QURANIC *FURQĀN**

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Abstract

The article proposes a new etymology of the word 'furqan' in the Qur'ān, arguing that in some cases it is derived from the Aramaic/ Syriac word 'purqana', 'salvation', as long assumed by many Western scholars, while in some other cases it goes back to the Syriac 'puqdana', 'commandment'. The implication is that some passages of the Qur'ān text must have been transmitted, at some point, only in written form without the benefit of a secure tradition of oral recitation, otherwise the misreading of Syriac 'puqdana' as 'furqan' could not have occurred.

Introduction

The text of the Qur'ān contains numerous problematic words, some of which have long been the focus of intense exegetical attention. The present article examines one such word, *furqān*, which occurs in seven passages in the Qur'ān (Q.). The remainder of this introductory section will lay out briefly the difficulties posed by the word *furqān*, and two subsequent sections will examine, in turn, the efforts of traditional Muslim scholars and Western scholars to explain it. A fourth section will present a proposed new solution to the exegetical problem posed by *furqān*. A fifth and final section will deal with the significant implications our proposal raises for the question of how the Qur'ān text was transmitted in its early years.

Let us begin by listing, for convenience of reference subsequently in the article, the seven Quranic passages which include the word *furqān*:

1. Q. 2:53. '…when we gave Moses the book and the *furqān.*'
2. Q. 2:185. '…the month of Ramadan, in which the Qur'ān was sent down as guidance for the people and as evidences of the guidance and of the *furqān.*'
3. Q. 3:3. '…he has sent down to thee the Book and the truth, confirming what was before it, and he sent down the Torah and the Gospel aforetime as guidance for the people, and he sent down the *furqān…*'
4. Q. 8:29. 'O Believers, if you show piety towards God, he will appoint for you a *furqān* and will absolve you from your evil deeds and will forgive you.'
5. Q. 8:41. '…if you have believed in God and what we sent down to our servant on the day of the *furqān*, the day the two parties met.'
6. Q. 21:48. 'We gave Moses and Aaron the *furqān* and illumination and a reminder for those who show piety.'
7. Q. 25:1. 'Blessed be he who has sent down the *furqān* upon his servant, that he may be to the worlds a warner.'

Even a superficial examination of the passages cited reveals that the word *furqān* occurs in contexts sufficiently varied that a single meaning is not obvious. The task of pinning down the semantic range of the word is complicated by the fact that *furqān* is not, to my knowledge, attested in early Arabic texts in contexts clearly independent of the Qur'ān. In passages 1, 3, 6, and perhaps 7 cited above, the context seems to imply that *furqān* is a form of revelation that has some relationship to other revealed texts — 'the book', 'the Torah', 'the Gospels' (Ar. *injīl*) — but the exact nature of this relationship is not immediately clear. The second example, however, seems to imply that *furqān* is not a form of revelation, but rather constitutes the intent or purpose of revelation — just as guidance (*hudā*), with which it is more or less equated, is the goal or purpose of the Qur'ān. Example four is too indeterminate to allow us to say much, except that *furqān* is 'appointed' by God for man — whether this is intended as another way of saying that *furqān* is a revealed text, or whether it represents the intent of revelation, is unclear. The fifth example involves curious phrasing; it could be seen to imply that *furqān* is a form of revelation, but if that which was 'sent down' on the 'day of the *furqān*' was the *furqān* itself, why does the text not simply say, 'if you have believed in God and the *furqān* we sent down…'? And what is the meaning of 'the day the two parties met', which is equated with 'the day of *furqān*?' In all passages except 4,

the *furqān* is something already sent down by God, and which ante-dates and is verified by the Qur'ān, whereas passage 4 portrays the *furqān* as something promised but not yet established by God.

In the following sections, we shall see how Muslim and Western exegetes have wrestled with this challenging textual evidence in search of a unified understanding of the word *furqān*.

Traditional Muslim Exegesis

Many Muslim exegetes attempted an etymological explanation for the term *furqān*. Starting from the Arabic root f-r-q, 'to split', 'to separate', and consequently 'to distinguish', these exegetes decided that the meaning of *furqān* was basically 'discrimination/the act of discriminating' or 'something that discriminates'. A typical example can be found in the late Qur'ān commentary of al-Bayḍāwī (d. late 7th/13th or early 8th/14th century), where in discussing the phrase *anzala l-furqān*, 'He sent down the *furqān*' in Q. 3:3, he says, 'by this he means a kind (*jins*) of divine books, for they are things that distinguish between truth and falsehood'. Similarly, in discussing Qur'ān 8:41, al-Bayḍāwī defines the 'day of *furqān*' as 'the day of Badr, for on it truth was distinguished from falsehood'.[1]

Al-Bayḍāwī's glosses represent a distillation of the dominant exegetical opinion that had emerged by his day, but earlier exegetes engaged in considerable discussion over the meaning of *furqān*, traces of which are preserved in some more comprehensive exegetical collections, such as al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr*[2] and al-Rāzī's *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*[3]. Like al-Bayḍāwī, many earlier exegetes referred to the meaning of the root f-r-q and argued that *furqān* referred in some way to God's separating, or distinguishing between, truth and falsehood. But in doing so they sometimes made closer identifications of the meaning of *furqān* which differed markedly from one another. In some cases they argued that *furqān* was a reference to the Qur'ān itself. For example, the early Baṣran commentator Qatāda ibn Diʿāma (d. 60/679), in commenting on Q. 3:3, stated that *anzala al-furqān* 'He sent down the *furqān*' refers to the Qur'ān, which God sent down

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[1] Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-taʾwīl* (ed. H.O. Fleischer [*Beidhawii Commentarius in Coranum*] 2 vols., Leipzig, 1846–8), vol. 1, 145 (on Qur'ān 3:3) and 368 (on Qur'ān 8:41).

[2] Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl al-qurʾān* (30 vols., Cairo, 1321/1903). (Hereinafter Tab. *Tafsīr*).

[3] Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (Cairo, 1934).

upon Muḥammad and by which He divided or distinguished (*faraqa* or *farraqa*) between truth and falsehood, making what is lawful (*ḥalāl*) lawful, and what is forbidden (*ḥarām*) forbidden, and laying down His statutes and drawing His limits and stipulating His requirements (*farāʾiḍ*), manifesting in it His proof, and ordering obedience to Him and avoidance of sin. Similarly, the commentator al-Rabīʿ b. Anas (d. 139/756) is reported to have said that *furqān* in Q. 3:3 refers to the Qurʾān, which divides (*faraqa* or *farraqa*?) between truth and falsehood.[4]

Other exegetes, however, gloss the word *furqān* with *al-faṣl*, 'division, separation, or discrimination', between truth and falsehood, of a more general kind, not to be equated specifically with the Qurʾān; thus Ibn Isḥāq (d. 150/767 or 151), quoting Muḥammad b. Jaʿfar b. al-Zubayr, calls the *furqān* of Q. 3:3 a *faṣl* or separation between truth and falsehood regarding those things about which the 'parties' (*al-aḥzāb*) disagreed in the matter of Jesus and other issues.[5] In this debate on the meaning of *furqān* in Q. 3:3, al-Ṭabarī offers a detailed refutation of the equation of *furqān* with Qurʾān by Qatāda and al-Rabīʿ, and affirms the argument of Muḥammad b. Jaʿfar b. al-Zubayr, on the grounds that in verse 3:3 God speaks first of sending down 'the Book with the truth', then of sending down the Torah and Injīl, and finally of sending down the *furqān* — in that order. Al-Ṭabarī argues that 'the Book with the truth' must be the Qurʾān, so that *furqān* later in the verse cannot also mean the Qurʾān 'because there is no reason to repeat it another time and no benefit in repeating it'.[6] It must, therefore, mean something more general, i.e., God's separation (*faṣl*) of truth from falsehood. This identification of *furqān* with a general separation (*faṣl*) between truth and falsehood also appears in glosses to other verses involving *furqān*, such as Q. 2:53, Q. 2:185, and Q. 25:1.[7] In the latter case, the report offers the interesting formulation that the Qurʾān's 'blessed be he who has sent down the *furqān* upon his servant…' means 'He sent down the sepa-

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[4] Tab. *Tafsīr* 3, 111; see also Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (Cairo, 1934), 7, 172–3, who also offers the Qurʾān as one possible meaning of *furqān* in Q. 3:3, perhaps (like al-Ṭabarī) drawing on Qatāda or Rabīʿa; also Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* 24, 45 (to Q. 25:1), where he states that 'there is no disagreement [among scholars] that *al-furqān* (in Q. 25:1) is the Qurʾān, because He distinguished through it between truth and falsehood in the prophethood of Muḥammad (ṣ) and between the permissible and the forbidden'.

[5] Tab. *Tafsīr* 3, 111.

[6] Tab. *Tafsīr* 3, 111–12.

[7] Tab. *Tafsīr* 1, 225; 2, 84–5 (al-Suddī as reported by Asbāṭ); 18, 135–6 (Ibn ʿAbbās as reported by al-Ḍaḥḥāk).

ration (*al-faṣl*) between truth and falsehood, separation after separation and *sūra* after *sūra*, upon His servant Muḥammad (ṣ)…,' thus implying that each Quranic verse is a 'separator'. Al-Rāzī, on the other hand, offers a gloss to Q. 8:29 that presents *furqān* as meaning 'separation' or 'discrimination' specifically in the sense that God discriminated between the Believers and the polytheists [*kuffār*].[8]

Another meaning sometimes associated with *furqān*, especially in Q. 3:3, 'We sent down the *furqān*', is the psalms (*zabūr*) of David, although al-Rāzī expresses his doubt about this interpretation on the grounds that the psalms are exhortations lacking in real legal content.[9]

Commentaries on Q. 21:48, 'We gave Moses and Aaron the *furqān* and the *ḍiyā'* (criterion? illumination?) and a reminder for those who show piety', included yet other glosses for *furqān*. Both Ibn Abī Najīḥ (d. 131/748–749) and Ibn Jurayj (d. 150/767 or 151) report Mujāhid (d. 104/722) as having equated *furqān* in this verse with 'the book' — without any further clarification as to just which book this meant. Qatada, no doubt motivated by the verse's description of *furqān* as something revealed to Moses, is said to have argued that *furqān* here meant the Torah, which, he says, distinguished between truth and falsehood.[10] Al-Ṭabarī promptly rebuts this argument, stating that 'If the *furqān* were the Torah, as some say, then the verse would read, "God brought Moses and Aaron the *furqān* as a criterion…," because the criterion which God brought is the Torah.' Instead, al-Ṭabarī points out, the verse has an 'and' intervening between *furqān* and 'criterion': 'God brought Moses and Aaron the *furqān* and a criterion…' By equating the 'criterion' *ḍiyā'*) with the Torah, in other words, al-Ṭabarī tries to deflect the identification of *furqān* with the Torah because the grammar of the verse makes it clear that the 'criterion' and the *furqān* are not one and the same: 'the introduction of "and" between *furqān* and *ḍiyā'* is proof that *furqān* is not the Torah'.[11] In making this argument, which seems to be original with al-Ṭabarī, he claims to be backing the opinion of Ibn Zayd, who identified *furqān* in Q. 21:48 not with the Torah, but with the truth (*al-ḥaqq*) which God brought to Moses and Aaron, 'distinguishing them from Pharaoh, judging between them with truth'. In fact, Ibn Zayd's explanation of the meaning of *furqān* in

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[8] Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* 15, 153.

[9] Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* 7, 172–3. No informant is provided.

[10] Tab. *Tafsīr* 17, 26; Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* 22, 178 also gives this explanation without naming his informant.

[11] Loc. cit.

this verse is totally different from that of al-Ṭabarī; they share only their refusal to identify *furqān* with Torah.

In the commentary of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), however, we also find that some of his informants equated *furqān* with the Torah in explaining Q. 2:53, 'We brought Moses the book and the *furqān*'. As al-Rāzī says, 'it [*furqān*] may be the Torah, or it may be something within the Torah, or something outside the Torah… Confirmation (*taqrīr*) of the first possibility is that the Torah has two characteristics, its nature as a revealed book and its nature as a *furqān* that discriminates between truth and falsehood…; as for confirmation of the second possibility [i.e., that *furqān* refers to something within the Torah], it is that the intended meaning of *furqān* is that which the Torah contains by way of explanation [*bayān*] of the religion [*dīn*], because when it came forth, the truth appeared distinguished from falsehood. So the meaning of *furqān* is some of that which is in the Torah that is an explanation of the principles of the religion [*uṣūl al-dīn*] and its application [*furūʿihi*].' The third possibility (i.e., that *furqān* refers to something outside the Torah) al-Rāzī's informants link to various possibilities, such as the signs that God gave to Moses (for example, Moses' staff and the hand, the latter presumably a reference to Moses' hand turning leprous when he placed it in his shirt, and then becoming clean again; cf. Q. 20:22 and Exod. 4:6–7).[12] In this passage, in other words, al-Rāzī cleverly attempts to combine the general idea, derived from the meaning of the Arabic root f-r-q, that *furqān* means 'to discriminate', with other explanations for *furqān* that depart from the sense, derived from the context in which it is sometimes used, that it meant a written work of some kind.

In explaining Q. 2:185, 'evidences of the guidance and the *furqān*', al-Rāzī likewise brings in the possibility of *furqān* referring to earlier scriptures, saying that 'guidance and *furqān*' refers to the Torah and Gospels (*injīl*).[13]

Q. 8:29, 'O Believers, if you show piety to God, he will appoint for you a *furqān* and will absolve you of your evil deeds and will forgive you', elicited a number of other glosses for the word *furqān*. Al-Ḍaḥḥāk ibn Muzāḥim (d. 105/723) is reported to have glossed it with *makhraj*, 'means of escape', whereas Qatāda and al-Suddī (d. 128/745) glossed it with *najāḥ*, 'deliverance, salvation'; Ibn ʿAbbas, ʿIkrima (d. 105/723), and Mujāhid are reported to have con-

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[12] Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* 3, 77–8.
[13] Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* 5, 95–6.

veyed both opinions. Ibn Isḥāq glossed it with *faṣl*, i.e., separation or distinction between truth and falsehood, and notes that in the speech of the bedouins *al-furqān* is a verbal noun from the verb *faraqtu* (*bayna al-shay' wa'l-shay'*), 'I distinguished (between a thing and another)'. Al-Ṭabarī notes the existence of this difference in opinion and states that all three words are close to one another in meaning.[14]

Q. 8:41 also generated a distinctive association for many early commentators, who almost without exception glossed the phrase 'the day of the *furqān*, the day the two parties met' as a reference to the battle of Badr in A.H. 2/624 CE, when Muḥammad's forces surprised a Meccan caravan and defeated its larger retinue of troops. A report conveyed by ʿAlī from Ibn ʿAbbās thus clarified 'the day of the *furqān*' as 'the day of Badr, on which God distinguished between truth and falsehood', echoing the many reports we have seen above in which *furqān* is glossed in this way; and similar explanations are reported on the authority of Mujāhid as cited by Ibn Abī Najīḥ, by ʿUrwa ibn al-Zubayr (d. 94/713) as reported by al-Zuhrī (d. 124/742), by Miqsam ibn Bujra (d. 101/719), by Ibn Isḥāq, and by Qatāda. None of these reports actually tries to define more closely what *furqān* meant, however. Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687 or 69 or 70) and Mujāhid cited by Ibn Jurayj simply equate *yawm al-furqān* with the battle of Badr.[15] Al-Rāzī includes in his discussion of Q. 21:48 the explanation of Ibn ʿAbbās that *furqān* referred to the victory sent by God to Moses, which he describes as akin to the victory at Badr; but he also mentions the explanation of Ibn Zayd that it referred to the proof that discriminates between the true religion and false religions.[16] Elsewhere, al-Rāzī notes that *yawm al-furqān* in Q. 8:41 simply refers to the battle of Badr, without any further explanation.[17]

In sum, the early Qur'ān commentators offered a wide variety of explanations — one might more honestly call them guesses — as to the meaning of *furqān*. These included equating it with the Qur'ān, the Torah, the psalms of David, earlier revelations in a less clearly defined way, the truth generally, a 'separator' (*faṣl*) by which God separated between truth and falsehood, deliverance or salvation, and a divinely-granted victory (usually associated with Badr, sometimes with

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[14] Tab. *Tafsīr* 9, 147–8.
[15] Tab. *Tafsīr* 10, 7–8. Cf. al-Ṣanʿānī, *Kitāb al-muṣannaf* (11 vols., Beirut 1970–2) 5, 548 (no. 9726), on the authority of ʿUrwa ibn al-Zubayr as transmitted by al-Zuhrī, which calls Badr *yawm al-furqān*.
[16] Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* 22, 178–9.
[17] Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* 15, 166.

Moses's victory over Pharaoh). Most of these meanings seem clearly to be deduced from the contexts in which *furqān* occurs in the Qur'ān; but it is noteworthy that the commentators, especially the later ones, frequently try to clarify these divergent meanings by linking them in some way to the vague notion of 'discrimination between truth and falsehood', which they derived from the root f-r-q that seemed to be the Arabic etymological origin of the word. In this way they sought to paper over the sharp differences in opinion on what the word meant. As Guillaume has noted, however, these differences of opinion would almost certainly not have existed had the word actually been of straightforward Arabic origin.[18]

We may note in passing here that in Persian, the word *forqān* came to mean 'distinction between truth and falsehood', 'the Qur'ān', or 'scripture' more generally—evidently reflecting the range of exegetical meanings provided by early Muslim commentators.

Western Scholarship on *furqān*

Like their Muslim forerunners, Western scholars also found it difficult to elucidate convincingly the meaning of Quranic *furqān*, given the various contexts in which the word occurs. Although they usually took note of the various attempts made by Muslim scholars to explain the word as of purely Arabic derivation, Western scholars — relying on the techniques of comparative Semitic philology — generally considered *furqān* to be not of Arabic origin at all, but rather a loan-word derived from the Aramaic *purqānā*, meaning 'salvation, deliverance'.[19] (As we have seen, this meaning had been suggested by some of the early Muslim exegetes who had glossed *furqān* with the Arabic *najāt* or *makhraj*, meaning 'salvation' or 'way out' [of a dilemma] in passages where this meaning seemed especially appropriate [for example, Q. 8:29.]; but the Muslim exegetes had always attempted to find an Arabic derivation for this meaning and did not relate it to an Aramaic word.)

From the perspective of comparative Semitists, the derivation of *furqān* from Aramaic (probably Syriac) *purqānā* was philologically

[18] Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad* (Oxford 1955), 323, note 1.

[19] E.g., Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Baroda 1938), 225–9; Julian Obermann, 'Koran and Agada, The Events at Mt. Sinai', *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 58 (1941), 23–48, at pp. 37–8; J. Wellhausen, 'Zum Koran', *ZDMG* 67 (1913), 630–4, also considered *furqān* to be of Aramaic origin. See also *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd ed.), s.v. 'Furḳān' (Rudi Paret), where the Western literature on this debate is reviewed.

neat and unproblematic, but unfortunately the meaning 'salvation' did not provide a compelling sense for all of the passages where *furqān* occurred in the Qur'ān. Of the seven passages where *furqān* occurs, 'salvation' fits best in the context of Q. 8:41, whereas in a number of other passages *furqān* seems to refer not to salvation but to scripture or, as Guillaume put it, 'some sort of book'.[20] Sometimes it was suggested by Western philologists that the Arabic word *furqān* was originally of Aramaic origin, and so meant 'salvation', but that over time this loan-word had acquired some of the semantic payload of the Arabic root f-r-q, 'to separate' or 'to discriminate' (and hence could be applied to revelation).[21] This hypothesis allowed scholars to waver between the two different clusters of meaning, 'salvation' and 'discrimination', picking as needed the one that seemed to offer the best sense for a particular passage, without binding them to it for the other passages. Even this stratagem did not really solve the problem posed by *furqān*, however, for neither meaning fits the majority of Quranic passages very well.[22] Whether one chooses 'salvation' or 'separation', it seems a vague and indirect way to refer to a book of revelation, particularly when other, more precise terms were readily available and frequently used in the Qur'ān, which does not lack references to 'the book' (*al-kitāb*), 'the sending down' (*tanzīl*), 'the revelation' (*al-waḥy*), 'the guidance' (*al-hudā*), etc. The evident phonemic and morphological similarity of *furqān* to Aramaic *purqānā*, however, led philologically-inclined Western scholars to gloss *furqān* as 'salvation', even though it did not fit most passages very well.[23]

The attractiveness to Western scholars of an Aramaic derivation or origin for *furqān* stemmed not only from the word's morphological

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[20] Guillaume, loc. cit.

[21] As Nöldeke puts it: 'The meaning "revelation" is not attested in Aramaic. It is therefore likely that this meaning first evolved in the Arabic language zone. To the extent that one does not wish to assume a simple misunderstanding on Muhammad's part, it remains to be considered whether this shift in meaning did not take place in a community in which the hope for a liberation or salvation dominated all aspects of religious thought, i.e. in the first instance and most probably among Christians, in second place in messianic Jewish circles'. (*Geschichte des Qorans*, [2nd ed., Leipzig 1909], 34, note 1.)

[22] The complicated discussion of the meaning of *furqān* in K. Wagtendonk, *Fasting in the Koran* (Leiden 1968), 62–7, reveals the lengths to which it was necessary to go to find a 'coherent' explanation for the word's meaning in the Qur'ān.

[23] The word *furqān* is not explored in either of the two works of Western *Qur'ānwissenschaft* that proposed extensive corrections to the received Arabic text of the Qur'ān: Günter Lüling, *Über den Ur-Koran* (Erlangen 1974); Christoph Luxenberg (pseud.), *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran* (Berlin 2000). On these works, see the penultimate section of this article.

resemblance to Aramaic *purqānā*, however, but also from their awareness of a more general pattern of relatedness between many passages in the Qur'ān and parallel passages in the Hebrew Bible, Gospels, and other religious literatures of the Near Eastern Jewish and Christian traditions. Although the exact nature and degree of this relationship remains to be explored in many respects, striking similarities have been noted in the way certain phrases are turned in the Qur'ān on the one hand, and in such texts as the Targums, Peshiṭṭa (Syriac Bible) and Haggada on the other.[24] This realization doubtless reinforced the inclination of many Western scholars to accept *furqān*'s Aramaic origin, despite its semantic awkwardness in many cases.

A New Hypothesis

The manifest inadequacy of the usual explanations for the origins and meaning of the word *furqān* in the Qur'ān entitles us to consider some possible alternatives. The fact that the diverse passages in the Qur'ān seem to resist the assignment of a single obvious etymology and meaning to the word *furqān* suggests that the word may actually have a complex etymology, that is, that it may actually be a derivative of more than one word, depending on its context. As we shall see below, two words, both Syriac, emerge as likely etymological ancestors of Arabic *furqān*.

Q. 8:41 and Syriac purqānā 'salvation'

We begin with Q. 8:41: '…if you have believed in God and what we sent down to our servant on the day of the *furqān*, the day the two parties met'. As noted earlier, Muslim exegetes have usually claimed that the 'day the two parties met' [*yawm iltaqā al-jamʿān*] is a reference to the Battle of Badr, portrayed by the traditional accounts of Muḥammad's life as an almost miraculous victory by his small forces over the much larger force of Quraysh tribesmen guarding a returning Meccan caravan.[25] It is worth noting, however, that the actual

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[24] E.g., Geiger, *Was hat Mohammed…*; Tor Andrae, 'Der Ursprung des Islam und das Christentum,' *Kyrkshistorisk årsskrift* 23 (1923) 149–206, 24 (1924) 213–92, 25 (1925) 45–112; Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* (London 1926); Heinrich Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (Gräfenhainchen 1931); Charles C. Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam* (New York 1933); Julian Obermann, 'Koran and Agada.'

[25] The numbers vary, but generally have the Quraysh outnumbering Muḥam-

words found in Q. 8:41 and surrounding verses do not in fact mention the name of Badr, nor do they offer anything specific that can be traced to the context of that battle as it is described in the *Sīra* literature, except for generic injunctions on how to behave in war. However, the unusual term *al-jamʿān*, 'the two parties' or 'groups', which is given as the context for the event described in Q. 8:41, also occurs in Q. 26:61. There, however, it is not related to Badr, but is part of the description of how Moses and the Children of Israel are saved from Pharaoh's army by the parting of the sea; the 'two parties' in Q. 26:61 are the Israelites led by Moses, and Pharaoh's army. Why the Muslim exegetes failed to make any association between these two verses is unclear, and in any case beside the point. In view of the common appearance of the locution '*al-jamʿān*' in both passages, however, it is worth considering the possibility that Q. 8:41, like Q. 26:61, may also be referring to the day the Israelites were saved by God from Pharaoh's force. In the Syriac version of Exodus which describes the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea, Moses refers to this miracle as 'the salvation of the Lord' (*purqāneh d-māryā*, Exod. 14:13); similarly, after the event, the people of Israel sing in triumph praising their Lord, whom they describe as their saviour (*pārōqā*, Exod. 15:2). It therefore seems plausible that Arabic *furqān*, as a derivitave of Syriac *purqānā*, might show up in any description of the Red Sea crossing episode in the Qur'ān — which, because of the reference to *al-jamʿān*, 'the two parties', Q. 8:41 seems likely to be.

In view of this, the Arabic *yawm al-furqān* of Q. 8:41 can plausibly be rendered as 'day of salvation', because that would indeed be a suitable characterization of God's miraculous intervention in parting the sea and thus saving the Israelites from Pharaoh — a supernatural, i.e. miraculous, occurrence if ever there was one. In this instance, then, *furqān* seems clearly to be a derivative of Syriac *purqānā*, 'salvation', as proposed long ago by Western scholars;[26] but it seems to refer to an episode not in the life of Muḥammad, as assumed by the traditional *Sīra* literature, but rather to an episode in the life of Moses and the history of the children of Israel.

mad's followers by a factor of two or three. For a summary, with the numbers, see W.M. Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford 1956), 10–13.

[26] Lidzbarski pointed out that the phrase *yawm al-furqān* in Q. 8:41 corresponds exactly to the Aramaic phrase *yawmā d-purqānā*, 'day of salvation', of Isa. 49:8 in the Peshiṭta and Aramaic Targums. Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 226; Mark Lidzbarski, 'Salām und Islām,' *Zeitschrift für Semitistik* 1 (1922), 85–96, at p. 92.

Q. 2:53, Q. 21:48, Q.3:3, and Syriac puqdānā 'commandment'

Q. 2:53 and Q. 21:48 present a completely different picture. Both verses refer to an event readily identifiable in the Hebrew Bible — God's revelations to Moses, including the tablets of the law containing the Ten Commandments; but in neither verse does the meaning 'salvation' seem particularly appropriate. When we examine the passages relating Moses's meeting with God on Mt Sinai in the Syriac text of Exodus, however, we find that the word used to render the 'commandments' of God is *puqdānā* (pl. *puqdānē*), which by coincidence bears a remarkable orthographic similarity to *purqānā*. (Compare the appearance of Syriac *purqānā*, ܦܘܪܩܢܐ, with Syriac *puqdānā*, ܦܘܩܕܢܐ.) Or is it merely a coincidence? Is it possible that in some way Quranic *furqān*, in those passages that refer to something revealed to Moses, is actually derived from Aramaic *puqdānā*, 'commandment'?

A personal note is in order. The possibility of a connection between *furqān* and Syriac *puqdānā* first occurred to me as a result of a misreading I myself made as a student thirty years ago, doing my Syriac homework. While working through translation exercises,[27] I mistakenly read the phrase *puqdānaw(hy) d-moshe*, 'the commandments of Moses', as *puqrānaw(hy) d-moshe* — that is, I misread the 'd' in the Syriac word *puqdānā*, 'commandment', as an 'r'. This is not difficult to do, at least for a beginner, because in Syriac script d and r are written with the same sign, distinguished from one another only by a diacritical dot, placed either above the letter (for r) or below it (for d), and I had mixed them up. Having done so, however, I realized that the misread word, *puqrānā*, would look very much like *purqānā*, 'salvation', if in addition to the simple misreading we reversed the order of the middle letters, q and d/r. Since I knew that some of the instances of *furqān* in the Qur'ān refer specifically to *furqān* as something given by God to Moses, the juxtaposition of *puqdānā* with Moses in the Syriac exercises led me to wonder whether the Quranic *furqān* passages that explicitly mention Moses, such as Q. 2:53 and Q. 21:48, might not also derive, through some kind of misreading or other confusion, from Syriac *puqdānā*. There is also the question of whether all Syriac texts of Muḥammad's time consistently employed the diacritical dot distinguishing d from r. Although some of the earliest extant Syriac texts (fifth century CE) seem to use the dot systematically, it is not clear that all manuscripts

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[27] The exercises were in Theodore H. Robinson's *Paradigms and Exercises in Syriac Grammar* (4th ed., Oxford 1962).

were so punctilious.[28] This opens the possibility that when the
Qur'ān was first being written down, during the first half of the sev-
enth century CE, this diacritical mark may have been missing entirely
in the written texts in question.

Inspection of the relevant passages in the Syriac Old Testament
(Peshiṭta) that deal with the revelation of the decalogue reveals that
in many cases the word used for the commandments revealed to
Moses on Mt Sinai is, as noted, *puqdānā*, or (depending on the syn-
tactic requirements of the passage) a verbal noun or verb from the
root p-q-d, 'to command'. So, for example, in the Syriac of Exod.
20:6, at the end of the prohibition of graven images, God refers to
'those who love me and keep my commandments [*puqdānay*]'. Exod.
34:32 tells us that '[Moses] gave them in commandment [*pqad*] all
that the Lord had spoken with him in Mount Sinai'.[29] Deut. 4:13
states, 'And he [God] declared to you his covenant, which he com-
manded you [*pqad-kon*] to perform…'.[30] Deut. 5:29 enjoins the peo-
ple of Israel '…to fear me and to keep all my commandments
[*puqdānay*]'. In Deut. 5:31, God tells Moses '…I will tell you all the
commandment and the statutes and the ordinances [*nāmosay w-
puqdānay wa dīnay*][31] which you shall teach them…' Deut. 6:1
states, 'Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the ordi-
nances which the Lord your God commanded me to teach you …
[*hālen puqdānē w-nāmosē w-dīnē da-pqad-ni māryā alāh-kon d-allef-
kon*]'. These passages show unquestionably that when God's revela-
tion of the commandments is described in the Peshiṭta, the word
pūqdānā is frequently the word of choice for 'commandment'; or, if a
verb is called for, it is frequently a form derived from the same root,
p-q-d, 'to command'. The other words that sometimes appear in

[28] I am grateful to the anonymous (and very learned) referee who reviewed the
draft of this article for *JSS* for calling my attention to British Library Ms 12150,
dated 411 CE, which uses the dots systematically. On the other hand, J.B. Segal,
The Diacritical Points and the Accents in Syriac (London, 1953), 5, notes the use of
this dot came into use before 600 CE, but this seems to imply that some earlier texts
(and maybe some later ones as well) did not use the dot with d/r, or did not do so
consistently.

[29] English quotes from the Bible follow the rendering of the Revised Standard
Version (RSV).

[30] Here the RSV translation misleadingly continues to speak of the 'ten com-
mandments', noting, however, that the Hebrew has 'words' (not 'commandments');
the Syriac likewise has *pethgāmīn*, 'words', as does Targum Onkelos.

[31] Deut. 5:31 in the RSV corresponds to Deut. 5:27 or 5:28 in the Hebrew
text, depending on the edition. It is unclear to me why RSV translates the three
words in this order, given that the Syriac and Hebrew give the order as 'statutes,
commandment, and ordinances'.

these contexts (notably *nāmosā*, 'law' [from Greek *nomos*] or *dīnā*, 'ruling, ordinance, law') have distinctly different meanings and are almost never used specifically to refer to the commandments themselves, although they obviously occupy a similar semantic niche.

The passages in the Jewish Aramaic translations and versions of the Pentateuch — the Targumim — do not use the word *puqdānā*, but they do employ other words derived from the root p-q-d, showing that the association of the root with the commandments (including the Decalogue) was strong.[32] Thus for Exod. 24:12, Targum Onkelos has *tapqīdta*, 'commandment', and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan has *piqūdayyā*, 'commandments'. Similarly, for Exod. 20:6 Targum Onkelos has *piqūday* and Targum Neophyti has *piqūdayyā*, 'my commandments'; for Deut. 5:28 (= RSV 5:31) Targum Onkelos has *kol piqūday*, 'all the commandment'; and for Deut. 6:1, *tapqdītā*, 'commandment'.

The word *puqdānā*, in other words, seems to be used mainly in Christian Aramaic (Syriac) versions of the scripture, rather than in Jewish ones, in reference to God's commandments. Moreover, *puqdāna* also figures prominently in later Christian Syriac literature, such as in the sermons of Ephrem the Syrian (fourth century CE), where the word is used for God's commandments. Thus, in one sermon of Ephrem, a sinner is said to be punished for not keeping the commandment [*puqdānā*].[33] In another sermon, he states 'Even the air before us / is a mighty scroll with His commandments [*kerkā rbā d-puqdānaw(hy)*].'[34] In yet another sermon, he notes that 'Whoever fears God keeps His commandments [*puqdānaw(hy)*]'.[35]

If we make the assumption that *furqān* in Q. 2:53 and Q. 21:48 is a garbled derivative of Aramaic *puqdānā*, these two Quranic passages become completely lucid. Q. 2:53, which is clearly a reference to

[32] Alexander Sperber (ed.), *The Bible in Aramaic. Vol. I. The Pentateuch according to Targum Onkelos* (Leiden 1959); Israel Drazin, *Targum Onkelos to Exodus* (New York *c.* 1990); Israel Drazin, *Targum Onkelos to Deuteronomy* (New York *c.* 1982); E.G. Clarke, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch: Text and Concordance* (Hoboken 1984); Alejandro Díez Macho, *Neophyti 1. Tomo II. Éxodo* (Madrid 1970). I am grateful to Shari Lowin for re-checking many of the references to the Targumim and Hebrew Bible for me, and for clarifying the notion that the commandments included more than the Decalogue.

[33] Edmund Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones* I, Sermo 2, line 1298 (Louvain 1970), p. 37 [=CSCO vol. 305, Scriptores Syri, Tomus 130].

[34] Ibid, I/3, line 377 (p. 54).

[35] Edmund Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones* III/1 (CSCO vol. 320, Scriptores Syri Tomus 138) (Louvain, 1972), p. 1 and in numerous other places in this sermon.

Moses's receipt of the tablets of the Law on Mount Sinai, can be translated, '…when we gave Moses the book and the *commandments*'. The same applies to Q. 21:48: 'We gave Moses and Aaron the *commandments* and illumination and a reminder for those who show piety'.

We can further suggest that Q. 3:3, which also speaks of the *furqān* as something 'sent down', likewise uses *furqān* in the sense of 'commandments': 'He has sent down to thee the book and the truth, confirming what was in front of him (?), and He sent down the To-rah and the Gospels beforehand as guidance for the people, and He sent down the *commandments*…'. Although Moses's meeting with God on Mount Sinai is not mentioned explicitly in Q. 3:3, the verse does speak of God's repeated acts of revelation to various communi-ties, which can be seen as an appropriate context in which to men-tion God's revelation of the commandments to Moses.[36]

Q. 25:1, Q. 2:185, Q. 8:29.

The remaining three occurances of *furqān* in the Qur'ān provide only a vague context and hence are not so neatly explained. In some cases it is difficult to decide from which of the two proposed Syriac referents a given passage is derived. Q. 25:1 describes the *furqān* as 'sent down', but the context is vaguer than in Q. 3:3; in this passage, there is no mention of other revelations. The verse reads, 'Blessed be he who has sent down the *furqān* upon his servant, that he may be to the worlds a warner'. It is possible that when the verse mentions 'his [i.e., God's] servant' it means Muḥammad, but in that case to trans-late *furqān* as 'commandment' or 'commandments' — particularly those revealed to Moses — does not seem to fit very well. If, on the other hand, 'his servant' actually refers to Moses, rather than Muḥammad, then 'commandments' might fit this passage quite well.

Q. 2:185 is rather vague; here *furqān* is put on the same plane with *hudā*, 'guidance', and there is no specific wording that links *furqān* with Moses on Mount Sinai; but the passage could nonethe-less be seen as accommodating the meaning 'commandment' in a general sense: '…the month of Ramadan, in which the Qur'ān was

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[36] We might note here also the text of Q. 17:106: 'It is a *qur'ān* that we made distinct, so that you may read it to the people…' [*wa-qur'ānan faraqnāhu li-taqra'ahu ʿalā l-nās…*]. The use of the verb *faraqa* in the context of the setting forth of the Qur'ān might be seen as justification for seeing the form *furqān* merely as a verbal noun of *faraqa*. But it might alternatively be seen as another garbling of an Aramaic precursor, going back to the Syriac verb *pqad* 'to command'.

sent down as guidance for the people and as evidences of the guidance and the *commandment*'. But it might equally well accommodate *furqān* as meaning 'salvation'.

Q. 8:29, as noted previously, is unlike all other references to *furqān* because it seems to imply that *furqān* is something that will happen in the future, whereas all other passages identify *furqān* with past contexts. In this case, 'salvation' seems to give a better sense to the passage, but this is, of course, only speculation.

Implications

The hypothesis proposed here that the word *furqān* in the Qur'ān has a double etymology — that in some instances it is a (deformed) derivative of Syriac *puqdānā*, 'commandment', and in others it is derived, as Western scholars long suspected, from Syriac *purqānā*, 'salvation' — has the advantage that it brings plausible meanings to more of the passages where *furqān* occurs, and in several instances connects well with the occurrence of the Syriac words in appropriate contexts in the Bible. It is important to note, too, that the revised meanings we have proposed do not, in themselves, create theological problems in the context of Muslim tradition. Traditional Muslim exegesis, as we have seen, did not reach a definitive consensus on the specific meaning of *furqān*, and many of the meanings proposed over the centuries by Muslim exegetes were quite vague. The specific meaning of 'commandments' that we have proposed for *furqān* in some Quranic passages can easily be accommodated by the general meanings provided by traditional exegetes; for example, 'commandments' can be seen as a more precise or sharply-focused equivalent of the frequently-encountered traditional definition of *furqān* as 'something that discriminates between good and evil', since God's commandments could certainly be understood as helping mankind to make such moral distinctions. Nor is associating some *furqān* passages with Moses's receipt of the Tablets of the Law (or other commandments) on Mt Sinai theologically problematic for Muslims, inasmuch as God's revelation of the Decalogue to Moses is referred to explicitly in Q. 7 (al-Aʿrāf): 145–55, which mentions the tablets (*alwāḥ*) on which the commandments were inscribed. (It is curious that that passage never actually uses the word *furqān* 'commandment' or 'commandments'; perhaps the disparity reflects an understanding of *furqān* as meaning God's commandments generally, not limited to the Decalogue, whereas *alwāḥ* 'tablets' would have the

more restrictive meaning.) In any case, the new meanings for *furqān* proposed above fall squarely within the parameters of meaning already established by traditional Muslim exegetes.

Nonetheless, our proposed re-interpretation of the origin and meanings of the Quranic word *furqān* has some far-reaching implications for the traditional Muslim understanding of the origins and transmission of the Qur'ān text. According to Muslim tradition, the Qur'ān was revealed to Muḥammad in oral/aural form; that is, he first received it as something heard, and the experience of revelation was so overpowering that the words of the Qur'ān were burned indelibly into his memory. Muḥammad then recited the new revelations to his followers, who memorized them in turn and, in some cases, began to write down parts of what they had memorized, at least to serve as an *aide-mémoire*. Eventually, some decades after the prophet's death, the definitive written form of the text was prepared on the orders of the third caliph, ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān, by an editorial team led by Zayd ibn Thābit, but Muslim tradition is quite adamant that it was the oral recitation of people who had memorized a particular segment of the text that safeguarded the accuracy of the written text.[37] In sum, the traditional Muslim view of the Qur'ān's origins as written text takes it as axiomatic (1) that the Qur'ān text we have today is the direct descendant of a single original text that first coalesced in the time of the prophet, and (2) that the accuracy of the transmission of this text was ensured by a living tradition of oral recitation going back uninterruptedly to the many companions of the prophet who had first heard him utter it. Western scholars have for the most part embraced the first axiom,[38] even as they remained more sceptical about the second.

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[37] The traditional Muslim accounts of the Qur'ān's early history are studied in Theodor Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorans*, 2. Teil, *Die Sammlung des Qorans* revised by Friedrich Schwally (Leipzig 1919) and 3. Teil, *Die Geschichte des Korantexts* revised by G. Bergsträßer and O. Pretzl (Leipzig 1938); briefer summaries can be found in W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān* (Edinburgh, 1970), 40–56, and in *EI* (2), 'al-Ḳurʾān,' part 3, 'History of the Ḳurʾān after 632' (A. Welch). See also Harald Motzki, 'The Collection of the Qur'ān. A reconsideration of Western Views in Light of Recent Methodological Developments', *Der Islam* 78 (2001), 1–34; Alfred-Louis de Prémare, *Aux origines du Coran. Questions d'hier, approches d'aujourd'hui* (Paris 2004), 57–99.

[38] The only serious challenge to this assumption has been that of John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies* (Oxford 1977) and his followers, who argue that the Qur'ān text does not go back to a prophetic archetype but rather coalesced gradually over two centuries or more following the prophet. A critique of this view is found in Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins* (Princeton 1998), 35–61.

Our proposed re-interpretation of the origins and meaning of *furqān*, however, implies that at least some passages in the Qur'ān text, as it exists today, were at some point in the text's history conveyed in purely *written* form, without any controlling oral transmission. Only in this way can we understand how the two Aramaic words *pūqdānā* and *pūrqānā* that appear to have been the precursors of Quranic *furqān* could have been conflated into the single word *furqān*, because although they sound different, they look very much alike in written form, particularly in an undotted text. If an independent oral transmission of these passages going back to the prophet had existed, it is difficult to see how such a conflation could have occurred.

Quranic *furqān* is not the only case that seems to call into question the traditional Muslim view that the Qur'ān text, as preserved and recited today, is in every detail exactly the same as it came from the prophet's lips. For one thing, the dogma of a complete and secure oral transmission of the Qur'ān seems to have prevailed only gradually in the Muslim community, because, as Nöldeke and Schwally pointed out long ago, some early Muslim exegetes also recognized the existence of 'errors' in the Qur'ān text as written.[39] However, neither the early Muslim exegetes nor, until recently, Western scholars followed this observation out to its ultimate implication: namely, that the recited Qur'ān text of today is derived, at least in part, by reconstructing the pronunciation from a written text, complete with its scribal errors, which thus antedates the recitation. In other words, the implication is that there is no secure, complete tradition of oral recitation going back to the prophet for the whole Qur'ān text.

In recent years, several scholars working in the West have addressed different aspects of the question of the written or oral transmission of the Qur'ān text. Some have argued that, as Muslim tradition maintains, the Qur'ān was originally an oral text, not a written one, despite the frequent use of the word *kitāb* (normally meaning 'book' or 'writing') in the Qur'ān itself; the relationship of the very word *qur'ān* to the Syriac and Arabic root q-r-', 'to say aloud, to recite', is usually stressed by such authors.[40]

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[39] See especially Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorans*, Part III, 1–6 on 'Fehler des othmanischen Textes'.

[40] One of the most recent and extensive treatments of this theme is Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qurān's Self-Image: writing and authority in Islam's scripture* (Princeton 2001). Madigan argues that the word 'kitāb' in the Qur'ān does not literally mean a written 'book', but rather refers more loosely to revelation in general.

On the other hand, a number of scholars have pointed out evidence that, they believe, shows that the Qur'ān, or parts of it, must have been transmitted at some point in written form in the absence of a secure oral recitation. Among the first was Günter Lüling, whose publications (particularly his *Über den Ur-Qur'ān*) advanced the hypothesis that the Qur'ān text as we have it today is the result of a process of redaction, undertaken by Muḥammad himself, of what were originally Christian strophic hymns in Arabic hailing from the Ḥijāz.[41] Some of Lüling's contemporaries criticized what they saw as Lüling's wilful and unjustified tampering with the Qur'ān text; more simply passed over it in disdainful silence, leaving it unclear whether they found his arguments not worthy of rebuttal, or were simply unable to rebut them convincingly. Even though Lüling's hypothesis claimed that the Qur'ān of today is the same as what left the hands of the prophet, it posited the existence of pre-Quranic written texts on which the Qur'ān is based, and thus emphasized the written, rather than strictly oral, nature of the Qur'ān's early transmission. Another scholar whose research bolsters the idea that some passages of the Qur'ān were the product of written transmission is James Bellamy, who in the 1990s produced a series of articles in which he examined some problematic passages in the Qur'ān text that, he decided, were the product of scribal errors.[42] Bellamy argued that these errors crept into the Qur'ān text sometime between the death of the Prophet and the crystallization of the 'Uthmānic 'vulgate'; but since the present recitation of the Qur'ān includes giving voice to the errors, their very presence reveals that at least for these passages, there was no living, accurate tradition of recitation that went back to the Prophet. On the other hand, the fact that the present recitation seems to be derived from the written text of the Qur'ān, complete with its occasional textual irregularities, reveals that the written text was taken early on to be fixed and sacred, even if the manner in which it should be recited was not known for all passages. The recent book by Christoph Luxenberg (a pseudonym), *Die syrisch-aramäische Lesart des Korans*,[43] also gives priority to features of the written Qur'ān text. Luxenberg's work, which has generated considerable

[41] Günter Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qur'ān. Ansätze zur Rekonstruction vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qur'ān* (Erlangen 1974).

[42] James A. Bellamy, 'Some Proposed Emendations to the Text of the Koran,' *JAOS* 113 (1993), 562–73; idem, 'More Proposed Emendations to the Text of the Koran,' *JAOS* 116 (1996), 196–204; idem, 'Textual Criticism of the Koran,' *JAOS* 121 (2001), 1–6; idem, 'A Further Note on 'Īsā,' *JAOS* 122 (2002), 587–8.

[43] First ed. Berlin, 2000.

controversy,[44] argues, among other things, that the Qur'ān text was originally couched in an Aramaic-Arabic 'mixed language' and that many problematic words or phrases in the Qur'ān cease to be problematic if we read them not as Arabic, but as Syriac. The difficulty with these passages, Luxenberg argues, arose because at some point people forgot that these words were Syriac and attempted to understand them as though they were purely Arabic. Some of Luxenberg's critics question the notion that the Qur'ān's Arabic contains not just Aramaic loan-words (the presence of which almost everyone accepts) but complete phrases replete, at times, with Aramaic grammatical constructions. However, it should be remembered that there are many known instances of languages that encapsulate complete phrases from another language, particularly if the source language has a more highly developed discourse in a given field. The many Latin phrases to be found in English-language legal and medical writings provide a good example: legal English is studded with phrases like *caveat emptor*, *nolo contendere*, *in loco parentis*, and *habeas corpus*, which include not only Latin words but also Latin grammatical markers. If we now imagine that, through some loss of historical continuity, we lost our memory of the nature and origin of these phrases and had only the written texts themselves, but written in a different, perhaps phonetic, alphabet, we would be facing a situation similar to what Luxenberg proposes for the Arabic of the Qur'ān; a phrase like *caveat emptor* would prove a vexing puzzle indeed for someone trying to explain its meaning on the basis of an assumed Anglo-Saxon etymology. Luxenberg's hypothesis that the Qur'ān text may contain passages reflecting such an evolution is far from proven, but deserves to be fully tested to see if it may apply for at least some Quranic passages.

Whatever one thinks of Luxenberg's hypothesis, it also implies that the recitation in use today must be later than, or at least secondary, to the written text. The evidence examined here on the word *furqān* provides further support for the view that the Qur'ān text, as we have it today, at some point underwent a process of purely *written* transmission, without the advantage of any controlling oral recitation, at least in part. We can speculate about several possible scenarios that might have produced the evidence we find in the text.

[44] See Christoph Burgmer (ed.), *Streit um den Koran. Die Luxenberg-Debatte: Standpunkte und Hintergründe* (n.p., 2004); negative reviews by François de Blois in *Journal of Qur'ānic Studies* 5 (2003), 92–7, and by Simon Hopkins in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 28 (2003), 377–80; a more positive review by Robert R. Phenix and Cornelia B. Horn is found in the online journal *Hugoye* 6:1 (Jan. 2003), 1–7 <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol6No1HV6N1PRPhenixHorn.html>.

One possible scenario would posit that parts of Qur'ān text as re-cited by Muḥammad originally distinguished in pronunciation be-tween the two Syriac loan-words *purqānā* and *puqdānā* or their Ara-bic cognates; early fragments written down by the prophet or his companions may originally also have distinguished these two words or some transcription of them in an early Arabic script, but the two words were subsequently conflated by later copyists, such as the edi-tors supposedly working under Zayd b. Thābit, when the Quranic 'vulgate'/*textus receptus* was established in the reign of 'Uthmān. The presumed Arabic cognate of Syriac *puqdānā*, 'commandments', would have appeared as **fuqdān* in the fragments received by the edi-tors, but this word already existed in Arabic with the meaning 'ab-sence, loss'. Because **fuqdān* was unfamiliar with the meaning 'com-mandments', and because it already existed as a word with negative semantic overtones, the editors presumably assumed **fuqdān* to be a scribal error for *furqān*, which either had no Arabic equivalent at that time[45] or existed with the meaning 'discrimination, separation' that had less negative overtones. Hence, according to this scenario, **fuqdān* was hypercorrected by the editors into the less offensive form *furqān*, rather than the other way around.

A second possible scenario would posit that the Qur'ān text as originally recited by Muḥammad already conflated the two Aramaic loan-words as *furqān*. This assumption would preserve the notion that the oral recitation of later times, right up until today, faithfully follows the prophet's recitation; but it opens up various possibilities as to how the conflation could have occurred in the first place:

One option is to assume that conflation of Aramaic *puqdānā* and *purqānā* had already occurred in pre-Islamic Syriac discourse, so that prophetic and 'original' Quranic usage simply followed the Aramaic usage.[46] That the prophet and Qur'ān would indeed follow estab-lished usage is what might be expected in the case of technical terms such as these, borrowed from another language with a highly-devel-oped religious discourse to remedy the lexical deficiencies of Arabic of that day, which was still a relatively undeveloped medium of ex-pression in many arenas. The problem with this option is that there is no evidence for such a conflation in Syriac. Certainly the Syriac

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[45] Assuming that *furqān* as a verbal noun of *faraqa* 'to separate, discriminate', which we find in dictionaries, is itself a product of the exegetical work of early Qur'ān scholars grappling with these Quranic verses.

[46] I owe this interesting suggestion to a conversation in spring, 2004, with Nancy A. Khaleq and Intisar Rabb of Princeton University.

and Aramaic dictionaries do not indicate that there exists any transfer of meaning between the two words *puqdānā and purqānā.*

The second possible way the prophet's recitation (and written Qur'ān) could have included a conflation of the two Syriac loanwords *puqdānā* and *purqānā* is to assume that the text was already written down during Muḥammad's lifetime — a possibility already advocated by John Burton.[47] In this case, Muḥammad himself may have been responsible for conflating the two words found in older religious texts on which he drew in compiling the Qur'ān, or he may have copied the terms correctly and distinct from one another, but (as in the first scenario above) later copyists then confused them.

These are, of course, all merely speculative scenarios, but something like one of them seems to be the only logical explanation of the evidence of the Qur'ān text as it exists today.

Conclusion

Whatever we decide regarding the possible scenarios by which this may have occurred, the evidence of the Qur'ān text and parallels in the Syriac Bible suggest that Quranic *furqān* represents a conflation of two Syriac words with different meanings: *puqdānā*, 'commandment', in passages dealing with Moses' receipt of God's commandment (including but not limited to the Decalogue); and *purqānā*, 'salvation', in some other passages, notably Qur'ān 8:41, where it is shown that the text probably refers not to the Battle of Badr, as claimed by almost all commentators, but to Moses' miraculous escape from Pharaoh's army through the parting of the sea. Although these two etyma sound different, they were conflated, it seems, because they look very much alike in Syriac script (and perhaps also in some hypothetical early Arabic transcription of the Syriac, about the existence of which we can at present only speculate). The implication is that for at least some passages of the Qur'ān, no tradition of oral recitation was available to prevent such conflations, which must have been the result of efforts to vocalize a text that was conveyed in purely written form. This example seems to confirm the assumption of other scholars who have subscribed to the idea that the Qur'ān text, from its earliest days, was at least in part transmitted in written form.

[47] John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'ān* (Cambridge 1977).