


Concepts and Methods in the Study of the Qur'ān

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Abstract: This paper addresses methodological issues in Qur'anic studies. At first, it intends to explain, through historiographical analysis, why methods proved fruitful in biblical and New Testament studies, such as form criticism and redaction criticism, have been disregarded in Qur'anic studies; secondly, it vindicates the application of such methods to the Qur'anic corpus; thirdly, it tries to exemplify the relevance of redaction criticism through examples. Two main issues are then discussed: the best way to account for the “synoptic problem” (the presence, in the Qur'ān, of variant parallel narratives), through an examination of some aspects of the Adam-Iblīs narratives (more precisely the composition of Q 2:30–38 and the nature of the relations between Q 38:71–85 and Q 15:26–43); and the beginning of Q 55. Two main conclusions are reached: first, the later versions of a parallel story are, in the examples discussed here, rewritings of earlier stories (namely, re-compositions based on a written version); second, sura 55 features the intervention of different authors, with two different profiles.

Keywords: Qur'ān; Qur'anic studies; biblical and New Testament studies; redaction criticism; synoptic problem; late antique cosmology



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1. Introduction

Remarkably enough, methods commonly employed in Old Testament and New Testament studies (and in the study of the Apocrypha as well), such as form criticism and redaction criticism, have only occasionally been employed in Qur'anic studies¹. I have three aims in this paper: first, to describe briefly, through historiographical analysis, why this is so; second, to vindicate the application of such methods to the Qur'anic corpus; and third, to exemplify the relevance of redaction criticism through examples, especially on sura 55.

As John Wansbrough remarked forty years ago, in the preface of his *Quranic Studies*: “As a document susceptible of analysis by the instruments and techniques of Biblical criticism, [the Qur'ān] is virtually unknown” (Wansbrough [1977] 2004, p. xxi). This expression of surprise is easy to understand: why have such tools (which have proved not only useful, but also necessary, in similar fields of research) not been applied to the Qur'anic corpus (and, with few exceptions, are still not used)?

There are several possible answers, but the most significant one pertains to the way most scholars have understood the nature and genesis of the Qur'ān. Two quotations will suffice:

“The genesis of the Islamic canon is entirely different [from the Bible and the New Testament]; one might even say that it was the product of the opposite development. It is not the work of several authors but of only one man, and was therefore accomplished in the span of a lifetime. The form of the Koran as we now have it was essentially complete two to three years after the death of Muḥammad. The 'Uthmānic redaction is only a copy of the collection of Ḥafṣa and was completed under Abū Bakr or in the reign of 'Umar at the latest. This redaction was probably limited to the composition of the sūras and their

arrangement. As far as the individual revelations are concerned, we can be certain that their text is transmitted generally in the form in which it was found in Muḥammad's literary bequest".²

"If Form criticism proved valuable as a clue to the transmission and the secondary *Sitz im Leben* of the New Testament, that is, "the situation in the life of the Church in which those traditions were found relevant and so preserved (as it turned out) for posterity", it can have no such useful purpose in Islam since there is no conviction that the Qur'anic material was in any way being shaped by or for transmission. On our original *assumption* that Muhammad is the source of the work, what is found in the Qur'an is not being reported but simply recorded; consequently, modern Form criticism amounts to little more than the classification of the various ways in which the Prophet chose to express himself".³

If Muḥammad is the sole author of the Qur'ān, and if the Qur'ān is nothing more than the record of his *ipsissima verba*, then applying the methods of biblical criticism to the Qur'ān seems pointless. Indeed, *source criticism* would consist of seeking possible Jewish or Christian informers of Muḥammad, or of postulating a form of oral dissemination of late antique Jewish and Christian traditions;⁴ *form criticism* would be superfluous, since the Qur'ān is seen as a bare collection of Muḥammad's proclamations, transmitted without alteration; finally, *redaction criticism* would be nothing more than a search for Medinan insertions in Meccan suras.⁵

2. A Few Questions

However, is this understanding of the Qur'ān warranted? Strictly speaking, this picture of the Qur'ān is more a preliminary assumption than the *outcome* of a close examination of the Qur'anic text: it is based, first of all, on the Muslim traditions, which, as is well known, should be treated with caution.⁶ In fact, one should not assume that Islamic sources are simply narratives, albeit embellished, but essentially reliable, about the beginnings of Islam. On the contrary, one must take into account that their aim is to construct the past by projecting into it a certain number of strategies of power and knowledge that deserve to be studied with the tools of critical discourse analysis.

Such an approach to Islamic sources does not amount to hypercriticism:⁷ it is simply a matter of following a common practice in similar fields of study, such as biblical and New Testament studies, and more generally fields which examine texts and communities that are involved in complex processes of self-definition, with all the vicissitudes of oral transmission and collective memory implied therein. As Stephen Shoemaker noted, relying on the *sīra* (biography of Muḥammad) traditions as trustworthy sources for the beginnings of Islam is similar to taking the second- and third-century apocryphal acts of the apostles as reliable sources about the Jesus movement—something no serious scholar of Christianity would ever do.⁸

This does not mean, of course, that Islamic sources should be ignored (on the contrary, they are among the topics that should be critically examined), nor that they do not contain very valuable information (they contain significant amounts of data). However, they also convey a huge amount of "information" that can be extremely misleading (back-projections, distortions, rewritings, transpositions, selections, omissions).⁹

In another well-known quotation, Michael Cook stated that, based on the Qur'ān alone:

"we could probably infer that the protagonist of the Koran was Muhammad, that the scene of his life was in western Arabia, and that he bitterly resented the frequent dismissal of his claims to prophecy by his contemporaries. But we could not tell that the sanctuary was in Mecca, nor that Muhammad himself came from there, and we could only guess that he established himself in Yathrib [i.e., Medina]" (Cook 1983, p. 70).

I confess that I find Cook slightly optimistic here: based on the Qur'ān alone, we could not so easily infer that the main protagonist is Muḥammad, whose name appears only four (or five) times in the whole corpus. Often (but not systematically), an anonymous prophet, or addressee, appears, but is it warranted to always identify this figure with Muḥammad? It cannot be assumed, at least. Localising the production of the Qur'ān in western Arabia also raises some problems.

There is indeed a significant paradox that does not seem to have received the attention it deserves. In fact, the Qur'ān often displays a Christian context. By "Christian context", I refer to various things: (1) several important Qur'anic characters are typically Christian figures: Jesus, Mary, John, Zachariah, the Sleepers of the Cave . . . ; (2) quite often, when Qur'anic narratives refer to figures shared by Jews and Christians (Adam, Joseph, Moses . . .), they seem to mirror Christian narratives more closely than Jewish ones:¹⁰ in short, the subtexts of many (para-)biblical stories in the Qur'ān tend to be closer to Christian texts than Jewish ones, as far as we can know; (3) some Qur'anic rhetorical arguments or *topoi* are directly borrowed from Christian sources: the anti-Jewish polemics, the use of the character of Abraham, and also Qur'anic demonology; furthermore, (4) many formulas and metaphors in the Qur'ān suggest a Christian background; (5) some texts are clearly addressed to Christians and show that there have been deep interactions between "Believers" (*mu'minūn*) and Christians; and finally, (6) some Qur'anic texts have been composed by *literati* who display a very deep and precise knowledge of Christian texts and traditions. Yet, the Qur'ān is supposed to have originated in a setting (seventh-century western Arabia) where the Christian presence seems marginal. Christianity encircled western Arabia, but that does not mean that it was widespread in western Arabia: no evidence speaks to this, neither materially (we know of no churches or monasteries there) nor in the literary sources (bishops are not mentioned in the Acts of synods and councils, nor is there a hagiographical tradition)—and the Muslim tradition does not give much usable and reliable information either.

In other words, we face an *aporia*, with four propositions that can hardly be reconciled: (1) Substantial layers of the Qur'ān display a Christian background. (2) The Qur'ān is only a record of Muḥammad's preaching. (3) Muḥammad's career took place in western Arabia. (4) Apparently, the Christian presence in western Arabia was at best marginal.

Some layers of the Qur'ān that display ideas, attitudes, and practices pointing to a Christian background might be explained as the outcome of a phenomenon of oral dissemination which would have reached western Arabia. However, other aspects of the Qur'ān suppose a Christian background that cannot easily be explained in this way: for example, a thorough and precise knowledge of Christian texts, traditions, and exegetical tools cannot be gained by simple hearsay, but requires training and instruction; moreover, a text that addresses Christians as the main interlocutors, looking for convergence or polemics, supposes the presence of a Christian community and substantial interactions with it. In short, it seems necessary to put, one way or the other, some Christianity in the Hijaz or, one way or the other, to put some of the Qur'ān outside the Hijaz.¹¹

Note that at this stage of the argument, my point is not to claim that the anonymous addressee is someone other than Muḥammad, or that the Qur'ān did not originate in western Arabia (to my mind, such questions are not well formulated if they seek a yes or no answer¹²). The point is rather to stress that most of what traditional scholarship considers to be obvious fact is not really based on an examination of the Qur'ān but presupposes (consciously or not) the traditional Muslim narratives.¹³

In sum, many historians have simply taken for granted the general framework induced by the (mainstream Sunni, never Shia) Islamic narratives,¹⁴ while there is not much independent evidence—and even some reasons for doubt. If so, then this framework cannot be the reliable basis it has often been assumed to be. In other words, when we address the Qur'ān from a historico-critical viewpoint, we should be careful *not* to subscribe too quickly to the "data" and the general framework provided by the Muslim tradition,

and thus interpret, consciously or not, the evidence we discover according to the frame provided by the Muslim tradition.

This point is crucial. Otherwise, we think we know more than we really know, since we take for granted, or proven, what is still doubtful or hypothetical, and we close possible promising paths of research just because they do not fit the traditional paradigm. Therefore, some decisive questions have not been asked (for example, about the profile of the author(s) involved in the production of the corpus, and the nature of their editorial work), and significant evidence has not even been noticed. Of course, in a second stage, a confrontation with the narratives of the Muslim tradition is always possible. We do not reject this tradition out of hand, but we cannot use it as a neutral starting point.¹⁵

I offer just one example to illustrate my point: How should we assess a study of the composition of the Gospels which uses, as its main evidence, the testimony of Papias of Hierapolis (circa 70–163 CE), instead of closely examining the texts themselves? In New Testament studies, such an approach (taking the testimony of Papias as authoritative) would appear absurd. Yet, a similar methodology, which gives priority to external (and later) testimony on an unprejudiced and straightforward reading of the text, still informs many studies of the Qur'ān.

Thus, we should follow a familiar process in the studies of the Gospels, where scholars design models to explain the chronology and the interdependency of the various Gospels, from clues that are found in the Gospels themselves. Instead of addressing the Qur'ān—not only its content, but also its genesis—with the lenses of the later Muslim tradition, it might be welcome to gather as much evidence as possible from the text itself, without *presupposing* the traditional model of the genesis of the Qur'ān, for example, the Mecca/Medina chronology, and the idea that the work which led to the constitution of the *muṣḥaf* merely consisted in the rearrangement of pre-existent pericopes (the so-called “collection of the Qur'ān”).

3. Some Historiography

Before introducing some of the tools which might be used in such a historico-critical study of the Qur'ān, and giving a few examples, I first address a more specific historiographical issue. As we saw, there has been a kind of methodological divorce between Qur'anic studies, on the one hand, and biblical and New Testament studies, on the other. One of the most pressing changes in Qur'anic studies must involve rescinding this divorce (there has been a remarkable dynamism in Qur'anic studies these last two decades, but much remains to be done in this regard).

This divorce between Qur'anic studies and biblical/New Testament studies owes much to the legacy of Heinrich Ewald (1803–75), who was Nöldeke's teacher; to Theodor Nöldeke himself; and also to the quasi-religious attachment to Nöldeke's oracles and verdicts that has characterised most of twentieth-century scholarship. This topic has been discussed by Stephen Shoemaker,¹⁶ so I will not focus on it here, though the topic needs further study. I limit myself to two remarks. First, many of us have certainly faced a quite natural remark to the effect that eminent scholars, who were certainly not naive, like Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) and Friedrich Schwally (1863–1919), did not hesitate to apply the methods of historical criticism to the Bible, but they did not really question the traditional narrative on the Qur'ān, and there might be a reason: it is because the traditional Islamic narrative is based on more solid ground.

My point is not to admonish earlier scholars, and it goes without saying that Wellhausen and Schwally should not be accused of gullibility. However, aside from the idea that earlier scholars were right to trust Muslim sources, there might be a much better explanation. The difference in treatment reveals, above all, something about the intellectual context in which Wellhausen and Schwally evolved.¹⁷ When Wellhausen applied historico-critical methods to the Hebrew Bible, he applied them to the Pentateuch. He did not apply them to the prophetic books of the Bible.

This reluctance to apply historico-critical methods to the prophetic books was the norm at the time in biblical studies, possibly for theological reasons (this would deprive the book of whole sections that were supposed to be the word of the prophet and therefore the word of God), but also because there was a certain model of the composition and transmission of what a prophetic book was supposed to be, with an exceptional person (the prophet), whose words were faithfully noted, kept, and transmitted by his disciples. This image of the genesis and transmission of the prophetic books is no longer relevant today, but it has long informed biblical studies, as well as Zoroastrian studies. The analogies with Islamic studies are striking. Qur'anic studies have not been so different, except that they seem to need more time to change. Yet, it is only in the beginning of the *second half* of the twentieth century (i.e., quite recently) that things began to change in biblical and Zoroastrian studies (and not without impediments).¹⁸ As in Qur'anic studies, the former image of the genesis of the prophetic books (regardless of the quality of the studies conducted) was based on a preconceived idea of what these books were, and how they were produced and transmitted.

Second, in some cases (and probably more often than acknowledged), this reliance on the Islamic tradition had a desperate flavour. Consider this quotation from the great French Arabist (and translator of the Qur'ān) Régis Blachère:

“Trop souvent . . . , l'on se trouve réduit à reprendre des conceptions qui ont seulement pour elles d'être celles du plus grand nombre. Convenons cependant, en contrepartie, que sans la Tradition, il faudrait se résigner à ne rien savoir de l'élaboration d'un livre religieux [le Coran] dont l'allure est étonnante” (Blachère [1959] 1991, p. 3).

This is very telling—especially the idea that, without the tradition, we could not know anything about the genesis of the Qur'ān. A similar example can be found with another major scholar, Alford Welch. In his article on the Qur'ān in the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, he examines the tradition about the codex of Ḥaḥṣa, and concludes that “there are serious problems with this account”. The story of the 'Uthmānic collection, according to him, “stands up to critical analysis no better than the first [Abū Bakr's collection]”, and is “another story whose particulars cannot be accepted”. Yet, he argues that “[t]he unanimity with which an official text is attributed to 'Uthmān, in the face of a lack of convincing evidence to the contrary”,¹⁹ ensures that the consonantal text of the Qur'ān can be assigned to the reign of 'Uthmān.

Blachère and Welch exemplify a more general phenomenon—the “paradox of the preface”: scholars acknowledge, in the prefaces of their works, the extent to which Islamic sources are late, fabricated, and biased, but they nonetheless decide to use them extensively (since they believe there is nothing else or nothing better to work with) and write a similar story, which ultimately remains close to the official and orthodox narrative of the Islamic sources. It seems that science, as nature, abhors a vacuum, and this might explain some parts of the trajectory of Qur'anic and early Islamic studies in the past.

However, such a vacuum might be illusory. That is, is there a possible way to approach the Qur'anic text, which would be safer than the reliance on the Islamic traditions? I think there is (and there may even be several). Here, note a basic fact: strictly speaking, the Qur'ān is not a book, but a *corpus*, namely a collection of texts (1) which were not originally intended to be put together in a codex, (2) which are heterogeneous (they belong to a variety of literary genres, and sometimes express divergent ideas), (3) which are, in some cases, independent, and in some others, are not independent from each other (there are numerous parallel passages, where some Qur'anic passages rewrite, correct, and respond to other passages). Therefore, the Qur'ān appears as a text which is both *composite* and *composed*, which has several layers, and contains many parallel stories—and this implies that there is, as in the Gospels, a “synoptic problem” in the Qur'ān.²⁰

With its various layers and many parallel narratives, the Qur'ān perfectly fits a method called “redaction criticism” (*Redaktionskritik*) that is fruitfully employed in biblical and New

Testament studies.²¹ Relying on various significant criteria, like tensions, contradictions, style changes, interruptions in the literary genre or in the themes developed inside a text, differing ways to introduce and stage the speech of various characters, etc., this method endeavours to reconstruct, at least in part, one or several previous states of a text, and studies the successive redactions/editions that gave the text its final form.²² This is a good way, for example, to fix the relative chronology of various Qur'anic texts without relying on the notoriously unreliable traditions of the "circumstances of the revelation" (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). Besides, there is no doubt that redaction criticism can legitimately be applied to the Qur'ān. It is sometimes said that redaction criticism could be applied to the books of the Hebrew Bible, whose texts were composed and reworked for centuries, whereas it could not be applied to the Qur'ān, whose genesis is much shorter. However, the genesis of the Qur'ān and the genesis of the Gospels took roughly the same time, and the Gospels are very successfully studied with the tools of redaction criticism.²³

Now let us examine this method more closely, first with some remarks on a general issue—the synoptic problem in the Qur'ān—and then with a few examples.

4. The Synoptic Problem

In many respects, the Qur'ān is a repetitive text. This is true for narratives: it is not uncommon for the same story to be mentioned in many places in the corpus—for example, the prostration of the angels and the banishment of Iblīs (Q 2:34; 7:11–18; 15:28–35; 17:61–65, 18:50; 20:116; 38:71–78), or the story of Noah (Q 7:59–64; 10:71–74; 11:25–49; 23:23–30; 26:105–22; 54:9–17; 71:1–28). However, it also pertains to other literary genres, like texts of instruction (compare, for example, Q 23:1–11 and Q 70:22–35),²⁴ or legal verses (for example, on dietary prohibitions: Q 2:173; 5:3; 6:145; 16:115).²⁵

These repetitions show the importance of such passages and the ideas they convey, both for the editors of the codex (who did not suppress them) and for the community or communities involved in the elaboration of the Qur'anic corpus. However, these repetitions do not have the same function: in some cases, the repeated passages are identical or almost identical (for example Q 2:173 and 16:115); in other cases, there are differences in wording that are evidence of changes and evolutions, and these can be significant.

How should we explain the presence of these parallel traditions, and what can they tell us about the history of the composition of the Quranic corpus? This is a broad subject, and in the absence of any systematic and exhaustive treatment of the question, I only introduce the main explanations.²⁶

A first explanation can be found in the Islamic tradition and might be called the "harmonising" reading. In other fields, like biblical and New Testament studies, this kind of explanation has long been rejected. A harmonising reading assumes that there are no real contradictions in the text (there are only apparent contradictions), that the "true" story can be found by combining the different narratives in the corpus, each one providing a partial version of the story. In doing so, the harmonising reading dismisses the tensions and contradictions between the different versions of a story, and the reconstructed version that it offers is ultimately incompatible with each of the stories in the corpus.²⁷

According to a second explanation (Wansbrough [1977] 2004, p. 21), parallel versions are independent traditions, perhaps regional traditions, which are incorporated, more or less intact, into the Qur'anic corpus. This thesis, however, might work in only a very limited number of cases. It does not explain the similarities—and sometimes even the identical formulation—between parallel versions of the same passage. In other words, the idea of independent traditions cannot explain the obvious interdependency of parallel passages.

A third explanation suggests that these parallel versions are a transcript of different oral recitations of the same story, as Donner suggested:

"But, might such similar passages not just as cogently be viewed as transcripts of different *oral* recitations of the same story made in close succession, something

like different recordings of a politician’s stump speech delivered numerous times over a few days or weeks?” (Donner 2008, p. 34).

The use of a stock of variable formulas, the adaptation of the story to its context, the fact that an oral composition is partially improvised from a given frame, and that two performances are therefore never quite identical could explain the differences between different versions of the same story.

This third hypothesis, however, raises serious difficulties (Witztum 2015, pp. 7–8). First, it assumes that all the texts examined belong to the genre of oral preaching. Yet, this is not always the case, not only because these are not always sermons (the texts implied are of various literary genres), but also because, especially in the versions of stories used in the longest suras, the hypothesis of a *written* composition (without the passage through an oral composition) appears much more plausible (Neuwirth 2006, p. 101).

Moreover, in many cases, the nature of the similarities and the nature of the differences between parallel versions do not support this hypothesis. The similarities are often too close to be explained except as a reference to a written text (see below). Differences—sometimes minor, with a simple stylistic adaptation to the context, but sometimes theologically significant, with the deletion or addition of elements which attempt to answer specific problems that the narrative posed in its previous version—do not favour the idea of memories of different versions of the same sermon or the same “political” speech. Indeed, according to this scenario, one should observe more variety between the versions,²⁸ especially on minor issues, and less coherence in the way the significant theological changes take place.

So we come to a fourth explanation (Witztum 2015, pp. 10–13): these are successive revisions of the same story, which can be reused, adapted, possibly modified in the context of a new composition. We are dealing here with a scribal and literate work, which some scholars situate, in totality or almost entirely, during the lifetime of Muḥammad, involving his circle of scribes (for example Neuwirth, Sinai), while other scholars (van der Velden, Pohlmann, Dye), though not excluding the possibility of such work at the time of Muḥammad (more plausibly, if it did happen, in Medina than in Mecca), consider that a significant part of this work could have taken place independently of Muḥammad, for example in the years between Muḥammad’s death and the final edition of the *muṣṣḥaf*.

Of course, we should *not* assume that all occurrences of variant traditions in the Qur’ān can necessarily be explained in the same way—each occurrence should be studied and analysed for its own sake. However, to better grasp the issues, and to better understand the approach of redaction criticism, I present some examples of variant traditions that exemplify the kind of editorial work just described: two pertain to the rewriting and revision of a narrative (the banishment of Iblīs and the fall of Adam, whose most recent version is found at Q 2:30–38); one is an interpolation (Q 55:8–9).

4.1. Q 2:30–38

I will be brief on this example, which has been much studied (Dye 2019b, pp. 810–15). My point is simply to illustrate how the work of rewriting can operate in the Qur’ān.

This section is composed of three parts: 30–33/34/35–38. Vv. 30–33 have no counterpart in the Qur’ān; v. 34 is an allusion to a story—the prostration of the angels—which is told many times in the Qur’ān, and which is specifically connected to Christian traditions in late antiquity, going back to the *Life of Adam and Eve* and other apocrypha, including the *Cave of Treasures*; vv. 35–38 tell a (famous biblical) story which is also narrated in suras 7 and 20.

Concerning the story of the prostration of the angels, Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann has provided excellent arguments for the following intra-Qur’anic chronology (Pohlmann 2015, pp. 85–153): Q 38:71–85 > 15:26–43 > 7:11–24 > 20:115–123 > 2:34. There is one story, which is rewritten or alluded to several times, and is slightly modified (it is also sometimes coupled with different stories). For example, the mention of God breathing His spirit into Adam is present only in the two earliest versions (Q 38:72; 15:29). Furthermore, it is only in Q 2:30–33 (the latest version) that the Qur’ān gives some rationale behind the angels’

prostration. In the Christian versions of the story, the angels bow down because Adam was created in God's image. However, what does the Qur'ān explicitly say in the other versions of the story? Should we suppose that the absence of an explicit reason for the angels' prostration is simply derived from the very allusive character of the text, and that it was unnecessary to tell the audience what they already knew perfectly well about Adam's creation? Or was the idea that man was created in God's image already thought to be such a sensitive issue that it was better to remain silent about it (the idea is implicit in Q 38:72 and 15:29, but vanishes in the later versions). It is clear that Q 2:30–33 implicitly provides an explanation: since the angels cannot answer the question raised by God (about the names of the animals), but Adam knew the answer, the angels appeared to be inferior to Adam. This is done, however, at the expense of Adam too: in the Bible, he named the animals (Gen 2:19–20), whereas in the Qur'anic version, God teaches Adam the names of animals. Therefore, the text insists on the gap between God and Adam, whose knowledge comes from God.

Thus, there is a story with Christian origins, a story which is progressively "de-christianised" *within* the Quranic corpus. This leads to some contradictions: in suras 15 and 38, God orders the angels to prostrate just after Adam is created; in sura 2, the prostration takes place after the exchange between God, Adam, and the angels (the version in Q 7:11 is also slightly different).

Next we look at Q 2:35–38.²⁹

(35) We said, "Adam, live with your wife in this garden. Both of you eat freely there as you will, but do not go near this tree, or you will both become wrongdoers".

(36) But Satan made them slip, and removed them from the state they were in. We said, "Go down, all of you! You are each other's enemy. On earth you will have a place to stay and livelihood for a time".

(37) Then Adam received some words from his Lord and He accepted his repentance: He is the Ever Relenting, the Most Merciful.

(38) We said, "Go down, all of you! But when guidance comes from Me, as it certainly will, there will be no fear for those who follow My guidance nor will they grieve".

The repetition of God's order in vv. 36 and 38 is striking, and strange—when God orders something, it is done instantly. So why are there two orders?

Literary, rhetorical, theological approaches might suggest (more or less) far-fetched ways to solve this conundrum, but redaction criticism has a very convincing answer (Witztum 2015, pp. 19–21). Indeed, there are two further parallel versions of this story in the Quran, in sura 7 and sura 20. Q 2:36 and Q 7:24 are identical:

Q 2:36: *wa-qulnā hbiṭū ba'ḍukum li-ba'dīn 'aduwwun wa-lakum fī l-arḍi mustaqarrun wa-matā'un ilā hīnin*

Q 7:24: *qāla hbiṭū ba'ḍukum li-ba'dīn 'aduwwun wa-lakum fī l-arḍi mustaqarrun wa-matā'un ilā hīnin*

The only difference is that God speaks in the first-person plural in Q 2 and the third-person singular in Q 7.

Moreover, Q 2:38 and Q 20:123 are extremely close:

Q 2:38: *qulnā hbiṭū minhā jamī'an fa-immā ya'tiyannakum minnī hudan fa-mani tabī'a hudāya fa-lā khawfun 'alayhim wa-lā hum yaḥzanūna*

Q 20:123: *qāla hbiṭā minhā jamī'an ba'ḍukum li-ba'dīn 'aduwwun fa-immā ya'tiyannakum minnī hudan fa-mani ttabā'a hudāya fa-lā yaḍillu wa-lā yashqā*

The similarities and differences are striking. Here, again, God speaks in the first-person plural in Q 2, whereas Q 20 (like Q 7) uses the third-person singular. However, Q 2 (like Q 7) uses the plural, whereas Q 20 uses the dual.

In suras 7 and 20, in contrast to Q 2, only *one* order is given. The explanation provided by redaction criticism is straightforward: the narrative in Q 2 is a combination of the stories in Q 7 and Q 20 41.³⁰ The author of Q 2:30–38 combined the parallel stories of Q 7 and Q 20, probably because they both had an authoritative character, and highlighted complementary

approaches; but by doing so, he created a narrative anomaly, giving the impression of two successive orders, when only one is needed and relevant.

For Pohlmann, this is a clear example of scribal work (namely, a work based on written exemplars). By contrast, Witztum does not exclude the possibility that such editorial work could have taken place orally, and considers that “clear criteria for distinguishing between oral and written practices of composition and editing remain to be established” (Witztum 2015, p. 21, footnote 71). In fact, such criteria have been suggested in New Testament studies (see Kloppenborg 2018b), and they are often based on issues of high verbatim agreement. I find Pohlmann’s explanation—revision by rewriting—more compelling than a revision through purely oral means (the phenomenon of adaptation to the new (literary) context, with the rhymes and the deletion of a potential repeat, corroborates this scenario), but since there might be matter for debate on such a short text, I turn now to a more convincing example of rewriting: the comparison between Q 38:71–85 and Q 15:26–43.

4.2. Q 38:71–85 and Q 15:26–43

The fact that we have a scribal work, namely a rewriting (and not an oral reformulation), can be shown in the following synopsis, which compares the first two earliest versions of the Iblīs narrative—see Table 1 (following Pohlmann (Pohlmann 2015, p. 114ff), I take Q 38:71–85 as the primary version, even though the chronology of the two passages is in a way irrelevant here: what is decisive for my point is the nature and the degree of the similarities). The high verbatim agreement between the two versions (for example, various identical strings of more than sixteen words (Kloppenborg 2012, p. 105ff)), whereas “ethnographic and psychological studies of the transmission of materials in a purely oral environment indicate that lengthy verbatim recall is in fact rare” (Kloppenborg 2018b, p. 52), points to the use of a written text, and to a literate context, not a context of pure orality.³¹

Table 1. Synoptic presentation of Q 38:71–85 and Q 15:26–43.

| Q 38:71–85 | Q 15:26–43 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | ²⁶ wa-la-qad khalaqnā l-insāna min ṣalṣālin min ḥama’in masnūn ⁱⁿ |
| | ²⁷ wa-l-jāna khalaqnāhu min qablu min nāri l-samūm ⁱ |
| ⁷¹ idh qāla rabbuka li-l-malā’ikati innī khāliqun basharan min ḥim ⁱⁿ | ²⁸ wa-idh qāla rabbuka li-l-malā’ikati innī khāliqun basharan min ṣalṣālin min ḥama’in masnūn ⁱⁿ |
| ⁷² fa-idhā sawwaytuhū wa-nafakhtu fihi min rūḥi fa-qa’ū lahū sājidīn ^a | ²⁹ fa-idhā sawwaytuhū wa-nafakhtu fihi min rūḥi fa-qa’ū lahū sājidīn ^a |
| ⁷³ fa-sajada l-malā’ikatu kulluhum ajma’ūn ^a | ³⁰ fa-sajada l-malā’ikatu kulluhum ajma’ūn ^a |
| ⁷⁴ illā iblīsa stakbara wa-kāna mina l-kāfirīn ^a | ³¹ illā iblīsa abā an yakūna ma’a l-sājidīn ^a |
| ⁷⁵ qāla yā-iblisu mā mana’aka an tasjuda li-mā khalaqtu bi-yadayya a-stakbarta am kunta mina l-ālīn ^a | ³² qāla yā-iblisu mā laka allā takūna ma’a l-sājidīn ^a |
| ⁷⁶ qāla ana khayrun minhu khalaqtanī min nārin wa-khalaqtahū min ḥim ⁱⁿ | ³³ qāla lam akun li-asjuda li-basharin khalaqtahū min ṣalṣālin min ḥama’in masnūn ⁱⁿ |
| ⁷⁷ qāla fa-khruj minhā fa-innaka rajīm ^{un} | ³⁴ qāla fa-khruj minhā fa-innaka rajīm ^{un} |
| ⁷⁸ wa-inna ‘alayka la’natī ilā yawmi l-dīn ⁱ | ³⁵ wa-inna ‘alayka l-la’nata ilā yawmi l-dīn ⁱ |
| ⁷⁹ qāla rabbi fa-anzīrni ilā yawmi yub’athūn ^a | ³⁶ qāla rabbi fa-anzīrni ilā yawmi yub’athūn ^a |
| ⁸⁰ qāla fa-innaka mina l-munzarīn ^a | ³⁷ qāla fa-innaka mina l-munzarīn ^a |
| ⁸¹ ilā yawmi l-waḥṣi l-ma’lūm ⁱ | ³⁸ ilā yawmi l-waḥṣi l-ma’lūm ⁱ |
| ⁸² qāla fa-bi-‘izzatika la-ughwiyannahum ajma’in ^a | ³⁹ qāla rabbi bi-mā aghwaytanī la-uzayyinanna lahum fi l-arḍi wa-la-ughwiyannahum ajma’in ^a |
| ⁸³ illā ‘ibādaka minhumu l-mukhlaṣīn ^a | ⁴⁰ illā ‘ibādaka minhumu l-mukhlaṣīn ^a |
| ⁸⁴ qāla fa-l-ḥaqqu wa-l-ḥaqqu aḥūl ^{un} | ⁴¹ qāla hādā širātun ‘alayya mustaqīm ^{un} |
| | ⁴² inna ‘ibādī laysa laka ‘alayhim sulṭānun illā mani ttaba’aka mina l-ghāwīn ^a |
| ⁸⁵ la-‘amla’anna jahannama minka wa-mimman tabī’aka minhum ajma’in ^a | ⁴³ wa-inna jahannama la-maw’iduhum ajma’in ^a |

xxx: additions made in Q 15:26–43

xxx: shared text

xxx: different formulations of the same idea

A synoptic presentation of Q 15:26–43—the later version—makes it even clearer, showing the scope of verbatim agreements, the absence of the kind of difference which could be explained by an oral transmission (except *la'natī*, “my malediction”, in Q 38:7 vs. *al-la'na*, “the malediction”, in Q 15:35), and the way the author of the second version worked on his *Grundschrift*, adding a few things and rewriting some others.³²

xxx: text shared by Q 38:71–85 and 15:26–43

xxx: additions of Q 15:26–43

xxx: text of Q 38:71–85, absent in its present form in Q 15:26–43 but rewritten

xxx: rewriting, in Q 15:26–43, of xxx

²⁶ **wa-la-qad khalaqnā l-insāna min ṣalṣālin min ḥama'in masnūnⁱⁿ**

²⁷ **wa-l-jānna khalaqnāhu min qablu min nāri l-samūmⁱ**

²⁸ **wa-idh qāla rabbuka li-l-malā'ikati innī khāliqun basharan min ~~ḥama'in~~ ṣalṣālin min ḥama'in masnūnⁱⁿ**

²⁹ fa-idhā sawwaytuhū wa-nafakhtu fihī min rūḥī fa-qa'ū lahū sājidīn^a

³⁰ fa-sajada l-malā'ikatu kulluhum ajma'ūn^a

³¹ illā iblīsā *stakbara wa-kāna mina l-kāfirīn^a* abā an yakūna ma'a l-sājidīn^a

³² qāla yā-iblīsū mā *mana'aka an tasjuda li-mā khalaqtu bi-yadayya a-stakbarta am kunta mina l-~~ālīn^a~~ laka allā takūna ma'a l-sājidīn^a*

³³ qāla *ana khayrun minhu khalaqtanī min nārin wa-khalaqtahū min ~~ḥama'in~~ lam akun li-asjuda li-basharin khalaqtahū min ṣalṣālin min ḥama'in masnūnⁱⁿ*

³⁴ qāla fa-khruj minhā fa-innaka rajīm^{un}

³⁵ wa-inna 'alayka l-la'natī ilā yawmi l-dīnⁱ

³⁶ qāla rabbi fa-anzirnī ilā yawmi yub'athūn^a

³⁷ qāla fa-innaka mina l-munzarīn^a

³⁸ ilā yawmi l-waḥṣi l-ma'lūmⁱ

³⁹ qāla *fa-bi-~~izzatika~~ rabbi bi-mā aghwaytanī la-uzayyinanna lahum fī l-arḍi wa-la-ughwiyannahum ajma'in^a*

⁴⁰ illā 'ibādaka minhumu l-mukhlaṣīn^a

⁴¹ qāla *fa-l-ḥaqqu wa-l-ḥaqqu-aqūl^{un}* hādihā ṣirāṭun 'alayya mustaqīm^{un}

⁴² **inna 'ibādī laysa laka 'alayhim sulṭānun illā mani ttaba'aka mina l-ghāwīn^a**

⁴³ *la-amla'anna wa-inna jahannama minka wa-minman tabi'aka minhum la-maw'iduhum ajma'in^a*

5. Q 55:5–13

Earlier in the paper, I noted that scholars who agreed to see the solution of (at least a substantial part of) the synoptic problem in a scribal work disagreed on one issue; namely, should this scribal work be assigned, in whole (or in part) to Muḥammad and his circle, or should it involve more people and more contexts?

There are several examples, which, I think, support the scenario for a process of textual revision that went beyond Muḥammad's death, or was independent of him (another possible explanation may be that some texts are earlier than Muḥammad and were revised during the time of his preaching). Here is one which I owe to my doctoral student Julien Decharneux in his dissertation on Qur'anic cosmology (Decharneux 2021).

Consider sura 55 and especially vv. 5–13. This text has a strong unity and highlights the blessings of God's creation of the natural world. Here is the transliterated Arabic text:

(5) ^al-shamsu wa-l-qamaru bi-ḥusbānⁱⁿ

(6) wa-l-najmu wa-l-shajaru yasjudānⁱ

(7) wa-l-samā'a rafa'ahā wa-waḍa'a l-mīzān^a

(8) allā taṭṭhaw fī l-mīzānⁱ

(9) wa-aqīmū l-wazna bi-l-qisṭi wa-lā tukhsirū l-mīzān^a

(10) wa-l-arḍa waḍa'ahā li-l-anāmⁱ

- (11) fihā fākihātun wa-l-naḥlu dhātu l-akmāmī
 (12) wa-l-ḥabbu dhū l-ʿaṣfi wa-l-rayḥān^u
 (13) fa-bi-ayyi ālāʾi rabbikumā tukadhhibānⁱ

In English (Droge’s translation, slightly modified):

- (5) The sun and the moon (follow) a calculated course,
 (6) The star and the tree prostrate themselves.
 (7) The sky, He raised it, and He laid down the scale,
 (8) so that you do not transgress insolently concerning the scale.
 (9) Establish the weight in justice, and do not cheat concerning the scale.
 (10) The earth, He laid it down for all living creatures.
 (11) On it there are fruits, and date palms with sheaths,
 (12) and grains with its husk, and fragrant herbs.
 (13) Which of the blessings of your Lord will you two call a lie?

From a formal point of view, the text has a unity, with a rhyme in *-ān/-ām*, and short and very rhythmic verses—v. 13 is repeated over and again later in the sura, as a refrain (vv. 16, 18, 20, etc.). However, there is something strange in vv. 8–9, which break the rhythm of the text (in v. 9) and speak of something preposterous in this context: why, in this passage about God’s creation and its blessings, is there such a recommendation about honesty in trade? In his translation of the Qur’ān, Droge (2013, p. 366 footnote 5) suggests that *mīzān* (“balance”) is “probably symbolic of divine justice in general”, but this does not make much sense here:³³ it does not explain why the reference to God’s justice has become an exhortation specifically addressed to traders, and it also does not account for the inclusion of such a moral recommendation in a hymn praising God’s creation.

Shawkat Toorawa has attempted to solve the riddle through an idiosyncratic translation of v. 7. Clearly aware of the problematic character of the passage, he translates (Toorawa 2011, p. 149):

- (5) The Sun and Moon follow a fixed rotation,
 (6) and the plants and trees prostrate in adoration.
 (7) He raised the skies and has balanced all in true proportion (*wadaʿa l-mīzān*),
 (8) that you not unbalance that proportion—
 (9) so be fair in your allocation and do not skew the proportion.
 (10) He rendered the earth for the sake of His creation . . . ”

Certainly, the transition from v. 7 to vv. 8–9 might look smoother (since God has made everything in true proportion, man should not deviate from God’s path and cheat in the proportions), though this does not solve the matter and does not fully erase the problematic character of vv. 8–9. However, Toorawa’s translation is highly arbitrary; and it pushes the meaning of the text far from its probable original meaning, as we see below.

Facing such a break in literary genre, content, and rhythm, many scholars have suspected an interpolation. In his translation of the Qur’ān (Blachère [1956] 1999, p. 566 footnote 6), Régis Blachère suggests that the words in italics are a later addition:

- (7) Le ciel, Il l’a élevé *et Il a établi la balance*
 (8) *Ne fraudez pas dans la balance*
 (9) *Établissez la pesée avec équité et ne fraudez pas dans la balance!*
 (10) La terre, Il l’a établie pour l’humanité.

In other words, for Blachère, we should remove the second half of v. 7, and vv. 8–9 as well:

- (7) wa-l-samāʾa rafaʾ ahā [*wa-wadaʾa l-mīzān^a*
 (8) *allā taṭghaw fi l-mīzānⁱ*
 (9) *wa-aqīmū l-wazna bi-l-qistī wa-lā tukhsirū l-mīzān^a*
 (10) wa-l-arḍa waḍaʾ ahā li-l-anāmⁱ

It is easy to see why this suggestion does not work: it breaks the rhyme (v. 7 would end with a rhyme in *-ā*), and it does not explain why this pericope about the balance has been added.

Other scholars, for example Richard Bell, have suggested that only vv. 8–9 are interpolated:

“[About *mīzān*,] Hirschfeld suggests that there is a reference here to the constellation of the Scales, which in the context is attractive, but there is nothing to support this in other passages. In vi:153; vii:83; xi:85; the ordinary balance is referred to. In xiii:16 and lvii:25 it is conjoined with *al-kitāb* and said to have been “sent down”. In spite of this lack of support elsewhere, in the context here it is probably the constellation which is referred to. Vv.7–8 are almost certainly a later insertion”.³⁴

Bell is right about the scope of the interpolation. In the same vein, Nöldeke and Schwally (Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–1919, vol. 1, p. 107) consider that “the moral lesson of verses 7 and 8 . . . was only added to verse 6 later” (they refer of course to verses 8, 9, and 7, respectively). However, at least two questions remain. First, why were these verses added? What was the purpose, and the reason, behind this interpolation? Second, how should we understand the word *mīzān* at the end of v. 7? There are good reasons to follow Hirschfeld, who tries to find a meaning that fits the context (and not an eschatological or a moral meaning), and this should be a reference which pertains to cosmology. However, one wonders why the constellation of the Scales would get such a specific treatment here.

Let us begin with the second question. The Qur’anic mention of “balance” is not without antecedents in other literature—provided we look in the right place. See the following passage, from the first *Homily on Creation* by the Christian exegete Narsai of Nisibis (d. 502), who wrote in Syriac:

“The second day the following order took place: May there be a firmament! and He divided the waters, half for the world from above and half for the earth.

May the firmament become a solid element in the midst of the waters and may it support the water above the surface so that it will not be burnt.

O command which solidified the water, liquid element, and made it a solid element which can carry water,

*O balance [mathqālā] which divided the large water reserve, and gathered it into two oceans, into (the world) from above and (the world) from below”.*³⁵

This is a fascinating passage. It is not the only Syriac text that develops the idea of a cosmological balance, which is in fact the firmament. A similar idea (but without the specific mention of a cosmological balance) can be found in the *Commentary of the Hexamaeron* by the West Syrian Jacob of Serugh (d. 521):

“He [God] made the firmament, a dwelling-place, on Day Two. He commanded the wind which was hovering above the raging sea, and it stood between water and water to separate them. His command went into action and He separated them [the two bodies of water] and *weighed* them, and *set* them in their places as He pleased. He put in the middle the firmament as a place with two sides, and separated them so that they would remain in their respective domain”.³⁶

Narsai and Jacob of Serugh comment here on Genesis 1:6–8:

“And God said, “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water”. So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. God called the vault “sky”. And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day”.

Narsai and Jacob add a new idea (but a very natural one in this context), concerning the way the waters are separated. If the waters are divided, then the partition must be

fair (half and half). This is precisely the role of this cosmological balance: to split the reserve of waters into two equal parts. The mention of the balance comes immediately after the creation of the firmament; this is the same in the Qur'ān (see the beginning of v. 6). Additionally, Narsai (vv. 83ff in the same homily), following the Bible (Genesis 1:20ff), talks later about the creation of the earth (as in sura 55, vv. 10ff). Other parallels between Q 55 and Narsai can be added. For example, compare v. 5, “the sun and the moon (follow) a calculated course (*al-shamsu wa-l-qamaru bi-ḥusbān*), with Narsai's first homily, vv. 60–83, which describes the course of the sun and the moon (including vv. 79–80, “the little moon runs through phases and goes up and down twelve degrees a month”).

In fact, Q 55, which is a kind of Quranic “psalm” about the blessings of God's creation, is simply retelling, in its own way (and skilfully, in terms of style and contents), the biblical narrative, while closely following some specific aspects of Syriac homiletics, especially those that can be found in Narsai and Jacob of Serugh.

Here is the new text, without the interpolation, which I refer to as Q 55:5–13*:

- (5) ^al-shamsu wa-l-qamaru bi-ḥusbānⁱⁿ
 (6) wa-l-najmu wa-l-shajaru yasjudānⁱ
 (7) wa-l-samā'a rafa'ahā wa-waḍa'a l-mīzān^a
 (10) wa-l-arḍa waḍa'ahā li-l-anāmⁱ
 (11) fihā fākihātun wa-l-nakhlū dhātu l-akmāmⁱ
 (12) wa-l-ḥabbu dhū l-'aṣfi wa-l-rayḥān^u
 (13) fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukadhhibānⁱ
 (5) The sun and the moon (follow) a calculated course,
 (6) The star and the tree prostrate themselves.
 (7) The sky, He raised it, and He laid down the scale,
 (10) The earth, He laid it down for all living creatures.
 (11) On it there are fruits, and date palms with sheaths,
 (12) and grains with its husk, and fragrant herbs.
 (13) Which of the blessings of your Lord will you two call a lie?

The text is much more convincing, and more skilfully composed (note the similar syntactic constructions of vv. 7 and 10, highlighting heaven and earth—the parallel is much less striking when vv. 8–9 are kept). The mention, between heaven and earth, of the firmament (*mīzān*), which is described by the role it plays in the creation (v. 7, a balance), also makes perfect sense.

Once the interpolation has been removed, and the original text becomes coherent, one should ask another question: why have vv. 8–9 been added to Q 55:5–13*? Remarkably, the interpolated verses can be found in all the old manuscripts where sura 55 is preserved.³⁷

Regardless of how we approach the problem, we fall back on the same explanation: these verses were not added by someone who knew what *mīzān* meant in its original context, since the term is glossed in a way that is not related to its cosmological significance, and even obscures this cosmological aspect. In other words, these verses could not have been added by the author of Q 55:5–13* (who is probably the author of a large part of the sura, in its original form). Therefore, these verses were added by someone else, who did not understand what *mīzān* meant in this context, but clearly wondered why the text mentioned a “balance”. The interpolator wrote a brief gloss on this word (using *mīzān* twice, at the end of vv. 8 and 9, to preserve the rhyme), drawing inspiration from other Quranic passages referring to the “balance” (Q 6:152; 11:85), but in the sense of the scale used in commercial activities. It was because the interpolator no longer understood the cosmological meaning of the term *mīzān* that he endeavoured to explain this term, whose presence in the middle of a hymn praising the beauty of the divine creation he certainly found strange.³⁸

In sum, *author 1*, who wrote the original version of Q 55, is a skilled author, with poetic skill and a deep knowledge of biblical, para-biblical, and homiletic traditions, like those of

Narsai and Jacob; and *author 2*, who inserted vv. 8–9, perhaps used his knowledge of other Qur’anic *logia*, but was unable to understand what *author 1* meant in v. 7.

Clearly, *author 2* did not have the same cognitive background, the same knowledge of Christian traditions, as *author 1*, and maybe most importantly, he could not benefit from the control of someone who would understand what *mīzān* meant in Q 55:7. It is sometimes said that there is a gap between the Qur’anic corpus and the first *mufasssīrūn*, who felt unable to understand the meaning of various Qur’anic words or verses. This is certainly true. This example shows that the gap is also present *inside the genesis of the Qur’anic corpus* itself.³⁹

Here, we might restate one of Lincoln’s famous theses on method, especially *Thesis 4*: “The same and irreverent questions one might ask of any speech act ought to be posed of religious discourse” (Lincoln 1996). Moreover, we must not only ask the same questions, but also answer them with the same methods, the same criteria, and the same requirements as those used for any other kind of question, without any sort of “exceptionalism”. To adapt Chase Robinson’s formula quoted above (n. 23), the history and the texts made by people from any religion are comparable to those made by people from another one, or from those without a religious bent at all, and the historian (qua historian) should treat them as such.

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Notes

- 1 This paper makes available for an English audience some ideas developed with additional arguments in two papers published in French: (Dye 2019a, 2020).
- 2 (Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–1919, vol. 2, p. 120; Nöldeke et al. 1938, p. 312).
- 3 (Peters 1991, p. 297 (italics added for emphasis)).
- 4 About the merits and limits of a reference to oral dissemination, see (Dye 2019b, pp. 777–83).
- 5 This phenomenon is already acknowledged by the Islamic tradition, followed by Western scholars: see, for example, (Nagel 1995).
- 6 See, for example, (Shoshan 2016, pp. 1–28; Crone 1980, pp. 3–17; Crone 1987, pp. 203–30; Shoemaker 2019).
- 7 On the questionable nature of the label “hypercriticism”, see (Amir-Moezzi and Dye 2019, pp. 23–24).
- 8 See, for example, (Shoemaker 2012, pp. 273–74).
- 9 See, e.g., Robin, about descriptions of pre-Islamic Arabia in Islamic sources: “when it is possible to check if traditionists are well-informed or if the sources they use are sound, the result is negative” (Robin 2017, p. 293).
- 10 See, for example, (Witztum 2011).
- 11 For a more thorough discussion, see (Dye 2019b, pp. 764–85).
- 12 According to (Sinai 2017, p. 63), “instead of solving the problem by relocating the Qur’anic milieu away from the Hijaz, however, it appears on the whole more promising to modify the portrayal of pre-Islamic Arabia that we inherit from the Islamic tradition”. I have two objections here. The first one is that describing the central Hijaz as a substantially Christian area does not only modify the portrayal of pre-Islamic Arabia inherited from the Islamic tradition: it runs counter all our present evidence about this part of Arabia. In other words, if the presence of missionaries and the oral dissemination of Christian traditions, which might have left no traces, is conceivable, points (5) and (6) above require a Christian presence in the Hijaz which we are not entitled to presuppose. The second objection is that Sinai seems to do as if the choice was between relocating the whole Qur’ān from one place to another one—but we have no reason to frame the issue this way: we should rather, while agreeing that Muḥammad’s career certainly took place in the Hijaz, accept the idea of *several contexts* for the Qur’anic corpus, and admit the possibility of at least a partial, but probably substantial, disconnection between Muḥammad and the Qur’ān.
- 13 I do not mean, of course, that Nöldeke, Schwally, Peters, or other scholars did not examine the Qur’ān—they did, and not without insights, but they did so with lenses provided by the Islamic tradition.
- 14 On the curious attitude of many historians towards Shia sources, see (Terrier 2013, pp. 406–8). Schwally (in Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–1919, vol. 2, pp. 81–112) devotes an entire chapter to accusations of falsification of the text, coming from Western scholars or from Muslims such as the Shias. The way he belittles the relevance of these arguments is a *cas d’école* and deserves a separate study.
- 15 Not taking the framework provided by the Muslim tradition as a starting point does not indicate which elements of the traditional stories should be preserved or rejected once they are confronted by the perspectives and outcomes of historico-critical

research. It is likely that some traditions will be kept, most notably, the existence of Muḥammad (although his date of birth remains unknown and the date of his death disputed); the birth of a politico-religious movement in the Hijaz; the strength of eschatological concerns; the importance of the date 622, which marks the first year of the “era of the believers”; the central status of Yathrib; the conquests; and the role of Umayyad power in the constitution and transmission of the Quranic corpus, while other traditions will not be kept. The issue, however, is that if one works only or mainly in the framework provided by the Islamic tradition, then it is very problematic to know what should be kept and what should be given up.

16 See (Shoemaker forthcoming).

17 Besides, the work of Nöldeke and many of his followers reflects the historical positivism of a certain nineteenth-century philology—an approach whose merits and limits are now better known.

18 On biblical studies, see (Macchi et al. 2012), especially (Macchi and Römer 2012, pp. 17–18; or Pohlmann 2012). On Zoroastrianism, see (Skjærvø 2011, esp. 321–37).

19 (Welch 1986, vol. 5, p. 405). Incidentally, this unanimity is much less obvious than Welch seems to admit.

20 The gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke are called “synoptic” because they share many similarities that make it possible to “see them together”. Traditionally, the question of the relations between these different writings is called the “synoptic question”, or “synoptic problem”. These relations concern, for example questions such as: what is the chronological order in which these texts were written? Which ones depend on each other, or on a common source, and in what way(s)? For an introduction, see (Marguerat 2008); for a recent discussion of various methodological issues, see (Kloppenborg 2018a).

21 The nature of this approach is often misunderstood, so a brief comment is in order (see Dye 2019b, pp. 785–89, for more details). Let us simply say that redaction criticism is *necessary* (examining only its final form considerably restricts the information that can be deduced—literally and historically—from a text or a corpus), and *reliable*—when it is practiced cautiously. In particular, when there is cumulative evidence of editorial reworking, redaction criticism has a good chance of accuracy. For an excellent defence of redaction criticism (on the Hebrew Bible, though it remains relevant in other contexts), see (Müller et al. 2014, especially pp. 1–18) (this book is also very valuable for the *empirical* evidence it brings to the fore); see also (Pakkala 2013).

22 It goes without saying that redaction criticism does not presuppose that any tension, contradiction, style change, etc. in a text, is an example of editorial work or rewriting. Only some are.

23 See Shoemaker (2019, p. 206): “The Christian gospels took literary form fairly quickly: the Q collection was compiled perhaps as early as twenty to thirty years after the death of Jesus, while the first gospels appeared within forty to fifty years. It is a fundamental principle of New Testament criticism that during this short interval, the so-called “tunnel period”, the early Christian community shaped and reshaped—even “invented”—traditions about Jesus’ life and teachings. If we follow Robinson’s prescription that the study of early Islam should be “committed to the idea that the history made by Muslims is comparable to that made by non-Muslims” (. . .), then one must allow the possibility that similar changes occurred during the early oral transmission of the Qur’ānic traditions. One certainly cannot, as Neuwirth resolves, simply exclude this possibility as a matter of principle”. The approach I advocate here does not *presuppose* that the genesis of the Quran is like that of the Gospels (in fact, there are differences as well as similarities). My point is only that we should dismiss a common a priori argument that prevents the use of very useful tools in Quranic studies.

24 On these two texts, and their relationships, see (Dye 2019a).

25 There is another type of repetition, which I do not examine here: stereotyped formulas, which are used many times in the Qur’ān. A good example pertains to divine epithets. Their use shows the existence of a repertoire of formulas in which the authors/editors can draw at will, especially to conclude a pericope, or to achieve a rhyme.

26 See (Witztum 2015, pp. 3–13; Dye 2020, pp. 241–52).

27 See (Witztum 2015, p. 6; Barton 2007, pp. 13–27).

28 I refer here the reader to the work of Jack Goody, e.g., (Goody 1998; 2010, p. 3).

29 Translations of the Qur’ān are taken from Droge 2013 with some modifications sometimes.

30 The formula *ba’ḍukum li-ba’ḍin ‘aduwwun wa-lakum*, which can be found in Q 7:24 (and Q 2:36) and Q 20:123, is absent in Q 2:38—this might be a stylistic choice from the author of Q 2, who already used the formula in v. 36. See also the difference of the formulas at the end of the verses: this is due to the rhyme (in *-ā* in Q 20, in *-ūn/-in* in Q 2). See (Witztum 2015, p. 21 footnote 68).

31 For a more developed discussion of these texts, whose conclusion and charts are only summarised here, see (Dye 2020, pp. 252–61).

32 It is not possible to determine whether the author of Q 15:26–43 also wrote Q 38:71–85, or if a second author adapted Q 38:71–85. I owe this method of presentation to (Kropp 2017).

33 Even if this meaning of *mīzān* works well in other Quranic contexts (like Q 42:17; 57:25), there the *mīzān* is “sent down” (*anzala*), whereas, here it is “laid down” (*waḍa’a*, a physical meaning).

34 (Bell 1991, vol. 2, p. 330). In her commentary on sura 55, Neuwirth makes a dissenting voice heard. She argues (see Neuwirth 2011, p. 597) that vv. 7–12 consists in an antithesis Sky/Earth, that the notion of balance informs the whole sura, and that these verses should therefore not be considered as a later addition, but are at their right place in this context. I confess I find her argument extremely baffling. For sure, the whole sura is based on the idea of the beauty and perfection of God’s creation (which

we can thus expect to be “well-done”, “fair”, “balanced”), but the mention of the balance in v. 7, as we shall see below, certainly means something else. Moreover, I do not see why we should take for granted the idea that there is this kind of antithesis in all these six verses (a strange antithesis, incidentally, since only v. 7 is about the sky). If there was an antithesis, it would rather be the one between celestial vs. earthly beings: compare vv. 5–7 (with the exception of “the trees”, v. 6) and vv. 10–12.

35 (Narsai 1968, p. 528) (vv. 47–56, Syriac); French trans., p. 529; italics added for emphasis. See a parallel passage in the third Homily (Narsai 1968, p. 592) (vv. 145–148, Syriac); French trans., p. 593).

36 Jacob of Serugh (2018), p. 50 (Syriac); English trans., p. 51; italics added for emphasis.

37 There is nothing surprising here: our eldest material witnesses belong to codices (even if they did not reach us in a complete form), whereas redaction criticism, while taking also into account the manuscripts’ evidence, addresses issues and developments in the text which happened before the corpus reached its shape as a codex.

38 Here, we can think of two possible objections. The first would ask, are these criteria of a change of subject and style really reliable? After all, we know that in speeches, like those of Donald Trump, consistency, logic, and syntax can be mistreated. Maybe a future practitioner of redaction criticism, examining the written record, would (wrongly) conclude that it contains many interpolations. To this, we should answer that redaction criticism does not presuppose that any form of tension, contradiction, repetition, or change of style or subject necessarily implies rewriting. In the case of sura 55, what works against an assimilation of the text to a disordered sequence of pericopes is the extremely consistent and remarkably composed character of the whole sura (except vv. 8–9), in terms of subject, style, rhyme, and rhythm. A second objection, along the same lines, would say, but can we not imagine a preacher who suddenly changes direction in his speech, and digresses? This is theoretically possible, but this objection itself raises two problems. First, in this context, this preacher would not be very skilled: instead of explaining an obscure term in its appropriate context, he glosses it with a meaning known to everyone, but not relevant in this cosmological context—this is certainly a good way to mislead the audience about what *mīzān* really means. Of course, a preacher may be clumsy, but the rest of the sura is the work of an extremely skilled author. Second, it is hard to accept the idea that sura 55 is a sermon, and therefore that there is a preacher (Muḥammad?) who delivers a speech. Form criticism shows that here we are dealing with a hymn, a kind of psalm, whose formal characteristics indicate a liturgical context, probably with a responsorial psalmody.

39 There are of course examples in the Quran where a text is rewritten or interpolated because the later author disagrees, or wishes to nuance, what the former author had written (for example Q 19:34–40, see (Dye forthcoming), or Q 23:6–7; 70:30–31, see (Dye 2019a))—but then, it seems that he/she understands perfectly what was originally meant. Some people might be inclined to understand this phenomenon as one author who changed his/her mind. This might be possible sometimes, but not always. In the current example, the possibility of a single author is ruled out.

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