

A LITERARY CRITICAL DISCOURSE ON QURANIC HISTORY IN SEVENTH-CENTURY ARABIA

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Abstract

The Qur'an is the holy scripture of Islam. For Muslims, the Qur'an is the literal word of Allah revealed via the angel Gabriel to the last Prophet Muhammad who relayed the revelation, verbatim, to his followers. As one of the essential beliefs of Muslims, the Qur'an is inimitable in its composition and argue that, just as the earlier prophets of Allah were given the power to perform certain miracles to prove to their respective followers that they were genuine prophets, the Qur'an is the proof of Muhammad's prophethood. Muslim scholars argue that the Arabs, whose literary tradition had reached its zenith just before the time of the revelation of the Qur'an, were fascinated by its style. Many of Prophet's contemporaries acknowledged the Qur'an as a non-human or divine composition on hearing the recitation of some of its passages. This article sets out first of all to explore the Arabic literary tradition around the time of the revelation of the Qur'an, since it is against this background that their evaluation of the composition of the Qur'an may be understood and, secondly, to examine the relevant Islamic literature on the response of the Arabs to the Qur'an and finally shed some light on the inimitable style of the Qur'an.

Keywords: Qur'anic Arabic, History of the Qur'an, Early Arabic Literature, Early Reception of the Qur'an, Inimitability of the Qur'an, Classical Arabic Poetry

Introduction

The term Qur'an, literally, something that is regularly read or recited, refers to the compiled form of the revelation that the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have received piecemeal over a period of 23 years, from the time when he began his mission as a Prophet at the age of 40 till his death at the age of 63 (571-632 CE). Certain passages of the Qur'an were revealed in response to some events, which took place during the time of the Prophet while others were revealed in response to certain queries posed to him. Muslims learnt the revelations by heart and recited them both within prayers and outside them as an act of worship. The Prophet, being unable to read and write, had a number of scribes who wrote the revelations down. Different materials were used to write the revealed verses, including camels' shoulder blades and animal skins. After the Prophet's death, the first ruler, or rather caliph, Abu Bakr, used some of the scribes to put together all the passages of the Qur'an in the final order approved by the Prophet himself, by threading a string through them.¹ This collection was later on copied out several times and the copies distributed around the Islamic state during the reign of the third ruler, Uthman ibn Affan.² In this context, Neuwirth writes that 'evidence of old Qur'an codices as well as new philological and historical studies have provided strong arguments in favour of the Qur'an's emergence from an Arabian environment and of an early date of the Qur'anic redaction, thus advocating for the fixation of the text in the shape transmitted to us'.³

The factors that have contributed to the way, in which the Arabs received the Qur'an in the seventh century, are numerous. They can be roughly divided into two main categories. The first group includes factors which pertain to the Qur'an itself, in terms of its language and content, while the other relates to the character of the Prophet himself as the medium of revelation. This paper only concerns itself with the response of the seventh century Arabs to the language/composition of the Qur'an, leaving both the content/prophecies of the Qur'an⁴ and the

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¹ Hussain Abdul-Raof (2003), "Conceptual and Textual Chaining in Qur'anic Discourse," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, Vol. II, pp. 55-56.

² Ibid, pp. 58-59.

³ Angelika Neuwirth (2006), "Structure and the Eemergence of Community," in Rippin, Andrew (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an*, New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing, p. 141.

⁴ There is no evidence in the literature that early receivers of the Qur'an, Muslims or non-Muslims, were surprised by the fact that it prophesied certain incidents that took place around that time. In fact, there is ample evidence indicating that the Qurayshites, the Prophet's tribe, used to trust him before he started his mission (he was known as 'the trustworthy one'), and continued to do so even when they had already rejected his call to Islam. For example, the Qurayshites continued to deposit their valuable items with the Prophet Muhammad for him to look after when they had to travel outside Makkah. In fact, all narratives of the life of Prophet Muhammad mention that when he decided to migrate from Makkah to Medina, in order to escape persecution, he left his cousin Ali ibn Abu Talib behind to return trusts/items back to their respective owners, i.e. the Qurayshites.

second group of factors to be dealt with in another paper. We will first provide some necessary background information about the Arab poetic/literary tradition before and around the time that the Prophet Muhammad started inviting the Arabs to embrace Islam and reciting the Qur'an, since it is against this background that the linguistic character of the Qur'an may be understood. We will then provide examples of narrations by Arabs who had accepted Islam and Muhammad as a Prophet of Allah, or were at least impressed by listening to/reading the Qur'an. Finally, we briefly discuss the notion of the inimitability of the Qur'anic style/composition.

The Literary Tradition of the Seventh Century Arabia

The linguistic character of the Qur'an may have been the factor that made the greatest impression on its early receivers. For example, Kermani argues that Muslim scholars consider the literary superiority of the Qur'an to be one of the most important reasons for the rapid spread of Islam in seventh century Arabia.⁵ There are a considerable number of instances in Islamic literature that indicate the astounding effect of the recitation of the Qur'an on the people who lived in this period. Instances are cited of instant conversion, emotional outbursts and states of ecstasy experienced by people reading/listening to the recitation of the Qur'an. Drawing on Neuwirth, Kermani is of the opinion that:

for Muslims, the aesthetic fascination with the Qur'an is an integral part of their religious tradition. It is this collective awakening, interpretation of theological reflection on the aesthetics of the text which specifically defines the religious world of Islam – and not the aesthetic experience as such, which seems to occur during the reception of any sacred texts. Only in Islam did the rationalization of aesthetic experience culminate in a distinct theological doctrine of poetics, the *i'jaz* [inimitability], based on the superiority and inimitability of the Qur'an.⁶

The linguistic character of the Qur'an must be understood in the context of the condition of the Arabic language and the poetic tradition when the Qur'an was revealed. Arabic had reached its highest stage of development around the time of the revelation, with poetry, arguably the most difficult form of literature due to the strict rule of composition (for these rules see below) reaching its peak of maturity. Arabic was already a developed language, not least in terms of its mature semantic structure, in the pre-Islamic period. The richness of this language was also manifest in the fact that it consisted of various distinct dialects. Arabic, Kermani argues, continues to retain the same qualities up to the present day thanks to the Qur'an, whose accommodation of some of the elements of classical Arabic has also been remarkable. Kermani argues that '[u]niquely, Arabic grammatical rules and the aesthetic norm are scarcely affected by the inexorable passage of the time. Instead, for centuries, a historical expression of language has been enshrined as the ideal⁷.' He further explains that "unlike Latin, classical Arabic is still a living language, existing parallel to the dialects. It is the official language, and the language of science and poetry"⁸

The literature stresses the significance of poetry in the pre-Islamic period and asserts that for the Arabs poetry was the most important means of literary expression, bearing in mind that prose was the other means. For example, Peterson argues that poetry was not only popular among the elite, but was equally popular among the masses.⁹ This observation finds support in what Kermani has to say about the Arabic literary tradition in that period. He argues that 'Old Arabic poetry is a highly complex phenomenon. The vocabulary, grammatical idiosyncrasies and strict norms were passed down from generation to generation, and only the most gifted students fully mastered the language.¹⁰' In the same vein, Ripperger explains that "[t]he Arab places unusual importance upon his poetry and the beauty of words ... for poetry expresses the sense of the beautiful, public opinion and political information."¹¹

Poets were accorded an esteemed position in their tribes; the Qurayshites, the Prophet's own tribe, were a prominent example of this. It was the poet who served as the spokesman for the tribe, as the historian who recorded their victories, the ambassador who represented the tribe in various contests, among other roles. Poetic gatherings used to be held annually: for example, the market of Ukaz, which was established fifteen years after

⁵ Navid Kirmani (2006), "Poetry and Language," in Rippin, Andrew (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an*, New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing, p. 110.

⁶ Ibid, p. 111.

⁷ Ibid, p. 114.

⁸ Kirmani, "Poetry," p. 115.

⁹ Daniel C. Peterson (2007), *Muhammad, Prophet of God*, Michigan & Cambridge: Grand Rapids Publishing Company, p. 16.

¹⁰ Kermani, "Poetry", p. 108.

¹¹ Helmut L. Ripperger (trans.) (1938), *Mohammed by Essad Bey*, London: Cobden-Sanderson, p. 29.

the War of the Elephant which took place in 570-1 AD, was a scene of poetic rivalry.¹² There, poets from all over Arabia had a chance to demonstrate their poetic capabilities and compete for financial rewards, esteem and fame. A contestant used to be asked to produce a poem, on the spot, on a given topic. His failure was the failure of his tribe and his success was similarly theirs. According to Ripperger, these poetic events were no less than tournaments in the truest sense of the term. The winning poetic composition was embroidered in gold on a black cloth which was then hung up at the main entrance to the Ka'bah,¹³ and this was the highest prize a poet could hope for. In today's world, this reward would be comparable to receiving the Nobel Prize for literature.

A special role was also reserved for poets at wars between tribes, which were common occurrences. Ripperger explains that the Arabs used to take their prominent poets with them to the battlefield to boost their morale before the fight and at the same time demean and ridicule the enemy tribe. On the occasions when the poet of the tribe could not achieve the desired effects with his poetry the tribe would withdraw from the battlefield, accepting their defeat.¹⁴ As Ripperger puts it: 'What good is the sword when the poem is of no avail?'¹⁵

In the same vein, Peterson explains that when a poet of that period succeeded in praising his tribe effectively and belittling the rival tribe, his poetry would set a standard and hence its style and technique would be an inspiration for poetry on similar topics for years to come. He goes on to say that:

As soon as someone was recognised as a poet, his family and other related tribes would gather to celebrate that. Such gatherings would create a festive mood among the people, so much so that special feasts would be arranged and all the people concerned, men and women, would sing, dance, play lutes and congratulate each other for the fact that a poet has appeared among them to defend their honour. A poet for them was a means to gain respect as well as a fierce weapon that they could show off to their rivals.¹⁶

It is no surprise then that poets were close to tribal leaders and other well-off members of the community, and were financially rewarded for praising them in their poetry. It is significant in this context to note that many Arabs, free and slave, had photographic memories. They used to be able to memorise a poem after hearing it only once. This dependence on memory is still evident today in Bedouin societies: 'It is no surprise, therefore, that nomadic societies living in these conditions have developed highly effective ways-of-life and social structures based on the use of powerful memories and oral communication, in which literacy can find no useful function'¹⁷. Another equally interesting point is that, to show their poetic talents, some poets would listen to a poem produced in honour of a certain tribe, memorise it, and repeat it while changing the number and/or position of dots over some letters of certain words, thus making some meanings the opposite of those in the original poem.

¹² M. J. Kister (1980), "Some Reports concerning Mecca. From Jahiliyyah to Islam," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. XV, p. 76. See also, M. J. Kister (editor) (1972), *Studies in Jahiliyyah and Early Islam*, London: Variorum. pp. 61-93.

¹³ Ripperger, *Mohammed*, p. 30. The Ka'bah is the most sacred place of worship for Muslims. Muslims around the world pray in the direction of the Ka'bah. It has been assigned special veneration in the Qur'an, where it is mentioned that it was the first place of worship ever built on earth (Qur'an 2: 127). It is reported to have been built first by the Prophet Adam, after which it drowned along with the people of the Prophet Noah. It was then restored by the Prophet Abraham and his son Ishmael. See Montgomery Watt and Michael McDonald (1988), *The History of Al-Tabari: Muhammad at Mecca*, OUP, pp. 51-58.

¹⁴ Ripperger, *Mohammed*, pp. 29-30.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30. The following story, told by Peterson, elaborates the rivalry that was prevalent between poets even in the early Islamic period. The story is about two well-known poets, Farazdaq and Jarir: There was a rather well-known poet called as 'the camel-Herd,' a member of the tribe of Banu Numayr, who had been very vocal in his opinion that Farazdaq was a better poet than Jarir, despite the fact that Jarir had been known to praise the Banu Numayr while Farazdaq had sometimes attacked them in his poetry. One day Jarir ran into the Camel-Herd near the new city of Basra, Iraq, and an argument arose. The Camel-Herd, whose son Jandal had accompanied him, was riding a mule. Young and impatient, Jandal suddenly burst out: 'Why are you stopping before this dog of the Banu Kulayb, as if you had anything to hope or to fear from him?' Saying so, he lashed the mule with his whip, and the surprised animal kicked Jarir, who was standing nearby. Picking up his cap, which had fallen to the ground, Jarir brushed it, put it back on his head, and said, in spontaneous

O Jandal! What will Numayr say of you
When my dishonouring shaft has pierced your father?

Jarir was coldly furious. He returned to his home, performed the evening prayer, called for a lamp ... and then proceeded to plot his poetic revenge ... By dawn the following morning, Jarir had composed a devastating eighty-verse satire of the Banu Numayr ... He immediately rode to meet the Camel-Herd and his friends, including Farazdaq himself. He said nothing to any of them, but proceeded directly to recite his poem. Farazdaq, the Camel-Herd, and their friends listened in horrified silence as the lethal satire unfolded.

Jarir closed his poem with an insult against the entire tribe:

Cast down your eyes for shame!
For you are of Numayr – no peer of Ka'b nor even of Kilab

The Camel-Herd, now agonizingly aware of the evil he had brought upon them all, hurried back to the camp of his tribesmen and cried: 'Saddle up! Saddle up! You cannot stay here any longer, for Jarir has disgraced you all!' They left as soon as they could strike their tents, and they never forgave the Camel-Herd for the shame he had called down upon their heads. Centuries later his tribe still lamented what he had done, and in fact, his story and his shame are preserved to this day in the great Arabic poetic anthology known as the *Kitab al-Aghani (Book of Songs)*. Peterson, *Muhammad*, pp. 18-19.

¹⁶ Peterson, *Muhammad*, p. 18.

¹⁷ M.C.A. Macdonald (2009), *Literacy and Identity in Pre-Islamic Arabia*, London: Ashgate Publishing Limited, p. 51.

In this respect, Ripperger writes that:

the simple desert folk command an unheard-of wealth of language. The Arab is the master of his language. He knows all of the hundred synonyms for the word camel, or sword, and delights in using the most complicated forms of expression. At the same time, he heartily pities the less fortunate people who are poorer in idiom than he. He takes meticulous care to preserve the purity of his speech.¹⁸

And to do just that, the Makkans used to send their new born children to be by nursed outside Makkah by Bedouin wet nurses so that they could learn pure Arabic and be spared from the possible ‘contamination’ of their tongue by all the dialects spoken in Makkah by outside visitors and pilgrims.

On the theme of the function of poetry, Kermani argues that 7th century Arabs were “bedouins or desert nomads, linked only by caravans of traders and frequent wars between the tribes.”¹⁹ There existed different dialects among Arabs, which must have made communication among them rather complex. Poetry had yet another important role to play across Arabia, as it unified the Arabs. This was because it was composed ‘following the same rules of composition’, serving as ‘a powerful public relations tool’.²⁰ Similarly, Kermani is of the opinion that old Arabic poetry, together with its structure and composition, was indistinguishable throughout the Arabian Peninsula. Arabic speech is divided into two branches. The first is rhymed poetry, which is divided into metres or what is called al-Bihar (literally the Seas).²¹ There are sixteen Arabic ‘Seas’: “*at-Tawil, al-Basit, al-Wafir, al-Kamil, ar-Rajs, al-Khafif, al-Hazaj, al-Muttakarib, al-Munsariih, al-Muktatab, al-Muktadarak, al-Madid, al-Mujtath, al-Ramel, al-Khabab and as-Saria*”. Each ‘Sea’ has its own rhyme scheme which is different from the other ‘Seas’. All pre- and post-Islamic poetry falls under one of these sixteen metres.²² The other branch of Arabic speech is prose that is non-metrical speech. Prose may be rhymed, alternatively called *saj’*. It consists of cola ending on the same rhyme, or of sentences rhymed in pairs. Prose may also be un-rhymed or straight (*mursal*) where there is no cola or division. The Qur’an does not fit into any of these forms of prose or poetry. This was indeed an extraordinary historical phenomenon, considering that the Arabic-speaking world was already vast, stretching from Yemen in the south and Syria in the north to the borders of modern Iraq and Egypt.²³

Farroukh (our translation) stresses that although several local dialects existed, the (lingua franca) language of Arabia was that of the tribe Mu±ar in which their poems were written. The difference between dialects and that common language was only in terms of word usage and pronunciation, while grammatical structures were the same across all dialects. The Qur’an was revealed in the common language of their poetry.²⁴

Finally, Brown writes that:

[t]hrough such poetry the Arabs left a literary legacy of daunting beauty that takes its place among the great works of world literature. Pre-Islamic poetry is often made to bear a greater burden, however, pressed into the service as the primary documentation of pre-Islamic thought, religion, and culture. Much of what historians know, or think they know, of the pre-Islamic Bedouin they knew from this poetry.²⁵

¹⁸ Ripperger, *Mohammed*, p. 28.

¹⁹ Kermani, “Poetry”, p. 108.

²⁰ Peterson, *Mohammed*, p. 18.

²¹ Kermani, “Poetry”, p. 108.

²² See M. S. M. Saifullah, Abd ar-Rahman Robert Squires and Muhammad Ghoniem (1999a), “What is the Challenge of the Qur’an with Respect to Arabic Prose & Poetry?” Islamic Awareness website, <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Miracle/ijaz.html>.

²³ Early Arabic poetry follows a set form known as the qasidah, which was characterised by featuring set thematic units. It begins with “a description of an abandoned campsite [followed by] recollections of the beloved – recollections which give rise to rich description of the beloved in nature imagery...[then by] an account of the poet’s journey, intertwined with, sometimes displaced by, a celebration of his camel or horse”. Daniel Brown (2007), *A New Introduction to Islam* (2nd ed.), Victoria/Australia: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 11-12. See also, Umar Farroukh (1984), *Tarikh Al-Adab Al-Arabi: Al-Adab Al-Qadim Min Matla’ Al-Jahlyyyah ila Suqut Al-Dawlah Al-Umawiyyah*, (5th ed.), Beirut: Dar Al-Ilm li Al-Malayin, Vol. I, p. 84.

In the next thematic unit of the qasidah “the poet boasts his strength, skill, and exploits”. Brown, *A New Introduction*, p. 13. After that, there is a description of the beloved, wine, enthusiasm (or pride), and, finally, mention is made of some wisdom or some description (of the beloved or nature). See Farroukh, *Tarikh*, p. 84. Poets who participated in Ukaz market festival followed these rules in their composition, in order to appeal to the judges so much so that this pattern became the formal pattern of poetry composition in the festivals. Other patterns also existed. Al-Rijz, featuring the use of two rhymes per verse, at the end of the first as well as the second half of each verse. Ibid. As for other types of (non-mu’allaqat) poems, some of them dealt with single topics including description, praise and enthusiasm.

²⁴ Ibid, pp. 36-37.

²⁵ Brown, *A New Introduction*, p. 14.

One cannot over emphasise the importance of Arabic poetry as a record of life in Arabia before and after Islam nor the unique aesthetic qualities that characterise the Arabic poetic heritage.

The Qur'an Recitation Begins: General Response

The above section has briefly described the Arabic literary tradition around the time of the revelation of the Qur'an. Against this background, Prophet Muhammad, at the age of 40, and for the first time in his life, started reciting Arabic passages to the people of Makkah, designating them clearly as revelation which he received directly from Allah via the Angel Gabriel.

To their surprise, the Arabs could not locate the passages as prose or poetry, the two known genres of their language, for the new passages represented a new genre. The sophistication of the composition was another source of surprise, since the Prophet was not known to them as a poet or any kind of an expert in the language. The Qurayshites probably would have been happy to hear the Prophet Muhammad claim that he composed these passages himself, although they would have questioned his ability to produce something as sophisticated as this. They would have been likely to accept him as the original author of these passages, not least out of a sense of tribal solidarity. The issue, however, was that he said the source of the passages, which he called the Qur'an, was divine, and the content called for the worship of one Allah, chastity, sanctity of human life, fairness and equality, which posed a dramatic challenge to idol worship, infanticide, alcoholism and oppression of the weak and the poor that were prevalent at the time. Picking up on the theme of the divine origin of the revelation, Watt argues that from the beginning:

[Muhammad] must have distinguished carefully between what, as he believed, came to him from a supernatural source and the products of his own mind. Just how he made the distinction is not quite clear, but the fact that he made it is as certain as anything in history. We cannot with any plausibility imagine him inserting verses of his own composition among those which came to him from this source independent of his consciousness.²⁶

This quote is of special importance since it epitomises the essence of the whole argument about the Qur'an being considered the literal word of Allah which had been passed on via the Prophet whose role in the transmission process was merely to repeat the words to his followers with no involvement whatsoever on his part in their content. It is worth noting that the same distinction is upheld until today; copies of the Qur'an only contain what was designated by the Prophet himself as such. The Prophet's own sayings, known as the Hadith, are available in other volumes independent from copies of the Qur'an itself.

Finally, a body of literature written by commentators and historians of the Qur'an, is also available in an independent collection of books. The following quote summarises this issue:²⁷

Muhammad grew up in a world which almost religiously revered poetic expression. He had not studied the difficult craft of poetry, when he started reciting verses publicly...The language was extremely powerful, captivating contemporary audiences with its pulsating rhythms, striking use of sound patterns, and a fantastical matrix of images (Sells 1999; Boullata 2000). Yet Muhammad's recitations differed from poetry and from the rhyming prose of the soothsayers, the other conventional form of inspired, metrical speech at that time. The norms of old Arabic poetry were strangely transformed, the subjects developed differently, and the meter was abandoned.²⁸

Having failed to locate the Prophet's composition and determined to reject his claim of prophethood, the Qurayshites decided to demand a miracle as proof of his authenticity. The answer was 'Is it not a sufficient and all-satisfying miracle that your ordinary language...has been chosen for the language of the Book, in which each single verse makes you forget your own verses and songs?'.²⁹ As a response, the Qurayshites decided to call together all the poets of Arabia in order to compose something that could compare with the sophistication of the Qur'an. The poets:

²⁶ Montgomery W. Watt and M. V. McDonald (translators) (1988), *The History of Al-ʿAbari, Muhammad at Mecca*, State University of New York Press, Vol. VI, p. 53.

²⁷ On the other hand, Brown describes the virtues of the Arabs, as described in their poetry, as "tribal humanitarianism" or *murūʿah* in Arabic, manliness which encompasses all that will display and protect man's honour: courage, loyalty, generosity. See Brown, *A New Introduction*, p. 14. Farroukh adds that the bedouin life also taught good moral lessons, including generosity, courage, protection of kinship and realising the importance of keeping lineage uncontaminated, and the importance of keeping the unity and integrity of the tribe. See Farroukh, *Tarikh*, p. 65.

²⁸ Kermani, "Poetry," p. 108.

²⁹ Ripperger, *Mohammed*, p. 101.

worked hard and took a great deal of pains with their poetry. But when they began to recite their verses, even the worst enemies of the Prophet had to admit that not a single one could compare with the verses of the Koran. And since the Arabs are a poetic people, many knelt down in the Cabaa [Ka‘bah] and were converted to Islam. The incomparable beauty of the Koran was sufficient proof of its divine origin.³⁰

The poets soon realised the fact that their poetic expertise was of little help in this regard. As a consequence, they not only admitted their inability to come up with a single verse on a par with the Qur’an, but many of them acknowledged the Qur’an to be a non-human composition and hence accepted the message of the Prophet Muhammad.

As indicated above, the Makkans took issue with the content of the Qur’an which effectively put an end to the idol worship on which they depended for survival in the hostile desert environment. Their livelihood, both inside and outside Makkah, depended on the 360 idols they had built around the Ka‘bah, the sacred House of Allah³¹, which was honoured by all Arabs. The surrounding Arab tribes did not dare to attack either Makkah or the Makkan caravans travelling across the desert as this in effect would put their idol, and their ability to go and worship it in the Ka‘bah, at risk. Kister argues that ‘Mecca owed its existence to trade...Caravans with wares used to pour into Mecca’³². He further explains that due to its importance, ‘[t]he intricate trade-transaction gave rise to various partnerships’³³ both inside and outside Makkah between tribes/tribesmen.

As we have mentioned earlier, the Qurayshites, however, recognised the excellence of the Prophet Muhammad’s recitation and admitted its superiority to their own poetry. Even his opponents could not but praise the Qur’an, as is clear from the stories below. The reason was that, according to Ripperger:

...[w]hen he began to preach in his melodious voice, a sort of charm went out from him...Even strangers could not withstand the magic of his manner. This was well known and was believed to be due to the magic of his verses.³⁴

The Qurayshites were now faced with a dilemma: the season of pilgrimage, when all the surrounding Arab tribes would come to visit the Ka‘bah, was imminent and they wanted to adopt a unified position regarding Muhammad, so that they could form a united front and warn the pilgrims against him before they arrived in Makkah. They decided to consult the poets for advice on how to technically categorise Muhammad’s recitations. These ‘experts,’ who were both astonished by and fascinated with the composition of the Qur’an, most often replied that the Qur’an was neither poetry nor rhyming prose, thus defining the boundaries for the evaluation of the Qur’an: “I know many Qasides and rajaz verses, and even familiar with the poems of the Jinnee. But, by Allah, his recitation is like none of them” remarked one famous poet, Walid b. Mughira ...echoing the perception of many of Muhammad’s contemporaries’³⁵.

The available literature on the Sirah (biography of the Prophet Muhammad) relates many narratives of how people were emotionally affected by the Qur’an. This article does not intend to reproduce an exhaustive list of all of these narrations, but will reproduce a representative selection to indicate how different sectors of the people responded to the Qur’an. In total seven narrations will be discussed below. The first and second stories record the response of the nobles of Quraysh, the third, a Christian response, the fourth to the seventh, the reaction of poets.

Selected Narrations of How Certain Individuals Responded to the Qur’an

The first story relates that Abu Jahl, chief of Quraysh, Abu Sufyan (a Qurayshite nobleman and future father-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad) and Al-Akhnas ibn Shurayq (also a Qurayshite nobleman), discreetly and independently of each other, went out one night to listen to the Prophet’s recitation of the Qur’an in his night prayer, which he used to recite at his own house. Unaware that the others were present, each of them sat

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Although they were pagans, the Arabs had some remnants from the Abrahamic monotheism. In essence, they believed in the existence of one Allah but they also believed that they needed to worship him through an intermediary, namely the idols. The reason, as they put, it is that they were too sinful to worship Allah directly. They also believed that the Ka‘bah is the House of the one Allah and they were certain that He would save it from destruction at the hands of Abraha’s army in CE 570-1, or what is known as the War of the Elephant.

³² Kister, “Some Reports”, p.76-77.

³³ Ibid, 78.

³⁴ Ripperger, *Mohammed*, p. 100.

³⁵ Kermani, “Poetry,” p. 109.

listening to the recitation of the Qur'an until early morning. On leaving, they all met and realised what was going on. They blamed each other and agreed not to repeat this behaviour, because if the common people of Makkah knew, 'they would start to suspect our opinion [of Muhammad and the Qur'an]'. The following night, however, each of them went back independently to listen to the recitation of the Prophet and at daybreak exactly the same thing happened all over again, and again on the third night. This time they pledged firmly not to return, then went their separate ways. Later the same day, the three men met up and discussed the recitation they had heard over the past three nights but concluded, on the words of Abu Jahl, that they could not accept Muhammad's message or acknowledge the divine source of the Qur'an because he belonged to a certain family, Abd Manaf, which had always been a rival of Abu Jahl's family.³⁶

The second story is that of Umar ibn Al-Khattab,³⁷ who later on became the second caliph. Umar was a young man who spent most of his time practising wrestling, horse riding and other forms of desert sports. He was also a commercial traveller, a merchant and served as the Quraysh's ambassador, a role reserved for his tribe because of their oratorical abilities. He was upset by the divisions starting to appear in Makkan society because of the Prophet Muhammad and his call to people to follow a different religion, which in effect provided them with a different way of life and different ethos. Having already joined the Makkan elite party and insulted the Prophet and tortured his followers whenever he could, Umar decided to murder the Prophet Muhammad in order to put an end to this societal division and also to secure the gratitude of Makkah:

With drawn sword he set out for the house of the Prophet, and on the way he met an old Arab. "You wish to kill Mohammad?" said the old man. "You had better see to it that there are no Moslems in your own house." He told Umar that his own sister had gone over to Islam. Filled with rage, Umar hurried to his sister's house and actually found her reading the Koran. He slapped his sister's face, but before slaying her he decided to inform himself as to the contents of the dangerous book she was reading. Like many others, he apparently had but little knowledge of the object of his hatred, and for this reason he sat down to read. It has been said that he was so greatly and wondrously affected by the verses of the Koran that he ran to the house of the Prophet... [and] converted to Islam.³⁸

The following story records a Christian response to the Qur'an. It took place in the fifth year of the Prophetic mission. The Prophet was not able to defend the early Muslims, who were tortured to death at the hands of the Makkan disbelievers. Ripperger writes that because the God of Islam is the God of the followers of the earlier scriptures (Christians and Jews), the Prophet Muhammad advised the persecuted Muslims, who had no protection, to emigrate to Abyssinia, which was then under a fair Christian ruler, the Negus. This incident is known as the first *hijrah* (the first immigration of Muslims from Makkah) by Arabian chronologists.³⁹ News of the immigration outraged the Quraysh, which set up a delegation headed by the 'ambassador' and cunning poet Amr ibn Al-As to persuade the Negus, with presents, lies and trickery, to hand over the immigrants. At Aksoum, the capital city of Abyssinia, in the throne room, Amr said, 'O Ruler, you are sheltering within your walls people who ridicule your and our faith. Deliver them unto us so that we may deal with them accordingly'. But the Negus decided not to hand them over until they were given a chance to respond to these accusations. He therefore called the representative of the Muslims, Ja'far ibn Abu Talib, and commanded him to explain what this faith was. Ja'far said:

We were ignorant...we knew nothing about God and committed evil deeds. The strongest fed upon us, the weakest, until God sent us a prophet who taught us to pray to God alone, and to shun evil. He led us to prayer, to giving alms and to doing pious deeds, and he freed us from deceit and wickedness.⁴⁰

The Negus then asked about what Muslims thought of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary? Ja'far recited the chapter entitled 'Maryam' (Mary) (Qur'an: 19). Upon hearing the Qur'an, the Negus cried so much that he wetted his beard and said, 'this and what was revealed to Jesus comes from the same [divine] source'. He then 'picked a small piece of wood from the floor and, looking at the ambassadors of the Quraysh, he said, 'The faith

³⁶ Ibn Kathir (1983), *Al-Sirah Al-Nabawiyyah*, Beirut: Dar Al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyyah, pp. 198-199. See also Al-Suyuti, Jalal al-Din (1985) *Al-Khasa'is al-Kubra*, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyyah, p. 90.

³⁷ The story is also mentioned in Ibn Kathir, *Al-Sirah*, p. 246 and a summarised version of the story is reported in Ahmad Abu Bakr Al-Bayhaqi (1925), *Al-Sunan Al-Kubra*, Hyderabad: Majlis Da'irat al-Ma'arif al-Nizamiyyah, Vol. I, p. 88.

³⁸ Ripperger, *Mohammed*, p. 114.

³⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 109-111.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 110.

of this people does not differ as much as the size of this little piece of wood from the faith of my people, and not for a mountain of gold would I give them up'. He then refused to hand Muslims over. Amr ibn Al-As, the future conqueror of Egypt, was forced to leave, and his gifts were returned to him.⁴¹

The fourth story tells of the reaction of a bedouin from Banu Sulaym to the recitation of the Qur'an. Qays ibn Nashba came to the Prophet Muhammad, heard from the Prophet about Islam and enquired about certain things. The man was satisfied with the Prophet's answer, at which the Prophet invited him to embrace Islam, which he did. Qays then returned to his people and said:

I have heard the verses of the Romans, the composition of the Persians, the poetry of the Arabs, the soothsayings of the sorcerers and the speeches of the man of Himiyar [a famous poet], but Muhammad's words are nothing similar to any of them. Obey me and follow him (our translation).⁴²

The next is the story of one of the most famous poets of the time, Labid ibn Rabi'a. As a sign of his prestigious position as a poet, Labid's poems were nailed to the entrance to the Ka'bah, according to the custom. None of Labid's rivals dared challenge his authority, nor hang any of their own poetry next to his. One day, though, at the time when the Prophet Muhammad was denounced by the Qurayshites as a sorcerer, some of his followers pinned up a passage from the second Surah of the Qur'an and called upon Labid to read it aloud: 'The King-Poet laughed at their impudence. Still, either to pass the time or to mock them, he agreed to recite the verses. Overwhelmed by their beauty, he converted to Islam on the spot (Lane 1843: 88)⁴³.

Kermani relates the story of the poet and nobleman Al-Tufayl ibn Amr Al-Dawsi. When he arrived at Makkah, some men of the Quraysh warned him against Muhammad's 'magic' and advised him not to listen to the Qur'an. Al-Tufayl said, 'By God, they were so persistent that I indeed decided neither to listen to anything he said nor to speak to him'. He even stuffed wool in his ears 'fearing that some of his words still might get through, whereas I did not want to hear any of it.' In the Ka'bah, Al-Tufayl eventually met the Prophet while the latter was reading his prayer. 'Here I am, an intelligent man and poet [sic], I can distinguish between the beautiful and the repulsive,' he said to himself. 'So what is to prevent me from listening to what this man is saying?'⁴⁴ Al-Tufayl eventually took the wool out of his ears, followed the Prophet Muhammad to his house and asked him to recite something of the Qur'an. He said 'By God, never before have I heard a word more beautiful than this.' On the spot the poet converted to Islam and returned to his clan and won the majority of his fellow tribesmen over to Islam.⁴⁵

The final story is that of Al-Walid ibn Al-Mughirah described by Abdul-Raof as 'the most well-known poet of Quraysh', was sent to see for himself what the Qur'an was about and how to defy Muhammad by producing something similar to his composition. He is said to have been 'softened' after listening to the Qur'an, upon which Abu Jahl, chief of the Quraysh, paid him a visit and said: 'your own people are collecting a lot of money to give you', which was considered an insult to this very wealthy man. Enquiring about this unjustified insult, Al-Walid was told that he was sent to defeat Muhammad and that he had to say something along these lines, rather than admire the Qur'an. His reply was as follows:

What do I say? There is none amongst you who knows about composing poetry, whether in free or rhymed verses, nor jinn's composition, better than me. But Muhammad's discourse is nothing similar to any of this; his discourse is sublime, beyond all of this. It is a sweet infinite and graceful discourse; it is grandiose at its beginning and it is never exhausted at its end, it surpasses everything else, and is capable of defeating any other discourses.⁴⁶

As we can see, the Makkans, those who became Muslims and those who did not, recognised the uniqueness of the style Qur'an and admitted to it being a divine revelation. It was after Islam spread beyond the boundaries of Arabia that Muslims scholars started engaging actively with the issue of what it is that makes the style of the Qur'an inimitable. In the following section I briefly review scholars' relevant views.

⁴¹ Ibid. The story is mentioned in various collections of the Hadith, such as in Al-Bayhaqi, *Al-Sunan*, Vol 9, p. 144.

⁴² Ibn Kathir, *Al-Sirah*, p. 344.

⁴³ Kermani, "Poetry", p. 110.

⁴⁴ Ibid, pp. 110-111.

⁴⁵ Ibn Hisham, (1963), *Sharh Qatr Al-Nada wa Ball al-Sada*, Egypt: Matba'ah Al-Sa'adah, p. 174. For a more detailed version of the story see Muhammad ibn Sayyid Al-Nas (1986), *Uyun Al-Athar fi Funun Al-Maghazi wa Al-Shama'il wa Al-Siyar*. Vol. 1, p. 184.

⁴⁶ Hussain, "Conceptual," pp. 66-67.

The Qur'an's *i'jaz* or Inimitability

The literature on Qur'anic studies by and large agrees on the inimitable nature of the Qur'an. Scholars, first of all, draw on the Qur'an's self-testimony and challenge to non-believers to produce a text similar to it to provide a religious reason for this inimitability. They also study the literary qualities of the Qur'an to provide linguistic reasons for their argument.

The Qur'an testifies to its own *i'jaz* (inimitability) and challenges mankind and *jinn* to produce a Surah like those found in it (e.g. Qur'an 2: 23), that is to write three lines which are neither prose, poetry nor normal everyday speech and which, at the same time, do not follow existing Arabic patterns of speech, and to sound like the Qur'an. *I'jaz* (literally translated, 'rendering incapable or powerless') refers to the impossibility of reproducing the Qur'an or anything that matches it in the same language, Arabic, let alone any other language. The theory of *i'jaz* maintains that the Qur'an is an inimitable text revealed from God and that it is unsurpassable not only in its style and composition but also in its meaning and content. The idea of *i'jaz* goes back to the notion that the Qur'an is a 'miraculous' sign of the authenticity of the Prophet Muhammad's message and that 'according to traditional explanations it was the utter majesty of the Quranic text that rendered anyone who read it "incapable"'.⁴⁷

Al-Baqillani (950-1013 CE) explains that the *i'jaz* of the Qur'an also comes from its stylistic perfection which 'defies classification' and its constant 'unfluctuating peak of eloquence', despite the wide range of themes it deals with. Al-Baqillani's point seems to be that the Qur'an did not only break the mould with its extraordinary degree of eloquence, but that it also broke with the tradition of existing literary forms.⁴⁸ In a similar vein, scholars also argue that the Qur'an is inimitable because, in addition to its eloquence, it does not fall under the existing Arabic patterns of discourse. Aisha Abd Al-Rahman concludes her recent study of the last fourteen Surahs of the Quran by re-stressing that 'the Qur'an, being neither prose nor verse, is a literary genre of its own that is of the highest eloquence and of matchless stylistic perfection'.⁴⁹ Thus, one of the reasons for which the Qur'an is considered a literary miracle is that the Arabs knew sixteen patterns of poetry (*bihar* in Arabic or 'seas') and two types of prose, but the Qur'an is different from all of them (Saifullah 1999a, see section I above). Al-Jurjani (d. 1078 CE), stresses that the stylistic *i'jaz* of the Qur'an involves its *nazm* (consonance). He considers *nazm* as the core of eloquence and defines it as 'a certain special way of joining words...[or] [a]ttaching words to each other and making some (words) causes for others' according to the principles of grammar and syntax'. Similarly, Abu Bakr ibn Al-Arabi (1076-1148 CE) maintains that the lexical items (i.e. words) in the Qur'an are tightly chained to each other, syntactically and semantically, in such a way that the entire Quran looks like 'one single word'.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Smyth, William (1992), "Rhetoric and *Ilm Al-Balaghah*: Christianity and Islam," *The Muslim World*, Vol. LXXXII 3-4, p. 250. The literary eloquence of the Qur'an is studied in the branch of Arabic language known as *Al-Balaghah* (the art of Arabic eloquence) = (rhetoric). *Al-Balaghah* studies the *i'jaz* of the Qur'an, amongst other things. There is a difference, however, between Arabic *Ilm Al-Balaghah* and Greek Rhetoric. Smyth writes that in the Western tradition "one studied rhetoric in order to make speeches...the main context for using it was the Forum and Law courts. In the Islamic context, on the other hand, one studied language in order to understand the basic proofs of Islamic Law...one studied the Arabic language primarily in order to extract a meaning from an established text and not to compose a new one". Arabic divides *Ilm Al-Balaghah* into *Ilm Al-Ma'ani* (the study of syntax/semantics), *Ilm Al-Bayan* (the study of figurative language) and *Ilm Al-Badi'* (the study of poetic conceits). See *ibid*, 251-252. Zebiri writes that the word 'rhetoric' has often been 'used or understood in a derogatory sense, for example to indicate an empty verbosity...or discourse aiming to manipulate or deceive, rhetoric is manipulative and therefore inimical to truth'. See Kate Zebiri (2003), "Towards a Rhetorical Criticism of the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, Vol. II, p. 100.

Boullata writes that the Arabic term *Al-Balaghah*, which has sometimes been translated as 'rhetoric', would more appropriately be rendered as 'the study of aesthetic effectiveness', or possibly 'the conveying of meaning in the best of verbal form'. Zebiri, "Towards", p. 104. Thus '*Balaghah* has never acquired the pejorative overtones which have sometimes been associated with rhetoric in Graeco-Roman tradition'. *Ibid*: 105.

⁴⁸ Sophia Vasalou, (2002) "The Miraculous Eloquence of the Qur'an: General Trajectories and Individual Approaches," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, Vol. IV, 2, p. 34.

In explaining what he means by the literary inimitability of the Quran, Shahid writes that 'the Quran was held as the model of Arabic literary excellence throughout the ages and consequently its effect on the development of Arabic literature has been incalculable'. Irfan Shahid (2004), "The Sura of the Poets, Qur'an XXVI: Final Conclusions," *Journal of Arabic Literature*, Vol. XXXV, no. 2, p. 193.

⁴⁹ M.S.M. Saifullah (1999b), "Topics Relating to the Qur'an: I'jaz, Grammarians & Jews," *Islamic Awareness*. Available at <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Miracle/ijaz1.html>.

Boullata praises Aisha Abd Al-Rahman since "[h]er fresh approach, with its lexical and syntactic rigour, supports the conclusion ... that 'Arabic composition should be divided into three categories, prose, verse and Quran, *sa'i* forming part of prose but the Qur'an being a category of its own'. Bruce B. Lawrence (2005), "Approximating Saj' in English Renditions of the Qur'an: A Close Reading of Sura 93 (al-Duha) and the Basmala," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, Vol. VII, no. 1, p. 64.

⁵⁰ Hussain, "Conceptual," p. 74. See also Ahmed Saleh Elimam (2009), "Marked word order in the Qur'an: Functions and Translation," *Across Languages and Cultures*, Vol. X, no. 1, pp. 109-129.

The beautiful style of the Qur'an continues to be admired in recent times. For example, Palmer, too, recognises the unique style of the Qur'an and writes in the introduction to his translation:

With the Prophet, the style was natural, and the words were those in every-day ordinary life, while with the later Arabic authors the style is imitative and the ancient words are introduced as a literary embellishment. The natural consequence is that their attempts look laboured and unreal by the side of his impromptu and forcible eloquence.⁵¹

In short, the linguistic aspects of the Qur'an are examined to establish how it stood out since its revelation: the relevant Arabic literature examines some 70 such aspects (e.g. the Qur'anic use of tense, lexical choices, word order, consonance, etc) and concludes that the Qur'an employs them in a very special manner. Finally, it is the cumulative effect of this use that makes the Qur'anic style special from a linguistic point of view.⁵²

Conclusion

It has been our intention in this article to emphasise the literary as well as the historical importance of the pre and early Islamic Arab poetic tradition in understanding the outstanding influence the Qur'an had on the seventh century Arabs. Special attention has been paid not only to the role of poetry as a tool of unification of tribes, but also on the role of poets as historian, ambassadors and communication brokers. Poetry was written in the Arabic dialect of the tribe Mudar, which was the standard dialect of the time. Qa'idahs followed the same rules of composition but single topic poems also existed. Arabs who revered poetic expression were fascinated by the sophisticated style of the Qur'an, which is described in the relevant literature as inimitable and irreproducible either in Arabic or any other language through translation. Arabs, those who became Muslims and those who did not, could not help express their fascination by the Qur'anic composition. It was after Islam spread outside Arabia that scholars started engaging with the text of the Qur'an to explain to non-Arabic speaking Muslims what qualities make the Qur'anic style inimitable.

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⁵¹ Saifullah, M. S. M., Abd Ar-Rahman Robert Squires and Muhammad Ghoniem (1999a), "What is the Challenge of the Qur'an with Respect to Arabic Prose & Poetry?" *Islamic Awareness*. Available at <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Miracle/ijaz.html>.

⁵² It is worth mentioning that some scientists have concluded that the Qur'an is miraculous also in terms of its content since several of its verses deal with scientific facts that have been discovered only recently (e.g. http://www.miraclesofthequran.com/scientific_index.html).

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