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Hartmut Bobzin und Angelika Neuwirth

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# Self-Referentiality in the Qur'ān

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# Qur'ānic self-referentiality as a strategy of self-authorization[1]

Nicolai Sinai

Like the Hebrew Bible, the Qur'ān came into being as the result of a literary process by which tradition – a fluctuating and partially oral body of concepts, motifs and narratives – crystallized into scripture. The poems ascribed to ʿUmayya ibn Abī l-Ṣalt testify to the presence in the Arabian peninsula of a sizable corpus of monotheistic folklore, a corpus to be told and retold in an endless succession of ever new variations.[2] With the emergence of the Qur'ān, one set of such recountings came to possess an authority analogous to that of the Bible itself. Much more so than the latter, however, the Qur'ān materialized in an environment familiar with pre-existent notions of sacred books, and consequently had to stake its own claim to authority in terms of these. This in turn shaped the kind of text that was evolving, and determined its literary and theological configuration. Despite their orality and situatedness, the qur'ānic revelations were from very early on subject to a kind of gravitational pull exerted by the notion of scripture.

It is against this backdrop that the relationship between the Qur'ān's self-rerentiality and its attainment of canonical status vis-à-vis the Islamic *Urgemeinde* must be understood. Due to the presence of Judaeo-Christian notions of scripturality the recitations promulgated by Muḥammad could not simply attain religious bindingness via an implicit process of recognition and acceptance on the part of the early Islamic community. Muḥammad's audience must have been at least vaguely familiar with the ways in which Jews and Christians were articulating the authoritative status of their respective canons. If the qur'ānic revelations were to lay claim to a similar kind of normativity – which is not to say that they necessarily must have done so –, they had to explicitly address their own origin and function, and thus to confront, rework



1 Thanks are due to Daniel Madigan, who has read and commented on an earlier version of this paper. I doubt whether all of his objections have been met.

2 Friedrich Schultheß, ed., *Umajja ibn Abi ṣ-Ṣalt. Die unter seinem Namen überlieferten Gedichtfragmente*, Leipzig 1911 (includes a German translation). For a recent discussion of the issue of authenticity, see Tilman Seidensticker, The Authenticity of the Poems ascribed to Umayya Ibn Abī al-Ṣalt, in *Tradition and Modernity in Arabic Language and Literature*, ed. Jack R. Smart, Richmond 1996. Seidensticker, basing himself on Joachim Hirschberg, argues that „parallels between 'Umayya and Muslim exegesis do not therefore prove that "Umayya' is forgery based on the latter; they can just as well be explained assuming that both are dependent on the same tradition" (ibid., 95); he therefore concludes that „there might well be some authentic material among the nearly 900 lines ascribed to 'Umayya" (ibid., 96). The authenticity of the material must accordingly be assessed on a case-by-case basis, and can be considered probable with regard to passages that have no parallel either in the Qur'ān or in Islamic exegesis.

and appropriate current ideas about textual authority. Explicit self-definition was a crucial factor on the recitations' way towards canonical status, and qur'ānic self-referentiality must accordingly be explained in terms of a need for self-authorization.

The following pages will be concerned above all with what I call the genetic dimension of qur'ānic self-referentiality, i. e. the notion of the text's origin in a celestial source document. In Section One I argue that the earliest recitations display neither a tangible concern with self-authorization, nor any other traces of self-referentiality. Section Two briefly examines some passages that employ one of the Qur'ān's earliest self-referential terms, the notion of *tadhkira*. The functional kind of self-referentiality exhibited by them, which revolves around the recitations' communicative intent as a 'reminder', can be viewed as emerging from a dialectic interaction between the recitations and their audience. The formative significance of such interactions is also foregrounded in Section Three: here the Qur'ān's claim to derive from a celestial *kitāb* is explained as a reaction to the audience's conviction that genuine revelations must be imagined as something 'scriptural'. Sections Four and Five discuss a further aspect of the genetic dimension of qur'ānic self-referentiality: the transformation process through which the heavenly *kitāb* is supposedly turned into an earthly *qur'ān*. Some of the hermeneutic consequences that follow from this are considered in Section Six. Finally, Section Seven examines the application of the term *kitāb* to the qur'ānic corpus itself.

In studying the Qur'ān's various uses of *kitāb*, I have drawn heavily on Daniel Madigan's recent monograph on the subject.[3] Reacting to scholars such as Arthur Jeffery, Madigan balks at picturing a heaven „cluttered" with different books, records and inventories.[4] Instead, he attempts to uncover an all-encompassing unity of meaning underlying not only the qur'ānic use of the word *kitāb*, but the verbal root *k-t-b* in general.[5] Madigan construes *kitāb* as „the symbol of a process of continuing divine engagement with human beings"[6] and argues against the idea that the Qur'ān might envisage itself as constituting, or evolving towards, a closed textual corpus. Yet in his search for an underlying semantic unity of the term *kitāb*, Madigan fails to offer more than a lowest common denominator – a semantic average computed from a broad variety of usages which must not, and indeed cannot, be fitted to one single meaning. In spite of the fact that all employments of *kitāb* share the connotations of authority and knowledge, each of them also exhibits additional semantic aspects, which justify a threefold distinction of the meaning of *kitāb*: (i) *kitāb* (usually with the definite article) as a celestial record book, which at the same time functions as the source of revelation (see Sections Three to Six); (ii) *kitāb* as a characterization of revealed text corpora such as the *tawrāt*, the *injīl*, and the Qur'ān (see Section Seven);

3 Daniel Madigan, *The Qur'ān's Self-image. Writing and authority in Islam's scripture*, Princeton 2001.
4 Ibid., 171. Cf. also ibid., 4 cont.
5 Ibid., 183.
6 Ibid., 165.



(iii) *kitāb* in the metaphorical and largely un-bookish meaning of 'divine decree / commandment'.[7]

In spite of these differences of opinion, I partially agree with Madigan's principal thesis that „nothing about the Qur'ān suggests that it conceives of itself als identical with the *kitāb*".[8] The ontological distance between the recitations and their transcendent source remains operative throughout the Qur'ān. Nonetheless, the traditional Islamic identification of *kitāb* and *qur'ān* must to some extent have been prepared by the conceptual and literary development of the recitations themselves.[9] In spite of its obvious importance, however, this issue will not be dealt with in the present essay.

There is one more preparatory remark to be made. The diachronic approach taken here relies in its broad essentials on the dating scheme proposed by Nöldeke. A detailed justification of his ordering of the material is of course beyond the scope of this article. Such an undertaking would have to base itself on the convergence of a number of different considerations, among which close attention to the *sūras*' compositional structure is of particular importance. This latter criterion yields a broad subdivision of the qur'ānic corpus into three classes of texts: structurally simply ones (mostly brief eschatological *sūras* like Q 100), structurally complex ones (i. e. *sūras* exhibiting a tripartite layout in which the middle part frequently recounts episodes from prophetic history, while the introductory and concluding sections consist of polemics and affirmations of revelation), and very lenghty texts that manifest no clear formal subdivision (e. g. Q 2).[10] When thematic and terminological considerations are taken into account as subsidiary parameters, the chronological order suggested by Nöldeke – which implies an evolution from structurally simple to structurally complex texts, with a subsequent disintegration of the tripartite compositional scheme in the texts classed as Medinan – simply makes the best sense of the material.

7 Of course one must „avoid multiplying entities" (ibid., 183), yet such a threefold distinction does not complicate things in an unjustifiable way, at least in so far as there are obvious 'family resemblances' connecting these different significations. The above distinction certainly does not go beyond the semantic complexities one regularly encounters in other religious and philosophical writings. Why should we assume a higher degree of terminological consistency in the Qur'ān than in other texts?
8 Ibid., 177.
9 See Angelika Neuwirth, Qur'ān, crisis and memory. The Qur'ānic path towards canonization as reflected in the anthropogonic accounts, in *Crisis and memory in Islamic Societies*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth and Andreas Pflitsch, Beirut, 2001, 113–152, for a number of preliminary observations on this subject.
10 This emphasis on compositional structure was of course pioneered by Angelika Neuwirth in her *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren* (Berlin / New York 1981), where the compositional integrity of the *sūras* as the Qur'ān's basic literary units is also established.

## Textual authority in the earliest qur'ānic revelations

The earliest stratum of the Qur'ān shows no traces of self-referentiality. To make such a claim of course presupposes that we are able to go beyond the threefold division of *sūras* proposed above, and ferret out the probable starting point of the Qur'ān's textual genesis. Nöldeke and Schwally are tempted to follow the traditional account about Muḥammad's initiation into prophethood at Mount Ḥirā' and thus appear inclined to accept Q 96 as the first revelation. Yet one can hardly fail to notice the extent to which their understanding of prophecy is fashioned after a romantic aesthetics of genius: the prophet's actions are irresistibly governed by a „religious idea" that has seized hold of him,[11] and prophecy itself is defined in terms of a dualist opposition of *Vernunft* and *Gefühl*.[12] These – by now rather time-worn – assumptions require that the beginning of Muḥammad's prophetic career is pictured as the spectacular onslaught of some overwhelming transpersonal force rather than as a gradual process of experimentation with ideas and literary forms. It is almost as if for Nöldeke and Schwally, to engage in religious preaching is such an extraordinarily unbourgeois mode of behavior that its beginning must be assimilated to the onset of mental illness.[13] It is obvious, then, that the dramatic character of their conception of prophethood is well served with the traditional account of Muḥammad at Ḥirā'.[14]

Locating Q 96 at the beginning is problematic not only because of the existence of a rival tradition that gives pride of place to Q 74. From a formal point of view, Q 96 – with its hymnical introduction, its polemical middle section and its concluding encouragement of the messenger – almost seems to anticipate the multi-

11 Theodor Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorāns. Zweite Auflage bearbeitet von Friedrich Schwally. Erster Teil: Über den Ursprung des Qorāns*, Leipzig 1909 (henceforth cited as *GdQ*, I), 1: „Das Wesen des Propheten besteht darin, daß sein Geist von einer religiösen Idee erfüllt und endlich so ergriffen wird, daß er sich wie von einer göttlichen Macht getrieben sieht, jene Idee seinen Mitmenschen als von Gott stammende Wahrheit mitzuteilen."

12 „Wenn überhaupt die Prophetie mehr aus der erregten Phantasie und unmittelbaren Eingebung des Gefühls entspringt, als aus der spekulierenden Vernunft..." (*GdQ*, I, 4).

13 „Nachdem Muḥammad lange in der Einsamkeit ein asketisches Leben geführt hat und durch Betrachtungen und innere Kämpfe in ungeheure Erregung geraten ist, wird er endlich durch einen Traum oder eine Vision entscheidend bestimmt, das Prophetenamt, die Verkündigung der ihm klar gewordenen Wahrheit zu übernehmen." (*GdQ*, I, 82) Cf. their interest in Muḥammad's „krankhaft bewegten Körper- und Geisteszustande" (*GdQ*, I, 26). All of this must not be mistaken for an 'Orientalist' glee at depreciating Islam, but rather as characteristic preoccupations of 19th century scholarship that manifest themselves quite independently of the particular subject matter dealt with.

14 Fortunately, however, Nöldeke's and Schwally's conception of prophecy does not directly govern the largely perspicacious way they deal with the textual material: „Für die historische Forschung ist ein selbständiger Qorānabschnitt aus diesem Grunde nicht Offenbarung schlechthin, sondern die literarische Form, in welcher der Prophet den Inhalt einer ihm zuteil gewordenen Offenbarung ausgeprägt hat." (*GdQ*, I, 26–27). In spite of their largely uncritical acceptance of the Ḥirā' legend, their discussion of Q 96 accordingly remains inconclusive: „Ob freilich Sūre 96, 1–5 das älteste aller Qorānstücke ist muß dahingestellt bleiben." (*GdQ*, I, 83)



partite structure that is so characteristic of middle and late Meccan texts.[15] A much more plausible reconstruction of the beginnings of the qur'ānic revelations has been proposed by Harris Birkeland, according to whom the first recitations were the short monothematic *sūras* 93, 94, 105, 106, 108.[16] As Birkeland has pointed out, these five texts are unlike other early *sūras* in that eschatological references are almost completely absent, and that their overall topic is divine grace and guidance rather than divine judgement. With the exception of Q 93, they lack all compositional subdivision. Placing these five *sūras* at the beginning would thus yield a continuous process of ever increasing structural complexity, an evolution that broke down only

15 Cf. the compositional scheme in Neuwirth, *Studien*, 231.

16 Harris Birkeland, *The Lord guideth. Studies on primitive Islam*, Oslo 1956. See also Gottfried Müller, Die Barmherzigkeit Gottes. Zur Entstehungsgeschichte eines koranischen Symbols, in *Die Welt des Islam* 28 (1988), 334–62. Even though Birkeland, in his introduction, speaks somewhat noncommittally of „five old Surahs of the Koran" (5), his inquiries do support chronological conclusions, as he himself emphasizes: „It might be objected that the divine guidance was only one of the many aspects of Muhammed's original experience of God. That is true. But when this aspect is so strongly emphasized in Surahs of that incontestable old age, it must have been of a special and fundamental importance. *Structurally* it is prior to the belief in reward and punishment. For the god must be a reality before he can appear as a judge. And the age of the Surahs seems to reveal the *chronological* priority as well." (133) – Alford T. Welch (Muhammad's understanding of himself: The Koranic data, in *Islam's understanding of itself*, eds. Richard G. Hovannisian and Speros Vryonis, Jr., Malibu 1983, 15–52) concedes that Q 93 must be „fairly early", yet thinks that the text refers to the „opposition and persecution" that arose after the beginning of his ministry (ibid., 18); Q 93 would thus not belong to the earliest textual stratum. Contrary to Welch, I am not convinced that v. 3 must be taken to hint at Muḥammad's disappointment at the religious resistance he encountered after having begun to preach in public; the text's reference to personal misfortune is far too general to warrant such a claim. – Andrew Rippin (Muḥammad in the Qur'ān: Reading scripture in the 21st century, in *The biography of Muḥammad. The Issue of the Sources*, Leiden 2000, 298–309), by contrast, remarks that „the 'thee' of this passage does not *have* to be Muḥammad" (ibid., 299); according to Rippin, „all the elements in the verses are motifs of religious literature... and they need not be taken to reflect historical 'reality' as such, but, rather, could well be understood as the foundational material of monotheist religious preaching" (ibid., 299–300). If Q 93 is taken in isolation, this might well be so. Yet the Qur'ān contains numerous dialectial passages where the 'thee' is obviously not a generic address of the individual believer, but instead refers to a specific person charged with the task of relaying divine communications; this perhaps justifies importing an analogous reading of the second person singular into the *sūra* at hand. Against Rippin's suggestion, Angelika Neuwirth (Erzählen als Kanonischer Prozeß. Die Mose-Erzählung im Wandel der koranischen Geschichte, in *Islamstudien ohne Ende – Festschrift für Werner Ende zum 65. Geburtstag*, eds. Rainer Brunner et al., Würzburg 2002, 323–44) has drawn attention to the thematic and lexical correspondence between Q 93 and Q 94, on the one hand, and the qur'ānic accounts of Moses' call to prophethood, on the other (ibid., 334–5, n. 30). As it seems, the experience of abandonment articulated in these two *sūras* was later integrated into the figure of Moses, the narrative portrayal of which provided Muḥammad with an interpretive mould for his own experiences as a religious charismatic (ibid., 343). This connection strongly supports a 'personalized' interpretation of Q 93 and Q 94. One might of course try to argue that Q 93 and Q 94 are pre-Muḥammadan and were only later appropriated and personalized by him. This would require sketching a plausible context for their preservation and transmission, though.

in Medina due to fundamentally different socio-political circumstances. Very likely, then, the qur'ānic revelations began with these five guidance *sūras*, which display no interest in defining their own authority, function and origin.

Subsequently Muḥammad's recitations must have undergone some sort of eschatological turn, for which Q 99 and Q 100 are good examples. As Angelika Neuwirth has argued, the oath series characteristic of these texts serve the purely literary task of providing a „pictorial matrix" (*Bildmatrix*).[17] Contrary to Biblical oath formulae, which frequently are conditional self-curses, early qur'ānic oaths do not function as invocations of a supranatural authority *beyond* the text, but rather as literary devices *within* the text.[18] Even after the eschatological turn, then, questions of authority were not yet explicitly addressed, and qur'ānic discourse still lacks any attempts at self-definition. In texts such as Q 89, Q 91, Q 99 or Q 100, the question of on whose authority the recitations can legitimately demand their listeners to mend their ways is nowhere posed. Their normative mandate rests above all on the fact that artful rhetoric, such as the oath series depicting the imminent nature of divine judgment, functions like an artfully ground lens that allows one to glimpse something distant, yet visibly real – knowing who has produced the lens is of less importance than simply looking through it.

Of course the diachronic model proposed here implies that the dominant discursive constellation in the Qur'ān – the juxtaposition of a divine speaker and a human messenger – was nascent already in the earliest qur'ānic revelations, as the second person address of Muḥammad in *sūras* 93, 94, and 108 shows. It is nonetheless striking that Q 105 and Q 106 could easily have passed for prophetic rather than divine speech; very likely, the use of the second person singular pronoun in pedagogic questions such as Q 105:1 (*a-lam tara...*)[19] was intended as an address of the listener in general rather than of Muḥammad in particular,[20] and this understanding might have carried over to *rabbuka*. Even the other three guidance *sūras*, despite their use of the prophetic 'you', do not employ any first person reference to God. In fact, the phenomenon is more widespread in the early Meccan texts than one would think: *sūras* 82, 89, 91, 99–107 and 111 all lack the divine 'I' / 'we' and non-generic uses of the second person singular.[21] Other texts exhibit no clear first person references to

17 Neuwirth, Der Horizont der Offenbarung. Zur Relevanz der einleitenden Schwurserien für die Suren der frühmekkanischen Zeit, in *Gottes ist der Orient – Gottes ist der Okzident. Festschrift für Abdoljavad Falaturi zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Udo Tworuschka, Köln 1991, 3–39, see 7.

18 By contrast, Nöldeke and Schwally (*GdQ*, I, 75) speak of „Schwüre, durch welche Muhammed... die Wahrheit seiner Rede bekräftigt."

19 Cf. also Q 89:6 and, for a similar use of the second person, the expression *wa-mā adrāka...*, used in Q 101:3 and elsewhere.

20 Note that I would hold such a generic use of the second person singular to be limited to rhetorical questions; cf. n. 17 for arguments against Rippin's suggestion that Q 93 could be interpreted analogously.

21 This is of course also true for texts that must have served as credal formulae and community prayers rather than as prophetic revelations, such as *sūras* 1, 55, 109, 112–114. Here, however, the absence of an authorial perspective is clearly due to their liturgical function. (I am of course assuming that the imperative *qul* in Q 109:1 is secondary.)



God and only contain an unambiguous second person address of the prophet in their concluding sections (cf. Q 79:42, Q 84:24; at the end of Q 86 and Q 88, both a divine speaker and an individual messenger appear). *Sūras* 77, 83 and 85, by contrast, lack an explicit address of the prophet, yet have first person references to a divine speaker towards the middle or end of the texts (Q 77:16, Q 83:13; Q 85 contains neither, yet concludes with a reference to the *lawḥ maḥfūẓ*).

William Muir has attempted to make sense of similar observations by advancing the thesis that the first eighteen *sūras* delivered by Muḥammad were considered human paraenesis rather than divine revelation.[22] In spite of its neatness, his scenario must founder because of the fact that some the earliest recitations – for example Birkeland's guidance *sūras* – feature both the divine 'I' / 'we' and the prophetic 'you'.[23] Nevertheless the fact remains that a substantial number of early texts do not seem particularly concerned about clearly differentiating divine and prophetic voice and skip into the divine perspective only locally, as it were, perhaps for reasons of rhetorical emphasis. It would have been relatively easy, through minor textual modifications, to rule out the possibility of these *sūras*' being understood as human rather than divine speech, yet the possibility of such an understanding is allowed to stand. In a certain sense, then, the discursive constellation of God addressing his messenger is nascent already in the earliest qur'ānic material, but is not yet exhaustively employed in order to unambiguously code the recitations as divine revelation.[24] The claim to revelation implicit in the use of the prophetic 'you' thus took some time before it was translated into a consistent rhetorics of divine address. Initially, then, the recitations' origin was not yet systematically indicated nor explicitly appealed to in order to ground their normative authority over their audience.

All of this fits in with Neuwirth's reading of the oath series as literary devices, rather than as devices of authorization. The early *sūras*' claim to validity is anchored above all in the truth of what is being said rather than being anchored in their putative divine origin. The occasional use of a first-person reference to God or a second

22 William Muir, *The life of Mahomet, vol. 2*, London 1861, 60 cont. Cf. the criticism by Nöldeke and Schwally in *GdQ*, I, 76–8.

23 Muir (ibid., 61) dismisses this as mere „poetical fiction". I doubt whether we can assume such a delicate distinction to have been made.

24 Perhaps this is not surprising. Ludwig Ammann (*Die Geburt des Islam. Historische Innovation durch Offenbarung*, Göttingen 2001) has drawn attention to the fact that the crucial difference between the Qur'ān and monotheistic poets such as Umayya Ibn Abi l-Ṣalt consists in the „revolutionary step" of introducing God Himself as the speaker (ibid., 43–4). The Qur'ān is a text skilfully staged as divine revelation; it was this claim, its translation into a discursive structure, and its acceptance by a religious community that made Muḥammad's recitations into more than an artistically pleasant rendition of monotheistic fairy tales (*asāṭīr al-awwalīn*). In view of this crucial importance of the Qur'ān's juxtaposition of divine speaker and prophetic messenger, and the fact that it formed a literary device unheard of in pre-Islamic Arabic literature, it becomes much less suprising that this constellation, albeit embryonically present in the very first recitations, took some time to crystallize completely.

person address to the messenger does convey a certain claim to supernatural inspiration. Yet until well after their eschatological turn, the qur'ānic texts still appear to be remarkably unconcerned about explicitly defining their function, authority and status vis-à-vis their listeners.

## Functional self-referentiality and the notion of *tadhkira*

Diachronically, the term *tadhkira* ranks among the earliest self-referential terms used in the Qur'ān. It appears prominently in some of the eschatological *sūras*' final sections. Q 88, for example, ends with a clarification of the messenger's task: *fa-dhakkir innamā anta mudhakkir / lasta ʿalayhim bi-muṣaytir / illā man tawallā wa-kafar / fa-yuʿadhdhibuhū llāhu l-ʿadhāba l-akbar / inna ilaynā iyābahum / thumma inna ʿalayna ḥisābahum* (Q 88:21-26).

While Q 88 only utilizes the verb *dhakkara*, the nominal form *tadhkira* makes its appearance in the conclusion to Q 74: *fa-mā lahum ʿani t-tadhkira muʿriḍīn /... / kallā bal lā yakhāfūna l-ākhirah / kallā innahū tadhkirah / fa-man shāʾa dhakarah* (Q 74:49–55; v. 56 is most likely a later addition). Q 73 concludes with a similar self-definition: *inna hādhihī tadhkiratun fa-man shāʾa ttakhadha ilā rabbihī sabīlā* (Q 73:19; here, too, the tortuous final verse is easily recognizable as a later addition). In determining what is meant by the somewhat elusive use of the third person pronoun *-hū* in Q 74:54 – also employed in a number of other final sections (e. g. Q 86:13.14, where the second oath of the *sūra* ends with the statement *innahū la-qawlun faṣl / wa-mā huwa bi-l-hazl*) – the notion of the Qur'ān as a literary unity beyond the individual recitations probably needs to be bracketed. Like the demonstrative *hādhihī* in Q 73:19, the free-floating 'it' in Q 74 seems to function simply as a backwards reference to 'the above'.[25] This is why, in speaking about the Qur'ān's self-referentiality, one must not assume that the 'self' referred to is necessarily understood as *mā bayna d-daffatayn*, in the sense in which we today speak of 'the Qur'ān' as a unified textual entity, or a book. In most of the early recitations, it is the individual *sūra* rather than the qur'ānic corpus as a whole which constitutes the basic textual unity and thus defines the horizon of self-referentiality.

In all of the three *sūras* just examined, the text's self-definition as a „reminder" is preceded by a depiction of the punishment awaiting those who ignore the inescapable reality of divine judgment. While early eschatological *sūras* such as Q 99 or

25 By contrast, Paret's translation displays a marked tendency to interpret verses like Q 74:19 as references to the Qur'ān as a whole. This is possibly due to the fact that at some point the recitations clearly *are* seen as parts of a larger whole (cf. Q 15:87, where *qur'ān* signifies the total corpus of available recitations, rather than one of the textual components making up this corpus). Accordingly, the horizon of self-referentiality at some point shifts from the individual *sūra* to the *qur'ān* as a corpus. But since this transition is difficult to pinpoint, it is perhaps legitimate for a translator to assimilate earlier uses of the free-floating 'it' to later ones, and to render them all as references to the Qur'ān as a whole.



Q 100 merely set forth an eschatological scenario, Q 73, Q 74 and Q 88 add a metalevel explication of their own communicative intention. From this point of view, Neuwirth's classification of Q 73:19 as an „affirmation of revelation" (*Offenbarungsbestätigung*)[26] is not entirely felicitous. Even though the command to „admonish" (Q 88:21) is obviously understood to be God's, the term *tadhkira* itself focuses on the text's paraenetic function within a human communicative context, rather than on its divine origin. Hence, the self-referentiality exhibited by the passages under discussion is primarily functional (i. e. concerned with the text's paraenetic and liturgical role) rather than genetic (i. e. concerned with the text's divine origin).

It is noteworthy that self-referential explications of the recitations' function and communicative intent were apparently first employed in their final sections. Only at a later point did the introductory sections acquire a similar role. The *sūras* discussed above thus illustrate how the framework metatextuality[27] which is so characteristic of middle and late Meccan texts might have started to emerge. Its trigger were perhaps skeptical reactions dismissing Muḥammad's recitations as „poetry" or „soothsaying" (Q 69: 41–42). In Q 69, a perceived misunderstanding of the recitations' literary genre is corrected through appeal to their divine origin (v. 43: *tanzīlun min rabbi l-ʿālamīn*). After some of the characteristics of the eschatological *sūras* (notably the enigmatic introductory sections) had clearly surfaced as recurrent literary patterns, it must have been obvious that the texts delivered by Muḥammad did not conform to any of the traditional genres of ancient Arabic literature. Assignment of a text to a literary genre of course defines the communicative function it is supposed to fulfill, the devices it may use to do so, and the stance one properly ought to take towards it. The recitations' literary novelty then engendered different attempts at categorization among their audience – not so much out of sheer curiosity, but rather because assigning them to a textual genre was a pre-condition for grasping their communicative intent. Two of such classifications are explicitly rebutted in Q 69, but in all likelihood they should be envisaged as underlying other self-referential passages as well, such as those employing the notion of *tadhkira*.

A discussion about a text's genre and function is in itself already a metalevel debate. Muḥammad's recitations, in defining themselves as *tadhkira* or *tanzīl*, take up this discussion which had initially been conducted outside of them: the metalevel debate is thus interiorized, as it were. Qur'ānic self-referentiality must accordingly be understood as gradually emerging from a process of discussion with an audience, the expectations and convictions of which had to be convincingly addressed. The recitations' engagement with their audience is of course evident from the dialectical structure of many qur'ānic passages ('if they say A, say B') which almost seems to

26 Neuwirth, *Studien*, 214.

27 The concept of „metatextuality" is here used to describe a text consisting of parallel layers or successive sections that refer to, comment upon, and presuppose each other. „Self-referentiality", by contrast, is used to denote a text which explicitly deals with the function it is meant to play, how it is properly to be understood, or how it came into being etc.

anticipate later *kalām* manuals. On the basis of this evidence it is justified, I think, to emphasize the importance of such interaction as a formative factor in the emergence of the Qur'ān's form and content in general, and its self-referentiality in particular. The qur'ānic corpus, like few other texts, documents that it is the outcome of its ability to assert itself on the market of ideas.

Whether the functional self-definition bound up with the notion of *tadhkira* is really chronologically prior to an insistence on the recitations' divine origin can not be conclusively established. It is tempting, though, to explain the genetic dimension of qur'ānic self-referentiality in terms of a polemical escalation that necessitated a more sustained emphasis on the idea of supernatural inspiration. In any case, at some point the debate about the recitations' authority must have touched upon the question of their origin: *in hādhā illā qawlu l-bashar*, some anonymous opponent is reported to have said (Q 74:25). In the end the notion of admonition proved convincing only if coupled with an explicit account of the identity of the one doing the admonishing. Q 81 exemplifies how the functional and the genetic aspect of qur'ānic self-referentiality begin to interlace. The *sūra* consists of two parts, the first of which sketches the eschatological disintegration of cosmic order, while the second one is devoted to a legitimatization of the prophetic messenger (v. 19–26) and a specification of the text's function as *dhikrun li-l-ʿālamīn* (v. 27–8).[28] The equal length of both parts illustrates how metalevel explications of the recitations' origin and function almost begin to preponderate over their original message of an eschatological accounting.

## Revelation and scripturality

As we saw above, the recitations initially did not provide an explicit account of whence and how they reached their addressees. Most likely, questions of origin and authorship were put on the agenda in response to objections of the sort preserved in Q 74:25. One strategy of reacting to these – one might dub it 'the picturesque approach' – is pursued in Q 73 and Q 74, which unfold the discursive constellation implied linguistically by the use of the prophetic 'you' into a nocturnal scenario of revelation; whereas in the bipartite *sūra* 81 eschatological admonition and self-authorization are placed side by side, in these two pieces the former is much more organically integrated in the latter. It is interesting that the integration does not proceed in the opposite direction, i. e. via the insertion of self-authorizing passages into an eschatological framework. It is almost as if the legitimizing superstructure – initially not more than a brief appendix, which in Q 81 has swollen to the *sūra*'s entire second half – has now, as it were, worked its way up to the top, where it takes precedence over the eschatological content it is supposed to authorize.

28 Once again, a consultation of the compositional scheme provided in Neuwirth (*Studien*, 221) is helpful.



This 'picturesque' approach is complemented by a number of passages where the messenger is not directly addressed, but instead is validated from a third person perspective (Q 53:2 cont., Q 69:40 cont., Q 81:19 cont.). In response to scathing polemics and sarcastic objections, the qur'ānic discourse is gradually driven into a rudimentary form of prophetological reflection, as attested by Q 81:19–25: *innahū laqawlu rasūlin karīm / dhī quwwatin ʿinda dhī l-ʿarshi makīn / muṭāʿin thumma amīn / wa-mā ṣāḥibukum bi-majnūn / wa-la-qad raʾāhu bi-l-ufuqi l-mubīn / wa-mā huwa ʿalā l-ghaybi bi-ḍanīn / wa-mā huwa bi-qawli shayṭānin rajīm.*[29] The visionary experience to which this passage alludes but briefly is recounted in more detail in Q 53:2 cont., where Muḥammad's assertion of divine inspiration, is now with greater terminological precision qualified as *waḥy*, „revelation": *in huwa illā waḥyun yūḥā / ʿallamahū shadīdu l-quwā* (Q 53:4.5). Q 69:44–47 even volunteers an elementary kind of argument in favor of Muḥammad's truthfulness: if he were lying, God would immediately call him to account.[30]

Another step in the same direction consists in the way in which the Qur'ān deploys the notion of *kitāb* in order to appropriate the peculiar charisma of authority that must have been associated with scriptural canons. As Madigan observes, the basic challenge for any interpretation of the term *kitāb* consists in the fact that the Qur'ān claims „to be of a piece with carefully guarded, lavishly appointed, and scrupulously copied sacred codices and scrolls, while itself remaining open-ended, unwritten, and at the mercy of frail human memory".[31] To my mind, this tension can be explained as resulting from a need to balance the obvious situatedness of Muḥammad's recitations with a strategic interest in imparting to them the glow of scripturality that was felt, by his audience, to be an indispensable concomitant of genuine revelations. In this sense the appeal to an archetypal celestial book, like other strategies of self-authorization, was also sparked by polemics.

Within this context Q 74:52 makes an interesting remark: *bal yurīdu kullu mriʾin minhum an yuʾtā ṣuḥufan munashshara*. Similar objections are preserved in Q 4:153 (*yasʾaluka ahlu l-kitābi an tunazzila ʿalayhim kitāban mina s-samāʾi...*), Q 6:7 (*fa-law nazzalnā ʿalayka kitāban fī qirṭāsin fa-lamasūhu bi-aydīhim la-qāla lladhīna kafarū in hādhā illā siḥrun*

29 One must probably concur with Richard Bell (Muhammad's Visions, in *The Moslem World* 24 (1934), 145–54; repr. in *Der Koran*, ed. Rudi Paret, Darmstadt 1975, 93–102), who, on account of vv. 20–21 takes the *rasūl karīm* to designate an angel (ibid., 97). This entails that the expression is used differently in Q 44:17, where Moses is qualified as a *rasūl karīm* (cf. also Q 91:13). In any case, the fact that Q 81:22 talks about *ṣāḥibukum* strongly suggests that a change of subject is intended, and that Bell's interpretation is therefore the correct one.

30 It is perhaps is a defining characteristic of religious canons that they are not merely treated as possessing normative authority on a factual level, but that they are also explicitly described as somehow categorically distinct from ‚normal', i. e. profane texts. Canonicity is thus a second-order phenomenon, in so far as the concept presupposes a classification of texts into profane and sacred, and some kind of account of what sets the canonical apart from the profane. In the case of the Qur'ān, prophetological reflections as those discussed above can be viewed as providing such an account.

31 Madigan, *Self-image*, 45.

*mubīn*), and Q 17:93 (... *wa-lan nu'mina li-ruqiyyika ḥattā tunazzila 'alaynā kitāban naqra'uhū*...). Commenting on the latter verse, Madigan draws attention to Ṭabarī's understanding of it as demanding a heavenly letter of attorney that would tell the Meccans to believe in Muḥammad. According to Madigan, „it seems clear that the kitāb referred to in the Meccans' demand is distinct from the Qur'ān".[32] Whether this is really as indisputable as he suggests I do not know; it is certainly possible that what the Meccans are demanding is not something else besides the Qur'ān, but rather the Qur'ān in a different medium, i. e. in the form of a written codex rather than as an ongoing series of oral recitations.[33] Yet even if Ṭabarī and Madigan are right, the basic issue which is at stake seems to be whether divine revelations are not something for which the appropriate mode of display is writing rather than oral recitation. As it seems, the Qur'ān's „ad rem mode of revelation"[34] – its frequent references to specific questions, objections and goings-on – no less than its oral mode of delivery were felt to be incompatible with its claim to divine authorship: „Why was the *qur'ān* not sent down to him *jumlatan wāḥidatan*, as a single complete pronouncement?" (Q 25:32), Muḥammad's opponents are reported to have asked. Due to their situatedness and uncompletedness, the qur'ānic revelations were apparently viewed as standing in need of being supplemented by something more in line with the phenomenology of Judaeo-Christian scriptures. From the audience's point of view, the recitations' claim to divine authorship, if true, must have presupposed some affinity with things written; revelations must be imagined as 'scriptural'.[35]

It is probably in response to this assumption that elsewhere the qur'ānic revelations are credited with an indirect participation in literacy, compensating, as it were, their orality and situatedness. In Q 80:11–16 they are presented as forming but the oral promulgation of some sort of transcendent divine draft: *kallā innahā tadhkira / fa-man shā'a dhakarah / fī ṣuḥufin mukarrama / marfū'atin muṭahhara / bi-aydī safara / kirāmin barara* (cf. Q 74:52, on which see above). By contrast, in Q 85:21.22 (*bal huwa qur'ānun majīd / fī lawḥin maḥfūẓ*) the transcendent storage medium from which the recitations supposedly derive are said to be heavenly tablets.[36] In a third passage, the term *kitāb* is used instead of *ṣuḥuf* or *lawḥ*: *innahū la-qur'ānun karīm / fī kitābin maknūn / lā yamassuhū illā l-muṭahharūn / tanzīlun min rabbi l-'ālamīn* (Q 56:77–80).[37] All three

32 Madigan, *Self-image*, 54.

33 Cf. also Q 25:32 (... *law lā nuzzila 'alayhi l-qur'ān jumlatan wāḥidatan*...) and Madigan's discussion of the verse (*Self-image*, 63 cont.).

34 Madigan, *Self-image*, 68.

35 This association rests on the connection between writing and authority which is analysed in detail by Madigan (see *Self-image*, 107-24, and passim) and forms the semantic backbone of his symbolic reading of *kitāb*. Q 68:37 provides a good manifestation of the idea: the opponents are confronted with the rhetorical question of whether they are in possession of a *kitāb fihi tadrusūn*.

36 See also Geo Widengren, *Muhammad, the apostle of God, and his ascension*, Uppsala / Wiesbaden 1955, 122.

37 The tangible nature of the *kitāb* as here portrayed constitutes, in my opinion, a decisive objection against Madigans ethereal reading of *kitāb* as a mere „symbol" (*Self-image*, 76). In Q 20:52, too, *kitāb* seems to connote a rather concrete medium of storage. To be sure, there are occurrences of the expression which must be understood in the looser, metaphorical sense of 'divine decree' or 'divine command' (e. g. Q 13:38; Q 66:12, cf. *Self-image*, 185; Q 98:2–3, cf. *Self-image*, 173; Q 8:68, cf. *Self-image*, 184); here, *kitāb* does indeed function primarily as a verbal noun. Yet such a symbolic reading of the term, justified as it may be in certain cases, cannot be maintained throughout.



quotations exhibit a similar structure: First, Muḥammad's revelations are qualified either from a functional viewpoint (they serve as *tadhkira*, i. e. admonition) or from a performative one (they are presented as *qur'ān*, recitation); then they are said to be „in" (*fī*) something else: *ṣuḥuf*, *lawḥ*, *kitāb*. In Q 56:80, the bipartite self-predication encountered in Q 80 and Q 85 is expanded by a reference to the process through which the heavenly writing is transformed into an earthly recitation. Note that the recitations are not without further ado identified with the *kitāb*, but instead described as a a ‚transmission' (*tanzīl*) of it. The objections reviewed above demonstrate that the qur'ānic revelations' situatedness and uncompletedness was, at least by their audience, felt to constitute a genuine difficulty for their claim to divine origin. Against this background it is arguable that the evocation of a celestial source scripture – a virtual *kitāb*, as it were[38] – might have served primarily to offset this handicap.[39]

At this stage it was probably not yet clearly worked out in which respect, and to what extent, the recitations were supposed to originate from their heavenly archetype. In response to the audience's understanding that genuine revelations must be imagined as something 'scriptural', Q 56, Q 80, and Q 85 posit a transcendent source document, participation in which is supposed to invest Muḥammad's recitations with a mediated kind of scripturality. The manoeuvre clearly serves to accommodate both the Qur'ān's orality and situatedness, which could not very well be denied, and the prevailing assumption that when God addresses man, writing somehow has to come into play. Yet contrary to audience expectations, the *kitāb* is placed out of human reach, and is said to be accessible only in the shape of the oral recitations delivered to Muḥammad. This unavailability of the *kitāb* is justified in Q 6:7 by saying that if the qur'ānic revelations had been given as a „writing on papyrus", even this would not have vanquished the unbelievers' scepticism: they would simply have discounted the phenomenon as „obvious sorcery" (*siḥr mubīn*). To a certain extent, then, pre-existing assumptions of the audience are embraced, yet at the same time subjected to a profound reconfiguration. Rather than simply rejecting the listeners' association of revelation and scripturality, the Qur'ān is striving to make some room for it without having to accept the conclusions drawn from it.

38 The expression is Angelika Neuwirth's.

39 This, of course, is diametrically opposed to Madigan's assertion that „the Qur'ān has little interest in writing as a mere mnemonic device for display or storage of the divine word" (*Self-image*, 178). In introducing the notion of a transcendent *kitāb* or *lawḥ*, and in celebrating its materiality in the way Q 80 and Q 56 do, the Qur'ān's point is precisely to evoke the idea of written storage and to appropriate the scriptural prestige associated with it.

It is within the context of this appeal to a transcendent *kitāb* that the recitations' introductory sections, too, acquire a metatextual function. As Nöldeke / Schwally have already pointed out, the enigmatic oaths of the early eschatological texts gradually evolve into more formulaic oaths centered around the terms *kitāb* and *qur'ān* (cf. in Mecca II Q 36, Q 38, Q 43, Q 44, Q 50).[40] These scriptural oaths are then substituted by revelation announcements such as *tilka āyātu l-kitābi* (cf. Q 15, Q 26, Q 27 in Mecca II, Q 10, Q 12, Q 13, Q 28, Q 31 in Mecca III), *kitābun* + asyndetic relative clause (cf. Q 7, Q 11, Q 14 in Mecca III), or a *tanzīl* formula (Q 32, Q 39, Q 40, Q 41, Q 45, Q 46 in Mecca III).[41] The substitution of the oath series with revelation announcements assigns to the introductory sections a metatextual function similar to the concluding passages discussed above: they become a privileged locus for self-referential comments on the nature of the texts supposedly revealed to Muḥammad. Unlike concluding passages operating with the terms *tadhkira*, however, these introductions are not concerned with the revelations' communicative function, but rather with their transcendent origin in a heavenly *kitāb*. The transition from eschatological oaths to more standardized revelation announcements appears to follow the introduction into qur'ānic discourse of an archetypal heavenly *kitāb* endowing Muḥammad's revelations with a sort of mediated scripturality.[42] The development of the introductory sections thus mirrors the Qur'ān's growing preoccupation with issues of authority and self-authorization.

40 Cf. *GdQ*, I, 120; Neuwirth, Vom Rezitationstext über die Liturgie zum Kanon. Zu Entstehung und Wiederauflösung der Surenkomposition im Verlauf der Entwicklung eines islamischen Kultus, in *The Qur'an as text*, ed. Stefan Wild, Leiden et al. 1996, 69–105, esp. 89 cont. Q 52:1–6 seems to exhibit an intermediary stage: most of the objects of the oath series are already drawn from revelatory history, but the passage is much less formulaic than later oaths like *wa-l-kitābi l-mubīn* (Q 43, Q 44) or *wa-l-qur'āni l-ḥakīm / majīd* (Q 36, Q 50).

41 For a convenient survey, see Neuwirth, *Studien*, 252 cont. – It might be objected that in collocations lacking the definite article such as *kitābun unzila / anzalnāhu ilayka* (Q 7:1, Q 14:1; similarly Q 11:1), reference is to the Qur'ān itself rather than to its heavenly source. Yet in view of the functional similarity to introductions where the definite article occurs (e. g. *tilka āyātu l-kitābi...* or *tanzīlu l-kitābi...*), it is plausible, I think, to interpret Q 7:1, Q 11:1, and Q 14:1 in accordance with these latter – namely, as specifying the following as a rendering of the 'signs of the celestial book'. Very likely, *kitāb* without the article is here doing duty for *al-kitāb* simply in order to allow for the attachment of an asyndetic relative clause providing additional information about the *kitāb*. Lack of the article is therefore due to a stylistic reason, while the underlying reference is to *al-kitāb*. – It is nonetheless true that in some sense the recitations received by Muḥammad must have been viewed as identical with the celestial *kitāb* from which they derived: Q 15:1 and Q 27:1, for example, imply that the '*āyāt* of the *qur'ān*' and the '*āyāt* of the *kitāb*' are really the same thing. This issue will be taken up below.

42 Note the correspondence between the evolution of the Qur'ān's literary structure and its theological and conceptual development. Without bringing out the relationship between these two dimensions, no truly processual understanding of the Qur'ān will be possible.



## Neuwirth's pericopization theory

Angelika Neuwirth, in studying the Qur'ān's understanding of its own genesis, has proposed a distinction between divine speech in general, and excerpts from the *kitāb* in particular: While the Qur'ān is staged as divine speech throughout, she claims that only parts of it are actually seen as excerpts from *al-kitāb*. Her argument may perhaps be spelled out as follows: With the crystallization of the tripartite *sūra* structure, free-floating uses of the third person singular pronoun in the concluding sections (like the one we have encountered in Q 74), and introductory formulae such as *tilka āyātu l-kitābi*, *kitābun unzila / anzalnāhu ilayka*[43] and *tanzīlu l-kitābi* acquire the function of specific pointers to a clearly delineated text section – namely, the *sūras*' middle sections, framed as they were by forward and backwards references affirming their origin in a heavenly book. From this it might be inferred that the *kitāb* portions revealed to Muḥammad were viewed as being contained above all in the narrative middle sections of the 'classical' tripartite *sūras*, while the introductory and concluding parts merely frame these scriptural pericopes and are not themselves considered to be part of the celestial archetype.[44]

However, this argument, at least in the way I have just formulated it, cannot be entirely correct, since a number of tripartite *sūras* introduced by one of the above *kitāb* formulae have middle sections which are not, or only minimally, narrative (Q 13, Q 31, Q 32, Q 39, Q 41, Q 45; Q 28 contains a lengthy passage on Moses, which appears to be part of the first section, however[45]). It can thus hardly be maintained that *kitāb* introductions in general refer to narrative middle sections, as the texts listed above have no narrative middle sections. Yet what is crucial in Neuwirth's position is that her distinction between divine speech in general, and divine speech based on *al-kitāb* in particular, discards the supposition that when the Qur'ān describes itself as deriving from a transcendent source document, that which is credited with heavenly pre-existence is in fact the text *in its entirety*. This assumption, shared by Islamic and much Western exegesis alike, inevitably imports into the celestial source document all the context-specific references and allusions with which the Qur'ān so characteristically abounds. In my view, the ensuing oddity „that from all eternity God has been concerned about such minutiae as the domestic arrangements of the Prophet"[46], among other things, clearly indicates that something must be wrong with this maximalist position.

It is interesting that the same presupposition – the Qur'ān in toto must derive from *al-kitāb* – fuels the distinction between „*kitāb* as a heavenly book" and „*kitāb* as

43 Cf. Neuwirth's translation of *kitābun* + asyndetic relative clause as „Es ist eine Schrift" (Vom Rezitationstext, 89).

44 See Neuwirth, Vom Rezitationstext, 90 cont.

45 See Neuwirth, *Studien*, 301.

46 Madigan, *Self-image*, 48.

Scripture" postulated by Arthur Jeffery[47] and scrupulously respected by Paret.[48] The implicit rationale behind it appears to run as follows: If one assumes that what is said to derive from *al-kitāb* can only be the whole Qur'ān, it becomes difficult to reconcile the Qur'ān's situatedness with the passages describing the *kitāb* as a transcendent record book, for it does not really make sense to imagine that a divine register would contain lengthy defenses of Muḥammad against his detractors, angry sermons addressed to his Jewish contemporaries, or references to the Prophet's household problems. Jeffery's distinction between „*kitāb* as a heavenly book" and „*kitāb* as Scripture" provides an admittedly tempting solution to this dilemma – the *kitāb* from which the Qur'ān is supposed to stem, it seems, must be different from the *kitāb* that is portrayed as God's record book. Yet such a differentiation is hardly tenable, as one and the same term – *kitāb mubīn* – is used to refer to both phenomena: the expression occurs in introductions such as *tilka āyātu l-kitābi l-mubīn* (Q 26:1), and in passages stating that „there is nothing hidden which is not contained in a *kitāb mubīn*" (Q 27:75; cf. also Q 11:6 and Q 36:12, to give but two additional references). As Madigan rightly emphasizes, the identity of the phrase makes it very implausible to construe these two groups of verses as applying to two different books.[49] *Pace* Jeffery, there appears to be but one heavenly *kitāb*, i. e. a universal register of things past, present and future, which also constitutes the source of the revelations received by Muḥammad. The distinction between different celestial books – „*kitāb* as Scripture" and „*kitāb* as a heavenly book" – thus ought to be abandoned.

As a matter of fact, its untenability was recognized long ago by Geo Widengren.[50] Neuwirth goes further than Widengren, however, in so far as she also discards the supposition that the Qur'ān in its entirety is presented as stemming from the *kitāb*. In setting out her view, Neuwirth speaks of a „pericopization"[51] of the heavenly *kitāb*, and thus envisages the passages based on the celestial *kitāb* as containing literal quotations from it. As I will attempt to demonstrate below, it would be much more adequate to speak of ‚renderings' of the *kitāb*. Yet what is more important is the underlying idea that not all of the Qur'ān claims to be a rendering of *al-kitāb*. Neuwirth's view thus allows one to economize on intricate speculations about a „celestial library"[52] and adopt Widengren's idea of a unitary heavenly register with different functions – without, however, viewing this heavenly register as containing *ad rem* references to the Qur'ān's immediate historical context. To be sure, these latter are marked as divine speech, but they do not therefore constitute divine speech drawing on *al-kitāb*.

47 Arthur Jeffery, The Qur'ān as Scripture, in *The Muslim World* 40 (1950), 41-55, 106-134, 185-206, 257-275 (repr. New York 1952). See especially 47-55.

48 Cf. for example Paret's note on Q 13:39, which takes for granted that if the expression *umm al-kitāb* denotes a „book of decrees", it *cannot* at the same time refer to the archetype of the qur'ānic revelations.

49 Madigan, *Self-Image*, 5.

50 See Widengren, *Muḥammad*, 119-121. Widengren draws on Johannes Pedersen's review of *Ursprung und Geschichte der Mormonen* by Eduard Meyer, in *Der Islam* 5 (1914), 110-5.

51 Neuwirth, Vom Rezitationstext, 90 cont.

52 Madigan, *Self-image*, 177.



What is the understanding of the heavenly *kitāb* that emerges when Jeffery's dichotomy of „*kitāb* as Scripture" and „*kitāb* as a heavenly book" is abandoned? The *kitāb* contains above all the facts of prophetic history as well as the fundamental characteristics of the cosmical order of things (as these are selectively listed in *āyāt* passages), yet it also records the good and evil actions of persons of lesser religious importance and is therefore suited to serve as the criterion of eschatological judgment.[53] Furthermore, it incorporates God's future decrees (such as the specific way in which Judgement Day will come to pass), which God is free to alter even while history unfolds (Q 13:39: *yamḥū llāhu mā yashā'u wa-yuthbitu* ...).[54] As Madigan succinctly puts it, the celestial *kitāb* is „the record of both God's knowledge and the authoritative divine will".[55] Since all of these kinds of information (historical, eschatological, cosmological) are found not only in the *sūras*' middle sections, but also appear in their introductory and concluding parts, *any* given Qur'ānic passage – regardless of which *sūra* section it appears in – containing these kinds of information is based on *al-kitāb*. It does not follow, however, that even these passages are envisioned as literal excerpts from their heavenly source – as I will argue in the following section, they ought to be seen rather as interpretative renderings of it which adapt it to a specific historical context.

The celestial *kitāb* serving as a kind of external storage facility[56] of God's knowledge and decrees, it is only through revelatory access to it that man can come to know about the episodes from sacred history which the Qur'ān recounts. Past events such as these, no less than future occurrences like the eschatological 'Hour'[57], belong to *al-ghayb*, knowledge of which is *'inda rabbī fi kitābin*, as Moses is reported to have said.[58] God alone is *'ālim al-ghayb*[59], since He alone is in possession of a *kitāb yanṭiqu bi-l-ḥaqq*[60]. Stripped of access to the latter, people are bound to lapse into un-

53 See for example Q 23:62.

54 On the historical antecedents of this aspect of the *kitāb*, see also Jeffery, The Qur'ān as Scripture, 47-49.

55 Madigan, *Self-image*, 105.

56 My diction is here inspired by André Leroi-Gourhan's concept of *mémoire extériorisée* (Leroi-Gourhan, *Le geste et la parole II. La mémoire et les rhythmes*, Paris 1965, 64), as referred to in Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, Munich 1992, 22, n. 5.

57 See for example Q 33:63.

58 Cf. Q 20:51.52.

59 See Q 34:3. Cf. also the references in Q 17:58 and Q 6:59. In Medina, the transcendent *kitāb* comes to contain not only knowledge about the past and the future, but also normative information about how man ought to behave (cf. Q 33:6). This is not surprising if one views the standards defining proper human behavior as somehow inherent in the cosmical order of things, and hence as factually given. Values and norms thus constitute objects of divine knowledge, and are accordingly recorded in the *kitāb*.

60 Q 23:62

founded speculation, whereas „this *qur'ān*", precisely because it taps the celestial *kitāb mubīn*, offers authoritative knowledge about that which the Israelites can but quarrel about (Q 27:76: *inna hādhā l-qur'āna yaquṣṣu 'alā banī Isrā'īla akthara lladhī hum fihi yakhtalifūn*).[61]

Jeffery is certainly right in pointing out that the qur'ānic references to a celestial *kitāb* must have drawn on a number of ancient Near Eastern conceptions which are genetically distinct. But instead of having been inadvertently jumbled up, they might have been intentionally synthesized in order to flesh out the postulate of a heavenly source document. Very likely, the latter's confluence with the notion of a celestial register was not achieved before the middle Meccan period. There is of course earlier evidence for some such notion of a divine register, as attested by Q 78:29 where „everything" is said to be „enumerated in writing" (*wa-kulla shay'in aḥṣaynāhu kitābā*). Yet the identification of this with the *ṣuḥuf mukarrama* and the *lawḥ maḥfūẓ* is probably the result of subsequent elaboration.[62]

## Transforming *kitāb* into *qur'ān*: the notion of *tafṣīl*

Neuwirth's distinction between divine speech in general, and divine speech drawing on *al-kitāb*, receives additional confirmation from the way the terms *kitāb* and *qur'ān* relate to each other. Contrary to the traditional Islamic identification of both terms, in some middle and late Meccan texts *kitāb* and *qur'ān* are actually kept carefully distinct. Even though *qur'ān* from a certain stage on can refer to the corpus of recitations that have so far been revealed[63] – a corpus, though, that has not yet reached closure –, it frequently specifies merely the characteristic mode of display in which *al-kitāb* is being delivered unto and by Muḥammad:... *tilka āyātu l-kitābi l-mubīn / inna anzalnāhu qur'ānan 'arabīyan la-'allakum ta'qilūn* (Q 12:1.2).[64] Thus, whereas *al-kitāb* evokes a celestial mode of storage – i. e. writing –, *qur'ān* points to an earthly mode of display.[65] At least by implication, there might be ways other than recitation to display *al-kitāb*; Moses, for example, is said to have received *alwāḥ* (Q 7:145) rather than oral recitations.[66] The contrast between *al-kitāb* as the starting point of this

61 The opposition between the reliable knowledge imparted by recourse to *al-kitāb*, and human „disagreement" also underlies Q 41:45 (*wa-la-qad ātaynā Mūsā l-kitāba fa-khtulifa fihi* ...)

62 Cf. Q 43:4: *innahū fī ummi l-kitābi ladaynā la-'alīyun ḥakīm*. Even if Pared (ad loc) is right in maintaining that, from a purely grammatical point, the predicate of the phrase is *'alīyun ḥakīm*, in view of passages such as Q 56:77 cont. the verse must be construed as a poetical ellipsis for saying that, *since* the *qur'ān* is contained in *umm al-kitāb*, it is *therefore 'alīyun ḥakīm*.

63 Cf. Q 15:87 (Mecca II).

64 Cf. also Q 20:113.

65 See also Madigan's general remarks on the concepts of storage and display (*Self-image*, 69 cont.).

66 Possibly this has to be connected with the recurrent affirmation that „We have given Moses the Book" (Q 17:2, Q 23:49, Q 25:35). It is somewhat conspicuous that Moses is reported to have been *given* the *kitāb*, whereas with respect to Muḥammad the *kitāb* is usually said to have been *send down*. This difference in diction in describing the respective transmission process might well



transmission process and *qur'ān* as its end product is made especially clear in Q 41:2.3: *tanzīlun min ar-raḥmāni r-raḥīm / kitābun fuṣṣilat āyātuhū qur'ānan 'arabiyyan li-qawmin ya'lamūn*. The heavenly *kitāb* is, as it were, 'unpacked' in the form of an Arabic recitation, rather than having been composed in Arabic from eternity on.[67] Elsewhere (Q 10:37), too, „this *qur'ān*" is qualified as *tafṣīl al-kitāb*. In a number of passages from Mecca II and III, then, *kitāb* and *qur'ān* are clearly distinguished, the transformation process leading from one entity to the other being labelled as *tafṣīl*.[68]

Any interpretation of meaning of the term *tafṣīl* must of course take into account the use made of the corresponding verb. Besides the *kitāb*, *faṣṣala* takes objects such as *kulla shay'in*[69], various *āyāt*[70], and kinds of prohibited food.[71] The basic meaning, as most translations of the Qur'ān signal, thus seems to be one of detailed elucidation. The transformation process from *kitāb* to *qur'ān* being described as a *tafṣīl*, it cannot simply be a matter of translating the celestial scripture into Arabic, nor of reproducing orally something written. Frequently, the verb *faṣṣala* appears together with the prepositional phrase *li-qawmin* + asyndetic relative clause, such as *faṣṣalnā l-āyāti li-qawmin ya'lamūn*.[72] Madigan suggests an optative reading of these phrases, according to which they do not stipulate a pre-existing attitude of the audience („We have explained the signs to people who know") but rather one which the *āyāt* passages are supposed to induce; the underlying meaning would thus be „We have explained the signs so that a people might know".[73] Even if this is so, the frequent use of these phrases indicates that *faṣṣala* possesses a kind of built-in reference to the interlocutor; logically, the basic form appears to be *faṣṣala shay'an li-* rather than simply *faṣṣala shay'an*.[74] A *tafṣīl* of something, it seems, must always target a specific audience in a specific situation. Q 41:44 (*wa-law ja'alnāhu qur'ānan a'jamiyyan la-qālū law lā fuṣṣilat*

reflect a difference in the medium of display. Unlike *ātā*, which evokes a straightforward and horizontal handing-over of a written exposition of the *kitāb* – something to be done with once and for all, as it were –, *anzala* indicates a vertical kind of transmission where what is being transmitted remains out of the recipient's reach and is therefore much more likely to be withheld. It should be kept in mind that when Moses is described as having been „given the *kitāb*", this probably does not mean that Moses has been given the *kitāb* in its totality; rather, that portion of it which has been given to him was transmitted to him in writing and *jumlatan wāḥidatan* (cf. Q 25:32), instead of orally and in successive installments.

67 Cf. Q 11:1 (*kitābun uḥkimat āyātuhū thumma fuṣṣilat*), where the result of the operation is not specified. It is possible that *aḥkama* here denotes composition of the celestial scripture. Madigan (*Self-image*, 162), however, interprets both verbs as near-synonyms.

68 Cf. also Q 6:114 (*anzala ilaykumu l-kitāba mufaṣṣalan*) and Q 7:52 (*wa-la-qad ji'nāhum bi-kitābin faṣṣalnāhu 'alā 'ilmin...*).

69 E. g. Q 6:154, Q 7:145, Q 12:111.

70 E. g. Q 6:55.97.98.126, Q 7:32.174.137, Q 9:11, Q 10:5.24, Q 13:2, Q 17:12, 30.28.

71 Cf. Q 6:119.

72 E. g. Q 6:97.98.126, Q 7:32, Q 9:11, Q 10:24, Q 30:28. See also Q 6:119 (*lakum*).

73 Madigan, *Self-image*, 99–101.

74 Even in Q 7:52, which lacks the prepositional complement, this reference to the interlocutor is implicitly present: *ji'nāhum bi-kitābin faṣṣalnāhu 'alā 'ilmin*.

*āyātuhū*) provides additional evidence for this: If the recitations had not been in Arabic, they would not have been properly adapted to their intended audience.[75]

This connotation of *tafṣīl* being an ad hominem address tailored to a particular communicative context is in fact borne out by a closer look at the narrative style of the Qur'ān. As Neuwirth remarks with regard to Q 15, „the narrated plot... merges into *metatexual appeals* to a plurality of listeners".[76] A random example of the way narration, explication, and adhortation are woven into one another is provided by Q 38:24, taken from the *naba' al-khaṣm* in Q 38:21 cont., which goes back to *2 Sam* 12:1–14. The verse runs:

*qāla*
*la-qad ẓalamaka bi-su'āli naʿjatika ilā niʿājihī*
*wa-inna kathīran mina l-khulaṭā' la-yabghī baʿḍuhum ʿalā baʿḍin*
*illā lladhīna āmanu wa-ʿamilū ṣ-ṣāliḥāti wa-qalīlun mā hum*
*wa-ẓanna Dāwūdu annama fatannāhu fa-staghfara rabbahū wa-kharra rākiʿan wa-anāba*

The verse starts out as a factual report of the answer David gives to the *khaṣmān*, presented as a verbatim citation. The divine speaker then generalizes David's response into an anthropological observation about human greed and deceit.[77] Yet since the addition picks up on some of the language used by the *khaṣmān* before (Q 38:22: *baghā baʿḍunā ʿalā baʿḍin*), it appears to be part of the same historical setting – almost like a second response given to the *khaṣmān* –, and yet to transcend it by extracting from it a general insight that is relevant to the text's audience. This carrying over of sacred history into religious admonition is completed in the subsequent restriction, where „the faithful and rightous" are implicitly enjoined not to lapse into the ordinary pattern of human behavior diagnosed before. There is thus a continuous transition from past report to present paraenesis via anthropological generalization as the connective link. Afterwards, the verse abruptly switches back to the level of historical narration. Yet the utter self-humiliation expressed by David would be quite unintelligible if the last part of the verse (starting from *wa-ẓanna...*) had been appended directly to David's response to the *khaṣmān*. Rather, the text makes it look as if David were reacting to God's antecedent exhortation to shun the

75 Madigan (*Self-image*, 161–2) suggests that *faṣṣala* could be understood „as often having a factitive sense: 'to make a thing decisive, to make it a criterion'." When combined with the *āyāt*, it would thus mean that these „have been set up as clear criteria to guide human action". This would complement my above interpretation rather nicely.

76 Angelika Neuwirth, Referentiality and textuality in Sūrat al-Ḥijr. Some observations on the Qur'ānic „canonical process" and the emergence of a community, in Literary structures of religious meaning in the Qur'ān, ed. Issa J. Boullata, London 2000, 143–172, see 150.

77 My reading of the verse is based on the conviction that David's response ends with *niʿājihī*, and that the following remark has to be understood as a divine commentary, rather than as part of David's answer. While Paret opts for the first construal, Hans Zirker's recently published translation (Darmstadt 2003) confirms my reading. – My use of indentations in representing the verse follows Zirker's layout.



evil ways of man and be one of the „faithful and righteous". The divine commentary inserted into the narration is at once firmly tied to the events reported, and at the same time transcends them. The Qur'ān thus gives the impression of a text evolving on different, yet closely intertwined levels of discourse.[78] This multi-layered nature in fact forms a literary counterpart to the theological claim of going back to *al-kitāb*. At its basic level, the text simply recounts one of the events recorded in the celestial scripture from which Muḥammad's revelations are said to derive, while at another level, the religious and ethical significance of this event is clarified in a way which is carefully attuned to the expectations, convictions and questions of the target audience.

Neuwirth's distinction between divine speech based on *al-kitāb*, and supplementary comments not derived from it, can thus be shown to manifest itself in the Qur'ān's literary structure. Yet the analysis of Q 38:24 which I have just proposed also points to the need to eschew any notion that the Qur'ān views itself as literally quoting the *kitāb*, as Neuwirth seems to imply when she speaks of "pericopes". Qur'ānic metatextuality, as the above passage shows, is not limited to the recitations' introductory and concluding sections, but, in the form of paraenetic glosses and appeals, punctuates the middle sections as well.[79] Hence even these latter do not purport to be word-for-word citations of the *kitāb*, but already form a sort of situated paraphrase of it; they constitute interpretive renderings rather than literal excerpts. The same conclusion must be reached in view of the fact that the Qur'ān often gives more than one rendering of Biblically inspired stories, re-telling and adapting them in the light of the early Islamic community's changing historical situation.[80] If these renditions were all citations from the *kitāb*, the latter would have to contain the same juxtaposition of different accounts as the qur'ānic corpus itself. From the qur'ānic perspective, then, the celestial scripture cannot be given to man in any other shape than *mufaṣṣalan* (Q 6:114). The *kitāb* is partially accessible, but never available: it can be tapped via divine revelation, but due to the need to tailor such revelations to a specific target audience, the *kitāb* as such is at no one's disposal, not even in the form of excerpts.[81]

78 See also Neuwirth's observations on the qur'ānic use of „parenthetic clausulae" (*Studien*, 157 cont.)

79 The above citation from Neuwirth, Referentiality and textuality, clearly shows her awareness of the phenomenon. Yet the terminology she has employed in describing the relationship between *qur'ān* and *kitāb* does not sufficiently take account of the fact.

80 See Neuwirth, Erzählen als Kanonischer Prozeß, for a diachronic cross-section of the evolution of the Moses narrative.

81 This point is emphasized very consistently by Madigan, who speaks of the „elusiveness of the *kitāb*" (*Self-image*, 167), and hinted at by Neuwirth (Vom Rezitationstext, 90: „... daß dieser Text in seiner Gänze der Disposition des Sprechers entzogen ist..."). See also Tilman Nagel, Medinensische Einschübe in mekkanischen Suren. Ein Arbeitsbericht, in *The Qur'an as text*, ed. Stefan Wild, Leiden et al. 1996, 59–68, 65: „Jedes irdische, papierne Buch ist nur ein winziger in menschliche Begriffe gesetzter Teil der weisen göttlichen Fügung...".

Above I have said that the transformation of *kitāb* into *qur'ān* must not be thought of as simply a matter of translating the former into Arabic.[82] As should have became clear by now, the idea of the *qur'ān* being an Arabic translation of the *kitāb* is problematic because it obscures the interpretive nature which the Qur'ān ascribes to itself via the expression *tafṣīl al-kitāb*.[83] Should we then simply replace the notion of translation with that of interpretation? The answer must be no, since the recitations proclaimed by Muḥammad are clearly viewed as in some respect identical with *al-kitāb*. This is perhaps obvious already from announcements of revelation like *tilka āyātu l-kitābi l-mubīn* (e. g. Q 26), and a similar impression of identity is conveyed by the frequent affirmation that God has „sent down the *kitāb*" to Muḥammad: what Muḥammad has received is thus not merely a summary or a rewriting of the *kitāb*, but somehow the *kitāb* itself. There is thus a certain presumption of identity between the two elements, and this also helps to explain the close proximity of *kitāb* and *qur'ān* in Q 15:1 (*tilka āyātu l-kitābi wa-qur'ānin mubīn*) and Q 27:1 (*tilka āyātu l-qur'āni wa-kitābin mubīn*), where the following text is characterized both performatively and genetically, i. e. as simultaneously forming 'signs which are recited' and 'signs from the Book'.[84]

One probably ought to say that the Qur'ān considers itself *both* a translation *and* an interpretation of the *kitāb*. It may be helpful to characterize the Qur'ān's integration of narrative renderings of the *kitāb* with ad hominem comments by saying that the text stages itself as a kind of divine targum. In the present context, this is not meant to be a historical hypothesis suggesting an ascertainable structural influence of the Aramaic translations of the Bible on the Qur'ān, even though such an influence is perhaps not altogether unlikely. Rather, I am suggesting that the term targum can meaningfully be employed as an analytical concept that might prove helpful in capturing some of the Qur'ān's literary characteristics. The relevant analogy between the Qur'ān and targum literature, as I see it, resides precisely in their blending of translation and interpretation.[85] Thus, by saying that the Qur'ān stages itself as a

82 This idea is prevalent, at least implicitly, in much of the relevant secondary literature. A representative example is Jeffery's statement that the Qur'ān „brings the message giving guidance to the way of Allah... in an Arabic medium" (The Qur'ān as Scripture, 274). The Qur'ān's Arabicness is certainly a hallmark of its self-understanding, but it must not lead us to simply equate *tafṣīl* with „translation".

83 This interpretive nature of the expression *tafṣīl al-kitāb* is briefly pointed out, yet not elaborated upon, by Matthias Radscheit in his *Die koranische Herausforderung. Die taḥaddī-Verse im Rahmen der Polemikpassagen des Korans*, Berlin 1996, 87: „Wenn er [= the Qur'ān] *tafṣīl al-kitāb* genannt wird, so ist damit ganz offensichtlich ein Text gemeint, der die Schrift darlegt und erläutert."

84 Cf. Neuwirth, Referentiality and textuality, 148 (about Q 15:1): „Verse 1 constitutes a liturgical *introduction*, consisting of a metatextual formula, which qualifies the entire following speech as part ('set of signs', *āyāt*) of an authorized comprehensive text („codex", *kitāb*) and specifies its function as a ceremonial recitation (*qur'ān*)."

85 Cf. Etan Levine, The targums: their interpretative character and their place in Jewish text tradition, in *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament. The history of its interpretation, vol. 1: From the beginnings to the Middle Ages (until 1300)*, ed. Magne Saebo, Göttingen 1996, 323–331, see. 325: „The



divine targum I mean to imply two things. Firstly, a targum is a relatively free paraphrasis of a text that provides it with explanations geared to make it speak to a specific audience; as a consequence, the relationship between the two texts is not one of literal identity. Secondly, however, a targumic rendering is not a different text which merely deals with the same subject matter, such as a summary or a rewriting, but is in essence the same text; in this respect the term *targum* is indeed more like a translation than a commentary. The word is helpful, I think, in capturing an understanding of text identity that would allow for a substantial amount of built-in updating and explanation, as opposed to the modern tendency to see text identity as requiring a maximally literal rendering. In any case, translation and interpretation of the *kitāb* must not be thought of as mutually exclusive.

The Qur'ān's staging of itself as targumic speech makes for a fairly plausible reply to the question why the text was not sent down „as a single pronouncement": *wa-qāla lladhīna kafarū law lā nuzzila 'alayhi l-qur'ānu jumlatan wāḥidatan ka-dhālika li-nuthabbita bihī fu'ādaka wa-rattalnāhu tartīlā* (Q 25:32). Exegesis of a canonical corpus – such as *al-kitāb* – secures the latter's continuing relevance vis-à-vis a certain community, and thus 'confirms' the latter in its commitment to the exegeted text's significance and bindingness. From this perspective, the fact that qur'ānic metatextuality casts God Himself in the role of the *metūrgeman* indeed makes Him fulfill the function of 'confirming the hearts' of Muḥammad and his followers in their adherence to *al-kitāb*.[86] A one-time rendering of the *kitāb*, by contrast, would have left Muḥammad's followers to their own interpretive devices afterwards. At this stage, and perhaps until the death of Muḥammad, the possibility that revelation might cease, and that the qur'ānic revelations might thereby wind up as a *jumla wāḥida* after all, does not appear to have been seriously reckoned with.[87] If revelation was „seen to be an activity of God directed towards human beings and expecting a response from them"[88], as W. M. Watt puts it, one might easily have assumed that this activity would go on indefinitely.

In qur'ānic discourse, then, God is presented as fulfilling the function of a *metūrgeman*, of paraphrastically rendering the heavenly *kitāb* and providing it with paraenetic glosses relevant to the specific circumstances of the Islamic *Urgemeinde*. It is fascinating to remark how neatly this transforms the Qur'ān's situated and interactive nature from a liability into an asset, since it is only via a situated *tafṣīl* that the *kitāb* is accessible at all. Far from betraying an awkward lack of scripturality and thus

*metūrgeman* was expected to reconcile the two functions of translater and interpreter".

86 Perhaps in Q 17:106, too, the fact that Muḥammad's revelations were delivered only successively and not *jumlatan wāḥidatan* is turned from vice into virtue and presented as a divine artifice facilitating the recitation's reception by their audience: *wa-qur'ānan faraqnāhu li-taqra'ahū 'ala n-nāsi 'alā mukthin wa-nazzalnāhu tanzīlā*.

87 On the significance of *inqiṭā' al-waḥy* see William A. Graham, *Divine word and prophetic word in early Islam. A reconsideration of the sources, with special reference to the Divine Saying or* ḥadīth qudsī, Den Haag / Paris 1977, 9 cont.

88 W. M. Watt, *Islamic Revelation in the Modern World*, Edinburgh 1969, 6.

calling into question the recitations' divine origin, the Qur'ān's „ad rem mode of revelation"[89] becomes a signal of God's revelatory engagement with Muḥammad's followers: it is a consequence of God Himself having undertaken to make the transcendent Book accessible to the community of the believers. The Qur'ān's situatedness is thus profoundly revalued and metaphysically sublimated.

Interestingly, by making scripture as such humanly unavailable, the Qur'ān undercuts Jewish and Christian claims to be in possession of it. This is perhaps no more than an incidental by-product of the qur'ānic notion of *kitāb* as it evolved in response to the objections examined above. Nonetheless faint echoes of such an interconfessional polemics can be discerned. In Q 6:91, for example, the Jews are charged with „making the *kitāb* into papyri" (*qul man anzala l-kitāba lladhī jā'a bihī Mūsā nūran wa hudan li-n-nāsi taǰʿalūnahū qarāṭīsa...*). Even though all revelations constitute, at different times, ways of access to the *kitāb*, it would be presumptuous for any materially available text to be considered an exhaustive expression of it; in this sense, one can only be in possession of a rendering of Scripture, not of Scripture itself. This is perhaps why in Q 3:23 and Q 4:44.51, the usual description of the Jews as *alladhīna ūtū l-kitāb* is replaced with the more cumbersome, yet theologically more precise *alladhīna ūtū naṣīban mina l-kitāb*.[90] The replacement makes it clear that 'having been given the *kitāb*' must not be understood as anything more than having been given access to a certain portion (*naṣīb*) of it. To be sure, this applies to the qur'ānic revelations no less than to earlier ones: like the *tawrāt* or the *inǰīl*, they are not envisaged as providing access to the *kitāb* in its entirety.[91] Unlike the Jews, however, the followers of Muḥammad „believe in the whole *kitāb*" (*tu'minūna bi-l-kitābi kullihī*, Q 3:119) – they observe the ontological distinction between scripture as such and its earthly manifestations, and are consequently aware that the *kitāb* is not exhaustively expressed by any one of the various renderings with which God has provided different people at different times.[92]

89 Madigan, *Self-image*, 68

90 Cf. also Madigan, *Self-image*, 169, 177–8, where he argues – in my view, correctly – against the position maintained by Welch that „those who have been given a portion of *al-kitāb*" is a revision, rather than simply a synonym, of „those who have been given *al-kitāb*".

91 See Jeffery, The Qur'ān as Scripture, 54, for more references.

92 This does not of course limit the Qur'ān's claim to have superseded earlier revelations. Like them, the recitations delivered by Muḥammad only provide access to „a portion of the *kitāb*"; yet within their cultural and historical context, they do this in an authoritative and definitive way, and this is why they „call" the Jews to God's *kitāb* (*yudʿawna ilā kitābi llāhi li-yaḥkuma baynahum*, Q 3:23). In dismissing the Qur'ān and clinging exclusively to their own scripture, the Christians, for example, have replaced obedience to God with obedience to their „scholars and monks" (Q 9:31). The conflict between the early Islamic community, on the one hand, and established monotheisms like Judaism and Christianity, on the other, here appears as the conflict between two conflicting conceptions of religious authority that have both shaped the monotheistic tradition: a 'scribal' one, which views revelation as a phenomenon of the past that is passed on and interpreted by a class of religious scholars, and a charismatic or prophetic one, which experiences revelation as a present reality. According to qur'ānic theology, the former conception, in focussing exclusively on the scholarly interpretation of a fixed set of texts, mistakes past renderings of the *kitāb* for the *kitāb* itself. Maybe Q 3:79 (... *kūnū rabbānīyīna bi-mā kuntum tuʿallimūna l-kitāba wa-bi-mā tadrusūn*) has to be read within the same context: as against the 'scribal' preoccupation with the transmitted text of earlier revelations, the 'real' rabbis are said to be those who study the *kitāb* itself, not merely its past renderings. Of course, to study the *kitāb* itself here means acceptance of the qur'ānic revelations. When faced with the choice between human exegesis of former renderings of the *kitāb*, and a divine explication of the *kitāb* itself, it is obvious which alternative must be preferred.



## The Qur'ān's anxiety of interpretation

Another consequence of the transcendence of Scripture is that only God can possibly act as its exegete. By itself this does not necessarily mean that the *kitāb*'s divine targum must not in turn be subjected to human exegesis: since divine and human interpretation are situated at different levels, and deal with different objects (the one with *al-kitāb*, the other with the divine *tafṣīl* of *al-kitāb*), there is no prima facie reason why one should exclude the other. Yet this is precisely what the text appears to imply. Q 75:16-19 (*lā tuḥarrik bihī lisānaka li-taʿjala bih / inna ʿalaynā jamʿahū wa-qur'ānah / fa-idhā qara'nāhu fa-ttabiʿ qur'ānah / thumma inna ʿalaynā bayānah*) not only puts forward an unequivocal claim to verbal inspiration, but also assigns to God the exclusive right to the recitations' interpretation (*bayān*). Presumably, revelations are simply to be interpreted by further revelations: not only does God act as the exegete of the celestial *kitāb*, he is also the sole authority to be turned to should the recitations revealed so far prompt any questions.[93] Indeed, since revelation was experienced by the early Islamic community not as the one-time conveyance of a closed textual corpus but as an „ongoing reality"[94], there was in fact no plausible reason to resort to any exegete other than God Himself as he spoke through Muḥammad. The delegitimization of human interpretation implied by Q 75:19 is thus a consequence of the recitations' situatedness and uncompletedness, sublimated as they were into a hallmark of God's continuing engagement with the community of believers. It is in this context, too, that the Qur'ān prides itself on its clarity: The attribute *mubīn* is joined not only to *kitāb*, but to *qur'ān* as well;[95] Muḥammad's revelations are described as capable of „elucidating" the meaning and significance of earlier revelations;[96] and they are characterized as being „in clear Arabic" (*bi-lisānin ʿarabīyin mubīn*).[97]

93 Cf. Q 20:114, which contains the same instruction to rely on divine clarifications of the corpus as Q 75:19.

94 Graham, *Divine word*, 29.

95 See Q 15:1, Q 36:69.

96 Q 16:44: ... *wa-anzalnā ilayka dh-dhikra li-tubayyina li-n-nāsi mā nuzzila ilayhim* ... (a similar expression appears in Q 16:64). According to the traditional Islamic understanding, this means that the prophetic sunna clarifies the Qur'ān, not that the Qur'ān clarifies the meaning of the preceding revelations (cf. Brannon Wheeler, *Applying the canon in Islam: the authorization and maintenance of interpretive reasoning in Hanafi scholarship*, New York 1996, 83). This construal of Q 16:44.64 patently ignores the fact that both verses are preceded by an evocation of bearers or recipients of earlier revelations. The traditional reading is of course still prevalent in the Islamic world. It is, perhaps not surprisingly, rehashed by M Mustafa al-Azami in his *On Schacht's Origins*

A similar anxiety about human interpretation is expressed by the Qur'ān's hermeneutic locus classicus Q 3:7, where „those in whose hearts is swerving" are said to „follow its [the Qur'ān's] ambiguous part, desiring dissension, and desiring its interpretation".[98] The continuation of the verse is notoriously obscure, as the expression *ar-rāsikhūn fi l-ʿilm* („those firmly rooted in knowledge") can be construed both as the end of the sentence preceding it, and as the beginning of the one following it. Yet I do not think that we must content ourselves with Stefan Wild's position that „there is no way to answer the question of what was the original form and meaning of this verse".[99] The passage obviously rests on the juxtaposition of „those in whose hearts is swerving" and „those firmly rooted in knowledge". As the transgression imputed to the former consists in the fact that they desire the ambiguous[100] verses' *taʾwīl*, it seems that the merit of the latter must consist in precisely the opposite, namely *not* desiring their *taʾwīl*. In fact, desire of the ambiguous passages' *taʾwīl* is equated with desire of dissension; how then could „those firmly rooted in knowledge", who are undoubtedly held up as a positive role model here, be said to know their interpretation, if any pursuit of such knowledge is tantamount to

*of Muhammadan jurisprudence* (Oxford / Cambridge 1985, 13). Ibrāhīm Fauzī, albeit an author of relatively liberal outlook, does not give a moment's thought to scrutinizing it more closely (*Taḥwīn as-sunna*, Beirut 2002, 38). – It is interesting to observe how the traditional interpretation of 16:44.64 presupposes an experience of the qur'ānic corpus that sees it, not as the subject, but as the object of *tabyīn*: the Qur'ān does not provide clarification anymore, it stands itself in need of clarification. After having reached closure, and having been detached from their original communicative context, the qur'ānic texts cannot, as it were, speak for themselves anymore, but are dependent on exegesis in order to retain their relevance and intelligibility. Perhaps the early opposition against *tafsīr* studied by Harris Birkeland (*Old Muslim opposition against interpretation of the Koran*, Oslo 1955) is fueled by a refusal to acknowledge this changed state of affairs.

97 Q 16:103; Q 26:195. – In a way, the Qur'ān's preoccupation with clarity perfectly understandable: If the entire point about the idea of divine revelation is that God Himself brings to an end the ineffective and wearisome human squabbling (*ikhtilāf*, see e. g. Q 16:64) about what to believe and what to do, He must be capable of expressing Himself with perfect lucidity – for otherwise the quarrel would merely shift to the problem of what He has in fact meant to say and thus resume with increased intensity. When God intervenes, he must therefore do it in a way which confronts people with the naked alternative of obeying or disobeying Him, without spawning lenghty preliminary debates about what He has said. (Sooner or later, of course, all revelatory religions have been forced to acknowledge that it is not as simple as that.)

98 The verse is discussed at length in Stefan Wild, The self-referentiality of the Qur'ân: sūra 3:7 as an exegetical challenge, in: *With reverence for the word: medieval scriptural exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe et al., Oxford et al. 2003, 422–436.

99 Wild, Self-referentiality, 424.

100 See Wild, Self-referentiality, 425–427, for a discussion of the various qur'ānic uses of *tashābaha*. In almost all of these verses, the basic sense appears to be one of mutual or internal similarity and indistinguishability. Q 2:70 (*inna l-baqara tashābaha ʿalaynā*) illustrates that it is but a short semantic step from the notion of indistinguishability to the more general one of obscurity. On the basis of these passages it is perfectly justified, I think, to translate *mutashābih* with 'ambiguous'.



striving for dissension?[101] If this argument is accepted, then Q 3:7 constitutes a grudging admission of the fact that God's exposition of the *kitāb* gives rise to interpretive inquiries that are not, or cannot be, satisfactorily answered by subsequent revelations; at least parts of God's *tafṣīl* of the *kitāb* thus lacks the inherent clarity attributed it elsewhere. In spite of this admission, Q 3:7 stops short of deeming this a sufficient ground for any human attempts at clarification, recommending instead that one resign oneself to the problem rather than trying to remedy it. Human interpretation of the corpus is here seen as a moral temptation, not as an epistemological necessity.

## The Qur'ān as a *kitāb*

In the above section on transformation we have already seen that the recitations are not merely an interpretive rendering (*tafṣīl*) or the *kitāb*, but, much like a translation, can also be considered identical with it. Nonetheless, this identity must not be conceived in the sense of the traditional Islamic understanding that the qur'ānic corpus is an exhaustive and literal transcript of the celestial *lawḥ maḥfūẓ*, a position which imports into the *kitāb* what originally had been merely viewed as God's situative glosses on it. There appear to be no passages in the Qur'ān where the expression *al-kitāb* without a qualifying relative clause unequivocally denotes the qur'ānic corpus rather than its transcendent source.[102] At least terminologically, then, the ontological distance between the recitations and their heavenly source is respected throughout.

101 In addition, if one were to suppose that the *rāsikhūn fi l-ʿilm* did share God's knowledge of the interpretation of the *mutashābihāt*, it would hardly make sense for them to say: „We believe in it; all is from our Lord". Here, to 'believe in the ambiguous verses' must mean 'to believe that they are from God'; yet belief in their divine origin amounts to the extraordinary feat which it is here portrayed as solely under the condition that it does not rest on a clear understanding of these verses. The most plausible construal of the statement, then, is to suppose that belief in the divine origin of the *mutashābihāt* stands in contrast to knowledge of their meaning; the bottom line is not exactly *credo quia absurdum*, but at the very least *credo quamquam ignotum*. Also, the word „all" must refer to the two classes of qur'ānic passages enumerated before, namely *āyāt muḥkamāt* and *āyāt mutashābihāt*; saying that „all is from our Lord" appears to mean that, despite their difference, both classes of verses go back to the same source. Yet if the *rāsikhūn* knew the meaning of the *mutashābihāt*, the crucial difference between both classes would – at least from their point of view – cease to exist, as both groups of verses would in fact be perfectly intelligible to them. In this case, it would be hardly noteworthy that the *rāsikhūn* are able to believe in the common origin of both groups of verses, because for them there would only be one group.

102 The only possible exception is Q 2:2, which – at least in its present wording – might have been intended from the outset as an introduction to the entire corpus rather than merely to *sūra* Two. The use of *dhālika* with its connotation of distance (instead of *hādhā*) goes back to the introductory *tilka* employed in Q 10:1, Q 12:1, Q 13:1, Q 15:1, Q 26:1, Q 27:1, Q 28:1 and Q 31:1. In all these cases, *dhālika / tilka* reflects the metatextual gap between a headline and what follows rather than the ontological gap between the Qur'ān and the celestial *kitāb*. If this

Yet the qur'ānic corpus is not only viewed as in a certain respect identical with *the* (celestial) *kitāb*, but occasionally seems to be considered as forming *a* (terrestrial) *kitāb* in its own right. Responsibility for conflating the Qur'ān and its source must therefore not be laid exclusively at the feet of the commentators. In the remaining part of this paper I will try to shed some light on the possible meaning of calling the recitations themselves a *kitāb*.

Promotion of the recitations themselves to scriptural status is evident in a number of verses which enumerate a plurality of *kutub* and arrange these in temporal succession, both of which implies a terrestrial rather than a celestial reference. Consider the following examples: *am ātaināhum kitāban min qablihī bihī mustamsikūn* (Q 43:21, Mecca II); *wa-min qablihī kitābu Mūsā imāman wa-raḥmatan wa-hādhā kitābun muṣaddiqun lisānan 'arabīyan...* (Q 46:12, Mecca III); *wa-hādhā kitābun anzalnāhu mubārakun muṣaddiqu lladhī bayna yadayhi...* (Q 6:92, Mecca III). When Q 43:21 asks whether „they" have been given a *kitāb* „before it", for example, this must be taken to entail that „it" (namely, the Qur'ān) is itself a *kitāb*. More unequivocally yet, Q 46:12 speaks of „this" as a *kitāb muṣaddiq* „in Arabic language" which succeeds the *kitāb Mūsā*, all of which precludes reference to the heavenly *kitāb*. It is noteworthy that all three passages are concerned with ranking the Qur'ān among a class of mutually supportive scriptures from which the *kitāb Mūsā* stands out most conspicuously.[103]

Another – and particularly obscure – case is Q 39:23, where the Qur'ān is called a *kitābun mutashābihun mathāniya*, „a *kitāb* consimilar in its oft-repeated", as Arberry translates. Here the *mathānī* probably denote different versions of one and the same narrative.[104] As regards the meaning of *mutashābih*, „consimilar", it can perhaps be guessed by taking into consideration that similarity is opposed both to identity and to

is so, then Q 2:2 – which does not describe the following as 'signs from the book', but as 'the book' – might well express a direct identification of the qur'ānic corpus with the transcendent *kitāb*. It is of course entirely possible that the wording of Q 2:2 as we have it was modified in the process of the Qur'ān's codification.

103 Cf. also the Medinan verse Q 4:136 (*wa-l-kitābi lladhī nazzala 'alā rasūlihī wa-l-kitābi lladhī anzala min qablu*). Madigan (*Self-image*, 175–6) tries – unsuccessfully, I think – to explain away this appearance of multiplicity. As regards Q 4:136, the phrase *al-kitāb alladhī anzala min qablu* does not necessarily group together all previous revelations into one single *kitāb*, but might refer solely to the *kitāb Mūsā*, which arguably forms the most important of the pre-qur'ānic revelations. In any case, affirming such a numerical multiplicity would not erode the Qur'ān's claim to contain substantially the same message as prior scriptures: two different books may well share the same content.

104 Horovitz (*Koranische Untersuchungen*, Berlin / Leipzig 1926, 26–27), Watt / Bell (W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān*, Edinburgh 1970, 134–5) and Neuwirth (Angelika and Karl Neuwirth, *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* – 'Eröffnung' des Text-Corpus Koran oder 'Introitus' der Gebetsliturgie?, in *Text, Methode und Grammatik: Wolfgang Richter zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Walter Gross et al., Sankt Ottilien 1991, 321–57, see 344) agree that the *mathānī* are the qur'ānic punishment stories. The Neuwirths argue for a different interpretation of the term in Q 15:87, though.



dissimilarity.[105] In calling the qur'ānic corpus *mutashābih*, then, the verse might be classifying these different renditions as neither identical nor dissimilar to the point of contradiction. Q 39:23 thus indicates that separate versions of the same story were from a certain point believed to complement each other, and that this internal complementarity was considered one of the hallmarks of the recitations' *kitāb*-ness. In any case, the fact that previous recitals were not dislodged by later ones, but must have continued to be used alongside them, is evident from their preservation as part of the qur'ānic corpus, and Q 39:23 might well articulate the rationale behind this.[106]

As the passages just examined show, it is difficult to pinpoint the precise significance of describing a particular body of linguistic utterances as constituting, or evolving into, a *kitāb*. It might have simply been an alternative way of stating that they derived from *al-kitāb*: the Qur'ān and earlier Judaeo-Christian revelations would then have merited the same appellation on account of their shared transcendent origin. Yet common descent is not the only alternative which comes to mind. Taking our cue from the above discussion of Q 39:23, for example, application of the term might have described these utterances as a unitary whole rather than an assemblage of disconnected parts. Alternatively, a *kitāb* might have been understood as a textual corpus that was closed rather than one that continued to grow; or as a text stored and/or displayed in writing. Or perhaps to be a *kitāb* was to function as a group's guiding text, as their 'canon' (cf. Q 3:3, where the *tawrāt* and the *injīl* are said to have been sent down *hudan*, „as guidance").[107] Finally, from passages such as Q 46:12 and Q 6:92 one might conclude that the Qur'ān's *kitāb*-ness consisted above all in its congruity with earlier revelations. All in all, then, to say that the Qur'ān is a *kitāb* can be interpreted in six different ways: (i) it supposedly derived from *al-kitāb*; (ii) it was perceived as constituting one textual whole rather than a collection of disconnected pieces; (iii) it had reached closure, or was seen as evolving towards closure; (iv) it was put down in writing; (v) it possessed canonical authority and relevance, i. e. it functioned as *hudā*; (vi) it was congruent with earlier revelations.

Option (iii) can be eliminated right away, as there is no evidence that the qur'ānic revelations at any point anticipated their own cessation.[108] Neither does (iv) strike one as a particularly illuminating explanation: Throughout all stages of its textual

105 Wild's interpretation of *mutashābih* in Q 3:7 is based on the similar notion of 'similar, but not identical'; cf. Wild, Self-referentiality, 427.

106 I doubt whether the expression *al-kitāb* in Q 3:7 (on which see above) ought to be construed as denoting the qur'ānic corpus. As a rule of thumb, any use of *kitāb* with the definite article that is not followed by a relative clause refers to the celestial source. Also, if Q 3:7 was a reference to the Qur'ān one would expect *fihi* instead of *minhu*.

107 See also Q 46:12, where this canonical function is expressed by the word *imām*.

108 See the *tafṣīl* section above. Cf. also Madigan, *Self-image*, 145: „in calling itself *kitāb* the Qur'ān cannot be suggesting that it is a bounded corpus, since it rejects calls to behave as a strictly delimited canon and insists on remaining responsive to and engaged with the human situation it addresses".

growth, the Qur'ān gives the impression of a text specifically composed for oral delivery; it is of course likely that the multipartite *sūras* were also written down, but in itself this was hardly more than a convenient mnemonic device.[109] (i) is obviously correct, and it is the alternative favored by Madigan, who thinks of it as necessarily excluding all the other possibilities: „This divine/prophetic address bears the name *kitāb* not because of its form (which remains oral, fluid, and responsive) but because of its origin...".[110] Yet if *al-kitāb* is not considered a mere symbol, but a concrete celestial entity – as I think it must be in view of Q 56:77–80, Q 80:10–16, and Q 85:21.22 –, the alternative of form vs. origin posed by Madigan proves to be misleading. The recitations' origin in a transcendent source scripture, far from constituting merely an external pedigree, might well manifest itself immanently, as it were: Since they derive from a heavenly *kitāb*, they inherit from it some of the defining characteristics of *kitāb*-ness, notably internal unity, canonical relevance and authority, and congruity with earlier revelations. From this perspective, options (ii), (v), and (vi), according to which the recitations are credited with *kitāb*-ness on account of properties inherent in them, do not contradict, but rather complement option (i), according to which they constitute a *kitāb* by virtue of their origin.

It goes without saying that regardless of the insufficiency of (iv) alone, the term *kitāb* cannot be wholly separated from its connotation of writing. Yet the fact that it was applied to the qur'ānic revelations in the face of their orality and uncompletedness indicates that its primary significance was perceived to reside elsewhere, most likely in the aspects singled out by (ii), (v), and (vi). On account of their transcendent origin, the recitations stand in a relationship of congruity with earlier revelations, fulfill the same function of canonical guidance, and just like them form a unitary corpus. Since the textual fall-out of previous revelations is called *kitāb*, the expression is extended to the Qur'ān as well, even though in the qur'ānic case the connotations of closure and of written display do not apply. Semantic developments of this kind correspond to Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblances.[111] Incidentally one might conjecture that the aspects of writing and closure were intentionally disregarded in order to be able to say that the followers of Muḥammad possessed a genuine *kitāb* after all. We are thus confronted with a partial re-definition of the word through a kind of borderline use of it.

109 (iv) appears to be the alternative espoused by Tilman Nagel (Vom 'Qur'ān' zur 'Schrift' – Bells Hypothese aus religionsgeschichtlicher Sicht, in *Der Islam* 60 (1983), 143–65). He surmises „daß dem Propheten, mit dem Redigieren der Offenbarungen befaßt, allmählich der 'Schrift'-Charakter des Ergebnisses dieser Tätigkeit bewußt wird" (ibid., 149; cf. also id., Medinensische Einschübe, 61). In my opinion, Nagel overestimates what cannot have been much more than a convenient supplement to memorization. Of course written, rather than exclusively oral, composition carries with it the possibility of much more extended, and much more complex, literary structures: it is difficult to imagine the shift from the monothematic *sūras* to the tripartite ones without an increasing reliance on writing. Perhaps (iv) ought to be construed as pointing to this evolution of the recitations' compositional structure, predicated as it was on the utilization of writing, rather than merely to the use of writing itself. In any case, Nagel himself does not make any such suggestion.

110 *Self-image*, 164.

111 For example, there is no one single property common to all the things we refer to as 'games'; rather, what X has in common with Y might be different from what Y has in common with Z. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophische Untersuchungen, in *Werkausgabe*, vol. 1, ed. B. McGuinness and J. Schulte, Frankfurt a. M. 1989, §§ 66 and 67.



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