The Qur'ān(s) in Context(s) [1-2]

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According to the Muslim tradition, the Qur'ān is a collection of utterances emitted by God through Muḥammad in the historical context of Hijaz, in Western-Central, Arabia between the second and the third decades of the 7th c. CE. Islamic sources abound with details about Muḥammad's life, the developments of his prophetic career and the cultural milieu in which it took place. However, despite enormous amounts of information on the matter recorded by early Muslim historians and Qur'ānic commentators, the situation for scholars in Early Islam is anything but clear.

Since the second half of the seventies, a number of controversial revisionist publications have challenged the dominant paradigm of the origins of Islam and the codification of the Qur'ān. These publications have resulted in an increased skepticism about the reliability of the accounts about the life of Muḥammad. The information transmitted by the Islamic tradition is actually recorded in sources written at least a century after the events they describe, and in cultural and political contexts very different from that where Muḥammad lived and preached. Such sources,

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revisionists claim, tell us more about how Muḥammad's preaching was understood by later generations of Muslims than as it was in his own time

To this one should add the scant material evidence that scholars have at their disposition to verify or dismiss what has been transmitted by the Muslim tradition. We also have sparse information about Muḥammad and early Islam in non-Islamic sources, which are early enough not to have been influenced by the Islamic tradition itself. To complicate things also contributes the very nature of the Qur'ānic text that represents the only extant literary document from the first century of the Islam. In fact, the Qur'ān is a profoundly ahistorical document that provides us with very few information about its prophetic recipient and its historical environment. You might be surprised to know that it is in only five occasions that the Qur'ān mentions the name of its prophet – who four times is referred to as Muḥammad, while in one case as Aḥmad. The two cities of Mecca and Yathrib are mentioned only once. There are also very few references to persons or historical circumstances and only one allusion to events which are recorded also by sources external to the Muslim tradition. In a few words, if we had to reconstruct the biography of Muḥammad and the early developments of his community on the basis of the information contained in the Qur'ān alone we would not have many data to work with. At the same time, the reluctance to use post-Qur'ānic sources in the study of the Arabic scripture has often led scholars to read the Qur'ān as a book without context.

During the last years, many scholars have increasingly adopted the principle of studying Early Islam in light of its late antique context. While this approach looks very promising and the field is in a very lively phase of research, there are still many basic and interconnected questions on which the scholarly community lacks a full consensus. To mention only some examples: from what religious and political context, but also geographical area (!), did Islam rise? Did the original community perceive itself as a new and distinguished religious group or the Muslim identity emerged only later in the sectarian milieu of the Middle East? When and who compiled the Qur'ān? Was it a simple compilation of texts issued by Muḥammad or

rather a redaction of prophetic speeches attributed to him? In other words, to what extent does the text represent the preaching of Muḥammad?

Given the vagueness that surrounds these very basic questions, the situation could appear as quite Kafkaesque. However, thanks to rare but precious material evidence and a handful of non-Islamic witnesses we can at least fix some points. Above all, we can infer that a Muḥammad existed, for some early Syriac sources mention his name. Early non-Islamic sources also confirm his profession as a merchant. We can also have some confidence that he was preaching in Central Arabia and that his movement was in contact with members of a Jewish community—whose presence in the Hijaz is certified by few inscriptions. We also know that many people, and probably at least some members of the community, perceived Muḥammad's preaching in strong apocalyptic terms. We can also assume that something important occurred in 622 – i.e., the traditional date of *hiǧra* – as very early documents already acknowledge the *hiǧra* dating system. As for the Qur'ān, the canon was probably already in existence by the end of the 7th c., while scholars disagree on the exact period. To this one might add that, as some colleagues with an approach more traditionalist than mine have recently shown, later Islamic sources occasionally mention traditions traceable back to the first half of the 8th c. While it is still problematic to connect these traditions to the first generations of Muslims (or proto-Muslims) such outcomes shorten the span of time elapsing between the earliest extant sources and the events they are concerned with. While belonging to the revisionist current, I shall admit that the skepticism about Islamic sources has sometimes been exagerated. Totally ignoring this literary material means to ignore a core of reliable information that these sources might contain.

That said, reconstructing with higher precision the historical events that took place in the early Islamic movement still appears as extremely problematic. Beside the fundamentals traced above, many crucial elements of the early history of Islam still remain obscure. The bulk of the transmitted knowledge about Muḥammad's life still needs to be verified. Many details reported by Muslim sources clearly appear as later fabrications and are contradicted on many levels. At a first level, the tradition itself

presents diverse and inconsistent accounts on many points. A very significant and problematic case is that concerning Muḥammad's death. While most Muslim sources mention that the Prophet died in Medina around 632, according to minor traditions he was still active in the first years of the community's expansion in Syria and Palestine and would have died only around 635. This minor view could be taken as one of the many incongruities emerging when comparing different traditional accounts. However, the idea that Muḥammad was leading the early expansion in the Byzantine territories is acknowledged also by very early Christian sources. These sources predate the first evidences for the normative view that Muḥammad died in 632 in Medina, which at the best can be traced back at the half of the 8th c.

Some of you might wonder how is it possible that already in early times there could be disagreement on such a basic thing as the place and date of Muḥammad's death. However, this situation appears quite possible when bearing in mind the historical conditions of the first century of Islam. In fact, we are talking about a small community from Arabia that - in not totally clear circumstances - first achieved a hegemonic position in the Arabian Peninsula and later established imperial control over an immense territory outside the Peninsula. On the one hand, we have a process of removal of part of the community from its cradle – that must have been dramatically boosted by the transfer of the center of political authority from Central Arabia to Syria. On the other hand, during the territorial expansion the community is numerically expanded, with many people joining the movement. We are thus in presence of the perfect conditions for a loss or a dilution of memory, for the simple reason that the proportion of direct eyewitnesses to the events happened in Central Arabia during Muḥammad's life dramatically decreased in a very short lapse of time. In these conditions, spurious elements could easily find a place in the process of reconstructing or re-shaping the collective memory of the young community. This could have happened either for an unbiased aim of answering questions about the life of the Prophet or as a consequence of individual interests. Some traditions were also fabricated for legal necessities, that is, to answer questions that the Qur'ān did not address and to place them under the authority of the Prophet.

To summarize, despite the progresses made, Islamic sources still present several problems. Caution more than skepticism is required. Furthermore, there is a crucial question that needs to be clarified and untangled, that is, the relationship between the data provided by the Muslim sources and those which can be extrapolated from the Qur'ānic text. In fact, important elements of the traditional framework of Muḥammad's life are contradicted by the Qur'ān itself, which though is supposed to be a transcription of his preaching. I will give you a couple of examples.

[1] According to the Muslim tradition, at the time of Muḥammad's preaching Mecca hosted an important sanctuary for pagan cults. Allah would have been a highest god in a pantheon that included many minor divinities among which a prominent position was held by Allah's three daughters, al-Lat, al-'Uzza and Manat. In Mecca Muḥammad had to face the strong opposition of most of his fellow citizens, who belonged as him to the clan of the Quraysh. Quraysh are mentioned only once in the Qur'ān, in a quite obscure passage (Q 106:1-4) where they are said to worship "the Lord of this house" (*rabb haḏā l-bayt*). More frequently, the Qur'ān refers to people labeled *mušrikūn*, literally "those who associate", whom Islamic sources identify with Quraysh and describe as pagan idolaters. The very meaning of the world *mušrik*, "the one who associates", in the sense of associating something or somebody to God, would actually suggest this identification. But what exactly did "those who associate" associate with God according to the Qur'ān? Recent scholarship has increasingly drawn the attention to the fact that when we read the Qur'ān, these associators do not appear at all as idolaters as the traditional accounts claim, but rather as a kind of corrupted monotheists. The minor divinities that the *mušrikūn* are accused of worshipping do not appear as idols, but rather as angels. According to the Qur'ān, the *mušrikūn* are thus, worshippers of angels.

[2] According to the tradition, Muḥammad had to face the opposition of the pagans in Mecca and that of a local Jewish community in Yathrib. By contrast, there are very few references to contacts or quarrels with Christians. Nonetheless, the Qur'ān often argues against the latter and contends with them on the theological mistake of venerating Jesus as the son of God. The polemic the Qur'ān holds against the

Christians is not minor than that against the Jews or the *mušrikūn*. At the same time, the Qur'ān often displays literary topoi or theological concepts typical of a Christian environment. It is very significant the way the Qur'ān uses these Christian elements that are evoked or alluded to but never commented or explained into details. This implies that the Qur'ān's audience was supposed to be familiar with such elements and able to grasp the wider meaning behind the allusions. The situation emerging from Qur'ānic flashes on its religious and cultural context is once again quite inconsistent with that described in the traditional accounts on Muḥammad's life.

How to reconcile Qur'ān and Islamic sources when they are so distant from each others as in the cases observed above? Revisionist scholars have argued that the bulk of the history described in Islamic sources represents a "salvation history", or *Heilsgeschichte*, that Arab historians elaborated in later times. In the case of the question of the religious creeds of the *mušrikūn*, it has been proposed that the traditional representation of the latter as a polytheist community is based on clichés about pre-Islamic Arabia that Muslim historians would have used in reconstructing the biography of Muḥammad. In other words, the life of the Prophet would have been written against a stereotypic background of a polytheist Hijaz. The outcomes of recent studies seem to suggest that the *mušrikūn* were a monotheistic community whose monotheism the Qur'ān blames to be imperfect. However, this reading, too, presents its own complications. Above all, we should consider that the Qur'ān is not a source of encyclopedic knowledge nor its aim is to provide following generations with a detailed and reliable picture of its historical environment. This problem is particularly important for issues concerning the Qur'ān's opponents. Indeed, it is difficult to trace the limit between what reflects real-life creeds or practices and what is part of a polemical representation of the opponents. In the case of the polemic against the *mušrikūn*, the Qur'ānic rhetoric often appears as related to stereotypes and arguments widespread also among late antique Christian heresiologists.

The situation is still more complex when coming to the question of the relationship with Christianity. The very marginal role the tradition credits Christians with is problematic, given the obvious impact of Christianity or of Christianizing concepts on

the Qur'ān. Of course, stressing the pagan character of the ambience where Muḥammad preached had the theological advantage to isolate his preaching from the rest of the monotheistic world and to emphasize its miraculous value of revelation with a heavenly and not an earthly origin. However, it might be observed that the tradition does not pass over the presence of a Jewish community in Yathrib in silence. Even assuming that the traditional account mostly represents a sacred history of salvation, the reasons for omitting a Christian presence in Muḥammad's social milieu would still remain unclear. What is sure is that the high presence within the Qur'ān of elements closely related to previous and contemporary Christian literature implies that the impact of Christianity on the Qur'ān's cultural milieu was much more substantial than the Islamic tradition admits. Western scholars have often adopted a kind of historical agnosticism about the "Qur'ān-Christian connection" and have focused their studies on stressing such connection rather than trying to explain how it did come into being. The question is part of the more general issue - deeply investigated in the last few years - about how the Qur'ān reflects the wider culture of the late antique world. We can trace two major hypotheses which scholars implicitly – and less often explicitly – have advanced to explain the transmission of concepts from other late antique communities – including Christian – to the Qur'ān's environment.

A first possibility advanced by scholars (while in quite different ways and terms) has been to relocate the origins of Islam further north. In this case the assumption is that the tradition has projected the origins of Islam into the Hijaz in its construction of a salvation history. The hypothesis has sometimes been accompanied by that of a shift in the sacred geography. Some scholars have in fact proposed that the religious focus of the community was originally on a sanctuary in North Arabia. The importance of Mecca in the Islamic sacred geography would have emerged only at later time. While some evidence supports this view – namely some early mosques with the *qibla* directed toward elsewhere than Mecca and one non-Islamic account of early Muslims' prayer direction – it is more probable that the initial unfixed focus reflects the presence of different currents within the community. Recent studies have indeed argued in favor of the heterogeneous and not sectarian character of the early Islamic movement. Even if we have strong evidence to infer that the early community had an intense apocalyptic character and a special focus on Jerusalem, this does not exclude

at all the religious importance of Hijazi localities from the moment of its rise. Even when bearing in mind what said above about the conditions for the loss of memory and its re-shaping in the collective imagery of the new born Islamic world, it still remains difficult to believe that such an alteration of the historical reality might have occurred. Furthermore, from very early times, non-Islamic sources associate the new religious movement with the Hijaz. It might be observed that, if Islam had arisen elsewhere and the identification of the latter as its cradle was just an element within an idealized Islamic salvation history, one should assume that by the end of 7th c. this salvation history was already established and so widespread to influence also writers from outside the community of believers. This seems to be quite improbable.

The second possibility proposed by scholars has been to rethink Hijaz at the beginning of Islam by extending the limits of the late antique world in order to include Central Arabia. A growing idea among scholars is that Muḥammad's community did not borrow from, but rather shared cultural and religious concepts with other doctrinal communities of the late antique Middle East. In general, we should surely welcome any attempt to go beyond the image of Hijaz as a remote and desolated spot, isolated from the rest of its contemporary world and importing from the latter "innovative monotheistic" concepts. However, it is difficult to envisage the exact extent of the Hijazi involvement in the late antique world in a center/periphery dynamic. In the specific case of Christianity, it is actually impossible to have a clear idea about how the area was Christianized as we lack any evidence about a Christian presence in the Hijaz. As said, the Islamic tradition only sporadically refers to Christians in the area, who mostly appear as fleeting background actors in Muḥammad's life. A well known scholar who proposed a theory about the Syriac linguistic background of the Qur'ān has been accused of imagining Mecca as it was Edessa, notoriously the major cultural center of Syriac Christianity in Northern Mesopotamia. Now, the linguistic reconstructions of this scholar are often sketchy and speculative. However, it remains the fact that, when reading many passages of the Qur'ān, one has the impression, not of it being a product of a lightly or moderately Christianized milieu, but rather of a flourishing Christian center! In many occasions, the Christianizing elements within the Qur'ān do not appear as simple evocations of well-known topoi, anecdotes or concepts but rather denote a highly sophisticated use of theological and literary

material which often finds its closest parallels in the works of contemporary Syriac writers. In many cases, the profile of the possible redactor(s) of Qur'ānic passages dealing with Christianizing elements does not appear at all as that of someone living in a marginal area of the Christian world. Nor as such appears the profile of the Qur'ān's audience who – I will stress it again – is meant to understand the elements the Qur'ān evokes and to recompose – for instance – the full meaning of the stories alluded to in the Qur'ānic sermons.

How to explain this situation? Rather than imagining the Hijaz as an Edessa-like area – something which is not supported by any data – I would rather propose to remember that, metaphorically speaking, the Hijaz soon reached Edessa and the main centers of Middle Eastern Christianity. In more concrete terms, I propose to consider the Qur'ān as a literary document that reflects not only Muḥammad's prophetic career in Central Arabia but also the developments of his community during the first decades of its territorial expansion. During this period the community was enriched by new elements who joined the movement and who brought their own traditions and religious beliefs. These new elements found a place in the Qur'ān when the latter was compiled and canonized some decades after Muḥammad's death. The reason why the Islamic tradition on the Prophet's life and the Qur'ān occasionally differ in describing the surrounding religious and cultural environment is that they do not always refer to the same historical context.

Of course, a starting point of my thesis is the denial of the single authorship of the text. My arguments are mostly based on the rejection of the various chronological systems elaborated by both Muslim and Western scholars to link the Qur'ān to the biography of Muḥammad. Chronology has in fact been used to explain the extremely heterogeneous character of the Qur'ānic corpus.

I will make a brief digression to expose to you the principal elements of such heterogeneity. The Qur'ān is composed of 114 chapters (or suras) very different from each other in terms of length, of language and of the literary genres involved. The

shortest suras are composed of few verses – as sura 108, with its three verses – while the longest ones count hundreds of them – the longest being sura 2 with 286 verses. In general, but not always, suras are arranged according to their length, from the longest to the shortest. The length of verses also varies considerably. We have verses of two or three words and verses composed by dozens of them. Longer suras usually contain longer verses, while some exceptions stay.

As said, the heterogeneous character of the Qur'ānic corpus has traditionally been seen as a consequence of the stylistic evolution of Muḥammad's *modus comunicandi* over the time. While the Qur'ān does not present any chronological order between its single components, Qur'ānic commentators have developed a system to control chronologically the text. However, it is very important to stress that in general such chronological system is not based on historical data about the evolution of Muḥammad's preaching but rather on exegetical speculations on the text. In fact, the explanations the tradition transmitted about the revelation of certain verses or suras, in Arabic *asbāb al-nuzūl*, mostly appear as anecdotal accounts written around the same Qur'ānic texts that they are supposed to explain. Many chronological reconstructions are also dictated by the necessity to address Qur'ānic single components containing diverse and somehow contradictory legal prescriptions. The exegesis developed a chronological system where the supposedly "more recent" verses abrogate the supposedly "older" ones. Take the example of Q 5:90 that prohibits wine, which came to be understood as chronologically successive to and thus abrogating Q 2:219 and Q 4:43 that by contrast tolerate the alcoholic drink. In this case, the chronological reconstruction is based on speculations on internal Qur'ānic evidence and on the assumption that incoherent prescriptions must necessarily be traced back to different periods of the life of Muḥammad.

In the establishment of the traditional chronology, the length of the verses apparently represented a fundamental element for the classing system. In general, the shortest verses are considered to be the earliest ones to have been "revealed", while the longest as the latest. Groups of verses – pericopes or suras – came thus to be divided into two main groups, traditionally identified as Meccan or Medinan, on the assumption that

the Qur'ān could be divided in parts revealed before and after Muḥammad's *hiǧra*. However, already quite early there were disagreements coming from some Muslim scholars who disputed the order of suras on many points. Furthermore, as I have recently argued, in at least two cases we can dismiss the traditional chronology as artificial. In fact, external evidence suggests that one Qur'ānic passage (Q 30:2-6) and and entire sura (Q 18) do not go back to the pre-*hiǧra* period, as the tradition claims, but must have been composed after 628/629 and very probably after Muḥammad's death in 632 or 635.

Western scholars have also attempted to provide a chronology of the Qur'ān. Suras have been divided into four periods, three Meccan and one Medinan. However, as some colleagues have recently noticed, such attempts are undermined from the beginning by their reliance on the same pseudo-historical knowledge of Muḥammad's life used by traditional Islamic chronologists. In many cases, the impression is that Western scholars have only refined the traditional Islamic chronology. I should acknowledge that these efforts have not been limited to linking the Qur'ānic text to traditional data, but have also involved observations about Qur'ānic stylistic features. The problem is that such *modus operandi* has often resulted in sophisticated circular arguments. To mention an example, scholars have noticed that the divine title *al-raḥmān* does not appear in many suras classed as belonging to the first Meccan period on the basis of the traditional accounts. As a result, the absence of *al-raḥmān* from these suras has been used as another argument to trace the line between first Meccan and second Meccan periods.

Some recent attempts to establish a chronology on the bases of stylometric data have also failed to demonstrate the single authorship of the text and to connect it to any specific historical context. In general, despite the claims about the supposed regular development of the Qur'ān's stylistic trend, there is a basic problem which cannot be ignored: such regularity can be observed only when re-arranging groups of suras or verses according to the same order that the stylistic trend is supposed to demonstrate. In other words, it is a sophisticated circular argument. In fact, for proving the chronological development on the base of stylistic variations, we would need at least

the safe assumption that the text belongs to a single author. In much the same way, if the issue is to prove the single authorship of the text through stylometry, we should know in which order its components came into being.

To resume, the situation is as follows: since we do not have any reliable historical information about the chronological sequence of the Qur'ānic components, any attempt to reconstruct a chronology of the text must necessarily pass through a stylistic analysis. The question that I would now like to put forth is: what if one considers stylistic differences as result of the multiple authorship of the Qur'ānic corpus? What I would like to argue is that the Qur'ān as we have it now is not the product of or the collection of texts produced by a single author; it is rather the result of a redactional processes that started with a diversity of literary materials, transmitted in diverse ways (oral/written) and through diverse channels. Some of these materials go back directly to Muḥammad; some others were altered during the transmission according to the different ways his preaching was received by the single transmitters; some others were composed after his death and attributed to him. In general, we are in the presence of different redactional strata which we have to detect by studying the literary, linguistic and rhetorical internal Qur'ānic features and by comparing them with literary and material reliable extra-Qur'ānic evidences. In other words, a stylistic and – whenever possible – historical analysis of the Qur'ānic material that is derived from any a priori assumption. As said, the lack of reliable evidence dictates the necessity of basing such analysis mostly on stylistic features. So, I will reiterate my question: can we think of stylistic differences in the Qur'ānic corpus as the result of multiple authorship?

A good issue to start with could be the case of the *hapax legomena*, that is, terms that occur only once in the whole Qur'ān. In fact, brief suras composed of short verses feature a number of *hapaxes* much higher than the rest of the Qur'ān. This is particularly striking from a statistic perspective. In fact, if the Qur'ān was a single authored document – even if developed across a long span of time – one would expect to come across a higher concentration of *hapax* in longer suras, which contain more verses, the latter also being composed by a higher number of words. Thus, in general

terms, the vocabulary of longer suras with longer verses is more homogeneous than the briefer ones which are composed by shorter verses. Rather than showing the sudden standardization of Muḥammad's preaching language, which would have occurred at the beginning of his prophetical career – as some scholars have proposed – the *hapax* phenomenon gives the impression of witnessing different corpora of texts deriving from different social and cultural milieux. One would be tempted to see in the more standardized vocabulary of longer suras composed by longer verses the reflex of a scribal ambience, that is, of a committee of scribes with the task of re-constructing Muḥammad's preaching. By contrast, brief suras composed by short verses would rather appear as a miscellaneous corpus of texts. Of course, this general distinction into two macro groups should not be kept too rigid. We can suppose the material in the corpus to derive from several different milieux. We should also keep in mind that the material coming from or attributed to Muḥammad may have circulated in the community for years or decades before being written down. This also may have contributed to increasing the heterogeneous character of the corpus. Furthermore, the redactional process might have included different steps, as the tradition itself seems to suggest. Some scholars would object – as in fact has been done – that there is a general thematic coherence that unifies the Qur'ānic corpus, that is, an underlining reference to a theological system turning around some fixed concepts. However, this can be well explained by postulating that a number of different authors elaborated independent texts while referring to the same religious preaching.

Now I would like to bring your attention to a manageable case study which can clarify my point. This is the corpus of brief suras composed by short and relatively short-length verses, which I selected on the basis of stylistic features. In making the selection I applied strict criteria, that is, I left out some brief suras composed of short verses whose stylistic connection to the corpus is not highly apparent, while still possibly arguable. The selected suras are:

52, 53, 56,

69,

73, 74[3], 75, 77, 78, 79,

81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 88, 89,

90, 91, 92, 93, 95, 99,

100, 101, 103, 104, 105, 106, 108,

In general, also after a very superficial reading, these suras appear as a quite homogeneous group of texts, as a corpus within the corpus, or as a Qur'ān within the Qur'ān. This appears when focusing on some stylistic features that relate these suras to one another, while distinguishing them as a group from the rest of the Qur'ānic corpus. Perhaps the most characteristic stylistic feature is the initial invocations of natural elements that open some of these suras. Another characteristic opening formula is that of the initial particle *iḏā*, "when", followed by the description of apocalyptic scenarios. Beyond opening formulas, the suras of the homogeneous group are interconnected by a characteristic phraseology. Take for instance the rhetoric questions *wa-mā aḏraka mā* "And what can make you know what is … ?" and *hal ataka ḥadīṯ*, "Has there reached you the report of … ?". Or take also as an example the sentence *lā uqsimu*, "I swear!" that occurs seven times in this corpus of suras but does not appear elsewhere in the Qur'ān. Other examples of specific stylistic features include the reference to the "orphan" at the singular instead that at the plural as in most part of the Qur'ān. I would also propose the case of the enigmatic and unique exhortations to give a respite to the unbelievers through the exhortative *mahhil*. Finally, let me also mention the characteristic descriptions of righteous and sinners as "the companions of the right" and "the companions of the left". While such description became central in the Islamic eschatological imagery about the final redistribution of reward and punishment, the two categories of "those of the right" and "those of the left" do not appear elsewhere in the Qur'ān. These are only some of the most representative examples, while other can be adduced.

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[3] Q 73 and 74 are similar and seem to have been both redacted starting from previous versions closer to the rest of the corpus. See for instance 74:32 where there seems to be the introduction of an originally independent text opened by the initial oath

Now, when I was selecting the corpus on the base of stylistic similarities I noticed that these suras also lack important phraseological and vocabulary features typical of the Qur'ānic rhetoric. Some of these "absentees" are sometimes striking, as the term *mušrik* and more generally any word related to root *š-r-k*[4]. As striking is also the absence of the divine title *al-raḥmān* which though we know from inscriptions to have been largely widespread among Arab-speakers. There is no reference to the term *sāʿa* that usually designates the eschatological Hour[5]. Nor do these suras feature the term *kitāb*, "the Book", which can refer to both the Qur'ān and previous scriptures. The verbs *nazzala* and *anzala*, "to send down", which are the most often used to describe the miracle of the revelation, are lacking as well in the corpus of suras I selected[6]. The term *nabī*, "prophet", and the important root-related word *nabāʾ*, "news", and verb *anabba*, "to inform", do not appear either. Striking is also the absence of the term *muʾmin*, "believer", that represents the most common designation for the followers of the Qur'ān's message[7]. Another significant absence in this corpus is the well-known formula *ǧannāt taǧrī min taḥtihā l-anhār* that very often goes with the Qur'ānic references to paradise. This absence is quite curious as these suras are among the richest in terms of eschatological descriptions of the abode of delight.

It clearly appears that this corpus of suras has its own specificity in terms of vocabulary and phraseology. Another important feature of this corpus – shared with other brief suras – is the characteristic rhymed prose style, consisting in short verses with rhymed ending. This distinguishes short suras from the bulk of the Qur'ānic corpus, where periods are longer and more flexible with the closing rhyme reduced to

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[4] At the exception of Q 52:43, "Glory be to God, above that which they associate!" (*yušrikūna*), but this occurrence is in a formulaic phrase and thus could be a later interpolation.

[5] The exception is Q 79:42, but the sentence *wa-yasʾalūnak ʿan al-sāʿa* is a well-known formula (cf. Q 7:187) and thus could be an interpolation.

[6] *Anzala* occurs in Q 56:69 and 78:14 but with the meaning of sending down water from heaven.

[7] While the term is reported in Q 74:31 and 85:7 and 10, these occurrences are found in verses which are clearly interpolated as exegetical glosses.

stereotypical syllables. The corpus is also very coherent in matter of thematic, with its strong apocalyptic tones and the focus of the discourse mostly turning on the last events. Much more than in other parts of the Qur'ān, the eschatological Hour appears to be expected as an event to occur very soon. If thus we wanted to set our corpus of suras in the traditional framework of Muḥammad's life and seeing in them the first literary expressions of his religious messages, we should assume that the Prophet's *modus comunicandi* dramatically changed at the beginning of his prophetical career. Some recurring terms and formulaic elements would have been abandoned and replaced by others. The original lexical wealth and variety would have left place to a more standardized vocabulary—as the evidence of the *hapax legomena* would suggest. The rhymed prose structure would have been abandoned as well. The initial apocalyptic fervor was mitigated in favor of a more pragmatic view of the developments of the sacred history of human salvation. To this, one should add a parallel enrichment in the variety of the literary motifs drawn from the Judeo-Christian tradition and some significant theological developments—as the inclusion of Jesus among the prophets.

These last aspects are particularly significant and bring us back to the question of the Qur'ān's cultural milieu. The corpus of selected suras seems to refer to a cultural context different from that we can extrapolate from other parts of the Qur'ān. For instance, the frequent invocations of natural phenomena suggest a background where pagan cultural elements are still strong enough to influence also a preacher calling to a strict monotheism. The principal actors of this pagan world, the Quraysh, and the deities they supposedly worshiped are mentioned by their names—while they are not in the rest of the Qur'ān. Monotheistic lore also represents a strong component, but this is mostly concerned with stories of local Arab prophets or with Judaic ones (Noah, Moses, Abraham), while no Christian figure is mentioned. In general, the image of the religious and social environment emerging from the selected corpus of suras concurs with the situation described in the Islamic traditional sources—much more, in any case, that the one emerging from long suras. An interesting case to observe is that sura 53 of the Qur'ān (*al-Naǧm*). The sura contains the only explicit reference to the deities that the pagan Meccans would have worshipped: al-Lāt, al-'Uzza and Manāt. The Islamic tradition reports that these deities were represented as

stone idols and venerated in connection to astral bodies. Pre-Islāmic inscriptions and material evidences confirm that these deities were associated with the cult of asters. In the Nabataean culture, the deity 'Uzza, in particular, was associated to the cult of Venus. We have evidence that such a cult was still alive in the 6th century, when a Syriac chronicler reports about a sacrifice made to honor 'Uzza and the morning star by the king of the North Arabian confederation of the Lakhmides. The association of the pre-Islamic deities with the cult of Venus is related to their identification with the Greco/Roman deity Aphrodites—an identification going back at least to Herodotus. However, the idea that the Arabs venerate Aphrodites and the morning star became an encyclopedic and stereotyped notion among Christian historians and heresiographers. Remarkably, after the raise of Islam we can notice a new element introduced in such stereotypic accounts. 8th and 9th century Christian writers, as John of Damascus and Nicetas of Byzantium, now report that the Arabs used to worship the morning star which they call *chabar* or *chobar*[8] which in Arabic would mean – the authors explain – "the mighty one". John of Damascus polemically extends these practices to Muslims and identifies *chabar* with the stone affixed in the Kaaba, the latter being called *kabar*. Something similar is reported by Germanus, Patriarch of Costantinople, who in the early 720s, writing about iconoclastic disputes, argued:

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

This account is surely polemic and aims to reproach Muslims for their former religious, idolatrous practices. What is interesting, however, is that in describing such practices, Germanus refers to a kind of stone worship very similar to those which the

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[8] *Chabar* probably is the original name known in Greek Christian circles, while *chobar* more likely represents a successive deformation under the influence of the homonymous and identically spelled name *Chobar* with which the Septuagint transcribes the Hebrew toponyme Ḫebar (e.g., Ez 1:1).

Islāmic tradition reports about the cult practices of the "pagans" (*mušrikūn*). The reference to *chabar/chobar* as the name of a worshipped stone makes the question still more intriguing, given its transversal connection to 'Uzza in the examined sources. A final use of this same name with polemical aims occurs in the work of the 9th c. polemist Constantine Porphyrogenitus, who charges Muslims of worshipping the idol *koubar*. Constantine gives an original and surely highly polemical interpretation of the Arabic sentence *Allahu akbar*, explaining that Muslims "call God Alla, and oua they use for the conjunction 'and', and they call the star (of Aphrodite) Koubar. And so they say 'Alla oua Koubar'"[9].

The name *chabar/chobar/koubar* has often been taken by scholars to be an altered form of the epithet *al-kubrā*, feminine equivalent of *al-akbar*, "the biggest one", which was supposedly applied to pre-Islamic feminine deities. Nonetheless, there is another etymology that, given the context of astral worship, makes much more sense. The term *chabar* is indeed a transposition in Greek of the Arabic *ğabbār*, meaning "the mighty one", which is exactly the translation that John of Damascus provides for the word. In the *Natural History*, Pliny also refers to the term *ğabbār*, transposed in Latin as Gabbara, as the name of an Arab of gigantic stature. Now, it should be noticed that in Arabic astrology the word *ğabbār* designates Orion or, sometimes, Sirius—the cults of the two stars being anyway connected to one another. The reference to *chabar* likely reflects the knowledge Christian authors had about the cults of Orion and Sirius among Arabs at the beginning of Islam. Both stars are actually reported by the Islamic tradition as being venerated by pre-Islamic pagans. More important, in the same sura where the names of the three pre-Islamic deities are mentioned, the Qur'ān directly argues against such astrolater cults. Q 53:49 in fact affirms God's authority over Sirius, evidently arguing against an independent cult of the latter. The initial formula that opens the sura, the invocation "by the star!", makes clear from the beginning that the sura is arguing against astrolatry. We are thus in

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[9] The evolution of *chabar/chobar* into *koubar* is likely caused by the author's desire to strengthen the assonance with the Arabic feminine superlative *kubrā* ("the mightiest")—his aim being to turn the Arabic formula *Allahu Akbar* ("God is Mighty") in the parodistic *Allah wa-l-Kubrā* ("God and the Mightiest"). The author's ability to deform the original Arabic sentence and to turn the last syllable of God's name, *-hu*, into the conjunction *-wa*, "and", actually shows his knowledge of Arabic.

presence of a case where the Qur'ān apparently refers to an exact cultural milieu described in Islamic sources and corroborated by exceptionally meaningful external evidence.

However, the confluence is broken in the same sura and namely in the verse stating that the three deities venerated by the pagans are nothing but names, and more specifically names of female angels (Q 53:23). We are thus in presence of a scholarly dilemma: the Qur'ān opposes an angel-worship practice but this is not recorded in extra-Qur'ānic sources. It has been proposed to solve this dilemma by referring to the well-known phenomenon, flourishing among some Jewish and Christian sects, of associating angels to planets and stars. In other words, we would be at the presence of a syncretic cult, where local divinities are identified with angels. This suggestion seems consistent with recent trends in Qur'ānic studies which identify the Qur'ānic opponents with a monotheistic community who practiced the cult of angels. However, in the case of *al-Naǧm*, this reading does not take into account a very important element. The description of the three female deities as angels occurs in a passage of the sura which has evidently been interpolated (vv. 23-32). This clearly appears when considering the very different stylistic aspects of the passage (different length of verses, metric, vocabulary, phraseology and, last but not least, theology and polemic arguments). The interpolation represents an exegetical gloss inserted to explain the preceding verses. The gloss betrays a second stage of the polemic about the worship of the three female deities, who came to be considered as female angels. Who inserted the gloss? To whom does belong the idea that the three pagan deities are just names of female angels? I propose to see in the gloss a rationalization of the pagan cult originally addressed in the sura, made by later compilers of the Qur'ān. The authors of this rationalization very probably had no connection with the historical situation reflected in the sura. The gloss rather reveals their point of view about a cult of which they didn't have any direct knowledge and that they reconstructed by using encyclopedic and stereotypical concepts. The polemic argument they use indeed reflects a well-known polemic *topos* used by Christian heresiologists against pagan cults: the entities you worship are only angels of the Lord. We have thus here a phenomenon where, in the same sura, a part of the Qur'ān refers to the cultural

environment described in Islamic sources, while another part does not. This is only an example among the many possible to illustrate my theory.

The corpus of suras I brought to your attention contains many other exegetical glosses of this kind (e.g., Q 103:3; 99:6-8; 91:13-14; 85:8-11; 84:25; 78:37-40). In general the language and style of these exegetical glosses betray their coming from an "alien" ambience, easily identifiable with the one that or one of those that produced longer suras. In a couple of cases it is also evident that the glosses were added on written material (i.e., Q 74:31 and Q 91:13-14), something that gives us the evidence that a part of the Qur'ān already circulated in a written form before the final canonization. To these arguments are to be added those of Qur'ānic passages which can arguably have been composed after Muḥammad's death and in a political and cultural context different from that of Central Arabia. However, to hear the end of this story you will have to wait for my next presentation in the next academic year. Enjoy the summer!