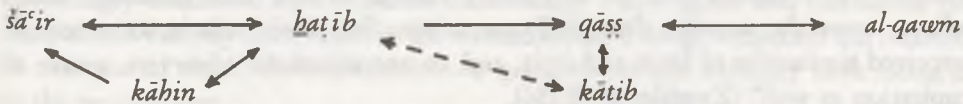


THE ORAL AND THE WRITTEN:
SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THE QUR'ANIC TEXT

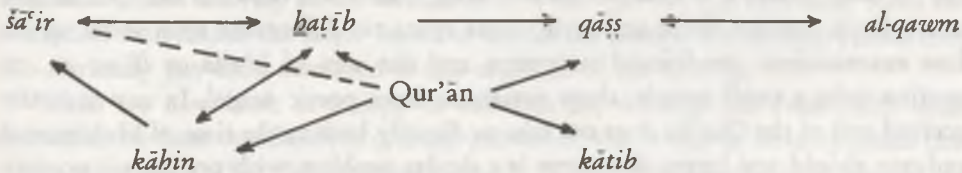
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In two recent papers (Jones 1994 and 1996), I have drawn attention to the linguistic affinity of the Qur'an to three literary prose registers that existed in pre-Islamic Arabia: those of the *ḥatīb*, the *kāhin* and the *qāṣṣ*. I also placed the three registers, and hence that of the Qur'an, between that of poetry, on the one hand, and that of the dialects, on the other. Little or nothing survives of these registers, but their existence is clear enough. We may thus schematize the registers of Arabic at the rise of Islam as follows:



With the Qur'an included this becomes:



Two objections have been raised to these *schemata*.

The first is that nowhere in the Qur'an is there any reflection of opponents ridiculing Muḥammad on the ground that he is a *ḥatīb* in the same way that they claim that he is a *sā'ir* or a *kāhin*. That might be a valid objection if one were to accept Zwettler's premise that: "The single feature that we can be sure the Qur'an shared with the mantic expressions of the *kāhins* and, especially, the poets was the use of a non-vernacular classical 'arabiyya, the language that had been created, conditioned and cultivated through an old-inherited and seemingly pan-Arab tradition of poetic rendition" (Zwettler 1978:159-60).

I have to say that I think that this premise is totally implausible, even if, for the sake of argument, we accept Zwettler's unproved, and unprovable¹, hypothesis that

¹ Rabin (1951:13) reminds us that, "It cannot be strongly enough stressed that we do not possess a single sentence in genuine dialect, apart from the Himyaritic material".

all the Arabic dialects of Muḥammad's time had lost their *i'rāb* and were consequently at no small remove from the poetic register (the only other one that he takes into consideration). The Qur'ān itself shows us that references to Muḥammad as a *ṣā'ir* and/or as a *kāhin* were part of his opponents' claims that he was 'possessed'. In fact, *ṣā'ir* occurs 4 times, in two of which it is linked to *kāhin*². Even if we add the reference to *ṣī'r* in 36:69, this is markedly fewer than the 11 instances of *maḡnūn* and 4 of *bi-hi ḡinna*³. Perhaps the most conclusive evidence of the meaning comes from a verse such as 34:8: *a-ftarā-hu am bi-hi ḡinna*. Here we have the two most potent objections of Muḥammad's Meccan opponents put together in the form of a question that invites the answer No: Has he invented lies against God or is he possessed?

In any case, it is surely just plain common sense that it is a more grievous accusation to say 'You are mad' than to say 'You are using high-flown language'. Zwettler half concedes this, but it is hardly enough to say: "One generally, and, I believe, correctly, assumes that [the] comparisons had their basis in some sort of perceived similarities of form and style, and, to unsympathetic observers, source of inspiration as well" (Zwettler 1978:156).

The second objection is that there is very little difference between the 'arabiyya of poetry, on the one hand, and the Qur'ān, on the other. I am not sure that this is true on close analysis. Whilst the most striking differences between the Qur'ān and poetry lie in content, form and style, some syntactic differences soon show up on close examination: conditional structures and the uses of *la'alla* or *li-* or *an*, to mention only a small sample, show variations from poetic usage⁴. In any case, the received text of the Qur'ān does not take us directly back to the time of Muḥammad (and one should not forget that there is a similar problem with pre-Islamic poetry: it exists only in an 'Abbāsīd guise).

Leaving aside the red herring about the meaning of *ummi*⁵, there is no real disagreement that during the lifetime of Muḥammad the Qur'ān, though "a scripture", was normally conveyed (*i.e.* recited and/ or transmitted) orally. There is no convincing argument against this view: even if one were to make the unlikely

² *ṣā'ir*: 21:5; 37:36; 52:30; 69:41; *kāhin*: 52:29; 69:43.

³ In addition to the four places [7:184; 23:35; 23:70; 34:8] where *ḡinna* means 'possession' 'madness', there are also four places where it means 'the Jinn'. More interestingly, there are two places [34:46 and 37:138, 1st occurrence] where there seems to be a blurring of the two meanings.

⁴ For details, see my *Quranic Grammar*. *La'alla*, for example, occurs over a hundred times in the Qur'ān. It is possible to find the odd example in poetry, but its rarity contrasts sharply with Quranic usage.

⁵ The notion that *ummi* means 'illiterate' is neither early nor accurate. It can only mean 'of the *umma*'.

supposition that the Islamic community has somehow managed to suppress reports of Muhammad reciting from sheets, as other prophets are said to have done in 98:2-3⁶, delivery would still be oral.

On the other hand, it is generally agreed that at least some of the Qur'ān was committed to writing during Muhammad's lifetime, particularly by the scribes he employed for that purpose at Medina. There is no agreement when the copying started or if the whole was copied during his lifetime, though there is a tendency to 'feel' that most of it was committed to writing in the final years.

However, there clearly was no *textus receptus* at the time of Muhammad's death⁷, nor, it would seem, after Abū Bakr's collection. It was left to 'Uṣmān to stabilize the text. From then on, the importance of the written text grew steadily, despite early opposition from the *qurrā'*; and, mirroring developments in other Islamic sciences, the written text became the one that formed the basis for the detailed studies increasingly demanded by the Islamic community. The original oral Recitation became almost entirely dominated by the written Book. Though recitation has retained its own special niche, the commentator or grammarian will normally have recourse to the written text.

Western scholars, too, have a predisposition for written texts that comes from their own background. It has thus been inevitable that they have directed their attention almost entirely to the written text of the Qur'ān, and that their focus has coincided with that of the major works of traditional Islamic scholarship. Hence they too normally pay little attention to the oral side of the Qur'ān.

When we now look at a copy of the Qur'ān, we find full *īrāb* (with some anomalies by later standards, it is true). However, this is due to developments that took place well after Muhammad's death. These developments, it should be emphasized, affect the whole of the text, not just *īrāb*. For example, it is a matter of record that *hamza* has been added to the text in hundreds of places, the number depending on the linguistic stance of the *qāri'* concerned⁸. Confirmation of this is readily available when one compares a copy of the Qur'ān from Egypt with one from Algeria. The former gives us *mu'min*, the latter *mūmin*, and so on.

It seems unlikely that there was ever full *īrāb*, unless our definition of *īrāb* allows for *iskān* at the end of Quranic verses. Yet look at the written text. Those verses in which *iskān* occurs in recitation are all written with full vocalization. Look again.

⁶ 2. A messenger from God reciting purified pages, 3. In which are true documents.

⁷ Cf. Jones 1983.

⁸ There is a good summary of the problem in Rabin 1951:130-40.

Take, for example, the famous crux from *Sūra* 85, to the general importance of which I have already referred elsewhere⁹. The text of verses 21-22 reads:

bal huwa qur'ānun mağīdun | fi lawḥin mahfūzun/in

The problem about the final syllable can only have arisen because the ends of the verses originally had *iskān* (and still do so in recitation):

bal huwa qur'ānun mağīd | fi lawḥin mahfuz

The assonance is clearly in *-ū/ī + d/t/z*, with no final vowel. (It would also be nice to know more about *huwa*, *qurān* (which would not have had *hamza*) and *lawḥ*, but we never shall.)

An altogether more important question lies behind the disagreement about the final word in 85:22. When did the differentiation between *mahfūzun* and *mahfūzin* become important? In the end, the *qāri*'s came out six to one in favour of *mahfūzun*, with only Nāfi^c in favour of *mahfūzin*. If we accept the information about the lives of the *qāri*'s at face value, it must have been before the deaths of Ibn Kaṭīr (d. 120/738) and Ibn ʿĀmir (d. 118/736). But was it really a first century problem? I have my doubts.

Though the two variants are now perceived to focus on a grammatical problem, one may also wonder whether this was the original perception. However, it has to be said that many canonical *qirāʾāt* centre on grammar and/or the written text or both.

This is less so with the non-canonical (*ṣawādd*) readings¹⁰, which deserve much more attention than has normally been paid to them. Without being able to go into detail, I think that I may fairly say that a significant proportion of them are synonyms or parallel versions of what we find in the received text. A number of readings attributed to Ibn Masʿūd, who notoriously resisted the introduction of the ʿUṭmanic text, will readily illustrate this. First, a group of simple variations in *Sūra* 12:

ʿattā (said to be the dialect of Hudayl) for ḥattā [v. 35];

ʿinaban for ḥamran and tarīdan for ḥubzan [36];

sanābil for sunbulāt [43 and 46];

for parallel phrases see, for example, 19:27:

wa-ğāʾat bi-hi tahmilu-hu ilā qawmi-hā

(for *wa-atat bi-hi qawma-hā tahmilu-hu*);

and 19:29:

fa-ašarat ilā man fī l-mahdi

(for *fa-ašarat ilay-hi*).

⁹ The most convenient summary is to be found in Jeffery 1937.

¹⁰ See Kahle 1948.

Synonyms, dialect variants and parallel texts are typical of oral material, and there, in my view, lies the primary difference between *šawādd* readings and the canonical (*mašhūr*) ones. The early (in traditional terms, pre-^cUṭmanic) *šawādd* readings are primarily concerned with oral texts; the later *mašhūr* readings primarily focus on written variants on a received consonantal text. There is no apparent continuity between the two. The emphasis is clearly quite different. It can hardly have been otherwise. We may accept, for example, that Ibn Masʿūd read *fa-ṣabran ḡamīlan* for *fa-ṣabrun ḡamīlun* [12:18 and 83]. However, any grammatical reasoning on the part of Ibn Masʿūd must have been instinctive. We have no convincing evidence of the existence of grammatical terminology during his lifetime¹¹.

We know that there was a long battle about *iʿrāb*, lasting into the fourth century of Islam. Quite what was entailed can only be guessed at; but it can hardly have been confined to what happened at verse endings. I think it timely to draw attention once again to an attempt by Arberry to put pausal endings at natural pauses¹². He gave the following transliterations of *Sūra* 101:

(a) "ḥatīb" form (my description)

al-qārīʿa : mā l-qārīʿa

wa-mā adrāk : mā l-qārīʿa

yawma yakūnu n-nās : ka-l-farāsi l-mabtūt

wa-takūnu l-ḡibāl : ka-l-ʿihni l-manfūs

fa-ammā man taqulat mawāzīnuh : fa-hwa fi ʿišatin rāḍiya

wa-ammā man ḥaffat mawāzīnuh : fa-ummuhu hāwīya

wa-mā adrāk : mā hiya

nārun ḥamiya

(b) the fully vocalized form

al-qārīʿatu mā l-qārīʿatu

wa-mā adrāka mā l-qārīʿatu

yawma yakūnu n-nāsu ka-l-farāsi l-mabtūti

wa-takūnu l-ḡibālu ka-l-ʿihni l-manfūsi

fa-ammā man taqulat mawāzīnuhu fa-huwa fi ʿišatin rāḍiyatin

wa-ammā man ḥaffat mawāzīnuhu fa-ummuhu hāwīyatun

wa-mā adrāka mā hiyah

nārun ḥamiyatun

¹¹ This does not of course mean that people do not react adversely to what they perceive as 'incorrect' or 'impossible' grammar. For an illustration for present-day unlearned Yemeni's see Qafisheh 1996.

¹² This avoids dealing with the problem of *iʿrāb* elsewhere in the verse.

All this (and more that I cannot deal with here) points to a need to pay more attention to the Qur'an against its seventh century, oral background. Other questions then begin to open up though not necessarily to be solved.

Chief among these I would put the compilation of *sūras* and general coherence, though more detailed problems such as semantic yield are also important. With all of these we are dealing not so much with solving problems as removing ignorance.

Let me first say a few words about general coherence. It is undoubtedly true that many verses of the Qur'an are clearer in recitation than on the printed page. Abrupt changes of subject rarely cause problems. Take, for example, the beginning of *Sūra* 6:

1. Praise belongs to God, who created the heavens and the earth and made darkness and light. Yet those who do not believe ascribe equals to their Lord.
2. [It is] He who has created you from clay and then fixed a term - and [it is] a term stated with Him. Yet you still doubt.
3. He is God in the heavens and the earth. He knows what you keep secret and what you make public, and He knows what you amass.
4. None of their Lord's signs comes to them without them turning away from it.
5. They denied the truth when it came to them; but news of what they used to scorn shall come to them.

The change from 3rd to 2nd person in verse 2 and back again in verse 4 is hardly noticeable to a listener. That may also be so with some apparent grammatical problems. There is the famous crux in 5:69 where we find: *inna lladīna āmanū wa-lladīna hādū wa-ṣ-ṣābi'ūna wa-n-naṣārā*, as opposed to the *wa-ṣ-ṣābi'īna* that we might expect and indeed do find in the other two verses in which the phrase occurs, 2:62 and 22:17. When one listens one is hardly troubled; yet it leaps out from the page. The two perceptions are quite different, and at the very least we should be aware of that.

Turning to compilation, the question of how the *sūras* came into their present form is one that most Muslim scholars are unwilling to press. Indeed they have no real need to, for they may fairly believe it to be the work of God. However, awkward problems were not always avoided¹³, though the probing is never very deep. We are told, for instance, that in *sūra* x verses y and z are Medinan, whilst the rest of the *sūra* is Meccan, and so on.

¹³ This is in contrast with the *sūra* order, which is certainly not due to Muḥammad though possibly to the 'Uthmanic editors. The order, in very rough order of length, after the *fātiha*, appears to be deliberately neutral.

Amongst orientalists it was Nöldeke who set the trend in more detailed probing, particularly in his *Geschichte des Qur'āns*¹⁴, which though now dated, is still both useful and influential. Much more striking, however, was the work of Richard Bell in his translation of the Qur'ān (Bell 1937-39). Bell was a learned and meticulous scholar, steeped in the ways of scholarly biblical criticism. In his translation he took the *sūras* apart and then more or less put them back again, with a explanation of how the 'pieces' had come together. It is a painstaking and opus, from which a great deal may be learned - though one gets the impression that Bell's own ways of thinking are ever present. Yet it is all based on a staggering misconception: "The translation goes frankly on the assumption that the Qur'ān was in written form when the redactors started their work, *whether actually written by Muḥammad himself, as I personally believe, [A.J.'s italics] or by others at his dictation*". This also referred to when he describes the third period of composition as: "the Book-period, beginning somewhere about the end of the year II, during which Muḥammad is definitely producing a book, *i.e. an independent revelation*"¹⁵.

He further tells us: "The alterations, substitutions, and other derangements of the text have been indicated by the setting of the print on the page. Later additions have been set in a space or two from the margin. Where parts of the text are printed in parallel columns, that which stands on the left is taken as first, and that which is on the right as a later substitution for it. Where an addition has been made on the back of a scrap or scraps from elsewhere, these are separated from what follows by lines ..." (*ibid.*).

The results are interesting for scholars but hardly convincing. A fair example is the way he treats a passage from *Sūra* 54:

Application to Muhammad's own people; same time as original stories, but several times altered.

43. Are the unbelievers of you better than these?
Fourth continuation of 43a; Medinan.
 Or have ye an (assurance of) immunity in the scroll?
44. Or do they say: 'We as a body will get victory'?
45. The whole body (of them) will be routed and will turn the back.

¹⁴ One needs to consult the version revised by Schwally, and with a third volume on the text added by Bergsträsser and Pretzl.

¹⁵ Bell 1937-39: I, vi-vii (Introduction).

First continuation of 43a

49. Everything have We created with a limit.
 50. And Our affair is but one (flash) like a glance of the eye.
 51. We have destroyed your allies, but is there any one who takes heed?

Second continuation of 43a

52. When every thing they have done is in the scrolls,
 53. And every little and every great (deed) is inscribed?

Third continuation of 43a

46. Nay, the Hour is their appointed time, and the Hour is grievous and bitter.
 47. The sinners are in error and madness.
 48. On the day when they will be dragged into the Fire upon their faces; 'Taste the effect of Saqar.'
 54. Lo, the pious are in gardens with a river,
 55. In a sure seat in the presence of a kingly powerful (one).

The spark has gone, and the logic is hardly improved. Yet Bell came closer than anyone else so far to the heart of the the problems that often face us about the contents of any given *sūra*. It is not enough to indicate, as the Egyptian edition does, that the final edition of *Sūra* 73 is Medinan. It is even less satisfactory when there is no comment about 74:30 *ff.*:

30. Over it are nineteen.
 31. We have appointed only angels to be masters of the Fire, and We have appointed their number simply as an affliction for those who are ungrateful, that those who have been given the Book may have certainty, and that those who believe may increase in belief; and that neither those who have been given the Book nor the believers may be in any doubt; and that those in whose hearts is sickness and the ungrateful ones may say, 'What did God mean by this as a parable?' Thus God sends astray those whom He wishes and guides those whom He wishes. No one knows the hosts of your Lord but He. This is simply a reminder for mankind.
 32. No indeed. By the moon,

Here it is quite clear that verse 31 is Medinan. Various phrases, such as 'those in whose hearts is sickness' indicate that. There is also no difficulty if one reads 30 and then 32 onwards. Bell is quite right to assign verse 31 to the Medinan period, and he does so without reference to 'scraps'. The question remains: how did verse 31 get inserted? If one examines such passages in the context of oral tradition, there is no great problem. The text of every *sūra* would have remained open during Muḥammad's lifetime, but closed at his death. Every time Muḥammad recited a *sūra* changes *could* have occurred. (Changes might very well occur when another person recited, but only Muḥammad's changes would have had authority.) My Muslim colleagues need not be alarmed - I am not suggesting that we have to believe that Muḥammad

was the conscious author of the Qur'an. The sort of mechanism I envisage can be shown by the following analogy.

A large number of academics know the text of their lectures more or less by heart, and they can deliver them orally, without reference to notes. However, from time to time they will suddenly feel that they must add a piece; and if one can look at the notes of a student who is present, one will find the added piece (at least, in note form). The lecturer simply feels impelled to add the piece. Equally, pieces may be changed or substituted.

If in the case of Muḥammad one wishes to call that 'divine inspiration', so be it. The inspiration is working on known, explicable lines.

I am therefore inclined to suggest that intuitive change is the basic force in the building up of *sūras*. With that in mind one can make a good deal of sense out of the suggestions of Bell or Blachère. But *caveat lector*. One should be very cautious about imposing one's own logic on the text. That simply replaces one set of problems with another. Appreciating the situation is one thing; reconstruction is altogether more dubious. That may not satisfy our intellectual instincts to identify problems, analyse and comment; but those instincts often stop us from doing the right thing: saying 'I have no basis for going further'.

Limited space, as well as prudence, prevents me from going further. I am painfully aware that I have just scratched the surface of the problems I have mentioned. However, if I have pointed *ilā l-hudā* and not *ilā ḍ-ḍalāl*, I shall have been more than fortunate.

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