

*Appendix*

*The question of the Qur'an's coherence  
in the history of its exegesis*





### An ancient question

The composition of the Qur'anic text has always been an enigma. The text's lack of coherence is one of the objections in the *Nazm al-Qur'ān* («The Qur'an's stylistic organization»<sup>1</sup>) treatises, which flourished from the mid-third and fourth centuries after the Hijra, and the works on the Qur'an's inimitability (*i'jāz*) which followed them sought to answer. The first book of this type that we have, the *Bayān i'jāz al-Qur'ān* («Meaning of the Qur'an's inimitability») by al-Khaṭṭābī (d. 386 or 388/996 or 998), answers the following objections about the Qur'an's style:

- 1 The Qur'an contains flaws in its composition (*sū' al-ta'līf*) and the layout of discourses (*nasaq al-kalām*)<sup>2</sup>. The examples given are the first five verses of sura 8, which present «a certain incoherence (*intishār*) due to the fact that the parts are scattered and the joints disjointed»<sup>3</sup>.
- 2 The Qur'an has many ellipses (*ḥadhf*) and such concise formulae (*ikhtiṣār*) that it is difficult to know how to understand them<sup>4</sup>.
- 3 The Qur'an, contrary to eloquence, has repetitions (*takrār*)<sup>5</sup>.
- 4 There are incoherences in the order of verses. «Between two statements (*kalāmayni*) we find ideas introduced which have no logical link or anything in common with them»<sup>6</sup>. The objector gives the example of vv. 75.16-19 which seem to be unrelated to what went before (v. 15) and what follows (v. 20).
- 5 In its organization of suras, the Qur'an mixes up subjects, rather than giving each subject a chapter. The objector criticizes the lack of unity in the ordering (*tartīb*) of suras<sup>7</sup>. «If the Qur'an was revealed chapter by chapter, so that each of its teachings had a specific place and a given classification, it would have been better composed (*nazm*) and more useful»<sup>8</sup>.

In fact, suras that are all in one piece are rare. The Joseph sura (12), containing the whole narrative of the patriarch-prophet, is the well-known exception that proves the rule. The mostly fragmented nature of the text is, probably responsible for the fact that from its beginnings and then all through its history,

1 According to C.F. AUDEBERT's translation, *Al-Khaṭṭābī et l'inimitabilité du Coran. Traduction et introduction au Bayān i'jāz al-Qur'ān*, 11.

2 AUDEBERT C.F., *Al-Khaṭṭābī et l'inimitabilité du Coran*, 130.

3 AUDEBERT C.F., *Al-Khaṭṭābī et l'inimitabilité du Coran*, 130.

4 AUDEBERT C.F., *Al-Khaṭṭābī et l'inimitabilité du Coran*, 130.

5 AUDEBERT C.F., *Al-Khaṭṭābī et l'inimitabilité du Coran*, 131.

6 AUDEBERT C.F., *Al-Khaṭṭābī et l'inimitabilité du Coran*, 131.

7 AUDEBERT C.F., *Al-Khaṭṭābī et l'inimitabilité du Coran*, 131.

8 AUDEBERT C.F., *Al-Khaṭṭābī et l'inimitabilité du Coran*, 142.

right up to today, Qur'anic exegesis has commented on the text verse by verse, in an atomistic way.

As to the Qur'an as a whole, it probably shows, if not an organization, then at least a certain classification of suras in decreasing order<sup>9</sup>, broadly corresponding to a sort of reverse chronological order, with the short suras at the end of the Qur'an dating from the Meccan period, and the longer ones at the start from the Medinan period. Here is, too, a certain thematic classification — the short suras at the end mostly have an eschatological nature, announcing God's judgment and emphasizing the duty of justice by the rich towards those less fortunate. They are situated in the context of the preaching to the Meccan polytheists. The first, long suras in the Book deal with many matters, particularly rules and laws for the life of the nascent Muslim community, in a context marked by the presence of Christians and Jews. This classification, however, is not strict — some suras said to be from Medina have moved to the end of the Qur'an, like sura 110 («Help») considered by tradition to be the last to be revealed, because it alluded to the Prophet's imminent death, and sura 98 («The Proof»), which is addressed to the People of the Book (Jews and Christians), thus pre-supposing a later, Medinan context. Nor is the decreasing order of suras strictly observed — far from it. So A.T. Welch reorganizes the first 30 suras in their precise order of length: 2, 4, 3, 7, 6, 5, 9, 11, 16, 10, 12, 17, 18, 26, 28, 20, 24, 33, 22, 8, 21, 40, 39, 27, 23, 37, 19, 25, 43 and 34<sup>10</sup>. This leads to the question of the probable influence of one or more principles for order different from the sura's respective lengths — but which?

Although the majority of ancient exegetes were content to comment on the text verse by verse, there were some who were interested in the correlations (*munāsabāt*) between the verses and the suras. According to Zarkashī (d. 794/1391), who also complained about the lack of attention paid by exegetes to this aspect of the text, the first to have examined the Qur'anic text from this angle was the Shafi'i *faqīh* Abū Bakr al-Nisābūrī (d. 324/936)<sup>11</sup>. While teaching in Baghdad, he was in the habit of asking the question, «Why was a particular verse

<sup>9</sup> Apparently arranging in decreasing length corresponds to a Semitic way of doing things. St Paul's letters in the Pauline corpus are arranged in this way, and «Iraqi philologists in the eight and ninth centuries also placed the longer pieces at the start of their collections containing the masterpieces of Arabic poetry» (BLACHÈRE R., *Le Coran*, Que sais-je?, 26).

<sup>10</sup> WELCH A. T., «*Al-Kur'ān*», *Et*, V, 411a.

<sup>11</sup> ZARKASHĪ, *Al-Burhān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, I, 36. The text's editor, M. Abū al-Faḍl Ibrahim, adds in a note that this is Abū Bakr 'Abd Allāh ibn M. Ziyād al-Nisābūrī, a Shafi'i *faqīh*, who, having studied in Iraq, Syria and Egypt, moved to Baghdad.

placed next to another particular verse? According to what logic was a particular sura put next to another particular sura?» He criticized the Baghdad scholars for their ignorance of what he called the *'ilm al-munāsabāt*, «the science of correlations»<sup>12</sup>. Zarkashī then reports Sheikh 'Izz al-Dīn ibn 'Abd al-Salām's objection (d. 660/1262) that there could be no coherence (*irtibāt*) between revelations spread out over twenty-three years, and a variety of occasions, to which other scholars replied that it was necessary to distinguish between the successive factual reality of revelation and the wisdom which governs the text's organization (*tartīb*). This supposes that each verse is examined to see whether it completes the previous verse or is independent from it, in which case it still needs to be determined how it agrees with what goes before it<sup>13</sup>.

The same goes for the suras — in each, what links it to the previous sura needs to be sought. So, Zarkashī tells us, we note that the start of each sura is in perfect agreement with the end of the previous sura<sup>14</sup>. He gives the example of the end of sura 5, *al-Mā'ida* («To God is the kingship of the heavens and the earth, and all that is in them. He is powerful over all things») and the start of sura 6, «The Cattle» «Praise to God who created the heavens and the earth...»). Both texts are linked by what in this work we called «median terms», that is, terms («heavens and earth») which are repeated at the end of the first sura and the start of the next. Curiously, this is not the point Zarkashī is making, but a much more subtle relationship. The last three verses of sura 5 announce God's judgment, while sura 6 begins «Praise to God». Now, he says, God's judgment and praise are linked, as v. 75 of sura 39 («The Troops»): «It shall be decided between them; and it shall be said, "Praise belongs to God the Lord of all Being"».

Another similar example is the start of sura 35 («The Angels») which also begins with «Praise to God». According to Zarkashī, this agrees with the end of the previous sura, which says «A barrier is set between them and that they desire» (Ar.), because in 6:45 we read, «So the last remnant of the people who did evil was cut off. Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being» (Ar.).

In these two examples, the commentator looks elsewhere in the Qur'an for a verse which brings together the subject of the end of one sura and the beginning of the next, contiguous sura, to relate them to one another. The examples

<sup>12</sup> ZARKASHĪ, *Al-Burhān fi 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 1, 35.

<sup>13</sup> ZARKASHĪ, *Al-Burhān fi 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 1, 37.

<sup>14</sup> ZARKASHĪ, *Al-Burhān fi 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 1, 38.

demonstrate Zarkashī's conviction that within the Qur'an there is an interrelation between verses.

The two examples which follow will seem more convincing by the fact that they do not make a third verse from somewhere else intervene in an artificial, not to say rather forced way. The end of sura 56 leads to praise: «Magnify the Name of thy Lord, the Almighty» (56:96), and the start of sura 57, as if in answer, begins with praise — «All that is in the heavens and the earth magnifies God» (57:1). The start of sura 2, «That is the Book, wherein is no doubt, a guidance to the God-fearing» alludes to the «path» of the verse of the *Fātiḥa* (sura 1): «Guide us in the straight path» (1:5). As the great Mu'tazili commentator Zamakhsharī (m. 538/1144) noted, it is just as though, to the question, «What is the path», the answer was given, «Here, it is the Book, which guides onto the right path»<sup>15</sup>.

496 In another chapter of his book<sup>16</sup> Zarkashī once again returns to the question of the organization (*tartīb*) of suras in the Qur'an. «It could, he says, respond to the reason we mentioned above, that is, the thematic correspondence between the end of one sura and the start of the next (just like the *Fātiḥa* and the start of sura 2). It could also be assonance, like the end of sura 111 (the last word of which is *masad*) and the start of sura 112 (the first word of which ends in *ṣamad*)»; or the similarity of phrases between the two suras, like the end of sura 93 and the start of sura 94 (both suras, in fact, allude, in similar terms, to various trials undergone by Muhammad); or even a similar content, like suras 2 to 5, which contain a great number of laws.

Let us again take the following example, an extract from the *al-Mā'ida* sura, which sums up Zarkashī's method well. He notes that v. 5:3, which starts with a series of prohibitions on the consumption of various meats, is suddenly interrupted by the solemn declaration, «Today the misbelievers despair of your religion... I have approved for you Islam as your religion», then returning to the development on meat, to make those who eat the forbidden meats in need, rather than from scorn for the law, innocent (here we find the objection to the text's incoherence, reported above, in Khattābī's *Bayān i'jāz al-Qur'ān*). Zarkashī first of all explains the link between the second part («Today...») and the first (on the prohibitions) as an encouragement to observe the food regulations and an incitement to oppose the unbelievers, completing religion in this way. Then he

15 ZARKASHĪ, *Al-Burhān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, I, 38. See too CUYPERS M., «Une analyse du début et de la fin du Coran», 252-253.

16 ZARKASHĪ, *Al-Burhān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, I, 260-262.

shows the link between the third part (the violation of the prohibition because of necessity) and the first part, by using v. 6:145, which effectively quotes these elements one after the other<sup>17</sup>. This is correct, and clearly constitutes an advance in the understanding of the text's coherence, but in doing so Zarkashī still does not notice that v. 3 is constructed in a structure which is found numerous times in the same sura, as indeed elsewhere in the Qur'an — two units with a semantic link are both interrupted and linked by a third, central unit, different from the two which frame it in both content and form. To spot these structures, one needs to have spotted the boundaries between the different parts that make up the text; in other words, one needs to know the principles of composition.

Even if he had not yet got there, by confirming a correlation between verses and suras, Zarkashī did strongly emphasize the question of the coherence of the Qur'anic text. Quoting the Andalusian *qāḍī* Abū Bakr ibn al-'Arabī (d. 543/1148), he saw that links between the verses of the Qur'an made it into «a single Word»<sup>18</sup>.

Among the few scholars who were interested in these correlations, apart from Abū Bakr al-Nisābūrī and Abū Bakr ibn al-'Arabī, whom we have already mentioned, Zarkashī also names Abū Ja'far ibn al-Zubayr (d. 708/1308), the teacher of Abū Ḥayyān (d. 745/1344) and author of a work entitled *Proofs of the appropriateness of the organization of the suras of the Qur'an*<sup>19</sup>, and, particularly Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), who saw «the greatest subtleties of the Qur'an in the arrangements (*tartibāt*) and correlations (*rawābiṭ*)»<sup>20</sup>. If there are no further scholars interested in this aspect of the Qur'an, it is, says Zarkashī, because of its difficulty<sup>21</sup>.

It seems that it is Zarkashī who should be credited with having initially introduced the study of correlations between verses and suras in the context of «Qur'anic studies» (*'ulūm al-Qur'ān*). The first known book which summarizes Qur'anic studies, *'Ajā'ib 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, by Ibn al-Anbārī (d. 328/940) breathes not a word about it<sup>22</sup>. Although he mentions symmetry between the suras, it is

17 «Say: "I do not find, in what is revealed to me, aught forbidden to him who eats thereof, except it be carrion, or blood outpoured, or the flesh of swine — that is an abomination — or an ungodly thing that has been hallowed to other than God; yet whoso is constrained, not desiring nor transgressing, surely thy Lord is All-forgiving, All-compassionate» (Sura 6:145, translation Ar.).

18 ZARKASHĪ, *Al-Burhān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 1, 36.

19 ABŪ JA'FAR IBN AL-ZUBAYR, *Al-Burhān fī munāsaba tartib suwar al-Qur'ān*, edited by M. Sha'bān, Rabat, Wizārat al-Awqāf, 1990.

20 ZARKASHĪ, *Al-Burhān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 1, 35-36.

21 ZARKASHĪ, *Al-Burhān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 1, 36.

22 See 'ABD AL-ḤALĪM ḤASHIM AL-SHARĪF, *Al-Suyūṭī wa juhūdihī fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 141-145. The author gives the content of the book according to unpublished manuscripts.

purely to note the external fact that some have the same number of verses, like suras 1 and 107 (7 verses), 8 and 39 (75 verses)<sup>23</sup>. And very few years prior to Zarkashī, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1327), in his work *Muqaddima fī usūl al-tafsīr* was unaware of the study of correlations as a principle of exegesis<sup>24</sup>.

It is noteworthy that Zarkashī does not cite as his predecessors in his theorizing about the correlation between the verses and suras any of the early teachers interested in rhetoric in the Qur'an like Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), in his *Ta'wīl mushkil al-Qur'ān*, or Ibn Mu'tazz in his *Kitāb al-Badī'* (completed in 274/887), nor any of the works of the *Nazm al-Qur'ān*, or on the Qur'an's inimitability (*i'jāz*) (such as the *I'jāz al-Qur'ān* by Baqillānī, d. 403/1013). Arabic rhetoric was only interested in figures or tropes (the figured meaning, or *majāz*; comparison or *tashbīh*; metaphor or *isti'āra*, etc.), which dealt with small units of text — words, phrases, verses or distiches. The *nazm* works, like the later works on rhetoric, understood the *nazm al-Qur'ān* as the stylistic organization of the sura, linked to its syntax and rhetorical figures<sup>25</sup>. The question that Zarkashī was asking went beyond these smallest levels in the text. What interested him were the relationships between the verses and the suras, that is, the coherence of the discourse.

A century after Zarkashī, Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqā'ī (d. 885/1480) wrote a large, twenty-three volume commentary on the Qur'an entitled *Nazm al-durar fī tanāsib al-āyāt wa l-suwar* («The order of pearls in the correlation of verses and suras»). In the introduction, he in turn repeats and comments on Zarkashī's text, which we have just skimmed through. He adds his own thoughts:

The study of the suitability of the correlations (*munāsabāt*) is of the greatest importance, whether in the Qur'an or elsewhere. Through this, we know the reasons for the arrangement (*tartīb*) [of the parts]. Its subject is the parts of such or such an object, and it shows the suitability of the correlations in their arrangement. It therefore tells us the relative importance of every part, through its connection with what goes before it and what follows it [...].

<sup>23</sup> AL-SHARIF 'A.H.H., *Al-Suyūti wa juhūdihi fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 143.

<sup>24</sup> See MIR M., «The *sūra* as a unity. A twentieth century development in Qur'ān exegesis», 212. On 211-112 M. Mir also summarizes Zarkashī's theory.

<sup>25</sup> «Muslim rhetoricians have called this unique composition of the Qur'ān *nazm al-Qur'ān* (lit. «the order of the Qur'ān»), a reference to the beautiful fusion of its wording and meaning in accordance with principles of grammar, rhetoric and phonology», BOULATA I.J., «Literary structures», *EQ*, III, 198.



Consequently, the study of the suitability of the correlations in the Qur'an is what shows us the principles of arrangement (*tartīb*) of its parts. It is *the secret of rhetoric* in that it brings out the agreement between the meaning and what the situation requires and that it obtains in this way the understanding of the meaning sought by the sura in question. This allows the intention of each of its sentences to be understood. Such a study is thus extremely valuable — it is to exegesis what *'ilm al-bayān* is to syntax<sup>26</sup>.

Here, Biqā'ī expresses an almost modern awareness that an element in the discourse only has its meaning in its context, within the structure it is part of; that the discourse is organized with a view to producing a meaning; and that this organization of the discourse depends on a rhetoric which is its «secret». While the *'ilm al-bayān* in Arab tradition is that aspect of rhetoric which «deals with the various possibilities of expressing the same idea in various degrees of directness and clarity»<sup>27</sup>, that is, which deals with comparison, metaphor and metonymy, the «study of correlations» itself is the rhetoric of the structures of the various parts of the discourse, even the Book as a whole. Biqā'ī later quotes an important reflection by Rāzī (similar to the one reported by Zarkashī quoted above) which appears in the commentary on sura 2 (v. 285), and which clearly shows Rāzī's attentiveness to the connections between the verses in his commentary:

Whoever meditates on the subtleties of the composition (*nazm*) of this sura and on its marvelous organization (*tartīb*) will acknowledge that the Qur'an, inimitable in the eloquence of its expression and the nobility of its meanings, is also inimitable in its organization and the composition of its verses. Perhaps this is what those who commented on the inimitability of its style meant. I note, however, that the commentators all avoid these subtleties and pay no attention to these hidden things. Should we not say here, «The eyes underestimate the star's dimension. This is due to the eye, not to the star's smallness!»<sup>28</sup>

Biqā'ī quotes two further commentators who were interested in the relationships between verses in the Qur'an whom he was inspired by — Abū l-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn Aḥmad ibn Ḥasan al-Tajībī al-Ḥarallā al-Maghribī and Ibn al-Naqīb al-Ḥanafī, who is said to have composed a sixty-volume *tafsīr*.

26 BIQA'Ī, *Nazm al-dura*, I, 5-6. Partially quoted as an epigraph to this work.

27 VON GRUNEBaum G.E., «Bayān», *ET*<sup>2</sup>, I, 1116.

28 RĀZĪ, *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, VII, 128. Partially quoted in epigraph to this work.

In the chapter in *Itqān fi 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (*Mastering the sciences of the Qur'an*) which he devotes to the «correlations between verses and suras»<sup>29</sup>, al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) essentially repeats Zarkashī without adding anything very new. He distinguishes between the following three types of relation between the verses: 1) from the similar to the similar (synonymy); 2) antithesis; 3) digression by association of ideas (*istirād*)<sup>30</sup>. He also focuses on the connections between the beginning and end of a sura and, looking at the order of the suras themselves, between the end of one sura and the start of the next.

Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī, in his work *Al-Tafsīr wa l-mufasssīrūn* (*Exegesis and the Exegetes*, 1961) also suggests that Khatīb al-Shirbīnī (d. 977/1569), author of the commentary *Al-Sirāj al-munīr*, Abū al-Sa'ūd (d. 982/1574), author of *Irshād al-'aql al-salīm ilā mazāyā al-Kitāb al-karīm*, and al-Ālūsī (d. 1270/1853), author of *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī*<sup>31</sup> were interested in the connections between verses and suras.

Despite these isolated attempts, the importance Rāzī, Zarkashī and Biqā'ī attached to the correlations between verses and suras and to their coherence did not succeed in being imposed as a principle of exegesis. This is probably due to the fact that their attention was particularly focused on the relationship between successive verses: they never really stopped treating the text in an «atomistic» way, but were only trying to link these «atoms» to one another. Mustansir Mir describes their method as «linear-atomistic»<sup>32</sup>: v. 1 of a sura is related to v. 2, v. 2 to v. 3, and so on until the end of the sura. Overall this is a concatenation of verses rather than a real structuring of the text.

In his evocative work on this area, M. Mir does suggest that in the twentieth century a serious change took place. Several exegetes dealt with the sura as a whole, claiming a coherence for the verses. Among them, he cites Ashraf 'Alī Thanavī (d. 1943), Ḥamid al-Dīn al-Farāḥī (d. 1930) and Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī (d. 1997) in Pakistan and India; 'Izzat Darwaza (d. 1984) and Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966) in Egypt; and Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī (d. 1981) in Iran. According to M.

29 SUYŪTĪ, *Al-Itqān fi 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, III, 322-338.

30 SUYŪTĪ, *Al-Itqān fi 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 324-327.

31 AL-DHAHABĪ M.H., *Al-Tafsīr wa l-mufasssīrūn*, I, 338, 342, 345, 350, 352, 361.

32 MIR M., «The sūra as a unity», 212.

33 MIR M., «The sūra as a unity», 219.

29 SUYŪTĪ, *Al-Itqān fi 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, III, 322-338.

30 SUYŪTĪ, *Al-Itqān fi 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 324-327.

31 AL-DHAHABĪ M.H., *Al-Tafsīr wa l-mufasssīrūn*, I, 338, 342, 345, 350, 352, 361.

32 MIR M., «The sūra as a unity», 212.



Mir, the trait shared by these modern commentators is their «organic-holistic» approach to the text, which replaces the «linear-atomistic» approach of their predecessors<sup>33</sup>. Of all the authors he quotes, Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī has clearly pushed the search for coherence of the suras the furthest. This returns to his teacher al-Farāḥī's idea that each sura has a main theme, which he calls the «pillar» (*ʿamūd*) of the sura, to which the other verses are logically pegged. In his large commentary in Urdu entitled *Taddabur-i Qurʾān*, (*Reflections on the Qurʾan*) A.A. Iṣlāḥī analyzes each sura from this perspective<sup>34</sup>. This leads him to pinpoint the major divisions of the suras and to analyze them in detail. M. Mir summarizes his analysis of sura 2 («The Cow») as follows: an introduction (vv. 1-39) and a conclusion (284-286) frame four sections: 1) an address to the Israelites (40-121); 2) the Abrahamic inheritance (122-162); 3) the *sharīʿa* or the Law (163-242); 4) the liberation of the Kaʿba (243-283). Within each of these sections the link between the different parts is shown<sup>35</sup>. But there is more — A.A. Iṣlāḥī also wondered about the link between suras, which led him to state that most suras, if not all (the *Fātiḥa* would be among the exceptions) form complementary pairs<sup>36</sup>, and that it was possible to divide up the whole text of the Qurʾan into seven large thematic groups of suras: suras 1-5, 6-9, 10-24, 25-33, 34-49, 50-66 and 67-114<sup>37</sup>. We could agree with A.A. Iṣlāḥī that we are dealing with a real study of the Qurʾan from the perspective of the structure of the text, but a structure which, here again, is only established by locating the thematic or logical links between the parts of the text, and which risks a certain subjectivity on the part of the interpreter. So as Farid Esack can say in conclusion to a summary of A. A. Iṣlāḥī's theory that, «The divisions which we have just suggested, certainly innovative, show that they are arbitrary and too dependent on what the reader chooses to see»<sup>38</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> MIR M., «The sūra as a unity», 219.

<sup>34</sup> For a detailed study of this commentary, see MIR M., *Coherence in the Qurʾan. A Study of Iṣlāḥī's Concept of Nazm in Taddabur-i Qurʾān*. There is also a summary of the Iṣlāḥī's analysis of sura 4 («The Women») (46-49).

<sup>35</sup> MIR M., «The sūra as a unity», 215-216.

<sup>36</sup> See MIR M., *Coherence in the Qurʾan*, ch. 5, «The Sūrah Pairs», 75-84.

<sup>37</sup> MIR M., *Coherence in the Qurʾan*, ch. 6, «The Sūrah Groups», 85-98.

<sup>38</sup> FARID ESACK, *Coran, mode d'emploi*, 102. For all this, we do not think that A.A. Iṣlāḥī's theory can be described as «fantasist», as A.T. Welch does in his article «Sūra», *ET*, IX, 924a. Our analyses of the last thirty suras of the Qurʾan confirms their organization in pairs. See our articles on this in the bibliography.

We could probably say the same about the attempts of Sheikh Sa'īd Ḥawwā, from the Syrian movement of the Muslim Brotherhood. In a great commentary entitled *Al-Asās fī l-tafsīr* (*The foundations of exegesis*) written in the 1980s, he proposes breaking the text of suras down into various levels, which in descending order are the part (*qism*), the piece (*maqṭa'*), the paragraph (*faqra*) and the group (*majmū'a*), with the stated aim of showing the text's unity and coherence<sup>39</sup>. His divisions follow the text's themes, but also respond to distant correspondences between terms which mark the literary units. Although still cursory, his method anticipates what could be a real analysis of the composition of the Qur'anic text as understood by this work.

Perhaps this new «organic-holistic» approach to the text is a reaction against Western Orientalists' exaggerated insistence on the Qur'an's disjointed, not to say incoherent, character. «But», continues M. Mir, «perhaps a more important factor is at work. In the twentieth century there has been a growing realization among Muslims that the task of reinterpretation of Islam has to begin with the Qur'an»<sup>40</sup>. From now on an interpretation of the Qur'an by itself is privileged, avoiding reliance on the principles of extra-Qur'anic interpretation which dominated ancient exegesis (reliance on the «occasions of revelation» or hadiths).

Finally, M. Mir suggests that «the real test of the *sūra*-as-a-unity thesis, then, is whether it gives rise to *a new method for the study of the Qur'an*. Is the thesis capable, on the one hand, of generating *techniques that will help establish plausible links between the verses and passages of the Qur'an, and, on the other, of generating meaning that cannot otherwise be generated?*»<sup>41</sup> The danger, of course, in this new approach to the text is of only calling on the commentator's intuition to establish the correlations between verses and suras. To avoid any subjectivity, it needs to be supported by the facts provided by the text itself, in all objectivity. So the question arises — does the Qur'anic text offer signs of composition which will allow its structure and, from that, its meaning, to be established? We feel that the rhetorical analysis of the Qur'anic text now allows this question to be answered in the affirmative.

<sup>39</sup> HAWWĀ S., *Al-Asās fī l-tafsīr*, 30-31.

<sup>40</sup> MIR M., «The *sūra* as unity», 218.

<sup>41</sup> MIR M., «The *sūra* as unity», 219. Our emphasis.

### From Western Orientalism

Just as historical biblical criticism was developing at the end of the nineteenth century, academic Orientalism, with, particularly, Gustav Weil (d. 1889), author of *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in den Koran* (*Historical-Critical Introduction to the Qur'an*, 1844) and Theodor Nöldeke (d. 1930) who published the first edition of his *Geschichte des Qurāns* (*History of the Qur'an*) in 1860, applied similar methods to the Qur'an, trying to locate additions, interpolations and «incoherences» to reconstitute the «history of the Qur'an». While refining and introducing techniques from modern linguistics, Orientalism remained, until very recently, very attached to this historical-critical approach. So, for instance, Richard Bell published his translation of the Qur'an in 1937-39, with the revealing subtitle, *Translated, with a critical re-arrangement of the Surahs*; the text is divided up and reorganized into fragments of different dates. Régis Blachère, in turn, published his French translation in 1949, presenting the suras in a chronological order suggested by him, and also reorganizing the text here and there to give a coherence, which according to him, was more logical.

In his 1981 article «*Al-Kur'ān*» in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, A.T. Welch emphasizes Bell's influence in the division of suras into fragments from different periods<sup>42</sup>. In the paragraph devoted to the Qur'an's «structure», he himself deals with only the following points:

- The suras: their decreasing order, with the explanation that some suras which disturb this order are rearranged (suras beginning with the same «mysterious letters»; dating from the same period; dealing with the same main themes; or with a similar introduction); the classification of suras according to their titles (corresponding to a word which appears at the start of the sura; or elsewhere in the sura; or does not appear at all).
- The verses: short and rhythmic verses in the Meccan suras, or longer, more prosaic verses in the Medinan suras; verses ending in rhyme or assonance («Because of the rhyme the verses form the most natural divisions of the text, and yet we cannot be certain where some verses originally ended»); the numbering of verses in different editions of the Qur'an.

Then A.T. Welch turns to the question of *basmala* (its meaning, origin, and place at the start of the suras) and the «mysterious letters» which appear at the start of twenty-nine suras.

42 WELCH A.T., «*Al-Kur'ān*», *EI*<sup>2</sup>, v, 418.

All this is a meager harvest to define the structure of the Qur'anic text. Later, Welch studies some literary forms which are characteristic of the Qur'an — oaths, «sign-passages», «say-passages», narratives, regulations, liturgical forms, eschatological scenes, sermons. There are many forms in which we can glean some sparse structural elements.

That same year, 1981, in which Welch published this article, marked an important development in Orientalist study of the Qur'an. Two very different studies appeared which nonetheless shared the fact that they approached the Qur'anic text not from the diachronic perspective, but from the synchronic perspective, postulating the suras' textual unity. Pierre Crapon de Caprona published *Le Coran: aux sources de la parole oraculaire, structures rythmiques des sourates mecquoises* (*The Qur'an: at the sources of the oracle discourse, rhythmic structures of the Meccan suras*) and Angelika Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren* (*Studies on the composition of the Meccan suras*). These two studies focused on the structures of the Meccan suras, the former on the text's rhythm and the latter on various signs, mainly rhyme. P. Crapon de Caprona, who died before his work was published, was unable to follow it up. A. Neuwirth's thesis, on the other hand, marked the start of fruitful research in a number of articles over several years a synthesis of which can be found in her article «Form and structure» in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (vol. 2, dated 2002)<sup>43</sup>, some points of which we emphasize here.

A. Neuwirth refuses to come out in favor either of the historical-critical trend which historicizes the Qur'an to excess, exploding the suras into composite fragments of different periods, or the trend initiated by John Wansbrough, influenced by *Formgeschichte*, which completely de-historicizes it, attributing its composition to an anonymous committee working a century or more after Muhammad, and only interested in the Book's macrostructure, ignoring its detailed structures. A. Neuwirth puts herself on a «third way», suggested by J. J. van Ess, who, thinking of the sura as a liturgical communication, supports its original redactional unity and its semantic unity. The Qur'an is to be considered as having been originally a grouping of liturgical texts to be recited (which the word *qur'ān*, Syriac in origin, means). The short or medium-length suras from the Meccan period show the traces of this liturgical origin in their rhythm, their mnemotechnical assonances, and their careful composition (with introductory

43 NEUWIRTH A., «Form and structure», *EQ*, II, 245 ff.

and concluding formulae). However, the final corpus integrated other texts, the long Medinan suras (including sura 5, *al-Mā'ida*), made up of isolated communications, relaxed composition, without coherent literary structure. The presence of these latter next to the former in the same corpus neutralized the liturgical nature of the Book as a whole and makes the characteristics of the long suras reflect back on the short ones. Their literary unity is lost from view, so that only isolated passages are seen, out of context, which could possibly be linked to other similar texts elsewhere in the Book. The text's canonization erased the historicity of its composition to emphasize only its eternal, timeless message. The internal historicity of the book was substituted by the external historicity of the «occasions of revelation», which link the text to events in the Prophet's life. A. Neuwirth suggests returning to the internal history of the Book, through the study of its development as a liturgical communication, reflected in specific textual structures. «Further literary investigations into the micro-structure of the Qur'ān, which might reveal the still-traceable traits of that history, remain an urgent desideratum»<sup>44</sup>. Here A. Neuwirth brings together M. Mir's research, which has made known some Muslim exegetes (al-Farāḥī, A.A. Iṣlāḥī) who rediscovered the sura as a semantic unity, «a concept long neglected in Muslim circles and generally dismissed as irrelevant in western scholarship»<sup>45</sup>.

Returning to the broader picture of her thesis, A. Neuwirth emphasizes the importance of rhyme and of groups of rhythmic unities in the structuring of the Meccan suras. An analysis of verses in their division into segments and the relation between the structure of each segment and its thematic content ends with a typology of the structures of suras: «Most Meccan sūras display fixed sequences of formally and thematically defined verse groups distinctly separated by a change of rhyme or other clearly discernable, sometimes formulaic markers of caesurae»<sup>46</sup>. In this way the verses can be grouped into two, three, four and even ten or more verses. Except for the shortest, the suras are made up of a balanced series of these groups, which can be classified into various types<sup>47</sup> — oaths, eschatological passages, «signs» (in nature or in history), debates (polemical or apologetic), regulations and evocations of events experienced by the community (in the Medinan suras), etc.

<sup>44</sup> NEUWIRTH A., «Form and structure», *EQ*, II, 248.

<sup>45</sup> NEUWIRTH A., «Form and structure», *EQ*, II, 248.

<sup>46</sup> NEUWIRTH A., «Form and structure», *EQ*, II, 252.

<sup>47</sup> But why does Neuwirth's article «Form and structure», *EQ*, II, 249, translate *Gesätze* (strophe) by the incomprehensible French «enjeux»?

The oldest Meccan suras are made up of one, two or three parts. The latest are marked by the presence of a framework. The Book is mentioned in the introduction, where there is a discursive section (apologetic, polemical, paraenetical), and they end with a matching section, most often a confirmation of revelation. In the middle is a narrative section which mentions a biblical personality. This triple division of the sura, however, tends to become blurred towards the end of the Meccan period. «In Medina, however, sūras have not only given up their tripartite scheme, but *they display much less sophistication in the patterns of their composition*»<sup>48</sup>. Note this last comment, which our analyses drew out: whatever the case for the other «long» suras, in the *al-Mā'ida* sura the triple division clearly structures the sura as a whole (made up of two sections each of three sub-sections) and it is very present at every textual level. The sophistication of its composition is certainly no less than in the Meccan suras; on the contrary, its very complexity makes it indiscernible. Once again, we say with Rāzī: «The eyes underestimate the star's dimension. This is due to the eye, not to the star's smallness».

A. Neuwirth's studies have the advantage of being based on a detailed analysis of the text and also bring an abundant harvest of observations, but in practice they are limited to the Meccan suras. The long, Medinan suras seem to be inappropriate for her methods of investigations.

As far as we know, three recent works have dealt with the question of the structure of the long suras. One, dating from 1997, is by Matthias Zahniser, who analyzes the structure of the *al-Nisā'* sura («The Women», sura 4)<sup>49</sup>. The other two are by Neal Robinson. The first (1996) examines the *al-Baqara* sura («the Cow»)<sup>50</sup>, and the other (2001), on which we will now focus, analyzes the *al-Mā'ida* sura, «Hands Outstretched: towards a Re-reading of *Sūrat al-Mā'ida*»<sup>51</sup>. The main interest of this work is not in its conclusion, which is presented as a hypothesis proposing a link between the ten parts of the text, arranged in mirror

48 NEUWIRTH A., «Form and structure», *EQ*, II, 264. Our emphasis.

49 ZAHNISER M., «Sūra as Guidance and Exhortation: The Composition of *Sūrat al-Nisā'*», 71-85.

50 ROBINSON N., *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, 201-223.

51 ROBINSON N., «Hands Outstretched: Towards a Re-reading of *Sūrat al-Mā'ida*», 1-19. We were only able to access this work having completed this work. We have added some convergences in certain places with Robinson's analyses as notes, and have even indicated a point which we did not make in our own analysis, which we borrow from him (the similarity of the endings of vv. 29, 30, 31 and 51, 52, 53, indicating the start of two parallel textual units). The broad convergence of method between totally independent research, convinces us that here is a decisive breakthrough for a new exegesis of the text of the Qur'an.



fashion (i.e., two sets of five parts, in reverse order), with the ten fingers of the two hands to help the recitation of the text by memory, but in the method used to locate the text's divisions. This method essentially (but not exclusively) consists in identifying remote repetitions of words, syntagmas, or whole phrases, both identical and similar, which act as indicators of the text's composition. This is also the principle we have used in this work. This method leads N. Robinson to various observations, that we also have partially made: the start and end of a section are often similar<sup>52</sup>, as are the second and penultimate verses of a section<sup>53</sup>; a section is often characterized by the repetition of a key word or phrase, which is absent from the sections which frame that section<sup>54</sup>; stereotyped theological formulae often mark the end of a section<sup>55</sup>. Here and there N. Robinson locates sub-sections within a section<sup>56</sup>. It is not only vocabulary which marks the transition from one section to another; it can also be the change of literary genre (the start of a narrative, for example, as in vv. 20 and 27); the theme (as in vv. 33-40, which are «mainly focused on the punishment of antisocial crimes»<sup>57</sup>), a rhyming formula (vv. 34 and 39)<sup>58</sup>, or a change in the person to whom the discourse is addressed (as in v. 41 «O Messenger», followed by «O you who believe» in v. 51, marking the start of a new section), the change in tense (v. 109 jumps to the Day of resurrection). N. Robinson also locates some linking devices between the sections, particularly the «hooked key words» and «hook-words» and «parallel introductions»<sup>59</sup>. Finally, he notes the importance of the chiasmus structure, both at the level of phrases and the text as a whole. He sees the *al-Mā'ida* sura as organized in one vast chiasmus, from v. 1 to v. 108, ignoring vv. 109-120 (which clearly raises a problem!).

52 «The first and last verses of the section can both begin in the same way», ROBINSON N., «Hands Outstretched», 3.

53 ROBINSON N., «Hands Outstretched», 3.

54 ROBINSON N., «Hands Outstretched», 3.

55 ROBINSON N., «Hands Outstretched», 3.

56 Just as vv. 12-14 and 15-19, forming «two sub-sections in one single section», ROBINSON N., «Hands Outstretched», 4.

57 ROBINSON N., «Hands Outstretched», 4.

58 ROBINSON N., «Hands Outstretched», 4.

59 It is interesting to note that Robinson applies these ideas to a thesis on the structure of the Epistle to the Hebrews: GUTHRIE G.H., *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-linguistic Analysis*. See ROBINSON N., «Hands Outstretched», 6-8 and n. 12. The Epistle to the Hebrews is an excellent location for the study of text structures (not only «hook-words») as A. VANHOYE's many works demonstrate, including *Structure and Message of the Epistle to the Hebrews*.

This analysis represents a great leap forward in the discovery of the text of the Qur'an's composition. We encountered most of the points raised above in our own work. Two essential elements distinguish our own work, however — reliance on a systematic theory (*rhetorical analysis*, theorized by R. Meynet), and a process which goes from the micro to the macro-structure, rather than the reverse process which N. Robinson adopts. N. Robinson's way of proceeding is found in many biblical studies, and R. Meynet has unceasingly emphasized the error in this method. As there are numerous symmetries in biblical texts, perhaps even more so in the Qur'an, it is extremely risky to approach the text from its structures as a whole, however tempting this may be. These large structures are, of course, the most interesting and the most significant for the understanding of the text, and the temptation to go straight to them is huge. But on what basis are these structures identified? Does repetition indicate the start of two corresponding units, or their end, or the two outer parts of a unit, or even hook-words between two neighboring units? Starting from a general perspective is surely to risk making an arbitrary decision between the various possible structures. It is therefore imperative to go through the dry and laborious work of starting from the smallest structures and going to the larger ones, clearly distinguishing between the different levels of the text, to ensure that the division of the text into its different units is correct, as are the connections between these textual units. So our analysis does not come to the same general conclusion as N. Robinson's. Of the eleven units he distinguishes, five correspond to our own divisions (but at different levels of the text, while for N. Robinson all the units are at the same level). These are vv. 33-40, 41-50, 51-58, 87-108, 109-120. But for N. Robinson, this grouping of the first ten units out of the eleven he distinguishes form a chiasmus. Our analysis showed a very different construction of the sura.

### Jacques Berque's vision

Jacques Berque did not really follow up the concrete analysis of the structures of the text, but he was always interested in it and he foresaw the coherence of the text of the Qur'an and its composition at various textual levels with unusually refined observations. In 1979 he wrote in the introduction to his translation of pre-Islamic poems of the *Mu'allaqāt*:

In all this [the succession of sequences with no apparent order in the odes] the critic criticizes the lack of organic unity, or at least of transitions [...]. This is to reject a con-

stant characteristic of this literature, in the name of a certain kind of logic, which is that every whole is arranged over sub-wholes, or motifs, without postulating any succession or regular link from one to the other. The same so-called incoherence is invoked by Orientalists about Qur'anic taxonomy. With a few exceptions, the individuality of the sura, so obvious to believers, and its composition escape us [...]. It is true that a fundamental difference, not only in content, which goes without saying, but in the internal sequences, makes a Qur'anic sura different from a Jahiliyyah poem. The sura can also be divided into sequences and these sequences into verses. It is just that, as the Qur'anic *āya* is not a verse, but varies in its mass, its sonorities and rhythms according to revelation, neither the verse, nor the sequence, nor the sura as a whole is modeled on a matrix; but a matrix does govern the poem, or at least in some ways «produces» it<sup>60</sup>.

J. Berque's long familiarity with the text of the Qur'an over the years which he devoted to his translation into French made him feel that it was not merely a disorderly compilation of fragments but, on the contrary, a knowingly structured text at every level. Its structure is difficult to identify, because it is not a fixed «matrix» which the text flows into, like the poetry of the pre-Islamic odes, the *Mu'allaqāt*. The first page of what is J. Berque's intellectual testament, published in 1990 as an appendix to his translation of the Qur'an, with the title «On rereading the Qur'an», sketches out the whole plan of our work.

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Beginning a study of the Qur'an by examining its composition is to approach it from its most demanding side. It is to seek connections between the whole, its sub-wholes or suras, and their divisions or verses; perhaps it is even to go further, to analyze the distribution of verses into sentences and of sentences into groups of words. Who knows? to get to the final level, where phonology links grammar, logic, *rhetoric*, of course carrying out this work without stopping to pay attention to the long or short rhythms which make a single vibration in this vast text; and finally, to take the other way, and rebuild a whole out of all its dismembering.

Although no survey, as far as we know, has so far taken on such an ambitious program, at least several of the partial problems which it embraces have continued to affect research, both Islamic and Orientalist, not without a marked emphasis in the former to draw out a preferential meaning of the expression, and the latter to reveal, under

<sup>60</sup> BERQUE J., *Les Dix Grandes Odes arabes de l'Anté-Islam. Les Mu'allaqāt*, 16-17.

this expression, gaps in the formulation according to the time. We, however, think that as this is, by definition, a single field of study, and seen as such, as tradition has transmitted it, *it is the system of this unity and this conformity which it is most important to grasp*, inasmuch as it is accessible to our means<sup>61</sup>.

Setting himself apart from the long historical-critical Orientalist tradition, particularly careful to reconstitute the genesis of the Qur'anic text, by revealing additions and interpolations, J. Berque wondered about the structure of the completed Book, in its totality as much as in its lesser parts, even down to the verses and words, and phonemes. Many observations led him to reject the idea that the Qur'an is a text without order or logic, as some continue to think. «All the undeniable regularities and symmetries... show... very clearly, according to us, the existence of an order to the Qur'an, its singularity and complexity, even, we would be tempted to say, its deliberate nature»<sup>62</sup>. Without being able to describe the precise way, he sees in the text of the Qur'an «a complex arrangement... an eminent organization»<sup>63</sup>, «an original putting together»<sup>64</sup>, which has nothing to do with the «numerical and literal speculation» followed by some: «Even if they now use the computer, their approach doesn't banish the arbitrary»<sup>65</sup>.

J. Berque glimpses the structural role played by repetitions: «The frequent repetition of concepts in identical or analogous terms is striking, and this is something very different from the rhetorical tropes of anaphora or redundancy»<sup>66</sup>. But neither does he hide the reverse phenomenon of «dissimilation»: «Reciprocally, one might say that the Qur'anic account enjoys sudden leaps. It moves without transition from one subject to another, then returning to the first, or to another»<sup>67</sup>. He spots «structures in tracery»<sup>68</sup>, and elsewhere observes «like two sides arranged to relate to a central clause, which thus forms a particu-

61 «En relisant le Coran», in BERQUE J., *Le Coran* (1990) 711-712. Our emphasis. In a similar, but less detailed text, written shortly afterwards, *Relire le Coran* (1993), J. Berque makes further observations on the Qur'an's structure about the importance of the centers, groups of verses or strophes, and parallelisms (27-32).

62 BERQUE J., *Le Coran*, 717.

63 BERQUE J., *Le Coran*, 713-714.

64 BERQUE J., *Le Coran*, 729.

65 BERQUE J., *Le Coran*, 717.

66 BERQUE J., *Le Coran*, 722.

67 BERQUE J., *Le Coran*, 723.

68 BERQUE J., *Le Coran*, 724-725.



lar importance»<sup>69</sup>. These facts, which his research «brings to light, as it were, from every angle»<sup>70</sup>, lead him to ask about the logical analysis of the text, considered in its *synchrony*, not in the diachrony of revelation. Traditional Islamic exegesis is no great help here, as it «most often [sticks to] a gloss on words or at least, groups of words»<sup>71</sup>. Among more recent exegetes, however, there are those who «try to take account of the link between sentences themselves»<sup>72</sup>. Here J. Berque cites as examples Ṭāhir ibn ‘Ashūr and Sayyid Quṭb. There are others whom we have encountered in previous pages, and we might also add Mawdudi, and the recent commentary produced by a team of ulama at al-Azhar, the *Tafsīr al-wasīṭ*<sup>73</sup>. This latter is not only attentive to the connections which link the verses to each other, but also to the logic which links a particular sura to its neighbors. Without an appropriate technical tool, however, it must be acknowledged with J. Berque that their «appreciations... are still subjective»<sup>74</sup>. «As for Orientalism, despite a few recent semiotic approaches, its interest is not, as far as we know, in taxonomy or the system»<sup>75</sup>.

J. Berque then wonders about the phenomenon of parallelism, citing some examples in the Qur’an, which lead him to discuss the Bible:

A bolder investigation would perhaps, in this instance, mention the analogy of the Psalms, in which some passages alternate between direct and responsorial or antiphonal speech. Of course, the Qur’an mentions the *Zabbūr*, but more precise arguments are needed to draw out an influence. However, thinking about the parallelisms which several Semitic languages enjoy, and which the Bible supplies examples of, is not forbidden. Finally, without wishing to attribute more to these affinities than required, this new stylistic trait of the Qur’an reinforces the impression which we already had of the Qur’an’s order of arrangement — the detail of its texture competing with intentionality<sup>76</sup>.

<sup>69</sup> BERQUE J., *Le Coran*, 727.

<sup>70</sup> BERQUE J., *Le Coran*, 728.

<sup>71</sup> BERQUE J., *Le Coran*, 728.

<sup>72</sup> BERQUE J., *Le Coran*, 728.

<sup>73</sup> See the Bibliography.

<sup>74</sup> BERQUE J., *Le Coran*, 728.

<sup>75</sup> BERQUE J., *Le Coran*, 728.

<sup>76</sup> BERQUE J., *Le Coran*, 745-46.

What the eminent Islamic scholar is hardly daring to suggest here was to show itself to be the key to all his other questions about the Qur'an's composition. The Bible not only supplies «examples» of parallelism — it has them in abundance on every page, most clearly in the Psalms and Proverbs, and more discreetly, but no less really, in other biblical writings. And so this «system», or «rhetoric», which J. Berque sought to decode in the Qur'an's composition, was found in neither Islamic exegesis nor in Orientalism, but by journeying via biblical studies.

We hope we have shown that the renewal of Qur'anic exegesis has everything to gain from the experience of biblical studies.