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 ḥātāb, the kāhin and the qāṣṣ. I also placed the three registers, and hence that of the Qur’ān, 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:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{šā'ir} & \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{ḥātāb} \\
\text{kāhin} & \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{qāṣṣ} \\
\text{katāb} & \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{al-qawm}
\end{align*}
\]

With the Qur’ān included this becomes:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{šā'ir} & \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{ḥātāb} \\
\text{kāhin} & \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{qāṣṣ} \\
\text{katāb} & \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{al-qawm}
\end{align*}
\]

Two objections have been raised to these schemata.

The first is that nowhere in the Qur’ān is there any reflection of opponents ridiculing Muhammad on the ground that he is a ḥātāb in the same way that they claim that he is a šā'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’ān 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 unprovable\(^1\), hypothesis that

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\(^1\) 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”.

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\[\text{THE ARABIST. BUDAPEST STUDIES IN ARABIC 17 (1996)}\]
https://doi.org/10.58513/ARABIST.1996.17.6
all the Arabic dialects of Muhammad's time had lost their š'rāb and were consequently at no small remove from the poetic register (the only other one that he takes into consideration). The Qur'an itself shows us that references to Muhammad as a šīr and/or as a kāhin were part of his opponents' claims that he was 'possessed'. In fact, šīr occurs 4 times, in two of which it is linked to kāhin. Even if we add the reference to šīr in 36:69, this is markedly fewer than the 11 instances of maqūnūn and 4 of bihi ginna. Perhaps the most conclusive evidence of the meaning comes from a verse such as 34:8: ašīrāhu am bihi ginna. Here we have the two most potent objections of Muhammad'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 concludes 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 'arabīyya of poetry, on the one hand, and the Qur'an, on the other. I am not sure that this is true on close analysis. Whilst the most striking differences between the Qur'an 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 usage. In any case, the received text of the Qur'an does not take us directly back to the time of Muhammad (and one should not forget that there is a similar problem with pre-Islamic poetry: it exists only in an 'Abbāsid guise).

Leaving aside the red herring about the meaning of ummi, there is no real disagreement that during the lifetime of Muhammad the Qur'an, 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 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 98:2-3, delivery would still be oral.

On the other hand, it is generally agreed that at least some of the Qur'an 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 death, nor, it would seem, after Abu Bakr's collection. It was left to 'Uthman to stabilize the text. From then on, the importance of the written text grew steadily, despite early opposition from the Qur'a; 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'an, 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'an.

When we now look at a copy of the Qur'an, we find full š'rāb (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 š'rāb. 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 gāri' concerned. Confirmation of this is readily available when one compares a copy of the Qur'an from Egypt with one from Algeria. The former gives us mu'min, the latter mi'min, and so on.

It seems unlikely that there was ever full š'rāb, unless our definition of š'rāb 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.
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3 In addition to the four places [7:184; 23:35; 23:70; 34:8] where ginnā means 'possession' 'madness', there are also four places where it means 'the /inn'. 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'alaa, 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'.
6 2. A messenger from God reciting purified pages, 3. In which are true documents.
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 elsewhere. The text of verses 21-22 reads:

bal huwa qur’dnun magid | fi lawhin mabhüzun

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

bal huwa qur’dnun magid | fi lawhin mabhüz

The assonance is clearly in -ii/i + d/t/z, with no final vowel. (It would also be nice to know more about huwa, qurdn (which would not have had hamza) and lawh, 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 mabhüzun and mabhüzin become important? In the end, the qārī’s came out six to one in favour of mabhüzun, with only Nāfi‘ in favour of mabhüzin. If we accept the information about the lives of the qārī’s at face value, it must have been before the deaths of Ibn Kaṭīr (d. 120/738) and Ibn cAmir (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 qird’t centre on grammar and/or the written text or both.

This is less so with the non-canonical (faswād) readings, 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 Mas‘ūd, who notoriously resisted the introduction of the ‘Uṭmanic text, will readily illustrate this. First, a group of simple variations in Sūra 12:

‘attā (said to be the dialect of Ḥudayl) for ḥatta [v. 35];
‘inābān for ḥamran and žāridan for ḥubzan [36];
ṣanābil for sunbulāt [43 and 46];
for parallel phrases see, for example, 19:27:
us-sag’at bi-hi tahmīlu-hu ila qawmi-ha
(for us-sat bi-hi qawmi-ha tahmīlu-hu);
and 19:29:
fa-asārat ila man fi l-mahdi
(for fa-asārat ilay-hi).

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10 See Kahle 1948.
Take, for example, the famous crux from Sūra 85, to the general importance of which I have already referred elsewhere. The text of verses 21-22 reads:

bal huwa qur'ānun magīdun / fi lawhin mahfīzun

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 magīd / fi lawhin mahfīz

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(for wa-atat bi-bi qawmi-ba tahlīlu-hu); and 19:29:
fa-ašrat ilā man fī l-mahdi
(for fa-atārat ilay-hi).

Synonyms, dialect variants and parallel texts are typical of oral material, and there, in my view, lies the primary difference between arwādd readings and the canonical (maḥbūr) ones. The early (in traditional terms, pre-‘Uṯmanic) arwādd readings are primarily concerned with oral texts; the later maḥbūr 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-sabran gamilan for fa-sabran gamilun [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 lifetime.

We know that there was a long battle about ḍrab, 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 pauses. He gave the following transliterations of Sūra 101:

(a) “ḥatib” form (my description)

al-qāriʾa : mā l-qāriʾa
wu-mā adrāk : mā l-qāriʾa
yawma yakini-n n-nās : ka-l-farāši l-mabṭūt
wu-taki-nu l-ġibāl : ka-l-šīni l-mansūf
fa-ammā man ṣaqūlat mawāzīnūn : fahwa fī ʾišātin rādīya
wu-ammā man ḥaffat mawāzīnūn : fa-ummuhu hawwiya
wu-mā adrāk : mā biya
nárūn ḥamiyya

(b) the fully vocalized form

al-qāriʾatu ma l-qarīʾatu
wu-mā adrākā ma l-qāriʾatu
yawma yakini-n n-nāsū ka-l-farāši l-mabṭūtī
wu-taki-nu l-ġibālu : ka-l-šīnī l-mansūfī
fa-ammā man ṣaqūlat mawāzīnūnu fa-hwūsā fī ʾišātin rādīyatīn
wu-ammā man ḥaffat mawāzīnūnu fa-ummuhu hāwiyyatūn
wu-mā adrākā ma biyāb
nárūn ḥamiyyatūn

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.

This avoids dealing with the problem of ḍrab elsewhere in the verse.

9 The most convenient summary is to be found in Jeffery 1937.
10 See Kahle 1948.
All this (and more that I cannot deal with here) points to a need to pay more attention to the Qur’ān 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 suras 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’ān 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 lladina amanu wa-
lladina hadu wa-s-sabi’una wa-n-nasard,
as opposed to the wa-s-sdbi’ina 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 suras 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 avoided[14], though the probing is never very deep. We are told, for instance, that in sura x verses y and z are Medinan, whilst the rest of the sura is Meccan, and so on.

Amongst orientalists it was Noldeke who set the trend in more detailed probing, particularly in his Geschichte des Qorāns[15], 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 suras apart and then more or less put them back again, with an 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 Muhammad 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 Muhammad 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.

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[1] This is in contrast with the sura order, which is certainly not due to Muhammad though possibly to the ‘Uthmanic editors. The order, in very rough order of length, after the fasih, appears to be deliberately neutral.
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13 This is in contrast with the sūra order, which is certainly not due to Muhammad though possibly to the ‘Uthmanic editors. The order, in very rough order of length, after the fātūha, appears to be deliberately neutral.

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

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, with a river, of Saqar.'

53. And every little and every great (deed) is inscribed?

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 sura. It is not enough to indicate, as the Egyptian edition does, that the final edition of Sura 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 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 sura would have remained open during Muhammad's lifetime, but closed at his death. Every time Muhammad recited a sura changes could have occurred. (Changes might very well occur when another person recited, but only Muhammad's changes would have had authority.) My Muslim colleagues need not be alarmed - I am not suggesting that we have to believe that Muhammad 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 Muhammad 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 suras. 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 ilâ l-huda and not ilâ d-dalâl, I shall have been more than fortunate.

REFERENCES


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?

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 sura. It is not enough to indicate, as the Egyptian edition does, that the final edition of Sura 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 be in any doubt; and that neither those who have been given the Book nor the unbelievers 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.

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REFERENCES
In this paper I shall be dealing with a group of Arabic chronicles dating from the second half of the seventeenth century in Egypt, when Egypt was under Ottoman rule. I have already studied lengthily, for my doctorate dissertation, one of the chronicles referred to here, a chronicle known under the title of Waqā‘î Miṣr al-Qāhira. Some readers may already be familiar with an important aspect of what I shall be discussing.

Here, however, I shall be considering this chronicle, and others close to it, in the context of folk literature and as representatives of folk literature and of popular culture. My claim is that these chronicles, which have usually been considered as historical documents, could actually be counted — according to the analysis which follows — as part of folk literature. Both form and content would seem to indicate that these chronicles are very similar to epics aimed at entertaining an audience of listeners be either the militaries or other.

This paper will perhaps answer certain questions while leaving others unanswered. The part which I believe I have an answer to concerns the nature of the text(s) and the condition of its composition; the part unanswered concerns the material, histori­cal side of my hypothesis, such as for instance being more precise about the author­ship or audience of the account.

1. Waqā‘î Miṣr al-Qāhira and its sister chronicles (mainly, another work known under the title of ad-Durra al-musna fi abhâr al-kina by al-Amir Ahmad Kāṭudā ‘Azābān ad-Dumārdās), are known as the Damurdās group1 and have been consid­ered by the historians of that period as popular chronicles2.

All of them tell very much the same story and share the same vision du monde which will be defined later in this study. The story is that of Egypt and more particularly the events which took place in Cairo in the middle of the seventeenth century between all the factions then present in Egypt: pashas, Mamluks, soldiers belonging to different militia, and even Arab tribes standing in favour of one faction

1 The Damurdās group is usually considered to consist of the various copies and versions of Waqā‘î Miṣr al-Qāhira as well as the copies and versions constituting ad-Durra al-musna fi abhâr al-kina. Cf. CRECEL 1989:7-9.