“ONLY GOD KNOWS THE CORRECT READING!”
THE ROLE OF HOMER, THE QURAN AND THE BIBLE IN THE RISE
OF PHILOLOGY AND GRAMMAR

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My language flies with me to our eternal unknown
on both sides of the shattered past behind us…
(M. Darwish)

Abstract
This paper, written by a Hellenist with no direct competence in Semitic languages, attempts an elementary comparison between forms and meaning of the development of grammatical thought in three linguistic traditions: Greek, Arabic and Hebrew. Special attention is devoted to the role of the respective foundational texts (Homer, the Quran and the Bible) within (and behind) this process, especially as far as their philological reconstruction and the identitarian value of their language are concerned. As a result, it will emerge that some analogies link the early interplay between philological approach and description of language in the Greek and Arabic worlds, whereas the Hebrew tradition, because of historical and partly of ideological reasons, followed a rather different path.

Introduction
Grammar is not an obvious discipline in the realm of human thought and knowledge. Not many civilisations in the history of mankind can be shown to have developed tools of linguistic analysis autonomously, i.e. without borrowing them more or less wholesale—through various adaptations—from a foreign, pre-existing tradition.1 In this respect, the three major cultures of the Mediterranean world (the Greco-Latin, the Jewish and the Arab) followed rather heterogeneous paths. What influenced the main features of the process most deeply were three elements: the role of canonical (holy or less holy) texts in the shaping of the “standard” language; the various degrees of continuity between old and new linguistic facies (spoken contemporary language vs. traditional written language of

1 See e.g. a nice overview in sections I–V of Koerner—Asher 1995, and a more succinct (though not always precise) one in Campbell 2001: 81–84.
the canonical text); the identitarian purport of linguistic and grammatical lore as a means of shaping scholastic praxis and thus the average public culture in general.

In what follows, we shall attempt to outline some of the most relevant features of the early stage of each of the three grammatical traditions, which will then enable us to draw some analogies as well as point to differences between them. This is not an easy task: the phenomena we are dealing with took place in different historical ages (spanning from early Hellenism down to the late Middle Ages), they were far from sudden or consistent, and above all the contact between the three cultures inevitably led to reciprocal influence and contamination. However, shared elements such as the central role of one canonical text, the more or less continuous shift in the spoken standard, and the broader cultural and historical (i.e. not only technical) significance of linguistic description, represent a common ground that justifies a comparative approach.

1. Greek

1.1. The Rise of Greek Grammar

Recent studies have shed considerable light on the controversial mechanism which raised Greek grammar from its ambiguous beginnings to the status of a real techne: the date of this consecration is debated, all the more so as what is commonly regarded as the first manual of grammar in Western culture should probably not be ascribed—at least not in its present form—to the scholar whom manuscript tradition claims as its author, the grammarian Dionysius Thrax. Yet, whatever the exact contents of Dionysius’ Techne grammatike, we can safely assume that it did exist, and that some sort of systematic treatment of the basic linguistic issues was in place by the early 1st century B.C.E.

Dionysius may or may not have been a Thracian himself, but he certainly studied in Alexandria at the school of Aristarchus of Samothrace (2nd cent. B.C.E.), by common consent the greatest philologist of antiq-

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2 Good overviews of the main modern trends in the history of Greek grammar can be read in Swiggers-Wouters 2002 (esp. the editors’ introduction, pp. 9–20, and the ambitious essay by Prencipe 2002); Swiggers-Wouters 2005; Ildéfonse 1997 is more theoretically oriented.

3 See the opposite views held by Di Benedetto 1958 and Erbse 1980, as well as the discussions in Law-Sluiter 1995 and Schenkeveld 1994.