The Silent Qur’an and the Speaking Qur’an: History and Scriptures through the Study of Some Ancient Texts*

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I. Addressing the Issues: Violence and Scriptures in Early Islam

During the last two decades, within the framework of my courses at the Sorbonne, I have dedicated many years to the study of some ancient Shi'i works: their historical and religious context, their authors, their structure and content, the intellectual and spiritual movements in which they came into being etc… Delving into the history of these texts has led me progressively to a series of issues that, despite their obviousness, had not been sufficiently studied: the connection between the development of Islam's scriptural sources, namely the Qur’an and the Ḥadīth, and the fratricidal violence and civil wars that have marked the first centuries of that same religion; two major facts indissolubly related that determined the historical and spiritual evolutions of Islam even to this very day.

As far as scriptural sources are concerned it all occurred quite straightforwardly according to Sunni tradition that came to be known as the “orthodox” one. The divine revelations, gathered faithfully and in their entirety by the two first caliphs Abū Bakr and ʿUmar, were collected in a single Qur’an by a commission of scholars during the rule of the third caliph ʿUthmān (r. 23/644 to 35/656), that is less than thirty years after the death of prophet Muḥammad (d. 11/632).1 Parallel Qur’anic versions, deemed unworthy to

* For its most part this article presents the subject of my book Le Coran silencieux et le Coran parlant, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2012.

1 The bibliography regarding the information presented during this introduction is plethoric. In order not to burden the notes let me to forward the readers to the usual reference works such as the Encyclopédie de l'Islam, the Encyclopaedia
be trusted, were destroyed and the official version, called the ‘Uthmānic codex, was soon accepted by the entire community of the faithful, except for a handful of heretics. Similarly, regarding the Ḥadīth, that is the prophetic traditions of which there were thousands, they were subjected to severe examination by scholars in order to identify the authentic from the fake ones; this ended up in the development of a vast reliable corpus established according to the strict rules of the criteriological science of Ḥadīth.

And yet, critical research, by submitting both Islamic and non-Islamic sources of all sorts to thorough historical and philological examination for the last 150 years, offers a far more complex and more problematic picture of the history of the composition of Islam’s holy writings. An important corpus of sayings by Muḥammad seems to have been progressively distinguished in Qur’an and Ḥadīth, that is, identified respectively as God’s words and prophetic traditions. The official Qur’an, put *a posteriori* under the patronage of ‘Uthmān, seems to have been established later, probably under the caliphate of the Omayyad ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (r. 65/685 to 86/705). It also presents all the signs of a long work of composition at the hands of a team of scribes and other established scholars. Only a few decades separate the eras of both caliphs but those decades amount to many centuries given that between both periods the incalculable consequences of both incessant civil wars and the huge and lightning conquests have disrupted the history, society and mentalities of the first Muslims. In addition, even when drawn up and declared official, the state codex took many centuries in order to be accepted by all Muslims. Among the scholars and movements opposed to the Omayyad state, a great number of important personalities seemed not to have accepted the authenticity of the ‘Uthmānic Qur’an and considered it to be a tampered version of the revelations that were made to the Prophet; among them the Shi’is expressed the most systematic and most numerous criticisms against the integrity of the official Qur’an. Other Qur’anic versions, sometimes very different in both form and content, like the ones of ‘Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet and fourth caliph, or of the companions ‘Abdallāh b. Mas’ūd and Ubayy b. Ka’b, continued to circulate at least until the 4th/10th century. Likewise unending discussions regarding the authenticity of ḥadīth-s opposed scholars often for centuries. And even

*of the Qurʾān or l’Encyclopaedia Iranica* to the entries corresponding to data supposed to be more or less known such as “Qurʾān”, “Ḥadīth”, “Badr”, “Muḥammad”, “Abū Bakr”, “‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb”, “‘Uthmān”, “‘Ali b. Abī Ṭālib”, “Fāṭima”, etc.