

MICHEL CUYPERS

# *The Banquet*

A READING OF THE FIFTH SURA OF THE QUR'AN

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## *Preface*



Over the last few years, studies of the «Qur'an as a text» have undergone a great revival. Among them, the critical examination of the structure, the composition and the formal constitution of the Qur'an text has been considerably refined thanks to the work of some exceptional scholars, all basically indebted to structural linguistics — Angelika Neuwirth, Pierre Crapon de Caprona, Neal Robinson and Mathias Zahniser (see the Bibliography). The first two studied the short Meccan suras — Crapon de Caprona starting from his analysis of the rhythm and Neuwirth focusing on the rhyme, style and theme— while basing themselves on the hypothesis of the literary unity of each sura. The latter two approached the long Medinan suras by studying the different repetitions and correspondences between words or phrases in publications of an article or a chapter length. Michel Cuyper's book, dedicated to rhetoric in the Qur'an, is a masterly completion of this research, as well as his own earlier work. Focusing on the methods of biblical exegesis, principally those practiced by Roland Meynet in Semitic rhetoric, he both draws out the analysis of the structures of composition of the text in one of the longest and latest suras, and considerably advances work on the correspondences forward considerably by distinguishing clearly between the different levels of the text.

The methodologies of these scholars, who treat the Qur'anic text from the synchronic perspective, are, sometimes radically, distinguished from the classical historical-philological approach based on the diachronic understanding of the Qur'an. From Gustav Weil to Uri Rubin, Theodor Nöldeke to Andrew Rippin, via Richard Bell, Régis Blachère or Alford Welch, the supporters of historical criticism have always considered the suras, particularly the Medinan suras, to be a composite of small texts of different dates, brought together by many collectors over the first century or two of Islam. Eager to reconstitute the history of the Qur'an's redaction, these scholars tried to draw out the real redactional work thought to be at the basis of the constitution of the Qur'anic corpus we know, which includes additions and suppressions, stylistic interpolations and interventions, which would explain the multiple «incoherences» in this corpus. This approach sometimes seems to be diametrically opposed to that of Cuypers and his predecessors, who focus on a basic hypothesis in which *each sura has an intrinsic coherence distributed over several levels of the text*. Here we find a resonance of Josef van Ess' thought, in which the Qur'anic sura (particularly the Meccan suras) is primarily a *liturgical text* which thus possesses an original redactional unity and a semantic coherence.



I was particularly touched by Cuypers' openness of mind when he asked me to write the preface to this book, since he knows that I practice the historical-philological method. From my point of view, this method no longer needs to be proven. It is solidly supported by a century and a half of academic work of great value by some of the most illustrious Islamists and Arabists. At the same time, it is true that many profound differences on the history of Qur'an come between this method's supporters, for the simple reason that, naturally, they base themselves on the wealth of Islamic textual tradition which is itself marked by many hesitations, contradictions and legends. Despite the existence of different theories on the matter, there are enough of these «areas of shadow» of the Islamic sources, and they are significant enough, to direct the researcher towards a thesis in which the definitive writing-down of the Qur'anic corpus took place over several decades, and seems to have resulted in confrontation between the redactional work of various groups of men of letters who did not always agree with one another.

In addition, works devoted to the Qur'an's structures of composition, at least as Cuypers sheds light on them, can be supported by very little classical Muslim work. The big question which seems to arise is thus, *how is it that, for almost a millennium and a half, no Muslim scholar turned to the examination of Semitic rhetoric in general, and Arabic rhetoric in particular, to explain the Qur'an's «incoherences» which always struck literary scholars?* It was not a lack of desire on their part — the aims of the vast literature of the *Nazm al-Qur'ān* («The organization of the Qur'an») or the *I'jāz al-Qur'ān* («The inimitability of the Qur'an») are, among others, to find plausible justification for the apparent lack of coherence of the Muslims' sacred text. However, among the hundreds and hundreds of commentators on the Qur'an, exegetes and hermeneutical scholars, grammarians and lexicographers, philologists and philosophers, mystics, theologians and legislators, the number of Muslim scholars who have studied the stylistic structures of the Qur'an whom Cuypers quotes can virtually be counted on the fingers of one hand. What is more, on his own admission, from Abū Bakr al-Nisābūrī, al-Zarkashī and al-Biqā'ī in the Middle Ages, to Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī and Sa'īd Ḥawwā in the present day, none of these unusual and largely unknown authors has managed to come up with objectively convincing results. Cuypers' hypothesis to explain this vast lacuna is that at the time when Muslim scholars began to be interested in the Qur'an's stylistic organization, Semitic rhetoric had already been completely forgotten, covered over by the influence of late-



Hellenistic rhetoric. As this was focused on the study of figures of speech and tropes (metaphor, metonymy, comparison, etc.), which only dealt with the smallest units of text (words and phrases), Arabic rhetoric went the same way, ignoring the study of the composition of the discourse, which constituted the basics of Semitic rhetoric. From then on, Arabic rhetoric was powerless to resolve the questions that scholars were asking about the text's organization.

I must confess that, for me, the question remains open; nevertheless, the pertinence and solidity of the work of the author of this book have always struck me. For a long time, I have even shared with him my wish to see brought together in one volume his many articles on the short suras, a wish which is still as keen as ever. For more than ten years, Cuypers has patiently developed his detailed system for rhetorical analysis of the Qur'an. This preface is obviously not the place to explain a very rich method based on such a complex discipline as rhetoric. However, it is appropriate to emphasize that the great technical skill in Cuypers' work is neither free nor arbitrary. On the contrary, it is constantly deployed in *rigorous methodology, systematic reasoning, and implacable logic*. Cuypers' aim in *The Banquet* was to know whether the rhetorical analysis which he had applied for so long to the older, short Meccan suras was as pertinent to a long, late Medinan sura such as *sura five*. To my mind, he has succeeded in a clear and perfectly-mastered way. The conclusion which he draws is that the Qur'an is composed throughout according to the same rhetoric. Among the most obvious implications of this conclusion it seems that, on the one hand, the Qur'an has a literary unity and coherence which make sense and, on the other, rhetorical analysis, based on the examination of the composition, can perfectly well help in the interpretation of the text of the Qur'an, the more so if, as in this book, it is accompanied by a study of the «interscriptural context» (the Qur'an's re-writing of the Bible and the other texts related to it). So the question which fundamentally concerns our author is not the history of the writing of the Qur'an, but the text's significance in its final redactional state. In this sense, the coherence of his approach is constant.

One of the remarkable results which Cuypers' analyses, both rigorous and objective, draw out is what we might call the «strategic» placing of *two types of Qur'anic text*. Alongside the traditional distinction between passages dealing with circumstantial events and facts (touching on the domain of belief — *'aqīda*, pl. *'aqā'id*) and passages containing universal messages (concerning the domain of faith — *īmān*), his rhetorical examination clearly shows, in the sura being

studied, that the former always have a «peripheral» position, while the latter enjoy a «centrality» which emphasizes their greater importance and sacred nature. Given the main theme of the fifth sura, Cuypers is particularly interested in the *relations between Islam and other religions*, or more precisely between Muslims, Jews and Christians. He thus shows the peripheral place, and therefore the secondary, almost circumstantial nature, of the passages which deal with tensions and violence towards, and repression of, non-Muslims, and the centrality, and therefore the primordial and universal nature of the passages which emphasize the deep unity, harmony and fraternity of the three so-called «Abrahamic» faiths. There is no need to mention the huge importance which such discoveries can bring both spiritually and politically.

I remain convinced of the validity of the analysis which comes from the historical-philological critical method; however, Cuypers' masterful, erudite and coherent approach proves to me that rhetorical analysis can be just as reliable a hermeneutical tool for understanding the Qur'anic text as others. I do not yet know exactly how, but I am sure that the two approaches can complete one another, mutually refining one another and create a breakthrough which is as decisive as it is original for a new exegesis of the great enigma which is the Qur'an.

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## *Introduction*



Like the Bible, the Qur'an now belongs to the universal cultural and religious heritage. The globalization of Islam<sup>1</sup> and the mass emigration of Muslims to the West have placed their Holy Book within the reach of all, whether or not they share the Islamic faith. While it is physically accessible to all, however, this book cannot be easily tackled. The Westerner who attempts to read it for the first time, particularly in translation, is rapidly thrown off course by this text, with its disconnected sequences, where subjects follow one another and are mixed up among one another without any discernable logic or order. Let us see what Jacques Berque, one of the greatest French specialists of the Qur'an in the twentieth century, has to say on this matter:

Those who, with no preparation, tackle these [suras in the Qur'an] find themselves overwhelmed by its profusion and apparent disorder. Many Westerners mention incoherence — the discussion ranges from one subject to another, without being followed up, and without being exhausted. The same theme and motif return here and there with no discernable regularity. It is impossible to find one's place in a dense text explained neither by the titles of the suras, nor by the breaks which translators introduce arbitrarily, nor by the framework or other indices which they claim to provide us with. All in all, despite some good chunks, it is, one might say, a very deceptive read!<sup>2</sup>

The South African Muslim intellectual Farid Esack admits that «the Qur'an is a difficult book for those who are “strangers” to it to penetrate, and indeed even for many Muslims who simply want to read it»<sup>3</sup>.

This rather general observation, in both the non-Muslim and the Muslim worlds, called for research into the composition of the Qur'anic text. *Are the different fragments which make it up arranged according to a certain internal logic which brings coherence and unity, that is, a greater intelligibility, to the text?* This question is far from new — it was asked of the Qur'anic commentators from the very beginnings of Qur'anic exegesis<sup>4</sup>. In fact, we find it written within the Qur'an itself: «Those who have disbelieved have said: “Why has not the Qur'an been sent down to him all at once?” Thus (have We sent it) that We may confirm

1 See ROY O., *L'Islam mondialisé*.

2 BERQUE J., *Relire le Coran*, 19.

3 ESACK F., *Coran, mode d'emploi*, 281.

4 At the end of the book, in appendix, the reader will find a detailed history of this question which we summarize here in broad brush-strokes.

your heart thereby and We have set it out distinctly» (25:32); «We have divided [this Qur'an] for you to recite it to the people at intervals» (17:106).

During the third century after the Hijra (ninth century CE) works were already appearing in reply to the objections of those who complained of the Qur'an's lack of composition — its dislocated parts, its repetitions, the mixing of miscellaneous subjects in the same chapter, the sudden appearance of a strange subject in another context, etc. These replies are hardly convincing to the modern mind-set, at least not in the works which have come down to us. Some exegetes, particularly the great commentator and theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209), practiced an «exegesis of the Qur'an by the Qur'an» in their search for textual coherence: they sought to shed light upon the meaning of one verse by using other verses situated elsewhere in the book, what today we would call *intertextual* exegesis. Again, particularly over the last century, many commentators link one verse back to the preceding one, or one sura to those around it. They consider the text to be a concatenation of verses or suras, which does not yet represent a true composition or textual structure. To the best of our knowledge, only two recent commentaries on the Qur'an, written and published in the 1980s, have suggested a particular composition of the Book. The first, written in Urdu, is by the Indo-Pakistani scholar Amin Aḥsan Iṣlāhī. According to him, most suras are grouped into thematic pairs (which we would agree with), and the Qur'an as a whole can be divided into seven large wholes (which remains to be proven). The other text, in Arabic, is by the Syrian Sheikh Sa'īd Ḥawwā, and divides the suras up into groups of verses at several levels, to achieve a certain organization of the text.

From the Western Orientalist perspective, since Theodor Nöldeke's famous study on the history of the Qur'an (*Geschichte des Qorāns*, 1860), research has been dominated by historical criticism, which has succeeded in dismantling the text into small units, supposedly of different dates<sup>5</sup>. It has also been used to make alterations to the text by moving verses or parts of verses to make the text more «logical». The text is considered to be a composite assembly of fragments spoken at different moments in the Prophet's life, and later brought together clumsily in the Book by editors under the Othman caliphate. Historical criticism thus brings all its attention to bear on the «anomalies» of the text, its «incoherence»,

5 This observation does not of course invalidate in any way the mine of information contained in T. Nöldeke's book which, particularly in the expanded re-editions by F. Schwally, G. Bergsträsser and O. Pretzl between 1908 and 1938 remains a major work of reference for the study of the Qur'an.



the «clumsy agreements», etc., to define the different fragments which make it up, to situate them chronologically and to rebuild them in a whole which is more logically satisfactory. Richard Bell's commentary and translation of the Qur'an, published in 1937, with the revealing sub-title «translated, with a critical rearrangement of the Surahs» looks like a real patchwork of rearranged paragraphs, at the cost of a total dislocation of the received text. Régis Blachère's 1950, version while much more sober, also suggests a number of rearrangements of verses. As we will see, in terms of the sura studied in this text, these shifts are not only useless, but «out of place» — they respond to a need of our Western logic, which comes from Greek culture, but deeply disturb another, *Semitic logic*, that of the Qur'anic text, in which these verses are very much «in the right place», where they are, having a definite rhetorical function which is often particularly important for the meaning of the text.

It was only from the 1980s that the direction changed, with the almost simultaneous publication of two works, the first by Pierre Crapon de Caprona, and the second by Angelika Neuwirth, which might be described as the first academic attempts to determine the structure of the Qur'anic text. Even though both researchers allowed themselves some textual displacement, their research at least hypothetically presupposes a certain literary unity within the sura. However, they limited themselves to the Meccan suras, approaching their composition by studying the rhythm (Crapon de Caprona), and the rhyme of the verses, their themes and the recurrence of certain stylistic traits (Neuwirth)<sup>6</sup>. In our opinion, their methods did not supply the real key to the text's organization, even though they did make many interesting observations. More recently, at the turn of the new millennium, some studies by Neal Robinson and Matthias Zahnisser dealt with the question of the composition of the long, Medinan suras<sup>7</sup>. To them it is the distant correspondences of terms, syntagmas, or whole clauses, identical or similar, which play the role of indicators in the composition. This, indeed, is one of the basic principles of the method used in this work. We will, however, push the systematization of the method and its application at every

6 See CRAPON DE CAPRONA P., *Le Coran: aux sources de la parole oraculaire, structures rythmiques des sourates mecquoises*, 1981; NEUWIRTH A., *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*, 1981.

7 ROBINSON N., *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, 201-223; «Hands Outstretched»: Towards a Re-reading of *Sūrat al-Mā'ida*, 1-19. ZAHNISER M., «Major Transitions and Thematic Borders in Two Long Sūras: *al-Baqara* and *al-Nisā'*», 26-55.

level of the text much further. The studies cited above, which are quite brief, do not go beyond examining the division of the long sequences in the suras<sup>8</sup>.

Thus we can see that both from the point of view of Islamic exegesis and from Orientalist study, the question of the text's coherence is of the moment. The development of structural linguistics in the twentieth century was not for nothing.

The solution did not, however, come directly from modern linguistics, but from a particular current in biblical exegesis which took form in the mid-eighteenth century, and which gradually discovered the rules which governed the writings of the books of the Bible. The starting point was the study of «parallel members» in not only the Psalms but also the Prophets, by Rev. Robert Lowth, professor at Oxford and later Bishop of Oxford and then London, in his 35 *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (1753), which became a classic of biblical exegesis. At the same time, the German Johann-Albrecht Bengel noted the importance of another rhetorical figure, the chiasmus, in the Bible. Beginning with the study of these few figures of rhetoric in the Bible, further observations and systematizations would develop during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and even in the twentieth century<sup>9</sup>.

Today there is no doubt that it is Roland Meynet, who teaches exegesis at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, and the Director of this «Rhetorica Semitica» series, who has pushed the theory and application of what he has called «rhetorical analysis» the furthest<sup>10</sup>. Others prefer the term «structure analysis» to differentiate it from «structural analysis»<sup>11</sup> — the former is interested in the «surface structures» of the text, which can be located from the words in the text, while the latter seeks the «deep structures» of which the author is not normally aware<sup>12</sup>.

This new discipline has recently gone beyond the purely biblical studies. It has shown itself to be pertinent to the study of the composition of other Semitic texts, some — Akkadian and Ugaritic<sup>13</sup> — very ancient, and others of late

8 N. ROBINSON's study, «Hands Outstretched: Towards a Re-reading of *Sūrat al-Mā'ida*», is no longer than an article (19 pages). His major divisions of the *al-Mā'ida* sura only partially correspond to ours.

9 R. MEYNET traces this history in the first part of his reference book, *Rhetorical Analysis*, 43-166.

10 See the second part («Exposition of Rhetorical Analysis») of R. MEYNET's *Rhetorical Analysis*, 167ff.

11 In French, respectively: «analyse structurelle» and «analyse structurale».

12 The distinction between «surface structures» and «deep structures» is made by Noam Chomsky.

13 R. MEYNET gives examples of this in *Rhetorical Analysis*, 357-8.

antiquity — the Islamic traditions (hadiths) in al-Bukhārī's great eleventh-century collection<sup>14</sup>, and even to the Qur'an itself. Applying rhetorical analysis to the short and medium Meccan suras of the Qur'an immediately demonstrated that it was the perfect tool for decoding their composition<sup>15</sup>. Less sophisticated than other tools of modern linguistics, it also has the advantage of only using simple terms from every-day language («segments», «pieces», «parts», «passages», etc.), which as a consequence are easily accessible to the non-specialist. The fact that it has been tested for a long time by biblical scholars who marry academic rigor with respect for a text which they consider to be the revealed Word of God, should remove Muslim readers' suspicion — the inopportune use of modern humanities in the study of the Qur'an has sometimes made Muslims afraid that the Qur'an is being reduced to a purely secular object of study, a text like any other, with its sacred nature pared away. While rhetorical analysis shakes up the methods of traditional exegesis, and «desacralizes» it in some way, it suppresses nothing of the sacred nature of the text itself, which is wholly respected as it exists canonically. It simply describes the structure, with the aim of understanding the meaning that that carries.

The pertinence of rhetorical analysis for the long Medinan suras, clearly more complex and apparently more disordered than the brief Meccan suras, remained to be demonstrated, and this is the initial aim of this work. The choice fell on «The Table» sura principally because of its late dating — it is claimed to be the last (or, some say, the penultimate) long sura to be revealed. It was particularly interesting to examine whether such a late text obeyed the same principles of composition as the short suras from the start of the Qur'anic revelation. If the answer were positive, one might be able to extrapolate that the whole Qur'an was composed in the same way, following the same «rhetoric». Let me say at once that this will in fact be the result of our research.

The use here of the term «rhetoric» may puzzle some readers, because it is not used in its usual sense. Literary and Qur'anic studies have, since the dawn of Islamic culture, and undeniably under the influence of late Greek rhetoric, developed a rhetoric which is understood to be the art of embellishing discourse by figures of speech (metaphor, metonymy, synonymy, antithesis, etc). As a con-

<sup>14</sup> See the example in MEYNET R., *Rhetorical Analysis* 359 and the joint work by MEYNET R., POUZET L., FAROUKI N., SINNO A., *Rhétorique sémitique. Textes de la Bible et de la Tradition musulmane* (see the Bibliography for the first edition in Arabic).

<sup>15</sup> See our articles in the Bibliography.

sequence it was only interested in the smallest units of the text — the words or sentences. The question of the composition of the discourse as such, which Aristotle tackled in his *Rhetoric* under the title *dispositio* (arrangement of the discourse) remained foreign to Arabic rhetoric, despite the questions raised by the Qur'an's composition, or rather its apparent non-composition. It remained powerless to answer these questions. However, rhetoric as we understand it, as «the art of the composition of the discourse» is not unconnected to the art of «figures of speech». Semitic rhetoric, which was used in the East before Greek rhetoric took over, was, of course, based upon some fundamental «figures of speech» — parallelism and chiasmus, among others, but used at every level of the text's organization. «Rhetorical analysis» is precisely the systematization of these figures of speech at their different levels.

30 It goes without saying that, while we hold that the study of the composition of the text is an indispensable stage of exegesis, it is not the only one. On its own it would not stand up without an examination of vocabulary and grammar. This work does not claim any originality in these areas, which have been widely explored both in Islamic tradition and in Orientalist research. We will occasionally allude to this in the section on «Points of Vocabulary», or during the course of the commentary.

The work of the analysis of the text very swiftly demonstrated the need to bring together the study of its «Composition» (the main section of the different parts of this research) with its «Interscriptural context» (the title of the third section). Both these approaches to the text — analysis of its *composition* and *intertextuality* — while different, turned out to complement one another closely. Attention to the immediate literary context of a textual unit — essential in rhetorical analysis — immediately draws attention to its broader context within the book as a whole (what Muslim exegetes call «the commentary of the Qur'an by the Qur'an») <sup>16</sup>, and beyond that, in the external context of all the sacred literature the Book is related to <sup>17</sup>, which, for the Qur'an means first and foremost the Bible and the parabiblical writings — rabbinic, intertestamental and apocryphal

16 This is the only level of intertextuality which J. Boullata envisages in his article «Literary structures» paragraphe *Transtextuality*, *EQ*.

17 In the final chapter of this book we will see a further reason to link these two steps — intertextuality, as we practice it, pays attention not only to the similarities in vocabulary between the Qur'an and the texts of the biblical tradition, but also to the similarities of structure, which presupposes that the composition of the texts is being studied.

writings, Jewish and Christian liturgical texts, etc<sup>18</sup>. There is of course no question of criticizing «borrowings», «imitations» or «influences» from apologetic or polemical intentions, as a certain Orientalism in bad taste has done, but rather recognizing that the Qur'an shares a phenomenon which is characteristic of Biblical writings — re-writing. The books of the Bible unceasingly re-appropriate earlier writings, reusing them and turning them to a new perspective which makes revelation advance. The Qur'an does no different, although it does so in a different way from the Bible, as we will see more clearly at the end of our reading<sup>19</sup>: since it positions itself as the final revelation in the Judeo-Christian tradition, it has had to re-assume the earlier traditions while making its own mark on the texts it repeats in this way. Far from reducing the Qur'an to a pastiche of earlier writings, the intertextual or «interscriptural» work we will undertake removes none of its originality, but on the contrary, better draws it out.

The study of the text's composition would be but of limited interest were it not to lead to what is its aim — the *interpretation* of the text. The intertextual study is, in truth, already a part of this. However, in a further section («Elements of interpretation»), an interpretation which seems to us to come from the composition will be found. We have given the title «*elements* of interpretation» to this section as we feel that it is for Muslims to interpret more deeply the text of the Qur'an. We therefore make no other claim than to suggest «interpretative angles» (which some may already judge to be rather overcrowded, as the subject matter has sometimes taken us beyond the limits we set ourselves initially!). We have had fewer scruples in our work on the intertextual aspects, which require a familiarity with the biblical literature which Muslim readers rarely possess.

The analysis of the text's composition may seem rather dry and laborious to some. Through our analysis in this work, however, and in the synthesis of the final chapter, we will see that the stakes, both theological and juridical, are high. This is far from being of merely literary or aesthetic interest.

Probably because of the fragmentation of the Qur'anic text, traditional exegesis has most often proceeded verse by verse, without considering their content or the larger textual groupings of which they are part, the result has been an

<sup>18</sup> This list makes no claim to be exhaustive. Other writings, such as Patristic writings or Manichean literature, also need to be explored.

<sup>19</sup> Let us add that the New Testament's rereading of the Old Testament suppresses nothing of the Old Testament, while in practice, the Qur'an substitutes itself for the early writings which it re-uses. The Jewish and Christian sacred writings are not part of Muslim Scripture, while the Jewish Scriptures are an integral part of Christian Scripture.

«atomistic» vision of the text, with all verses having equal weight. The great Egyptian reformer Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) already considered that the verses of the Qur’an should not all be read at the same level. He distinguished those verses which proclaimed essential dogmas of the Islamic faith from other, more circumstantial verses whose teaching or prescriptions were linked to particular historical situations and, therefore, susceptible to development<sup>20</sup>. We hope to show that this distinction is reflected in the composition of the text itself, with verses which are «universal principles» often, if not always, having privileged, central rhetorical places, in contrast with other, more particular verses, which surround them; this may have serious consequences for the interpretation of the Islamic faith and law. An objective criterion which is purely formal could support the widely-held opinion among the Muslim «new thinkers» that a distinction needs to be made in the Qur’an between *what is universal and unchangeable*, and *what is an exhortation or prescription governed by the historical circumstances* of Muhammad’s preaching.

This distinction might operate in particular in sura 5, which gives a certain number of rules for the life of Muslims and also deals at length with Islam’s relations with Jews and Christians — all very contemporary questions. The jurists (fuqahā’) have depended heavily on the juridical verses in this sura, and many classical commentaries devote many pages to it. While not neglecting them, we will treat them in a more sober manner, not having to consider the developments which Islamic law later gave them. Above all, beyond the hierarchy of rules and laws, we will retain the flexibility which the Qur’an shows in many cases in its rulings, a greater flexibility than is often thought. On the other hand, the relations of the Muslim community with the Jews and, even more, with the Christians, will keep our attention — complex relations arising from *convivium* (sharing food and marriage with Jewish and Christian women are permitted; Christians are «the closest by friendship» to the Muslims); *rivalry and superseding* (Islam substitutes the Jewish and Christian covenants); *seduction* (Jews and Christians are called to conversion); *hostility and condemnation* (particularly towards the Jews); *juridical and dogmatic polemic* (particularly towards the Christians); all finally, and unexpectedly, ending with a universalist vision in which the different religions have their place in God’s mysterious design for humanity. The sura is not simply a series of anti-Jewish or anti-Christian polemics,

20 FILALI-ANSARY A., *Réformer l’islam? Une introduction aux débats contemporains*, 30.

as a superficial reading might lead us to think — it also paves the way for what could well become a true «*Qur'anic theology of religions*», as the structure of the text so clearly holds this meaning. The detour via the study of the composition of the sura in all its subtleties, which might appear rather onerous, will show itself not only useful, but necessary, to reach the message in all its plenitude.

As for the book's title, the reader must wait until the end of the work to understand it, just as the reader of the sura has to wait until the final verses to grasp its traditional title of «The Table». We preferred «The Banquet» to this title, because it obviously includes a table, while also giving the connotation of a *festive meal*, whose link with the new covenant, the sura's central theme, will be seen. The difference between the sura's title and that of the present work also seeks to signify the gap between the Qur'anic text and its interpretation.

MICHEL CUYPERS

*Cairo, December 2005*



*Brief outline of «The Table» sura*





Before embarking on the complexity of the textual analysis, it would probably be good to give the reader an idea of *the sura as a whole*. As it does not appear in a linear manner, it would be better to start by mentioning the different themes which will intertwine like an arabesque — the theme of paraenesis (exhortations and threats); that of legislation (rules and prescriptions); the narrative thread, which is sometimes very developed and sometimes barely outlined; and the polemical theme (mainly towards Jews and Christians).

The sura begins by exhorting (Muslim) believers to respect the commitments of the covenant which ties them to God. Immediately rules on lawfulness and unlawfulness follow (particularly on the consumption of different kinds of meat), first within the context of the pilgrimage, and then in the context of ordinary life. But already this list of prescriptions is interrupted by a solemn declaration on Islam's completion as religion, given as a good thing by God to believers. The list of rules is then taken up again and pursued in other fields — the sharing of food with Jews and Christians (the «People of the Book»), and marriage with Jewish and Christian women, are authorized. Rules are given for ablutions before liturgical prayer. At the conclusion of this first sequence, believers are once again asked to remain faithful to the covenant.

The second sequence quickly takes on a polemical tone towards Jews and Christians, who have not been faithful to the covenant — they have disobeyed the Prophets and altered their Scriptures. Christians have deviated in their faith by proclaiming Jesus' divinity and (just like the Jews) understanding themselves to be «children of God». Lastly, they have not obeyed the last of the prophets, Muhammad, sent by God. In all this, they have imitated the rebellious children of Israel who refused to obey Moses when he invited them to enter the Holy Land. The first two sequences are therefore dominated by the idea of «entering into the (Islamic) covenant» — the Muslims who have entered into it are encouraged to remain faithful to it, in obedience to the rules of the new religion, while the Jews and Christians are reproached for not having entered into it.

There now follows a lengthy development of two new sequences, more juridical in nature. It begins with the symbolic account of the first murder, by Cain (who is not named, but recognized by everyone), who killed his brother. This account introduces allusions to the hostility of some Jews towards the Prophet and the proclamation of punishments for criminals, with a solemn reminder of the duty to respect life.

Authority is then given to the Prophet to arbitrate in conflicts between Jews and Christians, an arbitration which they refuse, based on their Scriptures and their own legal bodies, which are enough for them. In reply, they are told that they have altered their Scriptures — it is conceded that judgment is based on the law of retaliation in their Scriptures, which they do not observe.

The situations of conflict with the People of the Book lead to the question of relations between them and the new Muslim community — the Muslims are not to contract a (political) alliance with them. Their only ally is God; with his Prophet and with other believers, they form «God's party». The unbelief and hostility from the People of the Book, particularly the Jews, is then attacked in violent polemic. In the midst of this dark picture, however, a light shines out — salvation exists for the Jews and Christians, if they believe in God and his Judgment and do well. Thus ends the first section of the sura.

52 The second, shorter, section, is made up of three sequences. The outer two sequences are addressed to Christians in a lengthy effort to convince them of their errors through a series of polemical arguments. However, some among them convert to Islam — and this is an invitation to others to follow their example.

The central sequence returns to the juridical theme which also had a similar place in the first section. New prescriptions for the life of the Muslim community are given about oaths, illicit drink, and other rules, already given at the start of the sura. We will see that this redundancy has a very intentional rhetorical function. Curiously, the food prohibitions are interrupted by a verse (93) which appears to suppress them all, which will pose a question. Various situations which were inherited from paganism are then reviewed, some of which were adopted by Islam (such as the temple of the Ka'ba, and the sacred month of pilgrimage), while others are rejected (like some refinements in prohibited meat). Finally, a development on the legal measures for a valid will follows.

The final sequence returns to the arguments with Christians to convince them to convert. Eschatology is here mixed up with history — on the day of Judgment God will address Jesus, reminding him of all the good things he was given and the fact that he was allowed to work miracles. He will recall the apostles' faith, which is also illustrated by the sura's third narrative — at the request of the apostles, Jesus prays to God to send down mysterious food from heaven. The narrative, which is extremely elliptical, is nonetheless transparent — it is a reminder of the feast of the Last Supper, instituted by Jesus, to be «a feast for all generations» (114). The sura then returns to God's dialogue with Jesus on the

day of Judgment — Jesus summarizes his prophetic teaching, expressly denying that he (or his mother) are divine, and inviting worship of the one unique God — «Worship God, my Lord and your Lord». The sura can therefore end with a triumphant vision of the happiness of the elect in paradise, where «God will be pleased with them, and they will be pleased with him» (119).



*Chapter 14*

*A look back at the process, as a sort of conclusion*





Having come to the end of our analytical work, it would be useful to return in a more synthetic way on the process we have followed and the developments it went through. Having begun with a precise, if not a simple, aim, our work has become more complex en route, through the very demands of the aim we are seeking. At the start, our intention was simply to examine if and how a long sura, such as the *al-Mā'ida* sura, was composed, and what interpretation might flow from the text's composition once we had established it. However, it quickly became necessary to add intertextual analysis, a different, but complementary approach from the initial one, which was able to greatly enrich our interpretation. We need to return to the close link we noted between these two approaches. And finally, it was only very gradually that the question raised by a number of «strange» verses, which sometimes raised problems for traditional exegesis and sometimes for modern Orientalism, emerged. At the end of the analysis, we discovered a surprising relationship between these verses, all marked by the universality of their message and their central position in the text's composition. These verses appear to concur with the most modern and open reflection of many Muslim intellectuals on the Qur'an and Islam in general.

### The first aim — rhetorical analysis

It is probably superfluous to once again emphasize the pertinence of rhetorical analysis as a method to determine the structure of the text of the sura which we have just examined at length. Just as movement is shown by walking, so it is to be hoped that the long and detailed analyses, which will doubtless have tried the reader's patience, will at least have convinced him or her that the long Medinan sura studied here is not a chaotic labyrinth whose thread it is impossible to follow, but, despite appearances to the contrary, which suggest a linear reading, it is duly structured, perfectly coherent, and obeys all the rules of Semitic rhetoric.

As such, it is akin to the smaller or medium-length Meccan suras — while different in their style, their structure obeys the same principles of composition as the long Medinan suras<sup>1</sup>. This is an art of speaking and writing which permeates all the literary genres (oracles, exhortations, narratives, laws, polemic, and prayers), styles (rhyming and rhythmic prose, more «prosaic» verses) and periods of Qur'anic revelation. Semitic rhetoric seems to be a *grammar of the text or the discourse*, in a similar way to the fact that the morphology and syntax in all

1 For the rhetorical analysis of short suras, see our articles in the bibliography.

texts using the same language are the same, Semitic rhetoric seems to order the composition of the discourse in the whole Semitic sphere of the ancient Middle East. It is not linked to a particular language, for we find it in Arabic as much as in biblical Hebrew<sup>2</sup>, Akkadian or Ugaritic<sup>3</sup>, and even in New Testament Greek<sup>4</sup>. It is common to a large cultural area whose historical and geographical boundaries are still poorly understood, but which seems to have stretched over several millennia of Middle Eastern antiquity and only come to an end with the generalized influence of Hellenistic culture shortly after Islam's initial expansion.

While reading a text like the Qur'an is often puzzling for a modern reader, this is mostly because the modern reader has become a complete stranger to the rhetoric which the Qur'anic text is based on, and the way of thinking which underpins it.

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### From rhetoric to style

If we considered the Qur'an's particular way of applying the rules of Semitic rhetoric to be an essential part of its style, we would note two recurring characteristics.

In the *Glossary of technical terms* at the start of the book, we saw that in theory, the lower rhetorical levels (pieces, parts) can contain no more than three units of the level immediately below them, while the higher levels (passages, sequences, sections) may. Now, all our analysis have shown a system which is universally ternary or, to a lesser degree, binary. In the *al-Mā'ida* sura, passages never have more than three parts; sequences are all made up of two, or more often three passages. At the section level, the second section has three sequences, although it is true that the first has five. But as we saw, these five are divided into three sub-sections, A<sub>1</sub>+A<sub>2</sub>; A<sub>3</sub>+A<sub>4</sub>; A<sub>5</sub>, so that effectively there are no more than three sub-sections per section (the three sequences in section B being considered to be three sub-sections making only one sequence).

The second characteristic, linked to the first, is the overwhelming majority of concentric constructions at every level of the text. This, unquestionably, is the sura's preferred compositional figure (probably of the Qur'an, too, although this remains to be confirmed). This clearly explains the impression of disorder given by a linear reading — the center of a concentric construction is always semantically different from the units which frame it. From this comes historical

2 See e.g., BOVATI P. and MEYNET R., *Le Livre du prophète Amos*.

3 See the examples given above in MEYNET R., *Rhetorical Analysis*, 357-358.

4 See MEYNET R., *L'Évangile de Luc*, Paris, 2005, particularly the «Epilogue», 995-998.



criticism's tendency to move these centers to the end of the two units which frame them, to maintain their logical continuity. These centers are also most often stylistically different in the nature of their maxims, which are placed in the middle of a development. These centers are often considered to be adventitious, like disruptive parentheses, but on the contrary, they are of capital importance to the understanding of the text. We will return to them below when looking at interpretation.

We can further note that the Qur'an has a way, which is often very obvious (for those who know to look!) of handling Semitic rhetoric. The sudden changes of subject, sometimes interrupted (by central verses) and then continued, the frequent changes of persons (traditionally known by the term *iltifāt*: a leap from the divine «We» to the third person, for example), are all indicators of the text's division. They make the framework visible, under the skin of the text. Roland Meynet notes that «when some passages in Luke are compared with their parallels in Matthew, it seems that Luke has done his utmost to mask a too obvious symmetry by all sorts of variations and abbreviations»<sup>5</sup>. The Qur'an is *relatively* closer to Matthew's style than to Luke's, in the visibility of its rhetorical process, although it also has its own way of clouding the issue by its apparent disorder.

But there is a further stylistic point, a characteristic of Semitic languages, to be examined—the absence of nuance. Statements are often categorical, with no appeal, while they contradict others or are followed by a rider which relativizes them. Biblical scholars are very familiar with this trait, and often emphasize it in their commentaries. As an example, let us look at Jesus' words in Luke: «If any man comes to me without *hating* his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes and his own life too, he cannot be my disciple» (Luke 14:26). Exegetes explain the word «hate» as a Hebraism used by Luke<sup>6</sup> to mean «a greater love», suggesting a radical detachment which goes as far as one's closest relations, not, obviously, hatred towards them!<sup>7</sup>. Elsewhere, Jesus reminds the rich young man who wished to follow him to «Honor your father and mother» (Luke 18:20). It is not about abrogating one of these verses for the benefit of the other, but rather of «knowing what words mean» in Semitic languages. It is worth asking whether traditional commentaries have always taken this into account.

<sup>5</sup> MEYNET R., *L'Évangile de Luc*, 996.

<sup>6</sup> See note c in *Jerusalem Bible* at Luke 14:26.

<sup>7</sup> The parallel in Matthew says «Anyone who *prefers* father or mother to me is not worthy of me» (Matt 10:37).

### On interpretation

Anyone who consults the major commentaries of Islamic exegetical tradition is surprised by the wealth of different interpretation (sometimes as many as a dozen) given for the same verse. This obviously shows real flexibility — several readings are possible for the same verse. But more often, these variations in interpretation are based on the different «occasions of revelation» which are called on, or simply on the differences in opinion of earlier commentators, which are now gathered together and juxtaposed in these commentaries.

For interpretation we have tried to remain close to what might be suggested by the rhetorical composition of the text (while allowing the inevitable subjectivity of any interpretation). This has also led us to a certain flexibility in interpretation, but in a very different way from that described above. By moving from one textual level to another, the same verse can take on different lights, be enriched with new meanings, dictated by the symmetrical correspondences which vary at each level. Rhetorical analysis gives rise to a polysemic reading of the text, rich in many meanings which do not exclude one another but, on the contrary, need to be held together to give the text all its richness.

Probably not every reader of the Qur'an can carry out the detailed analysis, which has been carried out here, based on an academic exegesis. But the exegete can make the reader aware of the text's polysemy and move him/her towards a reading which is attentive to the resonances of words through repetition, synonymy and antithesis.

### From composition to intertextuality

The examination of the text's composition has led us, through internal necessity, to combine with it an intertextual analysis — the *contextual* reading of the text which rhetorical analysis practices requires that it goes as far as in *intertextual* reading, that is, a reading which reads the text alongside other texts from biblical tradition, with which the Qur'an has some kind of relationship.

To return to the way in which we proceeded with our intertextual reading, we must emphasize its close link with rhetorical analysis. Intertextuality can, in fact, be understood in various ways, even totally independent from the text's composition (proof that it is an approach which is distinct from rhetorical analysis). Orientalists and specialists in comparative literature have compared similar terms and ideas in the Qur'an and the Bible (faith, fear of God, love, etc.) from the semantic point of view for a long time now to demonstrate the similarities

and differences. This work is indispensable and continues to mature. The adoption by the Qur'an of a number of laws found in the Jewish Bible (the Christians' Old or First Testament) has also been noted for a long time, while Qur'anic eschatology seems to be derived from the New Testament and Christian tradition. However, we have not focused on these well-known aspects. The relationship between the Qur'an and earlier texts has been noted either where the Qur'an explicitly quotes that text (as in v. 5:32, quotation from the *Mishnah*, or the law of retaliation in v. 45), or because it sums up or translates in its own way a clearly indicated text (like the account of the failed entry into the Holy Land in the book of Numbers, the murder committed by Cain in Genesis, and the miracles of the child Jesus in the apocryphal writings), or, finally, because it refers to biblical texts in a way which is less immediately obvious. We paused particularly at these latter references. They stood out for us because of groups of words which were similar in the Arabic text of the Qur'an and the Hebrew or Greek text of the Bible, and, what is more, in *analogous contexts*. Although the account of the failed entry into the Holy Land was easily linked to the source-account in Numbers, we also linked it to Psalm 95 thanks to a group of terms found in this psalm which also appear in the same sub-section of the Qur'an this account belongs to — «today», «enter», «hardened hearts», «forty years», etc. Some of these terms are not only found, or not found at all, in the pericope of the entry into the Holy Land (5:20-26), but in a passage which is symmetrical to this pericope, in v. 3. Suddenly, light is shed on the whole meaning of the pericope of the entry into the Holy Land: it is a parable-account about the refusal to enter «Islam», the religion given as God's blessing to believers (5:3); the refusal which already stigmatized the psalm is applied to the revolt of the Israelites. Finally, the final stage — the repetition of elements from the psalm in the first sub-section of the sura recall the repeated use of this psalm in the Epistle to the Hebrews, which describes a similar process, the faithful following Christ as they enter God's rest. In other words, the Qur'an expresses the salvation offered by God in terms and structures which are drawn from several biblical texts that are themselves connected to one another.

Intertextual work is carried out in a constant coming and going with the study of the text's composition; so we might say that the analysis of the text's composition or structure remains primary, that it is independent of intertextual analysis, while the reverse is not always true. This is why we have always put the analysis of the text's composition before the intertextual analysis. The similarity

between terms in the Qur'an and texts from the biblical tradition are clues to the much deeper analogies at the level of the (narrative or theological) structure. By understanding these clues within the structure of the target-text (the Qur'an), the similar structure of the Bible (source-text), with the same clues, appears.

### From intertextuality to a figurative reading of the Qur'an

Our intertextual analyses have often ended with our seeing various characters or realities in the Qur'an as prefigured by other characters or realities in the Bible. This process is well-known to biblical exegesis as the figurative or «typological» (from the Greek *typos*, character), reading<sup>8</sup>. We saw how this typology played out between Moses leading his people to the Holy Land and Muhammad in charge of the pilgrimage of the Muslim people to the Sacred House. This role-playing is quite clear on reading the Qur'anic text. But when we pushed the comparison further, we encountered Jesus in the Epistle to the Hebrews, leading the new people of God to rest of salvation. All at once, Muhammad, in the Qur'an seems to be the completion of the two figures, Moses and Jesus, founders of the two rival religions of nascent Islam. And in other texts, the character of Jesus is visible behind Muhammad's: just as the persecuted Jesus was prefigured in Abel, so Muhammad is prefigured both by Abel and by Jesus, two persecuted innocents. Behind Muhammad, the bringer of *the light* to those who are in *darkness*, we recognized the face of the Messiah described in the *Canticle of Zechariah*. Finally, Jesus giving his apostles food which has *come down* from heaven prefigures Muhammad handing on the Word *sent down* from heaven. Elsewhere in the sura other sacred realities lend themselves to a figurative reading — as the Holy Land prefigures the Sacred House, as we said above, so the Christian Passover (itself prefigured by the Jewish Passover), is a prefigure of the annual Muslim pilgrimage, in which the gift of heavenly food prefigures the Qur'anic Word; Moses' people apparently prefigure those Jews who refuse to convert to Islam; Cain is easily seen behind those who plotted against Muhammad.

Of course, these prefigurings are not identities, but analogies, implying both similarity and dissimilarity. Neither are they arbitrary — convergences between vocabulary and structure mean that the characters strike chords with

<sup>8</sup> On this concept in the Bible, see, MEYNET R., *Mort et ressuscité selon les Écritures*, esp. 15-32.



one another<sup>9</sup>, at least for those who know how to *read* the text while listening to all the harmonies.

Islamic exegetical tradition has (vainly, we believe) over-evaluated its search for an explicit announcement of the coming of Muhammad in the Bible, particularly in the announcement of the Paraclete in John, to the detriment of a figurative reading, semantically far more fruitful.

### The Qur'an, a re-writing and recapitulation of earlier Scriptures?

The literary study of the *al-Mā'ida* sura has demonstrated the plentiful re-use that the Qur'an makes of earlier texts taken from the biblical tradition (the Bible and rabbinical and apocryphal writings). Having said this, we need to avoid the polemical hunt for the Qur'an's «borrowings» from texts which have been more or less (and rather clumsily) «plagiarized», just as much as the fear of traditional exegesis of seeing the Word sent down from Heaven reduced to a patchwork of earlier texts put together in some way or other. In reality, things are rather different. The Qur'an does what the various books of the Bible have always done — repeats and re-writes, in its own way, and with its own intentions, earlier texts. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible can be read as a series of repetitions and re-readings of earlier writings. Deuteronomy is the most striking (but not the only) example. This is why the biblical scholar Paul Beauchamp has called this phenomenon «deuterosis», from the Greek *deutērosis*, «repetition», linked to Deuteronomy, the «second law», which repeats and sums up all the earlier laws in the commandment of love: «I enjoin on you today... to love Yhwh your God» (Deut 30:16)<sup>10</sup>. This is not simply pure repetition — it «speaks of resemblance and alterity at the same time, novelty, the completion of the first Scripture»<sup>11</sup>. This principle is at work in the whole of the Bible. So Beauchamp sees the recapitulation of the Law in Deuteronomy, the recapitulation or «deuterosis» of prophecy in Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 40-55), and the recapitulation or «deuterosophia» of the Wisdom writings in the first nine chapters of Proverbs. For Christians, «the second Testament withdraws to the First to definitively complete and close it»<sup>12</sup>.

9 «The Bible *reasons* very little as philosophy, but rather allows its narratives and characters and their “figures” to resonate, in tune with each other». MEYNET R., *Mort et ressuscité selon les Écritures*, 15. The same can be said about the Qur'an.

10 BEAUCHAMP P., *L'un et l'autre Testament*, 150 ff.

11 BOVATI P., «Deuterose e compimento», 26.

12 MEYNET R., *Traité de rhétorique biblique*, Introduction, 22.

Intertextual study of the *al-Mā'ida* sura shows the Qur'an in the same way, as the completion and definitive closing of all earlier Scriptures, «the First books» (*al-suhuf al-ūlā*, Qur'an 20:133; 87:18). This repetition and completion imply both «resemblance and alterity, novelty». This is where the strangeness for the Jewish or Christian reader of the Qur'an, emphasized by Emilio Platti, comes from<sup>13</sup>: the repetitions from the Bible by the Qur'an are never purely repetition; they direct us to a completion in a new, original synthesis, which, while it claims its biblical heritage is nonetheless felt by the Jewish or Christian reader to be foreign to the biblical synthesis familiar to him or her. The discontinuity between Bible and Qur'an is not at the same level as that between the Old and New Testaments. The New Testament, while claiming to complete the Old, suppresses nothing — and this is the very condition of *deuterosis* in the Bible. The Qur'an, while repeating texts from both parts of the Bible with the intention of completing them, claims to replace or substitute them (which prevents it from being considered as a true *deuterosis*). So all Jesus' oral teaching in the Gospels is recapitulated in the Qur'an in Jesus' monotheistic credo, which ends the sura and the whole of Qur'anic revelation — «I only said to them what you ordered me: "Worship God, my Lord and your Lord"» (5:17). This is how the Qur'an positions itself as completing the Gospel and all earlier Scriptures, to the extent that their reading is rendered useless in the eyes of tradition.

And so a paradoxical situation for intertextual exegesis of the Qur'an comes about. On the one hand, it gives an unquestionably wider theological meaning, while remaining strictly true to the Qur'anic faith, to texts which otherwise would only have a more limited anecdotal significance, as the traditional commentary on the pericope of the banquet-table shows: commentators see this simply as a marvelous miracle by Jesus, embroidered by imagination, while intertextuality opens up this text to a reflection on the relationship between Christianity and the new Islamic religion, the Christian Easter's replacement by the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, and, finally, the Christian covenant's absorption into the original Islamic covenant. But on the other hand, a group of dogmatic positions have held back, and continue to hold back, this kind of exegesis. The (relatively late) dogma of the uncreated Qur'an, which seems to make any comparison with other texts, even inspired texts, useless; the idea that the Qur'an replaces other Scriptures whose whole substance it repeats, and, finally, the

13 PLATTIE., *Islam... étrange? Au-delà des apparences, au cœur de l'acte d'islam*, acte de foi.

overdevelopment in tradition, of the (Qur'anically based) idea of the Jews and Christians changing their Scriptures. This is also why ancient commentators who quote biblical texts are extremely rare. As we saw, Biqā'ī is the exception which proves the rule. Even his quotations only rarely come to real intertextual exegesis. In the *al-Mā'ida* sura, only the verse of the «twelve leaders» (v. 12) led to such an exegesis. Elsewhere he is content to quote, sometimes at length, from biblical texts, about such or such a verse, but without developing any reflection based on these quotations. However, we should note that his quotations (with one or two exceptions, which we indicated in passing, where he modified the biblical text to make it conform to Qur'anic teaching) are very precise: so he held the Bible, as it was available to him in the Arabic texts of his day, to be a text which was broadly reliable and not falsified<sup>14</sup>.

### What are the date and historical context of the *al-Mā'ida* sura?

Traditions concerning the dating of sura 5 are rather confused. Sheikh Muḥammad Sayyid Ṭaṇṭāwī's recent commentary lists the various opinions based on the hadiths: according to some, the sura was revealed in its totality following the Ḥudaybiyya treaty (year 6 of the Hijra), while others say that it was revealed as a whole during the farewell pilgrimage (year 10). For yet others, as Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) indicates in his well-known encyclopedia of Qur'anic studies<sup>15</sup>, some verses were revealed at different points. Sheikh Ṭaṇṭāwī concludes from this that the sura was revealed in several phases: partly before Ḥudaybiyya, and partly afterwards<sup>16</sup>. However, there is almost unanimity that v. 3 («Today I have completed for you your religion...») was revealed during the farewell pilgrimage, and is the final verse of revelation<sup>17</sup>.

Historical Orientalist criticism has of course dissected the sura, attributing its verses to different points of the time at Medina, mainly dividing them between the Ḥudaybiyya treaty, the completion of the little pilgrimage (ʿumra) the following year, and the farewell pilgrimage. In accordance with tradition, the central part of verse 3 is usually situated at this date<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> To be thorough, let us say that we found brief quotations from John in Rāzī, and that modern commentaries (*Manār*, S.H. Boubakeur, M. Hamidullah, Yusuf Ali, etc.) are more willing to quote the Bible.

<sup>15</sup> SUYŪṬĪ, *Al-Itqān fi 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 1951, I, 18 (p. 53 in the 1967 edition).

<sup>16</sup> ṬAṆṬĀWĪ M.S., *Al-Tafsīr al-wasīl li-l-Qur'ān al-karīm*, IV, 8-10.

<sup>17</sup> Although many commentators also consider sura 110 «The Help» to be the last revealed sura.

<sup>18</sup> See NÖLDEKE T., *Geschichte des Qorāns*, I, 227 ff.; BELL R., *The Qur'ān*, I, 92 ff. BLACHÈRE R., III, 1111.

What do rhetorical and intertextual analysis have to tell us about the date of this sura's revelation? They can only state that *in literary terms* the sura was written in such a way as to be held to be the final text of revelation, which goes hand in hand with tradition, situating this revelation during the Prophet's farewell pilgrimage just before his death. Several literary arguments make this case.

First of all, our whole analysis has shown that this sura shows real unity of composition. Verse 3 undoubtedly appears to be the concluding verse — «Today I have completed for you your religion...». Along with all exegetical tradition, M.M. Taha writes that:

This is the last verse of the Qur'an to have been revealed. It concludes and closes the whole of the divine message for humanity. The Prophet received it, and then solemnly addressed it to his community at an exceptional time and place. It was the high point of the Mecca pilgrimage, the last one the Prophet would make, on the day when all the pilgrims gathered at Mt 'Arafāt, which, in that tenth year of the hijra, coincided with the venerated day of the week, Friday<sup>19</sup>.

So, if v. 3 is situated within the context of the farewell pilgrimage, the same must be the case for the rest of the sura, if not historically, then at least in literary terms.

Secondly, the intertextual reading we have carried out has linked the first section (and the central sequence of the second section), in literary terms to Deuteronomy, the testament-address *par excellence*, placed in Moses' mouth at the end of his prophetic mission, just before his death. The fact that there are historical reminiscences which can be matched to the Ḥudaybiyya events does not in any way mean that revelation needs to be situated at that point — following the example of Deuteronomy, the Qur'an recalls the stormy events which marked the community's route to the Sacred Mosque, the ultimate aim of Mo-hammad's prophetic career, at the end of his preaching, just as Moses recalled the hostilities with pagan kings who were on the Israelites' route to the Promised Land<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> TAHA M.M., *Un islam à vocation libératrice*, 139.

<sup>20</sup> This enables Maududi's perplexity to be resolved: he situates the sura in its entirety at the time following the Ḥudaybiyya treaty (end of year 6 or start of year 7 of the hijra), while acknowledging that v. 3 accords only with the historical context of the farewell pilgrimage. As, on the other hand he acknowledges the sura's solid unity and that this verse is perfectly in place in its context, he is led to conclude that this verse was revealed twice — once in an anticipated way during the Ḥudaybiyya treaty, and a second time in its historical context during the year 10 pilgrimage. MAWUDUDI A.A., *The Meaning of the Qur'an*, III, 3-4 et 19.



Intertextual reading related the second section (particularly the last sequence) to Jesus' final act before his death, the giving of heavenly food in the Last Supper, and with the prayer which ends his farewell address in John. In the sura of the Banquet-table, therefore, the Qur'an recapitulates both Moses' and Jesus' testament-addresses.

Finally, the third literary argument — the sura offers surprising links with the last eight suras in the Qur'an, which precede the final two liturgical prayers (suras 113 and 114 which, along with the first sura, the *Fātiḥa*, constitute the liturgical framework of the book). We have shown elsewhere how these eight short suras, 105-112, the shortest in the Qur'an, make up a whole which is rhetorically coherent, despite the fact that they are certainly disparate in origin<sup>21</sup>. They can be read as a rhetorical «sequence», made up of two parallel series or «sub-sequences» (105-108 // 109-112), in which the suras match each other in pairs, the «negative» suras which announce the failure of those who disbelieve alternating with the «positive» suras which celebrate Islam's victory: the victory of the Quraysh tribe, the Prophet, the believers and, finally, God himself. Let us rapidly run through the main symmetries between the two sub-sequences:

- Suras 105 and 109 are Islam's victory songs over those belonging to other religions: «the people of the Elephant» (the army of the Christian king, Abraha) and the «misbelievers».
- Suras 106 and 110 celebrate God's «protection» over the Quraysh (the guardians of the Ka'ba) and God's «help», which has ensured Islam's «victory».
- Suras 107 and 111 are imprecations against the impious — «the one who treats Judgment as a lie» and «Abū Lahab», the symbol of the Prophet's implacable enemy.
- Suras 108 and 112 address the Prophet personally, enjoining him to pray («Pray», 108:2; «Say», 112:1) and, in sura 112, even giving him the words of his prayer, which is a profession of faith summing up all of Islam.

21 In CUYPERS M., «Une analyse rhétorique du début et de la fin du Coran», 257-266; and «Une lecture rhétorique et intertextuelle de la sourate *al-Ikhlās*», 155-158.

## S. 105

<sup>1</sup> Have you not seen how your Lord did with **the Men of the Elephant**? <sup>2</sup> Did He not make their guile to go astray? <sup>3</sup> And he sent upon them birds in flights, <sup>4</sup> which pelted them with stones of baked clay? <sup>5</sup> and made them like green blades devoured.

## S. 106

<sup>1</sup> For the **protection** of **Quraysh**, <sup>2</sup> their protection for the winter and the summer caravan! <sup>3</sup> Let them serve the Lord of this **House** <sup>4</sup> who has fed them against hunger and secured them against fear.

## S. 107

<sup>1</sup> Have you seen **HIM WHO CRIES LIES TO THE JUDGMENT**? <sup>2</sup> That is he who repulses the orphan <sup>3</sup> and does not urge the feeding of the poor. <sup>4</sup> So woe to those who pray, <sup>5</sup> who of their prayer are careless, <sup>6</sup> who make a show <sup>7</sup> but refuse succor!

## S. 108

<sup>1</sup> Verily, We have given you abundance. <sup>2</sup> So **PRAY** to your Lord, and sacrifice. <sup>3</sup> Verily, it is he who hates you who is the one cut off.

(or, according to Charles Luxenberg:)

<sup>1</sup> We have given you [virtue] of perseverance; <sup>2</sup> **PRAY** therefore to your Lord and persist [in prayer]. <sup>3</sup> [Thus] is your adversary [Satan] vanquished.

## S. 109

<sup>1</sup> Say: O **unbelievers**, <sup>2</sup> I serve not what you serve, <sup>3</sup> and you are not serving what I serve; <sup>4</sup> I am not serving what you have served, <sup>5</sup> nor are you serving what I serve. <sup>6</sup> To you your religion, and to me my religion.

## S. 110

<sup>1</sup> When comes the **help** of God and the **victory**, <sup>2</sup> and you see **the people entering into the religion** of God **in crowds**, <sup>3</sup> then give glory with praise of your Lord and ask pardon of Him. <sup>4</sup> Verily He has been prone to relent.

## S. 111

<sup>1</sup> The hands of **ABŪ LAHAB** have perished, and perished has he; <sup>2</sup> His wealth and what he has piled up have not profited him. <sup>3</sup> He shall roast in a flaming fire, <sup>4</sup> and his wife, the carrier of the firewood, upon her neck a rope of fiber.

## S. 112

<sup>1</sup> **SAY**: «He [is] God, One, <sup>2</sup> God the Rock. <sup>3</sup> He brought not forth, nor has He been brought forth, <sup>4</sup> and there has never been co-equal with Him any one.»

The main characteristics which link this to sura 5 are as follows:

- Both texts begin with the proclamation of the victory of the Muslims over those who wished to attack (105) the «House» (5:2; 106:3) or prevent them from going to it (5:3).
- Rivalry from Christians is symbolized by the «people of the Elephant» at the start of sequence 105-112, but clearly expressed in the final sequence of sura 5. It



- is also found, in veiled terms, in 5:3: «Today those who disbelieve despair of your religion».
- «When comes the help of God and *the victory* and you see the people *entering* into the religion of God in crowds» (110:1-2) clearly recalls the pericope of the failed entry to the Holy Land (5:20-26), with its repetition of the verb «to enter», and its central verse: «*Enter* upon them by the gate. And when you have *entered* it you will be *victors*» (5:23), which we said symbolized the entry into the true religion by the gate of obedience to the commandments of the covenant. «*The religion of God*» (110:2) echoes «Today I have completed your *religion* for you and I have perfected *my* good gift for you, and I have chosen Islam for you as your *religion*» (31-n).
  - Both of these wholes end with a profession of monotheistic faith, in which Jesus is implied. In 5:117 he himself declares «Worship God, my Lord and your Lord», in a context which vigorously denies his divine sonship. In 112, the proclamation of divine uniqueness is increased by the negation of any filiation in God, possibly aimed at polytheist theogonies, but particularly at the Christian faith in Jesus' divine sonship.

Comparing sura 5 and suras 105-112 leaves no doubt that the two groups obey the same plan — the victory of Islam and its shrine over other religions and, particularly Christianity; the believers' entry to Islam, the «religion of God»; the final profession of monotheistic faith, with the corollary of the denial of Jesus' divine sonship. Here are clearly two testament-addresses, one of which (suras 105-112) closes the book and the other of which closes revelation (sura 5). Tradition gives suras 5 and 110 a concurrent chronology, as the final sura to be revealed. The resemblance between sura 110 and the center, 5:23c-e, is such that it is legitimate to ask whether, originally, sura 110 was not part of sura 5.

## Sura 5.23c-e

<sup>23c</sup> «Enter upon them by the gate. <sup>d</sup> When you have entered by it, <sup>e</sup> surely you will be VICTORS.

## Sura 110

<sup>1</sup> When comes the help of God and THE VICTORY, <sup>2</sup> and you see the people entering into the religion of God in crowds, <sup>3</sup> then give glory with the praise of your Lord, and ask pardon of Him [...]

Let us note in passing that the very conclusive nature of sura 5 would make it incomprehensible in literary terms that another sura should come after it chronologically, like sura 9, where (only) one part of tradition places later than it in the chronology of revelation because of its supposedly abrogating verses (which we do not see as abrogating). Here we cannot go into the question in depth, but it might perhaps be useful to point out the uncertain nature, in literary terms, of this traditional chronology.

486 But this only deals with the *literary* aspect of these texts, and still does not determine their real historical dating. We can agree with historical criticism as much as with tradition that suras 105-112 do not constitute an original unit — these are originally independent fragments, which were brought together during the book's final redaction to make up a closing discourse for the book. Is the same true for sura 5?

The sura, starting by addressing «you who believe», the Muslims who are victoriously celebrating their pilgrimage, moves swiftly on to the People of the Book. They have a main role in the sura, that might seem surprising in the context of the farewell pilgrimage — according to the history of events given by Muslim tradition, neither Jews nor Christians were supposed to be present, as the pilgrimage consecrated the victory of the Muslim community over the pagans in Mecca, not the People of the Book. At the limit, in a recapitulatory text, we can understand the sometimes virulent attacks on the Jews as a reminder of the disagreements which arose from 624 between the Jews and Muslims in Medina. Muslim tradition often presents these disagreements as demonstrations of unilateral and unjustified hostility by the Jews. But one cannot not ask why the sura grants such a large space to polemic with Christians, whose presence was, it seems, more than discreet, even according to Muslim tradition itself, both in Median and Mecca. The sura gives the impression of a confrontation with a large, organized Christian community, competing with the Muslims. In addition, the constant call to Christians to convert, which extends over two of the three sequences in the second section, uses an impressive panoply of arguments to try to convince them of their errors, arguments which would have taken time to develop

during the controversies. This does not really fit with the farewell pilgrimage, or even simply with Muhammad's prophetic career as the Muslim account in the *Sīra* gives it. The place given to Christians, not just Jews, in sura 5, leads us to envisage a later period, once Islam was established in Christendom<sup>22</sup>. We are aware that this view does not really agree with the Muslim tradition in which the redaction of the Qur'anic text (although not its compilation) ended at the same time as its revelation to the Prophet, unless the problem is reversed, and it is admitted that the Qur'anic text clearly presupposes an important Christian presence in Mecca, even Medina, which also contradicts Muslim historical tradition. Is there a third way to avoid this apparent dilemma? The question cannot be avoided by the historians and remains open.

### On reading the Qur'an

Important as it is from the historical point of view to understand the origins of the Qur'an and Islam, this question of the dating of the sura should not be made more important than it is. It is not *the* question. It seems to us that the more urgent question is the one we asked at the beginning of the book about the *reading* of the text. How is the Qur'an to be read?

The reading we propose here did not start from general considerations or preconceived ideologies which would make the Qur'an be read in their light, but from a hypothesis, that the Qur'anic text, despite appearances, must have a unity and coherence. Given this working hypothesis, it turned out that rhetorical analysis was the best instrument to decode this coherence, and suddenly to leave a fragmented, atomized reading of the text in which each verse is taken on its own, out of context. It goes further than a reading following the run of series of verses, in the manner of some ancient commentaries, like that of Biqā'ī, and several modern commentaries like that of *Manār* or Mawdudi. It places each verse, even each member of a verse, in a structure which gives it meaning. From one level to the next, the text appeared to us as a very sophisticated construction of structures, which all have to be taken account of for its interpretation. Onto this contextual reading, we grafted an intertextual reading, which greatly enriched the meaning. These various steps took us to a great level of technicality, which some times may have been rather tedious for the reader. But it was only by following that through, that a really objective basis for the reading of the

22 J.L. Déclais asks a similar question at the end of a work on the «Cow» sura: DÉCLAIS J.L., «Lecture de la deuxième Sourate du Coran», 90.

Qur'anic text following its various registers could appear — verses with a universal application emerge from among those many others which deal with particular contingent situations. Their highlighting due to their central rhetorical position means they are not to be reduced to the same level as the verses around them. They share certain «family traits» among themselves, which enables us to read them as a series, and to see a wisdom displayed which goes beyond the boundaries of dogmas, rites and polemics which are written in the other verses and which tend to close religion in on itself, to the exclusion of other religions. Here, we believe, we can see what A. Filali-Ansary, talking about the reading of the Qur'an by M. 'Abduh, calls «universal principles, evident in the framework of all monotheism, and conforming to the moral aspirations of humanity for ever, which make religions and universal systems unanimous, and whose modern formulations or expressions are called justice, freedom, democracy, socialism, etc»<sup>23</sup>. And so the application which we wanted to be as rigorous as it could be of a process (rhetorical analysis) which comes from the humanities, and that can be linked to structural linguistics, shows that it is in no way an enemy of Qur'anic faith, but, rather, purifying it, raising it to the level of a universal ethics.

At a time of this great intermingling which is globalization, it seems ever more urgent that believers from the various religions — and particularly those from the two religions which claim to be universal, Christianity and Islam — should read in their Scriptures *both* what will nourish their own identity and what will take them beyond it to *encounter the other*, who is different, but acknowledged as a *brother in humanity*, coming from the same Creator who, had he so wished, «would have made a single community from them», but whose unfathomable will and wisdom decided to do other, so that «they may surpass one another in their good actions' (5:48)<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> FILALI-ANSARY A., *Réformer l'islam?*, 30.

<sup>24</sup> It seems to us that this spirit concurs with Sheikh Ṭaṭṭāwī, rector of the al-Azhar University, Cairo (the main theological center of Sunni Islam) who, when asked in an interview «How do you make dialogue between religions more effective», replied: «I personally am convinced of the importance of dialogue, and I am always ready to dialogue with any one who wishes. However, I find that dialogue about religious questions is ineffective and useless. Constructive dialogue is the dialogue which takes place between a Muslim and a non-Muslim with the aim of doing justice to both, to coming to the help of those who need it, or to spread the principles of fraternity and solidarity throughout the world. Of course at Al-Azhar there is an office in charge of dialogue between religions. But dialogue becomes absurd when we make accusations at one another. In my opinion, it is not right to tell anyone else that his beliefs are false». *Al-Ahram Hebdo*, Cairo, 19-25 Octobre 2005, 16.

The «universal» reading does not exclude an «identity» reading — both have their basis in human nature — but it must control and relativize it, although most often the opposite happens. From this results a religion closed in on itself, death-giving as soon as it encounters the other, to whom it offers no choice but conversion, disappearance or submission in a position of humiliating inferiority dependence. It is only when illuminated and given life through wisdom that the particularities of religious identity can be generators of what Henri Bergson calls the «supplément d'âme», that «extra spiritual dimension» which humanity always needs more of and which, in the end, is quite simply the aim of any religion worthy of the name<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> This work had already been written before we learned of A Cheddadi's important work, *Les Arabes et l'appropriation de l'histoire* (2004), which is mostly dedicated to an analysis of Ibn Ishāq's/Ibn Hishām's *Sira*. It is noteworthy that several conclusions we have reached during our analysis of the *al-Ma'ida* sura are close to A. Cheddadi's for the *Sira*, particularly to do with the importance of the Christian context in the emergence of these founding texts, their contacts with the Gospels (especially John) and their attitude which is broadly benevolent towards Christians, although not to Jews. These convergences are even more interesting for having come from two totally independent studies.