Locating the Qur'an in the Epistemic Space of Late Antiquity[*]

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Why do we need a scholarly reading of the Qur'an? Not perhaps for the sake of a spiritually deeper Muslim understanding. But maybe for the sake of reclaiming the Qur'an's universal significance, to remind of its message as *raḥmatan li'l-ʿālamīn*, as addressed ultimately to all mankind. And perhaps, most importantly, for preserving its integrity, correcting present misconceptions. The scholarly reading of the Qur'an today then is a politically relevant task. In the following, I wish to highlight what is presently at stake in Qur'anic studies, what are the pitfalls we have to beware of and how we can break a path through the thicket of contradicting scholarly positions in order to restore the image of the Qur'an as a text that concerns culturally and religiously committed individuals in general.

Allow me to start with a short gaze back: Until a few decades ago, Qur'anic studies in the West was an "exotic" discipline housed under the wide roof of Oriental Studies, which was then still dominated by "philology", i.e. textual investigations into Arabic literary and historical works ranging from the 5th century to the present. In the seventies, however, a parting of the ways occurred, separating textual studies, "philology", from "area studies". This new field of area studies –not least thanks to its surplus value as a provider of geopolitically relevant knowledge about the Middle East– came to prevail pushing aside textual studies, "philology" that appeared out-dated, antiquarian and a-political. Not only for pragmatic reasons but ideological as well. Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* in 1979 initiated an attitude of disdain and even suspicion vis-à-vis oriental philology, a polemic which was continued vehemently by others under the banner of "postcolonial studies". What finally came to rescue textual scholarship was an unexpected political development: the urgency to rethink the Middle East after the shock of 9/11. A vast number of centers were

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established worldwide to deal not only with the social and political but also with the cultural factors that were assumed to have kindled the suddenly experienced activism of Muslims. The Qur'an itself was reckoned to have been instrumental here –thus numerous centers cropped up– dedicated to a new type of studying the Qur'an –no longer in the "antiquarian" way practiced before, but with new identity political aims– not always free from bias, however. There is an intrinsic ambiguity in recent Qur'anic studies which demands that we sharpen our awareness of the political dimension of our work. When I say "our work", I am of course proceeding from the conviction that the world of scholarship is one, irrespective of the cultural background of the individual researchers. To care for methodologically sound scholarship on the Qur'an needs to be a shared interest of scholarly-minded individuals in general.

1. Is Historical-critical Research Harmful or Useful?

Let us briefly dwell upon the ambiguity of philological work on the Qur'an. It is striking to see that in our age of globalization, the Qur'an has not yet been acknowledged as part of the European or the Western canon of theologically relevant knowledge –although it is obviously a text that, no less than the Jewish and Christian founding documents, firmly stands in the Biblical tradition. Indeed, it seems to be the very fact of this close relationship that kindled the present controversy over the status of the Qur'an where two mutually exclusive views confront each other: the understanding of the Qur'an as a genuine attestation of Biblical faith, an extension of Biblical monotheism on the one hand, and its dismissal as a mere imitation, a theologically diffuse recycling of Biblical tradition on the other. It is easy to see that the Qur'an's peculiar relationship to the Bible and to Biblical tradition is a core issue here. This observation about the relevance of the Qur'an's context invites for a short historical detour.

Let us look briefly at a precedent of our controversy, an event that happened 140 years ago but which is still effective enough to have been reclaimed by a Berlin colleague of ours, Islam Dayeh, as a challenging vantage point for a comprehensive transcultural project called "Future Philology" which is by now a well established institution at the Freie Universität (Berlin)[1].

The name "Future Philology" derives from a debate that took place in 1872 between two of Europe's foremost philologists of the time, Ulrich von

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[1] See http://www.forum-transregionale-studien.de/zukunftsphilologie/.

Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1848-1931)[2] and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900),[3] both concerned with classics. Wilamowitz had written a polemical pamphlet "Future Philology", against Nietzsche, where he claimed that knowledge of the past could only be attained by examining every feature of its historical context, and that scholars' complete detachment from present-day concerns was necessary. Nietzsche, however, argued that the approach of this rigorously text-centered philology had perverted the goal of its study and had caused the death of antiquity. The American indologist Sheldon Pollock, looking at the scenario from a wider perspective,[4] has identified the dispute as 'a struggle between historicists and humanists', i.e. between scholarship and intellectualism.

What is at the core of the Nietzsche debate about living and dead philology is first and foremost a hermeneutic problem: is it appropriate and is it sufficient to apply historical critical methods to heritage texts? Are we entitled to focus these texts as such –in isolation from their recipients, and moreover, in isolation from present day concerns? Only a few decades after Nietzsche this problem was resumed and fiercely debated in the same Berlin academic milieu, this time in Jewish studies. Here some learned Jewish scholars had for the first time rigorously probed the historical-critical approach –applied in biblical scholarship before– on their own Jewish traditional texts, thus uprooting them from their traditional religious embedding in theology and transferring them into the new secular discipline of history, and thus depriving the recipients of their heritage. Their daring textual approach earned them the enmity of Jewish intellectuals who branded them as the "gravediggers of Judaism".[5] Critical historical scholarship –this is not only Nietzsche's view– can exert a deadening effect, since it radically separates the texts from the living tradition of their readers and practitioners.

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[2] Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Zukunftsphilologie!: Eine Erwiderung auf Friedrich Nietzsches "Geburt der Tragödie* (Berlin: Borntraeger,1872).

[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (Leipzig: E. W. Fritzsch, 1972). For the controversy, see Karlfried Gründer, *Der Streit um Nietzsches "Geburt der Tragödie": Die Schriften von E. Rohde, R. Wagner, U. v. Wilamowitz-Möllendorff* (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1969); Joachim Latacz, *Fruchtbares Ärgernis: Nietzsches ‚Geburt der Tragödie' und die gräzistische Tragödienforschung* (=Basler Universitätsreden; 94. Heft) (Basel: Helbing und Lichtenhahn, 1998).

[4] Sheldon Pollock, "Future Philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World," *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2009), pp.931-961.

[5] Gershom Scholem (1897-1982), "Überlegungen zur Wissenschaft des Judentums," in *Judaica 6: Die Wissenschaft vom Judentum* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1997), pp.7-52. The verdict "gravediggers of Judaism", which primarily aims at Leopold Zunz (1794-1886) and Moritz Steinschneider (1816-1907) (see p.22), is discussed and contextualized by Peter Schäfer; see his epilogue to Gershom Scholem, *Judaica 6*, p.96.

In Edward Said's terms, we would have to speak of a "dispossession", of the deprivation of the original owners of the texts, who are incapacitated, no longer deemed worthy to be entrusted with the sound interpretation of their traditions and thus cut off from the live stream of their heritage.

I had to take you on this short journey into history because the sadly disdained Jewish historicists, the "gravediggers of Judaism", are in no way figures of an obsolete past but are today again being acknowledged as the founding fathers of Western critical Qur'anic studies. Names such as Abraham Geiger (1810-1874) and Josef Horovitz (1874-1931) deserve to be mentioned here. Their rigorous textual approach is enjoying a come-back presently; we find it applied –though practiced with a completely different intent– in most of the current European and North American scholarship on the Qur'an. Yet, the principal question raised by Nietzsche is still worth asking: does historical-critical scholarship exert a beneficial effect when applied to canonical texts, particularly to Scripture, or does it rather cause harm to the heritage? This question will occupy us in the following.

Let us take up Nietzsche's demand that philology, textual studies, should be reconnected to education and life, i.e. to intellectual discourses vital and virulent in contemporaneous society –a demand repeated more recently by Sheldon Pollock who encourages a "presentist approach" and ask: "How can Western scholarship succeed to reclaim the Qur'an as bearing intellectual and aesthetic significance in our present day culture across the confessional boundaries as well?" Let us first discuss some of the arguments that stand in the way of such a scholarly aim and then propose a venue to re-think the Qur'an in trans-confessional terms. We will raise the claim that the emergence of the Christian, the Jewish and the Islamic tradition occurred in one and the same epistemic space, a space which usually is monopolized as the formative epoch of Europe, the Late Antique culture of debate. I need perhaps say a few words about Late Antiquity here. The term today is often taken to denote an epoch: the phase following antiquity, when Judaism and Christianity emerged inducing new distributions of power. I would prefer to look at Late Antiquity as a purely epistemic concept however, as a space in which diverse groups undertook to re-interpret the most variegated texts inherited from Antiquity –be they the Hebrew Bible, be they pagan poetry or be they philosophy in a new, monotheistic vein. This contextualization of the Qur'an with Late Antiquity of course needs to be cautious not simply to continue the 19th century discourses which –as will be shown– tend to regard the Qur'an merely as a passive beneficiary of Late Antique culture, but need

to focus on the Qur'an as a vital and creative player in the Late Antique debates.

2.   Present Day Western Scholarship on the Qur'an

Looking at contemporary Western scholarship there could be on first glance many reasons to view the present state of Qur'anic studies with optimism: the sheer number of scholars and institutions concerned with the Qur'an worldwide is unprecedented. What might on first sight appear as a welcome boom, on closer look, however, turns out to be rather a relapse into a dull positivistic historicism. It is hard to miss that a sort of pessimism hovers over Qur'anic studies, to be precise, an 'epistemic pessimism'. Not only are there vast corpora of Islamic learning rashly dismissed by a majority of scholars as useless for Qur'anic studies, such as *al-sīra al-nabawiyya* and often Islamic tradition as a whole. But there seems to be little interest in the pagan, the *jāhilī*, Arab background of the Qur'anic event either. All these texts and traditions are commonly excluded from the scope of Qur'anic scholarship for the sake of a principal re-location of the Qur'an out of Arabia into an undetermined Christian space, and its re-interpretation from the transcript of a prophetical communication into an anonymous compilation more or less completely dissociated from the historical event of the ministry of Muhammad and isolated from his community.

What has moved into the centre of interest is the relationship between the Qur'an and Christian tradition. Western scholarship whose earlier works had concentrated on the Qur'an as a "literary text",[6] has more recently come to focus on the alleged Christian "subtexts", *de facto* often considered as "sources", of the Qur'an. A momentous hermeneutic shift has occurred.

What does this shift imply? It is true that there are close relations between the Qur'an and biblical tradition. Modern scholars are thus confronted with two thematically widely equivalent text traditions –the Biblical, often Christian-imprinted, and the Qur'anic. They thus have to decide: are they going to explore the Qur'an as a new identity document of a historical community or are they to explore the Qur'an as a material source for the early Arabic reception of Christian tradition? *Vis-à-vis* this alternative, a representative group of Western Qur'anic scholars have opted for their own Christian heritage privileging it over the Qur'anic text. This is in tune with an almost axiomatic view often encountered in the Western public that assigns to the Bible the status of an undisputed charter of truth –

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[6] See the studies of Theodor Nöldeke (1836-1930) and Josef Horovitz in particular.

reserved however to its addressees, who are until lately identified as the Christians exclusively, more recently as the Jews as well.[7] 'Biblicity', the belonging to the people of the Bible, thus comes close to a cultural –and civilizational— pedigree which is denied to the –non-Biblical— Muslims. The option for the Christian tradition is thus no academic trifle. "Preference", "option", is a basic principle of hermeneutics. It had in earlier scholarship been applied in the opposite way: scholars had privileged the final shape of the Qur'an over its postulated historical layers. The American scholar Peter Heath has stressed that "privileging texts is a social decision. It is society that determines textual hierarchies. And radical changes in privileging provoke comprehensive hierarchical restructurings."[8] Due to the recent change in "privileging" and due to the new focus on Christian pre-texts - the Qur'an is now being read as a sort of post-canonical Christian text. Scholars no longer bother about its literary form which in sound philological scholarship would need to be analyzed according to the methods of literary criticism. Instead, the text is immediately "dissected" into haphazard textual bits that only need to be screened for their Christian essence. Essential steps of philology have been discarded –thus clearing the way for speculations, built on the assumption of the Qur'an's later and gradual emergence from an anonymous redaction process. A reductive form of historical scholarship, unaware of the basic methodological steps of textual work, seems to have won the day.[9] Restrictions of time do not allow us to unfold all the grave implications of this approach, some of which will be briefly mentioned in the following. Suffice it here to summarize the anti-philological approach under the label of "revisionism".

At this point a principal reflection on what philology as such is about maybe helpful. In his survey on the present situation of philology,[10] the already mentioned Sheldon Pollock has reminded us of the very useful categories that were developed by the Renaissance thinker Giambattista Vico (1668-1744),[11] who was clearly aware of the double-faced manifestation of

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[7] Maurice Olender, *Les langues du Paradis, Aryens et Sémites: un couple providential* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989). Olender has alerted us again to the ancient concept of the Bible as exclusively dependent on the Christian reading for its full understanding. Though this particular limit has been lifted in recent times an exclusivist dimension of Biblical truth has been retained which now outlaws the Muslims.

[8] Peter Heath, "Creative Hermeneutics: A Comparative Analysis of Three Islamic Approaches," *Arabica* 36 (1989), pp.173-210, p.189.

[9] See Angelika Neuwirth's review "*The Qur'ān and its Biblical Subtext* by Gabriel S. Reynolds, New York, 2010," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 14:1 (2012), pp.131-138.

[10] Sheldon Pollock, "Future Philology?" pp.931-961.

[11] The distinction goes back to Giambattista Vico's *Scienza Nuova* (1725).

texts which demands the distinction between two aspects: the text's "true meaning" deduced from the text in isolation from its existing interpretations, i.e. its "*verum*", and its interpretation through tradition, "taken for certain" by its recipients, in Vico's terms the "*certum*". The *certum,* the recipients' view, in the Qurʾanic case, on first sight appears most easily accessible in the extended exegetical literature of *tafsīr* –and indeed Western Qurʾanic scholarship used to study the Qurʾan through commentary over a long period of time,[12] a method still applied in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*.[13] Though a legitimate approach, this understanding reproduces the reading of a much later community, which thus mirrors social and ideological circumstances substantially different from those of the Qurʾan's genesis. To approach the Qurʾan, one needs to go back to the text itself. Meanwhile the tradition-informed reading of the Qurʾan (through *tafsīr*) in Western scholarship has been widely discarded, unfortunately not for the sake of sound textual study but for an equally dubious approach: modern revisionist research has established a diametrically opposed focus: the exclusive search for the historically "true" meaning of the text,[14] which is assumed to be hidden in the alleged Christian, Syriac, "subtexts" of the Qurʾan.

However, in the case of the Qurʾan, things are far too complex to allow for such a simplistic option in favor of the allegedly Christian textual layers. Allow me at this point to say a few words about our own Berlin Corpus Coranicum project. This project, established in 2007, does follow historical critical principles, i.e. our researchers read the Qurʾan as a document of its time, to be synchronized not with later Islam but with Late Antiquity. The Qurʾan is thus contextualized with ancient Arabic poetry, as well as Jewish, Christian and pagan poetic and philosophical traditions, that we assume to have made up the general knowledge of educated individuals of the time. But contrary to revisionist scholars, we are not content to merely identify such traditions but rather investigate their effectiveness as epistemic challenges for the community, who obviously negotiated and re-worked them in the course of the Qurʾanic proclamation. There is also a decisive difference in methodology: Viewing the proclamation of the Qurʾan as a

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[12] This approach is still mirrored in most articles of the *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2000-2006).

[13] The allegation of an "obsession for the ur-text" was a frequently used verdict, see e.g. Andrew Rippin, "Muḥammad in the Qurʾān: Reading Scripture in the 21st Century," in Harald Motzki (ed.), *The Biography of Muḥammad: The Issue of the Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp.298-309.

[14] See Gabriel S. Reynolds' introduction to his *The Qurʾān and its Biblical Subtext* (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp.3-30.

process we are interested not only in the historical dimension of the text, but as well in the gradual emergence of a new world view, and ultimately a new identity group, the Islamic community.

There is therefore no way around the simultaneous consideration of both sides of the text, its historical textual meaning, its *verum*, and its meaning taken for certain by its recipients, its *certum*. Reception, however, in the Qur'anic case, does not occur only with later exegesis, *tafsīr*, but is already part of the text's genesis itself. It is manifest in the live interaction between the proclaimer, the Prophet, and his diverse listeners, an exchange which has left conspicuous traces in the Qur'anic text itself. Looked upon as the document of a process, a successive proclamation of divine messages, received and responded to by listeners, the Qur'an presents itself to us as a unique case of prophetic speech interspersed with exegetic, i.e. community-related comments. As such a polyphonic text, the Qur'an, in our view, can be considered as the "climax" of the Late Antique culture of debate.

3.   What About Eastern Hermeneutics?

According to traditional Muslim understanding the Qur'an, documented in *tafsīr*, of course, does not constitute the climax of Late Antiquity, but opens a new era, that of Islam. History has been fulfilled with the coming of Islam which is presumed predicted in the Qur'an. The text is therefore submitted to a teleological reading, i.e. it is understood as the document of a divinely preconceived development. It is true that Islamic tradition has also admitted a historical dimension of the text and conceded that it entails a host of disputes fought out between the nascent community and their immediate neighbors, be they pagans, Jews or Christians, over particular religious traditions. Yet the eventual breakthrough of Islam turned these older traditions into no longer valid, obsolete, paradigms of meaning. "For early Muslims, [the Qur'an] abrogated … any pre-Islamic Arabian religious texts … and … relegated the Torah and the Gospels to positions of marginal importance." These earlier traditions including "pre-Islamic poetry and prose became instead resources, secondary materials to draw upon for understanding the lexical, grammatical, or historical context of the one text that mattered",[15] the Qur'an. One of the most significant consequences of this preference of the Qur'an over the earlier traditions concerns the valorization of the form: in Islamic exegesis, the form, the signifier, gains equal weight with the signified, the semantic contents. To return once again

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[15] Heath, "Creative Hermeneutics," pp.177-178.

to Peter Heath: "Each word becomes a trigger for interpretive processes," acquiring "enormous power for eliciting hermeneutic responses."[16] Since the text is viewed as having a single meaning but many significances, each word can attract as many readings as interpreters can identify. The Qur'an has become an ocean of significances, a *baḥr min al-maʿānī,* a view that is often based on a Qur'anic verse 18/al-Kahf:109: "Say: if the ocean were ink to write out the words of my Lord –sooner would the ocean be exhausted than would the words of my Lord, even if we added another ocean like it– for its aid."

There is, then, in traditional Islamic exegesis an almost exclusive interest in the "*certum*", the received "significances" that are warranted by trustworthy transmitters. The abstention from any dogmatic imposition of one particular significance maybe ascribed to the extraordinary openness vis-à-vis ambiguity that has been claimed by Thomas Bauer as a characteristic of pre-modern Islamic culture as such.[17] In more recent Islamic exegesis this has changed: modern exegetes tend to privilege one particular interpretation though often driven by the intent to accommodate the Qur'an within modern thinking. A scholarly analysis of the Qur'anic proclamation by the Prophet is still a desideratum.

4.   The Disputed Milieu of the Qur'an

As we have seen, revisionist Western scholars reject the historicity of the Prophet's proclamation, ignoring the "live dispute" between him and his community and their opponents, which is mirrored in the Qur'an, rather looking at the text as a palimpsest of diverse anonymous traditions. Muslim exegesis until now equally underestimates the scenario of "live interaction". It projects the Qur'an into a milieu where the theological voices of the diverse communities involved in the Qur'anic debate have already been muted, where the new paradigm of "Islam" has already come to prevail as the community's identity and where the Qur'an is represented by the codex, *al-muṣḥaf*.

This is, however, not yet the state of affairs during the Prophet's ministry. To explain not only the amazingly spontaneous success of the new creed, but also the establishment of a new and highly sophisticated paradigm of meaning in the Islamic world view –to explain the Qur'an's "epistemic

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[16] Heath, "Creative Hermeneutics," pp.178-179.
[17] Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islams* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011).

revolution"— one has to turn to the historical proclamation, i.e. to the text not yet fixed in the *muṣḥaf* but still in the state of its oral communication. The Qur'anic text in our project is therefore not focused as an "archive" but as a "process", the process of the Prophet's and the community's constructing a religious identity of their own by negotiating a mass of older traditions, their diverse "heritages" so-to-say. To fully understand the achievement of the Qur'an in terms not only of religious, but also of intellectual world history and history of knowledge, we must not ignore the massive "cultural translation process" which changed Biblical traditions into the Qur'anic message.

The instrument of this cultural translation is rhetoric. There is an unmistakably forensic dimension to the Qur'an. The single text units widely consist of debate, interspersed with questions and answers, caveats, retractions, concessions –all pointing to a lively negotiation of current opinions. The Qur'an, judged from its literary appearance, presents itself as the transcript of an ongoing debate on theological problems current in Late Antiquity. This Qur'anic debate methodologically even taps philosophical resources, such as found in Aristotle. Let me mention one example. In order to classify the degrees of lucidity or obscurity of scriptural verses the Qur'an uses two of the Aristotelian Categories: scriptural verses according to the Qur'an are either clear or ambiguous: *muḥkam* –in Greek: *pithanos*; or *mutashābih* –in Greek: *amphiboles*.[18] It is little astonishing that in a text so knowledge-oriented as the Qur'an the relationship to logic reaches even further: At least in the eyes of a later advocate of a philosophical reading of the Qur'an, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d.505/1111), Qur'anic arguments are replete with syllogistic structures which he himself discussed in a treatise, *al-Qisṭās al-Mustaqīm*,[19] "The well-balanced scale".

Already the Qur'an's rhetoric, then, would suffice to prove wrong what the prominent Princeton historian of Late Antiquity, Peter Brown, claims for early Islamic culture as such:[20] that it developed out of –or "under the umbrella" of– Late Antique Christian culture, early Muslims simply slipping into the guise of Christian models. I would vehemently oppose this view and

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[18] For the theological implications of this dichotomy, see Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike: Ein europäischer Zugang* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2010), pp.528-532.
[19] Angelika Kleinknecht, "Al-Qisṭās al-Mustaqīm: Eine Ableitung der Logik aus dem Koran", in Samuel Miklos Stern *et al*., *Islamic Philosophy and the Classical Tradition: Essays Presented by His Friends and Pupils to Richard Walzer on His Seventieth Birthday* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), pp.159-187.
[20] Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity 150-750* (London, 2002), pp.189-193.

claim that the Qur'an was in no way only a passive contemporary but a most active player in Late Antiquity. As Franz Rosenthal once remarked: The humanism of the early Abbasid translation and philosophical movements should be viewed as resulting from the ʿ*ilm*-driven humanism of the practitioners of the religious sciences, inspired by the status of knowledge attested in the Qur'an.[21] In its Arabian homeland, the Qur'an triggers the new activity of theoretical reflection, and –more importantly– it also triggers the adoption of the cultural practice of writing on an unprecedented large scale.[22] The new centrality of the Word of God propelled by the Qur'an, is warranted by the image of divine writing which is read out –*qur'ān*– by the Prophet. It is this discovery of writing that through the Qur'an effected a cultural shift, turning the Arabs from a ritually bound society into what the philosopher Jan Assmann[23] has termed a society relying on textual coherence. The discovery of writing as a divine emblem of power then lies at the basis of the unprecedented Islamic scribal culture that was soon after the Qur'an to emerge.

It is however first and foremost in theological terms that the Qur'an features as an active and creative player in the culture of debate of Late Antiquity. Writing – and that is language at the same time – according to the Qur'an was there already in pre-existence, before creation, creation ultimately obeys linguistic rules, see *Sūrat al-Raḥmān* 1-5. This is a theological breakthrough that by far transcends local Arabian dimensions of relevance. It is tantamount to a challenge of the Christian *logos* theology, the dogma of the incarnation, which in the Qur'an is countered by a new hypostasis, a new "embodiment", of the Word of God, the hypostasis of "language" and thus episteme. This understanding is lucidly exemplified in Qur'anic texts which establish a basic parallel: as language lends itself to the expression of parity, disposing of morphological means, the dual, *ṣīghat al-muthannā*, to express symmetry, so also creation is out-balanced, even symmetrical – language not being the mirror image of but being the very mould, the model, for creation. This priority given to the epistemic over the material again bears ethical implications, since the parallel can be extended further: as the microcosm of the human body is symmetrical so the

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[21] Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1970).

[22] Neuwirth, "The Discovery of Writing in the Qur'ān: Tracing an Epistemic Revolution in Late Antiquity," in Nuha al-Shaar (ed.), *Qur'ān and Adab* (Oxford, forthcoming).

[23] Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (München: C. H. Beck, 1997).

macrocosm of the city, of the body politic, *al-balad*, needs to be out-
balanced as well, see *Sūrat al-Balad*. It needs to be shaped as a harmonious,
ethically informed world, where the man-centered, heroic ideals of *jāhiliyya,*
have been substituted by the principle of charity, of *raḥma*. This new
theology is argued through reference to language and its intrinsic logic
which is verifiable in creation. There is a vivid imagination in the Qur'an of
the Ideal City –the City of God– long before al-Fārābī's famous reworking
of Plato's *Politeia*.

All these epistemic achievements are not least due to the Qur'anic re-
reading and re-molding of diverse "heritages", most of which –the Biblical–
have been widely flashed out in traditional Islamic exegesis. These
"heritages", should be rediscovered as the original embedding of the
Qur'anic proclamation, as part of the Qur'anic *verum*. Muslim scholarship in
my view needs to be more audacious. It is important that the historical
horizons of Muslim identities be widened to encompass the intellectual
landscape out of which the three cultures alike have emerged.[24] Western
scholarship as against that should be more cautious: it should not allow itself
to be lured into the historical fallacy of reducing the Qur'an to a mere post-
canonical reconfiguration of the Bible –an assumption that ignores the
unique Qur'anic event, its revelation and proclamation or that, if it admits
the historical reality of the ministry of the prophet, would reduce it to a mere
reform activity. This revisionist rigorous dismissal of the *certum* of Islamic
tradition, which is the most important witness to the Qur'an's dimension as a
living Word, is a politically dangerous distortion which we need to be alert
to counter. The Qur'anic text needs to be recognized as a highly innovative
theological discourse, a new, indeed revolutionary, response to the great
questions of monotheist faith raised in Late Antiquity. The shared heritages
of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam –however modified, corrected, or even
superseded in the Qur'an– clearly attest to the common ground on which we
stand, the fact that the three traditions of understanding the Bible each of
which is precious in itself ultimately stem from one and the same epistemic
space. So, why tolerate polarization –why not boast a shared great heritage?

5. An Example: *Sūrat al-Balad*

Q 90, *al-Balad*, "The Town", starts with a cluster of oaths: the first *lā
uqsimu bi-hādhā al-balad* (No! I swear by this town), conjures the high rank

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[24] Here Samir Kassir –although not concerned with Qur'anic issues– needs to be mentioned as a
determined advocate of a new reading of pre-Islamic history, see his *Taʾammulāt fī Shaqāʾ al-ʿArab*
(Beirut: Dār al-Nahār, 2005).

of Mecca as an urban settlement and –implicitly as a sacred place– Mecca, the home town of the addressee, has been introduced as a sanctuary before. The second oath connects the town with the act of procreation –*wa wālidin wa mā walad* (By the begetter and what he begot)– as the foundation of social life (v.1-3). At least two semantic registers have been opened: the sacred & topographic *balad* (town) on the one hand and the physiological & social *wālid-walad* (begetter, begotten) on the other. The oath cluster which contextualizes procreation with sacredness thus provides a particularly emphatic prelude for the ensuing statement which is surprisingly negative in tone, claiming that man –with all his merit in establishing the organized settlement, the *polis*, *al-balad*– has been created as a deficient being (v.4), *la-qad khalaqnā al-insāna fī kabad* (Indeed, we created man in trouble). The somewhat non-specific expression "created in trouble" is explained in the in ensuing verses (5-7): "man", *al-insān*, is still committed to the pagan behavioral code, manifest in his attitude towards worldly possessions which he wastes in acts of boastful overspending: *yaqūlu ahlaktu mālan lubadan* (saying, 'I have consumed wealth abundant') –a near-quotation of a verse from the pre-Islamic poet ʿAntara: *fa-idhā sharibtu fa-innanī mustahlikun mālī* (whenever I drink I bring ruin over my property). According to the pagan Arab paradigm, overspending and exuberant generosity (*jūd*) is a virtue which earns the hero fame and prestige. In the *sūra* it is re-interpreted as a vice. The following reproach –*a-yaḥsabu an lam yarahu aḥad* (What, does he think none has seen him?)— reveals the boastful person's epistemic inferiority, he has not realized that he is under the law of eschatological accountability.

Against this image of the pagan self-sufficient but ultimately ignorant individual, a new image of man is pitted: man is divinely endowed with particular faculties: to see, i.e. to discern, and to speak, i.e. to understand (v. 8-9): *A-lam najʿal lahū ʿaynayn wa lisānan wa shafatayn*? (Have we not appointed to him two eyes? / And a tongue and two lips?). This physiological equipment (referring back to the physiological register of the second oath, *wa wālidin wa mā walad* makes him accountable for his dealings. But his equipment not only entails a moral commitment –it furthermore mirrors the harmony of divine creation: Man is structured in a balanced way, having pairs of eyes (*ʿaynayn*), and pairs of lips (*shafatayn*), morphologically clad into the dual form. It is this empirically verifiable structure of man as a microcosm that needs to be imposed on the polis, the macrocosm, as well, thus the same morphological device of the dual is used

to construct the town as run through by two ways, *najdayn: wa hadaynāhu al-najdayn* (v.10).

The not-yet-assaulted "steep way", *al-ʿaqaba,* (v.11-12): *fa-lā iqtaḥama al-ʿaqabah* (Yet he has not assaulted the steep), reconnecting to the topographic register opened by the first oath, *lā uqsimu bi-hādhā al-balad*, poses a puzzle on first sight. Though the "system of two ways" *al-najdayn*, on first sight seems to refer to the topography of the addressee's home town, Mecca, its evocation of the Biblical topos of the "two ways" as opposite moral options is hard to miss. The enigma of the steep way, *al-ʿaqaba*, is accordingly solved in the crucial verses 13-16: Opting for the steep way is a moral endeavor: the triple act of freeing slaves, feeding the hungry and caring for the poor: *fakku raqaba / aw iṭʿāmun fī yawmin dhī masghaba / yatīman dhā maqraba / aw miskīnan dhā matraba* (The loosening of the rope of slavery, or giving food upon a day of hunger to an orphan near of kin or a needy man in misery).

The three charitable acts, however, are not new, but reflect a frequently quoted text from the Hebrew Bible, Isaiah 58:6-7: "The act of fasting I want is this: remove the chains of oppression, and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free.– Share your food with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless poor … ."

The three acts demanded by Isaiah in Late Antiquity had been re-cast into an eschatological and at the same time Christological frame in the Gospel of Matthew 25:34 ff. On Judgment day, Christ will bless the people "on his right" for having performed the three acts of charity on him, saying: "Come you that are blessed by my Father! … I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me, and I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me. The righteous will then answer him, When, Lord did we ever see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we ever see you a stranger and welcome you in our homes, or naked and clothe you? The King will reply I tell you whenever you did this for one of the least important of these brothers of mine you did it for me!"

And he will condemn those "on his left" to Hellfire for having failed to perform the acts of charity. The Qurʾanic reference to "people of the right", *aṣḥāb al-maymanah*, and "people of the left", *aṣḥāb al-mashʾama*, seems to resound Matthew's scenario. Yet, there is no trace of the justification of

charity through relating it to Jesus Christ. The argument of the *sūra* takes a completely different direction. It is true that a biblical canon of values, laid out eschatologically in the Gospel, has taken over the place of the pagan Arabian code of conduct in the Qur'an. The authority of Scriptural tradition has disempowered pagan ideals handed down in ancestral tradition. Yet, what is more important is that the dialectical dimension involved: it is obvious that the Christological metatext imposed on Isaiah is replaced by a new paradigm of meaning: the harmony in creation which reflects the harmony in language. It is the law of harmony, of balancedness, intrinsic in language and creation as such that suffices to render the attitude of charity and collective responsibility compulsory. The Qur'an replaces mythic loyalties by epistemic evidence.