Late Antique Syriac Homilies and the Quran

A Comparison of Content and Context

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This paper explores the recent debate between scholars of the Quran and Early Islam about whether it is appropriate to view the Quran, or parts of it, as a homily. Scholarly attempts at comparisons between corpora of Syriac homilies from Late Antiquity and the quranic corpus have yielded promising results without however addressing the crucial question of the definition of the homily in general and the Syriac homily more specifically. The present study wishes to attempt to resolve this shortcoming and, by way of a comparison of the content and context of passages from both the Quran and Syriac homilies, try to show that such a comparative study does indeed offer promising perspectives for our understanding of the text and context of Islam's sacred scripture.

1

As any scholar who has been working on the Quran or Early Islam during the past two decades very well knows, there has been a long-standing debate over the nature/extent of the relationship between the Syriac language and quranic Arabic and/or between Eastern Christian writings and the verses of the Quran.[1] Although this debate is not new, it had somewhat been set aside for most of the second half of the twentieth century, until it was unquestionably revived by the publication of Christopher Luxenberg's *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran* in 2000, followed by its expanded English translation in 2007.[2] This now famous book sparked heated debates among specialists of Islamic and Semitic studies, and received numerous reviews ranging from overly-laudative to blatantly hostile ones.[3] One of the shortcomings of Luxenberg's study is that he fails to give any historical context to his hypotheses, which is to say that he claims the core of the Quran is of "Christian Syrian origins",[4] but he does not provide a plausible scenario to accommodate his claims.[5] His entire monograph is based on an *ad hoc* philological comparative study between the Arabic of the Quran and the Syriac of modern dictionaries,[6] making it quite a sterile environment to try and make sense of how the quranic text came into being.

2

However, many subsequent scholarly endeavours, while most definitely benefiting from the momentum created by Luxenberg's book, have offered much more pondered and contextualized approaches to the question of the relationship between the Syriac milieu and that in which the Quran emerged. This was mainly achieved through a comparison between specific Syriac writings and relevant verses of the Quran. Among the different literary genres of the former, homilies have proven to be choice candidates for such comparative purposes, as will be briefly discussed hereafter.[7] Indeed, these Syriac homilies or *mīmrē* (sing. *mīmrō*), especially those composed during the period of history referred to as Late Antiquity which roughly extends from the third to the eighth century ce, seem to offer pertinent parallels to the Quran as regards to contents (biblical narratives, parenetical discourses, etc.), form (versification, allusiveness, etc.) and context (both historical and cultural). But very recently, some questions were raised by scholars such as Nicolai Sinai and especially Stephen J. Shoemaker, who have asked whether it is correct to consider the Quran as a homily and have frankly stated that it is not.[8]

3

This issue is highly important since following the two latter academics' conclusions would mean disregarding, at least in part, much of the findings and hypotheses of almost two centuries of scholarship (on which, see below) and would potentially slow down or halt further comparative examination between late antique *mīmrē* and the text of the Quran. On the other hand, if it were possible to show that parts of Islam's scripture conform to certain characteristics of Syriac homilies, and even more so, that in some instances the Quran might actually define itself as a homily, it would then open up new possibilities for our understanding of this text's history and its relation to the historical and cultural milieu in which it came into being.

4

In the following pages, I therefore wish to succinctly expose the main pros and cons of these two competing understandings of the Quran in order to respond to some of the objections raised by Sinai and Shoemaker, and by doing so, attempt to sketch a very broad definition of the homily, with a special focus on the Syriac homily. Having identified specific features of the *mīmrō*, a comparative study of the latter with parts of the quranic text will allow me to suggest that both share a number of common characteristics, which will then lead me to argue that the Quran, as a *corpus*, does in fact contain Arabic homilies among other literary genres.[9] As such, as I will try to demonstrate hereafter, it has the potential to make us reassess some points regarding the Quran's content (a point which is quite often discussed in modern scholarship, but not necessarily in a comparative manner), and context (which is much less so: for example, I will ask what the Quran can tell us about the composition of its audience, the interaction between the preacher and the audience, the process of preparation and oral delivery, and other related questions).[10]

The "Reading the Quran as Homily vs the Quran is not a Homily" Debate

5

The idea that the quranic text is somewhat related to Syriac writings,[11] and more specifically, to Syriac homilies, is almost two centuries old since, as far as I know, the very first Western scholar to have suggested this theory, be it in a primitive form, is Samuel Lee (1783–1852),[12] a professor of Arabic at the University of Cambridge, who edited the *Controversial Tracts on Christianity and Mohammedanism* (1824) by the late Henry Martyn and added appendices to them.[13] The second of these, in terms typical of nineteenth-century Orientalism, discusses the possible ways by which Muḥammad "obtained his information respecting the Scriptures and traditions of the Jews and Christians"[14] and suggests that many of the Quran's narratives were taken up by Muḥammad from "the books of the Syrians", among which Ephrem's (d. 373) works would have played a major role.[15] Aside from a proximity in contents, Lee remarks that Ephrem's writings and the Quran share a common form consisting of "a kind of rhythmus" which occurs "frequently in the Sermons of Ephrem".[16]

6

Almost exactly one century after Lee, Tor Andrae followed in his predecessor's footsteps, although without mentioning him, in his *Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum* (1923–1925),[17] in which he compared quranic eschatology to that found in Ephrem's homilies, thereby trying to show that these two corpora are rooted in "one and the same homiletic pattern".[18] A few years later, Edmund Beck also famously authored an article interpreting the quranic descriptions of the heavenly "houris" in light of Ephrem's Syriac *Hymns on Paradise*.[19]

7

What these three instances of scholarly studies have in common is that they compare selected, defined, passages of the Quran to Ephrem's homilies. None of them claim that the whole of the Quran is a homily. Rather, they compare either precise turns of phrases and words or more general literary traits to those found in Ephrem's writings. This, of course, is not without posing the problem of the wide time gap that exists between the two corpora: about two centuries and a half separate them, bringing into question the relevance of Ephrem for such a comparative study.

8

Thereafter, apart from a few scattered and brief allusions to the homiletic features of the Quran,[20] it will only be with Gabriel Said Reynolds' 2010 book *The Qurʾān and its Biblical Subtext* that this subject will once again receive full scholarly treatment. Indeed, Reynolds devotes an entire chapter entitled "Reading the Qurʾān as homily" to the question of the Quran's literary genre in which he notes that oftentimes the latter has been neglected in academia, and that had it not been the case, scholars would have certainly noticed that the Quran has a homiletic relation to the biblical corpus, or in other words, that the "Qurʾān's relationship to its subtext […] is like the relationship of homily and scripture".[21] Building on Tor Andrae's work and having insisted that "[T]he Qurʾān shares a number of telling commonalities with Christian homiletic, in particular with the tradition of Syriac Christian homilies",[22] Reynolds goes on to list a number of shared traits between both corpora which to my mind convincingly showed that one should certainly explore the writings of Syriac authors more pertinent than Ephrem, such as Narsai (d. *c.*502) or Jacob of Serugh (d. 521), for instance, as relevant parallels to *certain parts* (but *not all*) of the quranic text.[23] Among these, it will suffice to mention the allusive nature of both Syriac homilies and narratives of the Quran which implies that their audience had prior knowledge of said narratives,[24] the shared versification meant to facilitate recitation,[25] and the related fact that both corpora were composed for "repeated public recitation".[26]

9

Picking up on Reynolds' remarks, Emran I. el-Badawi stated that "[T]he Qurʾān shares the hermeneutical and literary approach of Syriac Christian homiletic works with which it must be considered in parallel",[27] although he did not put his words to action in his *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions* (2014), and Nicolai Sinai came to very interesting conclusions regarding parallels between Syriac homilists' eschatology and that of the Quran in his 2017 article "The Eschatological Kerygma of the Early Qurʾān",[28] while at the same time emphasizing the main difference between the two, namely the fact that the Quran "styles itself as divine speech" whereas Syriac homilies often explicitly deploy "a human auctorial perspective".[29]

10

But the most critical of Reynolds' proposition is certainly Stephen J. Shoemaker who, in a recent article, argues that "[I]t would be best to set aside entirely the early Christian homily as a possible analogue. The Quran simply does not possess the specific qualities that define a Christian homily and must instead be reckoned as something quite different".[30]

11

Now it is certainly problematic that Reynolds has not addressed the important fact that contrarily to Syriac homilies, the Quran never has recourse to an outside divine or scriptural authority as it—*seemingly*[31]—presents itself as divine speech. Also, it is regrettable that Reynolds goes on to compare these two corpora of texts without ever attempting to define what a homily is in general or more specifically what a Syriac homily consists of. Nevertheless, these flaws should not prevent us from further exploring the possibilities that such a comparative study could yield. On the

contrary, in the following section, I hope on the one hand to define the homily—albeit in broad terms—and on the other, to answer some of Shoemaker's criticism.

Towards a Definition of the Homily

12

In the following, I will attempt to identify some of the main characteristics that define the homily, since in the words of early Christian preaching specialist Wendy Mayer, the question of what exactly constitutes a homily is a "key problem".[32] Also, one of Shoemaker's main points is that "The Qurʾān simply does not possess the specific qualities that define a Christian homily […]. The truth of the matter is that there is very little in terms of form or content that defines the phenomenon of the early Christian homily."[33] Before going into what scholars have said about what the homily is, I would like to look at it from the perspective of their authors/preachers and ask: how do they speak about their own work?

13

The authors of what we, in the West, have come to call "homilies" use a limited set of words to refer to their writings within these same texts. From an etymological perspective, the English word "homily" comes from the Greek ὁμιλία (*homilia*)[34]—through Late Latin *homilia*—from the verb ὁμιλέω (*homiléo*) meaning to "speak" or "converse",[35] which finds a counterpoint in the Latin word *sermo*, from the verb *sermocinor* meaning to "converse". Thus, both ὁμιλία and *sermo* indicate a conversation or dialectic.[36] We also find the Greek verb διδάσκω (*didasko*) and Latin *praedicare* which indicate "instruction" or "teaching", and "speaking" of an audience in the case of the former,[37] and "proclaiming" for the latter[38].

14

Now in the specific instance of Syriac authors, they use a variety of words to refer to a "homily" which appear to be "mostly interchangeable" according to Philip M. Forness.[39] Still according to him, these are *turgōmō*, meaning "explanation, interpretation", "translation" and "discourse, speech";[40] *mamlelō* for "speech, talk";[41] and finally, by far the most common one: *mīmrō* which means "speech, oration"[42] and "sermon"[43].

15

What all these words have in common is of course *orality*, with a few subtleties involving interpretation and instruction (I will come back to these in the third section). This much can also be deduced from context, as can be seen with the following example taken from one of Jacob of Serugh's homily in which he refers to three key elements: the medium of his preaching, which is the *mīmrō*, to the fact that he "repeats" or "recites" it (Syriac verb *tnō*), and to the context of this recitation ("among Your congregations", implying a liturgical *Sitz im Leben*). The following is taken from an introductory prayer (vv. 1–4) in his *Homily on Simon Peter*:

> In all my homilies (*b-kulhūn mīmray*) I call to you, True Son! May all my words be given in you as praise to your Father […] as I recite a homily (*kad tonē nō mīmrō*) in praise of You among Your congregations.[44]

16

It is interesting to note that Syriac to Arabic dictionaries give the nouns *qawl* and *ḥadīṯ* as two of the equivalents of *mīmrō*,[45] which are words commonly used in the Quran,[46] and usually quite plainly translated as "word" and "story", respectively.[47] One can wonder, though, if in some instances they could not be understood more specifically as the equivalent of the Syriac *mīmrō*, that is, as an "oration" or a "discourse" delivered by a preacher (in this case, Muḥammad or

someone else from the early community of proto-Muslims or Believers) in front of an audience, in a liturgical context. These two cases, for instance, would be quite fitting (respectively Q. *al-Ṭāriq* 86:13–14 and Q. *al-Qalam* 68:44):

> This is truly a decisive oration/discourse/homily (*Innahu la-qawl*^{un} *faṣl*) / it is not something to be taken lightly.
>
> So, leave those who reject this oration/discourse/homily to Me! (*Fa-ḏarnī wa-man yukaḏḏibu bi-hāḏā al-ḥadīṯ*)…

17

To come back to Mayer's definition of the Christian homily, she insists on the fact that "[A]t the most basic level […] all we can claim is that a homily is something that conforms to a few essential conditions".[48] What are these "essential conditions"? According to her, the "defining characteristic of the Christian homily" is precisely orality.[49] Apart from what we could be tempted to call the "self-referential" terminology that we have just discussed (i.e., a homily referring to itself as such), and which unequivocally points to an oral setting, distinctive marks of orality in the written documents manifest themselves through direct address, or use of the second person, to mention only two.[50] Thus, in an introduction to his retelling of the biblical narrative of the Tower of Babel in his *Homily on the Tower of Babel* (vv. 69–70), Jacob of Serugh directly addresses his audience in the following manner:

> Therefore, prepare to listen sincerely, O discerning ones, / to this homily, which is full of every profit for the one who gives heed to it (*mēkīl ṭayēb šēmʿō šafyō ō porūšē / l-mīmrō da-mlēl kūl yūtrōnē la-d-ṣōēt lēh*).[51]

18

Such marks of orality, which strongly suggest a liturgical *Sitz im Leben*, are also not infrequent in the Quran as it regularly addresses its audience, at times using the same imperative as the Syriac homilist, such as in Q. *al-Ḥaǧǧ* 22:73: "O, people, here is a parable, so listen carefully! (*Yā ayyuhā al-nās ḍuriba maṯal fa-stamiʿū lahu*)…"[52]

19

Mayer is very sceptical about further defining the homily and the rest of the criteria she gives are qualified as either "problematic" or "inadequate".[53] However, alongside orality, another definite and related characteristic of the homily—although, as Shoemaker rightly observes, it is also a shared feature of New Testament writings and biblical apocrypha[54]—is the fact that it is inherently related to preaching (quite naturally, as it is delivered by a preacher), and therefore to paraenesis (i.e., exhortation).[55] Indeed, another way of translating the Syriac term *mīmrō* in Arabic is by using the word *mawʿiẓa*[56] which appears in several instances in the Quran as something—often translated precisely as an "exhortation"[57]—which is bestowed upon the "Pious" (*li-l-muttaqīn*) or the "Believers" (*li-l-muʾminīn*) and which contains a great benefit for them ("a healing", "guidance and mercy").[58] As such, it is not unlike Jacob of Serugh's foregoing use of *mīmrō* in the sense of something destined for the "discerning ones" and which is "full of every profit". But above all, it is telling that the purpose of this medium's rhetoric is to *convince* its audience in order to ultimately convert them.[59]

20

Therefore, based on the very "essential conditions" of what defines the Christian homily—namely orality and paraenesis (and the ways in/for which they are used)—I would argue that contrary to what Shoemaker says, in some cases the Quran "*does* possess the specific qualities that define a Christian homily". I would even go further and say that according to some of its so-called "self-referential" terminology (in some of its uses of the words *qawl*, *ḥadīṯ* and *mawʿiẓa*), at times the

Quran actually *defines* itself as a homily. Shoemaker also states somewhat paradoxically that "[T]here is very little in terms of form or content that defines the phenomenon of the early Christian homily", quoting Mayer's statement that the homily's "shape is elastic and changes with regional cultural conditions and with time".[60] If parts of the quranic corpus can be considered as Arabic homilies from the seventh century ce, it is then no surprise that they would not have the exact same "form or content" as Greek homilies from the fourth century or Syriac homilies from the sixth century.

21

Also, it is not entirely true that Christian homilies cannot be further defined, and the studies that have attempted to do so, be it in broad terms, tend to invalidate Shoemaker's objection, as well as a second one according to which "[T]he formal poetic structures of this homiletic tradition demanded texts that had been carefully composed *prior* to oral delivery".[61] Thus, in the introduction to their edited volume entitled *Preacher and Audience. Studies in Early Christian and Byzantine Homiletics*,[62] Mary Cummingham and Pauline Allen begin their general definition of a homily as a work "prepared beforehand or delivered *impromptu* at ceremonies".[63] Furthermore, in his "Preaching as the Audience Heard It" article, Nikolai Lipatov-Chicherin suggests an interesting scheme of the process of transmission of homilies from oral to written which starts with the two following actions preceding its oral delivery: the "preliminary sketches and drafts" made by the preacher, as well as the homily's "prepared text written in advance and learned by heart".[64] Nevertheless, as Forness rightly observes in his recent monograph, this scheme is "idealized" and reality was often more complex as certain preachers were highly trained and did not require to go through these two first steps, instead delivering their homily directly *without prior composition*.[65] When Shoemaker concludes his second objection by saying "[I]f Muhammad's Qurʾan were a *memra* [i.e., a Syriac homily], then it almost certainly must have been a written document from the very start", this is simply not true. Some passages of the Quran might have been delivered orally in a spontaneous manner as the Islamic tradition contends, while others might have been aligned with Lipatov-Chicherin's first two steps, his scheme also allowing for the possibility of ulterior modifications (as step three is the stenographic record of the preacher's words as they were uttered; step four is the transcript of the stenographic record into ordinary script; step five is the first edited version prepared for copying by scribes, etc.).[66]

22

If on the most basic level, certain passages of the Quran can qualify as homilies based on some of its terminology through which it possibly qualifies itself as a homily, on traces of orality such as addresses to its audience and on its definite paraenetic features, what results could be inferred from further comparative investigations? In what follows, I will succinctly list some of the main points that characterize the early Christian homily, which I have divided into two categories—content and context—following Forness' tripartite categorization of Cummingham and Allen's identification of ten approaches to understanding sermons,[67] alongside more specific remarks regarding Syriac homilies, which in turn invite comparisons with the Quran.

Some Comparisons of Content and Context

Content

23

The first point is very brief but is worth mentioning as it is a striking characteristic of the Quran: the identity of its preacher is never disclosed. That is to say that although later Muslim exegesis will claim that Muḥammad is the recipient of the quranic revelation and that he is the one who addresses or preaches it to his audience in Mecca and in Medina, none of this information is to

be found in the corpus itself. Therefore, as is the case with the Quran, it is telling that a great number of Greek and Syriac homilies are equally *anonymous*. Otherwise, until about the 900s of the common era, when laymen started preaching homilies, the person delivering the homily always had a religious affiliation, whether he was a patriarch, a monk, a priest, or a bishop (Jacob of Serugh, for example, was both of the latter).[68] I stress this point to ask whether it is possible to consider that the person (or persons) delivering the texts of what would later become part of the Quran might have taken on one such religious rank.

24

Second, as regards the genre of the homilies, as I alluded to earlier (with the case of the Syriac *turgōmō*, meaning "explanation, interpretation"), a homily is predominantly a commentary on a more or less lengthy passage from Scripture; and therefore, it is no surprise that most homilies are exegetical "in that they comment on or use Biblical texts".[69] For instance, Jacob of Serugh devotes an entire (polemical) section (against Jews) of his aforementioned *Homily on the Tower of Babel* (vv. 257–296) to the question of the interpretation of one single verse from the Book of Genesis (namely, 11:7: "Come let us descend") which he introduces in the following manner:

> The symbols that Moses included in his reading (*qēryōnēh*) are amazing; / the matters are hidden (*ksēn*), and who will define their interpretation (*pūšōqayhūn*)?[70]

25

Now, as is well known, a great part of the Quran is made of retellings—one could safely say exegeses—of biblical narratives, mainly through allusions, as is the case with Syriac homilies.[71] This raises the question of whether or not one can consider, as Guillaume Dye has recently suggested, that the Quran's biblical narratives were originally commentaries of scriptural lessons contained in a lectionary.[72] In this regard, it is interesting to look at the quranic verses which use the intensive *b y n* Arabic verbal root for "to make clear", but which also has the more relevant meaning of "to *explain*" in the sense of to "interpret",[73] as has the Syriac word *pūšōqō* used by Jacob of Serugh in the above verses.[74] One might certainly compare the wording and context of the following passage of the Q. *al-Māʾida* 5:15:

> People of the Book, Our messenger has come to make clear/explain (*yubayyinu*) to you much of what you have kept hidden of the Scripture (*tuḫfūna min al-kitāb*)…

26

This verse might be viewed as exposing the agenda of parts of the quranic corpus: the biblical narratives found therein are homiletical explanations or interpretations of previous Scriptures by way of an anonymous divine "messenger" (by and large, these quranic homiletical scriptural exegeses—which are part of what have been called *Straflegenden*[75]—aim to warn Men of their impending demise lest they repent urgently, as will be discussed below).

27

Besides being exegetical, according to Cummingham and Allen, homilies also have an ethical component to them, such as warnings. Jacob of Serugh's eschatological homilies are filled with warnings of the impending Judgment—and as a preacher he is also a warner, which is exactly how the anonymous quranic messenger is characterized in several instances (*munḏir*; and see the related "warnings" or *nuḏur*).[76]

28

This brings me to a third related characteristic of the homily which is its rhetoric. In the sense of "to convince by speech", rhetoric is used by *all* homilists, *inter alia* to "persuade the hearer to conversion".[77] In his first explicitly eschatological *Homily on the End* (v. 235), Jacob of Serugh

writes: “May every Man run towards repentance” (*nēʿrūq kul nōš la-tyōbūtō*), urging his audience through his words to convert before the impending End.

29

This much can also be said of the quranic preacher who, time and time again, insists that Men should urgently repent and convert before the coming of the *eschaton*. For instance, the following quranic verse (*al-Taḥrīm* 66:8) which bears an eschatological promise of Gardens for the Pious starts with the following exhortation: “O you who believe, turn to God in sincere repentance!” (*Yā ayyuhā al-laḏīna āmanū tūbū ilā Allāh tawbat*^{an} *naṣūḥan*). As Reynolds rightly observes, “[I]n the Syriac homilies, as in the Qurʾān, the fundamental medium of exhortation is eschatology”.**78**

30

Other notable rhetorical devices used by Christian homilists include *repetition*, and one of the homilists’ most common rhetorical ploys is *polemic*, against Jews, pagans, and heretics;**79** all of which assuredly can equally be said of the Quran.**80**

31

Fourth, with regards to their stylistic features, according to Forness, the vast majority of Syriac homilies from Late Antiquity are written in metrical form (only six homilies out of hundreds are written in prose) and they “exhibit many characteristics of oral composition”.**81** This much can certainly be said of the quranic corpus whose poetic characteristics have long been studied in Western studies**82** and as briefly mentioned earlier, similarly does contain traces of oral composition. Moreover, the poetic form of Syriac homilies “likely contributed to the dearth of contextual information” contained therein which explains why they do not include discussions regarding contemporary events.**83** One could possibly advance the same explanation to account for the fact that the Quran is a “text without context”;**84** that is, a text which strikingly contains close to no reference to contemporary events, places, or people.

32

It is also interesting to note that the Syriac homilies’ poetic form was used both for practical reasons (i.e., to be memorized more easily by the preacher) and to appeal to larger crowds. Jacob of Serugh’s homilies, which mostly take a poetic form, were thus enticing both to laymen and fellow educated theologians.**85** These might also be two reasons for the Quran’s constant rhyme and rhythm.

Context

33

First, regarding the composition of the homilists’ audiences, it should be noted that early Greek homilists such as Hermas (fl. *c.* second century) and Origen (d. *c.*253) preached to recent Christian converts from pagan and Jewish backgrounds.**86** Jacob of Serugh preached before both lay audiences (of both men and women) and monastic communities, as is evident from his “manual of ascetical […] theology”,**87** the *Homilies on the Solitaries*.**88** In the latter, he frequently “addresses his audience in the singular, [although] in most cases it is likely that he intends the singular to speak to any solitary [i.e., ascetic] who encounters the text”,**89** instructing them in different matters, such as in this instance of his first *Homily on the Solitaries* (v. 341):

> Keep vigil with hope and stand (*būt ʿal sabrō w-qūm pōrūšō*), O discerning man!**90**

34

In a forthcoming article, I have compared these particular *Homilies on the Solitaries* to Q. *al-Muzammil* 73 and Q. *al-Muddaṯṯir* 74 at length, and for this paper's present purpose, I will only limit myself to asking whether one can possibly consider that the introductions to these suras are in the same way actually intended for an audience of "solitaries" or ascetics referred to in the second person of the singular rather than to Muḥammad, as has been traditionally understood by both Muslim exegetes and most Western academics.[91] These are the introductory verses of Q. *al-Muzammil* 73:1–2:

> O you, enfolded in your cloak! / Stay up [in vigil] throughout the night! (*Yā ayyuhā al-muzzammil / Qum al-layl*)…

35

Recently, Dye has also suggested that two parallel quranic passages, namely Q. *al-Muʾminūn* 23:1–11 and Q. *al-Maʿāriǧ* 70:22–35 address both laity and ascetics, respectively, as the first instance lists quite general instructions for lay Believers, which could actually be a rewriting of Q. 70:22–35 as an earlier list intended for ascetics, or monks (on subjects such as unceasing prayer, continence, etc.).[92]

36

Second, I will end with some general remarks about the preparation, redaction, and transmission of the homily. As Forness explains in his monograph work on Jacob of Serugh, there are five practices associated with a homily from its oral delivery to its preservation as a written text: a) its delivery; b) its recording; c) its redaction; d) its collecting; and e) its circulation.[93]

37

As has already been discussed in the second section, a) can be preceded by drafts and prepared texts made in advance by the preacher; while some homilists, such as Origen, almost always spoke *ex tempore*, the implication being that stenographers took down his words (b). We have no evidence of this phenomenon for Syriac homilists, although there are signs that they were delivered orally. Therefore, in most cases, the written record of the Syriac homily was either made before or after the delivery.

38

Here, I wonder if the following very obscure quranic passage could not be understood as instructions given to the preacher regarding the process of delivering the sermon and copying it (Q. *al-Qiyāma* 75:16–19):

> Do not rush your tongue that you may do it quickly; / It is for us to put it together, and recite it; / When we recite it, repeat the recitation; / Then it is up to us to explain it (*Lā tuḥarrik bihi lisānaka li-taʿǧala bihi / Inna ʿalaynā ǧamʿahu wa-qurʾānahu / Fa-iḏā qaraʾnāhu fa-ttabiʿ qurʾānahu / Ṯumma inna ʿalaynā bayānahu*).

39

Regarding element c), homilists (and sometimes editors) edited and smoothed their work after delivering it, among other things to remove signs of oral delivery. For instance, some would want traces of dialogue with the audience withdrawn, while others would leave them, since we have examples of homilies which show traces of audience behaviour (applause, laughter, grumbling) influencing and even distracting the preacher. Is this perhaps why we find quranic verses ordering the audience to be silent, as is the case in Q. *al-Aʿrāf* 7:204:

> So, when the Quran is recited, listen to it, and keep silence, so that you will obtain mercy (*Wa-iḏā quriʾ al-qurʾān fa-stamiʿū lahu wa-anṣitū laʿallakum turḥamūn*).

40

As for d), in general, during Late Antiquity, homilies were gathered into collections according to authorship, monastic questions and/or concerns, or biblical exegesis. One example of the latter is the fact that, for example, all the homilies on a figure such as Joseph would be gathered in one collection. This particular example inevitably brings to mind the case of Q. *Yūsuf* 12 which is the only chapter of the quranic corpus to contain narratives on only one subject: It could be viewed as a single collection of stories surrounding his person, and one that originally might have been an independent gathering of texts related to Joseph, which was later included in the Quran at the time of its final edition.[94]

Conclusion

41

In the course of this admittedly preliminary study which will hopefully yield further investigations into the subject at stake, I have tried to show that certain passages of the quranic corpus—such as the ones dealing with eschatology or verses giving instructions to ascetics—can best be understood as Arabic homilies, in a way akin to their Syriac counterparts from Late Antiquity. That is to say that on the most basic level, both define themselves as a "discourse", an "oration", and ultimately as a "homily" (Syriac *mīmrō*, Arabic *ḥadīṯ* and *qawl*), this terminology indicating a necessary context of *orality* which is equally discernible through both of their uses of direct address and exhortations to the grammatical second person (of either the singular or the plural). Both the Syriac and Arabic homily are also inherently linked to the act of *preaching* as can be seen with their use of vocabulary (for e.g., Arabic *mawʿiẓa*) as well as general thematic (warnings of the impending End of the world are pervasive throughout both corpora as a primary means to convert and/or convince their audiences), which is the obvious result of these texts' original context in which a preacher (who remains anonymous in both instances) would deliver his sermon in front of his audience. Finally, the two corpora meet a number of criteria relative to their content and context which define the late antique homily (they are both exegetical, commenting on previous Scripture; they make use of the same rhetorical ploys such as repetition, anti-Jewish polemics; they share the same stylistic features which are once more related to orality; and they both contain traces of their elaboration from their composition and delivery to their editing and circulation), suggesting that they both belong to this very same genre.

42

I have tried to show that, if taken separately, each defining aspect of the homily can of course be found in other genres, but it is the sum of all its parts that makes the Syriac homily a very close match not to the entirety of the quranic corpus, but to a substantial part of it. I would therefore not state too eagerly that "[I]t would be best to set aside entirely the early Christian homily as a possible analogue" to the Quran, although I would concede that as homilies are part of the apocryphal genre, one cannot refute the fact that the Quran is *at the same time* an "Arabic apocryphon", to take up the title of Shoemaker's article.

43

Furthermore, I hope to have demonstrated the potential usefulness of comparing the Christian homily, and especially Syriac homilies from Late Antiquity, to the Quran as the former can offer a framework for better understanding the latter on questions of exegetical form, allusiveness, lack of discussions regarding contemporary events, and many other such themes. Furthermore, a comparison of Syriac homilies and the Quran can and should invite us to look further into such questions as the process of edition of the quranic text,[95] or even what can be deduced about the location of the quranic preaching from different passages.[96] We should also investigate common

traits such as polemics and the ways in which both corpora address their (often imagined) adversaries, and to tackle issues that have been raised in homily studies but not necessarily in quranic studies although they are indeed relevant and important. These include, but are not limited to, the need to pay more attention to the techniques of preaching, to the interaction between the preacher and the audience, and to the editorial process preceding the formation of the quranic canon.

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Notes

1 The present paper is a revised version of the presentation I gave at the Third Idéo Conference in Cairo, "Reciting in the Early Islamic Empire (7th–9th centuries)", on October 17, 2020. I wish to thank Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau, Jean Druel, and Asma Hilali for inviting me to participate, as well as the participants for their questions and input. I also extend my thanks to *MIDÉO*'s anonymous reviewers' constructive comments and suggestions.

2 Luxenberg, *Syro-aramäische Lesart*; *Syro-Aramaic Reading*.

3 For a brief and useful summary of eight of these various types of reviews, see King, "A Christian Qurʾān?", pp. 72–74. A list of reviews and articles discussing Luxenberg's monograph can be found in Ibn Warraq's apologetic "An Introduction", pp. 382–384.

4 Luxenberg, *Syro-Aramaic Reading*, p. 323.

5 The only "historical" contextualization offered by Luxenberg, seemingly as an after-thought, is that quranic Arabic must have been an "Aramaic-Arabic hybrid language" used by so-called Aramean settlers in Mecca. See Luxenberg, *Syro-Aramaic Reading*, pp. 327–328, and King's criticism in "A Christian Qurʾān?", p. 69, who rightly points out that the fact that "There is no evidence for the existence of such a dialect other than in Luxenberg's re-readings hardly needs stating".

6 King, "A Christian Qurʾān?", p. 70, duly notes that the dictionaries of Bar ʿAlī and Bar Bahlūl, which Luxenberg quotes from Payne Smith's *Thesaurus*, are more representative of the literary culture of the tenth century rather than of the religious milieu of the seventh century. See also el-Badawi's criticism in "Syriac and the Qurʾān": "Luxenberg does not identify any specific genre or corpus of Syriac literature to compare with the Qurʾān, but rather sifts through Syriac and Arabic dictionaries to fit his new Qurʾānic reading".

7 Four important studies discussing a possible relation between quranic verses and Syriac literature of a genre other than homiletic are Van Bladel, "The *Alexander Legend*"; Dye, "Lieux saints communs"; Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's Legal Culture*; el-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions*. See also Neuenkirchen, "Eschatology, Responsories and Rubrics", for a comparative study of Syriac and quranic scribal techniques.

8 Sinai, "Eschatological Kerygma"; Shoemaker, "A New Arabic Apocryphon".

9 The fact that the Quran is more aptly described as a corpus (i.e., a gathering of texts of heterogeneous literary genres, authorship, date, etc.) than as a book (which usually connotes a single author and a rather homogenous literary genre) is key to understanding that it can, and does in fact, contain independent texts of diverse genres among which are Arabic homilies. On understanding the Quran as a corpus, see De Prémare, *Aux origines du Coran*, pp. 29–30, and more recently Dye, "Pourquoi et comment se fait un texte canonique?", pp. 55 and 95.

10 By the Quran's content, I mean the body of texts that this corpus is made of (individual suras or chapters often being composed of different types of contents which one could identify according to literary genre or theme such as biblical narratives, prayers, paraenesis, etc.), and by its context I mean the events surrounding the production of the text (whether these are general historical events, or specific, local one-time events—which may or may not be related to the text's *Sitz im Leben*).

11 I here leave aside the question of the relationship of quranic Arabic to the Syriac language, one that was already addressed by Muslim authors during the first centuries of Islam (for e.g., Ibn Qutayba [d. 276/889] in his *Tafsīr Ġarīb al-Qurʾān*) and taken up by many modern Western scholars from Mingana, "Syriac Influence", to Dye, "Traces of Bilingualism/Multilingualism".

12 He is mentioned in passing by Witztum, "Joseph among the Ishmaelites", p. 425, in a footnote, but otherwise seems to be completely absent from modern discussions on Syriac and the Quran.

13 Martyn, *Controversial Tracts*.

14 Martyn, *Controversial Tracts*, p. 124.

15 Martyn, *Controversial Tracts*, p. 125. In the following pages, up to p. 132, Samuel Lee discusses parallels between various quranic verses and Ephrem's writings, stating for instance that "No one I am sure can read the Sermon of Ephrem 'in Pulcherrimum Joseph', and the twelfth chapter of the Koran, without being struck with a manifest similarity of style and sentiment" (p. 127).

16 Martyn, *Controversial Tracts*, pp. 134–135. In the next pages up to p. 138, Samuel Lee compares single words or expressions in quranic (as well as non-quranic) Arabic and in Syriac.

17 Originally published in several parts in German in the journal *Kyrkohistorisk Årsskrift*; and subsequently translated into French by Jules Roche and published as a single book.

18 Andrae, *Les origines de l'islam*, p. 145.

19 Beck, "Eine christliche Parallele", pp. 398–405; augmented and translated into French as "Les houris du Coran", pp. 405–408. Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise* are, according to the Syriac writer's own words, a summary of his lost homilies on the same subject. See Éphrem (d. 373), *Hymnes*, p. 14. This of course, constitutes a major point of disagreement with Andrae and of accord with Luxenberg whose very questionable theory is that the heavenly houris are not virgins but merely white grapes. See Luxenberg, *Syro-Aramaic Reading*, pp. 247–264, and particularly pp. 258–260. For a recent overview of the debate, see Griffith, "St. Ephraem the Syrian", pp. 781–805.

20 See, for instance, Gräf, "Zu den christlichen Einflüssen", pp. 396–398, and especially p. 397 the section entitled "Homiletische Vorlagen", and more recently Griffith, "Christian Lore", pp. 109–137, who starts his article by stating that "[T]he more deeply one is familiar with the works of […] the composers of liturgically significant, homiletic [Syriac] texts […], the more one hears echoes of many of their standard themes and characteristic turns of phrase at various points in the discourse of the Arabic Qurʾān".

21 Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and its Biblical Subtext*, pp. 232–233.

22 Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and its Biblical Subtext*, p. 249.

23 Those parts of the Quran which most aptly relate to Syriac homilies are biblical narratives or "re-tellings", especially those dealing with eschatology as I have tried to show in my PhD dissertation, "La fin du monde dans le Coran. Une étude comparative du discours eschatologique coranique" (EPHE, 2019).

24 Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and its Biblical Subtext*, pp. 233–234.

25 Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and its Biblical Subtext*, p. 249.

26 Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and its Biblical Subtext*, p. 249. Although, as we will see further on, Reynolds is mistaken in saying that "The Syriac homily is not a record of an extemporaneous oral sermon, but rather a formal work…". For a view opposed to that of Reynolds, formulated several decades before, see Neuwirth, "Einige Bemerkungen", p. 736, who insists that the original function of the Quran was "a liturgical oration, as a text for recitation" and certainly not a sermon, concluding that the Quran "may contain some elements of homily along with its many other elements", but that these are very few.

27 el-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions*, p. 7.

28 Sinai reintroduces Ephrem's writings in the comparative mix (alongside Jacob of Serugh), while at the same time warning that "The authenticity of some of the sermons ascribed to Ephrem is doubtful" (Sinai, "The Eschatological Kerygma", p. 257).

29 Sinai, "The Eschatological Kerygma", pp. 236 and 250.

30 Shoemaker, "A New Arabic Apocryphon", p. 35. I thank Stephen J. Shoemaker for sending me a copy of his paper before its publication.

31 As Shoemaker does concede in this instance, "[I]t is not at all clear just who it is that is 'speaking' in the Quran's pronouncements and whom is being addressed" (Shoemaker, "A New Arabic Apocryphon", p. 34). One good example of this is the three last suras of the Quran (Q. *al-Iḫlāṣ* 112 to Q. *al-Nās* 114) which all begin with the Arabic imperative "say!" (*qul*) whose function seems to be to put words pronounced by Men in God's voice. Also, far from all Syriac homilies explicitly quote Scripture (rather they *allude* to them; as in Jacob of Serugh's *Homilies on the Solitaries*) and although they do not present themselves as divine speech (but then again not all quranic suras do so either), many of them are in fact devoid of any reference to the need to have recourse to God, unlike when Sinai, "The Eschatological Kerygma", p. 250 speaks of "the *mimrē* literature's frequent and explicit deployment of a human auctorial perspective, usually in the form of dramatic self-incriminations or appeals for God's assistance in delivering the following homily."

32 Mayer, "Homiletics", p. 570.

33 Shoemaker, "A New Arabic Apocryphon", p. 35.

34 This noun primarily means "intercourse" or "company", but also "instruction" (Liddell, Scott & Jones [LSJ hereafter], *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 1222.

35 LSJ, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 1222.

36 Mayer, "Homiletics", p. 571.

37 LSJ, *Greek-English Lexicon*, pp. 421–422.

38 Mayer, "Homiletics", p. 571.

39 Forness, *Preaching Christology*, p. 22, n. 1.

40 Sokoloff, *Lexicon*, p. 1633.

41 Sokoloff, *Lexicon*, p. 777.

42 Sokoloff, *Lexicon*, p. 701.

43 Payne Smith, *Dictionary*, p. 247. It has then come to mean more specifically the verse homily of twelve syllables. See Gazzola, "Lexique des termes liturgiques", p. 292. According to Gazzola, the Syriac homily was sung to different melodies.

44 Jacob of Serugh, *Homily on Simon Peter*, p. 8.

45 Manna, *Qāmūs*, p. 340; Costaz, *Dictionnaire*, p. 12.

46 The first is used 92 times in the singular and once in the plural; and the second is used 23 times in the singular and five times in the plural.

47 Thus, in Abdel Haleem's rendering of these words in Q. *al-Takwīr* 81:19 and Q. *al-Burūǧ* 85:17. See Abdel Haleem, *The Qurʾan*, pp. 411 and 416, respectively. See also Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même*, pp. 134–135 for the word *qawl* which the author links to the Arabic *kalima* and translates as meaning a "word" or "saying" (parole), in the sense of the word of God (through the Quran or previous Scriptures); and pp. 136–137 for the word *ḥadīṯ* which she translates as

"event", "narrative" or "discourse" sent from God to Muḥammad. This latter translation is in line with my general argument about another possible meaning of *ḥadīṯ* in the Quran, although I would abandon the traditional context given by later Islamic traditional interpretative sources according to which these verses are necessarily addressed by God to Muḥammad (something the Quran itself does *not* claim).

48 Mayer, "Homiletics", p. 570.

49 Mayer, "Homiletics", p. 571.

50 Mayer, "Homiletics", p. 571.

51 Jacob of Serugh, *Homily on the Tower of Babel*, pp. 14–15.

52 The Quran also similarly addresses "discerning ones" or, in its own words, "people who reason". See for example Q. *al-Raʿd* 13:4.

53 Mayer, "Homiletics", p. 572.

54 Shoemaker, "A New Arabic Apocryphon", p. 36: "Paraenesis was a common style of literary discourse in antiquity with its roots in Greek philosophy and Hellenistic literature (including Hellenistic Judaism). Paraenetic discourse pervades the writings of the New Testament, and its importance within this corpus has been a major focus of biblical studies almost from the very beginning." However, I do not think it is fair to say that "[T]he so-called 'homiletic' elements of the Qurʾan are simply misnamed, because while they do not share the homiletic form or 'occasion,' they do share with the homiletic tradition its primary mode of discourse: paraenesis, or 'moral exhortation'." Paraenesis is only one out of many other common traits shared by both the Syriac homilies and the Quran, as will be discussed in what follows.

55 Rice, "Preaching", pp. 494–501.

56 Costaz, *Dictionary*, p. 12. Daniel Reig's modern Arabic/French, French/Arabic Dictionary (entry 5975) lists this very word under "exhortation", "homélie", etc.

57 Here again, see Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même*, pp. 159–160, who considers that this word refers to an "exhortation" bestowed by God upon prophets or the pious.

58 See in particular Q. *Yūnus* 10:57 and Q. *al-Naḥl* 16:125.

59 On this subject, see Reynolds, "'Une exhortation pour les pieux'", pp. 184–185 and 187.

60 Mayer, "Homiletics", p. 570.

61 Shoemaker, "A New Arabic Apocryphon", p. 35. Italics mine.

62 Cummingham & Allen, "Introduction", pp. 1–20.

63 Cummingham & Allen, "Introduction", p. 1. Italics mine.

64 Lipatov-Chicherin, "Preaching as the Audience Heard It", p. 278.

65 Forness, *Preaching Christology*, p. 41.

66 Lipatov-Chicherin, "Preaching as the Audience Heard It", p. 278.

67 Forness, *Preaching Christology*, p. 25: "These approaches fit roughly into three categories: (1) content of the sermon, (2) context of the preached sermon, and (3) the life of a homily before and after delivery." This last category has been alluded to in speaking of Lipatov-Chicherin's scheme of the transmission of homilies and would certainly require further treatment in a separate study.

68 Cummingham & Allen, "Introduction", pp. 4–5.

69 Cummingham & Allen, "Introduction", pp. 6–7.

70 Jacob of Serugh, *Homily on the Tower of Babel*, pp. 32–33.

71 A point duly noted by Reynolds both in his monograph *The Qurʾān and its Biblical Subtext*, for example p. 233: "The clearest indication that the Qurʾān is a sort of homily is its frequent recourse to allusions" and in a recent article, "Biblical Turns of Phrase", pp. 51–54.

72 Dye, "Pourquoi et comment se fait un texte canonique?", p. 98.

73 On this subject, see Gilliot, "Des indices d'un proto-lectionnaire", p. 312.

74 Manna, *Dictionary*, p. 509, gives the word *tafsīr* as its Arabic equivalent.

75 That is, "punishment stories". See Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, pp. 10–26.

76 See for example Q. *al-Nāziʿāt* 79:45 for the first word and Q. *Yā-Sīn* 36:6 for the latter. For a brief discussion on these related words, see Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même*, pp. 155–156. Also see Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and its Biblical Subtext*, p. 236, n. 14.

77 Cummingham & Allen, "Introduction", p. 7.

78 Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and its Biblical Subtext*, p. 251.

79 Cummingham & Allen, "Introduction", pp. 8–9.

80 Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and its Biblical Subtext*, p. 251: "The Qurʾān's anti-Jewish rhetoric, for example, parallels the anti-Jewish rhetoric in Syriac Christian works."

81 Forness, *Preaching Christology*, p. 25.

82 Among many other scholarly studies on this subject, see Hoffmann, *The Poetic Qurʾān*.

83 Forness, *Preaching Christology*, p. 26.

84 Peters, "The Quest of the Historical Muhammad", p. 300.

85 Forness, *Preaching Christology*, p. 55.

86 Cummingham & Allen, "Introduction", p. 10.

87 Griffith, *Mar Jacob of Serugh on Monks and Monasticism*, p. 81.

88 These homilies offer a good reason to object to another of Shoemaker's points: "The emphasis on specific definitive 'conditions' for a homily is paramount here. Homilies are defined by the conditions of their production for and their delivery in the context of Christian liturgical celebration. As such, their contents generally focus on moral instruction and exhortation for the congregation, particularly as related to the immediate liturgical context: the specific liturgical commemoration of the day, the biblical readings for the day, or 'novel events (such as the arrival of new relics)'. I think it is safe to say that this is not, in fact, what the Quran is: I doubt sincerely that this text or even parts of it were composed as moral elaboration of the specific liturgical themes for Eucharistic celebrations, which is what classifying it as a homily effectively entails" (Shoemaker, "A New Arabic Apocryphon", p. 35). Assuredly, Jacob of Serugh's *Homilies on the Solitaries* or *Against the Jews* were *not* composed for Eucharistic celebrations. Also see Cummingham & Allen, "Introduction", p. 5, who state that "The homily was commonly, but *by no means always*, delivered in the course of eucharistic or non-eucharistic liturgies". Italics mine.

89 Jacob of Serugh, *Homilies on the Solitaries*, p. 7.

90 Jacob of Serugh, *Homilies on the Solitaries*, pp. 54–55.

91 For both these traditional views, see Rubin, "The shrouded messenger", pp. 96–107.

92 Dye, "Ascetic and Nonascetic Layers", pp. 580–597.

93 Forness, *Preaching Christology*, pp. 42–53. Category e) lies beyond the scope of the present study, but is certainly a point worthy of further examination, especially if compared to traditional Muslim accounts regarding the production and dissemination of quranic codices.

94 It seems likely that Q. *al-Baqara* 2, for instance, originally circulated as an independent text, as is reported by John of Damascus (d. *c.*750) in his famous 100th chapter of his *Perì eréseon*, which states that the "Ishmaelites" (i.e., proto-Muslims) had a "writing of the Cow". This can also be inferred by Ibn Saʿd's (d. 230/845) *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* in which we learn that al-ʿAbbās' rallying cry at the Battle of Ḥunayn was: "O people of *sūrat al-Baqara!*" (*Yā aṣḥāb sūrat al-Baqara*). See de Prémare, "Process of the Qurʾān's Composition", pp. 195 and 207, respectively. I would argue that the quranic corpus is a gathering (see the *j m ʿ* root in the Quran as it is used in relation to itself as in the aforementioned quote of Q. *al-Qiyāma* 75:17) of texts which are, for the most part, themselves gatherings of smaller independent texts (Q. *al-Baqara* 2, for example, is a collection of biblical narratives, laws, polemical texts, and prayers).

95 As we have seen, in the case of homilies, certain characteristic features of orality have been edited out during the process of transmission. This also almost certainly must have been the case with the final version of the Quran.

96 For instance, we know that in the case of homilies, their preaching took place in three locations: Christian assembly (within a house or a church), catechesis and during missionary preaching. See Mayer, "Homiletics", p. 571. I would be inclined to view the latter as one very probable way in which some of the pre-quranic material came into being, as we know that clergymen of the East Syriac Church carried out missionary activities in Arabia by their sending of theological epistles to the Arab rulers in order to spread their doctrines throughout the Peninsula. More specifically, and more to the point of the present study, Jacob of Serugh wrote several letters to bring comfort to persecuted Christians in Nağrān, as well as to expose his vision of a certain aspect of Christology, namely the relation between the divinity and humanity of Jesus. See Forness, *Preaching Christology*, pp. 115–131.