THE QUR'ĀN(S) IN CONTEXT(S)[1]

Tommaso Tesei

(Duke Kunshan University)

Abstract

In this essay I argue that the notorious difficulties in dealing with Qur'ān's origins are mostly corollaries of the Islamic dogma that the entire corpus must be traced back to a single author and/or to a specific cultural and social context. Against this view, I propose an alternative model in which the Qur'ān is a literary document that reflects not only Muḥammad's prophetic career in the Hijaz, but also the development of his community during the first decades of its territorial expansion.

Keywords

Qur'ān, Early Islam, Late Antiquity, Q 53, Q 73, Q 74, Q 91, Exegetical Glosses

According to Muslim tradition, the Qur'ān is a collection of statements made by God to Muḥammad in the Hijaz between the second and third decades of the 7th century CE. Islamic sources contain abundant details about Muḥammad's life, his prophetic career and the cultural milieu in which it unfolded. However, the circumstances in which the Qur'ān was "revealed" are anything but clear to scholars. Since the second half of the 1970s, a number of studies have challenged the dominant paradigm about the origins of Islam and the codification of the Qur'ān. These publications have resulted in increasing skepticism regarding the reliability of accounts of Muḥammad's life and the codification of the Qur'ān.[2] The information transmitted by the Islamic tradition is recorded in sources written at least one century after the events they describe, and in cultural and political contexts very different from those in which Muḥammad lived and preached. Such sources often tell us more about how Muḥammad's preaching was understood by later generations of Muslims than about how it was understood in his own time.

There is little material evidence to verify or dismiss what has been transmitted by Islamic tradition.[3] There is also little information about Muḥammad and early Islam in non-Islamic sources that are early enough to have

---

[2] For a general overview of recent developments in the field of Qur'ānic Studies, see the introduction by Reynolds in Gabriel S. Reynolds, *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context*, New York, Routledge, 2007, pp. 1-25. See also: Devin Stewart and Gabriel S. Reynolds, "Afterword: The Academic Study of the Qur'ān—Achievements, Challenges, and Prospects," *JIQSA* 1 (2016), pp. 173-183; Roberto Tottoli, "Vent'anni di studi sulla vita di Muhammad," *Archivio di storia della cultura. Anno XXV* (2012), pp. 197-222; Caterina Bori, "Alfred-Louis de Prémare, John Wansbrough e le origini dell'Islam: Questioni di ieri letture di oggi," *Quaderni di Studi Arabi, Nuova Serie* 4 (2009), pp. 137-158. See also Bori's introduction to the Italian translation of de Prémare's book in Alfred-Louis de Prémare, *Alle origini del Corano*, ed. & tr. Caterina Bori, Roma, Carocci, 2015.

[3] On inscriptions dating to the early Islamic period, see: Robert Hoyland, "The Jews of the Hijaz and their Inscriptions," in *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān in its historical context 2*, ed. Gabriel S. Reynolds, London, Routledge, 2011, pp. 91-116; Frédéric Imbert, "Le Coran dans les graffiti des deux premiers siècles de l'Hégire," *Arabica* 48 (2000), pp. 384-390; *id.*, "L'Islam des pierres: l'expression de la foi dans les graffiti arabes des premiers siècles," *REMMM* 129 (2011), pp. 55-77; *id.*, "Le Coran des pierres: statistiques épigraphiques et premières analyses," in *Le Coran: nouvelles approches*, ed. Mehdi Azaiez, Sabrina Mervin, Paris, CNRS éditions, 2013, pp. 99-124; Christian J. Robin, "L'Arabie dans le Coran. Réexamen de quelques termes à la lumière des inscriptions préislamiques," in *Les origines du Coran, le Coran des origines* (AIBL, Actes de colloque), ed. François Déroche, Christian Robin, and Michel Zinc, Paris, De Boccard, 2015, pp. 27-74; Mounir Arbach, Guillaume Charloux, Hédi Dridi, Iwona Gajda, Ṣāliḥ Muḥammad Āl Murayḥ, Christian Robin, Saʿīd Fāyiz al-Saʿīd, Jérémie Schiettecatte, and Sālim Ṭayrān, "Results of four seasons of survey in the province of Najrān (Saudi Arabia) – 2007-2010," in *South Arabia and its Neighbourgs, 14. Rencontres sabéennes* (ABADY, XIV), ed. Iris Gerlach, 2015, pp. 11-46. On early documents, see Robert Hoyland, "New Documentary Texts and the Early Islamic State," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Research* 69 (2006), pp. 395-416. On numismatic documents, see Stefan Heidemann, "The Evolving Representation of the Early Islamic Empire and its Religion on Coin Imagery," in *The Qur'ān in Context. Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx, Leiden, Brill, 2010, pp. 149-196.

escaped the influence of the Islamic tradition itself.[4] The nature of the Qur'ānic text – the only extant literary document from the first century of Islam – contributes to the complexity of the problem. The Qur'ān provides very little information about its recipient and its historical environment.[5] For instance, only on five occasions does the Qur'ān mention the name of its prophet – who is referred to as Muḥammad four times and once as Aḥmad.[6] And the towns of Mecca and Yathrib are each mentioned only once. There are also very few references to persons or contemporary circumstances,[7] and only one allusion to events that are also recorded in non-Muslim sources.[8] In short, if we had to reconstruct the biography of Muḥammad and the early development of his community on the basis of the information contained in the Qur'ān alone, we would not have much data to work with. At the same time, the reluctance to use post-Qur'ānic sources has led many scholars to read the Qur'ān as a book without a context.

In recent years, increasing numbers of scholars have begun to study early Islam and to read the Qur'ān in light of their late antique context.[9] While this approach is promising and the research is lively, there are many basic questions about which there is no scholarly consensus. For example: In what religious and political context and in what geographical area did Islam emerge? Did the original community perceive itself as a new and distinctive religious group or did Muslim identity emerge only at a second stage? Who compiled the Qur'ān? And when? Is it a simple compilation of prophecies issued by Muḥammad or a redaction of prophetic utterances attributed to him? Or a mix of both? To what extent does the text represent the preaching of Muḥammad?

Thanks to rare but precious material evidence and a handful of non-Islamic witnesses, we can establish a few points.[10] First, we may assume that a man named Muḥammad existed, as evidenced by early Syriac sources. Second, early non-Islamic sources confirm his profession as a merchant.[11] Third, we can state with confidence that he preached in the Hijaz and that his movement was in contact with a Jewish community – whose presence in the area is confirmed by a few epigraphic records.[12] Fourth, we know that at least some members of the community understood Muḥammad's preaching as referring to an imminent apocalypse.[13] Fifth, we may assume that something important happened in 622 – the traditional date of Muḥammad's migration to Yathrib – as early documents acknowledge the *hiǧra* dating system. Sixth, the Qur'ānic text was probably circulating as a codex by the second half of the 7th century, although there is no scholarly consensus on this point.[14]

Later Islamic sources sometimes preserve traditions traceable to the first half of the 8th century and perhaps to the last half of the 7th century.[15] While it is difficult to connect these traditions to the first generations of

[4] For a survey of non-Islamic sources on Islam, see the monumental study by Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation Of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 13), Princeton, Darwin Press, 1997.

[5] See Fred Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, Princeton, Darwin Press, 1998, p. 80.

[6] Some scholars have suggested – not without good arguments – that most references to Muḥammad in the Qur'ān are interpolations. See Hartwig Hirschfeld, *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qoran* (Asiatic Monographs 3), London, Royal Asiatic Society, 1902, pp. 138-140.

[7] E.g., Q 33:36-40, on which see now David S. Powers, "Sinless, Sonless and Seal of Prophets: Muḥammad and Kor 33, 36-40, Revisited," *Arabica* 67 (2020), pp. 1-76.

[8] Notoriously in Q 30:2-7, on which see Tommaso Tesei, "'The Romans will win!' A Qur'ānic prophecy (Q 30:2-7) in light of 7th c. political eschatology," *Der Islam* 95/1 (2018), pp. 1-29.

[9] See Neuwirth & Alia, *The Qur'ān in Context* and Reynolds, *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context*.

[10] See Gregor Schoeler, *The biography of Muhammad: nature and authenticity* (Routledge Studies in Classical Islam), New York, London, Routledge, 2011, p. 14; Sean Anthony, *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith: The Making of the Prophet of Islam*, University of California Press, 2020, esp. chap. 1.

[11] For information about Muḥammad in early non-Islamic (Christian) sources, see Robert Hoyland, "The Earliest Christian Writings on Muhammad: An Appraisal," in *The Biography of Muhammad: The Issue of Sources* (Islamic History and Civilization: Studies and Texts 32), ed. Harald Motzki, Leiden, Boston, Köln, Brill, 2000, pp. 276-297.

[12] See Hoyland, "The Jews of Hijaz." On Jewish communities in pre-Islamic Arabia see Christian J. Robin, "Quel judaïsme en Arabie ?," in *Le judaïsme de l'Arabie antique, Actes du colloque de Jérusalem (février 2006)* (Judaïsme ancien et origines du christianisme 3), ed. Christian J. Robin, Turnhout, Brepols, 2015, pp. 15-295.

[13] See Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muḥammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011, esp. chap. 3; *id.*, "'The Reign of God Has Come': Eschatology and Empire in Late Antiquity and Early Islam," *Arabica* 61 (2014), pp. 514-558; *id.*, *The Apocalypse of Empire: Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018, esp. chaps. 5 & 6. See also: Mohammad-Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Muḥammad le Paraclet et 'Alī le Messie. Nouvelles remarques sur les origines de l'islam et de l'imamologie shi'ite," in *L'Ésotérisme shi'ite, ses racines et ses prolongements: Shi'i Esotericism: Its Roots and Developments* (Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études, Sciences Religieuses 177), ed. Mohammad-Ali Amir-Moezzi, Maria De Cillis, Daniel De Smet, and Orkhan Mir-Kasimov, Turnhout, Brepols, 2016, pp. 19-54.

[14] See the brief discussion at the end of this essay.

[15] See, for instance, Harald Motzki, "Quo vadis Ḥadīṯ-Forschung? Eine kritische Untersuchung von G. H. A. Juynboll: 'Nāfiʿ the *mawlā* of Ibn 'Umar, and his position in Muslim Ḥadīth Literature," *Der Islam* 73/2 (1996), pp. 193-231; *id.*, *Analysing Muslim Traditions: Studies in Legal, Exegetical and Maghazi Hadith*, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2010; Schoeler, *The biography of Muhammad*. On the *isnād-cum-matn* methodology see Pavel Pavlovitch, *The Formation of the Islamic Understanding of* Kalāla *in the Second Century AH (718–816 CE): Between Scripture and Canon*, Leiden, Brill, 2016. See also Anthony, *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith*, "Introduction."

Muslims (or proto-Muslims),[16] the outcomes of these studies shorten the time span between the information they contain and the events to which they reportedly are connected. It appears that the skepticism about Islamic sources on early Islam has often been exaggerated. These sources may (and probably do) contain a core of reliable information.[17] As Fred Donner observes: "Clearly, the *Sīra*'s vision, as a historical reconstruction of Islam's origins, has grave weaknesses […] But at this point, it seems likely that some aspects of the traditional *Sīra* framework may, in the end, emerge as historically sound."[18] In this case, it will be noted, revisionist scholars have failed to provide a credible alternative scenario for the historical circumstances in which the early Islamic community emerged.

Previous attempts to reconstruct early Islamic history on the basis of non-Islamic sources have not proved to be fruitful, since these sources are clearly tendentious.[19] Recent efforts to re-think the Qur'ān's religious and social environment exclusively on the basis of Qur'ānic materials have resulted in uncertain outcomes due to the incertitude that surrounds the text.[20] Moreover, this approach implies that the information contained in the Qur'ānic corpus goes back directly to Muḥammad and to the context in which he preached. However, these are assumptions that have never been proven. The single authorship of the text and its connection to a specific historical context have not been verified or corroborated by a critical analysis.

When using the Qur'ān as a source of historical information, scholars should be attentive to its contents and structures. Stylistic variations, conceptual tensions, and conflicting attitudes toward the same topic should be regarded as signs of a corpus of texts gathered rapidly during a chaotic period in which the community was expanding both geographically and numerically. Scholars should not attempt to reconcile internal Qur'ānic inconsistencies and should refrain from harmonizing the contradictory picture that often emerges when cross-referencing information in different parts of the text. Indeed, this approach merely reproduces the *modus operandi* of classical Qur'ān exegesis to explain the text as reflecting the life events of a single man or community of men in a specific historical context.

WHEN THE QUR'ĀN CONTRADICTS THE TRADITION (AND *VICE VERSA*)

A crucial question that must be answered concerns the relationship between the data provided by Islamic sources and data that can be extrapolated from the Qur'ānic text. In fact, important elements of the traditional framework of Muḥammad's life are contradicted by the Qur'ān itself. Let us examine two examples.[21]

[1] According to Muslim tradition, at the time of Muḥammad's preaching Mecca was the site of an important pagan sanctuary. Allah was the highest god in a pantheon that included numerous minor divinities among which, for instance, a prominent position was held by Allah's three daughters, al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt. In Mecca, Muḥammad faced strong opposition from many of his fellow tribesmen, who like Muḥammad himself, belonged to the clan of Quraysh. The Quraysh are mentioned only once in the Qur'ān, in a passage (Q 106:1-4) in which they are said to worship "the Lord of this house" (*rabb haḏā l-bayt*). More frequently, the Qur'ān refers to *mušrikūn*, literally "those who associate", who are identified by Islamic sources as Quraysh and as pagan idolaters. The meaning of the word *mušrik*, "one who associates," in the sense of associating something or somebody with God, appears to confirm this identification. But what exactly did these associators associate with God, according to the Qur'ān? Recent scholarship increasingly draws attention to the fact that in the Qur'ān these associators are not idolaters, as the traditional accounts claim. The Qur'ān describes their cultic practices as a form of imperfect monotheism and the minor divinities whom the *mušrikūn* are accused of worshiping

---

[16] See the criticism in Stephen J. Shoemaker, "In Search of 'Urwa's *Sira*: Some Methodological Issues in the Quest for 'Authenticity' in the Life of Muhammad," *Der Islam* 85/2 (2008), pp. 257-344; cf. Andreas Görke, Harald Motzki, and Gregor Schoeler, "First Century Sources for the Life of Muḥammad? A Debate," *Der Islam* 89/2 (2012), pp. 2-59. See also Robert Hoyland, "Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muhammad: Problems and Solutions," *History Compass* 5 (2007), pp. 6-9.

[17] For a possible historical kernel in the Qur'ān, see Andreas Görke, "Between History and Exegesis: the Origins and Transformation of the Story of Muḥammad and Zaynab bt Ǧaḥš," *Arabica*, 65/1-2 (2018), pp. 31-63, and Powers, "Sinless, Sonless and Seal of Prophets." On the *sīra-maġāzī* literature as a source for historical investigation, see Anthony, *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith*.

[18] Fred Donner, "The historian, the believer, and the Qur'ān," in *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in its historical context 2*, ed. Gabriel S. Reynolds, New York, Routledge, 2011, pp. 25-37.

[19] See, especially, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977; and the review of this book by John Wansbrough in *BSOAS* 41 (1978), pp. 155-156.

[20] See Patricia Crone, "Jewish Christianity and the Qur'ān (Part One)," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 74/2 (2015), pp. 225-253; *id.*, "Jewish Christianity and The Qur'ān (Part Two)," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 75/1 (2016), pp. 1-21.

[21] To the two cases that I will address below, one might add a third case pointed out by Crone. The frequent references to an agro-pastoral society in the Qur'ān is not consistent with the semi-nomadic community of merchants described in traditional sources. See Patricia Crone, "How did the Qur'ānic pagans make a living?" *BSOAS* 68/3 (2005), pp. 387-399.

are not idols, but rather angels. The picture that emerges from Qurʾānic descriptions of these associators is more of a community of henotheists than of polytheists.[22]

[2] According to traditional sources, Muḥammad encountered stiff opposition from pagans in Mecca and from the Jewish community in Yathrib. By contrast, there are very few references to contacts or disputes with Christians. Nonetheless, the Qurʾān often argues against the latter and accuses them of making a theological mistake by venerating Jesus as the son of God. The Qurʾānic polemic against Christians is not less vehement than that against Jews or mušrikūn. At the same time, the Qurʾān often uses literary topoi or theological concepts typical of a Christian environment. The Qurʾān use of these Christian elements, which are evoked or alluded to but never commented on or explained in detail, is significant. This use of Christian elements implies that the Qurʾān's audience was familiar with them and able to grasp their underlying meaning.[23] Once again, the religious and cultural context of the Qurʾān is not consistent with that described in traditional accounts of Muḥammad's life.

How does one reconcile the Qurʾān and Islamic sources when they are inconsistent as in the cases observed above? Some scholars have argued that the history presented in Islamic sources is largely a "salvation history" elaborated by Muslim historians in later times.[24] As for the mušrikūn, it has been proposed that their representation as a polytheist community is based on clichés about pre-Islamic Arabia used by Muslim historians to reconstruct the biography of Muḥammad. In other words, the life of the Prophet was written against a stereotypic background of a polytheist Hijaz. By contrast, recent scholarship suggests that the mušrikūn were a monotheistic community whose monotheism was criticized by the Qurʾān as imperfect.[25] However, this reading presents its own problems. Above all, we must keep in mind that the Qurʾān is not an encyclopedia nor is its aim to provide future generations with a detailed and reliable picture of its historical environment, especially with regards to its

opponents. Indeed, it is difficult to establish the boundary between real-life creeds and practices and polemical representation of opponents. With regard to the polemic against the mušrikūn, the Qurʾānic rhetoric is often related to stereotypes and arguments widespread among late antique Christian heresiologists.

The situation is even more complex when we ask about the Qurʾān's relationship with Christianity. The marginal role that the tradition assigns to Christians is curious, considering the undeniable impact of Christianity (or of Christianizing concepts) on the Qurʾān. Of course, placing emphasis on the pagan character of the environment in which Muḥammad lived and preached had the theological advantage of isolating his preaching from the rest of the monotheistic world and, as a consequence, emphasizing the heavenly and miraculous nature of revelation. However, it will be noted that the tradition does not ignore the presence of a Jewish community in Yathrib. Even if we assume that traditional accounts are largely salvation history, the reasons for omitting a Christian presence in Muḥammad's social milieu remain unclear. What is certain is that the significant presence in the Qurʾān of elements closely related to previous and contemporary Christian literature implies that the impact of Christianity on the Qurʾān's cultural environment was much more substantial than the Islamic tradition acknowledges. Western scholars have often adopted a position of historical agnosticism about the "Qurʾān-Christian connection," focusing their attention on the link rather than trying to explain how it came into being. The question is part of the general issue – deeply investigated in the past few years – of the relationship between the Qurʾān and the culture of the late antique world. Scholars have proposed two hypotheses – implicitly or, less often, explicitly – to explain the transmission of concepts from late antique communities – including Christians – to the Qurʾān's environment. Let us examine them.

Some scholars attempt to relocate, so-to-speak, the Qurʾān from its traditional Hijazi environment to north, based on the assumption that the tradition has projected the origins of Islam into the Hijaz while constructing a salvation history.[26] This view has not found favor in the academic community and most scholars (including myself) prefer to identify the Hijaz as the cradle of the Qurʾān's community.

Other scholars explain the similarities between the Qurʾān and the literary traditions, legal practices, and

---

[22] See Gerald Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999; Patricia Crone, "The Religion of the Qurʾānic Pagans: God and the Lesser Deities," *Arabica* 57/3 (2010), pp. 151-200; *id.*, "The Qurʾānic *Mushrikūn* and the Resurrection. Part I," *BSOAS* 75/3 (2012), pp. 445-472; *id.*, "The Qurʾānic *Mushrikūn* and the Resurrection. Part II," *BSOAS* 76/1 (2012), pp. 1-20.

[23] On the massive presence of Christianizing elements in the Qurʾān, see Gabriel S. Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and its Biblical Subtext*, London, Routledge, 2010.

[24] See especially John Wansbrough, *Qurʾānic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretations*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977 (repr., Amherst, New York, Prometheus, 2004); Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*.

[25] See Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*; Crone, "The Religion of the Qurʾānic Pagans."

[26] See Wansbrough, *Qurʾānic Studies*; Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*; Yehuda Nevo and Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State*, New York, Prometheus, 2003; Dan Gibson, *Qurʾanic Geography: A Survey and Evaluation of the Geographical References in the Qurʾan with Suggested Solutions for Various Problems and Issues*, Saskatoon, Independent Scholar's Press, 2011.

customs of late antique Middle Eastern communities by extending the influence of the late antique world beyond the *limes arabicus*.[27] These scholars expand the boundaries of the late antique world to include the Arabian Peninsula and the Hijaz.[28] According to this point of view, Muḥammad's community did not borrow from, but rather shared cultural and religious concepts with other religious communities of the late antique Near East.

Scholars should welcome any attempt to deconstruct the image of the Hijaz as a remote and desolate spot at the limits of the "monotheistic world." However, it is difficult to envisage the exact nature of Hijazi involvement in late antique culture. With respect to Christianity, it is impossible to determine the extent to which the Hijaz was Christianized. The Islamic tradition refers only sporadically to Christians, who mostly appear as fleeting background actors in Muḥammad's life. A well-known scholar who proposed a theory about the Syriac linguistic background of the Qur'ān has often been criticized for portraying Mecca as if it were Edessa, the major cultural center of Syriac Christianity in northern Mesopotamia.[29] In fact, many of the linguistic reconstructions advanced by this scholar are dubious and speculative.[30] However, it remains the case that when one reads many passages of the Qur'ān, one has the impression that it is a product of a flourishing Christian center. On many occasions, the Qur'ān does not simply evoke well-known Christian *topoi*, anecdotes, and concepts, but uses theological and literary material that often find their closest parallels in the works of contemporary Syriac writers. In many cases, the profile of the possible redactor(s) of Qur'ānic passages that use Christianizing elements appears to be someone living in the center of the Christian world. Similarly, the Qur'ān's audience appears to understand Christian elements in the text and the meaning of the stories alluded to in Qur'ānic sermons.

How are we to explain this situation? Rather than imagining the Hijaz as an Edessa-like area – an idea that is not supported by any data – it is more appropriate to remember that, metaphorically speaking, early Muslims (or proto-Muslims) soon reached Edessa and the main centers of Eastern Christianity. I propose to treat the Qur'ān as a literary document that reflects not only

Muḥammad's prophetic career in the Hijaz but also the development of his community during the first decades of its territorial expansion. Leaving aside dogmatic views, it is plausible that during this period the community was enriched by new members who, when they joined the movement, brought with them their own traditions and religious beliefs. These new elements found a place in the Qur'ān when the latter was compiled some decades after Muḥammad's death, no later – it is my conviction – than the reign of Muʿāwiya (r. 661–680).[31] In this case, differences between the Islamic tradition and the Qur'ān may be explained by the fact that they do not always refer to the same historical context. Of course, this hypothesis is based on the assumption that there is no single author of the Qur'ān.

A *QUR'ĀN* WITHIN THE QUR'ĀN

In order to clarify my thesis, I will now address a manageable case study. This is a corpus of short suras that I selected on the basis of stylistic features. The selection was made by applying strict criteria, that is, leaving out some suras whose stylistic connection to the corpus is not apparent, albeit arguable.[32] The selected suras are:

52, 53, 56, 69, 70, 74, 75, 77, 78, 79, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 95, 99, 100, 101, 103, 104, 105, 106, 108.[33]

---

[27] See R. Hoyland, "Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muhammad: Problems and Solutions," *History Compass* 5 (2007), p. 12.

[28] For examples, see the bibliographical references in Hoyland, "Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muhammad," pp. 11-12 and notes 56-62.

[29] See Christoph Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*, Berlin, Das arabische Buch, 2000.

[30] On which see, for instance, Tommaso Tesei, "Some Cosmological Notions from Late Antiquity in Q 18:60–65: The Quran in Light of Its Cultural Context," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 135/1 (2015), pp. 19-32.

[31] On scholarly debate about the period of composition of the Qur'ānic text, see the discussion at the end of this essay.

[32] Q 26, for example, appears to be a hybrid composition. Some of its verses contain stylistic features of the corpus selected here (see next section), while others do not. The original core of the sura seems to have been supplemented with new verses. Another example is Q 51: the first thirteen verses manifest similarities with the corpus, while the rest are stylistically different. It seems that the original core was vv. 1-13, to which was added vv. 14-60. However, the second section contains some verses that may belong to the original core, e.g., vv. 15 and 17-22.

[33] The most ancient manuscript evidence is as follows: the entirety of suras 52 and 53 occur in the MS Bibliotheque nationale 331; and the entirety of sura 56 appears in MS Bibliotheque nationale 331 and in E 20 Saint Petersburg (+ fragments). Verses 1-69 of Q 56 appear in the *scriptio superior* of the Ṣanʿāʾ manuscript, and vv. 53-96 appear in the codex Parisino-petropolitanus. Verses 3-52 of Q 69 appear in the codex Parisino-petropolitanus. The entirety of sura 89 appears in the *scriptio inferior* of the Ṣanʿāʾ manuscript, which also contain vv. 1-7 of Q 90. Verses 11-15 of Q 91 appear in Istanbul, TIEM ŞE 6277. All of the other suras in our corpus are absent in the oldest Qur'ānic manuscripts – although not all early manuscripts have been published yet. My thanks to Alba Fedeli and to the anonymous reviewer of the *Journal Asiatique* for helping me with this research. On early manuscripts see François Déroche, *La transmission écrite du Coran dans les débuts de l'islam. Le codex Parisino-petropolitanus* (Texts and Studies on the Qur'ān 5), Leiden, Brill, 2009; *id.*, *Qur'ans of the Umayyads, A Preliminary Overview*, Leiden, Brill, 2013; Asma Hilali, *The Sanaa Palimpsest. The transmission of the Qur'an in the first centuries AH*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017.

These suras appear to be a homogeneous group of texts with stylistic features that connect them to one another and distinguish them from the rest of the Qur'ānic corpus. Perhaps the most characteristic stylistic feature is the initial invocation of natural elements. Another is the opening formula, introduced by the initial particle *iḏā*, "when," followed by a description of an apocalyptic scenario. The suras also share a common phraseology, as, for instance, the rhetoric questions *wa-mā aḏraka mā*, "And what makes you know what is … ?", and *hal atāka ḥadīt*, "Has there reached you the report of … ?". Furthers, the phrase *lā*[34] *uqsimu*, "I swear!", occurs eight times in this corpus of suras but nowhere else in the Qur'ān. Other shared stylistic features include references to the "orphan" (*al-yatīm*) in the singular instead of the plural, as elsewhere the Qur'ān;[35] enigmatic and unique exhortations using the imperative *mahhil* to give a respite to the unbelievers; and finally, the characteristization of the righteous and sinners as "the companions of the right" and "the companions of the left." While these stylistic elements became a central feature of Islamic eschatological imagery about reward and punishment, neither "those of the right" nor "those of the left" appears elsewhere in the Qur'ān.

In addition, important phraseology and vocabulary typical of Qur'ānic rhetoric are missing in these suras.[36] Some of these absences are striking, e.g., the term *mušrik* and any word related to root *š-r-k*.[37] Also striking is the absence of the divine title *al-raḥmān* which, as we know from inscriptions, was widespread among Arab speakers. There is no reference to the term *sāʿa*, i.e., the eschatological Hour.[38] The term *nabī*, "prophet," also is missing, as is the term *mu'min*, "believer," the most common designation for followers of the Qur'ān's message.[39] Also absent is the well-known formula *ǧannāt taǧrī min taḥtihā l-anhār*, "gardens from beneath which the rivers flow,"[40] that very often goes with the Qur'ānic references

to paradise. This last absence is curious as these suras contain numerous eschatological descriptions of the abode of delight.

Another important feature of this corpus – shared with other brief suras – is the short length of its verses. Curiously, our corpus also has a higher number of *hapaxes* than the rest of the Qur'ān.[41] In fact, one would expect to find a higher number of *hapaxes* in suras in the rest of the Qur'ān, where the suras are longer and contain more verses and more words. In general, the vocabulary in our corpus is richer and less homogeneous than in the rest of the Qur'ān.

In sum, our corpus of suras has its own specific vocabulary and phraseology. The corpus is also thematically coherent, with strong apocalyptic tones and a focus on final events, which are expected to occur very soon. Equally important, our corpus seems to refer to a cultural context different from that of other parts of the Qur'ān. For instance, the frequent invocations of natural phenomena suggest a background in which pagan cultural elements are strong enough to influence a preacher who advocates strict monotheism. The principal actors of this pagan world, the Quraysh, and the deities they worshiped, are mentioned by name. Monotheistic tradition is also an important factor in the text, but it is mostly concerned with stories about local Arab prophets. Prophets of the Judeo-Christian tradition, e.g., Noah, Moses, and Abraham, are mentioned, but there is no reference to any "100% Christian figure", i.e., a figure who was not prophetically authoritative from a Jewish perspective. In general, the religious and social environment portrayed in our corpus is consistent with the situation described in Islamic traditional sources – to a greater extent than the picture in long suras – and the typical rhymed prose of the corpus, that is, the *saǧʿ*, is what one would expect to encounter if the reports by the Islamic tradition were accurate.

AN A-CHRONOLOGICAL READING

The corpus of suras that I have selected corresponds roughly to what is often considered to be the earliest layer of the Qur'ānic corpus, according to chronologies developed by both Muslim and Western scholars. This correspondence should come as no surprise: Qur'ānic

---

[34] I follow here the orthography of the Cairo edition of the Qur'ān and I transcribe the particle "*la*" with long [ā].

[35] With the exception of Q 6:152 and Q 17:34 where, however, the word *yatīm* occurs in the formulaic sentence: *wa-lā taqrabū māl al-yatīm illa bi-llatī hiya aḥsan ḥattā yabluǧ ašuddahu*, "And do not approach the property of the orphan save in the fairest manner, until he is of age."

[36] On words that do not appear in the Qur'ān, see Robert Brunschvig, "Simples remarques négatives sur le vocabulaire du Coran," *Studia Islamica* 5 (1956), pp. 19-32.

[37] With the exception of Q 52:43, "Glory be to God, above that which they associate! (*yušrikūna*)" which, however, appears to be a formula (cf. Q 7:190; 9:31; 10:18; 16:1, 3; 23:92; 27:63; 28:68; 30:40; 39:67; 59:23) that was interpolated in the text at a secondary stage.

[38] The exception is Q 79:42, but the sentence *wa-yas'alūnak ʿan al-sāʿa* is a well-known formula (see, e.g. Q 7:187) and it is likely the result of an interpolation.

[39] While the term occurs in Q 74:31 and 85:7 and 10, these occurrences are found in a pericope (vv. 7-11) that is clearly an exegetical interpolation.

[40] On this formula, see Tesei, "Some Cosmological Notions," p. 26.

[41] On the high concentration of *hapaxes* in these Qur'ānic units, see Sadeghi, "The Chronology of the Qur'ān," p. 246. I disagree, however, with the author's conclusion about the implication of this high concentration of *hapaxes* for the chronological development of the Qur'ānic corpus. On *hapaxes* in the Qur'ān, see Shawkat M. Toorawa, "*Hapaxes* in the Qur'ān: identifying and cataloguing lone words (and loanwords)," in *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in its Historical Context 2*, ed. Gabriel S. Reynolds, London, New York, Routledge, 2011, pp. 193-246.

chronology is not based on a historical memory of how the corpus developed over time, but rather on the observation of stylistic features.[42] Whatever the premises may be, the analysis of stylistic features inevitably brings one back to more or less the same suras. This is especially true for our corpus, in which the suras stand out stylistically from the rest of the Qurʾānic corpus. This stylistic distinctiveness also emerges when scholars apply more stringent parameters, as in recent attempts to establish a chronology of the Qurʾān using a stylometric approach.[43] In general, it appears that we can safely separate one group of suras from the rest of the Qurʾānic corpus, and that it may be possible to establish an internal chronology for the selected group – as Nicolai Sinai has done.[44] But is it possible to connect this specific group of suras to the rest of the Qurʾān in a single, comprehensive chronological system? On this point the question of the Qurʾān's chronology intersects with the purported single authorship of the text.

Qurʾān exegetes and several Western scholars assume that the heterogeneity of the Qurʾānic material reflects the evolution of Muḥammad's *modus communicandi* over the course of his prophetic career. However, when this assumption is applied to what traditionally is considered to be the earliest layer of the Qurʾān (which overlaps, in part, with our corpus of suras) a complication arises: The style and content of these suras is so different from the rest of the Qurʾānic corpus that one wonders if we are dealing with the same author and the same cultural universe. Even a strong partisan of the single authorship theory, Behnam Sadeghi, acknowledges that – speaking in chronological terms – stylistic variations are particularly evident "at the beginning."[45] The stylistic uniqueness of the purportedly early suras is so evident that – as Sadeghi observes – "even the relatively weaker univariate methods have no problem detecting the initial eruption."[46]

Let us now try to situate our corpus of suras in the framework of a chronological development of Muḥammad's preaching and to consider them as the first literary expressions of his religious message. From such a perspective it follows that the Prophet's *modus communicandi* changed dramatically as his prophetic career unfolded. Some common terms and formulaic elements were abandoned and replaced by others. The original lexical wealth and variety gave way to a standardized vocabulary. The rhymed prose structure was abandoned. The initial apocalyptic fervor was mitigated in favor of a pragmatic view of the workings of sacred history and the possibility of human salvation. The representation of the social and cultural background and the nature of opposition to the new message also changed. The Prophet's understanding of some opponents, now labeled as *mušrikūn*, also changed and his criticism of their cultic practices focused on angelolatry. Christians made their appearance in the Prophet's world and became targets of his polemics, much like the *mušrikūn* and the Jews – the latter now identified by the ethnonym *al-yahūd* ("the Jews") or by ethnonymic expressions such as *alladīna hādū* ("those who are Jews"), *kānū hūdan* ("they were Jews"), or *banū israʾīl* ("Children of Israel"). To this, one should add an increasing number of literary motifs drawn from the Christian tradition and significant theological developments – e.g., the inclusion of Jesus among the prophets.

Now, what if stylistic and conceptual differences in the Qurʾān are the result of multiple authorship rather than the evolution of the *modus communicandi* of a single man? The corpus of selected suras and other parts of

---

[42] In most cases, the chronologies established by Muslim exegetes were not based on historical data about the development of Muḥammad's preaching but rather on exegetical speculations about the circumstances in which one or another verse of the Qurʾān was revealed, in Arabic *asbāb al-nuzūl*. These narratives take form of anecdotal accounts written on the bases of the same Qurʾānic texts that they are supposed to explain (see Andrew Rippin, "The Exegetical Genre *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*: A Bibliographical and Terminological Survey," *BSOAS* 48 (1985), pp. 1-15). Many of these chronological reconstructions are derived by the need to explain verses that contain contrasting and contradictory legal prescriptions. The exegesis developed a chronological system according to which the "more recent" verse abrogates the "older" verse. A *locus classicus* for the doctrine of abrogation is Q 5:90, which prohibits wine, and which came to be understood as chronologically later than, and thus abrogating, Q 2:219 and Q 4:43, which tolerate the consumption of intoxicants. In this case, the chronological reconstruction is based on speculations about internal Qurʾānic evidence and on the assumption that conflicting prescriptions must be traced back to different periods of Muḥammad's life. On the doctrine of abrogation, see David S. Powers, "The Literary Genre *Nāsikh al-Qurʾān wa-mansūkhuhu*," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qurʾān*, ed. Andrew Rippin, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 117-138.

[43] See Behnam Sadeghi, "The Chronology of the Qurʾān: A Stylometric Research Program," *Arabica* 58 (2011), pp. 210-299; Nicolai Sinai, "The Qurʾān as Process," in *The Qurʾān in Context*, ed. Neuwirth, Sinai, and Marx, pp. 407-440; *id.*, "Inner-Qurʾanic Chronology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qurʾanic Studies*, ed. Muhammad Abdel Haleem and Mustafa Shah, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, chap. 21; *id.*, *The Qurʾan: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, Edinburgh University Press, 2017, chap. 5.

[44] Sinai, "The Qurʾān as Process."

[45] As Sadeghi puts it: "Now that we know head from tail, it is of interest to comment on the rate of stylistic change. If one accepts the broad outlines of the traditional reckoning of chronology and the division into Meccan and Medinan periods, and if one makes the heuristic assumption that the text was disseminated at a roughly even rate, then from both univariate and multivariate markers, one discerns that style changed rapidly at the beginning. The pace of change slowed gradually. The initially more rapid pace grants style greater discriminatory power in the earlier phases." Sadeghi, "The Chronology of the Qurʾān," pp. 283-284.

[46] Ibid., p. 284.

the Qurʾān reveal two parallel universes that are difficult to connect through a linear model of stylistic and thematic development. Moreover, if we follow a chronological model, the harmony between our corpus of suras and the representation of Muḥammad's life in traditional sources disappears and occasional discordances between the Qurʾān and tradition reemerge. Therefore, I propose that the authorship of our corpus of suras is not the same as that of other sections of the Qurʾānic corpus. Furthermore, I suggest that the social and religious context to which our corpus of suras refers is not the same as that of other suras. In my view, if our corpus is consistent with the cultural scenario found in traditional sources, this is because those suras were produced in the same context addressed by the Islamic tradition, whereas other parts of the Qurʾān were not.

To support my hypothesis, I now present three case studies of suras in our corpus that contain verses that are stylistically and conceptually diverging from most verses in the corpus. If we follow a chronological reading of the Qurʾān, these verses are later insertions in early suras. In my view, however, these verses are better explained as exegetical glosses added to the text by authors operating in different cultural contexts.

Q 53

Sura 53 (al-Naǧm) has sixty-two verses. The verses are short, consisting of three or four words on average. There are eight exceptions: v. 23 and vv. from 26 to 32. Among these longer verses, vv. 23, 31, and 32 are longer than the segment composed by vv. 26-30. The style of the short verses differs from that of the longer verses. The opening oath to a star, after which the sura is named, is consistent with the oracular character of the short verses. By contrast, longer verses are more prosaic and, as we will see, appear as glosses on, or explanations of, the oracles in the short verses. In what follows I will use "oracular" and "prosaic" to refer to the short-verses sections and long-verses sections, respectively.[47]

Scholars working on the origins of the Islamic movement often cite al-Naǧm because of its references to the religious environment in which the Qurʾān's preacher was situated. The sura contains the only explicit reference in the Qurʾān to the deities allegedly worshiped by the pagan Meccans: al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, and Manāt. Islamic tradition reports that these deities were represented as stone idols. Pre-Islamic inscriptions and material evidence indicate that these deities were associated with the cult of stars. In Nabataean culture, the deity al-ʿUzzā was

associated with the cult of Venus.[48] This cult was still alive in the 6th century, when, according to a Syriac chronicler, the king of the North Arabian confederation of the Lakhmids made a sacrifice to honor ʿUzzā (ʿwzy) and the morning star.[49] The identification of the pre-Islamic deities with the cult of Venus goes back at least to Herodotus (*Hist.* I, 131; III, 8.), who recognized the Greek goddess Aphrodite in the Arab Alilat (Ἀλιλάτ). The idea that the Arabs venerated Aphrodite and the morning star became a stereotype among Christian historians and heresiographers.

After the rise of Islam a new element was added to these stereotypic reports. Eighth and 9th c. Christian writers, like John of Damascus and Nicetas of Byzantium, report that the Arabs used to worship the morning star, which they called *chabar*, or *chobar* (χαβὰρ / χοβαρ), in Arabic – the authors explain – "the mighty one." John of Damascus extends these practices to the Muslims and identifies *chabar* with the stone set in the southwest corner of the Kaaba, which he calls *kabar*.[50] Writing about iconoclastic disputes in the early 720s, Germanus, Patriarch of Costantinople, argued:

> With respect to the Saracens, since they also seem to be among those who urge these charges against us, it will be quite enough for their shame and confusion to allege against them their invocation which even to this day they make in the wilderness to a lifeless stone, namely that which is called *Chobar*, and the rest of their vain conversation received by tradition from their fathers as, for instance, the ludicrous mysteries of their solemn festivals.[51]

This account, which is surely polemical, reproaches Muslims for their (alleged) former religious, idolatrous practices. When describing such practices, Germanus refers to a type of stone worship similar to the one described by Islamic tradition as the cult practices of the *mušrikūn*. Germanus' account is arguably the oldest notice we have about the type of stone-worship described in later Islamic sources.

The reference to *chabar/chobar* as the name of a stone that was worshiped is intriguing, especially in view of the connection of this name to al-ʿUzza in the sources. In the two versions of the Arabic name reported by Christian authors, *chabar* appears to be the original form that circulated in Greek Christian circles. Indeed, *chobar* likely represents a deformation of *chabar*, influenced by the homonymous and identically-spelled *Chobar*, which

---

[47] I borrow these terms from Patricia Crone, "Problems in sura 53," *BSOAS* 78/1 (2015), pp. 15-23.

[48] See John F. Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans. A Conspectus* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 136), Leiden, Boston, Köln, Brill, 2001, pp. 114-119.

[49] Ibid.

[50] See Healey, "The Religion of the Nabataeans," pp. 117-118; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, pp. 485-487.

[51] Trans. by Hoyland in ibid., pp. 105-106.

is the Septuagint's transcription of the Hebrew toponym *Ḫebar* (e.g., Ez 1:1). Some scholars regard *chabar/chobar* as a variant of *al-kubrā*, the feminine equivalent of *al-akbar*, "the biggest one," that reportedly was applied to pre-Islamic feminine deities.[52] To support this view, they refer to a statement attributed to the 9th c. Christian polemicist Constantine Porphyrogenitus, who charges Muslims with worshiping the idol *koubar*.

Constantine gives an original (and highly polemical) interpretation of the Arabic sentence *Allahu akbar*: Muslims "call God *Alla*, and *oua* they use for the conjunction 'and', and they call the star (of Aphrodite) *Koubar*. And so they say *Alla oua Koubar* [i.e., 'God and Aphrodite']."[53] This statement may support the contention that *chabar/chobar/koubar* is a defective transcription of *al-kubrā*, as in the hypothetical sentence, "*al-Lāt kubrā*." Furthermore, *koubar* is phonetically closer to the original Arabic than *chabar/chobar*. There is, however, reason to think the opposite, that is, that *koubar* is a variant of *chabar/chobar*. Constantine clearly knows some Arabic. He turns the last syllable of God's name, *-hu*, into the conjunction *-wa*, "and." This shift was likely caused by Constantine's desire to strengthen the assonance of *chabar/chobar* with the Arabic feminine superlative *kubrā* – so that he could transform the Arabic formula *Allahu Akbar* ("God is Mighty") into *Allah wa-l-Kubrā* ("God and the Mighty one"). This observation complicates the idea that *chabar/chobar/koubar* is derived from *al-kubrā*. In this case, another etymology for *chabar/chobar* can be considered.

The term *chabar* can be read as a transposition in Greek of the Arabic *ǧabbār*, "the mighty one," which is John of Damascus' translation the word.[54] Now, in Arabic astrology *ǧabbār* designates Orion. Similarly, in Syriac, Orion is called *gabbarā* rather than *kislā*, its ancient Aramaic name.[55] In Syriac astrology, the word *gabbarā* frequently occurs in the phrase *kalbā d-gabbarā*, "the dog of the mighty one," i.e., Sirius.[56] Here too there is parallel in Arabic, where Sirius is named *kalb al-ǧabbār*. What is important for the present investigation is the high frequency with which the root *Ǧ(/G)-B-R* occurs in connection with astrology and astrological practices. It may be that references by Christians to *chabar*/Venus reflects

their knowledge about Arab astrolater cults at the beginning of Islam.[57] Indeed, Islamic tradition reports that Orion and Sirius were venerated by pre-Islamic pagans.[58] Admittedly, this explanation is weakened by the fact that there is no parallel case, so far as I know, in which the Arabic [ǧ] is represented in Greek as [χ]. One explanation for the shift from *ǧabbār* to *chabar* is to postulate a phonetic alteration during transmission, but this explanation is speculative.

Be that as it may, the connection between the cult of the pre-Islamic Arab deities and star-worship is confirmed independently of the etymology of *chabar* that one wants to accept. There is overwhelming evidence of a cultic association between deities and celestial bodies in pre-Islamic times. In Q 53, it will be noted, the Qur'ān engages polemically with astrolatical practices. The initial invocation to the star: *wa-l-naǧm iḏā hawā*, "by the star when it goes down" (v. 1), makes clear that the sura is dealing with this topic. Significantly, the affirmation of God's authority over Sirius (*ši'rā*) at v. 49 points to a polemic against an independent cult of Sirius (an echo of which may have reached Christian polemists, if we accept that *chabar=ǧabbār*). Note also that the only Qur'ānic reference to the names of three pre-Islamic divinities, al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā and Manāt, occurs in a polemic against astrolatry. In general, the cultural milieu of this Qur'ānic passage is consistent with evidence external to the Islamic tradition. Here the Qur'ān appears to react against the cults that, according to traditional sources, were celebrated in Mecca, i.e., the worship of planets and stars by pre-Islamic pagans.[59] In sum, the information derived from pre-, post-, and infra-Qur'ānic evidence is remarkably consistent.

However, this consistency is broken, in the same sura, in the prosaic passage that follows shortly after the mention of the three deities (i.e., vv. 23-32, except vv. 24-25). In this pericope we first read that the three deities venerated by the pagans are merely names, and, later, that those who deny life in the hereafter give the angels female names. The polemical implication is that al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt are only names, female names that

---

[52] Ibid., p. 106, n. 179; Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans*, p. 118.

[53] Trans. by Hoyland in *Seeing Islam*, pp. 105-106.

[54] Interestingly, in his *Natural History* (VII 74), Pliny mentions an Arab of gigantic stature named Gabbara, which is a transposition in Latin of *ǧabbār*.

[55] For instance, Peshitta on Job 9:9 and 38:31 translates the Hebrew *kesîl* as *gabbarā*.

[56] In Greek mythology, Sirius is represented as the bloodhound of the mighty hunter. Similarly, in ancient Egyptian cultic practices Orion and Sirius are often connected to one another.

[57] The fact that the term *chabar* is attributed to Venus and not to Orion or Sirius is not problematic. Christian polemicists probably had only indirect knowledge of Arab cultic practices and may therefore have transmitted imprecise notions. Moreover, the identification of foreign deities with those of Graeco-Roman mythology and with the different celestial bodies was not systematic. An example of this fluidity is a passage by Herodotus (*Hist.*, I:131), according to whom "the Assyrians call Aphrodite Mylitta, the Arabians Alilat, and the Persians Mitra" (καλέουσι δὲ Ἀσσύριοι τὴν Ἀφροδίτην Μύλιττα, Ἀράβιοι δὲ Ἀλιλάτ, Πέρσαι δὲ Μίτραν). Similarly, the Egyptians associated Sirius with the goddess Isis, who was in turn identified with Aphrodite.

[58] Bassel A. Reyahi, "Sirius," in *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane McAuliffe, Leiden, Brill, 2001-2006, vol. V, pp. 51-52.

[59] Ibid.

the Prophet's opponents give to the angels. On this basis, one may conclude that, at least from the Qur'ān's perspective, the cult of the three pagan deities is an angelic one. This conclusion poses a dilemma: although the Qur'ān opposes angel-worship, this practice is not mentioned in extra-Qur'ānic sources. The situation is even more puzzling in Q 53 because in one part of the sura the Qur'ān refers to the cultural environment described in traditional Islamic sources while in another part it does not. To solve this puzzle, some scholars refer to the well-known practice, among some Jewish and Christian sects, of associating angels with planets and stars. In other words, the Qur'ān is referring to a syncretic cult in which local divinities are identified with angels. Hawting observes:

> The identification as angels of entities bearing female names could make sense in relation to a group that saw stars, planets and other astral bodies as angels, ideas which seem to have flourished in some early Jewish and Christian sects […] The non-Muslim evidence, especially that relating to al-'Uzzā but to some extent also that relating to the other two, has led modern scholars frequently to associate the cults of the three 'goddesses' with the worship of astral bodies, particularly Venus. It is conceivable that this idea underlies the koranic accusation that the opponents gave the angels female names and regarded them as the daughters of God. If the three names given in Koran 53:19–20 had been used to refer to Venus or any other of the heavenly bodies, and if the opponents did associate the heavenly bodies with angels, the koranic polemic against them would be understandable.[60]

This reading, although insightful, presents difficulties. The Qur'ān's description of the three female deities as angels is found in a pericope that may have been interpolated. In this pericope we find verses of different length, metrics, vocabulary, phraseology, theology, and polemic arguments. Although Hawting is conscious of the possible interpolated character of this pericope,[61] he states:

> It is preferable, however, to resort to such explanations only when a text cannot be made sense of as it stands, and it is not only possible to comprehend Koran 53:19–28

without recourse to the possibility of interpolation but the passage is of a piece with others that polemicise against the *mushrikūn*: more than that, it helps to make sense of a feature of those other passages that is otherwise puzzling […].[62]

Hawting's argument is susceptible to criticism. His use of Q 53 to explain other Qur'ānic passages that involve polemics against the *mušrikūn* (and vice versa) is based on the assumption that the Qur'ānic corpus emerged from a single context and that it offers a single point of view. But any effort to reconstruct the history of the Qur'ān's cultural and historical environment based only on Qur'ānic materials is weakened by the uncertainty that surrounds the history of the text. Questions that emerge, especially when addressing polemics and religious quarrels, are: Can we trust the information found in the Qur'ān? How do we relate this information to its original context if we cannot confidently trace it back to a direct witness or make the safe assumption that it was not formulated by somebody writing in later times and in different circumstances? Can we treat the Qur'ān as a reliable source of historical information if we are not sure about its internal chronological development, its relation to the environment (or environments) in which it emerged, or its authorship? Should we assume that the Qur'ān offers information on a given topic or event from a single perspective or from multiple perspectives that reflect multiple authors? Hawting, who is aware of these methodological difficulties, honestly acknowledges: "I do recognise, however, that I may be laying myself open to the charge of attempting to harmonise conflicting materials, a criticism I have made against some others above."[63]

We can now return to Q 53 and to the stylistic and theological tension between its "oracular" and "prosaic" sections. The solution proposed by Hawting is ingenious, but suffers from two fundamental difficulties. The first one concerns the angelo-astral cult that Hawting envisages to solve the puzzle. In fact, there is no evidence, on the one hand, that the three Arab deities were identified with angels, while, on the other hand, the Qur'ān does not mention any kind of worship that connects angels and stars. The three elements (pagan deities, angels, and stars) occur together only in Q 53. However – and this is the second difficulty – it is difficult to connect these three elements because of the probable interpolated character of the prosaic section, which is where the alleged qualification of the three deities as angels occurs. As seen, Hawting circumvents the problem by inferring that the entire textual sequence is conceptually coherent—an inference that forces him to downplay the stylistic differences

---

[60] Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, pp. 146-147.

[61] As Hawting observes: "Of course, it is possible, as has sometimes been suggested, that the koranic passage as we know it is the result of interpolation and combination of materials that were at one time distinct. Read by itself it may be judged to have an element of inconsequentiality (the transition from the three names to the talk of angels and intercession at first seems odd), it switches from addressing the opponents directly to referring to them in the third person, and the story of the 'satanic verses' seems at least to envisage a text that has been disrupted at some point." Ibid., p. 147. Unfortunately the author does not provide any bibliographical reference and I could not identify the source of the reported suggestion that the Qur'ānic passage was interpolated.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid.

between the two sections. Now, I concede that Hawting has successfully established that "the transition from the three names to the talk of angels and intercession" is not as odd as it "at first seems."[64] The polemical arguments in Q 53 are in fact lucid, from his perspective. This lucidity, however, does not explain why the author of this thematically coherent polemic manifests stylistic incoherence between the different components of the sura – specifically, between the verses in which the names of the three deities are mentioned (vv. 19-20) and the verses in which their apparent qualification as female angels occur (vv. 23 and 26-32). In sum, the coherence of the polemic is not sufficient to establish the original unity of the oracular and prosaic sections.

Alternatively, the thematic coherence of the pericope can be explained on the assumption that a redactor intervened and crafted this passage to reflect his point of view, namely that the three pagan deities were part of a cult of angel-worship. To this end, the redactor added the prosaic section, which represents an exegetical gloss and comments on the three deities mentioned in the preceding verses. The gloss betrays a secondary stage of the polemic about the worship of the three female deities, who had come to be considered as female angels. In line with this reading, the polemical argument expressed by the redactor in the gloss – i.e., that these three deities are merely angels – is a rationalization of the pagan cult originally addressed in the sura. This rationalization was made by a later compiler (or compilers) of the Qurʾān who probably had no knowledge of the historical situation reflected in the sura. The gloss reveals her/his/their point of view about a cult about which s/he/they did not have any direct knowledge and that s/he/they reconstructed by using stereotypical concepts. The polemical argument that s/he/they use/s reflects a well-known *topos* used by Christian heresiologists against pagan cults: the entities you worship are merely angels of the Lord.

This reading – in my view – has several advantages. First, it accounts for both thematic consistency and stylistic inconsistencies in the different sections of the sura. Furthermore, it helps to explain the puzzling distance between the Qurʾānic and traditional Islamic descriptions of the cult of the pre-Islamic divinities. The ancient core of Q 53, that is, its oracular section, describes a cult that can be reconstructed on the bases of traditional knowledge of pre- and non-Islamic information, and of material evidence. By contrast, the most recent layer of the sura, that is, its prosaic section, which I regard as an exegetical gloss, reveals how that cult was understood by an audience who were not familiar with the cultural context addressed in the oracular section. From this perspective, it will be noted that the style and the vocabulary of the

gloss in Q 53 are different from that of the rest of sura and from the other suras in our corpus (in which there is no reference to angelogical disputes). However, the style of the gloss does resemble that of other sections of the Qurʾān where the accusation of angel-worship is a salient element of the polemic against the *mušrikūn*.

Now, the *crux* is to determine who inserted the gloss and in what circumstances. From a traditional perspective the longer textual section of the sura is a later insertion that reflects what was "revealed" to Muḥammad in the Medinan period. From this perspective, one may infer that the idea expressed in the "Medinan" (i.e., prosaic) section reflects a change in Muḥammad's understanding of the worship practices of his opponents. This change in the representation of the cult of the pre-Islamic deities would thus be another in a long list of conceptual changes that the Prophet made during his career. In my view, however, the frequency and the conspicuousness of these changes are too great to connect the Qurʾān to a single author. Distinguishing between the work of the glossator and the oracular part of the sura is certainly a better approach than attributing the whole composition to a single author. Once one abandons the model of chronological development and of a "Meccan/Medinan dynamic," the likelihood that the sura was composed by a single author decreases in light of the stylistic, cultural, and theological differences between the oracular and prosaic sections of the sura. If so, there are other plausible scenarios to be considered.

A first possibility is to assume that some Qurʾānic materials predate the preaching of Muḥammad. We can imagine that either the Prophet or his early followers (or both) had access to ancient texts or oral compositions. We also can imagine that the gloss in Q 53 was added by Muḥammad himself, or by a member of his community, as a comment to a book that s/he was reading or to a sermon that s/he was reciting.[65] The consequences for our understanding of the early Muslim community are considerable. According to this approach, Muḥammad himself used earlier texts and adapted them to the new social and religious circumstances of the Hijaz in the first third of the 7th century. This approach implies that the traditional representation of the Qurʾānic *mušrikūn* as idolaters is the memory of an archaic past that was used in traditional sources to create a context for Muḥammad's prophetic career.

A second possibility is to consider the gloss in Q 53 as a post-Muḥammadan *addendum*.[66] From this perspective,

---

[64] Ibid., p. 147.

[65] A similar possibility has been proposed – on the basis of arguments different from mine – by Patricia Crone (Crone, "Problem in sura 53").

[66] On other possible cases of post-Muḥammadan additions (i.e., Q 3:7 and 3:144), see Sinai, *The Qurʾan: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, pp. 52-54.

the oracular section of the sura was composed by Muḥammad himself, or by a person in his community, whereas the gloss was added by a later redactor (or redactors) living in a different cultural and historical environment. If so, it follows that the information transmitted in Islamic sources about the religious and cultic practices of the *mušrikūn* is more accurate than the occasional inconsistency between Qurʾānic and traditional data suggests. This inconsistency would indeed be motivated by the fact that the several Qurʾānic passages in which the *mušrikūn* are described as henotheists, rather than polytheists, were composed in a different context than the one in which Muḥammad's polemic against his Meccan opponents took place. I consider this second approach more likely than the first one, as it does not require a sophisticated and, perhaps, excessively elaborate revision of the relationship between the Qurʾān and traditional accounts of Muḥammad's life.

There are additional considerations to be made about Q 53. First, according to Islamic tradition, Q 53 included the infamous Satanic verses in which the three deities are addressed in positive terms as "the high flying cranes" whose intercession is to be sought. This unexpected concession to the Arab pagan pantheon was provoked – according to Islamic tradition – by Satan's intervention in the revelation. However, with divine assistance Muḥammad revoked the embarrassing verses. This is not the place to evaluate the historical reliability of the reports about the Satanic verses and the authenticity of the abrogated verse.[67] Rather, we are interested in the possible historical elements of the story. In fact, the traditional Satanic verses story seems to acknowledge that the Qurʾānic materials underwent successive re-elaborations before attaining their final shape. According to the tradition, an explanatory comment was inserted to rectify the shameful identification of the pagan deities as divine intercessors. This comment coincides exactly with the gloss that was interpolated in the text. Of course, the tradition attributes this comment to the Prophet himself, something that, however, is highly improbable in light of the above-mentioned difficulty with connecting the entirety of the sura with a single author. By contrast, the traditional explanation that the rectifying comment was inserted after the revelation about the pagan deities confirms the hypothesis formulated above, that is, the gloss did not belong to the original core of the sura. Whether the gloss was inserted to correct what came to

be considered as a theological mistake or to provide an exegetical explanation is not of importance here. The relevant conclusion to be drawn from the Satanic verses episode is the implicit recognition by traditional sources that the text of the Qurʾān was in fact subjected to a process of redaction.

A final consideration to be made relates to the initial oracular segment at vv. 1-18 of Q 53. The pericope describes the twofold apparition of a "mighty power" (*šadīd al-quwā*) who conveys a revelation to the speaking visionary (*fa-ʾawḥā ilā ʿabdihi mā ʾawḥā*, v. 10). The first apparition occurs at the highest horizon (*bi-l-ufuqi al-aʿlā*, v. 7) while the second occurs near a lote-tree (*sidra*) in the garden of the boundary (*ǧannat al-maʾwā*, v. 14). As I have argued elsewhere, the setting in which the visions take place closely resembles the cosmological descriptions of the heavenly mountain in Ephrem's (d. 373 CE) *Hymns on Paradise*.[68] Similar textual parallels may be explained by the collective cosmological imagery of late antique societies, or by positing a hypotextual relationship between the Qurʾānic passage and Ephrem's poems. This last hypothesis may be supported by the wide diffusion of Ephrem's *Hymns* in the centuries after the poet's death in the 4th century CE. In this context, let us mention one additional element that merits attention.

The paradisiacal images evoked in Q 53 are devoid of the complex Christian symbolism that abound in the representations of the Edenic garden in Ephrem's works and, generally, in Syriac literature. The Qurʾānic passage contains no traces of these tropes or images, which a Christian audience would have connected to subjects like Jesus' redemptive mission. From this perspective, one can speculate that the author of vv. 1-18 of Q 53 was familiar with Syriac hymns – if not with Ephrem's work itself – which he used as a model for his own compositions, but from which he omitted any element related to Christian symbolism. The decision to omit these elements may be explained by his audience's disinterest in, or unfamiliarity with, these Christian elements. The profile of this author coincides with traditional representations of Muḥammad as a merchant who traveled in a Syriac-speaking region. During his journeys he would have been exposed to Syriac hymns which he might have "imported" to his environment, perhaps in an effort to adapt the contents of his sources to the needs of a local society, whose members were not interested in, or accustomed to, the complex symbolism of the Syriac poetic.

---

[67] The Satanic verses episode has been accepted as authentic by many Western scholars on the ground of the criterion of embarrassment. However, see Crone's recent criticism of this position in *ibid.*, pp. 20-21. On Satanic verses episode, see Shahab Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2017.

[68] Tommaso Tesei, "Commentary on Q 53," in *The Qurʾan Seminar Commentary: A Collaborative Analysis of 50 Select Passages*, ed. Mehdi Azaiez, Gabriel S. Reynolds, Tommaso Tesei, and Hamza Zafer, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2016, p. 374.

Q 73 & 74

The exegetical gloss in Q 53 is not a unique case in our corpus of suras. Indeed, the corpus contains several examples of this kind of gloss (e.g., Q 103:3; 99:6-8; 85:8-11; 84:25; 78:37-40; 70:4, 11, 30). In general, the language and style of the exegetical glosses betray their origin in a different environment. This environment sometimes can be identified with that of longer Qurʾānic suras. On the following pages, I will discuss three more cases in which glosses were added to previously composed written material.

The first gloss is found in sura 74, al-Muddaṯṯir. The sura takes its name from a term that occurs in the initial invocation to "the one who is enveloped [likely in a mantle]" (muddaṯṯir). This invocation, yaʾayyuhā l-muddaṯṯir ("oh you who are enveloped"), has only one parallel in the Qurʾānic corpus, in the immediately preceding sura 73 (al-Muzzammil), which opens with yaʾayyuhā l-muzzammil, "oh you who wraps up." Perhaps – indeed, probably – it was because of this similarity that the two suras were placed next to one another in the final redaction of the Qurʾān. The two suras also share a similar structure. The first eight verses of Q 73 explain how to perform prayer to the Lord, while the following verses mostly contain eschatological warnings and apocalyptic reminders. The beginning of Q 74 similarly includes exhortations, followed by verses that evoke the final events. The length of the verses differ in the two suras. The verses in Q 73 are longer than Q 74, while the latter is stylistically closer to other suras in our corpus. It is possible that Q 73 was composed at a second stage, on the model of Q 74, and perhaps by a different author, but there is no compelling evidence to support this view.

Each sura contains an exegetical gloss. In both cases the gloss occurs in a single verse that is substantially longer than the average length of verses in the two suras. Each gloss contains a comment about the preceding verses. In Q 73 the gloss occurs in the final verse (v. 20) and complements the directions about how to perform the prayer found at the beginning of the sura (esp. vv. 2-7). The statement in v. 6 that prayer during the night is more efficient than prayer during the day is explained in v. 20, in which the Qurʾān concedes that one cannot stay awake the whole night and allows believers – especially those who are sick or traveling – to recite "what is easy (for you)." Whoever inserted the gloss surely wanted to encourage pious members of the community to take some time to sleep at night!

As for the gloss in Q 74, it occurs at v. 31 and appears to be an expansion on and explanation of v. 30. Verse 30 refers to nineteen enigmatic and unspecified beings who guard the saqar, an instrument of eschatological punishment mentioned in vv. 26-29.[69] The gloss in v. 31 adds details about some of the enigmatic elements mentioned in v. 30. It specifies that the nineteen beings who guard the saqar are angels and that the saqar is a kind of fire: "And We have not made the keepers of the Fire except angels." The polemical tone suggests that we are again dealing with an angeological controversy about the number of beings mentioned in v. 30. Such a polemic is apparently extraneous to the statement in v. 30. Indeed, the information about the nineteen beings does not seem to imply anything related, or relatable, to a dispute. We can imagine that the polemical attitude in the gloss emerged from controversies that arose at a secondary stage. The vague statement about the number of the beings, guardians of the saqar, generated questions by members of other religious communities for whom angelology was an important concept. However, if the verse that contains the polemic was interpolated, it is likely that these communities were not the same as those originally addressed by Q 74. In all likelihood, this type of polemic was not part of the original context of Q 74.

Whereas the gloss in Q 73 occurs at the end of the sura, the gloss in Q 74 is located in the middle of the sura. In all probability, however, Q 74 originally ended with v. 30, while vv. 32-56 originally belonged to a different sura. If so, the gloss at v. 31 was added immediately after the verse that originally closed Q 74. Support for this assumption is found in v. 32, which arguably was the first verse of an originally independent sura. Indeed, v. 32 contains an invocation to the moon, wa-l-qamr. As is known, in the Qurʾān oaths usually function as opening formulas, although they sometimes occur in the middle of a sura – as in Q 84:18, which also contains an oath about the moon. Note, however, that the type of oath in Q 74:32, which is composed of the conjunction wa- followed by a single term without any qualifying adjective or verb, appears elsewhere in the Qurʾān only at the beginning of a sura and never in its middle. Q 74:32 is further distinguished by the fact that the oath is preceded by the negative exclamation kallā. The combination is ambiguous. The word kallā usually introduces either an apocalyptic warning or an invective against the unbelievers. Apart from Q 74:32, kallā is never followed by an oath.

These peculiarities of v. 32 may be related to the gloss in v. 31. The addition of the gloss in a manuscript containing Q 74 may have generated confusion. The "textual

[69] According to Daniel Beck, these nineteen beings are the twelve zodiacal signs plus the seven planets (Daniel Beck, *Evolution of the Early Qurʾān. From Anonymous Apocalypse to Charismatic Prophet*, New York, Bern, Peter Lang, 2018, p. 20). I thank Marijn van Putten for drawing my attention to this publication. According to van Putten: "It is a clear astrological reference which the [author of the] exegetical gloss was evidently disturbed by, hence the polemics recasting such a heathen topic as angelic" (private conversation, Dec 10, 2018).

occupation" of the space that originally separated the two suras (the first of which ended with the present v. 30, and the other began with what is now v. 32) may have confused later readers and redactors, who came to read the two originally independent chapters as a single one. If so, the exclamation *kallā* at the beginning of v. 32 may be a later interpolation, added to harmonize the abrupt and discontinuous transition from the long explanatory comment in the gloss in v. 31 to the oath in v. 32. Of course, this explanation only works if we assume that the exegetical gloss was added to written materials, i.e., the two suras were already circulating in written form when the gloss was added. This assumption would obviously have implications for the history of the redaction and transmission of the Qur'ānic text. The next case study corroborates the idea that some Qur'ānic materials in our corpus of suras circulated in written form before they were revised and expanded with the add of exegetical glosses.

Q 91

The last exegetical gloss that I address in this article occurs in sura 91, al-Šams. Like other suras in our corpus, Q 91 begins with an oath – to the Sun – that is followed by a series of oaths – all about natural elements: the moon, the day, the night etc. The fifteen verses that compose the sura are short, on average two or three words. The phenomenon that attracts our attention here is the anomalous length of vv. 13-14. These verses are part of a pericope that starts at v. 11 and ends with the final verse of the sura (v. 15). This pericope presents the story of the Ṯamūd as an example of a people who were destroyed because they refused God's prophets. The "anomalous verses" 13-14 report the story of a she-camel, which also occurs – with further details – in other Qur'ānic passages (Q 7:73-79; 11:61-68; 17:59; 26:141-159; 54:23-31). The verses provide some key elements of the story: an exhortation by an unnamed messenger of God (likely Ṣāliḥ) to let the she-camel drink; the refusal of the Ṯamūd, who hamstring the she-camel; and God's reaction to their sin, which leads to the destruction of the Ṯamūd. Even if these two long verses do not offer as many details as other Qur'ānic passages, they include narrative elements that convey a general understanding of a story that would otherwise be obscure – given the scant information provided in the short verses of the pericope (vv. 11, 12, and 15). Unlike vv. 13-14, these short verses have the same length as other verses in the sura. This suggests that vv. 11, 12, and 15 were part of the original core of the sura, whereas vv. 13-14 were added to provide details about the story of the Ṯamūd. If I am correct, then these verses are another explanatory gloss on the original components of the sura.

The anomalous length of vv. 13-14 is not the only indication that they are a secondary addition to the text. The author of the gloss left a clear trace of her/his work. Verse 13 includes the verb *yaḫāfu*. The subject of this verb is usually assumed to be *rabbuhum*, "their Lord," in v. 12. If so, then vv. 14-15 mean "[…] and their Lord doomed them because of their sin and leveled them [v. 15] and He did not fear the consequences of that (*'uqbāhā*)." Now, the idea that God did not fear the consequences of punishing the Ṯamūd is theological nonsense. Why should God fear the consequences of His punishment? The problem disappears if we assume that this enigmatic statement was not part of the original version of the sura. Once the exegetical gloss at vv. 13-14 is removed, the verb *yaḫāfu* in v. 15 can be re-connected to its original subject, that is, the substantive *ašqāhā*, "the most wicked of them" (i.e., of the Ṯamūd), in v. 12. In this manner, the pericope composed by vv. 11, 12, and 15 regains its original meaning: "[v. 11] In their arrogant cruelty, the people of Ṯamūd called [their messenger] a liar, [v. 12] when the most wicked man among them rose [against him]. [v. 15] And he [the most wicked of them] did not fear the consequences of that."[70] The original meaning of the passage is radically altered by the insertion of the gloss. Verses 13-14 were no doubt intended as a parenthetical note, similar to the modern use of square brackets. The absence of any demarcation sign misled later readers and reciters who had no choice but to connect the verb *yaḫāfu* to its closest subject in the newly extended passage.

The gloss at vv. 13-14 sheds some light on the history of the redaction of the Qur'ān and its reception. In all probability, the gloss was inserted into a written text, since it is implausible that such a break in the exposition as the one observed above was made while performing an oral recitation. This suggests that some Qur'ānic materials were circulating in a written form before the final canonization of the text – as confirmed by later Islamic sources.[71] This also explains the location of the gloss in the middle of the pericope (i.e., in between vv. 12 and 15) instead of at its end, as one would expect. It will be noted that the position chosen by the glossator does not provide any exegetical advantage. In fact, it creates confusion that could have been avoided if the gloss had been added at the end of the pericope. Let us compare the two options.

---

[70] Here I modify the translation of Abdel Haleem, who freely translates v. 15 as "He did not hesitate to punish them." This translation may reflect the translator's willingness to avoid the theological nonsense illustrated above. Abdel Haleem adds a note in which he explains: "One of the lexical meanings of *'uqba* is *jaza'* [*sic*], here 'to punish'; or 'does not fear the consequences'."

[71] See the bibliography at n. 73.

The gloss in the *textus receptus*:

11 In their arrogant cruelty, the people of Ṯamūd called [their messenger] a liar, **12** when the most wicked man among them rose [against him] **13** *The messenger of God said to them, '[Leave] God's camel to drink,'* **14** *but they called him a liar and hamstrung it. Their Lord destroyed them for their crime and levelled them.* **15** And he did not fear the consequences of that.

Text as it would have been if the gloss had been added at the end:

11 In their arrogant cruelty, the people of Ṯamūd called [their messenger] a liar, **12** when the most wicked man among them rose [against him] **15** and he did not fear the consequences of that. **13** *The messenger of God said to them, '[Leave] God's camel to drink,'* **14** *but they called him a liar and hamstrung it. Their Lord destroyed them for their crime and leveled them.*

Why did the glossator insert her/his comment into the story rather than placing it at the end? Perhaps, s/he was also a copyist who assumed that the sura ended at v. 12 – possibly because in the manuscript that s/he was copying the final verse appeared on either the reverse of a folio or on a different folio. Perhaps s/he was not a copyist but a reader who added her/his gloss in a space left by the scribe who had written the manuscript. If so, the gloss may have been added at the end of a folio that ended with v. 12, while the final verse of the sura, v. 15, was written on the first line of the following folio. Be that as it may, the only clear evidence that we have is that the insertion of the gloss changed the meaning of the text. This change raises two more considerations. First, the glossator must have been working at a time when the text had not yet been fixed. The eventual acceptance of her/his gloss as part of the sura suggests that there was no fixed codex (so that the gloss could not be discarded by way of comparison). Second, the manuscript to which the gloss was added must have played an important role in the written transmission of the Qurʾān, since the altered form of the final verses of Q 91 became authoritative and eventually was included in the *vulgate*.

Additional considerations arise when we consider the *horizon d'attente* of the glossator. S/he felt the need to add information about the story evoked therein. This suggests that her/his audience were not familiar with the narrative cycle of the Ṯamūd. Her/his exegetical gloss exposes a need to provide details about the story for those who could not fully understand the example of the prophet Ṣāliḥ and the people of Ṯamūd to which the final segment of Q 91 alludes. The story is related to local traditions that may not have been accessible to all Arab speakers living in the Peninsula and the Near East when the new community of believers established its identity as a religious group. Thus, one should ask what members of the community benefited from the gloss? When and where was the gloss added? In what cultural and geographical context? Arab speakers living outside of the Peninsula are the most likely addressees. It is easy to imagine that the glossator decided to write a marginal note with supplementary information on the story of the Ṯamūd. This gloss would have served as a useful base for answering questions about the account, questions raised previously by people who heard the recitation of the sura.[72]

To what kind of Qurʾānic materials did the glossator have access? Which traditions about the Ṯamūd did s/he use to compile her exegetical comment? Let us compare the two verses in question with other Qurʾānic passages that include the story of the impious people and the she-camel (Q 7:73-79; 11:61-68; 17:59; 26:141-159; 54:23-31).[73] It is striking that the noun *nāqa*, "she-camel," and the verb *ʿaqara*, "to hamstring," occur not only in the gloss but also in the other passages. However, the terminological overlap is limited to these two terms and the glossator does not quote from any other more developed versions of the story found elsewhere in the Qurʾānic corpus. The terminology of the gloss is unlike that of the other passages. For instance, the verb *damdama*, "to destroy" (v. 14) is a *hapax*, while the verb *sawwā*, "to level" (v. 14), occurs nowhere else in the Qurʾān to designate the destruction of impious people. This suggests that the glossator was not the same person who composed the other passages about the story of the she-camel in the Qurʾān. One wonders whether or not s/he had knowledge of the versions of the story that were included in the Qurʾān, and whether the pericope to which s/he added the gloss was part of a corpus of texts that included also other accounts of the she-came.

The Qurʾānic stories of the she-camel may be placed in two groups on the basis of narratological features: [1] Those verses in which the disobedience of the Ṯamūd

---

[72] It is likely that the gloss originally was meant to address an audience composed of listeners rather than readers. A reader would have been able to recover information about the Ṯamūd that is missing in Q 91 from other Qurʾānic passages. By contrast, an oral reading of the sura would require the integration of narrative details addressed to the listeners who were not totally familiar with what happened to the Ṯamūd and the she-camel. However, we must also consider the possibility that the sura circulated as an independent text or as a part of a corpus of texts that did not include a highly developed narrative on the Ṯamūd. In that case, the glossator may have wanted to provide readers with details of the story that were not directly accessible from those written materials.

[73] The story of the Ṯamūd is also told in Q 27:45-53 and Q 41:13-18. None of these passages, however, refers to the she-camel motif. For an overview of scholarship on parallel traditions in the Qurʾān, see Joseph Witztum, "Variant Traditions, Relative Chronology and the Study of Intra-Quranic parallels," in *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone*, ed. Behnam Sadeghi, Asad Q. Ahmed, Adam Silverstein, and Robert Hoyland, Leiden, Brill, 2014, pp. 1-50.

relates to their refusal to let the she-camel feed, i.e., Q 7:73-79 (esp. v. 73) and 11:61-68 (esp. v. 64). [2] Those verses in which the Ṯamūd refuse to let the she-camel drink, i.e., Q 26:141-159 (esp. v. 155) and 54:23-31 (esp. v. 28).[74] The glossator refers to the second group of Qurʾānic traditions about the she-camel: Q 91:13 evokes God's order to let the she-camel drink: *nāqat allāh wa-suqyahā*, "the she-camel of God and her drink." This statement may be connected to two verses: [1] Q 26:155: *la-hā širb wa-la-hum širb*, "for her there is drink and for you there is drink," and [2] Q 54:28: *al-māʾa qisma bayna-hum kull širb muḥtaḍar*, "the water is to be divided between them [i.e., between the Ṯamūd and the she-camel], each drink being regulated." While the glossator does not directly quote these passages, there is little doubt that the cryptic sentence in Q 91:13 refers to the tradition of the second type in which the Ṯamūd refuse to let the she-camel drink.

Why did the glossator privilege one kind of tradition over the other? Did s/he make a choice between them and opted for the "drinking tradition"? Or did s/he ignore of the first type of traditions, in which the Ṯamūd refuse to let the she-camel feed? The easiest explanation is that s/he did not have access to the Qurʾānic materials that include the feeding tradition. It will be noted that the drinking tradition which s/he selected occurs only in suras stylistically similar to the sura in which the gloss is found. The fact that the glossator used narrative material found only in suras similar to the one in which s/he added the gloss suggests that s/he was working on a stylistically coherent corpus of texts. That is to say, the glossator probably did not have access to the final redaction of the Qurʾānic *vulgate* but rather to written materials that form one part of it, possibly consisting of the group of suras that I have analyzed in this article.

CONCLUSIONS

Islamic tradition transmits several diverse accounts about the "collection" of the Qurʾān. According to the most widely accepted account, the collection was made during the reign of the third caliph ʿUṯmān (r. 644-656 CE).[75] At the same time, the tradition has transmitted several divergent opinions that attribute roles in the work of "collection" to other illustrious personalities, e.g., Abū Bakr and ʿAbd al-Malik.[76] Western scholars have advanced

several hypotheses about the codification of the Qurʾān without reaching any consensus.[77] Current views concerning the dating of the earliest fragments of Qurʾān manuscripts seem to dismiss the hypothesis of a late canonization of the text, as proposed by Wansbrough.[78] Even if we do not know the exact dates in which these fragments were written, there seems to be an increasing scholarly consensus that the *vulgate* emerged in the middle of the 7th century—a position that I myself advocate.[79]

Regrettably, the idea of a mid 7th c. redaction is often paired with the questionable assertion that no significant change could be made to the Qurʾānic materials in the period between the date of Muḥammad's death (632 CE, according to Islamic tradition) and the moment on which the text was completed. Those who advocate this view

[74] Q 17:59 represents an exception as it does not include any of these narrative features.

[75] On which see Viviane Comerro, *Les traditions sur la constitution du muṣḥaf de ʿUthmān* (Beiruter Texte und Studien 134), Beirut, Orient-Institut Beirut, 2012.

[76] On the collection of the Qurʾān, see Alfred-Louis de Prémare, *Les fondations de l'islam. Entre écriture et histoire*, Paris, Seuil, 2002,

pp. 285-300; David S. Powers, *Muḥammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, 2009, pp. 155-162; Herbert Berg, "The Qurʾān: Collection and Canonization," in *The Routledge Handbook on Early Islam*, ed. Herbert Berg, London, Routledge, 2017, pp. 37-48. See also Etan Kohlberg and Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *Revelation and Falsification: The Kitâb al-qirâʾ ât of Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Sayyârî*, Leiden, Brill, 2009, "Introduction."

[77] Paul Casanova, *Mohammed et la fin du monde: étude critique sur l'Islam primitive*, Paris, P. Geuthner, 1911-1924, pp. 103-142; Alphonse Mingana, "The Transmission of the Kurʾān," in *Journal of the Manchester Egyptian and Oriental Society* 5 (1916), pp. 25-47; John Burton, *The Collection of the Qurʾan*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977; Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, pp. 20, 44, 50, 170-202; Fred Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, Princeton, NJ, Darwin Press, 1998, pp. 152-158; Angelika Neuwirth, "Vom Rezitationstext über die Liturgie zum Kanon: Zu Entstehung und Wiederauflösung der Surenkomposition im Verlauf der Entwicklung eines islamischen Kultus," in *The Qurʾān as Text*, ed. Stephen Wild, Leiden, Brill, 1996, p. 78 n. 24; *ead*., "Structural, linguistic and literary features," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qurʾān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 98-99; *ead*., "Structure and the Emergence of Community," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qurʾān*, ed. Andrew Rippin, Oxford, Blackwell, 2006, p. 143; Chase Robinson, *ʿAbd al-Malik* (Makers of the Muslim World), Oxford, Oneworld, 2005, pp. 102-104; Stephen Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginning of Islam*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, pp. 147-158; Nicolai Sinai, "When did the consonantal skeleton of the Quran reach closure? Part I," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 77/2 (2014), pp. 273-292; *id*., "When did the consonantal skeleton of the Quran reach closure? Part II," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 77/3 (2014), pp. 509-521. On recent attempts to date early Qurʾānic manuscripts with radiocarbon dating, see: Michael Josef Marx and Tobias J. Jocham, "Radiocarbon (14C) Dating of Qurʾān Manuscripts," in *Qurʾān Quotations Preserved on Papyrus Documents, 7th-10th Centuries* (Documenta Coranica 2), ed. Andreas Kaplony and Michael Marx, Leiden, Brill, pp. 188-221. See also: Eva Mira Youssef-Grob, "Radiocarbon (14C) Dating of Early Islamic Documents: Background and Prospects," in *ibid*., pp. 139-187.

[78] Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, pp. 47-50.

[79] Marijn van Putten makes a strong case for a mid 7th c. redaction of the of the of the Qurʾān. Marijn van Putten, "'The Grace of God' as evidence for a written Uthmanic Archetype: The importance of shared orthographic idiosyncrasies," *BSOAS* 82/2, pp. 271-288.

consider this time period too short to allow alterations to the (hypothetical) original corpus of Muḥammad's "revelations."[80] Recall, however, that Muḥammad's community underwent dramatic and very rapid changes in its formative period. According to the sources, a small community from the Hijaz achieved a hegemonic position in the Arabian Peninsula and later established its control over a large territory in former Byzantine and Sasanian provinces. As these events unfolded, many members of the original community left their home in the Hijaz and many new members from different geographical areas joined the community during its territorial expansion. As a result, the percentage of people in the community who had direct contact with the Prophet substantially decreased in a very short period of time. These are the perfect conditions for loss, dilution, or even distortion of historical memory.

It is unlikely that in similar circumstances the transmission of Muḥammad's "revelation" could be protected from external contamination. Traditional and conservative views about the redaction of the Qurʾān imply that the knowledge of materials commonly recognized as Qurʾānic was so widespread that any attempt to introduce new materials could easily be unmasked. The actual situation, however, must have been more complex. Following the Arab territorial expansion, most members of the new community, especially the new members, would have had only a vague idea of the doctrines preached by the charismatic, founding Prophet, and even less knowledge of his actual words. In sum, it is likely that the historical circumstances that characterized the early Islamic period influenced the redaction of the Qurʾān. It is unlikely that a corpus of prophetic speeches, not yet been committed to writing, was preserved intact – without any alteration – in such chaotic times.

The corpus of suras studied here differ significantly from other parts of the Qurʾān, both stylistically and thematically. Unlike other Qurʾānic materials, these suras manifest a socio-religious worldview that is consistent with the one described in traditional accounts on Muḥammad's life. It is tempting to see in this corpus a direct entry point to the context in which Muḥammad's preaching took place or a direct testimony to his preaching. The exegetical glosses that were added to our corpus at a secondary stage of the transmission suggest two important facts. First, the glosses likely were added in a cultural context different from the one in which the suras were produced. Second, these glosses were added to previously written material, confirming the report in traditional Islamic sources that parts of Muḥammad's preaching had been written down by the time of his death. According to these reports, folios in possession of Muḥammad's wife Ḥafṣa were used to redact the Qurʾān canon.[81] One wonders if our corpus of suras coincides with those early Qurʾānic materials.

The exegetical glosses provide us a new lens to achieve a better understanding of some notions transmitted by the traditional sources. The glosses suggest that there were several scribal interventions during the process that culminated in the establishment of the *vulgate*. The very shape of the Qurʾānic text suggests that the corpus underwent several revisions that involved the adding of new elements and, perhaps, omissions.[82] In this case, it should be noted that certain Qurʾānic passages, e.g., Q 18:83-102 and Q 30:2-7, seem to refer to a political scenario outside of a local Arabian context and likely were composed during the first Arab expansions into Byzantine territory.[83] Similarly, Q 19:22-27, about the nativity of Jesus, arguably may be connected to a geographical area outside of the Hijaz.[84] In general, the heterogeneity of the Qurʾānic corpus suggests that it is a combination of several diverse literary materials that came to be attributed to a single author – traditionally identified as Muḥammad.

In my view, the Qurʾān as we have it now is not the collection of texts produced by a single author; it is rather the product of a redactional process that brought together a diversity of literary materials, transmitted in diverse ways (oral/written) and through diverse channels. Some of these materials go back to Muḥammad himself – I would identify these materials with the corpus of

---

[80] See Angelika Neuwirth, "Zur Archäologie einer Heiligen Schrift. Überlegungen zum Koran vor seiner Kompilation," in *Streit um den Koran. Die Luxenberg-Debatte: Standpunkte und Hintergründe*, ed. C. Burgmer, Berlin, Schiler, 2007, p. 130; *ead.*, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike: Ein europäischer Zugang*, Berlin, 2010, p. 250.

[81] On these traditions, see de Prémare, *Les fondations de l'islam*, pp. 290-292; Powers, *Muḥammad Is Not the Father*, pp. 155-162.

[82] On possible omissions and additions of new elements see Powers, *Muḥammad Is Not the Father*; *id.*, *Zayd*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. See also Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, p. 152; Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *Le Coran silencieux et le Coran parlant. Sources scripturaires de l'islam entre histoire et ferveur*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2011, chaps. 1 & 2.

[83] See Kevin van Bladel, "The Alexander Legend in the Qurʾān 18:83-102," in *The Qurʾān in Its Historical Context*, ed. Reynolds, pp. 175-203; Tommaso Tesei, "The prophecy of Ḏū-l-Qarnayn (Q 18: 83-102) and the Origins of the Qurʾānic Corpus," in *Miscellanea Arabica* (Nuova Sapienza Orientale 5), ed. A. Arioli, Ariccia, Aracne, 2013-2014, pp. 273-290; *id.*, "The Romans will win!". A similar case of non-Hijazi origins can be made about the Qurʾānic verses promising reward for dying in battle (i.e., 2:154, 3:169-171, 4:74, 9:111, 47:4-6), on which see *id.*, "Heraclius' War Propaganda and the Qurʾān's Promise of Reward for Dying in Battle," *Studia Islamica* 114 (2019), pp. 219-247.

[84] See Stephen Shoemaker, "Christmas in the Qurʾān: The Qurʾānic Account of Jesus' Nativity and Palestinian Local Tradition," *JSAI* 28 (2003), pp. 11-39; G. Dye, "La nuit du Destin et la nuit de la Nativité," in *Figures bibliques en islam*, ed. G. Dye and F. Nobilio, Bruxelles-Fernelmont, EME, 2011, pp. 107-169.

suras selected above, minus the exegetical glosses. Others were altered as they circulated among the members of a growing community in which Muḥammad's preaching was arguably received in a variety of different ways; others were composed after his death and attributed to him. Viewed in this manner, the Qur'ān manifests the rapid developments and changes that accompanied the rise of the new religious movement later identified as Islam. The explanatory model proposed here revolves around the idea of a text that developed together with the community of people who came to regard it as its sacred scripture.