

"We Believe in the Torah Wherein is Guidance and Light"

Language, Narrative and Law in the Qur'an



Muhammad Al-Hussaini

Introduction to Classical Study of the Qur'an

Leo Baeck College, London

<http://www.scriptsindialogue.org/>

Outline

- What is the “voice” of Islamic scholarship in relation to the purpose and scope of Qur’anic study?
- What are sciences of the metre and poesy of the Qur’an and how are these linked to the doctrine of *‘ijaz al-qur’an* “the miraculous inimitability of the Qur’an”?
- What are themes and literary topoi in Qur’anic narrative and what structural elements can be discerned? How do these relate to Islamic beliefs?
- *Text Study:* Qur’anic exhortatory narratives leading towards the formulation of religious law

The Voice of Islamic Scholarship

- Please review the sample text, the opening of Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti's *al-Itqan fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an* – a prescribed text in all Arabic-speaking Islamic universities since the 16th Century.
- Al-Suyuti extensively categorises and subcategorises Qur'anic sciences
- 12 categories of *asbab al-nuzul* "occasions of revelation" – eg. Makkan/Medinan, daytime/night, present/not present in former scriptures, revealed piecemeal/revealed all at once
- 6 categories of exegetical hadith – eg. *mutawatir* "widely reported", *ahad* "singly reported", *shadh* "corrupt"
- 8 categories of *ada'* "rendition" – eg. *imala'* "leaning", *mudd* "extension"
- 7 categories of *lafdh* "voicing, expression" – eg. *majaz* "metaphor", *tashbih* "simile", *mushtarik* "combinatorial"
- 14 categories of *ma'na muta'alaq bi-l-ahkam* "meaning pertaining to jurisprudence" – eg. *al-'am al-makhsus* "specification of general application", *al-khass al-'am* "generalisation of the specific case", *mubin* "clear, obvious", *mu'awal* "elucidated by interpretation"
- 5 categories of *ma'na muta'alaq bi-l-alfadh* "meaning pertaining to expression" – *ijaz* "laconic concision", *al-asma'* "namings" in 50 subcategories...and so on...

Metrical Typologies in the Qur'an

- Early Makkan suras with exhortation or eschatological import are highly metrical, powerful and resonant
- Later Medinan suras with juridical and didactic content move towards rhymed prose
- The doctrine of the *'ijaz al-qur'an* "miraculous inimitability of the Qur'an" which emerged in classical exegesis from the outset is based on various "*bring a sura like it*" statements:

وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ فِي رَيْبٍ مِّمَّا نَزَّلْنَا عَلَىٰ عَبْدِنَا فَأْتُوا بِسُورَةٍ مِّثْلِهِ وَادْعُوا شُهَدَاءَكُمْ مِّنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ

'And if you are in doubt as to what We have sent down upon Our servant, then bring a sura like it, and call your witnesses aside from God if you are truthful' *The Heifer* (*Qur'an 2*):23

The Metre and Poetry of the Qur'an

- Abu Bakr al-Baqillani *'Ijaz al-Qur'an* and similar treatises on Qur'anic inimitability from 11th century and similar works by Fakhr al-Din al-Razi from 12th century strongly reject the Qur'an being described as *shi'ir* "poetry" or *saj'* "rhymed prose" or any other form – it is inimitable, *sui generis* and from heaven
- Pre-Islamic and Classical Arabic poetry recognises various literary forms – *shi'ir* or *nadhm* "poetry, verse", *qasida* "epic formal poetry", *nathr* "prose", *saj'* "rhymed prose"
- Pre-eminent form is the *qasida* exemplified in seven pre-Islamic *mu'allaqat* 6th cent. preserved in oral tradition

Rules of Classical Arabic Versification

- Classical Arabic is a language of syllable length
- Short syllable is consonant plus short vowel – eg. *Ka-Ta-Ba* “he wrote”
- Long syllable is consonant followed by long vowel – eg. *Kaa-Ta-Ba* “he wrote to”
- or alternatively is consonant with a *sukun* pause – eg. *MaK-Ta-Ba* “library”
- These form feet – eg. *short-long-long*, *long-short-long*, *long-long-short-long*
- Arabic verse has both *qafiya* “rhyme” and *wazn* or *bahr* “metre”
- Versification metres constructed by combinations of words of varying feet:
Tawil, Kamil, Wafir, Rajaz, Basit, Khafif, Sari
- Rhyme is consonantal:

ما لنا لا نتفكر أين كسرى أين قيصر؟

ma lana la natafakkir 'aina Kasra 'aina Qaysar?

What is wrong with us that we do not think Where is Chosroes where is Caesar?

Makkan Metrical Typology

innahu fakkara wa qaddara إِنَّهُ فَكَّرَ وَقَدَّرَ

fa-qutila kayfa qaddara فَقُتِلَ كَيْفَ قَدَّرَ

thumma qutila kayfa qaddara ثُمَّ قُتِلَ كَيْفَ قَدَّرَ

thumma nadhara ثُمَّ نَظَرَ

thumma 'abasa wa basara ثُمَّ عَبَسَ وَبَسَرَ

thumma 'adbara wa-stakbara ثُمَّ أَدْبَرَ وَاسْتَكْبَرَ

fa-qala in hadha illa sihrun yu'thar فَقَالَ إِنَّ هَذَا إِلَّا سِحْرٌ يُؤْتَرُ

in hadha illa qawlu 'l-bashar إِنَّ هَذَا إِلَّا قَوْلُ الْبَشَرِ

The One Wrapped Up (Quran 74):18-24

Medinan Metrical Typology

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا سَوَاءٌ عَلَيْهِمْ أُنذِرْتَهُمْ أَمْ لَمْ تُنذِرْهُمْ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ
خَتَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَى قُلُوبِهِمْ وَعَلَى سَمْعِهِمْ وَعَلَى أَبْصَارِهِمْ غِشَاوَةٌ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ
وَمِنَ النَّاسِ مَنْ يَقُولُ آمَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَيَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَمَا هُمْ بِمُؤْمِنِينَ
يُخَادِعُونَ اللَّهَ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَمَا يَخْدَعُونَ إِلَّا أَنفُسَهُمْ وَمَا يَشْعُرُونَ

*inna 'lladhina kafaru sawa'un 'alayhim 'a'andhartahum 'am lam
tundhirhum la yu'minun*

*khatama Allah 'ala qulubihim wa 'ala sam'ihim wa 'ala 'absarihim
ghishwatun wa lahum 'adhabun 'adhim*

*wa min an-nas man yaqulu 'amanna bi-llahi wa bi-l-yaum al-akhiri wa
ma hum bi-mu'minin*

*yakhda'un Allah wa-lladhina 'amanu wa ma yakhda'una illa
'anfusahum wa ma yash'arun*

The Heifer (Qur'an 2):6-9

Various Literary Topoi

- *wa'd* "promise" and *wa'id* "threat" narratives as 1) God's messengers come to warn 2) are arrogantly rejected or persecuted 3) the punishment is delivered – eg. Noah, Lot, Moses and Pharaoh, 'Ad, Thamud
- "And recall the story of..." narratives from Biblical and Midrashic discourse delivering the Qur'an in continuity with the foregoing scriptures – eg. Abraham and the idols, Israel at Sinai, Jonah
- "Look upon the Signs of Creation..." passages that exhort Man to ponder and wonder at the mystery of Creation as evidence of God's revelation
- Descriptive *clausulae* at the end of narratives as an intrinsic commentary – eg. "Truly He is Glorious, Full of Power", "Truly your Lord is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful"
- Narrative passages and the moral instruction they deliver sometimes presage the formal prescription of religious laws – eg. Abel and Cain narrative leads to *lex talionis*
مِنْ أَجْلِ ذَلِكَ كَتَبْنَا عَلَىٰ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ أَنَّهُ مَن قَتَلَ نَفْسًا بِغَيْرِ نَفْسٍ أَوْ فَسَادٍ فِي الْأَرْضِ فَكَأَنَّمَا قَتَلَ النَّاسَ جَمِيعًا وَمَنْ أَحْيَاهَا فَكَأَنَّمَا أَحْيَا النَّاسَ جَمِيعًا وَلَقَدْ جَاءَهُمْ رَسُولُنَا بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ ثُمَّ إِنَّ كَثِيرًا مِّنْهُمْ بَعَدَ ذَلِكَ فِي الْأَرْضِ لَمُسْرِفُونَ

'On that account: We ordained for the Children of Israel that if any one slew a person - unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land - it would be as if he slew the whole people: and if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people. Then although there came to them Our apostles with clear signs, yet, even after that, many of them continued to commit excesses in the land.' *The Table (Quran 5):32*

Summary

- Classical scholarship considers matters of literary *balagha* "rhetoric" and *nadhm* "poesy" as much of a science and integral to the exegesis of the text
- The doctrine of *'ijaz al-qur'an* "miraculous inimitability of the Qur'an" arose from references in the primary text and is a whole science of itself
- Notwithstanding this, there is a clear heterogeneity of literary and metrical typologies in the Qur'an
- Rhythm, metrical and sonic issues in the recitation of the Qur'an are important to Muslims – remember the majority of Muslims in the world do not understand the Arabic text and for them the recitational sound is part of "liturgy"
- There are identifiable literary devices and topoi of Qur'anic narrative, with moral exhortations illustrated by prophetic stories presaging the prescription of religious laws