various formats (for example, the Lewis-Mingana codex in Cambridge) that provide evidence of different uses and suggest an initial differentiation

1 and the Origins of the Qur'ān," *Der Islam* 87/1–2 (2010): 1–129; Behnam Sadeghi and Uwe Bergmann, "The Codex of a Companion of the Prophet and the Qur'ān," *Arabica* 57/4 (2010): 343–436; Elisabeth Puin, "Ein früher Koranpalimpsest aus Sanʿa (dam 01–27.1) [i]," in *Schlaglichter: die beiden ersten islamischen Jahrhunderte*, ed. Markus Groß and Karl-Heinz Ohlig (Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2007), 461–93; Elisabeth Puin, "Ein früher Koranpalimpsest aus Sanʿa (dam 01–27.1): Teil ii," in *Vom Koran zum Islam*, ed. Markus Groß and Karl-Heinz Ohlig (Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2009), 523–81; Elisabeth Puin, "Ein früher Koranpalimpsest aus Sanʿa ii (dam 01–27.1): Teil iii. Ein nicht-ʿuṯmānischer Koran," in *Die Entstehung einer Weltreligion I*: *Von der koranischen Bewegung zum Frühislam*, ed. Markus Groß and Karl-Heinz Ohlig (Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2010), 233–305; Elisabeth Puin, "Ein früher Koranpalimpsest aus Ṣanʿāʾ ii (dam 01–27.1): Teil iv. Die scriptio inferior auf den Blättern 17, 18 und 19," in *Die Entstehung einer Weltreligion II: Von der koranischen Bewegung zum Frühislam*, ed. Markus Groß and Karl-Heinz Ohlig (Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2012), 311–402; Alba Fedeli, "Variants and Substantiated Qirāʾāt: A Few Notes Exploring Their Fluidity in the Oldest Qur'ānic Manuscripts," in *Die Entstehung einer Weltreligion II: Von der koranischen Bewegung zum Frühislam*, ed. Markus Groß and Karl-Heinz Ohlig, 403–40; Alba Fedeli, "Early Evidences of Variant Readings in Qur'ānic Manuscripts," in *Die dunklen Anfänge: neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islams*, ed. K.-H. Ohlig and G.-R. Puin, 293–316; Asma Hilali, *The Sanaa Palimpsest. The Transmission of the Qur'an in the First Centuries AH* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); François Déroche, *Qur'ans of the Umayyads. A First Overview* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2013), 48–56; Déroche has recently discussed and criticized the argumentations upheld by Asma Hilali, according to whom the palimpsest should not be considered a *muṣḥaf* but rather a collection of sheets used in a context of teaching: Déroche, *Le Coran, une histoire plurielle*, 201–29. On the problems regarding Carbon dating and in relation to the first manuscripts of the Qur'an, see Eva M. Youssef-Grob, "Radiocarbon (^{14}C) Dating of Early Islamic Documents: Background and Prospects," in *Qur'ān Quotations Preserved on Papyrus Documents, 7th–10th Centuries and the Problem of Carbon Dating Early Qur'āns*, ed. Andreas Kaplony and Michael Marx (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2019), 139–87. Qur'ans that are datable through paleography, orthography, artistic elements, or material analysis (C_{14}) are discussed because the first dated Qur'an is quite late, dating only to 860: Cellard, "Les manuscrits coraniques anciens," 676.

between the copies of the Qur'an designed for private uses and those, in a larger format, designed for public use, in an environment where codices made of parchment must have cost substantial sums. The entirety of these rediscovered or reconsidered materials, along with those that have been re-studied, highlights a series of particularities connected to the manuscript transmission that only partially confirm the exegetical construction we have discussed above, and they attest to the early date of a form of the text not too distant from ʿUthmān's Vulgate in its organization and structure, even though the two do not fully coincide.[166]

166 Déroche, *Le Coran, une histoire plurielle*, 180–201; François Déroche, *La transmission écrite du Coran dans les débuts de l'islam. Le codex Parisino-petropolitanus* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2009), 157–58: the large format of the manuscript could be connected to al-Ḥajjāj's intervention on the Qur'an, to be attributed, first, to the practice of reciting and reading the Qur'an in mosques. See also Dye, "Le corpus coranique: questions autour de sa canonisation," 864–65. For other manuscripts, see the general introduction by Cellard, "Les manuscrits coraniques anciens," 667–73; François Déroche and Sergio Noja Noseda, *Le manuscrit arabe 328 (a) de la Bibliothèque nationale de France* (Lesa: Fondazione Ferni Noja Noseda, 1998); François Déroche and Sergio Noja Noseda, *Le manuscript Or. 2165 (f. 1 à 61) de la British Library* (Lesa: Fondazione Ferni Noja Noseda, 2001); Yasin Dutton, "An Umayyad Fragment of the Qur'an and Its Dating," *Journal of the Qur'anic Studies* 9/2 (2007): 57–87; Yasin Dutton, "Some Notes on the British Library's 'Oldest Qur'an Manuscript' (Or. 2165)," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 6/1 (2004): 43–71; Yasin Dutton, "Two 'Ḥijāzī' Fragments of the Qur'an and Their Variants, or: When Did the *Shawādhdh* Become *Shādhdh*?" *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 8 (2017): 1–56; Efim A. Rezvan, *'The Qur'ān of ʿUthmān' (St. Petersburg, Katta-Langar, Bukhara, Tashkent)* (St. Petersburg: Peterburgskoe Vostokovedenie, 2004); Éléonore Cellard, with the collaboration of Sabrina Cimiotti, *Codex Amrensis 1* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2018). On other manuscripts or fragments, see Alain George, "Le palimpseste Lewis-Mingana de Cambridge, témoin ancien de l'histoire du Coran," in *Les origines du Coran, le Coran des origines*, ed. F. Déroche, C. J. Robin and M. Zink, 219–70; Alba Fedeli, "The Provenance of the Manuscript Mingana Islamic Arabic 1572: Dispersed Folios from a Few Qur'ānic Quires," *Manuscripta Orientalia* 17/1 (2011): 45–56; Alba Fedeli, "The Digitization Project of the Qur'ānic Palimpsest, MS Cambridge University Library Or. 1287, and the Verification of the Mingana-Lewis Edition: Where Is *Salām*?" *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 2/1 (2011): 100–117, and the edition of this manuscripts, also by Alba Fedeli, in http://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/minganalewis; Fedeli, "Early Evidences of Variant Readings in Qur'ānic Manuscripts"; Fedeli, "Variants and Substantiated Qirāʾāt: A Few Notes Exploring Their Fluidity in the Oldest Qur'ānic Manuscripts"; Alba Fedeli, "Isolated Qur'ānic Fragments: The Case of the Three Papyri from the Mingana Collection," in *The Making of Religious Texts in Islam: The Fragment and the Whole*, ed. Stephen R. Burge and Asma Hilali (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2019), 175–98, dedicated to papyri with Qur'anic fragments whose evaluation is problematic, about which it is possible to refer to Fedeli's edition in: http://cal-itsee.bham.ac.uk/itseeweb/fedeli/start.xml; cfr. Déroche, *Qur'ans of the Umayyads*, 56–64. For a traditional explanation, with much data and tables on various manuscripts, see Al-Azami, *The History of the Qur'ānic Text from Revelation to Compilation*, 95–202.

The data regarding later manuscripts and studies carried out on the evidence contained within them in recent years allow for the tracing of a well-founded depiction of the first stages and subsequent evolution of the Arabic script used in the Qur'an. The earliest Qur'anic manuscripts, written in *ḥijāzī* script, are documented both in defective and plene writing. The most significant specific cases regard the *scriptio plena* or not of the long vowel *ā* (*alif*), or the manners of writing short words or particles either as fused to the following words or as separate individual words. The writing of *hamza* and the long vowels in general are other points of focus, as is the case with other varieties of Arabic throughout the history of its modes of transcription. In the earliest manuscripts, the use of diacritics is often unsystematic and applied inconsistently, appearing in some passages where it is not necessary to resolve ambiguities in the text. The divisions into verses are regularly indicated, but they do not always correspond to the systems documented in exegetical literature and that are known from the Vulgate. This situation, it must never be forgotten, was probably made even more complicated, in this phase, by the complex relationship between oral knowledge and the problematic nature of the graphic rendering, mediated by the linguistic knowledge of the scribes and their capacity for interventions in the text.

There is no lack of differences or, probably, errors that, as in the most evident case of the Sanaa palimpsest, generate other doubts. These manuscripts, overall, demonstrate a fluidity and variety in the 1st century AH that does not fully correspond to the depiction of the ʿUthmānic tradition, something which makes the traditional accounts of the formation of the ʿUthmānic codex appear as more of an aspiration to reconstruct *a posteriori* a reality that did not coincide with actual history.

Nevertheless, there is, also in this case, a series of differences that do not alter the structure and form of the Qur'an with respect to the text we possess today. There is no evidence, for example, to suggest the existence of a chronologically ordered codex, containing profound alterations, like that attributed to ʿAlī (pp. 170–74).

If the perspective is broadened to include the manuscripts of the first three Islamic centuries, one may detect in outline the progressive, relative stabilization of the text: a substantial number of variants is connected, above all, to the orthography, dotting the letters of the consonantal skeleton, to diacritics, the division of verses. The text shows evidence of the presence of errors or corrections with a modest impact on the content. That is, the *rasm* of the ʿUthmānic Vulgate was adopted as an inevitable point of reference, and variability intervenes within the confines of a text that seems to have started moving towards an overall stability.

The manuscripts, all together, demonstrate that ʿUthmān's reform stabilized, not without difficulty and with the necessary exceptions (related, above all, to long vowels and to the *alif* especially), a consonantal skeleton (*rasm*), and disseminated it as the form of the Qur'anic text available for use by the Islamic community. The *rasm*, however, was problematic in that it left much space for possible, differing interpretations, easily justifiable by adding dots to one letter or another. The first intervention on the skeleton regarded, therefore, the dotting of the letters, which initially occurred in an unsystematic manner. Only later, in another just as unsystematic manner, was there the move towards affixing the vocalization to the manuscripts, and this was indicated by applying different systems, often resorting to the use of signs of different colors, instead of the markings that are common today.[167]

The picture that emerges is not very different from the one depicted by the Islamic tradition, in which a particular form (that of ʿUthmān) is imposed in the presence of different codices that differ from each other in some parts but not in general structure, with the exception of rare cases. The details documented in the manuscripts are, however, different: alongside the readings in their various forms, canonical and non-canonical, the documentary evidence seems to indicate that some variants of the *rasm* of the Vulgate did circulate, and that, therefore, the text of the Qur'an was progressively stabilized in its definitive form only in the early Islamic centuries.

The documented variants only partially coincide with those pointed out by the tradition of Qur'anic readings. They are not only novel but also difficult to evaluate, given the modest quantity of ancient materials available. In other

167 On these topics, see Keith E. Small, *Textual Criticism and Qur'ān Manuscripts* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2011); Déroche, *La transmission écrite du Coran dans les débuts de l'Islam*. On problems regarding the writing in more ancient Qur'ans and a careful analysis of the consequent problems, see Elisabeth Puin, "Vowel Letters and Ortho-Epic Writing in the Qur'ān," in *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context 2*, ed. G.S. Reynolds, 147–90. See also Fedeli, "Early Evidences of Variant Readings in Qur'ānic Manuscripts"; Fedeli, "Variants and Substantiated Qirāʾāt: A Few Notes Exploring Their Fluidity in the Oldest Qur'ānic Manuscripts"; Alain George, "Coloured Dots and the Question of Regional Origins of Early Qur'ans. I," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 17/1 (2015): 1–44; Alain George, "Coloured Dots and the Question of Regional Origins of Early Qur'ans. II," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 17/2 (2015), 75–102; Dutton, "An Early *Muṣḥaf* According to the Reading of Ibn ʿĀmir"; Intisar Rabb, "Non-Canonical Readings of the Qur'an: Recognition and Authenticity (The Ḥimsī Reading)," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 8/2 (2006): 84–127; Hamdan, *Studien zur Kanonisierung des Korantextes*; Arthur Jeffery and Isaac Mendelsohn, "The Orthography of the Samarqand Qur'ān Codex," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 62 (1942): 175–95. Variants in ancient manuscripts were already pointed out in Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 457–59 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Vol. 3, 97–99).

words, it is sometimes difficult to decide whether to consider them specific regional and local features or specific variants of the single manuscript.

The most striking case is that of the differences and complexities of verse divisions, since no Qur'anic manuscript from the first two centuries follows the rules codified by the exegetical literature on the variant schemes that are attributed to regions.[168]

Although less relevant than the study of Qur'anic manuscripts, a promising sector of research on the preservation and transmission of the Qur'anic text in the first centuries is that of analyzing the utilization of the Qur'an in other written, literary attestations. For example, the presences of citations or allusions to the Qur'an in Arabic religious and non-religious literature is, without a doubt, interesting in order to comprehend the way it is circulated and how it is referenced. In the case of legal and juridical literature, it is one of the overall relevant factors between jurisprudential development and the use of the sacred

168 It is possible to hypothesize that the Islamic exegetical literature, often written in eras in which one could probably have access to these more ancient manuscripts, above all of Iraqi origin and from Kufa in particular, could have different findings than those available today, but there is no proof in this regard. On the writing of the first Qur'ans and vocalization, besides the works of Déroche cited above, see Adam Bursi, "Connecting the Dots: Diacritics, Scribal Culture, and the Qur'ān in the First/Seventh Century," *Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association* 3 (2018): 111–57; Éléonore Cellard, "La vocalization des manuscrits coraniques dans les premiers siècles de l'Islam," in *Les origines du Coran, le Coran des origines*, ed. F. Déroche, C.J. Robin and M. Zink, 151–76 and, on the *hamza* in particular, 156–63. On this topic, see also Marijn van Putten, "Hamzah in the Quranic Consonantal Text," *Orientalia* 87 (2018): 93–120; Cellard, "Les manuscrits coraniques anciens," 682–98. On the non-coincidence between correction in the manuscripts from the first centuries and attestation of the different readings in literature, see Daniel A. Brubaker, *Corrections in Early Qur'ān Manuscripts. Twenty Examples* (Lovettsville: Think and Tell Press, 2019), esp. 9–10. On the division in verses and the vocalization, see respectively Dutton, "Some Notes on the British Library's 'Oldest Qur'an Manuscript' (Or. 2165)"; Yasin Dutton, "Red Dots, Green Dots, Yellow Dots and Blue: Some Reflections on the Vocalization of Early Qur'anic Manuscripts. I," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 1/1 (1999): 115–40; Yasin Dutton, "Red Dots, Green Dots, Yellow Dots and Blue: Some Reflections on the Vocalization of Early Qur'anic Manuscripts. II," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 2/1 (2000), 1–24; Estelle Whelan, "Writing the Word of God: Some Early Qur'ān Manuscripts and Their Milieux, Part I," *Ars Orientalis* 20 (1990): 113–47. On all these problems, see Hassan Chahdi, "Entre *qirāʾāt* et variantes du *rasm*: l'exemple du fragment Marcel 18," in *Les origines du Coran, le Coran des origines*, ed. F. Déroche, C. J. Robin and M. Zink, 177–89. On the *scriptio plena* and its development, see also Blachère, *Introduction au Coran*, 92–94. The problems regarding the non-systematic use of diacritics in the earliest witnesses are also discussed in Andreas Kaplony, "What Are Those Dots For? Thoughts on the Orthography of the Qurra Papyri (709–710), the Khurasan Parchments (755–777) and the Inscription of the Jerusalem Dome of the Rock," *Arabica* 55/1 (2008): 91–112.

text, even though it falls under the literature of later eras, mainly those later than 800 AD, years in which the dynamics of consolidation of the text were already well underway.

Different and much more interesting is the case of the Qur'anic attestation on papyrus or other media: an area of research that is relatively new and that takes its first steps with a limited amount of materials published amongst a great quantity of attestations that still await description and analysis. In this area, it is necessary to distinguish between actual parts of the Qur'an and, therefore, presumably the surviving parts of larger manuscripts, and the citations or references to the Qur'anic text in papyri of different uses, such as letters, and legal or magical documents. In the first case, the papyri that preserve more or less limited paragraphs of the Qur'an are less than ten, while in the second one there is not a very abundant sample, but they are significant in terms of evocative formulas and references.

More interesting are the testimonies of the first two centuries on papyri, stone, etc., which document a certain fluidity in the personal use of the text, even modifying it, or at least freedom in terms of citation. They are, ultimately, useful testimonies, but limited in number.[169]

The picture completely changes when one examines later manuscripts that circulated in growing numbers from the 10th century onward. The introduction of pulp paper and its definitive diffusion, even though in the Maghreb the use of parchment continued until the 14th century, was accompanied by the use of carbon-based ink, which was less damaging for the paper, and the page-setting of medieval Qur'anic codices that was the result of a growing effort to increase the legibility of the characters and the words.

The categories of Qur'ans produced with limited means, those produced primarily as displays of calligraphy, or those destined for public use and embellished in various ways, emerged and were stabilized. As to the text itself, the definitive affirmation and a certain stabilization of the exegetical Sunni vision

169 On these themes in general, see the contributions in Andreas Kaplony and Michael Marx, *Qur'ān Quotations Preserved on Papyrus Documents, 7th–10th Centuries and the Problem of Carbon Dating Early Qur'āns* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2019), and, in particular, the introduction by Michael Marx, 1–41; and Fedeli, "Isolated Qur'ānic Fragments: The Case of the Three Papyri from the Mingana Collection." On the Qur'an in inscriptions, see Imbert, "Le Coran des pierres: statistiques et premières analyses," 99–124; Frédéric Imbert, "Le Coran dans les graffiti des deux premiers siècles de l'Hégire," *Arabica* 47 (2000): 381–90. Some useful indications on the condition and circulation of the Qur'anic text during the first centuries can be found in citations in the literature of other religious communities, especially in Christian texts. See Mark Beaumont, *Arab Christians and the Qur'an from the Origins of Islam to the Medieval Period* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2018).

regarding the Qur'an and the canonization of the text and the acceptable variation of readings functioned as a unifying element.[170]

Certain variants found in early manuscripts disappeared, and a progressive stabilization in the form of the text and in the apparatuses that had been added to the consonantal skeleton displayed its lasting effects. The defective script continued to be used alongside the production of Qur'anic copies in *scriptio plena*. From the few studies completed to date, the division into suras appears to be substantially stable, with little variation with respect to the earliest manuscript attestations, even though sura titles and division in verses remained relatively fluid. Vocalization and dotting are documented in forms that are not always univocal, in a context that seems to be that of substantial stability of the consonantal text. Certain renderings of the *hamza* or the collocations of signs for recitation were other factors that left further space, though limited, for other choices.

Unfortunately, a systematic study of late-medieval and early modern manuscripts of the Qur'an, before the introduction of printing, has not yet been carried out. Only a limited number of studies have been undertaken on some prestigious copies of the Qur'an, and therefore, a more precise picture of the textual and formal condition of Qur'anic manuscripts disseminated during the centuries preceding the contemporary era cannot be given. Writing, dotting, vocalization, versification, and all other formal aspects of the Qur'ans that were transcribed and transmitted during the long span of time from the middle ages until the dawn of the modern period are essentially unknown. Instead, they are prejudged to be the product of a presumed stabilization, a characterization that is plausible and actually probable but never verified on the basis of a sufficient sample among the thousands of Qur'anic manuscripts that have been preserved from this period.

3.3.2 Printing and new media

An important chapter in the history of the dissemination of the Qur'an and its preservation in written form is the story of the production of printed editions of the sacred text in the Islamic world. Introduced for various reasons in massive and definitive form only since the second half of the 19th century, printing

170 On these topics, see Sheila S. Blair, "Glorifying God's Word. Manuscripts of the Qur'an," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, ed. Shah and Abdel Haleem, 217 and ff., and the bibliography cited and discussed here.

generated sensational changes in the production of written copies of the Qur'an and in their diffusion. In an era marked by significant social changes, print entered the modern Islamic world with an acceleration that has gradually grown throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century. In this situation, new possibilities have been opened up for the dissemination of the Qur'an in new media, beyond oral transmission and manuscripts.

As in the cultural history of other civilizations, starting with European civilization, print media has led to the unprecedented dissemination of the culture and, at the same time, of affirmation of the specific forms of the texts. In the case of Islamic civilization, the exponential growth of printed copies of the Qur'an since the 19th century has favored the reproduction and diffusion of particular forms, thus canceling the implicit variety that characterized manuscript transmission, in which each copy was different from any other, even in the case of unintentional variants.

An overall view of printed editions of the Qur'an shows that they had complex beginnings that did not always occur in the Islamic world. In addition, the process was initially slow and then gradually grew more and more rapid. In recent decades, this condition has further developed, thanks to the continuous improvements in the technical possibilities connected to book production and to the support of other media that have allowed for the dissemination of the Qur'an, not only in written form but also in others, starting with those transmitted in various media – such as radio, television, cassette tapes, etc. – that ultimately relate to the role of the recited text (pp. 225–28) – and ending up with all of the varieties that the digital world offers today.

The history of the printing of the Qur'an with movable type, however, did not begin in the Islamic world, but in Europe. There, since the 16th century, there were attempts to produce the first texts in Arabic, and the first printing of the Qur'an was carried out. The reasons for these actual undertakings, which were very complex and were the end product of countless other attempts, were different from the reasons for which Muslims would begin to print the Qur'an in the 19th century. In Europe, the cultural and linguistic interests of learned people were sometimes combined with commercial concerns, as in the case of the Qur'an printed by the Paganinis.

The first chapter of this lengthy story occurred in Italy in 1537–38, with the printing of the first complete Qur'an in Arabic by two printers and typographers from Brescia, Paganino and Alessandro Paganini, who worked between Lake Garda and Venice. Only one copy of this Qur'an, which was created using wooden type, survives, and it was discovered in 1987 on a Venetian island.

The reasons for this operation seem to be the desire to mount a business venture within the Ottoman Empire, with all the fervor that coursed through the

Venetian entrepreneurial world before the tight hold of the Counter-Reformation. The quality of the non-collated copy, which presents even more than one copy of the same page, suggests that, rather than a production intended for wide circulation, it might have been a work of high quality destined for a client connected with the Ottoman court.

The quality of the typographical characters and the printed text, resulting from imprecision in the production process and in communication between the arabophone informants and the copy entrusted to the typographer, derailed the operation and forced the Paganini brothers into bankruptcy.[171]

Subsequent editions of the Qur'an in Arabic were also European, carried out by Abraham Hinckelmann in Hamburg in 1694 and by Ludovico Marracci, who entrusted the printing of his edition, as well as the translation and his annotations on the Qur'anic text, to the typography of the Seminary of Padua, where it was published in 1698. These were courageous editions, destined to be read by a small circle of Arabic experts and those who knew Oriental languages. They showed various limitations in terms of the quality of the typographic reproduction of the Arabic script, as well as limited access to knowledge of the Arabic text from an organizational viewpoint. This was a period of limited technical possibilities, and this was one of the factors that caused the Ottoman prohibition of printing religious texts with movable type, during a period of ferocious opposition between the two shores of the Mediterranean.

The last great European edition, that of Gustav Flügel in 1834, shared many of these characteristics. The Arabic of the text was improved, but still did not measure up to the best calligraphic productions. In addition, eclectic choices had been made for the presentation of the text, which rendered it a problematic product in the eyes of Muslims.

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171 Angela M. Nuovo, "Il Corano arabo ritrovato (Venezia, Paganino e Alessandro Paganini, tra l'agosto 1537 e l'agosto 1538)," *La Bibliofilia* 99 (1987): 237–71; Maurice Borrmans, "Observations à propos de la première édition imprimée du Coran à Venise," *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 8 (1990): 3–12; Maurice Borrmans, "Présentation de la première édition du Coran à Venise," *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 9 (1991): 93–126. On more recent debates regarding this manuscript, see Maḥmūd S. ash-Shaykh (= Elsheikh, Mahmoud S.), *Muṣḥaf Pājānīnī bayna takhmīnāt al-māḍī wa-akhṭāʾ al-ḥāḍir* (Cairo: National Library of Egypt, 2012); Mahmoud S. Elsheikh, "I manoscritti del Corano conservati nelle biblioteche pubbliche di Firenze," *La Bibliofilia* 115 (2013): 553–61; Angela M. Nuovo, "La scoperta del Corano arabo, ventisei anni dopo: un riesame," *Nuovi Annali della Scuola speciale per archivisti e bibliotecari* 27 (2013): 9–23; Hartmut Bobzin, *Ließ ein Papst den Koran verbrennen?: Mutmaßungen zum Venezianer Korandruck von 1537/38; vorgetragen in der Sitzung vom 10. Dezember 2004* (München: Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2013).

The sources utilized for all these editions and the choices made by various editors, including Flügel's, are anything but clear. This lack of certainty regarding sources brings to light a problematic assessment regarding the formal particularities of Qur'anic manuscript transmission overall, as well as the understandings provided by the exegetical tradition on the various formal particularities of the Qur'anic text. However, all these aspects have yet to be the subject of a thorough investigation.[172]

At the beginning of the 1800s, when Flügel released his edition, printing presses had already produced the earliest printed books by Muslims, or intended for Muslim consumption. After an initial imperial initiative by Catherine the Great, who printed the sacred text for her Russian Muslim subjects in 1787 in St. Petersburg, various other editions followed in the subsequent years which began to disseminate a printed form of the Qur'anic text that reflected Islamic insight and stylistic features.

Catherine's interest in printing and distributing the Qur'an formed part of her inclusive policy towards Muslims. The edition was prepared for publication under the supervision of a *mullā* named ʿUthmān Ismāʿīl and printed with Arabic types created especially for the project by the editor, J.K. Schnoor. In 1801–2, the types were transferred to Kazan, where the Qur'an would be published

172 On these editions, see Reinhold F. Glei and Roberto Tottoli, *Ludovico Marracci at Work: The Evolution of His Latin Translation of the Qur'ān in the Light of His Newly Discovered Manuscripts with an Edition and a Comparative Linguistic Analysis of Sura 18* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2016); Roberto Tottoli, "New Light on the Translation of the Qur'ān of Ludovico Marracci from His Manuscripts Recently Discovered at the Order of the Mother of God in Rome," in *Books and Written Culture of Islamic World. Studies Presented to Claude Gilliot on the Occasion of His 75th Birthday*, ed. Andrew Rippin and Roberto Tottoli (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2015), 91–130; Gian Luca D'Errico, ed., *Il Corano e il pontefice. Ludovico Marracci tra cultura islamica e Curia papale* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2015); Maurice Borrmans et al., *Il Corano. Traduzioni, traduttori e lettori in Italia* (Milano: IPL, 2000); Alastair Hamilton, "A Lutheran Translator for the Qur'ān. A Late Seventeenth-Century Quest," in *The Republic of the Letters and the Levant*, ed. Alastair Hamilton, Maurits H. van den Boogert and Bart Westerweel (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 197–221; Hellmut Braun, "Der hamburger Koran von 1694," in *Libris et Litteris. Festschrift für H. Tiemann zum sechzigsten Geburtstag am 9. Juli 1959*, ed. Christian Voigt and Erich Zimmermann (Hamburg: Maximilian-Gesellschaft, 1959), 149–66; Jean Aucagne, "Le Coran: la préface d'Abraham Hinckelmann [Hamburg, 1694], ou la naissance d'un nouveau monde," in *Le livre et le Liban jusquʿà 1900 (Exposition)* (Paris: Unesco-Agecoop, 1982), 135–43; Rijk Smitskamp, "Flügel's Koran Edition," *ʿĀlam al-kutub* 15 (1994): 553–555; Arne A. Ambros, "Die Divergenzen zwischen dem Flügel- und dem Azhar-Koran," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 78 (1988): 9–21. On the problems in Flügel's edition – including its verse division, which does not adhere to any one tradition – see Jeffery and Mendelsohn, "The Orthography of the Samarqand Qur'ān Codex," 181.

in numerous editions throughout the first half of the 19th century. Based on the reading of Ḥafṣ and including, from the edition of 1857 on, references to the variants of the seven readings (*qirāʾāt*) in the margins, the printings of Kazan played a fundamental role in consolidating the dissemination of a particular reading, not only within the Islamic populations under Russian domination, and then in Central Asia, but also in the rest of the Islamic world where they began to circulate in the 19th century.

The extensive production of these Russian editions, in larger numbers and with much wider circulation in comparison with the previous European products, allowed for the affirmation of a text in a stable manner, in a very precise form and with extremely reduced space for variability between one edition and another, displaying, for the first time, the unifying and homogenizing potential of printed Qur'ans.[173]

It was probably the long wave of these editions and its effects, besides the possibility of dissemination of the text in areas of relative or reduced literacy, that shifted the project of producing printed Qur'ans to other Muslim regions. After Russia, India and Iran were the first nations to produce printed Qur'ans, generally in a lithographic form that guaranteed a more controllable page setting, with an appearance closer to that of manuscripts copies. They were the first publishers who began to circulate copies of the Qur'an more and more, even outside their own regions, while manuscript production started to lose its central role that had been established for centuries.

The Ottoman Empire had a long history of affinity and connections, through the Mediterranean, with the European environment, where the revolution of print had already begun in the mid-15th century. The first Ottoman bans on the production of Islamic books through printing date to the 16th century. They were renewed many times, and, for the production of religious literature specifically, remained effective even when the first printed productions were introduced in the 18th century.

A change in direction was brought about by the great upheavals of the 19th century, when printed copies of the Qur'an coming from India, Russia, and Iran began to enter the Empire. In response, in 1856 there was the first attempt to produce a printed Qur'an in Istanbul.

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173 Horst Röhling, "Koranausgaben im russischen Buchdruck des 18. Jahrhunderts," *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch* (1977): 205–10; Efim A. Rezvan, "The Qur'ān and Its World: VI. Emergence of the Canon: The Struggle for Uniformity," *Manuscripta Orientalia* 4/2 (1998): 26; Efim A. Rezvan, "The Qur'ān and Its World: VIII/2. *West-östliche Divans* (The Qur'ān in Russia)," *Manuscripta Orientalia* 5/1 (1999): 36–40.

Commercial drive and above all general consideration of the benefits of a large scale, controlled dissemination of the text inevitably prevailed upon religious doubts regarding issues of purity and the reluctance caused by the greater aesthetic quality of manuscript copies. Pressure became more and more urgent until the ban on printing the Qur'an was lifted in 1871, and the first lithographic editions appeared in Turkey in the years immediately following the revocation of the ban. In this case as well, they were lithographic productions that allowed for an effective control of the accuracy of the text, and they continued to offer a product that easily allowed incorporation of the calligraphic style prevalent up until that time.[174]

Between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the production of printed Qur'ans exploded in different forms in the various regions of the Islamic world, no different from what occurred during the dissemination of books of all other genres, which revolutionized the access to intellectual production, and opened the entire Islamic world to a culture that was no longer dependent on manuscript transmission. Together with India and Iran, Egypt quickly emerged as one of the most important actors in this new reality, in producing books in movable type, including the Qur'an. A first and partial printing of the Qur'an, prompted by Muḥammad ʿAlī, dates from 1833, but it was printed in limited numbers and taken off the market in 1853 before later editions that did not meet with opposition were published by the official printing press of Bulaq.

It was actually in Egypt that the next fundamental step in the dissemination of the printed Qur'an occurred, along with the progressive homogenization of the published form, through the famous edition of 1924 named after King Fuʾād, who was the reigning king at that time. The edition was born in circumstances analogous to those that led to the definitive dissemination of printing. The circulation of various editions of the Qur'an and fear of reduced control over the production of the sacred book accelerated the decision of the king and the state to authorize the release of an official version.

174 Brett M. Wilson, *Translating the Qur'an in an Age of Nationalism. Print Culture and Modern Islam in Turkey* (London-Oxford: Oxford University Press, in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2014), 55–83. On the 1918 edition and then the informative appendixes of the 1924 edition, see Muhammad A. Abdel Haleem, "Qur'ānic Orthography. The Written Representation of the Recited Text of the Qur'ān," *Islamic Quarterly* 34 (1994): 180–87. On the editions of the Qur'an printed in London during the 19th century for various purposes, see Michael W. Albin, "Printing of the Qur'ān," *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. J.D. McAuliffe, 4:265. On the Ottoman opposition to printing, see also Mohammed Ghaly, "The Interplay of Technology and Sacredness in Islam: Discussions of Muslim Scholars on Printing the Qur'ān," *Studies in Ethics, Law, and Technology* 3/2 (2009): 1–24.

Not everything is known about the modes of production. According to the pages attached to the first edition, a committee of experts, coordinated by the Ministry of Education, undertook the project of creating a single text that could be used in school and on a larger scale. These experts chose the reading of Ḥafṣ via ʿĀṣim, through manuscripts but most of all through oral tradition, given its diffusion throughout the entire Islamic world. They also made a series of choices regarding the various signs added to the text, including marks for vocalization, pauses, and pronunciation, which were destined to exert a lasting influence.

This version, not free from some criticism, was the object of later revisions, especially that of 1936, known as the Fārūq edition, from the name of the Egyptian king who was reigning when it was completed. While created with specific aims of an educational nature, said edition and its successive revisions became a point of reference for nearly all those editions that followed, rendering the version of Hafs the most diffused form of the Qur'an in the entire world from then on, despite revisions and differences that highlighted a continual process of adaptation.[175]

The later history of the printed editions is marked by the primacy given to the reading of Ḥafṣ via ʿĀṣim and by the use of the 1924 Cairo edition and later editions as a basis for modifications and improvements, though in a limited and gradual manner. In recent decades, the most active agents in this endeavor have been Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, which have made financing consistently available for the production of printed Qur'ans and have promoted the establishment of the form of the text. They have been investing substantial resources into the resolution of issues regarding the script with increasingly sophisticated technical resources. The creation of official institutions, starting with the Qur'an printing agency, which was created by al-Azhar in 1977 and the

175 ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ al-Qāḍī, *al-Muṣḥaf ash-sharīf: Abḥāth fī tārīkhihi wa-aḥkāmihi* (Cairo: al-Majlis al-Aʿlā li-sh-Shuʾūn al-Islāmiyya, 1388/1968); Abū al-Futūḥ Riḍwān, *Tārīkh maṭbaʿat Būlāq wa-lamḥa fī tārīkh aṭ-ṭibāʿa fī buldān ash-Sharq al-Awsaṭ* (Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Amīriyya, 1953); Gotthelf Bergsträsser, "Koranlesung in Kairo. I," *Der Islam* 20 (1932): 2–13, on the edition and the successive pages dedicated to the most significant figure of the group of four: Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Khalaf al-Ḥusaynī al-Ḥaddād. Bergsträsser affirms that Qur'anic manuscripts were not used for the writing of the Cairo Qur'an. See also Albin, "Printing of the Qur'ān," 272; Natalia K. Suit, "Quranic Matters: Media and Materiality" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2014); Reynolds, *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context*, 2–3; Wilson, *Translating the Qur'an in an Age of Nationalism*, 189–90; Nasser, *The Second Canonization of the Qur'ān*, 8, where he defines the 1924 Cairo edition as the fifth canonization. See also Adrian Brockett, "Studies in Two Transmissions of the Qur'ān" (PhD diss., University of St. Andrews, 1984), on the differences between the diverse editions of the 20th century of the Qur'an according to Ḥafṣ.

organization named after king Fahd which was founded in Saudi Arabia in 1985, led to the investment of significant resources for the dissemination of the Qur'an in various print editions.

Various forms of availability of the Qur'anic text have been introduced into this reality in the modern era. They include those that have used the different media that have traversed the history of the 20th century, from radio transmissions, recordings on all types of media (records, cassettes, CD-Rom), and even the various textual forms available in digital formats and that can now be used with a variety of media with growing degree of interactivity.

The recited, oral dissemination has experienced significant momentum thanks to new technologies such as apps for smartphones, and videos through internet channels like Youtube, which facilitate an individual, direct relationship with the Qur'an and, therefore, an education that is no longer mediated by traditional learning methods.

The form of the text in these new realities confirms a strengthening of the primacy of the reading of Ḥafṣ via ʿĀṣim and the ongoing tendencies in printed production, showing, even in this digital sphere, the presence of various institutions that aim to define a unique and possibly more stable form of the Qur'anic text. There are still only a limited number of in-depth studies of policies of production and of dissemination of digital versions, with regard to the form of the circulating Qur'an and to specific issues that might arise from digital media in light of the history of the Qur'an's dissemination.

3.3.3 Stability and variants: an overview

The condition of the earliest manuscripts that preserve the Qur'an, the interpretation of the data of those manuscripts, and the data offered by the exegetical tradition are fundamental aspects for the critical debate on the origins of the Qur'an as we possess it today. Beyond confessional perspectives, the scientific literature that discusses it is traversed throughout by a clear line dividing skeptical views, which mistrust the traditional evidence, from opposing views, which aim to highlight consistency and antiquity in the testimonies of the Qur'anic text. The textual question is obviously connected to the question of particular contents, and the question of the prehistory of the Qur'an or the concepts and contents that the Qur'an conveys.

According to some critical interpretations, the current form of the Qur'an and the debates on its early origin in a traditional key are only part of the problem that the *textus receptus* highlights. According to these interpretations, the documentary data apply, after the death of Muḥammad, to all that material

which was considered to resemble revelation and that became the preserved Qur'anic text. The totality of the prophetic *logia* could, consequently, contain everything that he pronounced between 610 and 632 or, according to the more skeptical viewpoints, everything throughout the course of the history previous to and following this date that was ascribed to him in the progressive definition of the Qur'an.

Now, the earliest extant and dated manuscripts preclude the fixing of a stable Qur'an at any point after the 7th century. Instead, they demonstrate that, already in the generation following the Prophet, as the Islamic tradition generally attests, though not always in detail, the sacred text of Islam was essentially conceived as the one we possess today. The preceding period must be examined in order to hypothesize complications or elements of disturbance for the Islamic confessional reconstruction, which can explain some of the problems that the text indicates, placing the focus beyond the Qur'an itself.

Inevitably, the answers result from the questions posed and discussed in the previous chapters. The repetitions and often identical or similar passages of the Qur'an may be the product of multiple versions, preserved by different figures, which were then included out of respect for and devotion to the memory of the founder. Such an operation would imply the fact that some passages of the Qur'an are spurious but, at the same time, would highlight the fact that from the earliest moments Muslims adopted an attitude of extreme care and devotion, to the point where they preferred a conservative approach, even at the risk of including repetitions in the text.

Together with this, passages not revealed to Muḥammad but that circulated in his environment as expressions of uncontroversial religiosity would be included in the canonized text. This would fully explain parallels and echoes of other scriptures and religious traditions. On this point as well, the answers may vary depending on approach and pre-conceived attitude. For some, a textual entity like this, which is plausible in terms of what we have seen, could then have been "closed" by a later redactional process that re-elaborated the text, consciously bringing in the Qur'an segments of texts belonging to other religious traditions. For others, more receptive to traditional Islamic information, such permeability to other traditions may have been conveyed by Muḥammad himself, who would have absorbed and repeated what was known and echoed by his contemporaries, or attributed to him soon after his death, without distinguishing between how much was part of his own revelation and how much was known to him and possibly proclaimed by him but originated in other sources.

A univocal response does not exist. What exists is the Qur'an as we know it, with its mysteries and problems, which offer a considerable range of possible interpretations. This process of progressive fixation highlights precisely what

the Islamic tradition attests, that is, that the textual history of the Qur'an reveals problems based on the dynamics of human communities that are marked by divergences and different attitudes and clouded by innumerable factors.

Leaving faith in the perfection of the Qur'an to the believers, the preserved text, like the sacred texts of other religious traditions, bears the marks of human intervention, inevitably inspired by differences that are not necessarily dictated by distortive aims, but often by contingencies and problems that are difficult to resolve. The unreachable goal was to identify the memory of exactly what the Prophet conveyed in his revelation and to preserve its divine message in the rapidly changing historical reality of great conflict that was early Islam.

If the prehistory of the Qur'an still rests on very conjectural grounds, the events surrounding the manuscript and recited transmission of the sacred text, both in its original sources and in its exegetical elaborations, exhibit diverse processes and various modes of resolution, including political intervention. In any case, such complexity is not limited to early Islam. The history of the printing of the Qur'an, even in its most recent reflections, demonstrate to what extent the dispute regarding the preservation of the text in a specific form has still not been resolved definitively. The perfect sacred text is an ideal like the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise rather than a tangible milestone to be reached.

4 The Legacy of the Qur'an

The Qur'an and the life of Muḥammad are the foundations from which Islam's concepts, perceptions, and religious devotion originate. They are the two pillars that support the creed and the behaviors in the personal and collective sphere. At the same time, they have been inspirational since the first generations of Muslims. Throughout history, Muslim communities have turned to the text of the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet for guidance and inspiration in contexts that are evolving and changing.

From this point of view, the Qur'an, even more than the life of Muḥammad, has constituted an ample space for reading and interpretation, circumscribed by the concrete words of the canonized text but at the same time expanded by the continuous analysis of the meanings of various chapters, verses, and single words. The pervasive character of the Qur'anic text for devout Muslims in all questions, whether fundamentally religious or otherwise, ensures that every literary and intellectual work contain a Qur'anic reference, either explicit or implicit, depending on the motivation or the explanation given for the citation. It is no understatement to consider Islamic literature in its entirety as an articulated, exegetical reflection on the Qur'anic text and simultaneously a means of religious knowledge that aims to gain support from the sacred text.

Consequently, it is possible to rethink Islamic religious history and to understand it as an interpretative path of the Qur'anic text itself, so as it is possible to understand Islam as the legacy of the Qur'an and the result of its exemplification in the history of the communities inspired by it.

While religious ideals and the historical development of religious discourse are only one factor amongst others in the evolution of society and historical realities, and often not the determining factors, every area of individual and social life in Islamic history has often resorted to the Qur'anic text. The text of the Qur'an has constantly pervaded every sphere of human activity, either as a source of inspiration or as a support for attitudes and viewpoints that were developed independently, but which sought in the Qur'an a reference for their own legitimacy from a religious point of view. On this account, the Qur'an has been and is a constant presence in every Muslim reality, a sonorous, visible, and palpable presence, in all forms and modalities, in the religious sphere, in the discourse surrounding the articulation of the creed, and in other spheres.

Since the very first generations of Muslims, some historical analyses have insinuated doubts regarding the absolute centrality of the Qur'anic text. Without affecting its divine and foundational character in any way, scholars have highlighted that in certain textual witnesses from the first two centuries of

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Islam, especially literary ones, they did not find the continuous and constant reference to the Qur'an that would come to be the norm in later eras. The impression is that the Qur'an was an important yet not omnipresent element of written Arabic expression. Accordingly, the hypothesis developed that, in the first Islamic century, God's word did not yet have the pervasiveness that would characterize it in later periods of Islamic history. It is difficult to evaluate, from these few witnesses, the actual role played by the Qur'anic text at the beginning of Arabic and Islamic literary production, but exaggerating its meaning would be an error. This fact must surely be measured against customs and cultural expressions in written and documentary production during the first two Islamic centuries, which was scarce and problematic and did not likely attest to social practices in every area.[176]

4.1 The sacred text in religious discourse

The first pervasive area of influence of the Qur'an was inevitably that of religious discourse. The creed is the first of these chosen locations, since the Qur'an, overall, and the words it contains, inevitably provided the foothold for the first speculations of a theological nature.

Developments in Islamic religious discourse regard the history of Islamic thought more than the history of the Qur'an in a strict sense. Accordingly, what interests us more is the concept of the Qur'an as the word of God that is being defined in Islamic thought, along with the hermeneutic and exegetical process that is the legacy of the Qur'anic word.

There are many directions to explore. The exegetical element best expresses the ambivalent capacity for inspiration and reference that the Qur'anic word represents, as well as its capacity for the dissemination of ideas. The Qur'anic sciences, on the whole, highlight the depth and variety of exegetical approaches to the Qur'an, far beyond the classical literary genre of Qur'anic commentary. This has

176 Dye, "Le corpus coranique: questions autour de sa canonisation," 883–94. A lesser initial emphasis on the mention of the passages of the Qur'an would justify, for example, paraphrastic or less precise citations regarding the canonized form of the sacred text. See Lahcen Daaïf, "Citation coranique probablement erronée dans la plus ancienne lettre arabe datée d'Égypte," *Arabica* 62 (2015): 1–18. Some initial liberty in the terms cited, at the end of the verses, also seems to be documented by the Islamic tradition, see Déroche, *Le Coran, une histoire plurielle*, 231–64. See also Gerald R. Hawting, "Two Citations of the Qur'ān in 'Historical' Sources for Early Islam," in *Approaches to the Qur'ān*, ed. G.R. Hawting and A.A. Shareef, 260–68. This is a particularly meaningful theme for those who doubt the Islamic version of the canonization of ʿUthmān's text.

already been said for the traditional and literary production with regard to certain aspects of the text, such as the canonization of the readings and all of the specific literary production connected to elements of the Qur'an. Each topic related to the Qur'an, whether from the perspective of form or content, has consequently been the object of discussion and written, traditional elaboration. Such bodies of literature aimed to guide believers through the best use of the sacred text, seeking a full and mature understanding of its meaning and the best manner of preserving, transmitting, and using it, with the utmost respect for its divine nature.

In this area, even more so than in others, a distinction must be made between Qur'anic facts and the exegesis, history, theology, and so on that followed and expanded upon or were inspired by them; the sacred text should be separated from its subsequent history. The richness of the Qur'anic sciences and the encyclopedic literary productions on all its topics constitute, above all, the history of the reception of the Qur'an. They are not, or at least not necessarily, where the ultimate definitions of Qur'an's meanings are to be found. This does not at all diminish the greatness of the vast intellectual production that the Qur'anic sciences represent. Rather, it underscores their unique human character as the fruit of profound devotion. And, at the same time, it highlights the capacity of the Qur'an, like that of other sacred texts, to give rise to further meanings that go beyond those of a stable canon.

4.1.1 Theology and inimitability

The history of Islamic theology involved a continuous comparison with the data contained in the Qur'an. Thinkers addressing the main themes that have characterized Islamic theological speculation, such as religious authority after the death of the Prophet, the degree of human freedom in comparison to divine Omnipotence, or the relative importance of faith and works, scoured the Qur'an looking for passages that could corroborate the different viewpoints that emerged in the community of believers. This was likewise the case for other questions regarding which the Qur'an served the function of instrumentally supporting ideas or practices that emerged from the historical reality and imposed specific meanings on certain contents of the Qur'an (pp. 56–60).[177] In view of this, even

177 In studies in the field, it is often inevitable, therefore, to discuss Qur'anic theological questions looking at exegetical literature. On the natural theology of the Qur'an, see, for example, Robert G. Morrison, "Natural Theology and the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 15/1 (2013): 1–22. On other Qur'anic themes, see Binyamin Abrahamov, "Theology," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. A. Rippin, 420–33. On the first theological debates on the Qur'an, see,

though the passages that mention or allude to relevant themes that were subjects of subsequent speculation are not few, the Qur'an does not contain any systematic outline of theological doctrine, but it inevitably presents various elements that contribute to defining God and His relationship with creation and human action. The most significant questions touched upon are God's omnipresent unicity, His eternity, His attributes, including anthropomorphic attributes or the Throne, and the issue of faith and justice, which is connected with the relationship between faith and works and, therefore, to the status of the sinner.

Some questions alluded to or mentioned in the sacred text regard the nature of the Qur'an and are more directly significant for this study. One salient theme is the question whether the Qur'an was created or uncreated, that is, whether it is an external manifestation of God, a created word, or a form of the essence of God, and therefore eternal. The controversy between these two views highlights the important use of the Qur'an in theological debate. At the same time, it exemplifies how much the Qur'an was itself the reflection and fulcrum of a greater debate regarding the nature of the sacred text.

This debate caused the religious persecution and consequent crisis of the *miḥna*, which began in 833 and then ended in 847, in a development that spelled the end of Muʿtazilism as the Abbasids' official theology and opened the doors to Sunni traditionalism. This resolution, which was reached during the mid-ninth century, guaranteed, from the Sunni side, a unique status for the Qur'anic text of the Vulgate that reinforced the construction of Sunnism as we know it today.

Another lasting effect on the exegetical history of the Qur'an and a greater capacity to question the nature of the Qur'an can be found in another theme that emerged in debates during the first centuries of Islam. It was the affirmation of the Qur'an's inimitability or miraculous nature (*iʿjāz*), the product of an exegetical elaboration which assigned to the Qur'an a unique nature vis-à-vis other books, even sacred scriptures, as well as a unique role in human history.

According to this concept, the Qur'an is so perfect that it could never be imitated on account of the unique quality of its contents. It was an unrepeatable event, as can be inferred from its miraculous nature. However, it was only so defined by theological speculation that occurred in the course of the first centuries after the death of Muḥammad.

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instead, Josef van Ess, *Theology and Society in the Second and Third Centuries of the Hijra. Vol. 4. A History of Religious Thought in Early Islam* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2019) (or. ed. *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra. Eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991–1997), 203–57, and on the created or uncreated character of the Qur'an, 673–700.

While the inimitability of the Qur'an is an exegetical principle extraneous to the text itself, it may find a possible echo in Qur'anic passages that aim to uphold the unique qualities of the revelations received by the Prophet, challenging humankind to produce other texts of equal beauty. This theological concept had the primary goal of establishing the unique status of the Qur'an itself as a miracle (*muʿjiza*) and of evoking the sense of provocation that the Qur'an presents to humankind, since humans are incapable of producing anything similar to it (Text no. 66).[178]

Text no. 66: The inimitability of the Qur'an

Say, 'If Man and *Jinn* were to assemble to produce the like of this Recitation,
they could not produce its like,
even though they supported one another.' (Qur. 17:88)
Say, 'Then bring a Scripture from God
that gives you better guidance than the two of them,
and I shall follow it,
if you are telling the truth.' (Qur. 28:49)
Or [because] they say,
'He has invented it.'
Say, 'Then bring ten *sūra*s like it, invented,
and call on everyone you can,
to the exclusion of God,
if you are truthful.' (Qur. 11:13)

The theological principle of inimitability was attached to passages in the Qur'an that portray a polemical exchange with the unbelieving audience in which a theoretical comparison is made between the Qur'an and other potential texts. The contemporaries of the Prophet, the Qur'an reports, rejected the revelation, affirming that they recognized in it already known words and texts without particular allure or appeal. The Qur'an itself refuses this affirmation, upholding

178 On these topics, see Wilferd Madelung, "The Origins of the Controversy Concerning the Creation of the Qur'ān" *Orientalia Hispanica: sive studia F. M. Pareja octogenario dicata*, ed. J.M. Barral (Lugduni Batavorum [Leiden]: Brill, 1974), 504–25 (repr. in Wilfred Madelung, *Religious Schools and Sects in Medieval Islam*, London: Variorum Reprints, 1985, no. 5); W. Montgomery Watt, "Early Discussions about the Qur'ān," *The Muslim World* 40/1 (1950): 21–40; W. Montgomery Watt, "Early Discussions about the Qur'ān," *The Muslim World* 40/2 (1950): 96–105; Radscheit, *Die koranische Herausforderung*. On the question of inimitability, see Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, Vol. 5, 1873–905 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, Vol. 2, 1076–99): the area of linguistic and formal perfection was chosen by God because it was that in which the Arabs excelled. On the various themes connected to the reception of the Qur'an and its aesthetic qualities, see Kermani, *God Is Beautiful. The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran*; Anthony H. Johns, "A Humanistic Approach to *Iʿjāz* in the Qur'an: The Transfiguration of Language," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 13/1 (2011): 79–99.

its unique quality, and, in doing so, attests to its divine origin and miraculous nature (pp. 18–22).

In early Islamic history, there were a number of concrete imitations or attempts to imitate the Qur'an, such as those attributed to the false prophet Musaylima (d. 632), a contemporary of Muḥammad, or to Muslim scholars such as Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (d. ca. 755), al-Mutanabbī (d. 965), and Abū l-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī (d. 1057).

The uniqueness of the Qur'an, as it is confirmed in the text itself, has first a polemical function and second, a theological one that affirms its divine nature. In exegetical discourse, however, the argument that its nature is unique is promoted with the motivation of determining its unattainable quality in each area, its richness, and its capacity to convey meanings in different and complex manners. Islamic literature makes lavish use of rhetorical devices, from metonymy (*kināya*) to concision and prolixity (*ījāz*, *iṭnāb*), and these are identified and corroborated in rhetorical manuals through Qur'anic citations, attesting to a process of analysis that traversed centuries of interpretative history, as well as devotion to the Qur'anic text on the part of Muslim authors who produced increasingly complex analyses of rhetorical and literary techniques and theological concepts. The literature specifically dedicated to the study of *majāz al-Qurʾān*, "the figurative expressions of the Qur'an" we discussed above (pp. 128–29), which provides a broader mode of explanation and exegesis of the meanings of the Qur'anic verses, contributes to this trend.

All these cases involve the history of the interpretation more than the intrinsic qualities of the Qur'anic text. This text undoubtedly includes ample spaces for interpretation on account of its variety and complexity. Every reading that aims directly to underscore the literary or aesthetic excellence of the Qur'an is, however, influenced to a greater or lesser extent by theological exigencies that are extraneous to the Qur'anic text itself.[179]

179 Among the available studies, we refer in particular to Lara Harb, "Form, Content, and the Inimitability of the Qur'ān in ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī's Works," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 18 (2015): 301–21; Sophia Vasalou, "The miraculous eloquence of the Qur'an: general trajectories and individual approaches," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 4/2 (2002): 23–53; Issa J. Boullata, "The Rhetorical Interpretation of the Holy Qur'ān: *Iʿjāz* and Related Topics," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, ed. A. Rippin, 139–57; Margaret Larkin, "The Inimitability of the Qur'ān. Two Perspectives," *Religion and Literature* 20 (1988): 31–47; Kermani, *God is Beautiful. The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran*, 185–251; D. Urvoy and M.T. Urvoy, *L'action psychologique dans le Coran*, which also discuss the Islamic treatises of *naẓm al-Qurʾān* (literally the composition of the Qur'an). Western studies that underscore qualities and particularities of the Qur'anic text abound. See, for example, Todd Lawson, "The Qur'an and Epic," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, 16/1 (2014): 58–92, where Joycean modernism in the Qur'an and in its exegesis is

Exegetical discussions of the early Islamic centuries debated the various causes and modes of the Qur'an's inimitability, including a hypothesized divine intervention preventing opponents from ever possibly rivaling its unattainable intrinsic and rhetorical qualities. These concepts were established and consolidated through literary and rhetorical analysis, following the early development of Sunni Islamic theology in the early Islamic centuries, thanks to the contributions of authors such as Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013). Not coincidentally, this occurred alongside the emergence of the concept of the infallibility of the prophets and of Muḥammad himself, in an analogous process of preservation and further sacralization of the two cornerstones of the Islamic faith: the Qur'an and the *ḥadīth* (reports of the words and deeds of the Prophet).[180]

The concept of the Qur'an's inimitability also served other precise functions related to the history of the text itself. The first of these, from a Sunni perspective, was to erase any doubt about the reliability of ʿUthmān's Vulgate: the Qur'an's inimitability inhered of course in the celestial archetype but no less in its manifestation in the text redacted by the third caliph, then improved over time, and closed with the concept of the canonical readings. The second function of the Qur'an's inimitability was to endow Muḥammad with a comprehensive prophetic miracle that would withstand inter-religious comparison. In this manner, it would have a circular effect: the Qur'an's perfection attested to Muḥammad's prophetic perfection, and that, in turn, guaranteed the exceptional nature of Muḥammad's mission and thus the revelation itself.

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discussed, and then taken up in Todd Lawson, *The Quran. Epic and Apocalypse* (London: Oneworld Academic, 2017), 131–68; Todd Lawson, "Duality, Opposition and Typology in the Qur'an: The Apocalyptic Substrate." *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 10/2 (2008): 23–49. A similar example of academic study that supports the uniqueness and substantial untranslatability of the Qur'anic style and rhetoric is Khalid Y. Blankinship, *The Inimitable Qur'ān. Some Problems in the English Translations of the Qur'ān with Reference to Rhetorical Figures* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2020). The theme of inimitability and whether it is implicit in the verses relative to the poetry contained in the Sura of the Poets (no. 26) is one of the issues discussed in the debate between Michael Zwettler and Irfan Shahid (see n. 113).

180 In Islamic literature, and for the use of the concept in areas beyond theology, see Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. aṭ-Ṭayyib al-Bāqillānī, *Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1374/1954); Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAbd al-Jabbār al-Asad-Ābādī, *al-Mughnī fī abwāb at-tawḥīd wa-l-ʿadl. Al-juzʾ as-sādis ʿashar, Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*, ed. Amīn al-Khūlī (Cairo: Wizārat ath-Thaqāfa wa-l-Irshād al-Qawmī, al-Idāra al-ʿĀmma li-th-Thaqāfa, 1960); ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, *Dalāʾil al-iʿjāz*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1995); Claude-France Audebert, *al-Ḫaṭṭābī et l'inimitabilité du Coran: traduction et introduction au* Bayān iʿǧāz al-Qurʾān (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1982); Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, Vol. 4, 1556–685 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, Vol. 2, 851–942), and for an annotated list of rhetorical forms, Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, Vol. 4, 1723–83 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, Vol. 2, 968–1014).

4.1.2 Qur'anic sciences

Directly connected to the will and capacity to question the Qur'an overall and to affirm, without a doubt, its centrality in the life of Muslims themselves, a myriad of disciplines and literary genres that have the Qur'an at their center emerged in the course of Islamic history and, in most cases, continue to inspire literary production still today. Commentaries on the entire text of the Qur'an, verse by verse, constitute the genre *par excellence* and the most prestigious sub-category of Qur'anic studies scholarship from a literary point of view (pp. 202–19). However, there are many more disciplines that reflect, ultimately, the ways in which the Qur'an is brought to bear on the life of Muslims and, at the same time, to collect the questions and answers that these uses generated among believers over time. Jalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī's vast compendium dedicated to the Qur'anic sciences (*ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*) represents an ideal summary of what these are in terms of dimensions and variety.[181]

One fundamental Qur'anic science is that which analyzed the text of the Vulgate, reaching a complex solution regarding the canonization of a number of schemes of readings – seven, ten, or fourteen – in a debate that gave rise to an actual literary genre (pp. 163–69). The books on the *qirāʾāt* became especially numerous and were continuously composed, even after the 11th century. They are thus evidence of a debate that has never ceased and of the prestige accorded to knowledge of a subject that has always been important for the learning and communication of the Qur'anic text, with repercussions even regarding the choice of the forms of the text to be printed in contemporary times.

For centuries, the expert on the Qur'an was not only the author of a verse-by-verse commentary but also an expert/connoisseur who was attentive to the variant readings and to the corollary literary production that discussed subsidiary issues related to the text, such as the regional traditions of recitation, the schemes of verse division, or the rules regarding pauses and other features of the readings.

Traditional discussions of the rules for recitation were of central importance in the Islamic imaginary as well as in the circulation of the sacred text and constituted a Qur'anic science that combined the sciences of the book and social practice. The literature on the variant readings (*qirāʾāt*), even though its

181 See also Ahmad von Denffer's introduction to the topic in *ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān. An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qurʾān* (Leicester, U.K.: Islamic Foundation, 1983). The traditional disciplines are also subject to expansion, as in the case of the contemporary success of the theme of "intentions" of the Qur'an. See, in this regard, Tazu Islam, "The Genesis and Development of the *Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān*," *American Journal of Islam and Society* 30/3 (2013): 39–58.

main focus was the question of preservation in manner similar to that of the ʿUthmānic Vulgate, nevertheless had a component of attention to verbal recitation, though it is difficult to establish to what extent.

Alongside the books on *qirāʾāt*, there was a specific discipline devoted to the psalmodic recitation of the Qur'an, termed in Arabic *tajwīd* (orthoepy of the Qur'an), which describes and analyzes the particular methods one should follow when one recites the Qur'an, according to various modes and with fleeting references to the variant readings and more frequent references to the literature on pauses and meanings in the various verses. The rich literature on *tajwīd*, a significant sub-genre of exegetical literature, was receptive to the essential nature of the Qur'an, that is, its oral and recited nature (on *tajwīd*, see (pp. 225–26).

The various large categories, literary genres, and different individual types of Qur'anic sciences also include the history of the revelation, and other disciplines connected to the chronology of the Qur'anic text and to the definition of the moments in which Muḥammad received certain revelations (pp. 72–77). The chronology of revelation is significant for specific reasons; as explained above, legal hermeneutics and the theory of abrogating and abrogated verses (*an-nāsikh wa-l-mansūkh*) depended on being able to determine which potentially conflicting verse came later than the other. This focused interest on chronology for legal purposes led to the creation of lists of suras in the order of revelation, which have been discussed above (pp. 63–66). Another genre related to the previous ones is the literature dedicated to the occasions of the revelation (*asbāb an-nuzūl*), which identify the historical events of Muḥammad's life and mission that formed the circumstances to which specific revelations responded.

Literary production on these topics was continuous and closely connected to other themes of the exegetical discourse that were taking shape in the production of Qur'anic commentaries. The contents of the literature on abrogating and abrogated verses and on the occasions of the revelations, of dubious historical accuracy, include information that is much more useful for the history of exegesis and the Islamic legal thought in the early Islamic centuries of Islam than for the history of the Qur'an itself.

4.1.3 Exegesis and Qur'anic commentaries

The literary genre connected to the Qur'an *par excellence* is exegetical literature, that is, commentaries on Qur'anic words, verses, and passages. In the mature and full phase of defining the genre, Qur'anic commentaries (*tafsīr*) became quite extensive treatises that aimed to explain and comment on the entire text, from beginning to end.

Incorporating and re-elaborating what has been discussed in the Qur'anic sciences generally, Qur'anic commentaries have provided the space in which it was possible to explain what was obscure, unclear, or insufficiently explained. It was read by Muslims of all times and, no less importantly, it was also the place where various concepts and visions were displayed in pursuit of legitimacy. Working in these two directions, the authors of the Qur'anic commentaries demonstrated their own knowledge of the contents of the sacred text and became experts on the central core of Islamic faith, law, and theology.

Exegetical activity, though not structured as an organic written production, must have occurred since the beginnings of Islam. It is significant, in this regard, that the Islamic tradition highlights contrasting attitudes and needs related to exegesis. On the one hand, it affirms that some words of the revelation had been considered obscure ever since its origins or came to be obscure with the passing of time, because of non-Arab converts' limited knowledge of Arabic – words that needed, therefore, an explanation and interpretative support. At the same time, the Islamic tradition throughout the first Islamic century speaks to an initial skepticism, if not opposition, to all exegetical activities, even recognizing the risk of diluting the sacred word in a direction that could evidently lead to a loss of control and indirectly impose different meanings, including those open to improper and diverging readings of the divine word, which was implicitly clear and incontrovertible in its Arabic expression.

In the end, exegesis of the Qur'an overcame these oppositions or simple doubts of legitimacy, in a process not unlike the establishment of a new religious tradition in a broad sense. The modes of citation that became typical in the collection of Muḥammad's sayings (*ḥadīth*) were applied to the early attestations of exegetical viewpoints: names of transmitters, in sequence, generally were prefaced to and introduced brief pronouncements that explained a single word or phrase in the Qur'anic text. An initial oral diffusion of these exegetical comments and of other knowledge of a religious nature must have accompanied the very first generations of Muslims. The oral tradition must be considered as the origin and foundation of the genre of Islamic exegesis that would later develop.[182]

182 A general introductory profile that embraces a large part of the themes relative to the characteristics, types, and areas of the Islamic exegetical tradition is given by as-Suyūṭī in his manual on Qur'anic sciences: Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, Vol. 5, 2261–457 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, Vol. 2, 1248–339). See also Muḥammad Ḥusayn adh-Dhahabī, *at-Tafsīr wa-l-mufassirūn: Baḥth tafṣīlī ʿan nashʾat at-tafsīr wa-taṭawwurihi, wa-alwānihi wa-madhāhibihi, maʿa ʿarḍ shāmil li-ashhar al-mufassirīn [. . .]* (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, 1989). The earliest traditional sources on the opposition to Qur'anic exegesis by the Caliph ʿUmar are discussed by Nabia Abbott, "The

Some Companions of Muḥammad are considered particularly important in this activity. Among them, the figure of the Prophet's young cousin stands out, the aforementioned ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbbās. As in the case of the most early traditions, great doubts remain as to the historical accuracy of the statements ascribed to Ibn ʿAbbās, many of which are much more plausibly the product of later elaborations. Ibn ʿAbbās was rendered a putative father or eponym of the genre of *tafsīr* more than an author or producer of the concrete interpretative opinions attributed to him, which often even conflicted with each other.

The names of Ibn ʿAbbās and his successors designated collectors of disparate exegetical opinions on single words or verses. They made up the initial phase of an approximate authorial elaboration, possibly written in part, which functioned as a link between the final edition of the Qur'an, its mnemonic preservation, and the need to explain its full meaning in the rapidly expanding Islamic world, which was witnessing increasingly more structured contacts with non-Arab populations. Under these conditions, hesitations to record exegesis, if there ever were any, disappeared. The caliphal expansion of the Islamic Empire provided the background for the development of the genre, from the first steps of exegetical discussion until its full-fledged literary form.[183]

Early Development of Tafsir," in *The Qur'an: Formative Interpretation*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 1999), 29–40; see also Harris Birkeland, *Old Muslim Opposition against Interpretation of the Koran* (Oslo: I kommisjon hos J. Dybwad, 1955). One tradition cited by Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad imām al-muḥaddithīn wa-l-qudwa fī az-zuhd . . . Abī ʿAbd Allāh Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ḥanbal ash-Shaybānī al-Marwazī; wa-bi-hāmishihi Kitāb Muntakhab kanz al-ʿummāl* . . . , 6 vols. [Cairo]: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Maymanīya, 1313/1895, vol. 2, 185 confirms aversion to the commentaries of the Qur'an (*tafsīr*), besides those with an apocalyptic and eschatological theme (*malāḥim*) and on the battles of Muḥammad (*maghāzī*), since they include unverified materials. See, on this topic, Birkeland, *Old Muslim Opposition against Interpretation of the Koran*, 16–19. On the origin of exegesis, see the contributions collected in Andrew Rippin, ed., *The Qur'an: Formative Interpretation* (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 1999). On the merits of the Qur'anic interpretation, analysis, and the comment as praiseworthy activities and also similar to the martyr's reward, see Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, Vol. 6, 2271–73 (French transl. *Le parfait manuel*, Vol. 2, 1254–55).

183 Several studies have been dedicated to the role of Ibn ʿAbbās in the initial Islamic exegesis. See in particular Herbert Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam. The Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), which contains a lengthy review of earlier studies on the origins of Qur'anic exegesis in the first part and, in the second part, the traditions ascribed to Ibn ʿAbbās that are cited by aṭ-Ṭabarī. Among earlier studies, the most significant on Ibn ʿAbbās is still that of Claude Gilliot, "Portrait 'mythique' d'Ibn ʿAbbās," *Arabica* 32 (1985): 127–83. See also Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 346–52 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Vol. 2, 163–69).

An attendant issue is the attempt to recognize, in the citations attributed to early authorities such as Ibn ʿAbbās, faithful attestations of the first phases of exegetical activity and also those that project later interpretative pronouncements regarding the Qur'anic text back to early dates.

On this point, there are numerous non-confessional studies that present many different ideas and perspectives. Overall, they reflect the general current polarization regarding the evaluation of these attestations, between viscerally skeptical views and others that are less skeptical. Proponents of the latter set of view accept the possibility of dating the circulation of certain traditional materials back to the first century of Islam while acknowledging the known problems and difficulties involved in doing so. Both of these exist alongside traditional Islamic criticism, which is based above all on the plausibility of chains of transmission.

Despite the various doubts about the historical accuracy of reports concerning the beginnings of the genre of *tafsīr*, one may say with confidence that recorded texts by identified exegetical experts emerged by the late 8th century. These texts evidently had a completely formed structure, including both discussion and commentary of the entire text of the Qur'an, along with materials of various types that explained first the meaning and secondly the implications of the verses. The first commentary of a certain size that has survived until the present, although in a later recension, is traced back to Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 767), but material attributed to other figures in the preceding and following generations attest to the beginning of exegetical activity in the fullest sense, aiming towards the production of distinct literature specific to the topic.[184]

184 Muqātil's commentary has been published in various editions. The first and that cited here is the edition of ʿAbd Allāh Maḥmūd Shaḥāta: Muqātil b. Sulaymān al-Balkhī, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān, 80–150 H*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh Maḥmūd Shaḥāta, 4 vols. (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li-l-Kitāb, 1979–1989). On this work and its author, see Claude Gilliot, "Muqātil, grand exégète, traditionniste et théologien maudit," *Journal Asiatique* 279 (1991): 39–72; Nicolai Sinai, "The Qur'anic Commentary of Muqātil b. Sulaymān and the Evolution of Early *Tafsīr* Literature," in *Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History. Exploring the Boundaries of a Genre*, ed. Andreas Görke and Johanna Pink (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2014), 113–43; C.H.M. Veerstegh, *Arabic Grammar & Qur'ānic Exegesis in Early Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1993). A review of the studies on the origins of the *tafsīr* is given in Berg, *The Development of Exegesis*, 65–105. See also Sinai, *Fortschreibung und Auslegung*; Fred Leemhuis, "Origins and Early Development of the *Tafsīr* Tradition," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, ed. A. Rippin, 13–30; Claude Gilliot, "The Beginnings of Qur'ānic Exegesis," in *The Qur'an: Formative Interpretation*, ed. A. Rippin, 1–27; Ignác Goldziher, *Schools of Koranic Commentators*, ed. and trans. Wolfgang H. Behn (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006; or. ed. *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung*, Leiden: Brill, 1920), 1–21. On the single figures of commentators and transmitters of exegetical material, see Claude Gilliot, "A Schoolmaster, Storyteller, Exegete and Warrior at Work in Khurāsān: al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāhim al-Hilālī (d. 106/724)," in

Text no. 67: From the commentary of Muqātil b. Sulaymān

Glory, i.e., great admiration, *be to Him who journeyed with His servant* in the month of Rajab, i.e., abducted the Prophet, God bless him and grant him salvation, f*rom the Sacred Mosque to the Furthest Mosque*, i.e., the temple of Jerusalem, one year before the Hegira. That night, the five daily prayers were prescribed for him, and three rivers were shown to the Prophet – God bless him and grant him salvation: a river of milk, a river of honey, and a river of wine. The Prophet – God bless him and grant him salvation – did not drink the wine, and Gabriel said, "God has indeed forbidden wine to your community." *Whose neighbourhood We have blessed*, i.e., with the blessing of water, trees, and every good thing, *to show him some of Our signs*, and among these signs that he saw were the Burāq, the Antichrist, the angels, and his own prayer together with the prophets. *He is the Hearing and the Seeing*.

Commentary to Qur. 17:1, *Tafsīr*, vol. 2, 513–15.[185]

This initial production of exegetical literature precedes the vast commentary of the Persian Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 923), who formulated one of the first examples of the encyclopedic analysis of every single Qur'anic word and passage, clarifying his own view after listing previous views that he has put in order and presented in groups according to their expressed positions. He is rightly considered the key author in the evolution of early exegesis and his monumental work is viewed as having closed the first three centuries of activity in the field of Qur'anic commentary. Accordingly, the value of his work goes beyond his own pronouncements, which are never lacking, for it provides rich historical testimony of earlier exegetical production that was founded upon the collation and apposition of earlier authorities' views, generally brief, or their testimonies of greater breadth. These views are listed and attributed in detail to their originators, and they are then compared and used to motivate the author's own assessment. It became a standard model for Qur'anic commentary, technically termed *tafsīr bi-l-maʾthūr* (commentary based on that which has been transmitted), that was destined to continue until the modern age, along with innovative tendencies that appeared from time to time.

Aims, Methods and Contexts of Qur'anic Exegesis (2nd/8th – 9th/15th c.), ed. Karen Bauer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 311–92; Claude Gilliot, "Mujāhid's Exegesis: Origins, Paths of Transmission and Development of a Meccan Exegetical Tradition in Its Human, Spiritual and Theological Environment," in *Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History. Exploring the Boundaries of a Genre*, ed. A. Görke and J. Pink, 63–111; Michael E. Pregill, "Methodologies for the Dating of Exegetical Works and Traditions: Can the Lost *Tafsīr* of Kalbī Be Recovered from *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās* (Also Known as *al-Wāḍiḥ*)?" in *Aims, Methods and Contexts of Qur'anic Exegesis (2nd/8th – 9th/15th c.)*, ed. K. Bauer, 393–453.

185 Qur'anic text in italics.

The dissemination of aṭ-Ṭabarī's commentary may have been less significant historically than the importance attributed to the work today. It does not appear that manuscripts of the work were very numerous in comparison to those of other commentaries, but this could be due to the size of his work and the fact that it required too many volumes – 30 large volumes in one modern edition. The author's fame in the pre-modern Islamic world does not seem to have been unanimous or as great as that accorded to him in Western Islamic studies, which is due to his commentary, and above all, to his famous history (*Tārīkh ar-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, "Chronicle of Messengers and Kings"). The documentary function and the value of this first encyclopedic commentary cannot, however, be underestimated, nor can the actual quality of its medieval reception obscure its historical importance.[186]

By the 10th century, Qur'anic commentary, like other genres of Islamic literature, had become a fundamental expression of a religious perspective that may be defined as imperial, and that contrasts in its focus on ideals with the disintegration of political unity. The genre of Qur'anic commentary grew during the subsequent periods to encompass a vast production in Arabic that connected very different social and political realities, from al-Andalus to India.

The genre continuously evolved, and from the 9th century on, the widespread use of linguistic, grammatical, and lexical analysis introduced much material of profane origin into discussions of the text. The extreme variety exhibited by Islamic communities in space and in time, from that period until the 19th century, has contributed to the creation of a precise type of commentary in which the sacred text is meticulously analyzed in sequence. The single exegete found his own authorial originality by choosing materials and articulating, while drawing on these, his own vision, which increasingly embraced every aspect of the Islamic tradition, since such author was often an expert in the Islamic religious tradition broadly speaking and, like aṭ-Ṭabarī and many others, was also interested in legal and historical scholarship.

Later, the division between the aforementioned *tafsīr bi-l-maʾthūr* (commentary based on that which has been transmitted) and the *tafsīr bi-r-raʾy* (commentary based on personal opinion) took shape. It resulted from a late formalization and definition, but it described a reality in which different views

186 On aṭ-Ṭabarī, see the studies collected in Kennedy, *Al-Ṭabarī*. On his commentary, the study of reference is that of Claude Gilliot, *Exégèse, langue, et théologie en Islam: l'exégèse coranique de Tabari (d. 311/923)* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1990). See also Marianna Klar, ed., "Exegetical Facets of Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923)," special issue of *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 18/2 (2016): 130–79; Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 353–54 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Vol. 2, 171–73).

emerged, alongside aṭ-Ṭabarī's. In a variety of commentaries, these views could convey moderate rationalism, philosophical positions, or theological attitudes that were later abandoned.[187]

The names of a number of exegetes deserve mention, and the most recent studies have outlined, with some accuracy, their specific qualities and their role in the history of production of commentary on the Qur'an. Abū al-Layth as-Samarqandī (d. 983) was a figure that must undoubtedly be remembered along with Abū Isḥāq ath-Thaʿlabī (d. 1035), whose voluminous work represents a culmination in the development of religious and exegetical literature in Nishapur, an intellectual center of prime importance, between the 10th and 12th century. Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 944) was another important author: he wrote a very influential commentary that drew extensively on the work of Muqātil b. Sulaymān. The commentary of az-Zamakhsharī (d. 1143), despite his adherence to the Muʿtazilite creed, was widely diffused throughout the Sunni, Islamic medieval period and even beyond, above all thanks to his meticulous discussion that moved between points of grammar and theological perspectives. Al-Bayḍāwī (d. ca. 1311), who wrote an original compendium of az-Zamakhsharī's *Kashshāf*, met with just as good fortune, above all because his commentary, *Anwār al-tanzīl* (The Lights of Revelation), was used in the traditional *madrasa* curriculum.

No less significant for the fate of the genre in the Sunni circles was Fakhr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī (d. 1209), who left a commentary that was, not coincidentally, known as *at-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (the Great Commentary). It contained a great deal of theological and philosophical speculation, and its exegetical forays involved profound discussions of the most disparate topics and views, all with the goal of exhaustive, comprehensive coverage. The model of this exegesis, verse by verse, word by word, survived until the last great encyclopedic product in line with this tradition, titled *Rūḥ al-maʿānī* (The Spirit of the Meanings), the commentary of the

187 On the evolution of exegesis or some specific cases, see, for example, Goldziher, *Schools of Koranic Commentators*, 22–115; Daniel Gimaret, *Une lecture muʿtazilite du Coran. Le Tafsīr d'Abū ʿAlī al-Djubbāʾī (d. 903/915) partiellement reconstitué à partir des ses citateurs* (Louvain–Paris: Peeters, [1994]); Jane D. McAuliffe, *Qur'ānic Christians. An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Claude Gilliot, "Kontinuität und Wandel in der 'klassichen' islamischen Koranauslegung (II./VII.-XII./XIX. Jh)," *Der Islam* 85 (2009): 1–155; Norman Calder, "*Tafsīr* from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the Description of a Genre, Illustrated with Reference to the Story of Abraham," in *Approaches to the Qur'ān*, ed. G.R. Hawting and A.A. Shareef, 101–41. Less convincing are the studies by Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis. Genesis and Development* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Theological Approaches to Qur'anic Exegesis. A Practical Comparative-Contrastive Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2012).

Iraqi Abū ath-Thanāʾ al-Ālūsī (d. 1854) in thirty volumes, which also exhibits an encyclopedic aim.[188]

The finest examples of commentary on the sacred text represent the maximum of possibilities of meaning, even though the boundary between what is inherently related to a proper commentary and what is extraneous to it and that, in all reason, can be considered as being superimposed on the sacred text is quite blurred. The exegetical genre, so defined, became pervasive in all Islamic environments and, as time passed, also came to be expressed through languages other than Arabic, such as Persian and Turkish.

There have been many studies of the dissemination of the Qur'an and Qur'anic commentaries in various regions of the Islamic world. Here, the influence of the classical tradition and the permanence of many conservative elements in the approach to and the reading of the sacred text highlight that the Qur'an is surrounded by Islamic discourse and that its interpretation and explication

188 Abū l-Layth as-Samarqandī, *Tafsīr as-Samarqandī, al-musammā Baḥr al-ʿulūm*, ed. ʿĀdil Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Mawjūd et al., 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2014); Aḥmad b. Muḥammad ath-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf wa-l-bayān: al-Maʿrūf bi-Tafsīr ath-Thaʿlabī*, ed. Abū Muḥammad b. ʿĀshūr, 10 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ at-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 2002); Maḥmūd b. ʿUmar az-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf ʿan ḥaqāʾiq ghawāmiḍ at-tanzīl* . . . 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2015); ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār at-tanzīl wa-asrār at-taʾwīl*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1988); Abū Manṣūr Muḥammad al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt Ahl al-Sunna*, 5 vols., ed. Fāṭima Yūsuf al-Khaymī (Beirut: Muʾassasat ar-Risāla, 2004); Fakhr ad-Dīn Muḥammad b. ʿUmar ar-Rāzī, *at-Tafsīr al-kabīr aw Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 33 vols., ed. Aḥmad Shams ad-Dīn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1990–1992); Maḥmūd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ālūsī al-Baghdādī, *Rūḥ al-maʿānī fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm wa-s-sabʿ al-mathānī*, 30 vols. (Beirut: Muʾassat ar-Risāla, 2015). The fame of al-Bayḍāwī's work among European scholars is also due to the edition published in Leipzig between 1846 e 1848, edited by Heinrich L. Fleischer, *Beidhawii Commentarius in Coranum: ex codd. Parisiensibus, Dresdensibus et Lipsiensibus* (Lipsiae: Sumptibus F.C.G. Vogelii, 1846–1848). On ath-Thaʿlabī, see Walid A. Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qur'ān Commentary of al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035)* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2004); on az-Zamakhsharī, see Andrew J. Lane, *A Traditional Mu'tazilite Qur'ān Commentary: The Kashshāf of Jār Allāh al-Zamakhsharī (d.538/1144)* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2006); Kifayat Ullah, *Al-Kashshāf: Al-Zamakshari's Muʿtazilite Exegesis of the Qur'an* (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2017). On ar-Rāzī, see Ahmed Oulddali, *Raison et révélation en Islam: les voies de la connaissance dans le commentaire coranique de Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (m. 606/1210)* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2019); Tariq Jaffer, *Rāzī: Master of Quranic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Michel Lagarde, *Les secrets de l'invisible: essai sur le Grand commentaire de Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1149–1209)* (Beirut: Albouraq, 2008). On al-Ālūsi, see Basheer M. Nafi, "Abu al-Thana' al-Alusi: An Alim, Ottoman Mufti, and Exegete of the Qur'an," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34/3 (2002): 465–94.

have also been examined in areas peripheral to the "great" Arabic traditions even before contemporary times.[189]

It should not be forgotten that other Islamic perspectives have left precise marks on the history of the Qur'an's reception. The entire Sunni debate over use of oral reports passed down from the early generations of Muslims and the positions that derive from a theological approach do not at all exhaust the possibilities of investigating the text.

The inevitable possibility of a formalistic and surface reading of the Qur'anic passages left open room for more profound readings not connected to the primary meanings of words or expressions. This space was taken up within Sunni circles by mystical Sufi exegesis and in sectarian circles by the various forms of Shi'i exegesis. Writers in these particular traditions understand true commentary of the Qur'an as consisting of attaching to the term on which they have chosen to focus in their own exegetical activity, a particular meaning of presumably original and profound significance, in a process known as *taʾwīl* (returning to a first or principal meaning).

These paths have been trod by various currents of thought and in a specific manner by the exegesis of a Sufi matrix. The line of dissemination and construction of a Sufi tradition of exegesis that parallels the Sunni and Shi'i traditions throughout history was not at all secondary, neither in terms of antiquity nor in terms of size, with tendencies and specificities diversified, in turn, within it.

Starting from the centrality of the Verse of the Light (Text no. 68) and the images evoked there, Sufi exegesis supported the existence of profound and hidden meanings in the Qur'anic text. Its activity aims to reveal them and to bring them to life for believers who cultivate their internal spirituality. It came to theorize different levels of meaning in Qur'anic verses such as literal, allegorical, subtle, and real, or other similar formulations, which have opened up speculation on what Ibn Barrājān (d. 1141) defined as an immersion in the mysteries of the Qur'an.[190]

189 See, for example, Peter G. Riddell, *Malay Court Religion, Culture and Language. Interpreting the Qur'ān in 17th Century Aceh* (Leiden: Brill, 2017); Majid Daneshgar, Peter G. Riddell and Andrew Rippin, eds., *The Qur'an in the Malay-Indonesian World: Context and Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 2016).

190 The production of Sufi commentaries on the Qur'an is vast and constitutes a specific field of research. In recent years, numerous studies have been published on the subject, but much remains to be done, both in terms of editions of the original texts and in terms of their analysis. On this topic see, among others, the following works: Paul Nwyia, *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique: nouvel essai sur le lexique des mystiques musulmans* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq Éditeurs, 1970); Pierre Lory, *Les commentaires ésotériques du Coran d'après ʿAbd al-Razzâq al-Qâshânî* (Paris: Les Deux Océans, 1980); Kristin Z. Sands, *Ṣūfī Commentaries on the Qur'ān in*

Text no. 68: The Verse of the Light

God is the light of the heavens and the earth.
His light is like a niche in which there is a lamp
– the lamp in a glass, and the glass like a brilliant star
– lit from a blessed tree, an olive-tree
neither from the East nor from the West,
whose oil almost glows,
even though no fire has touched it
– Light upon light.
God guides to His light those whom He wishes;
and God coins parallels for the people.
God is aware of everything. (Qur. 24:35)

The Shi'is dedicated themselves to the production of exegetical literature in line with their doctrine, even though it did not have the dimensions of that of the Sunnis. Especially for the Imami or Twelver Shi'is, a production of a certain breadth and with evolving lines of thinking has been identified since the 8th and 9th centuries. Moreover, it has been established by recent studies that, along with other aspects of the Imami Shi'i tradition, their earliest commentaries presented a series of intrepid and distinct interpretations that contrasted with standard Sunni interpretations and that they included views that would later be defined by the Sunni majority as extremist and heretical.

Later commentaries, from the Buyid era onwards, witnessed an attenuation in opposition to Sunnism. They maintained precise positions on central themes of the Shi'i imaginary, such as the imamate and the rights denied to the Family of the Prophet, drawing on works that had been elaborated in other doctrinal genres. At the same time, they attenuated and moderated the most virulent anti-Sunni parts, ultimately articulating a discourse that differed little from their Sunni counterparts. Even against the background of this development, the Imami approach is characterized by insistence on the plurality of meanings in

Classical Islam (London-New York: Routledge, 2006); Martin Nguyen, *Sufi Master and Qur'ān Scholar: Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī and the Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Annabel Keeler and Sajjad H. Rizvi, eds., *The Spirit and the Letter. Approaches to the Esoteric Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Toby Mayer, *Keys to the Arcana: Shahrastānī's Esoteric Commentary on the Qur'an; A Translation of the Commentary on Sūrat al-Fātiḥa from Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī's Mafātīḥ al-Asrār wa-Maṣābīḥ al-Abrār* (Oxford-London: Oxford University Press-Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2009); Annabel Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics: The Qur'an Commentary of Rashīd al-Dīn al-Maybūdī* (Oxford–London: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2006). On Ibn Barrajān, see Yousef Casewit, *The Mystics of al-Andalus: Ibn Barrajān and Islamic Thought in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

the text and by particular attention to the issue of the alteration of the Qur'an (*taḥrīf*) of which Shi'is accuse the Sunnis (p. 172).[191]

The Ismailis did not cultivate the genre of the *tafsīr* (Qur'anic commentary), and did not produce commentaries, although their texts contain frequent examples of esoteric and allegorical interpretation (*taʾwīl*) of the Qur'an. The distinguishing features of Ismaili commentary is emphasis on symbolic meanings, a very different interpretative reading that reproduces their clear distinction between *ẓāhir* (apparent) and *bāṭin* (hidden) meanings, and a generally reduced interest in the formal explanation of every verse in the strict sense, as is ordinarily done in the Sunni tradition. Even more than in the view of the Imami Shi'a, the task of "making the Qur'an speak" is the Imam's responsibility, not that of the exegete. On account of their constant selective interest in specific Qur'anic passages, the Ismailis did not develop systematic commentaries like those developed in the Sunni or Imami tradition.

Other approaches to the Qur'an that generate symbolic and esoteric readings should be considered to reflect similar sensitivity but a different imaginary. For example Babism and the Baha'i Faith exemplify the possibility of generating symbolic meanings of the Qur'an from a particular interpretative viewpoint in a different manner, suggesting the sacred text's outstanding ability to support adaptation in every area.[192]

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191 See, on this topic, Meir M. Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imāmī Shiism* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 1999); Mahmoud Ayoub, "The Speaking Qur'ān and the Silent Qur'an: A Study of the Principles and Development of Imāmī Shīʿī *Tafsīr*," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, ed. A. Rippin, 177–98; Tehseen Thaver, "Language as Power: Literary Interpretations of the Qur'an in Early Islam," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 28/2 (2018): 207–30. For an overall view, which today is somewhat dated but still useful, see Goldziher, *Schools of Koranic Commentators*, 167–96. On one of the most important Shi'i exegetes, aṭ-Ṭabrisī (d. 1154), see Bruce Fudge, *Qur'ānic Hermeneutics: al-Ṭabrisī and the Craft of Commentary* (London: Routledge, 2014). On Ibadi exegesis, see İsmail Albayrak, ed., *Approaches to Ibāḍī Exegetical Tradition* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2020); Ismail Albayrak and Sulayman al-Shueili, "The Ibāḍī Approach to the Methodology of Qur'ānic Exegesis," *The Muslim World* 105/2 (2015): 163–93.

192 On these topics, see Ismail K. Poonawala, "Ismāʿīlī *Taʾwīl* of the Qur'ān," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, ed. A. Rippin, 199–222; Meir M. Bar-Asher, "Outlines of Early Ismaili-Fatimid Qur'an Exegesis," in *The Spirit and the Letter. Approaches to the Esoteric Interpretations of the Qur'an*, ed. A. Keeler and S. H. Rizvi, 179–216; and, above all, Todd Lawson, *Gnostic Apocalypse and Islam. Qur'an, Exegesis, Messianism, and the Literary Origins of the Babi Religion* (London: Routledge, 2012); Lawson, *Tafsīr as Mystical Experience*; Todd Lawson, "Interpretation as Revelation: The Qur'ān Commentary of Sayyid ʿAlī Muḥammad Shīrāzī, the Bāb (1819–1850)," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, ed. A. Rippin, 223–53.

4.1.4 Contemporary exegesis

It is not always easy to propose an accurate historical periodization of Qur'anic commentary and to trace distinct exegetical trends, including those that remained close to the traditional path and those that reflected instead innovative attempts or, at least, the introduction of new terms into Qur'anic interpretation. The modes of exegetical production and of the transmission of traditional knowledge in the Qur'anic sciences continued without significant changes until the 19th century.

From that time on, in the space of modernity that is generally understood to have begun ca. 1800 in the history of the Islamic world, innovations in the production of Qur'anic commentaries began to emerge alongside persistent traditional customs. With regard to the tradition, the most significant characteristic of exegesis in the modern period is that the definition of commentary of the Qur'an remained constant for the whole of the 19th and 20th centuries and has continued into the the 21st century. A Qur'anic commentary is understood to be a written or recited text that discusses, explains and interprets the Qur'an from beginning to end, verse by verse or paragraph by paragraph.

The only partially innovative tendency in this area has been that contemporary Qur'anic commentaries often isolate paragraphs including a number of verses rather than discuss single words or verses. This choice is closely connected to the tendency to uphold the unity of the Qur'an and its suras and to a critical response to the fragmentation that was indirectly caused by the detailed medieval discussions of individual words and verses. In addition, there has been a significant growth in studies devoted to the analysis of individual suras. Such analyses expanded on a previously attested approach, but they became significantly more popular throughout the 20th century.

The traditional view of what a commentary to the Qur'an is has also survived the drastic changes in media publication and distribution of the works of Qur'anic commentators over the last two centuries, including the introduction of the printing press, and then, during the 20th century, the use of radio, television, and recordings, until the most recent introduction of the Internet and of numerous modes of digital publication. Even in these areas, in everything that has to do with the religious sphere, the Qur'an enters into religious discourse, cited and explained, as the attestation of continuous and pervasive exegetical activity surrounding the Qur'anic text. Undertaking the role of an exegete of the Qur'an, however, continues to mean producing commentaries and discussion of the entire Qur'an or substantial parts thereof, in a systematic and comprehensive manner, addressing the various topics connected to the text. Whether it is written in printed form, on web pages, voice recorded, or diffused in a digital format, the

practice of commenting on the Qur'an continues apace, in the new media of distribution, along lines of articulation that are in continuity with traditional Qur'anic exegesis.

An initial impulse to modernize the classical and medieval tradition may date back to the movements and reflections that accompanied various historical developments in the Islamic world in the decades following the emergence of Wahhabism in the Arabian Peninsula. A Zaidi, Yemeni author such as ash-Shawkānī (d. 1835), though in all likelihood not directly influenced by the Wahhabism of the Arabian Peninsula, wrote a Qur'anic commentary that was traditional in terms of form but that attests to an effort to distance itself from the custom of constructing religious discourse squarely on transmitted tradition. The favored references seem to be, as in Wahhabi thought, to the works of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), which had limited following in the periods immediately after the 14th century, when they lived, but would become increasingly important points of reference in modern exegetical discourse. Writing several years before the last great *tafsīr* that was in continuity with the tradition, al-Ālūsī's *Rūḥ al-maʿānī*, ash-Shawkānī highlights the ability of Qur'anic commentaries to absorb innovation and change in a framework that remains the same, that is, which presents the serial analysis and interpretation of the entire sacred text.[193]

Ash-Shawkānī's commentary included more than one point of reference for later developments. Siddiq Hasan Khan (d. 1890), an Indian exponent of the Ahl-i Ḥadīth, was constantly influenced by it in many of his works. In the latter half of the 19th century, he was able to support financially the printing and wide distribution of many of his works, thereby influencing the religious discourse of the Middle East, where his works circulated.

Siddiq Hasan Khan's *tafsīr* followed the formal conventions of the tradition, which imposed the treatment of the entire Qur'an, but its contents included novel elements with respect to the traditional construction of interpretative practices, which stressed the citation of previous authors and authorities. This was not entirely unprecedented, since it was in line with what Ibn Kathīr and ash-Shawkānī had done, but the print distribution of his works contributed to influencing exegetical discourse much more than his predecessors had.[194]

193 On periodization and modernity, see Johanna Pink, "Where Does Modernity Begin? Muḥammad al-Shawkānī and the Tradition of *Tafsīr*," in *Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History. Exploring the Boundaries of a Genre*, ed. A. Görke and J. Pink, 323–60. On the figure of ash-Shawkānī, the most important study is the one by Bernard Haykel, *Revival and Reform in Islam: The Legacy of Muhammad al-Shawkānī* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

194 See, on this topic, Pink, *Muslim Qur'ānic Interpretation Today*, esp. 94–100 on the visual dimension that emerges as a constant in some commentaries with pedagogical aims, and

Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905) and Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) produced the incomplete commentary titled *Tafsīr al-Manār* (The Exegesis of The Lighthouse), which exhibited new modes of commenting on the Qur'an. It broke free from traditional restrictions regarding the construction of exegetical discourse based on precedents, and it aimed instead to discuss the meaning of Qur'anic passages with constant reference to the new historical, political, social, and economic realities of Muslims in Egypt, the Middle East, and the world, at a moment of maximum European expansion. Against this background, they were particularly outspoken and influential from a political and critical perspective. The work inaugurates a dynamic era that was particularly rich in the production of commentaries of the Qur'an. Those who contributed to the flourishing genre during this period espoused different positions, assessments, and critical views, depending on the place, era, and convictions of the author who wrote them.[195]

Upon entering the 20th century, during which literary production changed radically, Qur'anic exegesis opened itself, in a definitive and complete manner, to various experiments in languages other than Arabic. These were not absent in previous centuries, but with print dissemination and new media, much wider and previously unknown spaces opened up to Islamic societies and to those who did not use Arabic as their primary language in their approach to the Qur'an. Concurrently, political agendas dictated by the emergence of various nationalisms in the post-colonial period and in the construction of modern nation-states gave new meaning to the forms of local exegesis expressed in the languages of the various Muslim nations.

128–31, on the importance of the concept of *maqāṣid al-Qurʾān*, the intentions or objectives of the Qur'an.

195 On *Tafsīr al-Manār*, see Johannes J. G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 18–34; Jacques Jomier, *Le Commentaire coranique du Manār: tendances modernes de l'exégèse coranique en Egypt* (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve, 1954). For specific cases, see Benjamin Flöhr, *Ein traditionalisticher Korandeuter im Dienste des Kemalismus. Emlalılı Muhammed Hamdi Yazır (1878–1942)* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2015); Susan Gunasti, *The Qur'an between the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. An Exegetical Tradition* (London–New York: Routledge, 2019); Felix Körner, *Revisionist Koran Hermeutics in Contemporary Turkish University Theology. Rethinking Islam* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2005); Seyed Ali Sadr, *Offenbarung, Exegese und Ratio: ʿAllāma Saiyid Muḥammad Ḥusain Ṭabāṭabāʾī und sein Korankommentar al-Mīzān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Berlin–Boston: De Gruyter, 2022); in general, see Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt*; Massimo Campanini, *The Qur'an: Modern Muslim Interpretations* (London-New York: Routledge, 2011); and for a broader discussion, although somewhat dated, see Johannes M. S. Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation (1880–1960)* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1961). An interesting study on the specific topic of the polemical passages of the Qur'an is Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics. The Qur'ān and Other Religions*.

It is not easy to define an entire genre in a few words: traditional approaches continued to exist alongside others that were more innovative, and intermediate or eclectic positions abound. The general trend, though, was undoubtedly to use fewer and fewer references to the classical tradition and to favor themes that were evidently considered more modern, such as natural history, philology and linguistics, or the sciences. This period witnessed the establishment of what has been termed "scientific exegesis" (*tafsīr ʿilmī*), which identifies and brings to light alleged Qur'anic references to contemporary scientific discoveries and technical innovations.[196]

One of the most widely disseminated Qur'anic commentaries of the 20th century was undoubtedly *Fī ẓilāl ʾal-Qurʾān* (In the Shade of the Qur'an), the exegesis of Sayyid Quṭb – the exponent of the Muslim Brotherhood who was condemned to death and executed in Egypt in 1966 – the author who has most profoundly influenced the ideology of jihadist groups from 1970 onward throughout Islamic world. Sayyid Quṭb was a prolific author and particularly able writer, in large part because of the literary vocation to which he dedicated himself before he joined the Muslim Brotherhood in the years after World War II. Sayyid Quṭb wrote the six volumes of his *Fī ẓilāl al-Qurʾān* during his years in an Egyptian jail, where he succeeded in overcoming the communication challenges due to his captivity. The success of *Fī ẓilāl al-Qurʾān* was due to multiple factors. The literary quality of Quṭb's prose combined with a commentary that pointed directly to the moral significance of Qur'anic passages, producing a series of moving sermons more than a traditional commentary in the strict sense. The previous exegetical tradition has not been forgotten, but it is treated incidentally and in a cursory manner, as a starting point for the effort to communicate a militant, cohesive thought of great appeal. Its success, outside the reception among radical Islamists and jihadists, goes beyond these limits and only recently has been put into perspective thanks to the passage of time and to the low opinion of Sayyid Quṭb's work held by the Salafis.[197]

196 Among the authors of Qur'anic commentaries of the 20th century, Ṭantāwī Jawharī (d. 1940) is invariably considered the key figure in the emergence and affirmation of scientific commentary, see Majid Daneshgar, *Ṭanṭāwī Ǧawharī and the Qur'ān. Tafsīr and Social Concerns in the Twentieth Century* (London-New York: Routledge, 2018).

197 Many have written about his biography and his work. We limit ourselves to referring to James Toth, *Sayyid Qutb. The Life and Legacy of a Radical Islamic Intellectual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). The most important study of his commentary is by Oliver Carré, *Mystique et politique. Lecture révolutionnaire du Coran par Sayyid Quṭb frère musulman radical* (Paris: Cerf—Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1984). An English expanded and updated translation of this work is Oliver Carré, *Mysticism and Politics. A Critical*

The developments of the last twenty years attest to the persistent production of commentaries on the Qur'an at the center of religious discourse. It has followed precise lines of evolution according to the tendencies that can be identified in today's Islamic community and responded to the complexity and, at the same time, facility engendered by new technological media. The lines of thought that the commentaries reflect have precise genealogies directly linked with historical tendencies, though they introduce developments of all kinds dictated by changing realities. Additionally, several different types of modern commentary may be recognized. These include commentaries produced by the ulema or authors who have followed similar educational pathways, modernist commentaries; commentaries inspired by radicalism in its various forms or Salafi thought; and, lastly, more recent commentaries that adopt postmodern approaches.

Among this varied production of Qur'anic commentary in the Islamic world today, as it has been described by Johanna Pink, the scholar who has most assiduously analyzed it, what emerges is an evolution in the attitude towards the Qur'an in Islamic communities which anticipates a new and more accentuated centrality of the Qur'anic text. It has been defined as a sort of process of "Protestantization" of Islam that emphasises the unity of the text, its intangibility, its perfection, and its primacy over other sources of the tradition, such as the *Sunna* of the Prophet or Islamic law, in a more marked form as compared to earlier commentaries. Exegetical literature, in this situation, is even more important, because it gives a voice to the Qur'an, though interpreting it according to various intellectual trends and according to different linguistic and national expressions from Morocco to Turkey and to Indonesia. In some cases, Qur'anic commentaries have even been the product of precise governmental policies that guide their production, in a variety that is no less significant than the persistence of very precise conventions regarding what counts as *tafsīr*.[198]

The centrality of the Qur'an in religious discourse has always been beyond dispute, but in the modern and contemporary eras it seems to emerge with particular emphasis, especially in the 20th century. The literary space of exegesis

Reading of Fī Ẓilāl al-Qur'ān *by Sayyid Quṭb (1906–1966)*, trans. by Carol Antigues, rev. by W. Sheperd (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2003).

198 On all of these topics, see Johanna Pink, *Sunnitischer Tafsīr in der modernen islamischen Welt. Akademische Traditionen, Popularisierung und nationalstaatliche Interessen* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2011); Pink, *Muslim Qur'ānic Interpretation Today*: the cases of Turkey and Indonesia are not the only ones, although they are the most significant, and see pp. 244–57, where there is the example in which exegesis reflects and becomes the bearer of themes that emerge in society, for example, those related to gender issues.

has extended to include new actors who actively participate by writing on religious themes. One's own reading of the Qur'an or an assiduous presence of the Qur'an in the elaboration of personal views regarding Islam has become more and more important. Therefore, even outside the classical genre of the verse-by-verse commentary, many contributions on the Qur'an over the last century, have accompanied the works and thought of the most important figures in the history of Islamic thought and of those who have written widely acclaimed literature or attracted the attention of the Muslim community. We increasingly find works being written on hermeneutics of the Qur'an by Muslim authors drawing on disciplines such as sociology, linguistics, or gender studies that are closely connected to Western cultural history. Here lies one of the innovations of contemporary Qur'anic commentary, which has been affected by the changed definition of the authorial figure that printed distribution and the most recent technical developments have uprooted from the classical, manuscript, and traditional practices of the production of religious knowledge.[199]

In this context, complete commentaries of the Qur'an are no longer the only way to present one's interpretation of the Qur'an. Rather, they coexist with other manners of doing so. New lines and paths in dialogue with this tradition are quite alive in the production of *tafsīr* in various contexts, and they are often expressed orally or through other forms of the transmission of knowledge that favor the various languages spoken in the Islamic world and beyond. The resilience and vivacity of the genre is the result of the centrality of the Qur'an in the religious life of Muslims. It represents another variety that is increasingly challenged by adverse pressures from Salafi thought, which aims at a homogenization based on the tradition that they consider credible.

Along with this, other pressures that have characterized the innovations of 20th-century exegesis include an increased emphasis on the principle of interpreting the Qur'an only through the Qur'an itself and a mistrust of most classical exegesis that is becoming more and more accentuated. The rich production of Qur'anic commentaries that participate in this new but substantial trend in

199 See, for example, the figures dealt with in the contributions in Suha Taji-Farouki, ed., *Modern Intellectuals and the Qur'an* (Oxford–London: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2004), which show examples of the engagement of modern Muslim intellectuals with the Qur'an, although they are not actually writing exegesis of the text. For a specific case in the West, see Timur R. Yuskaev, *Speaking Qur'an. An American Scripture* (Columbia, South Carolina: The University of South Carolina Press, 2017). On Iran, see Alessandro Cancian, ed., *Approaches to the Qur'an in Contemporary Iran* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). On Indonesia, see Abdullah Saeed, ed., *Approaches to the Qur'an in Contemporary Indonesia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

the many languages of the Islamic world, among other various and contrasting impulses, demonstrates the vivacity of the genre even today.[200]

4.2 Uses and diffusion of the Qur'an

The use and the constant reference to the sacred text recur throughout Islamic history rendering the Qur'an a fundamental and omnipresent point of reference. Extensions of the use and citation of the Qur'anic text are countless and cover every field of existence, since the Qur'an pervades every aspect of the life experience of Muslims and not only intellectual production in the traditions we have examined above.

Whether in the great virtuosity of calligraphic productions, in architectural and artistic stylizations, or in the use of God's word by popular healers, the effectiveness of the sacred word has never been called into question, just as the comfort of a constant divine presence that the sacred word offers for every Muslim has not been doubted. The Qur'an, its chapters, and even its single verses represent, accordingly, a continuous reference with the dual function of an unreachable model and, at the same time, an effective foothold in every moment of life, across a wide range of possibilities that reflects the divine Omnipotence that the Qur'anic word expresses.[201]

The possibilities have occurred and continue to occur in the various manners in which the Qur'an has historically become widespread through the

200 See, for example, Andrea Brigaglia, "*Tafsīr* and the Intellectual History of Islam in West Africa: The Nigerian Case," in *Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History. Exploring the Boundaries of a Genre*, ed. A. Görke and J. Pink, 379–415; Andrea Brigaglia, "Learning, Gnosis and Exegesis: Public *Tafsīr* and Sufi Revival in the City of Kano (Northern Nigeria), 1950–1970," *Die Welt des Islams* 49 (2009): 334–66; Andreas Görke, "Redefining the Borders of *Tafsīr*: Oral Exegesis, Lay Exegesis and Regional Particularities," in *Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History. Exploring the Boundaries of a Genre*, ed. A. Görke and J. Pink, 361–78; Howard M. Federspiel, *Popular Indonesian Literature of the Qur'an* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1994). On Salafi exegesis, see Pink, *Muslim Qur'ānic Interpretation Today*, 61–71.

201 One of the introductions that is most attentive to the pervasive use of the Qur'an in Muslim social realities is Ingrid Mattson, *The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life* (Malden, MA–Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2008), 137–74. On the daily presence of the Qur'an in the life of Muslims, see Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, 9–24. On the contemporary diffusion of the Qur'an in the various media, see Natalia K. Suit, *Qur'anic Matters. Material Mediations and Religious Practice in Egypt* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020). On the aesthetic qualities of the Qur'an in various areas, see Kermani, *God Is Beautiful. The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran*, 67–132.

knowledge and the sensitivity of Muslims. This occurred first in the original Arabic, in both the written form, unreachable as an expression of a unique value and in the modality of oral and recited communication, and then in the form of diffusion of the text through translations into various languages. These last two aspects represent unique examples of the pervasiveness of the Qur'anic word and its multiform presence in historical and contemporary reality.

4.2.1 Prestige and power in the Qur'anic word

The entire Qur'an, each single word of it, have been sources of inspiration for artistic virtuosity and a reference for each aspect of collective and personal religiosity. The Qur'an has been used in the most varied ways, starting from the highest artistic expressions to almost magical purposes in which the Qur'anic word appears, recurs, and is constantly present in different forms. The logic is clear: the presence of and attestation to the divine that the Qur'anic text expresses touch every area, from calligraphy to amulets and talismans, Qur'anic texts on fabric, and contemporary artistic uses connected to its word, as well as, naturally, to the immense patrimony of literary and intellectual production of all kinds in which references to Qur'anic expressions are unfailing and ever-present.

In particular, in cultured literary contexts, the Qur'an acts as an aesthetic model, starting with poetry and then as an unreachable reference in Arabic literary and rhetorical criticism. But Arabic and Islamic literature continuously resorts to Qur'anic references, as a place in which every type of discourse can find refuge. Reasoning in terms of particular literary genres would be useless, given the pervasive character of the Qur'an and the emergence, over time, of verses of reference repeated on certain occasions or in certain narrations. The Qur'anic word returns in a mindful way, or maybe not, to enrich every area, since the origins of Islam and since the production of Arabic letters and documents, even when this occurs in forms that do not always adhere, especially in the first centuries, to that of the text of ʿUthmān's Vulgate (pp. 153–62).[202]

202 See Nuha Alshaar, ed., *The Qur'an and Adab. The Shaping of Literary Traditions in Classical Islam* (Oxford-London: Oxford University Press in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2017). Sarah R. bin Tyeer, *The Qur'an and the Aesthetics of Premodern Arabic Prose* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), discusses the theme from the point of view of the aesthetics of the Qur'an, and its relationship with *adab*. See also Stefan Sperl "The Qur'an and Arabic Poetry," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'ānic Studies*, ed. Shah and Abdel Haleem, 405f.: the presence of the Qur'an in poetry from the 9th century onward is pervasive. On all these topics, see Kermani, *God is Beautiful. The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran*, 67–132.

The use of the Qur'an in all expressions of Muslims' individual and social life lends itself to diverse evaluations, which are also affected by the different historical periods. Regarding the first Islamic centuries, examination of the Qur'anic text in attestations of all kinds has often been used to gauge the presence of the later canonized form. Evaluating certain citations as forms of para-Qur'anic texts or as attestations of different forms of the text is the inevitable outcome of the emphasis placed in non-confessional research on the question of the origin of the text. From the inscription of the Dome of the Rock and the Sanaa palimpsest to the citations in letters or in stone inscriptions, there has been no lack of attestations of para-Qur'anic citations or alternative forms of Qur'anic verses from the early Islamic period. Whether they represent a liberal rereading of the contents of the revelation or distinct variant forms that were accepted and circulating, all of these testimonies demonstrate the immediate pervasiveness of the Qur'anic text and its strong influence on its attestations, especially written ones, that were destined to leave a mark or memory.[203]

In the artistic sphere especially, calligraphic virtuosity and inscriptions of various types occupied the space that aniconism left unattended, unfurling a variety of solutions that have ensued in different areas and with different timing. The evolution of calligraphic styles in the production of Qur'an manuscripts is a history unto itself of the reception of the text in the religious history of Muslim societies and of the development of manners of writing. Epigraphic sources also constitute a testimony of great value for the history of the text and its non-literary uses.

Qur'anic inscriptions display a constant presence of the divine word, and they engender particular attention both to the inscriptions themselves and to the conservation of the support on which the divine word is inscribed. This attitude has been reflected in every form of reproduction of the Qur'an, including funeral steles

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Vanessa De Gifis' analysis is interesting: *Shaping a Qur'ānic Worldview. Scriptural Hermeneutics and the Rhetoric of Moral Reform in the Caliphate of al-Ma'mūn* (London–New York: Routledge, 2014), on the use of the Qur'an in letters attributed to the Abbasid caliph al-Maʾmūn (r. 811–831), from which it is highlighted that Qur'anic references carry out a function of rhetorical reference in which the subjective historical condition searches for parallels with Qur'anic figures with a moralizing intent, affirming the caliphal role. On the same topics, see also Wadād al-Qāḍī, "The Impact of the Qur'ān on the Epistolography of ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd," in *Approaches to the Qur'ān*, ed. G.R. Hawting and A.A. Shareef, 285–313.

203 On these topics see Kaplony, "Comparing Qur'ānic Suras with Pre-800"; Kaplony, "What Are Those Dots For? Thoughts on the Orthography of the Qurra Papyri"; Imber, "Le Coran des pierres: statistiques et premières analyses"; Imbert, "Le Coran dans les graffiti des deux premiers siècles de l'Hégire." On the inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock, there is an extensive bibliography; for an analysis in light of the Qur'anic text, see Whelan, "Forgotten Witness. Evidence of the Early Codification of the Qur'ān."

and monumental inscriptions that, throughout history, have been characterized by a conventional specialization in the choice of verses cited and used in specific acceptations, even though few studies have taken up these specific themes.[204]

Another related issue is the use of the Qur'an in various forms of popular religiosity, including medicine, magic, and music in particular. The diffusion and permanence of the Qur'anic word in types of magical uses or in talismans are constant throughout Islamic history and particularly significant for the diffusion of the Arabic script, even outside Arabic-speaking areas. The prestige of these expressions in Arabic language and Arabic script is a result and material expression of the affirmation of the original language in which the Qur'an was revealed. It is possible to speak rightly of magical powers, while the Qur'an itself and Islamic tradition espouse a clearly contrary position regarding magic and human capability, according to which the ability to influence the courses of nature and events is denied. They can only depend, in every detail, on the creative and omnipotent will of God. Despite this, the power of word, conceived of as the word of God, uncreated according to Sunni doctrine, expressed in Arabic, recited and also written, has paved the way for uses of all kinds and for multiple applications. The divine word is considered capable of determining the course of events and, with God's involvement, of protecting humans from the machinations of Satan from evil spirits (*jinn*, *ʿifrīt*, etc.), from black magic (*siḥr*), and from the evil eye (*ḥasad*). Specifically, some chapters and verses are particularly significant for these uses, such as the Opening sura (no. 1), the verse of the Throne (Qur. 2:255), the Sura Yā Sīn (no. 36), and the last three suras of the Qur'an (nos. 112–114). The name attributed to the last two suras (*al-muʿawwidhatān*), "the two that protect", are explicit in this sense: these are the words to pronounce in order to seek refuge from evil. Moreover, the condition demanded of believers that they be ritually pure before touching the written word, causes, in the opposite direction, a diffusion of sacrality and therefore a reflected power that is to some extent inevitable.

204 See Erica Cruikshank Dodd and Shereen Khairallah, *The Image of the World. A Study of Quranic Verses in Islamic Architecture*, 2 vols. (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1981); Robert Hillenbrand, "Qur'anic Epigraphy in Medieval Islamic Architecture," *Revue des Études Islamiques* 54 (1986): 171–87; most of the chapters in Fahmida Suleman, ed., *Word of God, Art of Man: The Qur'an and Its Creative Expressions. Selected Proceedings from the International Colloquium, London, 18–21 October 2003* (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies London, 2007). On calligraphy, see Sheila S. Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006); and, above all, Sheila S. Blair "Inscribing God's Word. Qur'anic Texts on Architecture, Objects, and Other Solid Supports," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, ed. Shah and Abdel Haleem, 239–54.

These practices come from various environments in the Islamic world and testify to the believers' deep devotion to the Qur'anic word. It is learned by heart, written, and even physically ingested. It is soothing and healing for all conditions in the created world, and for all believers who entrust themselves to it for their needs. Recourse to the Qur'anic text is constant and involves every act of the believer. Specific Qur'anic passages are found in amulets that contain invocations and prayers, in incantations against black magic and possession by demons, in talismanic tunics, and in traditional medicine to cure certain pathologies according to different local traditions. A specific and distinct use can also be found in magic bowls that are used for healing in various regions of the Islamic world, in which certain Qur'anic verses carry out specific functions that unite local traditions with widespread ideas regarding the power of certain Qur'anic verses or passages.[205]

The mixture of such uses with more traditional forms of learning and the devotion to the text highlight a relationship with the Qur'an that can include all possibilities of expression of personal devotion and all modes of acquisition of the divine word. Even physical incorporation/ingestion, by drinking water in which Qur'anic texts on media of various types such as tablets or chits of paper have been washed or soaked or by licking transcribed texts, is a regional practice engendered by specific circumstances and, at the same time, a form of devotion that is firmly attested in the classical tradition. In any case, these practices bring to light the exceptional devotion to the Qur'anic word in all its physical forms, as well as the particular and unique value of the revelation in the fragmentary form of verses and short passages.[206]

205 See, for example, Constant Hamès, ed., *Coran et talismans. Textes et pratiques magiques en milieu musulman* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2007); Cornelius Berthold, *Forms and Functions of Pendant Koran Manuscripts*, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2021). On these topics in general, see Déroche, *Le Coran*, 91–110. On divination in particular and the Qur'an, see Sergei Tourkin, "The Use of the Qur'ān for Divination in Iran," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 59 (2006): 387–94; Christiane Gruber, "The 'Restored' Shīʿī *Muṣḥaf* as Divine Guide? The Practice of *Fāl-i Qur'ān* in the Ṣafavid Period," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 13/2 (2011): 29–55; Majid Daneshgar, "The Divinatory Role of the Qur'ān in Malay World," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 44 no. 129 (2016): 123–44. For examples of Qur'anic amulets, see Karl R. Schaefer, *Enigmatic Charms: Medieval Arabic Block Printed Amulets* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 7–20; Mark Muehlhaeusler, "Eight Arabic Block Prints from the Collection of Aziz S. Atiya," *Arabica* 55 (2008): 528–82; A. Osman El-Tom, "Berti Qur'anic Amulets," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 17/3 (1987): 224–44.

206 An example is offered by those studies that have analyzed the meaning and the role of schools for learning the Qur'an in non-Arab regions, like the one carried out by Rudolph T. Ware III on Senegambia and Western Africa in his *The Walking Qur'an. Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014); see also Zulfikar Hijri, ed., *Approaches to the Qur'an in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press in collaboration with The Institute of Ismaili

The classical Islamic tradition has often viewed some of these practices with suspicion, given the innate mistrust and decisive rejection of magic. It is not always easy to draw a line between an instrumental use of the Qur'anic text for customs of ancient origin, justified by confidence in the power of the word and in the knowledge of specific experts, and acceptable devotion towards the divine word.

The evaluations of these uses of the Qur'an have fluctuated over time and have been subject to changes in levels of mistrust, though the prohibition of black magic has remained unchanged. One response from the exegetical tradition has been, as often occurs in the elaboration of religious discourse, to include and circumscribe these concepts and practices, establishing, in literary and therefore official terms, the limits of the use of the Qur'anic text for such functions.

Under the titles *Khawāṣṣ al-Qurʾān* (Special Properties of the Qur'an) and *Faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān* (Virtues of the Qur'an), many works have been written that list the uses of the Qur'an that are considered acceptable and sanctioned by transmitted tradition. These uses have then been included in the classical exegetical works in order to guarantee their acceptability and to set precise limits thereon from the traditional point of view.[207]

Studies, 2019). On practices of ingestion of amulets with Qur'anic writings, see A. Osman El-Tom, "Drinking the Koran: The Meaning of Koranic Verses in Berti Erasure," *Journal of the International African Institute* 55 (1985): 414–31.

207 See, for example, Abū ʿUbayd al-Qāsim b. Sallām, *Faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān*, ed. Marwān al-ʿAṭiyya, Muḥsin Kharāba, and Wafāʾ Taqiyy ad-Dīn (Damascus-Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1995); Abū al-ʿAbbās Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad al-Mustaghfirī, *Faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān*, ed. Aḥmad b. Fāris al-Sallūm, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1427/2006). On the emergence of *Khawāṣṣ al-Qurʾān* literature, and the relationship between *Faḍāʾil* and *Khawāṣṣ al-Qurʾān*, see Giovanni M. Martini, "The Occult Properties of the Qur'ān (*Ḫawāṣṣ al-Qur'ān*): Notes for the History of an Idea and Literary Genre between Religion and Magic in Islam," *Oriente Moderno* 100 (2020): 322–77. See also Travis Zadeh, "'Fire Cannot Harm It': Mediation, Temptation and the Charismatic Power of the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 10 (2008): 50–72; Asma Afsaruddin, "The Excellences of the Qur'ān: Textual Sacrality and the Organization of Early Islamic Society," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122 (2002): 1–24; Travis Zadeh, "Touching and Ingesting: Early Debates over the Material Qur'an," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 129 (2009): 443–66. On some uses of the sura Yā Sīn, see M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, "The Core of the Qur'an: Sūrat Yā Sīn (Q. 36)," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 15/2 (2013): 65–82. On the last two suras of the Qur'an and their power, see Shawkat M. Toorawa, "Seeking Refuge from Evil: The Power and Portent of the Closing Chapters," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 4/2 (2002): 54–60.

4.2.2 A recited text

The words that the Qur'an cites to define itself show that its written and primordial essence (*al-lawḥ al-maḥfūẓ*,"the Well-Preserved Tablet," Qur. 85:22) fully coexists with its oral nature as a recited text (*al-Qurʾān*). This already emerges forcefully from the statements of the Prophet's Companions and from the role that those who knew the Qur'an by heart played therein, for it was the first manner of conserving the divine word and revelation received by Muḥammad (pp. 154–55). Additionally, over successive generations, the history of the variant readings brings to light that variety of the text took the shape of different manners of recitation and reading of a text that was supposed to be substantially the same. However, inconsistencies may be found in its recited form, at least ideally, that is, in the "concrete" manner in which it speaks to all humankind.

Islamic historiography and tradition, in all their expressions, preserve countless attestations to the early and central character of the mnemonic conservation of the Qur'anic text, suggesting that the practice of memorization has existed throughout the history of the Islamic world. The pervasiveness of the practice of publicly or individually reciting verses and chapters of the Qur'an is continuously attested and is evident in today's Islamic world. The Qur'an itself includes important references to recitation that, originally, had a more general meaning, while it later became the point of reference for a series of meticulous formal and technical definitions (Text no. 69).

Text no. 69: Recitation

[We have sent it down] thus that We may strengthen your heart by it,
and We have sent it down distinctly (*tartīlan*). (Qur. 25:32)
And be distinct (*tartīlan*) with the Recitation. (Qur. 73:4)

As mentioned above (pp. 114 and 202), Islamic exegetical literature uses the term *tajwīd* to indicate psalmodic forms of recitation of the Qur'an, from a verbal form (*jawwada*) which means to embellish or improve, alongside other terms that then became definitions of specific modalities, such as the more neutral *tartīl*, which is a Qur'anic term (Text no. 69) referring to recitation in a broader sense. In its meaning, *tajwīd* has a precise connotation of activity, with specific rules, that makes the text even more beautiful and enjoyable and therefore expresses the fullness of its unique and inimitable character. It is, however, a discipline that provides practical rules, while the science of the *qirāʾāt* represents the theoretical part that defines the text on the basis of which recitation is performed.

Tajwīd is thus the set of rules that provide the correct pronunciation of the letters and words of the Qur'an, which can vary based on position and on rules

regarding the flow of breath and pauses and reprises connected to the meaning. It is based on its own characteristics that are specific to the Qur'an and on what is prescribed by Arabic pronunciation.

Every question concerning correct recitation is sanctioned and formalized in a wide literary production. It deals with the various aspects and acts, first, as a practical manual, even though it then became a literary genre unto itself. Differences in evaluation and, therefore, in styles, are determined in connection to the reading and to the meaning of certain passages in the customary unfolding of varieties of opinions and of debate on schools and on earlier works. The competencies so defined served and continue to serve to satisfy the demand for the recitation of the Qur'an on various social occasions, such as births, deaths, celebrations, festivities such as *mawlid* (the birthday of the Prophet), or nighttime events that occur during Ramadan.[208]

208 Abū al-Khayr Muḥammad Ibn al-Jazarī, *at-Tamhīd fī ʿilm at-tajwīd*, ed. Ghānim al-Qaddūrī (Beirut: Muʾassasat ar-Risāla, 2001); Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, Vol. 5, 2176–95 (French translation. *Le parfait manuel*, Vol. 2, 1209–17); Muhammad Abul Quasem, *The Recitation and Interpretation of the Qur'an. Al-Ghazālī's Theory* (London–Boston–Melbourne: Kegan Paul International, 1982), which translates the book of the *Iḥyāʾ* by al-Ghazālī on the recitation and interpretation of the Qur'an; William A. Graham and Navid Kermani, "Recitation and Aesthetic Reception," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. J.D. McAuliffe, 115–41; Frederick M. Denny, "The Adab of Qur'an Recitation: Text and Context," in *International Congress for the Study of the Qur'an*, ed. Anthony H. Johns (Canberra: Australian National University, 1981), 143–60; Khalil I. Semaan, "*Tajwīd* as a Source in Phonetic Research," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 58 (1962): 111–19; Lauren E. Osborne, "Textual and Paratextual Meaning in the Recited Qur'an: Analysis of a Performance of Sūrat al-Furqān by Sheikh Mishari Rashid Alafasy," in *Qur'ānic Studies Today*, ed. A. Neuwirth and M. Sells, 228–46; Lauren E. Osborne, "The Experience of the Recited Qur'ān," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 48 (2016): 124–28; Bergsträsser, "Koranlesung in Kairo"; see also Michael A. Sells, "Sound, Spirit, and Gender in *Sūrat al-Qadr*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111/2 (1991): 239–59, on the many levels on which the Qur'an operates: semantic (lexicon, syntax, etc.), acoustic (resemblance to poetry), etc. On the also social meaning of recitation, see Michael Frishkopf, "Mediated Qur'anic Recitation and the Contestation of Islam in Contemporary Egypt," in *Music and the Play of Power in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia*, ed. Laudan Nooshin (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 75–114; Federspiel, *Popular Indonesian Literature of the Qur'an*, 92–97 on recitation; Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 533–40 and 568–73 (or. ed. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Vol. 3, 191–99 and 231–37). Frederick M. Denny, "Exegesis and Recitation: Their Development as Classical Forms of Islamic Piety," in *Transitions and Transformations in the History of Religions: Essays in Honor of Joseph M. Kitagawa*, ed. Frank E. Reynolds and Theodore M. Ludwig (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 91–123, also discusses other themes connected to recitation, from exegesis to readings. A solid number of studies, including recent ones, analyzes the practices of recitation from a musicological perspective. See, for example, amongst the first studies in this area, Habib H. Touma, "Die Koranrezitation: eine Form der religiösen Musik der Araber," *Baessler-Archive* 23 (1975): 87–120. The Islamic tradition also includes testimonies that

The polyvalence of the term Qur'ān has always marked the fundamental role of mnemonic learning and of the articulated dissemination of the sound of the Qur'an through all the technical means orthoepy could make use of. In contemporary times this also included radio, television, recordings, and the Internet. Muslims have not rejected any possible use of the technology that has gradually appeared to promote knowledge of the psalmodic text. The manners of recitation in relation to what is sanctioned by the literature on the various techniques are a very visible and significant aspect of the contemporary production and performance of the Qur'an. Throughout the 20th century, just as printing with movable type caused a sweeping revolution in the dissemination of written copies of the Qur'an, new means of communication have allowed for the increasing circulation of recorded versions of the text and made it possible for believers to listen to the recited Qur'an in many new fora, apart from the traditional circles of learning and locations of in-person recitation. Radio, later television, and then recording on various media such as disks, cassettes, CD-ROMs, smartphone apps, the Internet, and all the possibilities afforded by digital reproduction have exponentially increased the availability of recited, psalmodic, and almost sung versions of the Qur'an. These have tangibly marked the different traditions and modes of dissemination, often aiding certain reciters to gain fame and to become important public figures, combining a medieval tradition with new technological possibilities of diffusion.[209]

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critique the practice of reciting with tones that recall musical tones, given the negative judgment and the Islamic opposition to music. See, on this topic, Christopher Melchert, "The Controversy over Reciting the Qur'ān with Tones (*al-Qirāʾah bi'l-Alḥān*)," *Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association* 4 (2019): 85–109. Larcher, *Sur le Coran. Nouvelles approches linguistiques*, 31–55, highlights that *tajwīd* is based on the writing and the primacy of the *rasm* acquired after its fixation, and not on the specific features stemming from oral transmission.

209 Besides the bibliography cited in the previous footnote, see, above all, Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur'ān* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), in part. p. xxii-xxiii: the *murattal* text is, in general, more personal and devotional, conceived for a recitation to oneself, while *mujawwad* is recited by professional, for the public, and is based on phonetics and rhythm; see also Anna M. Gade, *Perfection Makes Practice: Learning, Emotion, and the Recited Qur'ān in Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004); and Mohammed R. Elashiry, *Sounds of Qur'anic Recitation in Egypt. A Phonetic Analysis* (Lewiston–Queenston–Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008); Helen N. Boyle, *Quranic Schools: Agents of Preservation and Change* (New York-London: Routledge Falmer, 2004); Labib as-Said, *The Recited Koran. A History of the First recorded Version*, translated and adapted by Bernard Weiss, M. A. Rauf, and Morroe Berger (Princeton, New Jersey: Darwin Press, 1975), underscores the conformity of the practice to the written version of the Vulgate and, therefore, to its oral confirmation. On a specific version, see Bernard Weiss, "*Al-Muṣḥaf al-Murattal*. A Modern Phonographic 'Collection'

In this area, the classical tradition, sanctioned in literature over time, is dynamically related to contemporary practices. The importance of Arabic recitation, and only in Arabic, renders oral communication a central factor in the diffusion and pervasiveness of the Qur'an, even more than exegetical production, which is instead more closely connected nowadays to linguistic traditions that are national and diverse. The centrality of Arabic in this particular subfield of Qur'anic studies renders Arab countries those that hold the best keys for the cultivation of recitation techniques and of their exemplifications in diffused and commercialized products. Egypt has always been a prominent center for the cultivation and dissemination of *tajwīd*. It should not be forgotten that mnemonic learning and, therefore, the appreciation for the melodic part, more than for the content of the recitation, is cultivated everywhere in the Islamic world, from Pakistan to Bosnia, even by those who do not comprehend the words that they are reciting.

4.2.3 The translations

Alongside production of the Arabic original, the Qur'an is also disseminated more and more in translations into other languages. Access to the divine word through translation and the issue of the translatability itself of the Qur'an have a particular historical and theological salience in the Islamic world. First, there is historical information regarding translation activity that began very early on in Islamic history. It was necessary for the comprehension of a text that became the sacred scripture of a community in which, from the outset, the majority was made up of non-Arabic speakers. It is unthinkable that the forms, including oral ones, of translation of some contents were not already considered legitimate from the time of the early Islamic conquests that founded the Empire and necessarily included large populations who spoke other languages besides Arabic. Recent studies have demonstrated that there exists a long history of translations of the Qur'an for use by Muslim communities.

In contrast, this contingent reality had to reckon with the concept of a Qur'anic word that was uncreated in its original expression, which gives a particular meaning to its recited and oral reproduction. Its psalmodic declamation and also its intrinsic quality can be fully appreciated only in Arabic. Accordingly, each tradition cannot and should not compete with the original, but serves

(*Jamʿ*) of the Qur'ān," *The Muslim World* 64 (1974): 134–40. On more recent dynamics, see Ehab Galal, "Magic Spells and Recitation Contests: The Quran as Entertainment on Arab Satellite Television," *Northern Lights: First & Media Studies Yearbook* 6/1 (2008): 165–79.

merely to convey meaning and nothing more. It follows that every translation is something else, it is not the Qur'an, because the Qur'an is untranslatable. Some traditional lines of translation affirm this, supporting and pushing for the use of the Qur'an in its original Arabic form, on account of its unparalleled literary excellence and its inimitable character (pp. 197–200).

Social practices regarding translation have differed throughout the centuries. The unbreakable bond between contents considered unique and the miraculous excellence of the form of the Arabic Qur'an contributes to making every translation be considered something other than the Qur'an itself. However, once its alterity has been defined, a translation has every right to be used as a cognitive tool or as an introduction to the "meanings" of the Qur'anic text, even if it is deprived of the Qur'an's linguistic and aesthetic perfection, which cannot be accessed in a language other than Arabic.

The debate on the translatability of the Qur'an focuses on the definition of these limits. It has been present in the Islamic tradition since its origins, such as in the specific debate over the propriety of reciting the Qur'an in a language other than Arabic. Sufficiently early sources already signal cases of this type in relation to the use, for example, of Persian in prayer or in the religious sphere, practices on which some aimed to place a precise limit. The Islamic tradition states that the controversy goes back even to the Companions: Salmān al-Fārisī (d. ca. 655), a companion of the Prophet, is reported to have recited a Persian translation of the Opening Sura of the Qur'an. The Islamic legal schools prohibited these practices, aiming to restrict the ban on translation to liturgical uses of the Qur'an, which they considered improper, and not to apply it to translation overall. This distinction can be observed in the legal legacy of the Hanafi school, which maintained a more open position, accepting the practical benefits offered by translations.

Beyond these traditional discussions, Islamic history has been acquainted with the rapid dissemination of interlinear translations and commentaries, initially in the languages of the early conquests and in the languages that were culturally more important, such as Persian, since the 9th century in Khorasan and Transoxiana, and Turkish, and then in all of those languages and regions affected by the conquests.

The Persian interlinear translation by Shāh Walī Allāh (d. 1762) definitively sanctioned the very long history of translation and commentary of the Qur'an in languages other than Arabic.[210] The history of the Islamic communities has

210 On such topics, see Travis Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'ān. Translation and the Rise of Persian Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Travis Zadeh, "The *Fātiḥa* of Salmān al-

been, to some extent, a history of reception and consumption of the Qur'anic word. It has been preserved and recited in Arabic in its cultural expressions and, above all, in prayer. It has been learned by heart in order to carry out these function, even though many believers may not fully know its meaning. This process also involved the partial appropriation of the sacred text through oral or written translations, often included in Qur'anic manuscripts as interlinear or marginal support. Such marginal translations provide evidence of the untouchable centrality of the original and, at the same time, of the need for mediation.

In more recent times, translations have gained increasing prominence, especially with the introduction of printing. Printed editions have met the educational needs of Muslim societies with growing literacy rates that no longer exclusively depended on traditional Qur'anic schools and primarily oral instruction. Far beyond considerations of the permissibility of translating the Qur'an, the reality of the 20th century and of today shows that, in the interplay between exegesis and interpretative tradition, a limitless space for re-discussion and re-interpretation of the sacred text has been opened up in every area of the Islamic world. Sunnis and Shi'is alike are equally dedicated to it. This process has traversed, in different manners, all of Islamic history, and it emerges with even more rich and complex modalities in today's reality, which witnesses the presence of Islamic communities all over the globe, including in regions outside the historical confines of the *Dār al-Islām* (Abode of Islam). The most recent survey of Qur'anic translations into many different languages by Islamic organizations moves from a programmatic indication: Qur'anic translations should be understood to mean the translations of the mere apparent sense of the sacred text. It shows a new awareness that translations are an essential instrument of knowledge and a way of approaching the original text.[211]

Fārisī and the Modern Controversy over Translating the Qur'an," in *The Meaning of the Word. Lexicology and Qur'anic Exegesis*, ed. S.R. Burge, 375–420. On the question of translatability and the debate in the Islamic area, see also Abdul-Raof, *Qur'an Translation*, 19–67; Meir M. Bar-Asher, "Avis musulmans sur la question de la traduction du Coran," in *Controverses sur les écritures canoniques de l'islam*, ed. D. De Smet and M. A. Amir-Moezzi, 297–327; Abdul Latif Tibawi, "Is the Qur'ān Translatable? Early Muslim Opinion," *The Muslim World* 52 (1962): 4–16; Ismail K. Poonawala, "Translatability of the Qur'an: Theological and Literary Considerations," in *Translation of Scripture: Proceedings of a Conference at the Annenberg Research Institute May 15–16, 1989* (Philadelphia: Annenberg Research Institute, 1990), 161–92. Shāh Walī Allāh's translation is entitled *Fatḥ ar-Raḥmān bi-tarjamat al-Qurʾān*. See also Consuelo López-Morillas, *El Corán de Toledo. Edición y estudio del manuscrito 235 de la Biblioteca de Castilla-La Mancha* (Gijón: Ediciones Trea, 2011).

211 See, on these topics, the contributions in Suha Taji-Farouki, ed., *The Qur'an and Its Readers Worldwide: Contemporary Commentaries and Translations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Wilson, *Translating the Qur'an in an Age of Nationalism*, 55–83, 104–11, 157–83

In non-Muslim regions, the translation of the Qur'an has carried out very different functions throughout history. In the contrast and comparison across the Mediterranean, European Christians initially saw gaining access to the meaning of the Qur'an through translation as a means by which to understand the enemy better for purely polemical purposes. Translations of the Qur'an, even partial ones, were surely already in circulation in the Byzantine region, which was in more direct contact with the Islamic world. The first Latin translation was inspired by Peter the Venerable (d. 1156), the abbot of Cluny, and carried out by Robert of Ketton (fl. 1136–1157) in the Iberian Peninsula in the 12th century. It was characterized by strong anti-Islamic content, just like the translation by Mark of Toledo (d. ca. 1216), which, though very different in terms of approach and literal fidelity to the text, aspired to serve the cause of converting Muslims to Catholicism. The attempts that accompanied the decline of the Middle Ages and the beginnings of the changes in the pre-modern era were marked by a more informed and precise desire for knowledge of the Qur'an through new Latin translations. The translation completed by Juan of Segovia (d. 1458), with the support of a Muslim scholar from al-Andalus, ʿĪsā Gidelli (fl. ca. 1450), has unfortunately been lost. The translation commissioned by Egidio of Viterbo (d. 1532), also with an Iberian imprint, was a more informed attempt, though not widely disseminated.[212] During and after the Reformation, Europe witnessed the unfolding of

and 221–47. An indicative list of the translations produced before 1980 is given in Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, İsmet Binark and Halit Eren, eds., *World Bibliography of Translations of the Meanings of the Holy Qur'an Printed Translations 1515–1980* (Istanbul: Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture, 1986). Specific studies on translations in various linguistic areas between Africa and Asia are numerous and continue to grow. On specific areas and specific questions, see, for example, Marc Gaborieau, "Traductions, impressions et usages du Coran dans le sous-continent indien (1786–1975)," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 218 (2001): 97–111; Neal Robinson, "Sectarian and Ideological Bias in Muslim Translations of the Qur'an," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 8 (1997): 261–78. On the productions in English by Muslims residing in Muslim nations, see Stefan Wild, "Muslim Translations and Translators of the Qur'an into English," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 17/3 (2015): 158–82.

212 On the medieval translations, see Thomas E. Burman, *Reading the Qur'ān in Latin Christendom, 1140–1560* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Ulisse Cecini, *Alcoranus latinus. Eine sprachliche und kulturwissenschaftliche Analyse der Koranübersetzungen von Robert von Ketton und Marcus von Toledo* (Berlin-Münster: LIT Verlag, 2012); the first part of Olivier Hanne, *L'Alcoran. Comment l'Europe a découvert le Coran* (Paris: Belin, 2019); Marie-Thérèse D'Alverny, *La connaissance de l'Islam dans l'Occident médiéval* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994). The translations by Robert of Ketton and by Mark of Toledo are published in Theodore Bibliander, ed., *Machumetis saracenorum principis, eiusque successorum vitae, doctrina ac ipse Alcoran . . .* (first ed. Basileae: Johannes Oporinus, 1543) and Nadia Petrus Pons, ed., *Alchoranus Latinus quem transtulit Marcus Canonicus Toletanus: estudio y edición crítica* (Madrid:

many different types of activity surrounding the Qur'an, alongside great revolutions brought about by the invention of the printing press, the unrest that swept through Europe during the Wars of Religion, and the discovery of the New World. Harmut Bobzin has brought to light, in an unparalleled manner, the reasons regarding the desire for knowledge and for the translation of the Qur'an in the 16th century. This led to the printing of Ketton's Latin translation in Basel by Theodore Bibliander (d. 1564), as well as to its first translation into a European language, the Italian rendition of Giovanni Battista Castrodardo (d. ca. 1588), which had been commissioned by the Venetian printer Andrea Arrivabene (d. ca. 1580).

The first translation into a modern European language carried out directly from the Arabic was the French translation of André du Ryer (d. 1672), which, along with that of Castrodardo, was at the origin of many other translations into European languages. The apex of these activities was the Latin translation, along with commentary, of Ludovico Marracci (d. 1700). Shortly before his death, he was able to see the final result of decades of efforts and studies in which the Qur'an was translated for blatantly polemical purposes, without foregoing all the means necessary for production of a closely supervised rendition that was faithful to the original text. The evolution of Marracci's versions of translation highlights a progressive reconsideration regarding the challenges posed by the twin desires for steadfast adherence to proper Latin style and for the greatest possible fidelity to the original Arabic structure. With the Qur'an translated by Marracci, the community of European scholars received the ultimate product of medieval and pre-modern erudition. Accordingly, good use of it was made by others, particularly by George Sale (d. 1736) in his influential English translation. Besides, the advent of the Enlightenment and the transition to modernity introduced new attitudes and innovated approaches to the traditional, polemical view of the Qur'an.[213]

Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2016). Bibliander's edition has been recently re-edited by Anthony J. Lappin, *Alcoran Latinus. Volume III. Editiones Theodori Biblianderi (1543 et 1550)* (Roma: Aracne, 2011).

213 Hartmut Bobzin, *Der Koran im Zeitalter der Reformation: Studien zur Frühgeschichte der Arabistik und Islamkunde in Europa* (Beirut: In Kommission bei Franz Steiner Verlag Stuttgart, 1995); Hartmut Bobzin, "Latin Translations of the Koran: A Short Overview," *Der Islam* 70/2 (1993): 193–206. The Latin translations of this period were the object of various studies: Katarzyna K. Starczewska, *Latin Translation of the Qur'ān (1518/1621) Commissioned by Egidio da Viterbo. Critical Edition and Case Study* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2018); Óscar De la Cruz Palma, *La traducción latina del Corán atribuida al Patriarca de Costantinopla Cirilo Lúcaris (1572–1638)* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2006); Roberto Tottoli, "La traduzione latina del Corano attribuita a Cirillo Lucaris (m. 1638) nel Ms Berlin, SBPK ar.

Overall, specialized studies in various subfields over recent decades have contributed to greatly widening the horizon of knowledge of the Qur'an outside the Islamic world. They have examined the circulation of translations that bear the mark of different approaches and solutions, being inspired by profoundly different purposes. What historians or historians of ideas have brought to light in a series of more recent studies is that interest in the Qur'an, Arabic, and the disciplines connected to the "Oriental" languages reflects, since the advent of the modern age, a variety of objectives that cannot possibly be relegated to a reiterated, oversimplified attitude towards the "other." The interplay of European alliances with the Ottoman Empire, together with the bloody divisions in post-Reformation Christianity, along with general ignorance regarding Islam, exerted, no less than the polemical aims, considerable influence on the circulation of translation and works on the Qur'an in different historical periods.[214]

Beginning in the 18th century, English and French emerged as the languages of widest use in translation of the Qur'an. This was due to significant colonial interests, in addition to academic purposes, but it occurred more often for practical reasons. Other European languages also stood out in this area, including Italian, though after the works of Castrodardo and the Latin publications of Marracci, the first Italian translation carried out directly from the Arabic, by Arnaldo Fracassi,

1032 e in altri manoscritti," *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 11 (2016): 135–48; Antonio García Masegosa, *Germán de Silesia. Interpretatio Alcorani Litteralis. Parte I: la traducción latina; introducción y edición crítica* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2009). The history of the Italian translation carried out by Giovanni Battista Castrodardo (*Alcorano di Macometto*, Venezia 1547) but erroneously attributed, until a few years ago, to Andrea Arrivabene, was masterfully reconstructed by Pier Mattia Tommasino, *L'Alcorano di Macometto. Storia di un libro del Cinquecento europeo* (Bologna: Società Editrice il Mulino, 2013; Engl. ed. Pier Mattia Tommasino, *The Venetian Qur'an. A Renaissance Companion to Islam*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018). A first Italian translation of excerpts from that by Mark of Toledo is in Luciano Formisano, *Iddio ci dia buon guadagno. Firenze, Biblioteca Riccardiana, ms. 1910 (Codice Vaglienti)* (Florence: Edizioni Polistampa, 2006). André Du Ryer, *L'Alcoran de Mahomet, translaté d'arabe en françois par le sieur Du Ryer . . .* (Paris: Antoine de Sommaville, 1647); Ludovicus Marracci, *Alcorani textus universus . . .* (Padova: Ex Typogr. Seminarii, 1698); on du Ryer, see Alastair Hamilton and Francis Richard, *André du Ryer and Oriental Studies in Seventeenth-Century France* (Oxford: The Arcadian Library in association with Oxford University Press, 2004); on the translation of the Qur'an by Marracci, see Glei and Tottoli, *Ludovico Marracci at Work*. On Marracci and Sale, see Alexander Bevilacqua, *The Republic of Arabic Letters. Islam and the European Enlightment* (Cambridge, MA.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018); Ziad Elmarsafy, *The Enlightenment Qur'an: The Politics of Translation and the Construction of Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009).

214 See, for example, Reinhold F. Glei, ed., *Frühe Koranübersetzungen. Europäische und außereuropäische Fallstudien* (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2012).

only dates back to 1914.[215] The increase in readership and in the consumption of printed material in all regions of the world has led to a progressive and continuous growth in the supply of translations of the Qur'an in all languages. The production of Qur'anic translations over recent decades, especially in English, is of substantial dimensions and does not show any sign of diminishing. They include publications that are decisively innovative, and Qur'anic studies research has endeavored to develop new discourses on the reproduction of the Qur'anic word in Western environments. They include renderings that go beyond the simple English translation of the text, such as the ambitious *American Qur'an* by Sandow Birk (2016), an artistic production that avoids adhering to traditional Islamic calligraphic models and reintroduces the text in an comic book-like framework that opens up the expressive possibilities of a Qur'an translated into a Western language and transposed into a Western imaginary. Other themes that have been of interest to specialized studies are translation theory, which has focused on general theoretical issues of linguistics and communication rather than on historical and religious specificities.[216]

There are now many studies that analyze the various Qur'anic translations and raise questions about the relationship between the original and the translation into other languages, often to bring into relief particular problems and the impossibility of effective translation of Qur'anic style. All of this has not impeded the continuous production, publication, and dissemination of translations into various languages, which are now regularly financed by Islamic nations, alongside the no less substantial number of translations that appear in various nations outside the Islamic world, either as products of scholarly research or at the initiative of local

215 Among the studies on translation in European languages, especially contemporary ones, see Bruce B. Lawrence, *The Koran in English. A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Abdarrahman Khair-ud-Din, *Approches critiques des translations françaises du Qur'an* (Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Kutub li-ṭ-Ṭibāʿa wa-n-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīʿ, 1989); Mahmoud Haggag-Rashidy, *Die deutschen Koranübersetzungen und ihr Beitrag zur Entstehung eines Islambildes beim deutschen Leser* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011); one of the most interesting studies on translation theory and ideology of translations is Nora S. Eggen, "Universalised versus Particularised. Conceptualisations of Islam in Translations of the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 18/1 (2016): 49–91, specifically dedicated to the translation of *islām*/*aslama* and derivatives in the translations of the Qur'an in Scandinavian languages; as to Italian translations, see Borrmans et al, *Il Corano. Traduzioni, traduttori e lettori in Italia*. On these topics, see also Stefan Wild, "The Qur'an Today: Translating the Translatable," in *The Meaning of the Word. Lexicology and Qur'anic Exegesis*, ed. S.R. Burge, 421–46; Wild, "Muslim Translations and Translators of the Qur'an into English."

216 James W. Morris, "Qur'an Translation and the Challenges of Communication. Towards a 'Literal' Study-Version of the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 2/2 (2000): 53–67.

Islamic communities speaking different languages. In these cases, the traditional caveat is also valid: each translation is an interpretation and, therefore, not the sacred text in the Arabic original that can be listened to and learned according to traditional techniques of recitation. Nevertheless, in order to be fully appreciated, should the need arise, the contents of the text may be conveyed through the medium of a translation into the reader's own language. Such a translation makes no claim to perfection but only serves the function of communicating the contents of the divine word in a manner that will never be able to come close to the original.

Conclusions

In the introductory pages, and in those that have accompanied us throughout the chapters of this essay, we have analyzed various aspects of research on the Qur'an. All along, we have stressed the points of contact among the various approaches that make up, from our point of view, the current state of research, and we have attempted to suggest possible mediations between hypotheses and interpretations that are sometimes in contrast. In our view, this attempt is more a descriptive synthesis of the possible construction of shared knowledge than a conclusive end point.

We began with the formation of the Qur'an in relation to the figure of Muḥammad. In the combined assessment of studies that highlight its unity and coherence and those that, on the contrary, hypothesize alternative interpretations and raise doubts of various types concerning the Muslim reconstruction, there emerge various problems that are not easily resolved. Regarding the possibility of redactional revisions and adjustments of the Qur'an as it was developing or after the death of Muḥammad, it seems that today it is impossible to respond conclusively. However, the material evidence and, for their own reasons, Islamic traditions testify to a text that has been defined generally since the generation after the death of Muḥammad but that maintained fluidity in its details and was subject to a continuous process of assessment and "normalization." This process was carried out in the course of a lengthy historical process that lasted centuries and that, in some respects, especially with regard to more detailed themes, has reached up until the present day. It took place alongside another process of exegetical interpretation of the sacred, Qur'anic word, one of the most meaningful products of Islamic civilization, in myriad contexts.

The themes that have been chosen and on which the chapter division of the present volume is based are paths that cover the research carried out in recent decades. This guidebook is intended to make available an instrument of interpretation and study but also, at the same time, to bring to light lines of further and possible future research.

Investigations of the contents of the Qur'an, for example, have benefited from increasingly more accurate and far-reaching analyses, with various methodologies that are more and more sophisticated. It is not difficult to foresee that Qur'anic studies in the future will be able to benefit from the expansion of sources from late antiquity in languages other than Arabic. More such texts will continue to be discovered, edited, and published, from various literary and religious traditions, resulting in the fine-tuning of understandings of the historical role of the birth of Islam in the Near East. It will become more and more possible to combine

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the search for parallels, if not of direct sources, with the growing evidence of archaeological and epigraphical materials from the Arabian Peninsula. The latter body of evidence tells another part of the story, that of the rootedness of Islam in the Arabian cultural horizon.

The study of the linguistic and literary form of the Qur'an represents the most intense focus of recent studies, which are rich with interpretative suggestions that have taken various directions. In our synthesis, we have given a voice to a series of investigations that, on the one hand, have aimed to take analysis of various aspects of the Qur'an back to the methods that have been applied to other literary texts and that, on the other hand, have searched for an unbiased approach to the Qur'anic text as such. While the results can be appreciated, and the particularities highlighted show a remarkable complexity and innovative spirit, the confessional or apologetic intent of many of these operations risks invalidating the results. Finding a way out of this dilemma is anything but easy. Centuries of exposure of a recited, omnipresent text have inevitably influenced Muslims' reception of the Qur'an. It is viewed as an ideal of literary perfection in Islamic culture and so has forged Muslims' literary taste. Today, that renders any "neutral" assessment difficult.

At the same time, something of a similar nature occurs in the non-Muslim reader, possibly non-arabophone, for whom the reception of the Qur'an is surely different and objectively limited in the opposite manner. Those who are experts, scholars, or simply readers are inevitably guided by a different outcome, sometimes a prejudicial one. This is true both when they struggle to perceive the Qur'an's uniqueness and perfection, and, on the contrary, when they desire to overcome this limit in the name of the admirable principle of avoiding older, limited perspectives, in order to seek out an irenic arena for the evaluation of Islam's sacred text. This positive attitude, remarkable and important, is more useful for inter-religious dialogue than for scientific research on the Qur'an, which can only trust in the knowledge and ability to reduce the limits of both parties.

Very important and presaging great innovations in the near future is the study of Qur'anic manuscripts, both from the first Islamic centuries and from later periods. The picture that we have given highlights the potential of this subfield of Qur'anic studies and, at the same time, testifies to the incomprehensible delay in the discussion of some very early manuscript witnesses discovered or reported decades ago. The few scholars active in this subfield should be commended for their efforts, and we hope that many others will join them in order to broaden the area of research and to trace a complete history of the text and of the transmission of the Qur'an.

The possible connections to the Islamic tradition's reports concerning the variability of the text constitute another area that deserves further research efforts. In an age when skepticism or the lack of willingness to sift through the literary sources emerges constantly, a comprehensive approach to Islamic literature on the Qur'anic text, along with a more articulated material testimony, could produce some surprises. At this point, these are distinct and separate competencies in Qur'anic studies, but, more than in other subfields, they could collaborate in order to produce a historical reconstruction that would be founded upon primary and secondary sources in a comprehensive and effective manner.

In the last section, which is dedicated to exegetical production and the effects of the Qur'an on Islamic civilization, we have limited ourselves to an overview. Every theme touched upon deserves much more space, but we believe that it was necessary to mention them only briefly in order to give greater historical depth to the reception of the sacred text. This was done, however, within the limits of a conclusive testimony that aims to underscore that this reception is connected with and derives from the Qur'an, but it is not the sacred text itself. A fundamental distinction to which we have often returned is that the approach to the Qur'an, for the believer, the scholar, or the simple reader, is often, or almost always, mediated by an interpretative reading. Such a reading may be fundamental and sometimes unavoidable, but it is not the Qur'anic text as such. We do not want to reduce the reach of this historical activity and its significance in Islamic civilization, but mediating the reading and approach to the Qur'an through the eyes of commentators does not well serve the study of the Qur'an. From this point of view, most recent studies have placed this question at the center of their own analyses, and this practice should continue into the future.

In these lines of research, we have listed subfields of Qur'anic studies that require different areas of expertise. The scholars and researchers active at present and into the future must necessarily be observant of what occurs in contiguous subfields in order to be able to deal with the many issues that face Qur'anic studies and that, in the long run, are interwoven.

No less important will be moving beyond the polarization within each single, specific area of study into opposing parties that do not conduct dialogue with each other and instead generate an impasse of opposition that prevents the growth of knowledge. Increased scientific production should be able to provide increased knowledge of the Qur'an, but will only occur if the competencies necessary to analyze the cultural, linguistic, and religious context of late antiquity can be combined with a full and informed evaluation of the surrounding historical factors. This must be carried out with the laborious precision in selecting what the Islamic literary tradition can offer and, finally, with multidisciplinary

attention. No one is able to do all of this alone, and for this reason it is necessary to create the conditions that allow for the active exchange of information and for effective syntheses.

The reading and the study of the Qur'an that we have aimed to delineate seeks to be an initial response to this challenge. It is an attempt to compose a panorama of research that draws some conclusions, even partial ones, and that is able to connect the enormous efforts in all directions, of those who have studied the sacred Islamic text more profoundly than have we. The future challenge for Qur'anic studies can only be to advance research and to produce more diversified analyses and, at the same time, to create grounds for the sharing, comparison, and development of knowledge.

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