



CHAPTER

2 The Qur'an and Scripture

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Abstract

This chapter provides a study of the Qur'an's self-presentation as a revealed and proclaimed text. The concepts of "writing" (*kitāb*) as well as the various terms used within the Qur'an to refer to revelation and the proclaimer's delivery of scripture are discussed, and the relevant Qur'anic texts are studied. This leads to a discussion of the somewhat controversial concept of "inlibration," or the supposed becoming-book of the text. The resulting image of the self-understanding of the Qur'an as text is a complex one, in which the self-conceptions of earlier scriptures are adapted to the pre-Islamic Arabian conceptual area.

Keywords: [scripture](#), [writing](#), [revelation](#), [inlibration](#), [sending down](#), [proclamation](#)**Subject:** [Regional and National History](#), [Classical History](#), [Religion in the Ancient World](#)**Translator:** Samuel Wilder**Collection:** [Oxford Scholarship Online](#)

2.1 "Sending Down," *Tanzīl*, and "Inspiration," *Wahy*

We are accustomed to designating the Qur'an immediately as the "revealed scripture" of the Muslims. In doing so, we carry out the transference onto Islam of a Jewish-Christian concept¹ whose appropriateness still requires systematic testing—even if this designation, frequent in Western media, has long been used also by Muslim researchers themselves. With this designation we direct our attention primarily to the transcendent dimension of the Qur'an, its being a revelation, which—deemed exclusively a matter of belief of Muslims²—frees us from the necessity of reflecting on the position of the Qur'an beyond the limits of its Islamic reception history, within our own theological history. In what follows, a change of perspective will be suggested: in place of the "Islamic revelation," the "Qur'anic proclamation" should come to the fore, entailing a reading of the Qur'an not as the exclusively Muslim founding document of a religion but rather "inclusively," as a document of Late Antique theological debates. At the same time, a view should be given to the process reflected in the Qur'an of the communication of its message, and thus its genesis. The Qur'an does indeed yield information self-referentially about the process of its emergence, information that is given already in the early suras through the depiction of various scenes of emergence. The designation "revelation,"³ which is so commonly used today, in fact stands for several Qur'anic concepts at once: for *wahy*, "inspiration,"⁴ and for *tanzīl*, "sending down."⁵ In what follows, we will seek to illuminate the central Qur'anic texts on *wahy* and *tanzīl* and then present the Qur'anic conception of an orally recited scripture, alongside Late Antique reflections over heavenly and earthly writing. After a detour through debates conducted in Western research about the concept of "inlibration," an attempt will be made to sketch an overall image of the medialities of the Qur'an, which in reality are more complex than they might seem.

Yet, skepticism is warranted not only in relation to the Jewish-Christian designation "revelation": the two inner-Qur'anic designations *wahy* and *tanzīl*, which in Islamic exegesis are used without distinction for

the whole Qur'an, also should not be accepted immediately as a Qur'anic-sanctioned fait accompli. For more than twenty years, the Qur'an was a communication process, before it became fixed as a text and was later canonized. It is precisely its self-referentiality, brought to expression in the images of "sending down" and "inspiration," that must be investigated and "historicized," that is, viewed in connection with the otherwise detectable traces of the process of text genesis, alongside an engagement with extra-Qur'anic predecessors.

Islamic tradition itself also clearly marks a distinction between two manifestations of the Qur'an, as fixed written text and oral communication, in that it distinguishes between the concepts *muṣḥaf*, "codex," and *qur'ān*, "reading/recitation."⁶ It would be difficult to overstate the importance of this distinction. Only after the oral communication process, *qur'ān*, came to a standstill with the death of the proclaimer were the texts gathered systematically and perceived, through a process of textualization, as canonical scripture (*muṣḥaf*),⁷ to be read both ahistorically as a divine monologue and historically as a document initiating a new epoch and marking the victory of Islam over the rivaling traditions. Once this latter manifestation of the Qur'an came to play a predominant role in the identity construction of the religious community, those traits of the Qur'an's genesis that are significant for the researcher of Late Antique religious history, the traces of the Qur'anic community's engagement with the older traditions, became virtually irrelevant for Islam. Accordingly, they were marginalized in inner-Islamic exegesis, and it is on this one-sided exegesis that Western Qur'an translations and overview presentations down to today are still strongly dependent,⁸ so that both scholarly traditions draw the image of a largely homogenous Arab scenario of the Qur'an's emergence. Indeed, Islamic tradition allows for the participation in the Qur'anic communication scenario of individual Christians and Jews who were knowledgeable about, or even quite learned in, religious traditions, but these always remain minor characters. It is historically warranted, however, to assume that there was a lively exchange between members of the different traditions that went well beyond such a circle of people, since the Qur'an reflects a multiplicity of negotiations, modified appropriations, rewritings, and even decided rejections of earlier traditions.

2.1.1 Tanzīl

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The image evoked by *tanzīl*, "sending down," the vertical communication of the divine message, is by no means present in the Qur'an from the very beginning. ↳ The idea of the sending down of the Qur'an through the divine sender, which occurs for the first time in early Meccan suras (Q 97:1, 69:43, and 56:80), seems on first view rather to cohere with the older Arabian conception of the vertically conceived communication of supernatural wisdom associated with poetic inspiration.⁹ "God's sending down" could then be understood as a corrective of the common pre-Islamic imagination of supernatural verbal conveyances through inspiring spirits, jinns¹⁰ or satans, which "bring down" their wisdom, gleaned through eavesdropping on the higher spheres, to the individuals to be inspired, that is, to poets or soothsayers. The associating of the proclaimer to these communicators is rejected implicitly in the middle Meccan sura Q 26:221–222.:

*hal unabbi 'ukum 'alā man tanazzalū l-shayāṭīn
tanazzalu 'alā kullī affākin athīm*

Shall I let you know upon whom the satans descend?
They descend upon every sinning liar [i.e., poets]

Other early texts, such as Q 69:41–43, even turn explicitly against this insinuation of the proclaimer's inspiration on the model of the poets, whose "muses" in the ancient Arabian context are the inspiring demons. Their *qawl*, that is, their "speech," which is not guaranteed transcendentally, is contrasted to the word of God:

*wa-mā huwa bi-qawli shā 'irin qalīlan mā tu 'minūn
wa-lā bi-qawli kāhinin qalīlan mā tadhakkarūn
tanzīlun min rabbi l- 'ālamīn*

It is not the speech of a poet—how little you believe!
Nor that of a seer—how little indeed you recall!
It is rather a sending down from the Lord of the worlds.¹¹

So the sending down, set into this “pagan” context, should be understood at first in the sense of a “correction,” that is, an apologetically motivated replacement of an existing mythic configuration, not the result of theological reflection. It is notable, however, that *tanzīl* in later Qur’anic texts is also the mode of communication of the other scriptures, which are viewed collectively as *munazzal*, “sent down,” and represented as “excerpts” from a preexisting heavenly writing. In the later period, then, *tanzīl* is not a trait specific to the Qur’an.

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But was *tanzīl* ever a trait specific to the Qur’an, a mode of reception that only occurred in the Qur’an? The earliest *tanzīl* verses suggest the possibility that the image of sending down connects to older monotheistic conceptions rather than ↪ pagan ones. In Q 97:1, we read *innā anzalnāhu fī laylati l-qadr*, “Truly, we sent it down in the night of destiny,” a verse which, interpreting “it” in the sense of a determined text, would give rise to an interpretive aporia. The referent of —*hu*, “it,” cannot be identical to that which has just been recited; Q 97:1 refers to a new usage. It stands rather for an authoritative manifestation of the word of God, an analogue to the “embodiment” of the word of God in the neighboring traditions.¹² In the Nicene Creed it is said of Christ, “He descended from the heavens” (Greek *katelthonta ek tōn ouranōn*, Arabic *nazala mina l-samā*). The image of the sending down should then be considered in the early Meccan period to be a manifestation of the word of God that goes beyond the verbal-semantic proclamation and thus stands as a “vocal embodiment” alongside the teaching and guidance given with scripture. Although the Qur’an becomes manifest not through incarnation but rather as the verbally delineated word of God, it nonetheless shows distinct structural analogies to the word of God becoming man, to the incarnate logos (see p. 90–92). It has recently even led to discussions of the Qur’an in terms of “inlibration,” “the becoming book of God’s word.” This designation reflects a problematic understanding of the Qur’an, as will be shown below, and reveals how far apart we still are from a proper understanding of *al-qur’ān* and *al-tanzīl* in relation to “writing,” or in relation to a manifestation of God’s word that transcends writing.

2.1.2 Wahy

The mode whereby the message arrived to the proclaimer is presented in two distinct scenarios in the early texts. The first is a vision. Here, the message itself is designated as *wahy*, “inspiration,”¹³ and its authority is corroborated through the evocation of a divine communication, Q 53:4–12:¹⁴

in huwa illā wahyun yūhā
‘allamahu shadīdu l-quwā
dhū mirratin fa-stawā
wa-huwa bi-l-l-ufuqi l-a ‘lā
thumma danā fa-tadallā
fa-kāna qāba qawsayni aw adnā
fa-awḥā ilā ‘abdihi mā awḥā
mā kadhhaba l-fu ‘ādu mā ra ‘ā
a-fa-tumārūnahu ‘alā mā yarā

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↪ It [the reading] is but an inspiration inspired,
 taught to him by one immense in power
 of great prestige. Erected high he sat enthroned
 on the upper horizon,
 then he drew near and hung suspended
 and was two bows’ distance away or nearer
 and inspired in his servant what he inspired.
 The mind did not question what it saw.
 Do you dispute with him what he saw?

This scenario reflects in some details Isaiah’s vision in Isaiah 6:1–11:¹⁵

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; The whole earth is full of his

glory.” . . . Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I. Send me!” He said, “Go and tell this people . . .”

The historically embedded, dynastically dated first-person report of Isaiah’s calling as a Prophet contrasts with the Qur’anic report of the communication of divine teachings to the proclaimer, which is told in the third person and not set into historical time. The proclaimer’s vision is not reported for its own sake, but is embedded within an argument that sets out to authenticate the transcendent origin of the proclamation as such. But still, the two visions are related: in both scenes, the envisioned sits upright on the throne. The verb *istawā*, “to stand/sit upright,” is to be understood as an abbreviation for *‘alā l-‘arshi stawā*, “he sits upright on the throne” (Q 20:5, 13:2, 10:3, *passim*); *dhū l-‘arshi*, “he of the throne,” “the enthroned,” (Q 81:20), a frequent image in ancient Near Eastern and biblical tradition,¹⁶ may reflect the image of the enthroned *pantokrator*,¹⁷ which is frequent in Late Antique iconography and is present verbally in both Jewish and Christian liturgy.¹⁸ In both vision scenes, something is proclaimed: in the biblical text the praise of God articulated by the seraphim, in the Qur’anic text an inspiration to the proclaimer. But the two throne visions differ in some crucial characteristics: in contrast to Isaiah, the divine appearance in the Qur’an is not static, but seems rather to move toward the onlooker.¹⁹ The two prophet visions also part ways in further details: unlike the speech of God in Isaiah, the “inspiration,” *wahy*, in the Qur’an does not form part of a prophetic calling, even if the inspired speech is identical semantically with the proclamation whose transcendent source the report of the vision is meant to confirm. Above all, the biblical image of God undergoes decisive changes in the Qur’an that does not allow for anthropomorphic traits.

This is in tune with the report in the earlier sura Q 81:19–23 of the vision of a phenomenon that also appears on the horizon (*bi-l-ufuqi l-mubīn*), a report in which the proclamation is identified not as God’s immediate speech but rather as the “word” (*qawl*) of a “noble messenger with power before the enthroned” (*rasūlin karīm / dhī qūwatin ‘inda dhī l-‘arshi makīn*). Here too the entire proclamation is authorized through the vision of a supernatural phenomenon, but now of an angel, similar to the seraphim in Isaiah, one who is “closely related to the enthroned.”

The two vision scenes that evoke Isaiah’s vision (Q 81:19–23 and 53:4–12) are complemented by a third, immediately following Q 53:4–12, in which no divine communication is given to the proclaimer. Here, the experience of divine closeness is confined to the visual, the divine person manifesting himself only emblematically through a natural phenomenon, a bush changed in its appearance (Q 53:13–18)—an evident reference to the shrub figuring in the calling of Moses. All the three Qur’anic vision reports are clearly not immediate imitations of reality, but rather are “overdetermined,” charges with biblical textual evocations. At the same time, the biblical models are also “corrected”: in sura 81, an angel is interposed as speaker, so that God himself does not need to speak. In Q 53:4–12 a divine communication follows, but manifests itself, unlike in the biblical report, as *nonverbal* speech. Again unlike the message of the angel, which appears as “(understandable) speech,” *qawl*, God’s address is introduced as *wahy*, “(nonverbal) inspiration.” The striking fact that God speaks directly in none of the visions is no accident: the Qur’anic presentation here undertakes a “correction,” quite in concert with the theological tendencies of its time, of the anthropomorphism that dominated the biblical reports to various degrees. With *wahy*, unlike in the case of angelic speech, no clear communication is intended—but what exactly then is meant by *wahy*?

The word, already common in pre-Islamic poetry, indicates not an articulated message but rather one signaled through suggestive signs, as might exist for example in the chirping of birds or in an unreadable writing on a rock.²⁰ The Egyptian thinker Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid²¹ recontextualizes the Qur’anic *wahy*, which is reclaimed in the Islamic tradition to mean divine speech, with its ancient Arabic usage, and determines that it refers to a communication that is not yet verbalized, a “suggestion” or “inspiration” that can only become comprehensible through a “translation” achieved by the recipient. Everything that precedes this process of resetting into human speech remains inaccessible to the outsider, and thus to the researcher as well (this is the important point for the reformist thinker Abu Zaid), who must properly limit himself to the already verbalized speech of the Prophet, that is, to his “horizontal” communication with his hearers,²² dispensing with treating the transcendent side of the text. This “horizontal” manifestation of *wahy* can be understood—to proceed beyond Abu Zaid’s ideas—as part of a drama²³ that plays out between the proclaimer, the community as it forms, and which is reflected in the Qur’anic texts that have been “translated” by the proclaimer into verbal language. The Qur’an, it is true, is formally almost continuously the speech of a divine “I” or “we” to a Prophetic “you,” through which one can, however, “hear” the social situation that is involved in the address. In light of its dramatic communication to the hearers, the text is

polyphonic, in that some hearers and hearer groups enter the text alongside the proclaimer who is present as the addressee, or at least are spoken about in their absence.

Only in the post-Qur'anic period, after the death of the proclaimer, is *waḥy* generalized to become a designation of the Qur'anic message as a whole. With the proliferation of the dogma of the non-createdness of the Qur'an in the ninth/tenth century, the concept of *waḥy* grew massively in authority. But only in recent times has this authority come to operate so restrictively within conservative circles as to withdraw the Qur'an entirely from the access of analytic approach. Pre-canonically, that is, understood with Abu Zaid in the context of ancient Arabic, extra-Qur'anic evidence, *waḥy* means a preverbal inspiration that is far remote from its understanding in the later developed dogma of verbal inspiration.

2.1.3 Vigils as Frames of “Inspiration”

p. 72 The visions, of which there are three recorded in the Qur'an, are rare exceptions as a frame for the communication of messages.²⁴ There is a second scenario that presents the receipt of God's word less dramatically, namely, as the result of askesis, as new texts growing out of the nightly recitation of texts that were already in circulation. Here, the receipt of texts presents itself as resulting from the recitations performed by the proclaimer in his vigils, which must have been conducted with highly intense concentration. The most evident case is Q 73:1–9:

yā ayyuhā l-muzzammil
qumi l-layla illā qalilā
niṣfahu awi nquṣ minhu qalilā
aw zid 'alayhi wa-rattili l-qur'āna tartilā
innā sa-nulqī 'alayka qawlan thaqilā
inna nāshi 'ata l-layli hiya ashaddu waṭ'an
wa-aqwamu qilā
inna laka fī l-nahāri sabḥan ṭawilā
wa-dhkuri sma rabbika wa-tabattal ilayhi tabtilā
rabbu l-mashriqi wa-l-maghribi
lā ilāha illā huwa fa-ttakhidhhu wakilā

You who are enwrapped in your garment,
Stand the night, the large part of it,
Half of it, or take away some of it,
Or add something to it,
And chant the reading in clear chant.
We will charge you with a weighty speech.
In the beginning of the night impression are strongest and words are the most collected.
You have in the day long-lasting activity.
So remember the name of your Lord
and give yourself entirely to him.
He is the lord of the sunrise and the sunset.
There is no God but him! So take Him as a protector!²⁵

Although here we also find language related to divine visitation—God himself gives the proclaimer admonitions for the right disposition toward the reception of the messages and “gives to him heavy speech”—the new texts emerge not least through human effort, namely, through the recitation in vigils of texts already known. These vigils may have consisted of recitations of Psalm-like liturgical texts such as constituted by the early suras. The text itself reflects this close relation to the Psalms: verse 2, *qumi l-layla*, “stand the night,” recalls “at midnight I stand up, to praise you” (Psalms 119:62); verse 8, *wa-dhkur sma rabbika*, “recall the name of your Lord,” recalls “praise the name of the Lord” (Psalms 113:1), and verse 9, *rabbu l-mashriqi wa-l-maghribi*, “Lord of the sunnriser and sunset,” recalls “from rise to setting of the sun” (Psalms 50:1).

The early Qur'an consists to a large extent of paraphrases of psalms; it forms part of Late Antique psalmic piety which for the first time finds its place in the Arabic language, there being no Arabic translation of the Psalms extant before the ninth century.²⁶ At this early stage, the text is still very little interested in self-definition; the word *qur'an* itself at the beginning refers to the process of recitation rather than to the text

itself. Only with the growth of the community and the emergent necessity of self-assertion does the urgency of self-authorization arise, which, as we should expect, occurs on the one hand through self-distinction of the proclaimer against ancient Arabic predecessors, in particular the poets,²⁷ and on the other hand through contrast between the text and the preceding scriptures of the two older religions,²⁸ which are known in the form of scrolls or codices.

2.2 Al-Qur'ān: Communication of Texts from the Heavenly Scripture

In contrast to these scriptures, the Qur'an presents itself at first as a new formation in altered verbal dress, as a new message that follows, and confirms, the earlier scriptures. But above all, already in the earliest community, the conception took shape that the oral Qur'an stemmed from the "preserved tablet" that is with God, *al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz*, an original and heavenly writing;²⁹ cf. Q 85:21–22.: *bal innahu qur'ānun majīd / fī lawḥin maḥfūz*, "Truly, it is a glorious reading [*qur'ān*] / on a preserved tablet." The Qur'an thus has its origins and roots in a transcendent original writing, from which excerpts are "sent down," so to speak, as divine messages for recitation (Q 56:77–78: *innahu la-qur'ānun karīm / fī kitābin maknūn*, "Indeed, it is a generous reading [*qur'ān*] / preserved in a hidden writing").

Narratives in the later Meccan suras are often explicitly presented as elements of "the writing," *al-kitāb*. This writing is viewed as unchanging and extensive, perhaps a Qur'anic adaptation of the idea of the book of the heavenly register, which is found in the book of Jubilees, a Jewish apocryphon of the second century BCE, but which was a widely prevalent notion already in the ancient Near East.³⁰ The Qur'anic references to the writing, *al-kitāb*, presuppose a kind of archive, a store of narratives that exist already fixed in writing to be communicated ↵ to the proclaimer by the sender in the form of clearly defined pericopes, resembling the textual units read out in the services of Jews and Christians. In the Qur'anic proclamation, these pericopes are framed by introductory and closing parts and are set into a Qur'anic unit of recitation, a sura, which includes various sorts of texts.

Narrative communications from the heavenly scripture are at first clearly distinguished from less universal elements, such as debates over ephemeral issues of the community. The particular rank and ceremonial function of the narratives transmitted from biblical tradition but ultimately originating from the heavenly scripture is underlined by introductory formulas such as *wa-dhkur fī l-kitāb*, "recall in [the communication of] the scripture" (Q 19:16). It is only in a later phase, in Medina, that the entire message communicated to the community is considered to constitute "scripture," that is, that communal issues discussed in Qur'anic speech are themselves recognized as a part of salvation history, so that entire suras are counted as manifestations of *al-kitāb*.³¹

But even at this stage of development, the distinction between the message and its transcendent sources is maintained. The claim raised so energetically today in fundamentalist circles of a transcendent rank also for the *materially* present text, a rank that withdraws it from scholarly analysis, is not founded in the Qur'an. It can rather be connected to the dogma of the uncreatedness of the Qur'an that became widespread in the ninth/tenth century,³² according to which the Arabic language of the Qur'an does not stem from social convention but rather from divine imposition, so that exegesis of the Qur'an falls within strict theoretical limits of veritative, "literal" explanation. That the insistence on the transcendent character of the Qur'an as an exclusive feature of Islam is in no way an inherited tradition but rather something new, and that it represents a withdrawal into essentializing self-isolation that is obviously politically conditioned, is shown by the tradition of the Qur'an interpretation through the past 1,300 years. Throughout history, the Qur'an was in fact always of two natures: a scripture of transcendent origin and the inner-worldly focal point for a form of life, and thus the object of wide-ranging theological reflection.

Above all, to give a monopoly to the transcendent origin of the Qur'an contradicts the text itself, which insists on the shared origin of all three monotheistic scriptures and invites Jews and Christians, as older "possessors of scriptures," *ahl al-kitāb*, to acknowledge the shared genealogy of the three monotheistic religions, which according to the later evidence of the Qur'an all stem from one and the same transcendent archetype. The Qur'an here occupies a pioneering position, since, as William Graham emphasizes,³³ the concept of holy writings beyond ↵ one's own religion, which has become widely familiar only since the nineteenth century, is already self-evident in the Qur'an: countless verses speak not only of the heavenly writing, *kitāb*, but also of its forms of appearance already established in this world, the "writings," *kutub*, of other religions, the Jews and Christians.

The later Qur'an sketches a "scriptural community," a concept that is then thwarted by the process of canonization after the closure of the proclamation. But while the Qur'anic text itself stresses at great length its consubstantiality with the other scriptures, it nonetheless features unambiguously in later Islamic theology as the final manifestation of divine speech that perfects all other scriptures. Between the statements of the proclaimed Qur'an text and its later interpretation lies the break of canonization,³⁴ which grants a new predominance to the transcendent dimension. The historic-dialogic character of the Qur'an at the time of the proclaimer, a polyphonic religious conversation with and about others, becomes a univocal text after the death of the proclaimer, a divine monologue. In the context of the reading of the Qur'an as a Late Antique text, we therefore have to go back behind canonization.

Canonicity, which involves the social recognition of the already victorious community, imposes a substantially new reading. It no longer reflects the historical drama of engagement with others characterized by trial and error, but rather sees the scripture as a triumphant symbol of victory, even granting it the authority to unseat chronometrical time. If we follow the historian and cultural critic Aziz al-Azmeh, the canonical text not only raises the claim of eternal validity but is also structured a-historically.³⁵ Canonization is a reconfiguration, so to speak, from a sequence of speeches conditioned by time into an array of timeless individual texts. In place of the historically developing genesis of the text as it unfolds under the eyes of the analytical-historicizing reader, the reader of the canon beholds an original myth, which henceforth covers the text like an opaque screen: namely, the myth of the event, transcending history, of the granting of the scripture to the Prophet. Each individual or collective Qur'an recitation is thus a restaging of the event of revelation, in that it repeats mimetically the act of the physical-acoustic recording of the heavenly writing by the Prophet Muhammad. Thus the universalist character of the Qur'an is drowned out by the emphasis laid on its "Islamic character," its particularistic belonging to one single religious community exclusively, which is conveyed by the daily prayer ritual. Yet this cultic role of the Qur'an over the course of Islamic history was only one of several manifestations of the text, which was simultaneously present as a literary text, as a rhetorical model, and as a kind of score for artistically sophisticated recitations.³⁶

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2.3 Orality as Theologumenon

Like the other scriptures, the Qur'an emerged out of an extensive corpus of heterogeneous traditions, from which excerpts eventually crystallized into a coherent writing, a process which occurred through the proclamation to the emerging community. What distinguishes the Qur'anic situation is its specific milieu, in which scripture had already materialized into written codices and become a familiar phenomenon. As Nicolai Sinai has convincingly demonstrated,³⁷ the emerging Qur'an had to assert itself vis-à-vis Jewish-Christian conceptions of scripture, in order to set out its own claims to authority. It is surprising that in this process it was not the conception of a written manifestation of scripture that was followed, but a new concept, that of an "oral writing" was developed. Daniel Madigan first propounded the thesis that "nothing about the Qur'ān suggests that it conceives of itself as identical with the *kitāb* [i.e., the heavenly book],"³⁸ that is, in no phase of its development did the Qur'an pursue the objective of a closed written corpus. This claim of "an ontological difference between the recitation and its transcendent sources" is linked to certain conditions, as Sinai shows.³⁹ The first requirement was the consciousness of an essentially oral character as the goal of the Qur'an in its process of formation, independent of the occasional use of writing as a mnemotechnic aid. Secondly, convincing arguments were required to explain the absence of the conventional ceremonial frameworks that surrounded the revealed word of God in the neighboring cultures.

The community's consciousness of the special feature of Qur'anic mediality took shape gradually. It is striking that in the earliest suras, there is not yet explicit language about the divine source of the recitation. Clearly, some time was required before the revelation claim implicit in the Prophetic second-person address was perceived reflexively enough that the problem of the relation of the Qur'an to written models could arise. This development, which was at first gradual, is easily comprehensible in view of the Qur'anic beginnings. The earliest suras stand in an already pre-founded tradition, that of the Psalms; they thus existed in a genre of oral liturgical speech and required no explicit authorization.

The important step toward Qur'anic self-legitimation, toward the introduction of an explicit reference to authority in the texts, was required only later, toward the end of the early Meccan period, and in reaction to a challenge from outside. This can be deduced from verses such as Q 69:40–42:⁴⁰

innahu la-qawlu rasūlin karīm
 wa-mā huwa bi-qawli shā'irin qalīlan mā tu'minūn
 wa-lā bi-qawli kāhinin qalīlan mā tadhdhakkārūn

It is the speech of a noble messenger
 not the speech of a poet—how little you believe!
 Nor the speech of a seer—how little you recall!

An antagonistic “misreading” of the literary genre of the recitation, with implications about its particular type of inspiration, is “corrected,” through reference to its divine origin, verse 43: *tanzīlun min rabbi l-‘alamīn*, “A sending down from the lord of the worlds.”

This specific Qur’anic self-referentiality, which legitimizes speech through reference to its transcendent origin, “must thus be understood as having grown up successively out of the process of confrontation with the audience, whose expectations and views had to be convincingly addressed.”⁴¹

2.3.1 Strategies of Justification for the Orality of Scripture

The Qur’an itself confronts the problem of its non-written form and the lack of the paraphernalia of writing. Sinai points to the problematic already raised by Madigan: according to Madigan, the central problem in every attempt to interpret the concept of *kitāb* lies in the fact that the Qur’an understands itself on the one hand as “of a piece with carefully guarded, lavishly appointed, and scrupulously copied sacred codices and scrolls, while itself remaining open-ended, unwritten, and at the mercy of frail human memory.”⁴² According to Sinai, this tension can best be explained via “a need to balance the obvious situatedness of Muḥammad’s recitations with a strategic interest in imparting to them the glow of scripturality that was felt, by his audience, to be an indispensable concomitant of genuine revelations.”⁴³

The familiar complaint brought against the proclaimer by his opponents is brought to a point in the question in Q 25:32: *law lā nuzzila ‘alayhi l-qur’ānu jumlatan wāḥidatan*, “Why is the reading not sent down to him in one go, as a complete communication?” The incompleteness and situation-boundedness of the message were clearly perceived as defects by the hearers, which set these recitations apart from the conventional manifestations of God’s word, and which therefore had to be compensated for through additional forms of authentication, so that they might better correspond to the familiar models. These had to do with writing, since revelation in the Jewish and Christian context was tied to the concept of a written corpus.

p. 78 Sinai sees this compensation realized in a group of early suras, which assert a connection to the heavenly book as a form of authorization. Thus, in Q 80:11–16, the Qur’anic communications are presented as a kind of excerpt from the heavenly original text:

kallā innahu tadhkirah
 fa-man shā’a dhakarah
 fī ṣuḥufin mukarrama
 marfū’atin muṭahharah
 bi-aydi safarah
 kirāmin bararah⁴⁴

No indeed, it is a reminder
 —Who so desires may remember it—
 inscribed in hallowed scrolls
 sublime immaculate
 by the hands of scribes
 noble, virtuous.

The expectations of the hearers could only be fulfilled in this way because the “heavenly writing” as an emblem of authority was a firm component of the differentiated spiritual conceptions in Late Antiquity. Karel van der Toorn, who has retraced the long process of the Bible’s formation as a corpus characterized by scribal culture, points to the conception, common since the books of Enoch (third century BCE) and Daniel (ca. 160 BCE), of the heavenly source of writing, which is accessible to individual Prophets through visions.⁴⁵

Such efficacious older traditions concerning heavenly writings as the sources of revelation should also—the real, physical, manifestations of writings in the neighboring traditions notwithstanding—have played a role in the Qur’anic authorization of the message through heavenly writing. The heavenly source of the Qur’anic message is elsewhere designated as a “tablet” (Q 85:22) and somewhat later, in the middle Meccan period, even as “the mother of the script,” *umm al-kitāb* (Q 43:4), conceptions which may ultimately go back to the book of Jubilees. This apocryphal work,⁴⁶ which posits a heavenly tablet written by divine instruction on which all wisdom and the events of salvation history are recorded, had an intense reception in Late Antiquity and brings to a point the complex conceptions of writing that are reflected in various late books of the Bible.

p. 79 2.3.2 Qur’ān versus Kitāb

What is the relationship between the performed *qur’ān* and the heavenly *kitāb*? After the two had long been kept neatly separate from each other, the dichotomy between the Qur’anic recollections from the *kitāb* (i.e., biblical recollections) and other types of Qur’anic proclamation increasingly softens in the late Meccan suras: *al-kitāb* becomes the designation of a heavenly “mode of storage,” as Sinai formulates it, while *al-qur’ān* comes to refer to earthly realization. But the two are never treated as wholly identical, since the proclaimer does not receive excerpts from the *kitāb* in an unchanged form, but rather these excerpts are adapted to the particular needs of the recipients in the course of their transmission. Sinai stresses this difference, which the Qur’an itself reclaims as a particular hermeneutic coding, even designating it with a particular technical term: *tafṣīl*. The locus classicus for this perception is Q 41:2–3:

tanzīlun mina l-raḥmāni l-raḥīm
kitābun fuṣṣilat āyātuḥu qur’ānan ‘arabiyan
li-qawmin ya‘lamūn

A sending down from the Merciful, the Compassionate,
 a scripture, whose verses are made distinct
 an Arabic reading, for a people who have knowledge.

According to Sinai, *tafṣīl* thus implies a kind of paraphrase of the *kitāb*, by which the texts are adapted to the horizon of the hearers.⁴⁷ This observation also throws light on the fact, often perceived with irritation, that individual stories are recalled in more than one place and in differing versions in the Qur’an. In light of the *tafṣīl* hermeneutic, these differing narratives can be seen as successive repetitions of a single *kitāb* pericope, which are formulated anew multiple times and adapted to changing communal situations. Sinai then states: “From the qur’ānic perspective, then, the celestial scripture cannot be given to man in any other shape than *mufaṣṣalan* (Q 6:114). The *kitāb* is partially accessible, but never available: it can be tapped via divine revelation, but due to the need to tailor such revelations to a specific target audience, the *kitāb* as such is at no one’s disposal, not even in the form of excerpts.”⁴⁸ Thus, in late Meccan time, the orality of the holy script assumed the rank of a Qur’anic article of belief, a theologumenon—a phenomenon that is unknown in the case of any other scripture.

p. 80 This being said, the basic conception of the possibility of adapting scripture to the changing situations of the recipients is not specifically Qur’anic, but is already a biblical stereotype. The textual growth of the Bible also incorporates the advent of new expectations in the addressees. Multiple biblical books appeared that retold things already known but provided new aspects to the subject. James Kugel even sees this possibility of “self-actualization” as one of the principles of the Bible’s development. The Qur’an, with its retelling of biblical stories, sets itself in this tradition, which was already established in the development of the Bible.⁴⁹ Indeed, it puts this praxis into the service of its own oral mediality. Orally communicated versions of the biblical stories are more flexible than written texts; they allow for back-references and even, on the occasion of the renewed performance of an already preached text, of clarifying expansions, a kind of oral glossing.

Only in Medina are there critical reflections on the medium of sacred scripture in human hands.⁵⁰ The members of the two older religions are now perceived as competitors vying with the Qur’anic community for the inheritance of the monotheistic tradition, which until that point was available to all, and was not assigned to particular confessions. It is in this function that the members of the older religions in the late Meccan period are designated as “possessors of scripture, *ahl al-kitāb*, in their function as “rivals in a contest of inheritance,” making claims on the basis of their writings as a kind of “title deed.” Their first

mention in Q 29:46 already stands in the context of a virtual conflict, which can only be pursued through “fair dispute”: *wa-lā tujādilū ahla l-kitābi illā bi-llatī hiya aḥsanu*, “Do not dispute with the people of the scripture, except in a way that is seemly!” This first designation of the members of other religions as *ahl al-kitāb* should be surprising, since it seems to evoke a characteristic also shared by the Qur’anic community. Since there is no disparaging connotation in this quotation, the expression may reproduce a self-designation of the Jews and/or Christians, which perhaps was linked to their most important distinction: Jewish-Christian scripturalism against the Qur’anic orality of God’s word. In contrast to the scripture that was claimed by these others and reified *materialiter*, the Qur’an remained a “virtual sacred script” at the time of the Prophet, an orally preserved message.

2.4 Late Meccan Reflections on Heavenly and Earthly Scriptures

2.4.1 Announcements and Confirmations of Revelation

p. 81 The late Meccan suras attest to a greater degree of attention paid to the function and significance of writing. Exegesis now comes to the foreground. The idea of ﷻ God’s people, which was already developed in the middle Meccan period, and which implied the idea that election is expressed through the communication of scripture, becomes the key point of a new discourse: the reflection about one’s own role in the “scripture,” that is, the status and function of the continuously unfolding or already unfolded communications of the heavenly “writing.” In view of the expanding circle of hearers, which seem to also have included members of the neighboring religions, these communications had to be reflected on anew. This reflection is mirrored in the late Meccan period not only in later “corrections,” that is, additions to older suras, but also in a critique of the handling of writing of the earlier possessors of scripture, whose idealized role comes into doubt in this phase.

The Qur’anic sign theology, according to which God manifests his presence in creation and intext,⁵¹ is refined, so that the successive oral communication of transcendentally written pericopes adapted to the respective situations of the hearers comes to be understood as a specifically Qur’anic privilege—this is quite different from the scriptures of the Jews and Christians, which are presented as having been revealed all at once.

In the late Meccan period, the sura structures become stereotyped to such a degree that a particular typus develops for the sura’s beginning: the “announcement of revelation,”⁵² a form that occurs only twice in the middle Meccan suras (suras 26 and 27).⁵³ As a rule, it correlates with a later mention of scripture, a “confirmation of revelation,” that regularly introduces the sura’s closing part. With only six exceptions, all late Meccan suras begin—either implicitly or explicitly deictically⁵⁴—with an introduction that is related to scripture. This incipit sets the tone, so to speak, for the further course of the text, and is referred to again at the close of the sura.

p. 82 One should perhaps imagine the frequently deictic announcement to have been underscored by gestures. In any case, a ceremonial significance comes to attach itself to this stereotyped beginning, which first becomes frequent in the late Meccan suras. Their introduction authorizes what follows as a speech of transcendent origin, and this is as a rule underlined again by the closing confirmation of revelation. That the recited text is thus itself understood as “signs” or a “sign system” seems to be confirmed by the initiatory naming of letters or letter combinations in the form of minimal textual units.⁵⁵ The majority of all late Meccan ﷻ suras that are introduced by references to writing also begin with detached letter names, such as for example *ṣād*, *alif lām rā*, etc. Although there is no consensus in the tradition or in Western research about the function of these letters, their interpretation as representing the smallest elements of the acoustic performance of the word of God seems to be the most convincing. More explicitly, this understanding of the text as signs, which sets before the listener/ reader the epistemic task of decoding, is evinced by its frequent designation as the “signs of scripture,” *āyāt al-kitāb*. As in Q 12:1–2:⁵⁶

alif lām rā’ tilka āyātu l-kitābi l-mubīn
innā anzalnāhu qur’ānan ‘arabīyan la ‘allakum ta’qulūn

Alif lam ra. Those are the signs of the clear scripture.
We send it down to be an Arabic reading,
so that you may understand.

The notion of signs of writing is supplemented by the further sign dimension of the hearers' native tongue,⁵⁷ through which knowledge ('aql) will be enacted. The frequency of the description of the *qur'ān* as "Arabic" seems to allow further conclusions: here clearly a transformation is attested, of a universal *kitāb* into a sensorily, aurally perceptible manifestation that serves to communicate the message but exceeds the semantics of the proclamation as something new and unique. In these verses, the Qur'an assumes a new dimension as a transcendent communication, which approaches a hypostasis, an "embodiment," in this case sonic, of the word of God. Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid has spoken in this connection of a "trans-formation" of God's word into the form of the Arabic language.⁵⁸

At the conclusion of the sura, in Q12:111, the intention standing behind the narration of biblical stories is named:

la-qad kāna fī qaṣaṣihim 'ibratun li-ūlī l-albābi mā kāna ḥadīthan yuftarā wa-lākin taṣdīqan li-lladhī bayna yadayhi wa-taḥṣīla kulli shay'in wa-hudan wa-raḥmatan li-qawmin yu'minūn

In the telling of them is a lesson to those possessed of minds. It is no story that has been invented, but rather a confirmation of what came before it, a clear explication of all things and a guidance and mercy for a people who believe.

p. 83 The written signs confirm the message of the earlier revelations (*taṣdīq*); they set out their message as adapted for the respective proclamation situations (*taḥṣīl*)⁵⁹ and teach those with understanding (*ūlī l-albāb*).

The introductory announcement of revelation and closing confirmation of revelation correlate also in sura 14, which in its opening verses (1–2) raises the high claim of leading the community out of the condition of ignorance into that of insight:

alif lām rā' kitābun anzalnāhu ilayka li-tukhrija l-nāsa mina l-ẓulumāti ilā l-nūri

Alif lam ra. A scripture, which we have sent down upon you, so that you may lead men from darkness to light.

The initial pronouncement gains further pathos through the following hymnic recollection: *allāhu lladhī lahu mā fī l-samawāti wa-mā fī l-arḍi*, "It is God, to whom what is in heaven and earth belong" (verse 2). This entails an expressive statement about the transcendent dimension of the two works of creation: transcendent writing and cosmos. Yet, despite this sublime origin, scripture should serve the pragmatic goal of the teaching of men. The closing confirmation (verse 52) thus declines to offer an affirmation of the transcendent character, underlining instead the appellatory character of the message for those with understanding (*ūlī l-albāb*).

hādha balāghun li-l-nāsi wa-li-yundharū bihi wa-li-ya'lamū annamā huwa ilāhun wāḥidun wa-li yadhakkārū ūlī l-albāb

This is a proclamation to the people. Let them be warned thereby, and recognize that He is but one God, so that those possessed of minds remember.

In sura 28, the announcement and confirmation of revelation are motivated apologetically (verses 1–3):

*ṭa sīn mīm
tilka āyātu l-kitābi l-mubīn
natlū 'alayka min naba'i Mūsā wa-Fir'awna bi-l-ḥaqqi li-qawmin yu'minūn*

Ta sin mim.

Those are the signs of the clear scripture.

We recite to you the reports about Moses and Pharaoh in truth,
to the people who believe.

p. 84 In this sura opening, the intermediary role of the proclaimer is confirmed alongside the authenticity of the scripture, whereas at the sura's end he is exonerated of the accusation of authorial interference; the sura's conclusion begins thus (verses 85–88):

inna lladhī faraḡa ‘alaya l-qur’āna la-rādduka ilā ma ‘ādīn
qul rabbi a ‘lamu man jā ‘a bi-l-huda wa-man huwa fī ḡalālīn mubīn
wa-mā kunta tarjū an yulqā ilayka l-kitābu illā raḡmatan min rabbika
fa-lā takūnanna ḡahīran li-l-kāfirīn
wa-lā yuḡuddunnaka ‘an āyāti llāhi ba ‘da idh unzilat ilayka

He who ordained the Qur’an upon you will bring you back to a home place. Say: my Lord knows better, who brings right guidance and who is in clear error.

You had not expected that scripture would come down to you,

it happens only through mercy of your lord.

So do not be a supporter to the unbelievers

And do not turn yourself away from the signs of God, after they have been sent down to you.⁶⁰

This reflection over the status of scripture as a text world that opens itself to the receivers not through their own witnessing (Q 3:44), or through their appropriation of wisdom (Q 18:26–27), but only through inspiration is also thematized elsewhere; cf. Q 29:48.

That the proclaimer himself perceives signs of creation and of scripture as inextricably linked is shown in Q 45:1–6:

ḡā mīm
tanzīlu l-kitābi mina lladhī l- ‘azīzi l-ḡakīm
inna fī l-samawāti wa-l-arḡi la-āyātīn li-l-mu ‘minīn
wa-fī khalḡikum . . .
tilka āyātu llāhi natlūhā ‘alayka

Ha mim.

A sending down of scripture from God, the powerful and wise.

In the heaven and the earth are signs for the believers,

And in your creation . . .

Those are signs of God that we recite for you.

The neglect of the signs, which are not specified, is set into a description of hell as a reason for punishment, which is followed by a doxology that closes the sura; Q 45:35:

p. 85

dhālikum bi-annakumu ttakhadhtum āyāti llāhi huquwan wa-ḡharratkumu l-ḡayātu l-dunyā

That, because you have taken God’s signs lightly and this lowly world has beguiled you.⁶¹

The sign value of scripture is strengthened several times by the sign character of creation. Thus, there is the complaint in the closing part of sura 29, which begins exceptionally without *kitāb*-introduction, that the unbelievers require “[wonder] signs,” even while the recitation itself consists of clear signs that can be understood by knowledgeable hearers; Q 29:50–51:

wa-qālū law lā unzila ‘alayhi āyātun min rabbihi qul innamā l-āyātu ‘inda llāhi wa-innamā anā nadhīrun mubīn

a-wa-lam yakfihim annā anzalnā ‘alayka l-kitāba yutlā ‘alayhim

They say: if only a sign came down to him from his Lord!

Say: the signs are with God; I am only a clear warner.

Is it not enough for them that we have sent down the scripture upon you, so that it can be read out to them?

Miracle signs and written signs are indicated through a homonym in Arabic, as in Syriac,⁶² which is a shibboleth for the unbelievers, and at the same time a hermeneutic challenge for the pious. In the same sura, and for the first time in the Qur'an, we find mention of the existence of present hearers who are also in possession of scripture, with whom a disputation is clearly underway; Q 29:46:

wa-lā tujādilū ahla l-kitābi illā bi-llati hiya aḥsanu

illā lladhīna ḡalamū minhū

wa-qūlū amannā bi-lladhī unzila ilaynā wa-unzila ilaykum

wa-ilāhunā wa-ilāhukum wāḥidun

wa-naḥnu lahu muslimūn

Do not dispute with the people of the scripture except in a seemly way—save those who do wrong —

and say: we believe in what has been sent down to us and to you,

your God and our God are one, and to Him we submit.

Although the exhortation does not allow us to draw precise conclusions about the concrete content of the exegetical controversy, it transpires that the previous imagination of being able to deal with biblical tradition autonomously has begun to totter.

p. 86 2.4.2 Decryption of Signs as a Touchstone among the Receivers of Scripture

While the signs (āyāt) still serve in these texts as pointers toward insights into the truthfulness and divine origin of one's own scripture,⁶³ they elsewhere become the object of struggle between religious parties. Sura 11 begins:

alif lām rā' kitābun uḥkimat āyātuhu

thumma fuṣṣilat min ladun ḡakīmīn khabīr

Alif lam ra. A writing, of which the signs are set right,

and then made distinct from on high by one wise and knowing.

The hymnic statement is relativized at the beginning of the sura's close, which is not a confirmation of revelation of the Qur'anic message but rather confirms the revelation character of earlier messages, namely, the scripture of Moses. The message to Moses has triggered dissent, Q 11:110:

wa-la-qad ataynā Mūsā l-kitāba fa-khtulifa fīhi

wa-law lā kalimatun sabaqat min rabbika la-quḡiya baynahum

wa-innahum la-fī shakkin minhu murīb

We gave Moses the scripture, and disputes arose concerning it.

Were it not for a prior word from your Lord

judgment would have been passed upon them.

They are in perplexing doubts concerning it.⁶⁴

Sura 10 begins similarly with an announcement of scripture signs; Q 10:1:

alif lām rā' tilka āyātu l-kitābi l-ḡakīm

Alif lam ra. Those are signs of the wise scripture.

Here too, the closing part of Q 10:93 makes reference not to the Qur'anic message but to the benefactions granted to the Israelites, and the same disunity is stated:

la-qad bawwa 'nā banī Isrā 'īla mubawwa 'a šidqin
wa-razaqnāhum mina l-ṭayyibāti
fa-mā khtalafū ḥattā jā 'ahumu l- 'ilmu
inna rabbaka yaqḍī baynahum yawma l-qiyāmati
fī-ma kānū fīhi yakhtalifūn

p. 87

We have given to the Israelites an abode befitting the just
and supplied them with good things.
They quarreled not until knowledge came to them.
Your Lord will judge between them on the day of resurrection,
about that over which they quarreled.

The dissent is not named explicitly, but in terms of religious history it is probably best to think here of the Jewish-Christian schism, which also resonates in the polemical commentary on the story of Jesus in sura 43.⁶⁵ What is important is that the historical fact of the splitting of the earlier communities on account of disagreement over the meaning of given signs compromises them as predecessors of the community. The new community must rely on itself to cope with its problems. They now confront the hermeneutic problem that persists until the end of the Meccan period, that of communicating the signs probatively to those who do not yet believe: sura 30, which begins without a *kitāb* introduction, contains the passage Q 30:52–53:

fa-innaka lā tusmi 'u l-mawtā wa-lā tusmi 'u l-ṣumma l-du 'ā 'a
idhā wallaw mudbirīn
wa-mā anta bi-hādi l- 'umyi 'an ḍalālātihim
in tusmi 'u illā man yu 'minu bi-āyātīnā fa-hum muslimūn

You will not make the dead hear, nor make the deaf hear the call,
if they turn and walk away.
Nor can you guide the blind away from their error.
You will only make hear those who believe in our signs
and submit themselves.

The passage closes with a controversy over the much disputed Late Antique textual type of the parable (*mathal*), in which the Qur'anic speaker recognizes a particular medium for authorization of the message, but which is a weak point of his rhetoric in the eyes of the opponents. Q 30:58–60 states:⁶⁶

wa-la-qad ḍarabnā li-l-nāsi fī hādhā l-qur 'āni min kulli mathalin,
wa-la 'in ji 'tahum bi-āyatīn, la- yaqūlanna lladhīna kafarū,
in antum illā mubṭilūn
ka-dhālika yaṭba 'u llāhu 'alā qalbi lladhīna lā ya 'lamūn
fa-šbir inna wa 'da llāhi ḥaqqun
wa-lā yastakhiffanka lladhīna lā yūqinūn

p. 88

We have struck for people in this reading all kinds of parables. But when you bring them a sign/verse, those who disbelieve speak:

you only put forward what is preposterous.

So does God stamp the hearts of those who do not understand.

Have patience, the promise of God is true.

And be not disheartened by those who are not convinced.

Resignation is expressed even more drastically in sura 13, although the beginning confirms both the character of scripture as revelation and the election of the proclaimer, Q13:1:

alif lām rā` tilka āyātu l-kitābi

wa-lladhī unzila ilayka min rabbika l-ḥaqqu

Alif lam ra. Those are the signs of the scripture.

What was sent down by your Lord to you is the truth.

The close of the sura, which again confirms the sending of the proclaimer, also complains of the stubborn unbelief of the opponents, who are not impressed even by the long history of punishment sentences. Even exceedingly clear signs such as miracles remain unnoticed, as Q13:30–31 states:

ka-dhālika arsalnāka fī ummatin qad khalat min qablihā umamun

li-tatluwa `alayhimu lladhī awḥaynā ilayka

wa-hum yakfurūna bi-l-raḥmāni . . .

wa-law anna qur`ānan suyyirat bihi l-jibālu

aw quṭi `at bihi l-arḍu aw kullima bihi l-mawtā

*bal li-llāhi l-amru jamī`an*⁶⁷

We have sent you to a nation, before whom many nations have passed away,

so that you may recite to them what has been inspired in you,

while they do not believe in the Merciful . . .

Even if it were a reading wherewith mountains are moved from their place,

or the earth is cut into pieces, or the dead are spoken to. Indeed, this entire matter is God's.

The signs themselves are not thrown into question by the failed handling of scripture by the earlier peoples, nor by the doubt of those without understanding. Nor are they shaken in their truth value by the “possessors of scripture,” who appear on the stage later in Medina, and whose polemic brings to light the existence of divergences between the old and new scriptures.⁶⁸ Already in Mecca, one sees a ↵ softening of the erstwhile firm conviction in the persuasive power of the scripture, as the sura dispenses in its final part with the positive confirmation of revelation and replaces it with the mention of the scripture of Moses with its schismatic consequences, thus sending out a negative signal. Though this reorientation does not affect the announcement of revelation at the start of the suras, which remains stable due to its ceremonial function, the previously prevailing ring composition of the late Meccan suras is broken. This maceration of the composition, alongside the replacement of the narrative section by a discursive middle part, which also occurs in the late Meccan period, is a further step toward a freer, or at least less predictable, sura structure.

But faith in scripture as such remains unshaken. The scriptural signs of God are presented as beyond measure. Q31:27 takes up an idea also familiar from the Bible:

wa-law annamā fī l-arḍi min shajaratin aqlāmun

If all the trees of the earth were writing pens

and the sea [full of ink] extended so that beyond it were seven more seas, still the words of God would not be exhausted; God is powerful and wise.

2.5 Inlibration or Qur’anic Logos Theology?

The designation reserved for the members of the older religions, *ahl al-kitāb*, literally “people of scripture,” which already occurs once in a neutral sense in a late Meccan sura (Q 29:50), becomes in Medina an expression of a decidedly critical perception of the Jewish and Christian treatment of scripture, to which is now ascribed an exclusivist and particularist bias that eliminates the new believers.

The very concept *ahl al-kitāb* has long been treated as an ideal starting point for interreligious dialogue.⁶⁹ The essential commonality between the three religions seemed to lie in their shared access to scriptures with a monotheistic message. According to this paradigm, Muhammad becomes a figure corresponding to Christ, in that both brought a message that would become a scripture.⁷⁰ But the fact that this analogy does not hold has long been recognized. What should instead be seen as analogous, as Stefan Wild and Daniel Madigan have stressed, are ↵ Christ and the Qur’an.⁷¹ Madigan, who follows the traces of this insight through early Islamic theological history investigating the concept *kitāb*, “writing,” arrives to the image of the Qur’an as a hypostasis of God’s word.

But what we still lack is an investigation of the Qur’anic proclamation itself as to development of the understanding of the received word of God. The question arises to what extent the reception of the message was understood already by the community itself through the categories of Jewish or Christian logos-theology. The Qur’an was constituted in Late Antiquity, a period in which scripture-discourse had become highly differentiated. Alongside scripture, other forms of the appearance of God’s word had manifested themselves by this time, such as wisdom, Sophia, or the “word,” *memra* (Aramaic for logos), that functions to communicate divine knowledge to men. The perception of the divine logos, *memra*, at work in the world, which was upheld in early synagogue Judaism, but which—as a “second power in heaven,”⁷²—was to draw heavy polemics from the rabbis, in Christian tradition is interpreted Christologically, most emphatically in the prologue of John.⁷³ The word of God, embodied in the logos or even incarnate in Christ, thus takes its place alongside the divine self-communication through scripture. This increase in complexity in the understanding of the word of God is reflected not only in the later treatment of the Qur’an, whose formal recitation in the Friday communal worship stands in the position of the Eucharist of the Christian service,⁷⁴ but also already in the genesis of the Qur’an itself. It has left behind clear traces, above all in the much-recited prologue to sura 55.⁷⁵

2.5.1 Preexistence of the Qur’ān?

2.5.1.1 Traces of a Logos Theology in the Qur’an

This prologue (Q 55:1–4) presents a praise of the Qur’an as the preexistent word of God, in a solemn-pathetic tone that is unexampled elsewhere in the entire text corpus. With its linguistic style and its theological claim, it raises the expectation that an authoritative pronouncement from the older traditions is being answered.

al-Raḥmān

‘allama l-qur’ān

khalaqa l-insān

‘allamahu l-bayān

The compassionate,
He taught the reading,
He created man

The word *qur'ān* in verse 2 raises problems. It cannot mean the later-achieved text corpus, nor can it mean the praxis of recitation. That something else is intended here, something that transcends history and reality, comes out already from the naming of *qur'ān* before the naming of the act of creation. The power of divine-human communication that is at work here shows clear similarity to logos conceptions, which present this power as an intermediary between the divine and human spheres.

The particularly solemn form of the sura prologue is striking. It may have originated in a competitive situation, through the necessity of offering an equivalent to an already available and similarly outstanding text. Such a theological key text within the Christian tradition, dedicated to the same phenomenon of the word of God, is the prologue to the Gospel of John (Jo 1:1–5). As Daniel Boyarin has shown,⁷⁶ this text reflects a wisdom literature midrash on the creation report preserved in the Targumim, which tells of the *memra* that descends into the world in order to strengthen the bond between God and man, but which fails in this and. In the Christian version of the prologue it is only able to accomplish its work through incarnation.

In the beginning was the word,
And the word was by God, and God was the word.
The same was in the beginning by God
All things are created through it, without it nothing is created.
In it was life, and life was the light of men.
Light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not taken it. . . .
He was in the world, the world arose through him, but they rejected him.

A short comparison of the texts yields no truly consistent parallels: both prologues present the word of God as preexistent—in the sura this is named simply as *qur'ān*, and is therefore not terminologically distinct from the Qur'an text itself. But the *qur'ān* possesses no power of creation, which belongs only to God. Rather, God manifests himself in the communication of wisdom insofar as it is “taught” (verse 2); the Qur'anic logos thus appears, not unlike the Torah in earlier Jewish tradition, in the form of the revelation. Its fate among men is not disclosed, but there is no indication either of its failure. The failure of the logos attested by the older traditions is avoided in the Qur'anic view through divine intervention. For the addressees are prepared for its reception, as shown by verse 4, which displays yet another trace of the logos: *'allamahu l-bayān*, “he taught him understanding.” This capability of understanding, which is granted to man, enables him to receive the logos. At the same time, it lends plausibility to the Qur'anic conception of the world as a sign system that man must read—a vision that recalls Philo's conception of the *kosmos noetos*, the archetypal world of ideas, which has its origin in logos and is made amenable to understanding through logos.⁷⁷ Thus on the one hand logos is hypostasized as *qur'ān*, as authoritative power that manufactures human-divine communication, and on the other hand logos is represented through the capability of understanding given to men by God, his *bayān*, through which the world becomes intelligible. A very particular significance thus comes to adhere to language, which again recalls Philo's logos teaching. “Philo idealizes language more than man. For him, the ideal language does not at all belong to the realm of createdness. It rather seems to have preexisted with God Himself.”⁷⁸ In the Qur'an, this dimension of the logos is represented through *bayān*, which oscillates in meaning, and which can mean “clear speech,” as well as “faculty of understanding.”

Certainly, the thrust of the sura prologue is different from that of the Gospel's prologue. It does not aim to raise the logos up to a “second power in the heaven,” as rabbinic polemic found objectionable in the early Jewish logos-teaching. Rather, the Qur'anic logos manifests itself in divine teaching and in the epistemic proliferation of creation. The Late Antique and Qur'anic conceptions of the working of the logos on the world are thus different. Yet it should not be overlooked that sura 55 engages with logos conceptions and reinterprets them in the light of the new manifestation of God's word. As the text treats the working of the logos from a new perspective, not as failure but rather as divinely prepared success, it inverts the negative prehistory of the Johannite incarnation. Since the logos is not dismissed but rather adopted, the theological necessity of incarnation is invalid. Although the logos given by the *qur'ān* does not possess far-reaching powers in comparison to the Jewish-Christian equivalent, it is still the logos that successfully penetrates the world and works in it. This initial investigation of a single text makes the exploration of the Qur'an's self-referentiality for further logos references appear a promising avenue of research.⁷⁹

2.5.2 Inlibration?

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What could be set in parallel, then, both in terms of the theological history and in terms of the Qur'anic pronouncements themselves, is the becoming-human of ↪ God's word in Christ, and the "becoming Qur'an" of God's word. The historian of philosophy Harry A. Wolfson attempted to bring the relationship between these two to a point with the neologism "inlibration," which he coined for this purpose.⁸⁰ The Qur'an would then be the embodiment in book form of God's word, just as Christ is the word's embodiment in the flesh. For the historian of philosophy, this abbreviation will possess particular suggestive power. At least on first view, it seems that later reflections over the eternality or createdness of the Qur'an cannot be imagined in isolation from the Christological challenge. Already soon after the death of the Prophet, the recording of the Qur'an on the "preserved tablet" appeared to some traditionists to have been accomplished *before* the creation of the world;⁸¹ but it was only later, after the objections voiced by the rational theologians of the Mu'tazila, who felt the closeness to Christology to be a threat and who were partisans of the createdness of the Qur'an, that the preexistence of the Qur'an as a divine attribute became a precondition for correct belief in Sunni theology.⁸² And it was only later still that its eternality became dogma.⁸³

But even outside of theological speculation, the parallels between the becoming-human and "becoming Qur'an" of God's word go even further: the philosopher of religion Seyyed Nasr writes that "the medium of the divine message in Christianity is the Virgin Mary, while in Islam it is the soul of the Prophet,"⁸⁴ thus making a parallel between the virginity of Mary and the traditionally maintained illiteracy of the Prophet: just as Mary bore a child although she "knew no man" and God's work was thus accomplished, so according to Islamic tradition Muhammad is presented as wholly untouched by previously acquired knowledge of scripture. *Al-nabī al-ummī* (Q 7:157–158) is thus understood as "illiterate prophet,"⁸⁵ so that the Qur'an can be recognized as a purely divine work.

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Despite these incontestable parallels, which were already recognized in early Islamic history, some skepticism regarding the designation "inlibration" is required, as Madigan has already pointed out. The designation not only reads Islamic phenomena through a Christian lens, transferring onto Islam the myth-imprinted Christian thought figure of the divine assumption of corporeality, despite the fact that Islam is broadly amythical and myth-critical. Even more misleading is the fact that the suggestion of an entelechy "book" or "writing" leads wrongly to the assumption that "while the Christians believe in a living, active and personal word of God, the Muslims have only a closed canon, dead ↪ letters."⁸⁶ This sounds something like the Pauline polemic against the "dead letters" of the law, which are contrasted to the "heart writing" of the Christian Bible. But it is just such a writing of the heart that is reclaimed for Islam by the Muslim religious philosopher Seyyed Nasr, in arguing for the analogy Christ-Qur'an, when he claims that the medium of the divine message in Christianity is the Virgin Mary, while in Islam it is the soul of the Prophet.⁸⁷ We cannot deny in substance the analogy Christ-Qur'an that already struck some early Islamic theologians, whose verdict *makhlūq*, "created," can be recognized as a negative echo to the Nicene *genēthenta ou poiēthenta*, Arabic *mawlūd ghayr makhlūq*, "born, not created."⁸⁸ But the term "Qur'an" must be filled out differently. Thus, Seyyed Nasr does not speak explicitly of the Qur'an's manifestation as a book as analogue to Christ. This would scarcely be conceivable for a Muslim, because the written character of the Qur'an is only one, and by no means the central, manifestation of the divine message. The central manifestation is instead the recitation, performed by heart. What must be maintained then is the analogy of logos embodiment: the incarnated word of God in Christianity and the acoustically present word of God in Islam.

One cannot capture the dimension of significance of logos in the Qur'an if one reduces the Qur'an to its message. Hartmut Stegemann notes: "Bible and Qur'an are not merely 'holy scriptures'; beyond that, in both religions, they are the 'word of God,' but in quite different senses."⁸⁹ These differing "self-understandings in Islam and Christianity" that are illuminated by Stegemann cannot be reduced to contrasting statements: "For Islam, the Qur'an is the *direct word of God*, formulated by Allah himself and communicated only to the Prophet Muhammad. The Qur'an is a gift from God, which guides men rightly and enables them to lead their lives according to the directives of God. For Christians on the other hand, their Bible is only indirectly the word of God. It becomes the word of God in the sermon. . . . Apart from that, the Bible is at the same time the word of humans. . . . The Bible is testimony . . . on a scale that is personal."⁹⁰ Here, the evidence of the Qur'an itself is ignored, which never speaks of a pre-formulation by God (according to Stegemann, "Allah"). The Qur'an not only is "writing" and "word of God in the sense of right

guidance,” but also claims for itself, already during the course of the proclamation, the status of a unique, sensorily perceptible *self-manifestation* of God’s word—its own reception of logos theology.

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Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid has offered a challenging contribution to the clarification of the Christian–Islamic analogy, which, as Andreas Meier emphasizes, ↳ draws for illustration on the concept of transformation (*taḥawwul*), which is related to traditional Christian dogma: “The Arabic language represents the medium of the Islamic revelation, into which and through which the transformation becomes real, just as flesh and blood, namely, Mary, represent in Christianity the medium into which and through which the transformation is made real.” Meier’s interpretation, that the “paradoxical reality of incarnation must be taken seriously in a view toward the Qur’an and humanity,” is certainly applicable.⁹¹ Abu Zaid’s observation, which gives terminological priority to an early Islamic position,⁹² gains even more weight if one considers the Qur’anic–Christian analogy not simply as a *fait accompli*, nor, as has been done up to now, merely as an object of early Islamic theological discussion, but rather takes into view the epistemic relationship with the Late Antique and incarnate logos that developed over the course of the revelation of the Qur’an. The observation then shows itself to be an important corrective to the inlibration theory, which is so widely taken at face value.

It is then not that a book stands in place of the incarnation as the embodiment of God’s word, but rather, as Madigan also stresses, that a sensorily perceptible acoustic–linguistic manifestation takes on this status, which does not first come to the fore in the tradition studied by Madigan but is inherent in the Qur’an itself. A religious conversation with Islam that does not aim to remain arbitrarily selective therefore would gain substantially from a diachronic reading of the Qur’an. For the determination of the Qur’anic relation to Christian traditions, the negotiations of logos theology, that is, the dialectic of the Qur’anic self-localization in relation to the surrounding logos conceptions, must be taken into account—a task that can only be accomplished through a diachronic treatment of the Qur’an.

2.6 Medialities of the Qur’an

2.6.1 The Restaging of the Sending Down in Recitation

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Writing is just one of the medialities of the Qur’an. With the conclusion of the canonization of the Qur’an, at the very latest, a third, new foundational experience is thus set beside the Old Testament and Christian myth of origin. Not the inscription of the tablets of the law for Moses as the document of God’s covenant with the elected people nor the notion of “love as fulfilment of the law” guaranteed by Christ’s self-sacrifice (Romans 13:10), but rather the divine teaching, continuously over many years, of God’s verbal addresses to Muhammad and his ↳ community, stands as the central event in Islamic self-understanding. In comparison to this event, what is narrated in the Qur’an about other Prophets is downsized to the status of typological precedents. Since the speech of God is recalled as a decisive event of listening, the Qur’an remains, even later, chiefly an acoustic experience. From the very beginning, there is a particular “language” of the Qur’an that adheres to its acoustic realization.

According to Islamic tradition, the Qur’anic message begins with the challenge to announce the divine word: “Read, *iqra’*, in the name of your lord, who created” (Q 96:1). This verse is traditionally interpreted as the first divine address to the Prophet. Although what stands behind this exhortation maybe a current liturgical exhortation familiar from the Jewish and Christian tradition, the verse remains emblematic of the early Meccan suras, in which the occurrence of the proclamation, *qur’an*, is a central theme. Navid Kermani has justly spoken of the Qur’an as a score, which requires a musical resetting for its realization.⁹³ Indeed, the speech of God is cultic speech, which can only be adequately reflected through the backing of the text by a cantilena. This sacral performance of the text is not a new discovery of the Qur’anic community but rather an answer to the forms of worship of the plural cultures in the milieu of the Qur’an’s emergence, which however assumes a central significance for Islam.

Already for the earliest Qur’anic community, the recited Qur’an had its own setting in life, its *Sitz im Leben* in ritual prayer, which in its form, fixed at the latest in the second Islamic century but probably already during Muhammad’s ministry, and valid down to today, consists of a sequence of short formulas accompanied by gestures and, as its most crucial component, several instances of Qur’an recitation. Through this ceremony, the worshipper exits the profane frame of time and space and enters a sacral state that includes him in an imaginary simultaneity with all the other worshipers and places him in a spatial

proximity to the central sanctuary. This sacral frame opens a space for different degrees of spiritual fulfillment, which were described by the medieval theologian Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (1058–1111): “If I recite, I hear the Qur’an immediately just as if a reciter performed it for me, then with greater profundity, as if the Prophet recited it for me, and then finally I hear it as if it were spoken out by God himself.”⁹⁴ It is not by chance that the Qur’an’s physical–spiritual reception, accomplished through recitation, has been compared with the taking-into-self of the Eucharist in Christian ritual.⁹⁵ Not the book, then, but the recitation is the manifestation of God’s word approachable by humans.⁹⁶

p. 97 The anthropologist Kristina Nelson has referred to the Qur’an as a text that is oral in its very being.⁹⁷ In fact, one can easily extract the Qur’anic determination for recitation out of the text structure itself. Not only does the Qur’an consist of verses, first of short, rhythmically catchy poetic verses and later of long and syntactically complex speech units that manifests themselves as verses through their rhyming end colons.⁹⁸ It is also structured rhetorically so that units of sense and breath coincide—differently, for example, from the case in the speech units of the Hebrew Bible, the Gospels, or the letters of Paul. Namely, in its early parts the Qur’an comes very near to the Psalms or the speeches of the biblical prophets. But even in its later suras, where one must speak of artistic prose rather than poetry, the Qur’an is rhetorical to a very high degree. Here, in place of the tonally marked rhymes, closing clausulas are now formed, which allow the text to be scanned not only rhythmically but also semantically, or theologically, so to speak, again and again introducing references to transcendence into the text. Thus, many of the long narrative Qur’an verses end with a closing clausula such as *inna llāha l-samī‘u l-baṣīr*, “God is the hearing, the seeing” (Q17:1), or *inna llāha yuḥibbu l-muqṣiṭin*, “God loves those who act justly” (Q60:8). These commentary formulas sprinkle divine evaluations of justly repaid human deeds or references to God’s ubiquitous presence and almighty power throughout the text. The commenting clausulas are not monotone interruptions that halt the flow of speech, as is often claimed in the critical literature; rather, through their linking back of all events to the will of God, they form the backbone of Qur’anic discourse.⁹⁹ It is no wonder, then, that in the praxis of recitation they undergo a particular melodic design, similarly to the concluding half verses in Gregorian choral. The sacral recitation of the Qur’an is thus designed to strengthen the significance of the transcendent origin of the Qur’an, which has come to be regarded as so central in recent times. This particular speech praxis also re-enacts the emergence of the Qur’an, which is said in the origin myth to have come from a process of divine oral inspiration.

But independently of the linkage to prayer, Qur’an reading, as Andreas Kellermann stresses, is “in itself already ritual.”¹⁰⁰ It creates a unity of reader and hearer that would never exist in a solitary reception of a written text. The performance as a “ceremonial making present of the social stock of sense”¹⁰¹ repeats the proclaimed truth not with the goal of the communication of information but rather as “practiced wisdom,” in order for “institutionalized forms of coming together” to come into existence.¹⁰² A striking example of this is the widespread praxis in the countries of the Maghreb, especially Morocco and Algeria, of group reading (*qirā’a jamā’iyya*), in which those who have learned the Qur’an by heart or are currently learning it meet daily in order to recite together a thirtieth part of the Qur’an, *juz*, at a very fast tempo. This group reading is also practiced on festive occasions.¹⁰³ The performance, described in detail by Kellermann, is concerned above all with the rules of pronunciation, “orthoepy” (*tajwīd*), and the melodic shaping of the reading.¹⁰⁴ While the orthoepy of *tajwīd* within the canon of knowledge is no more than a propaedeutic for the science of reading,¹⁰⁵ the *tajwīd* rules remain practically indispensable for the Qur’an reader.

They come to be considered as a component of the text itself, so that their omission counts as a distortion of the text and thus a sin: *man lam yujawwidi l-qur’āna athīm*, “He who does not recite the Qur’an with *tajwīd* is sinful.”¹⁰⁶ We see here a clear position that emerged in the course of the tradition, taking the Qur’an to be the word of God even on the level of its expression; *tajwīd* preserves the text’s archaic language condition, which guarantees the distinction of the divine speech from colloquial language and intensifies the effect of secondary complexity generated through poetic means, as it controls the text’s intonation.¹⁰⁷

Regarding the melodic forming of the reading, two styles are distinguished: *murattal* and *mujawwad*. The former is a relatively unadorned style used in teaching and liturgy, “characterized by a stereotyped melodic course. The emphasis lies in the exact realization of *tajwīd* rules. The latter, on the other hand, is formed as art music, characterized by frequent repetitions of single passages, strong contrasts of registers, and an interaction with the listeners that is articulated through cheers.”¹⁰⁸ Kellermann concludes his presentation of the conditions of the Qur’anic performance thus: “A classification of the Qur’an into the category of purely written literature must . . . appear inadequate. The designation of the Prophet as author of the Qur’an,

p. 99 which was often adopted automatically by earlier Orientalists, is rooted in this kind of treatment, whereby the text is uprooted from its social situation and, in Goody's words, 'decontextualized,' thus having to rely on a 'name that supports it.'"¹⁰⁹ In contrast to this, the Qur'an always requires performance in a ritual context. Here, the individual metaphysical experience of the Prophet as the addressee of the revelation and sender of the message in its reenactment becomes a sonic experience that always manifests itself again as new and different, in which the personal religiosity of the reader finds its medium ↵ of expression, so that he has the possibility to encode his "I" for the purpose of "knowledge and determination of his own wisdom."¹¹⁰ The ritual of Qur'an reading consists in the personal reliving of the act of revelation, so that not only an "initial speech act" but also the positioning of the receiver and of the contemporary oral transmitters are comprehended as a means toward the public glorification of God—and that is much more than can be represented with writing."¹¹¹

It is notable that the aural performance of the Qur'an in no way remains limited to the private and collective cultic sphere, but also exists in more recent times as a means of the proliferation of the Qur'an alongside the printed volume. Since the 1960s, alongside the printed *muṣḥaf*, the "codex," there also exists a *muṣḥaf murattal*, a "recited codex." In 1961, Egyptian radio broadcast the first complete recording of the Qur'an, recited by the highest authority in Qur'an recitation at the time in al-Azhar University, Mahmud al-Husari.¹¹² Since then, innumerable recordings by various readers have become available, which are distributed on all the newest audio devices. Although already in the 1930s audio records of Qur'an readings were being produced and individual Qur'an recordings were broadcast on radio,¹¹³ the regular radio broadcast of the *muṣḥaf murattal* represents something new. With the *muṣḥaf murattal*, according to Andreas Kellermann, "we find an intention that goes well beyond mere conservation, and throws light on the Muslim understanding of the Qur'an: namely, the usage of modern mass media for the maintenance of the tradition of performance of the Qur'an vis-à-vis the progressive textualization of Islamic culture. . . . For even today, with the unlimited written reproducibility and availability of the Qur'an, the conception has not been abandoned that the text must be made into sound in performance"¹¹⁴

2.6.2 Writing as Coding

p. 100 The Qur'an not only is ubiquitous in discourse through its text, and in sound through its recitation, but also proliferates as calligraphy in Islamic art, so that one can speak of the visual as a further "language" of the Qur'an. The Arabic alphabet itself, although fully developed only through the praxis of Qur'an writing, is already a theme in the Qur'an itself: twenty-nine suras begin with the naming of one or several letter names, such as *ṣād*, *alif lām mīm*, etc.¹¹⁵ The heavenly writing paraphernalia, the reed pen and above all the writing tablet, also play a striking role in the Qur'an and can be seen at the intersection of important developments, in a phase of the community's new orientation toward a writing-supported ↵ biblically inspired self-understanding. Indeed, we can see an analogy between what occurred for Arabic culture in the genesis of the Qur'an and what has been described for various ancient cultures by Jan Assmann as a transition from "ritual" to "textual coherence" that occurs with the onset of writing.¹¹⁶ After an early phase, in which the new proclamation still stood in the frame and context of the Kaaba rites, a profound process of change can be observed in the early Meccan community, namely, from an ancient Arab self-positioning to a biblically imprinted one. The biblical stories that had up to that point been evoked in short allusions now come to the foreground, and the protagonists of the early historical narratives, ancient figures of the Arabian Peninsula, give way to biblical figures, while the Holy Land itself—though less as a geographical space than a spatial oscillation between heaven and earth—enters as a backdrop in place of ancient Arabia. The biblical sacred-historical past, set in place of the inherited historical memory, crystallizes into a text world that competes with the now-problematic Meccan realities. This "other world" is referred to in gestures, enacted in prayer: through the new direction of prayer toward Jerusalem, the central biblical sanctuary. The act of writing plays an important role in this—it is in this phase that the proclamation is recorded for the first time (admittedly for purely mnemotechnic aims) in writing;¹¹⁷ written scripture was the emblem of the older religions, the Jews and Christians who are later designated as "possessors of scripture." In the Qur'anic view, their revelations owe their authority to their relation to writing; like the emerging Qur'an, they are excerpts from the heavenly original writing, given visual form as the "preserved tablet," *al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz*. A poet of the early twentieth century, the Egyptian Ahmad Shawqi, presented the process of the communication of this "writing" to men as a kind of liquefaction of letters into drops of speech:¹¹⁸

wa-l-lawḥu wa-l-qalamu l-badī‘u rawwā‘ū
 ismu l-jalālati fī bahā‘i ḥurūfihī
 alifun hunālika wa-smu Ṭāhā l-bā‘ū

Inspiration pours down in drops of pearls,
 While the tablet and the astounding pen are shining
 The name of Majesty in the glory of its letters
 The A is there, and the name of the Prophet follows like B.

p. 101 From this perspective, writing transcends its functionality as a sign system: a transcendent universe out of letter signs, which obtain their significance through their supernatural beauty, their “glory,” corresponds to the writing that is perceptible in the world, which consists of semantically functional signs, granting to it and elsewhere unknown aura.

Although supported by the same object of the tablet, the Qur’anic process of becoming scripture is thus substantially different from the episode of the granting of the tablets in the Hebrew Bible, and even more so from its later Christian interpretation. The theologian Friedrich Wilhelm Graf has clearly outlined the significance of the description of the tablet for religious history, which is foundational above all from the Protestant perspective: “At Sinai, the transcendent God sealed a covenant with his people, of which the conditions are literally the moral laws. This sealing of the covenant at Sinai, seen from the perspective of religious history, signifies an entirely new conception of the relation between God and man, characterized by radical transcendence of God, an unconditioned claim to exclusive worship by his people, and a moralistic and legal order.”¹¹⁹

It is true, already in rabbinic Judaism, a more comprehensive perception of the communication of God’s word, the *tora mi-Sinai*, the teaching communicated on Sinai, had been superimposed onto the event of the handing down of the tablets, so that the post-Mosaic *tora she be-‘al pe*, that is, the oral teaching, had come to outweigh the written. For the Qur’an, the Mosaic event is submerged into an episode that, reported in an entirely de-dramatized text in sura 7, has completely lost its history-generating dimension.¹²⁰ The Ten Commandments, which are listed three times in the Qur’an, are never linked to this event. Seen from the Qur’anic perspective, divine writing is withdrawn from human access, God sends only oral excerpts from the heavenly tablet to his Prophets—a transformation that negates the uniqueness of the biblical event without, however, devaluing it. What occurs in medieval Christian reception, where at the entrance to Gothic cathedrals we find the figure of the *synagoga*, a feminine figure blindfolded and with broken staff, symbolizing the “fall of the tablets,” which literally slip down from the figure—an allegory of Judaism deemed obsolete in pre-modern Christian tradition—is not imaginable in an Islamic context.

p. 102 The Islamic equivalent of the tablets, the heavenly writing, is a source of cultic rather than moral authority. It not only manifests God’s transcendence but also remains transcendent itself. For that reason, not only is there no image of the handing down of the tablets in Islam, but there is also no historic precedent for such a representation in written form of the divine word such as is so common in Western reception¹²¹—an even stronger challenge to the imagination of the believers to take possession of this ultimately heavenly writing through art.

For according to the Qur’an, not only letters or the Qur’an verses but indeed all created things are “signs,” *āyāt*, of God. Creation is understood as a sign system in analogy to writing, which man is constantly called upon to “read” in the Qur’an.¹²² These signs of creation, such as the cosmic order, the blessings of nature, and the historical fortunes of the community, are unfolded narratively in the Qur’an, and thus take on a verbal form through the prophetic proclamation. But since they had already existed in written form in the original Qur’an, the “mother of the writing,” *umm al-kitāb*, they are at the same time coded in writing. Without this coding, things could be represented figuratively without problem—as they are in other cultures. Instead, in view of their anchoring in the heavenly writing, it is the form of writing that suggests itself as their visual, inner-worldly presentation; in place of the image, we thus have the “script image.” Language and writing unite in this image, which, as in Ahmad Shawqi’s poem, glorifies the majestic name of God.

2.6.3 Text, Sound, and Body

In looking for commonalities between the three monotheistic religions, it is problematic to rely on external shared traits, which can be represented in suggestive coinages such as “Abrahamic religions,”¹²³ “possessors of scripture,”¹²⁴ or “revealed religions.” More interesting are the differences, expressed for instance in the diverse medialities of the respective proclamations. We could observe here that what we are accustomed to designating as “Qur’anic revelation” was connected by its receivers with other, completely different experiences. Alongside the communication that was experienced quasi-vertically, the “sending down” (*tanzīl*) and the “inspiration” (*waḥy*), which both also describe the experience of earlier prophets, there was the completely amythical emergence of performance texts, generated during the intensive ascetic practice of the proclaimer during his vigils. Here, it was an aural experience, also called *waḥy*, that came about in the course of the recitation of already received texts. An important feature is the still preverbal quality of the “inspiration” *waḥy*, discussed by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd,¹²⁵ which first had to be decoded and verbalized before it could be passed on to the hearers. With the absence of the proclaimer, rearticulation came to take the place of the listening. The recitation of the community or of the single worshiper is an *imitatio* of the Prophet.

p. 103 Even as it makes use of the same verses, the Prophet *imitatio* implies an entirely new reading of the Qur’an. It de-historicizes the earlier message, since the divine communication, which had once been spoken in a defined historical time through the resumption of Prophetic time, the *illud tempus*, becomes a sacral recollection that removes the reciting hearer/speaker from time. Simultaneously, it restages the original scene of the genesis of Islam; the text thus becomes exclusively Muslim.

Contrarily, within the Qur’anic self-understanding, the divine message recorded on the “preserved tablet,” from which the proclaimer receives his communications, was still perceived as universal, that is, it was destined for monotheistic believers in general. The “mother of the scripture,” *umm al-kitāb*, most likely has its equivalent in the hypostasizing of the logos or wisdom as the first-created thing of God known from ancient Judaism; cf. Prov. 8:22–36. In that all creation is already recorded in the “original writing,” it is coded “scripturally”—a Qur’anic conception that can be traced back to preceding Jewish speculations over the relationship between word/book and body, even if the acoustically realized word remains of prime importance for the Islamic conception of divine self-communication. What the American Kabbalah researcher Elliot R. Wolfson has claimed for the Jewish and Christian relationship between word and body can be extended also to Islam. According to Wolfson, both Jewish and Christian thought are based on a particular correlation of body and book/word,¹²⁶ but with a reversal of their respective emphasis, in a way that can be summarized as follows: “For Christians the body is the embodiment of the book, for Jews the book is the textualization of the body.”¹²⁷

Looking for an “embodiment of God’s word” in Islam, one should not seek to find it in a “book” representing scripture, as presupposed in the concept of “inlibration,” but rather in the living recitation of the Arabic Qur’an. This has its place in an organic “resonant cavity,” which, as is appropriate for a ceremonial-acoustic performance such as Qur’an recitation, is fit to incorporate spoken word and cantilena. This “resonant cavity” is not to be sought in transcendence but rather, since spiritual and aesthetic experience are innate in the creation of man, in human nature itself. ↵

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Notes

1. On the biblical background of the concept, see Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 205–232.
2. Cf. Arkoun, *Lectures du Coran*; Arkoun, “The notion of revelation.”
3. See Wiedenhöfer, “Offenbarung.”
4. Abu Zaid, *Mafhūm al-Naṣṣ*; cf. Kermani, *Offenbarung als Kommunikation*.
5. See Wild, “We have sent down to thee the book.”
6. Cf. chap. 3, 109–114.
7. The process of canonization should be seen as gradual. On its implications, see Al-Azmeh, “The Muslim Canon,” and Al-Azmeh, “Chronophagous Discourse,” and see now also Sinai, *Studien zur frühen Koranauslegung*, 1–22.
8. So in Fück, “Die Originalität des arabischen Propheten”; see also Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*; Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*; Paret, *Mohammed und der Koran*; Paret, “Der Koran als Geschichtsquelle.”
9. See Wild, “We have sent down to thee the book.”
10. Cf. Chabbi, “Jinn”; on reflections of jinn in the Qur’an, see Hawting, “Eavesdropping.”
11. On these texts, see chap. 12, 427–429.

12. On the hypostatization of the word of God in the Jewish tradition of Late Antiquity, cf. Boyarin, "The Gospel of the Memra," and Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 221–227; cf. below, 91–94.
13. See Izutsu, "Revelation as a Linguistic Concept," and Izutsu, *God and Man in the Quran*, although he does not take account of biblical and non-biblical traditions. Cf. also Chabbi, *Le Coran décrypté*, 81–92, which connects the delivery of the message to an inspiration of jinns.
14. Cf. on the vision and its relationship to the narrative of calling.
15. On the scene with Isaiah, see Irsigler, "Gott als König."
16. Cf. Hooke, *Myth and Kingship*; Brettler, *God Is King*; Schmidt, *Königtum Gottes*.
17. Rippin, "God," bases the kingly image of God on the Qur'anic predications of God, without naming concrete biblical intertexts.
18. The Kedushah, an exclamation evoking the divine holiness within Jewish prayer, contains the encomium of the seraphim from Isaiah 6:3, "Holy, Holy, Holy, The Lord of Hosts, The entire world is filled with His Glory." The Christian liturgy recapitulates this calling in an anaphoric prayer during mass ("with Your Glory").
19. This is not a Qur'anic innovation, but rather reflects a biblical notion developed after Isaiah: James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 600–606 (as suggested in a personal communication from Dirk Hartwig) points out that the throne was already understood to be in motion in Ezekiel's time; God left Jerusalem and was ascending to heaven in a transportable chariot throne, having left his temple during the first wave of exile to Babylon.
20. Cf. the function of *wahy* in early Arabic poetry, see chap. 12, 444–447.
21. Abu Zaid, *Mafhūm al-Naṣṣ*; see also Kermani, *Offenbarung als Kommunikation*.
22. This occurred in conjunction with the Mu'tazila theology, which, in the eighth/ninth century, assumes a distinction between the uncreated, intrinsic, knowledge of God and his created word, and asserts the existence of a necessarily not-eternal substrate for the retention of this word; see the evidence in Maalouf, *La place du verbe*. The fact that this position was replaced a century later with the dogma of the uncreatedness of the Qur'an is related to anti-Christian polemic.
23. See Neuwirth, "Structure and the Emergence of Community."
24. The Qur'an gives accounts of two visions in three places: Q 53:4–12; 53:13–18 and one, Q 81:23f., that is arguably identical with the first vision mentioned in sura 53.
25. On the relationship between text genesis and cult development, cf. chap. 6, 205–208.
26. On the Arabic tradition of the psalms, see Schippers, "Psalms."
27. See Farrukh, *Das Bild des Frühislam*, and now also Bauer, "The Relevance of Early Arabic Poetry."
28. There have only been a few studies on this, primarily Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*; Busse, *Die Theologischen Beziehungen*; and, on Qur'anic engagement with the Psalms, Neuwirth, "Psalmen."
29. See Jeffery, *The Qur'an as Scripture*; Madigan, *The Qur'an's Self-Image*.
30. On the role of writing in the book of Jubilees, see Najman, "Interpretation as Primordial Writing," and Kugel, *The Bible as It Was*. On the history of this idea, see Van Doorn, *Scribal Culture*, 214–227.
31. Cf. Neuwirth, "Structure and the Emergence of Community."
32. See Wild, *Mensch, Prophet*, 7.
33. Graham, "Scripture and the Qur'an."
34. Sinai, *Studien zur frühen Koraninterpretation*, 1–22.
35. Al-Azmeh, "Chronophagous Discourse," 163–164.
36. On this image, cf. Kermani, *Gott ist schön*, 197–205.
37. Sinai, "Qur'anic Self-Referentiality."
38. Madigan, *The Qur'an's Self-Image*, 177.
39. Sinai, "Qur'anic Self-Referentiality," 110.
40. Ibid, 111.
41. Ibid.
42. Madigan, *Self-Image*, 45, cited in Sinai, "Qur'anic Self-Referentiality," 113–114.
43. Sinai, "Qur'anic Self-Referentiality," 114.
44. See Q 85:21–22: *bal huwa qur'ānun majīd / fi lawḥin mahfūz*, and 56:77–80.
45. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 227–231.
46. Najman, "Interpretation as Primordial Writing"; Grintz, "Jubilees."
47. A similar conception is advocated by Kadi and Mir, "Literature and the Qur'an."
48. Sinai, "Qur'anic Self-Referentiality," 126.
49. Kugel, *The Bible as It Was*. Furthermore, one could refer to the Targumim, which convey Bible texts not only in a new language but in one that would be appropriate to the expectations of later listeners and readers. Cf. also Shinan, "Midrash on Scripture."
50. On the differentiation made at this time between various kinds of written verses, unambiguous and ambiguous, see Neuwirth, "Mary and Jesus," and cf. chap. 9, 324–327.
51. See chap. 7, 244–277.
52. When labeling both kinds of texts, the term "revelation" is used for the Qur'an despite the preliminary problems with the term, since it most clearly relays the transcendental origin. Cf. chap. 5, *passim*.
53. Mentions of the Qur'an were also common before, but they rather assumed the form of an oath, see Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition*, 264–289.
54. That is, fifteen of twenty-one suras. For the exceptions, meaning those with a different introduction, such as with a hymn in suras 6, 34, 35, or suras without a distinctive introduction, such as Q 16, 29, 30, reference should be made to Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition*, 276–313.

55. Cf. chap. 4, 144–146.
56. Also in suras 10, 11, 13, 28, 31, and 41.
57. On this particular self-referentiality, see Wild, “An Arabic Recitation.”
58. See Abu Zaid, *Islam und Politik*, 63; cf. on “inlibration” 92–95.
59. Sinai, “Qur’anic Self-Referentiality.”
60. For an example of the resistance to similar misrepresentations, cf. Q29:48–49.
61. Furthermore cf. Q42:1–2, taken up again in Q42:48–49.
62. On the Qur’anic theology of signs in more detail, chap. 7, 264–277.
63. Further suras, which argue apologetically in the opening section and/or closing section based on the signs of scripture and creation, are sura 46 (verse 1 and 29ff.), 40 (verse 1 and 77ff.), 39 (verse 1 and 41ff.), and 31 (verse 1 and 20ff.).
64. Also the case in sura 32, which in the closing section (verses 22–25) depicts the collapse of consensus; accordingly also Q41:1 and 41ff.
65. See chap. 8, 300–301.
66. See chap. 8., 305–310.
67. Sura 7 commences similarly, and it also remains apologetic in the closing mention of the proclamation.
68. In the dispute with these new adversaries, there was an increase in the frequency of the introduction of arguments that had already been tried and tested in the long tradition of biblical scriptural apologetics. See Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 19–28.
69. Madigan, “Gottes Botschaft an die Welt.”
70. This parallelization is the main content of the inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock from the year 691, which include almost exclusively Qur’anic verses; see Neuwirth, “The Spiritual Meaning of Jerusalem.”
71. Wild, *Mensch, Prophet*, 6. Recognition of this problem was primarily advanced by Madigan, “Gottes Botschaft an die Welt.” Madigan refers to Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931) as the first advocate of the analogy Christ-Qur’an.
72. Segal, *Two Powers*.
73. See Boyarin, *Borderlines*, 89–127; Boyarin, “The Gospel of the Memra.”
74. On the dispute between early theologians, for whom the proximity of the Qur’an to the incarnate word of God itself became a problem, see van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 4:615, 6:411; Thomas, *Early Muslim Polemic against Christianity*, 37–59. On the Islamic dogma of the “inimitability of the Qur’an,” cf. chap. 13, 458–462.
75. Cf. chap. 3, 125–127.
76. Boyarin, “The Gospel of the Memra.”
77. On the forces involved in Logos and Sophia, see Schäfer, *Weibliche Gottesbilder im Judentum*, 64–68.
78. Niehoff, “What Is in a Name?” 224, cited in Boyarin, “The Gospel of the Memra,” 115.
79. The power to produce order is, however, granted to the Qur’an through the force of liturgical texts. An extensive litany commemorating the Laylat al-Qadr names a number of beneficial interventions in creation, which are solicited “through the Qur’an,” *bi l-qur’ān*. (The age of these texts, which is taken for granted in contemporary usage, is difficult to determine.)
80. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, 244–245.
81. See Madigan, “Preserved Tablet”; Maalouf, *La place du verbe*.
82. Madigan, “Gottes Botschaft an die Welt.”
83. See van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 4:628.
84. Seyyed Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, 43ff.
85. See Günther, “The Illiterate Prophet.” This interpretation is not tenable in historical-critical scholarship. In the Qur’an, the designation of the proclaimer as *al-nabī al-ummī* designates rather his affiliation with the “faithful among the (non-Jewish) peoples”; see chap. 11, 402–405.
86. Madigan, “Gottes Botschaft an die Welt.”
87. Cf. note 84 above.
88. Thus, we can see here an attempt within the proclamation of the Qur’an to avoid proximity to a Trinitarian idea of God; see Nader, *Le système philosophique*, 101, and Maalouf, *La place du verbe*, 85–107.
89. Stegemann, “Gedanken zum Johannesprolog,” 178.
90. Ibid.
91. Meier, “Gottes Wort in Knechtsgestalt,” 71–73, cited in Elsas, “Religionswissenschaftliche Vermittlung,” 185–186.
92. Here we can think of someone like Ibn Kullāb, a contemporary of Ibn Ḥanbal, according to whom the message communicated by Gabriel to the Prophet is only a rendition, not the direct word of God; see van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, vol. 4, 614–615.
93. Cf. the discussion of the sura in chap. 7, 248–252.
94. Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’*, 1:402.
95. Cf. Wild, *Mensch, Prophet*.
96. Cf. Lacocque, *Apocalyptic Symbolism*.
97. Nelson, *Art of Reciting*.
98. See chap. 5, 321–324.
99. See Neuwirth, “Yūsuf-Sure”; cf. chap. 13, 472–477.
100. Kellermann, “‘Die Mündlichkeit’ des Koran.”
101. Assmann, “Nachwort,” 270.
102. Ibid., 274.
103. Kellermann, *Koranlesung im Maghreb*, describes this in detail.

104. Kellermann also dwells on the particular of the text used (*qirā'āt*); cf. chap. 4, 149–155.
105. Bergsträsser and Pretzl, *Geschichte des Korantexts*, 232.
106. Thus Ibn al-Jazarī in his didactic *tajwīd* poem, the so-called *Jazarīya*, 13.
107. Kellermann, “Die ‘Mündlichkeit’ des Koran,” 18.
108. Ibid., 22.
109. Assmann and Assmann, “Nachwort,” 276.
110. Lotman, *Die Struktur literarischer Texte*, 101.
111. Kellermann, “Die ‘Mündlichkeit’ des Koran,” 22.
112. Cf. Al-Sa'id, *al-Jam' al-Ṣawtī*; on its reception, see “Die ‘Mündlichkeit’ des Koran,” 1–3.
113. On the reception, which was initially met with skepticism among religious scholars, see Jomier, “La place du Coran.”
114. Kellermann, “Die ‘Mündlichkeit’ des Koran,” 2.
115. On these letters groups, misleadingly denoted in scholarship as “ciphers,” see chap. 4, 144–145.
116. Assmann, “Kanon und Zensur”; on an application of the model to the Qur'an, see Neuwirth, “Vom Rezitationstext”; cf. also chap. 6, 205–208.
117. This newly introduced textualization is referred to in the introduction of the suras by the invocation formulation *bi-smi llāhi l-raḥmāni l-raḥīm* “In the name of God, the compassionate the merciful,” the so-called Basmala—analogous to the Christian practice of precluding textual elements with the formulation, “In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.”
118. Shawqī, *al-A'māl al-Shi'riya al-Kāmila*, 34.
119. Graf, *Moses Vermächtnis*.
120. See Neuwirth, “Meccan Texts, Medinan Additions?”
121. See the evidence of this in images and texts in Graf, *Moses Vermächtnis*.
122. Cf. chap. 7, 264–277.
123. On the problem of abbreviating the three monotheistic religions as “Abrahamic,” see Nagel, “‘Der erste Muslim’—Abraham in Mekka.”
124. On “inlibration,” see above, 92–95, and Madigan, “Gottes Botschaft an die Welt.”
125. See Kermani, *Offenbarung als Kommunikation*.
126. Wolfson, “The Body in the Text.”
127. Ibid. 482.

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