ARABIC AVANT LA LETTRE. DIVINE, PROPHETIC, AND HEROIC ARABIC

Stefan Wild
Bonn

1. Introduction: the Qurʾān

The history of the Arabic language is indelibly marked by the fact that the Qurʾān has made Arabic a prophetic language with its own holy book and a worldwide appeal. Arabic had been a mantic language in pre-Islamic times. When the poet recited verses or when the soothsayer uttered his sayings, reciter and listener were sure that behind his voice there was another voice. This voice ‘really’ speaking was that of a higher power.

With the Qurʾān, the mantic voice behind the voice of the Prophet Muhammad became in the believer’s ear the voice of the one and only God. Muslim dogma and the consensus of the unlearned considered the Qurʾān to be the direct, undiluted Arabic word of God. The status of Classical Arabic, the standardization of Arabic including the development of Modern Standard Arabic, the diglossia Standard Arabic versus Arabic dialects, the nature of the Arabic vocabulary, Arabic orthography, Arabic style and vocabulary—all are unthinkable without the ‘Qurʾānic fact’. The history of the Arabic language down to our times cannot be written without constant reference to the Qurʾān.

Conversely, the Qurʾān is deeply marked by its ‘Arabness.’ The Qurʾān is the first literary document in Arabic. It is also the first Arabic document to mention the Arabic language. In contradistinction to the attitude of the Jewish Bible and the Christian New Testament toward their own linguistic forms, the language of the Qurʾān is an important topic of Qurʾānic self-reflection. While neither the Bible nor the New Testament refer to their Hebrew (or Aramaic) and Greek literary forms, the Arabic character of the Qurʾān is in its self-view a cornerstone of its divine quality.

The adjective ʿarabī in the Qurʾān always refers to the language, never to a tribe or a social class. The term as an ethnic designation is also
very rare in Jāhiliyya poetry. In the Qurʾān, ʿarabī refers always to the language of the holy text. It occurs eleven times in the Qurʾān, and only in Sura’s traditionally dated to the Middle and late Meccan period. In six passages, the adjective ʿarabī is a qualification of the word Qurʾān, a word meaning primarily ‘recitation, reading aloud…’ (Sura 12:1–2; 20:113; 39: 27–28; 41:1–4; 42:7; 43:1–4). The conjunction lisān ʿarabī ‘Arabic tongue’ occurs three times in the Qurʾān (Sura 16:103; 26:195, 46:12), and is used to describe the language of the Qurʾān. The conjunction ḥukm ʿarabī (Sura 13:37) ‘an Arabic judgment’ also refers to the holy text, and in 41:44, in which the possibility of a Qurʾān a’jamī ‘a non-Arabic Qurʾān’ is dismissed, the adjective ʿarabī again refers to the holy text. The Arabic quality of Qurʾānic revelation could scarcely be more solidly established.

On the other hand, the Qurʾān seems indifferent to the linguistic shape of preceding revelations. In the Qurʾān, the only language used is Arabic. Arabic is also the only language mentioned by name. The Qurʾān does not specify in which languages Nūḥ, Ibrāhim, Ismāʿīl, Mūsā, ʿĪsā or other prophets and messengers spoke to their peoples or in which languages their holy books might have been.

God speaks Arabic to Adam and his wife, Satan whispers in Arabic (Sura 20:120), the angels and the jinn speak Arabic (Sura 72:1–15), Moses addresses the Pharaoh, Joseph addresses the Egyptian minister’s wife in Arabic, Jesus speaks Arabic from his cradle, ʾDū ʾl-Qarnayn and the People of the Cave—they all use Arabic. Every single soul is made to speak Arabic at the Day of Judgment, animals like the ant (Sura 27:18) or the hoopoe (Sura 27:22), even inanimate entities like Hell (Sura 50:30) speak Arabic. Everybody and everything that speaks in the Qurʾān must necessarily speak Arabic, because Arabic is the only language used throughout the Qurʾān.

But the intention of the text is in no way to convey that all mankind throughout history shared and will share the same language. I do not know of any exegete who concluded from the Qurʾānic accounts that the language used between Mūsā and the Egyptian Pharaoh was Arabic or that the language used between the Egyptian notable’s wife and her lady-friends must have been Arabic, or that the Messiah spoke in Arabic—just because the Qurʾān reproduces their words in Arabic. It is a different matter for Adam and Ismāʿīl (see below).

1 Cf. Agha and Khalidi: Poetry and Identity 70.