

Two Faces of the Qur'ān: *Qur'ān* and *Muṣḥaf*

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Introduction: Qur'ān and Rhetoric, *Balāgha*

Every prophet is given a sign that testifies to his rank as a messenger. Moses, who was sent to the Egyptians, had to convince addressees with magic. To eclipse them he had to perform a miracle, changing a rod into a snake and changing the snake back into the rod. Jesus made his appearance in an age when the most prestigious discipline was medicine; he therefore had to work a medical miracle: resurrecting the dead. Coming still later, Muḥammad was sent to a people who would no longer be won by physical miracles, but—being particularly committed to rhetoric, *balāgha*—demanded a more sublime prophetic sign. Muḥammad, therefore, had to present a linguistic and stylistic miracle to convince them. He presented a scripture, the *Qur'ān*.¹

This review of the prophetic missions, often evoked since the time of its first transmitter, the eighth- and ninth-century polymath al-Jāhīz, seems to hit an important point in the perception of the kind of scripture the *Qur'ān* constitutes. Although one might object to the classification of the two great messengers preceding Muḥammad as professionals in magic and medicine, the classification of Muḥammad and the *Qur'ān* as closely related to linguistics and rhetoric is certainly pertinent. His communication of the message is in fact the central part of his mission, unlike Moses and Jesus whose significance relies on both deeds and words. Not only by virtue of Muḥammad's addressing a linguistically demanding audience should the *Qur'ān* be acknowledged as particularly closely related to *balāgha*, but also for another reason about which the authors of the above-quoted classification were arguably less conscious. I am referring to the peculiar *iunctim* of speech and meta-speech in the *Qur'ān*. Unframed by any narrative scenario, the entire *Qur'ān* is speech as such. Qur'ānic speech, moreover, is not limited to the oral communication of a message to listeners, but is often a metadiscourse, a speech about speech, a comment on the Qur'ānic message itself or on the speech of others. The *Qur'ān*—so one might summarize the classifications of prophets related above—was sent down not in an age where amazement could be aroused by extraordinary deeds, but where a speaker successfully confronted and vanquished another, eclipsing the argument of the other in what in Islamic theology would later term *i'jāz*, meaning to “render the other rhetorically impotent.” That age was neither an age of magic, nor of science, but an age of exegesis. The *Qur'ān* accordingly

¹ Paraphrase of Al-Jāhīz 1979. See also the summary in Pellat 1967:80.

presents itself as a highly rhetorical and often metatextual document that reflects an ongoing debate.

In light of these considerations, the problem underlying the present crisis in Western Qur'ānic scholarship—the seemingly unbridgeable divide between a traditional position that regards the *Qur'ān* as the literary outcome of a prophetic mission in Mecca and Medina during the first half of the seventh century CE, and a skeptical position that ascribes its compilation to a later syncretistic Mesopotamian community²—appears to reflect a mistaken premise, very much like the problem that tormented the customs inspector in the famous Tijuana anecdote (Boyarin 2004:1):

Every day for thirty years a man drove a wheelbarrow full of sand over the Tijuana border crossing. The customs inspector dug through the sand each morning but could not discover any contraband. He remained, of course, convinced that he was dealing with a smuggler. On the day of his retirement from the service, he asked the smuggler to reveal what it was that he was smuggling and how he had been doing so. “Wheelbarrows; I’ve been smuggling wheelbarrows, of course.”

I mention this humorous anecdote to argue that what Qur'ānic scholars should be looking for is not the whereabouts of a literary compilation called “*Qur'ān*,” let alone asking “What the *Qur'ān* really says,” but should instead be looking at the Qur'ānic text as a “medium of transport,” triggering and reflecting a communication. The *Qur'ān* in its emergent phase is not a pre-meditated, fixed compilation, a reified literary artifact, but a still-mobile text reflecting an oral theological-philosophical debate between diverse interlocutors of various late antique denominations. It is a text that first of all demands to be read as a drama involving multiple protagonists. What is demanded is a change in focus from the exclusive perception of a reified codex to a still-fluid pre-canonical text that can provide a solution to the historical problems that Qur'ānic scholarship addresses.

To understand this perspective, we need to remember that the Qur'ānic age roughly coincides with the epoch when the great exegetical corpora of monotheist tradition were edited and published, such as the two *Talmudim* in Judaism and the patristic writings in Christianity. These writings, not the Bible, as is often held, are the literary counterparts of the *Qur'ān*. Daniel Boyarin (2004) repeatedly stresses that the Talmud is—no less than the writings of the Church fathers—imbued with Hellenistic rhetoric. Indeed, the *Qur'ān* should be understood first and foremost as exegetical, that is, polemical-apologetical, and thus highly rhetorical. The *Qur'ān* is communicated to listeners whose education already comprises biblical and post-biblical lore, whose nascent scripture therefore should provide answers to the questions raised in biblical exegesis—a scripture providing commentary on a vast amount of earlier theological legacies.

This thesis contradicts the dominant views in present Qur'ānic scholarship. More often than not, the *Qur'ān* is considered as a text pre-conceived, so to speak, by an author, identified in Western scholarship with Muḥammad, or anonymous compilers, a text that was fixed and canonized somewhat later to constitute a liturgical manual and a religious guide for the Muslim community. This view reflects Islamic tradition, which equally regards the *Qur'ān* as an

² For the state of Qur'ānic studies, see Neuwirth, Marx, et al. 2008.

auctorial text. Islamic tradition, however, does distinguish between the (divinely) “authored Book,” labeled *al-muṣḥaf*, as the canonical codex, and the Qur’ānic communication process, labeled *al-qur’ān*. Yet the hermeneutical predominance of the *Qur’an*’s perception as *muṣḥaf* in Islamic tradition is hard to deny. The shift from the “original,” that is, intra-Qur’ānic concept of *qur’ān*, to the post-Muḥammadan concept of *muṣḥaf* is, of course, due to the event of canonization, which reconfigured the text from a historical document into a timeless symbol. Aziz al-Azmeh (1994) has shown that texts become detemporalized through canonization, their single units being considered indiscriminate in terms of chronology;³ instead—so we have to add—they become amalgamated with myth, turning into testimonies of the foundational myth of their communities.

The core of this paper will focus on the *Qur’ān* not as the fixed corpus it became after the death of the Prophet, *al-muṣḥaf*, but as a chain of oral communications conveyed to the Meccan and the Medinan community, whose expectations and religious background are reflected in the Qur’ānic texts. Following Daniel Madigan (2001), I claim that the oral character of the communication during the Prophet’s lifetime was never substituted by a written text—not because the ongoing revelation process stood in the way of codification but rather because the emerging conviction that the Word of God is not accessible to humans except through oral communication. To highlight the notion of *qur’ān* in the sense of “oral communication,” I first will briefly survey the hermeneutical implications of a Qur’ānic reading as either *muṣḥaf* or *qur’ān*. Then I will vindicate the claim that orality in the *Qur’ān* is not limited to its function as a mediality but successively acquires the dimension of a theologumenon (that is, a conviction shared by the speaker and his audience). This will be demonstrated by tracing the strategies that the *Qur’ān* applies to justify its essentially oral character as a legitimate scriptural manifestation and to challenge the rival concept of codified scripture. The third part focuses on literary devices that serve as markers of Qur’ānic orality. Finally, I will analyze an example of the Qur’ānic “re-reading” of earlier monotheistic traditions as an oral and public procedure.

Qur’ān Versus Muṣḥaf

The study of the *Qur’ān* as a post-canonical, closed text (that is, the text established after the death of the prophet, which was codified a few decades later and acknowledged as unchangeable), accessible only through the lens of traditional Islamic exegesis, is a legitimate task for elucidating the community’s understanding of the *Qur’ān*. It is an anachronistic approach, however, when it is applied—as it tacitly often is—to investigate the formation of the Qur’ānic message, that is, the dynamics of its textual growth and diverse changes in orientation during the oral communication phase of the *Qur’ān*. To evaluate the *Qur’ān* historically one has to be aware of the reconfiguration that the prophetic communication underwent in its redaction and canonization: whereas the single units (*sūras*) collected in the *muṣḥaf* are juxtaposed,

³ Although in exegesis a rough grid ascribing the texts to particular “situations of revelation” (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) has been laid over the text whose single units are more generally divided into Meccan and Medinan, this does not prevent readers from applying a purely synchronic approach when explaining texts through others.

constituting a sort of anthology, the oral communications build dynamically on each other, later ones often rethinking earlier ones, sometimes even inscribing themselves into earlier texts. Thus there is ample intertextuality to be observed between *sūras* absent from the *muṣḥaf*, where the chronological order of the *sūras* is no longer evident and the tension produced by dialectic interactions between texts is extinguished (Neuwirth 2002). But Qur'ānic texts viewed as communications also refer to extratextual evidence, to unspoken intertexts, so to speak, drawing on the discourses that were debated in the listeners' circles. These fell silent once the text was turned from a dramatic polyphonic communication into a monolithic divine account. The oral *Qur'ān* (to use a loose expression) may be compared to a telephone conversation where the speech of only one party is audible, yet the unheard speech of the other is roughly deducible from the audible one. Indeed, the social concerns and theological questions of the listeners are widely reflected in the *Qur'ān* text pronounced by the Prophet's voice. To approach the text as a historical document thus would demand the researcher to investigate Muḥammad's growing and changing public, listeners who belonged to a late antique urban milieu, many of whom must have been aware of and perhaps involved in the theological debates among Jews, Christians, and others in the seventh century.

When studying the *Qur'ān* from a literary perspective, it is even more perilous to use the two manifestations of the text indistinctly. In view of their generic differences, both would require different methodologies: the communication process comes closest to a drama, whereas the *muṣḥaf* presents itself as a divine monologue, in generic terms, a kind of a hagiographic account. The theory of drama that distinguishes between an exterior and an interior "level of communication" (Pfister 1994) best illustrates the relation between canonized text and the communication process. On the exterior level, which in literary texts is occupied by the author of the printed dramatic text and his readers, the *muṣḥaf* authored by God addresses the readers of the written *Qur'ān*. Against that, on the interior level—in literary texts occupied by the performers of the drama who are observed acting—the speaker, Muḥammad, and his listeners are interacting. This scenario demands that a number of extra-semantic signs, such as rhetoric and structure, be taken into consideration (Neuwirth 1980). The divine voice here acts as a further protagonist speaking continuously to the Prophet, seldom directly to the listeners, but the voice permanently stages the various scenarios of the prophet-listeners-interaction through speaking about the listeners, thus acting as a kind of invisible stage director or as a sort of reporter. Looking back once again to the exterior level, the *muṣḥaf*, the divine voice has merged with that of the Prophet to become the narrator, whereas the interacting audience has disappeared from the stage completely, to become mere objects of the sole speaker's speech. These two scenarios of the *Qur'ān*—as a communication process and as a scriptural codex—are thus essentially different and consequently demand methodologies of their own.

Strategies of Vindicating Scriptural Orality

Returning to the thesis that the orality of the Qur'ānic message, rather than being a pragmatic medial option, amounts to no less than a basic theologumenon, let us look at the Qur'ānic strategies of vindicating scriptural orality as an appropriate manifestation of the divine

word. The *Qur'ān*, not unlike the other Scriptures, originated from a vast body of heterogeneous traditions current in its geographical context, a selection of which, answering to the needs of an emerging community, crystallized into a Scripture in its own right. What is characteristic of the *Qur'ān*, however, is its emergence from a milieu in which the phenomenon of Scripture, materialized in written codices, was already familiar. As Nicolai Sinai (2006) has lucidly demonstrated, it is in confrontation with the Judeo-Christian notions of scripturality that the developing *Qur'ān* had to stake its own claim to authority. What is striking here is that the *Qur'ān* did not subscribe to the concept of a written manifestation of scripture but established a new image, that of an “oral scripture”; in William Graham’s words, “The *Qur'ān* has always been pre-eminently an oral, not a written text” (2003:584). Daniel Madigan justly claims that “nothing about the *Qur'ān* suggests that it conceives of itself as identical with the *kitāb* (the celestial book)” (cited in Sinai 2006:115), that is to say the *Qur'ān* in no phase of its development strove to become a closed scriptural corpus. This claim to “an ontological difference between the recitations and their transcendent source” (*ibid.*:109), however, presupposes that two conditions be fulfilled, and these can only be traced through diachronic investigations that Madigan has avoided. First, it requires an awareness of the essentially oral character of the emerging *Qur'ān* as its entelechy, irrespective of the occasional employment of writing for its memorization. Second, it requires a set of arguments to justify the striking absence from the *Qur'ān* of the conventional paraphernalia surrounding the revealed Word of God in the neighboring religions.

Sinai has observed that in the earliest *sūras* the divine origins, let alone the scriptural source of the Qur’ānic recitations, are not indicated. Obviously it took some time before the claim to revelation that is implicit in the use of the prophetic address “you” was translated into a consistent rhetoric of divine address, so as to raise the problem of its relationship to written models (Sinai 2006:109). In view of the Qur’ānic beginnings this is no surprise. The early *sūras* on closer examination reveal themselves as rereadings of the Psalms (Neuwirth 2008). They clearly reflect the language of the Psalms not only in terms of the poetical form (short poetic verses), but equally in terms of their imagery and the liturgical attitude of their speaker. This thesis is unaffected by the absence of early translations of the Psalms into Arabic, since the Psalm corpus, contrary to the other biblical books, was used primarily in liturgy, being recited by heart so that complete or at least partial texts rendered in a more or less verbal form thus may have been current through oral transmission. Though the early *sūras* cannot be considered faithful paraphrases of individual Psalms, early *sūras* and Psalms alike are unique in expressing the mood of their speaker articulated in close communication with the divine Other.

The step toward establishing an agency of authority in the texts was taken only at a later stage, although still in early Mecca, arguably in response to a challenge from outside. This is evident from verses like Q 69:41-42 (trans. by Arberry 1964:ii, 298):⁴

Wa-mā huwa bi-qawli shā'irin—qalīlan mā tu'minūn
wa-lā bi-qawli kāhinin qalīlan mā tadhakkarūn

⁴ See further the discussion in Sinai 2006:111.

It is the speech of a noble messenger, it is not the speech of a poet—little do you believe.
Nor the speech of a soothsayer—little do you remember.

A perceived misinterpretation of the recitations' literary genre involving a particular mode of inspiration is corrected through appeal to their divine origin (Q 69:43; trans. by Arberry 1964:ii, 298):

tanzīlun min rabbi l-'ālamīn

A sending down from the Lord of all being

Sinai in his attempt to explain the *Qur'ān*'s contrasting of poetry/soothsaying with “revelation” focuses on the issue of literary genre (2006:111):

The recitations' literary novelty . . . engendered different attempts at categorization among their audience not so much out of sheer curiosity, but rather because assigning them to a textual genre was a pre-condition for grasping their communicative intent. Muhammad's recitations in defining themselves as *tadhkira*—“reminder”—or *dhikr*—“warning”—or as *tanzīl*—“revelation”—take up a discussion which had initially been conducted outside the *Qur'ān*. The meta-level debate is thus interiorized, as it were.

Although the salient point in my view here is the need to reject a particular—inferior—source of inspiration rather than a non-pertinent literary genre, it is certainly true that “*Qur'ānic* self-referentiality must accordingly be understood as gradually emerging from a process of discussion with an audience, the expectations and convictions of which had to be convincingly addressed” (*idem*). The recitations' engagement with their audience is of course evident from the strikingly dialectical structure of many early *sūras*, as noted by Jane McAuliffe (1999:163):

The often argumentative or polemical tone of the *Qur'ān* strikes even the most casual readers. . . . The operative voice in any given pericope, whether it be that of God or Muḥammad or of another protagonist, regularly addresses actual or implicit antagonists.

The importance of such interactions as a formative factor in the emergence of the *Qur'ān*'s form and content is evident.

Let us now turn to the *Qur'ānic* engagement with the problem of its non-written form and, moreover, the missing scriptural paraphernalia. As Madigan observes, the basic challenge for any interpretation of the term *kitāb* consists in the fact that the *Qur'ān* claims to be “of a piece with carefully guarded, lavishly appointed, and scrupulously copied sacred codices and scrolls, while itself remaining open-ended, unwritten, and at the mercy of frail human memory” (2001:45; cited in Sinai 2006:113). This tension, according to Sinai, can be explained as resulting “from a need to balance the obvious situatedness of Muḥammad's recitation with a strategic interest in imparting to them the glow of scripturality that was felt, by his audience, to be an indispensable concomitant of genuine revelation” (114). Equally the appeal to an

archetypal celestial book—an issue that I will turn to presently—may have been propelled by polemics.

As often quoted, the most explicit reproach made by Muḥammad's opponents is the question posed in Q 25:32: "Why was the Qur'ān not sent down to him as a single complete pronouncement—*jumlatan wāḥidatan*?"⁵ The incompleteness and situatedness of the communications obviously were viewed by the audience as a deficiency that set them apart from conventional manifestations of the Word of God and thus needed to be compensated by additional credentials more in line with the familiar models. These of course had to be related to writing, since revelation in Jewish and Christian contexts was bound to the concept of a written scripture.

Should the fact that some early *sūras* of the Qur'ānic revelations are credited with an indirect participation in literacy be related to this expectation of the listeners? There is a cluster of early *sūras* that establish a relation to the celestial book. Thus in Q 80:11-16 the Qur'ānic communications are presented as being emanations, or excerpts, from the celestial ur-text:

kallā innahu tadhkirah
fa-man shā'a dhakarah
ft̄ ṣuḥufin mukarramah
marfū'atin muṭahharah
bi-aydī safarah
*kirāmin bararah*⁶

No indeed; it is a reminder
 —And who so wills, shall remember it—
 Upon pages high-honored,
 Uplifted, purified,
 By the hands of scribes, noble, pious.

The heavenly source of the Qur'ānic communication is elsewhere labeled "tablet" (Q 85:22)—a reference to the Book of Jubilees—and somewhat later, in Middle Mecca, even "mother of the book," *umm al-kitāb* (Q 43:4). Sinai justly claims that these verses "posit a transcendent source document, participation in which is supposed to invest Muḥammad's recitations with a mediated kind of scripturality" (2006:114). He comments (*idem*):

The manoeuvre clearly serves to accommodate both the Qur'ān's orality and situatedness, which could not very well be denied, and the prevailing assumption that when God addresses man, writing somehow has to come into play. Yet contrary to audience expectations, the *kitāb* is placed out of human reach, and is said to be accessible only in the shape of the oral recitations delivered to Muḥammad. To a certain extent then pre-

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.

⁶ Cf. Q 85:21-22: *bal huwa qur'ānun majīd ft̄ lawḥin mahfūz*; and Q 56:77-80: *innahu la-qur'ānun karīm ft̄ kitābin maktūn lā yamassuhu illā l-muṭahharūn tanzīlun min rabbi l-'ālamīn*.

existing assumptions of the audience are embraced, yet at the same time are subjected to a profound reconfiguration.

Although I share his conviction regarding the continuous impact of the audience on the configuration of the emerging *Qur'ān*, I would like to attribute some of the driving force behind the foregrounding of the transcendent Scripture to the important role played by the Book of Jubilees in the thinking of the community. That apocryphal text (cf. Najman 1999) had retained a strong influence on Judeo-Christianity and was in no way absent from the scenario of late antique theological debate. It is reflected in several early *sūras* and can plausibly be considered a source of inspiration in the Qur'ānic relocation of the written Word of God exclusively in the transcendent sphere. Still, the ongoing debate with opponents cannot be overestimated. And it is this debate that should have propelled the promotion of the factual orality of the Qur'ānic communications to become a Qur'ānic theologoumenon.

Once more back to *al-kitāb*: what is the relation between the performed *qur'ān* and the celestial *kitāb*? Post-canonical thinking, of course, holds that both are identical. It is, however, striking to observe that in some middle and late Meccan texts *kitāb* and *qur'ān* are carefully kept distinct. A few remarks concerning the background may be in place here. It is in middle and late Mecca that the earlier undetermined *sūra* structures develop into a structurally distinct shape: the tripartite *sūra*. This composition—analogue to the structure of ecclesiastical and synagogal services—presents a biblical story as its core part, framing it by more dialogical initial and final parts, entailing polemics/apologetics, or else hymns and affirmations of the rank of the communication as a revelation (Neuwirth 1996). These *sūras* attest to a new *Sitz im Leben*, a new social-liturgical function. It is here that the reference to *al-kitāb* is reserved for the biblical accounts in particular, figuring in the center of the triad. Later the dichotomy between (biblical) recollections from the *kitāb* and other kinds of Qur'ānic communications is loosened: *al-kitāb* becomes the designation of a celestial mode of storage, whereas *qur'ān* points to its earthly performance. Yet in terms of form both are never deemed identical: the excerpts from the *kitāb* are not received by the Prophet unaltered but have in the course of the transmission process been adapted to the specific needs of the recipients. Sinai (2006:121) emphasizes the importance of this difference that the Qur'ān itself recognizes as a peculiarity, conceiving it as a hermeneutical code, so to speak; it even receives a technical designation: *tafṣīl*. The *locus classicus* for this perception is Q 41:2 f. (Trans. by Arberry 1964:ii, 185):

tanzīlun min al-rahīmāni r-rahīm
kitābun fuṣṣilat āyātuhu qur'ānan 'arabiyyan li-qawmin ya'lamūn.

A sending down from the Merciful, the Compassionate
 A book whose signs have been distinguished [or “adapted”] as an Arabic Koran, for a
 people having knowledge.

The heavenly *kitāb* is coded as an Arabic recitation—not implying, however, that it was necessarily composed in Arabic from eternity on.⁷ This means that even biblical stories that are ascribed to *al-kitāb* do not involve the claim to verbal quotations from the celestial source, but *de facto* constitute a kind of paraphrase adapted to the listeners' scope. This observation equally throws light on the fact—often considered irritating—that in the *Qur'an* individual stories are told more than once and presented in different versions. In the light of the hermeneutics of *tafsīl* these are to be considered as subsequent renderings of a particular *kitāb*-pericope, repeatedly re-phrased and adapted to the changing communal situation. Sinai concludes (2006:126):

From the Qur'ānic perspective, therefore, the celestial scripture cannot be given to man in any other shape than *mufaṣṣalan* Q 6:114. The *kitāb* is partially accessible, but never available, it can be tapped via divine revelation, but due to the need to tailor such revelations to a specific target audience, the *kitāb* as such is at no one's disposal, not even in the form of literal excerpts.

At this stage, orality has acquired the dimension of a Qur'ānic theologumenon.

Markers of Orality

Proportions

Having discussed the development of orality as a Qur'ānic theologumenon, let us now turn to some of the textual characteristics that strikingly point to the oral composition of the text. The most technically evident of these are quantitative regularities between verse groups that often amount to clear and certainly intended proportions (Neuwirth 1981/2007).

Since the sensational hypothesis presented by David Heinrich Müller (1896) claiming a strophic composition for the *sūras* was dismissed without further scrutiny by subsequent scholarship, the possibility that “a firm hand was in full control” of the composition and structure of individual *sūras* has been virtually excluded. Against this view, structures do become clearly discernible beneath the surface through micro-structural analysis (Neuwirth 1981/2007). These structures mirror a historical development. Particularly in the early short *sūras*, distinctive verse groups can be isolated that often form part of clear-cut patterns of proportions. Thus, Q 75 is built on the following balanced verse groups: 6 + 6 + 6 + 6 + 5 + 5 + 5; Q 70 is made up of 6 + 7 + 7 + 7 + 7 + 9; Q 79 entails two groups of nine verses, its proportions being strikingly balanced 5 + 9 / 6 + 6 + 6 / 9 + 5. Q 51 is made up of groups of 9 + 14 + 14 + 9 + 7 + 7 verses. Similar

⁷ Sinai explains (2006:121), “Elsewhere, in Q 10.37 too, this *qur'an* is qualified as *tafsīl al-kitāb*, a sequence of excerpts or interpretative renderings from the celestial book. In a number of passages from Mecca II and III the *kitāb* and *qur'an* are clearly distinguished. The transformation process leading from one entity to the other being labeled as *tafsīl*.” Sinai stresses that “a *tafsīl* of something must always target a specific audience in a specific situation. Q 41.44 *wa-law ja'alnāhu qur'ānan a'jamiyyan la-qālū law lā fuṣṣilat āyātuhu* provides additional evidence for this. If the recitations had not been in Arabic, they would not have been properly adapted to their intended audience” (*idem*).

cases are found in many of those early Meccan *sūras* that exceed some ten verses, proportions being obviously a mnemonic device required when memorization without written support was demanded from the listeners.

*Clausulas*⁸

At a certain stage of the Middle Meccan period, verses that have become longer, exceeding two-sentence structures, cease to be marked by expressive and frequently changing rhyme formulas. Verses now start to display a more simple rhyme, mostly following the stereotypical *-ūn*, *-īn*-pattern that would hardly suffice to fulfill the listeners' anticipation of a resounding end to the verse. A new mnemonic-technical device is utilized to solve the problem. This device is the rhymed phrase, a syntactically stereotyped colon that is distinguished from its context inasmuch as it does not partake in the main strain of the discourse but presents a kind of moral comment on it, such as in the case of Joseph's brothers' plea, "Give us full measure and be charitable with us," which is commented on with the statement "Truly God will repay the charitable" (*Fa-awfi lanā l-kayla wa-taṣaddaq 'alaynā inna llāha yajzi l-mutaṣaddiqin*. Q 12:88). Or else the clausula refers to divine omnipotence and providence, such as in the case of Muḥammad's night journey: *Subḥāna lladhī asrā bi-'abdihi laylan [. . .] li-nuriyahu min āyātīnā, innahu huwa l-samī'u l-baṣīr*. Q 17:1, "Glory be to Him who carried His servant by night . . . that we might show him some of our signs," which is commented on with the clausula: "He is the All-hearing, the All-seeing." An elaborate classification of the rhymed phrases has shown that the clausulas display a large number of divine predicates. Although it is true that not all multipartite verses bear such formulaic endings but occasionally contain ordinary short sentences in the position of the last colon, clausula verses still may be considered a characteristic developed in the late Meccan period and present in later verses. Clausulas serve to turn the often-narrative discourse of the extended *sūras* into paraenetic appeals, thus immediately supporting the communication of their theological message. In this manner they betray a novel narrative pact between the speaker and his audience, the consciousness that there is a basic consensus on human moral behavior as well as on the image of God as a powerful agent in human interaction, a consciousness that has of course been reached only after an extended process of the community's education.

The Exegetical Qur'ān: *Sūrat al-ikhhlāṣ* as an Example

Let us finally turn to an example of the Qur'ānic absorption of earlier traditions that were orally transmitted in its milieu and—appropriated by the Qur'ānic community—emerged in a new shape that however still re-sounds their pre-Qur'ānic acoustic and rhetorical shape. One of the core texts of the *Qur'ān*, the creed articulated in *sūrat al-ikhhlāṣ* (112), the "pure belief," is celebrated in Islam as a textual, visual, and acoustic icon of unity (trans. by Arberry 1964):

⁸ See further Neuwirth 1980.

Qul huwa llāhu aḥad / Allāhu ṣ-ṣamad / lam yalid wa-lam yūlad / wa-lam yakun lahu kufuwan aḥad.

Say: He is God, one / God the absolute / He did not beget, nor is He begotten / And there is none like Him.

The short text unit, made up of succinct verses with a proper end-rhyme, would, on first sight, fit into the pattern of the neatly constructed poetical early Meccan *sūras* were it not for the introductory “*qul*,” “say,” that is characteristic of later—more discursive—texts. Indeed, upon closer examination, the text is not as monolithic as it appears. It is hard to ignore the way verse 1—“Say, God is One”; *qul huwa llāhu aḥad*—echoes the Jewish credo “Hear Israel, the Lord, our God, is One”; *Shema’ Yisrā’el, adōnay ḗlōḥēnū adōnay eḥad*. It is striking that the Jewish text remains audible in the Qur’ānic version, which—against grammatical norms—adopts the Hebrew-sounding noun *aḥad* instead of the more pertinent adjective *wāḥid* for the rhyme. This “ungrammaticality” should not go unnoticed. I refer here to Michael Riffaterre (1978), who coined the notion of the “ungrammaticality,” meaning the awkwardness of a textual moment that semiotically points to another text which provides a key to its decoding. The particular kind of ungrammaticality that is operating in our text can be identified with Riffaterre’s “dual sign.” To quote Riffaterre (92):

The dual sign works like a pun . . . It is first apprehended as a mere ungrammaticality, until the discovery is made that there is another text in which the word is grammatical; the moment the other text is identified, the dual sign becomes significant purely because of its shape, which alone alludes to that other code.

The Jewish text, as we saw, remains audible in the Qur’ānic version. Why? This striking translanguing quotation is certainly not without function. It is part of a negotiation strategy: to appropriate the Jewish credo by making it universal and thus acceptable to a non-Jewish audience by underscoring that difference, addressing not Israel but any believer. This kind of exegetical correction is a modification that the *Qur’ān* applies to numerous earlier traditions. Yet the audible resonance of the earlier text seems to be a clear oral address to Jewish listeners in particular; the text might thus additionally entail a strategy to bridge the gap between the Qur’ānic and the Jewish communities.

But, as the following table shows, the *sūra* refers to more than one earlier credo:

Nicano-Constantinopolitanum	Deuteronomium 6,4	Qur'ān, Sura 112 (al-Iqlās)
<p>We believe in one God,</p> <p>Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἕνα Θεόν</p> <p>the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible</p> <p>Πατέρα παντοκράτορα, ποιητὴν οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς, ὁρατῶν τε πάντων καὶ ἀορατῶν.</p> <p>And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds (aeons), Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made,</p> <p>Καὶ εἰς ἕνα κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν, τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ τὸν μονογενῆ, τὸν ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς γενηθέντα, πρὸ πάντων τῶν αἰώνων, φῶς ἐκ φωτός, Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ, γεννηθέντα οὐ ποιηθέντα,</p> <p>being of one substance with the Father;</p> <p>ὁμοουσίον τῷ πατρὶ</p>	<p>Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.</p> <p>שמעו ישראל: יהוה אחד. יהוה אחד</p>	<p>Say: He is God, one,</p> <p>قُلْ هُوَ اللهُ أَحَدٌ</p> <p>God, the absolute,</p> <p>اللهُ الصَّمَدُ</p> <p>He did not beget, nor is He begotten,</p> <p>لَمْ يَلِدْ وَلَمْ يُولَدْ</p> <p>And there is none like Him.</p> <p>وَلَمْ يَكُن لَّهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ</p>

Verse 3—“He did not beget nor is he begotten”; *lam yalid wa-lam yūlad*—is a reverse echo of the Nicene creed; it rejects the emphatic affirmation of Christ’s sonship—begotten, not made; *gennêthenta, ou poiêthenta*—by a no less emphatic double negation. A negative theology is established through the inversion of a locally familiar religious text. This negative theology is summed up in verse 4—“And there is none like Him”; *wa-lam yakun lahu kufuwun aḥad*. The verse that introduces a Qur’ānic *hapax legomenon*, *kufuwun*, “equal in rank,” to render the core concept of *homoousios*, not only inverts the Nicene formula of Christ’s being of one substance with God—*homoousios to patri*—but also forbids thinking of any being as equal in substance with God, let alone a son.⁹

Although these verses negate the essential statement of the Nicene creed, they nevertheless “translate” the Greek/Syriac intertext, adopting its rhetorical strategy of *intensification*. The Nicene wording first emphatically denies Christ’s being made, “begotten, not made,” and then goes on to top that verdict by proclaiming his equality in nature with the Father, *homoousios to patri*, “being of one substance with the Father.” In the *Qur’ān*, the no less emphatic *exclusion* of the idea of sonship and fatherhood alike—*lam yalid wa-lam yūlad*, “he did not beget, nor is he begotten”—is likewise “topped” by a universal negation stating that there is no way to think of a being equal with God: *wa-lam yakun lahu kufuwun aḥad*. Again the pre-text is audible in the final version.

Rhetorically, again, this text echoes the earlier Christian wording. Verses 3 and 4 are certainly not primarily a polemic address to Christians, but, raising more general claims, have become part of an integral new text, a universalist monotheistic creed. That text is a composite counter-text to two powerful earlier texts, the creeds of both the Jews and the Christians, that can both still be “heard” re-sounding through the new Arabic rhetorical shape. A cultural translation has taken place, brought about most immediately by oral communication and continuing to rely for its effectiveness on the still-audible rhetorical matrix of both the Jewish and the Christian tradition. What for Islamic tradition has become an icon of unity reveals itself in the pre-canonical *Qur’ān* as living speech—a suggestive example of the *Qur’ān*’s oral and at the same time exegetical nature.

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⁹ I am making use of Greek quotations here for the sake of simplicity, Greek being more familiar to present readers than Syriac. I am of course aware that the creed may have been current in the Syriac language.

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