

**A PIECEMEAL QUR'ĀN: *FURQĀN* AND ITS
MEANING IN CLASSICAL ISLAM AND IN
MODERN QUR'ĀNIC STUDIES**

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Like citizens in the 19th century European landscape, words have become inalienable, with a fixed meaning that was impossible to forfeit or eradicate. This untranslatable and fixed meaning became the mode of understanding linguistic borrowing in Orientalist philological discourse of the late 19th and early 20th century. Words were seen as autonomous citizens, incapable of losing their original meaning, a meaning that shone with a light of its own and was impossible to efface regardless of what new use the borrowed word was put to in a different language. It was a light which no borrowing could hide. A word could be masqueraded, but no serious scholar would mistake it for what it had adorned itself with; with some effort, an enlightened philologist could uncover the charade, expose the conceit and lay bare the true meaning of the original word. Authenticity now became something material, a substantive characteristic of existence that adhered to the word regardless of historical or linguistic contexts. The “original” meaning was the authentic one, the inalienable one, and the normative and operative one. It did not matter how many migrations it underwent and into how many new languages it was incorporated. Borrowing was seen as a degenerative process: for the move to a new linguistic environment meant that the word had degenerated and became less authentic. This perceived process gave even more significance to the rhetoric of authenticity.

This romantic and a-historical approach to word borrowing and semantic development in a Semitic language's borrowing process is perhaps one of the most persistent features of Qur'ānic studies, a discipline too fond of erudition to give up on this etymological fallacy. James Barr has laid bare the pernicious effects of etymological studies in Biblical studies.¹ I did the same in a long article on the foundations of the et-

¹James Barr, *Comparative philology and the text of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

ymological approach in Qur'ānic studies.² This present article is the second installment in this effort to show how and why such an approach is untenable, and has failed to produce any real insights into the meanings of the Qur'ān. In view of the entrenchment of this approach, nothing short of a concerted effort that shows concrete examples of its limitations and its futility will turn the tide.

The foundational text for this approach remains Arthur Jeffery's *The foreign vocabulary of the Qur'ān*, published originally in 1938, and reissued repeatedly — most recently, in the Texts and Studies on the Qur'ān.³ The work is the culmination of the etymological trend, and illustrates its foundational premises. Its introduction is remarkable for the absence of any serious theoretical discussion about how the meaning of a borrowed word changes in the borrowing language, or what is the relationship between the original meaning of the word in its mother language and its meaning in the new setting. What we have in the introduction to this book is actually a discussion of what the native philological Arabic tradition has to say about the phenomenon of foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān. This would have been a commendable exercise if it had been carried out for its own historical and cultural reasons — that is, to determine how a pre-modern philological tradition understood the nature of borrowing.⁴ But the introduction is designed to prove that the tradition was clueless about the origins of the words discussed, and could only occasionally fathom the etymology of a word.⁵ This is so self-evident that the point is superfluous — etymology proper came in the wake of the philological revolution in Europe, and required multilingual training in cognate languages (or neighboring languages) that Muslim scholars did not possess. What Jeffery's exercise attempts to do is to circumvent any internal philological inquiry into the words themselves in the Arabic context, and to equate etymology with philology.⁶ In this way,

²Walid Saleh, "The etymological fallacy and Qur'ānic studies: Muḥammad, paradise, and Late Antiquity," in Angelika Neuwirth et al., eds., *The Qur'ān in context: historical and literary investigations into the Qur'ānic milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 649–698.

³Arthur Jeffery, *The foreign vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938); reissued by Texts and Studies on the Qur'ān Brill Series (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

⁴See Ramzi Baalbaki, "Early Arab lexicographers and the use of Semitic languages," *Berytus* 31 (1983): 117–127. See now Andrew Rippin, "The designation of 'foreign' languages in the exegesis of the Qur'ān," in J.D. McAuliffe, Barry Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering, eds., *With reverence for the word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 437–444; *idem*, "Foreign vocabulary," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, s.v.

⁵Jeffery, *Foreign vocabulary*, p. 31: "From the discussion thus far it has become obvious that we cannot rate very highly the work of Muslim authorities who have dealt with this difficult and important subject."

⁶Arthur Jeffery, *Foreign vocabulary*, p. 32: "All things considered, one is not

etymology was purposefully made into the only tool to understand the “foreign” vocabulary in the Qur'ān. Yet, to classify a word as foreign in the Qur'ān does not in itself make the argument for its etymology as the only path to its semantic analysis.

The premise in etymological studies is that borrowed words are an inherently different category of words.⁷ But that is neither self-evident, nor factually true. A tradition could fail to understand a native word in a canonical text, or actively misrepresent the meaning of a native word for many reasons. The tradition could, however, know the exact and correct meaning of a borrowed word as it was intended and used in a specific way, regardless of its meaning in the source language. Borrowed words are “native words”; they are words used by a speaker of the language to express ideas or notions in his own words in the context of his own language, even if these words are borrowed. The meaning of a borrowed word is not its etymological meaning, to repeat the insights of Barr. A word means what it means in a particular context, which is not necessarily connected to its original meaning in the source language. An etymological analysis is thus neither the proper nor the philological way to understand foreign words. To know the meaning of a borrowed word, we ought to conduct a philological analysis similar to the one we carry out to investigate native words. Moreover, borrowed words are not the equivalent of calque translated words in a high cultural setting, where the meaning even of native terms is colored by the original translated word from the source language. The historical setting of the word and the text should be the determinant factors of how we approach the analysis of the semantic meaning of a given text.

The analysis of the word *barzakh*, which occurs in three instances in the Qur'ān, is a good example of the irrelevance of etymological semantic studies as carried out regarding the Qur'ān.⁸ In his short discussion, Jeffery gives us the reasons why he presumes that this word is foreign and thus suitable for an etymological analysis: Muslim exegetes were clueless about its origin, for they gave no trilateral root, nor any citations from older poetry, but they were of fecund imagination; lexicographers were no better.⁹ But this is not the sum total of a philological investigation

surprised that they had so little success with the problems of the foreign words in the Qur'ān, or that they detected so few out of the relatively large number recognized by modern scholarship, for they had but the most meagre of philological resources at their disposal.”

⁷See Martin R. Zammit, *A comparative lexical study of Qur'ānic Arabic* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 51–61. Zammit excluded foreign vocabulary from discussion in his work, based on Jeffery's precedent.

⁸Qur'ān 23:100; 25:53; 55:20.

⁹Jeffery, *Foreign vocabulary*, p. 77: “...and the exegetes do not know what the reference is, though as a glance at aṭ-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr* will show, they were fertile in

in Arabic of the word, is it? A glance at al-Ṭabarī and at some lexicons, and a presumed absence of usage of the term before the Qurʾān, is not an exhaustive analysis. The underlying assumption here is that not knowing that the word is foreign means that the tradition is incapable of knowing its meaning. Etymology is thus positioned as the method to determine words' meanings. This is hardly cogent or true. The tradition was not only aware of the proper meaning of a given word, but often, as in the case of *barzakh*, it also continued to develop its meaning and use it for additional religious concepts. A closer look at the philological analysis carried out on *barzakh* by medieval Muslim scholars shows it to be far more cogent than Jeffery was willing to admit. Yet, to limit ourselves to what they managed to do would be counterproductive, for in many cases Muslims did not merely take a pure philological interest in the meanings of words. They were careful not to let philology undermine theology, and in many instances their "philological" analysis was designed to undermine philology. This does not mean that we ourselves cannot re-examine the word and offer a better understanding of it from inside its linguistic matrix.

The Qurʾān uses the term *barzakh* in two distinct contexts: to speak about the separation between sweet and salt water (Qurʾān 25:53; 55:20), and to speak of the duration or time (Qurʾān 23:100) between an individual's death and his ultimate resurrection. This data clearly indicates that the text is using *barzakh* in various ways, a sign that it is not using the word haphazardly. The context in Qurʾān 23:100 is such that it allows us to understand what the Qurʾān is implying and trying to emphasize.¹⁰ Qurʾān 23:100 speaks of unbelievers' wishful thinking at the moment of death, when they plead for another chance to prove their worth. Not only is this rebuffed, but they will reside in their tombs for an unknown duration (*barzakh*) until they are resurrected. A continuation of this scene, which is not portrayed in Qurʾān 23:100 — the moment of resurrection from the grave and the questioning of the resurrected about how long they had stayed there — is an oft-repeated scene in the Qurʾān. There are at least eleven verses that depict this scene of post-resurrection questioning, and the word used there is "to abide," "dwell," "stay" (Arabic: *labath*).¹¹ Thus *barzakh* in Qurʾān 23:100 refers

guesses. That the word is not Arabic seems clear from the Lexicons, which venture no suggestions as to its verbal root, are unable to quote any examples of the use of the word from old poetry, and obviously seek to interpret it from the material of the Qurʾān itself."

¹⁰Qurʾān 23:99–100: "When death comes to one of them, he cries, 'My Lord, let me return so as to make amends for the things I neglected.' Never! This will not go beyond his words: a barrier stands behind such people until the very Day they are resurrected" (Abdel Haleem's translation).

¹¹Qurʾān 10:45; 17:52; 20:103, 104; 23:113, 114; 30:55, 56; 46:35; and 79:46.

to this duration of existence in the grave in a state of death (or sleep), during which one is unaware of the passage of time, until one is awakened unaware as to how long the slumber of death was. *Barzakh* is thus a “duration,” a “span of time.” It is clearly a barrier in the other two verses.

Both the exegetical tradition and the lexicographic tradition were not unaware of the meaning of the term; they were simply unaware of its foreignness, hardly a disqualifying gaffe. Their analysis stands, and is more cogent than Addai Sher's argument that *barzakh* means “weeping” in Persian — one of the etymological possibilities cited by Jeffery only to be rejected. Nonsensical etymological guesses are admitted into the academic discourse, regardless of how untenable they may be, while the indigenous tradition is disqualified with a wave of a hand. This is a feature of Qur'ānic studies — speculations receive an audience so long as they are not of the tradition. But “weeping” as the meaning for *barzakh* is not only impossible, it makes no sense. Vollers' etymology that it is from Pahlavi (*frasang*, a measure of land and of roads) is accurate, but hardly illuminating in the Qur'ānic context. In Arabic it did not mean a measure of land, but that which lies between two things — or figuratively, a duration or a barrier or an obstacle.¹² The term is actually used in an early rare *ḥadīth* about 'Alī who forgot a passage (*barzakh*) while reciting the Qur'ān — a usage that was not known to Orientalists.¹³ The culmination of Jeffery's argument is that the meaning of the word in Pahlavi is the basis to be used to explain the Qur'ān — or as he states it which “could thus fit the sense of barrier in all three passages.” So is *barzakh* in the Qur'ān “*frasang*”? Or is it “barrier”? Exactly how do we go about analyzing terms in the Qur'ān if not from the Qur'ānic context? Neither Muḥammad nor the people around him were using the word as it was used in Pahlavi, that much is certain. Unless Muḥammad or the authors of the Qur'ān knew every language that they are supposed to have borrowed from, this sort of analysis does not stand. Its usage in Arabic is what is essential for understanding its meaning in Arabic.

To show how flimsy Jeffery's analysis is, let us take the word *jund*, “host, army, troop, force.”¹⁴ The lexicons provide us with a trilateral analysis, they know how to quote old poetry, and the native tradition was apparently not in any doubt about the meaning of this word. Thus, all the missing items that were cited as reasons for considering *barzakh*

¹²See the detailed analysis of *barzakh* in al-Wāḥidī's *al-Basīṭ*, vol. 16, pp. 64–66.

¹³The *ḥadīth* is quoted in *al-Basīṭ*, who is quoting it from Abū 'Ubayd (see *al-Gharībayn fī al-Qur'ān wa-l-ḥadīth*, Aḥmad al-Mazīdī, ed. [Beirut: al-Maktabah al-'aṣriyyah, 1999]), vol. 1, p. 169). It is also mentioned by al-Azharī in his *Tahdhīb al-lughah* (see references in *al-Basīṭ*).

¹⁴Jeffery, *Foreign vocabulary*, pp. 104–105.

foreign are here available for *jund*. This shows that the absence of this information is hardly relevant to Jeffery in determining if a word is foreign. *Jund* is from Pahlavi, through Jewish Aramaic. But what does this etymology offer for the meaning of the word in the Qur'ān? Nothing, as the analysis of Jeffery shows. What this adds is a patina of erudition, a tone of scholarly objectivity, and, more significantly, a claim to speak authoritatively on the proper way to analyze the Qur'ān. It is moreover an evasion, for *jund* is not analyzed, even if we know its etymology. Etymology is here replacing literary analysis and philological investigation; almost any investigation of the Qur'ān is ruled out by this trajectory. The etymological history becomes a pre-history of the word, presented as if it leads to its usage in the Qur'ān and to the understanding of this usage.

The examples I have cited so far are innocuous and harmless enough, since there is not much at stake in the words subjected to etymological analysis, and not much is actually gained; the meaning of the words etymologized remains the same as the meaning the tradition has given us. It is with theologically-laden words that the real hazards of this approach become apparent. How we understand the theological terms in the Qur'ān is thus the issue — with reference to the Qur'ān, or with reference to the “original” language, where the original language is a stand-in for an earlier religion? It is here that the ideological vector of etymological studies becomes exposed. No term can match *furqān* in this regard. The history of the study of this term is a fascinating example of the workings of etymological studies on the Qur'ān.

Furqān in etymological studies

There is much to unravel in the history of the study of the term *furqān*, caught as it is in a tug-of-war between competing camps in the study of Islam, those who favour the existence of Christian origins of Islam versus those who support the theory of its Jewish origins. The term *furqān* became central in the claims of those who saw Christianity as being the most potent factor in the emergence of early Islam.¹⁵ For if it is truly from Syriac *pūrqānā*, “salvation,” this would be one of the most pivotal of words in the Qur'ān, tying the Qur'ān to a fundamental Christian term and concept. The problem with this understanding

¹⁵Chief among them was Richard Bell, see his *The origin of Islam in its Christian environment* (London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1926), pp. 118–129; reiterated in his *Introduction to the Qur'ān* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1953), pp. 136–138.

of *furqān* as salvation would become all too apparent to scholarship, hence the continuous attempt to settle the issue of the meaning of the term. In his study of the “problem” of salvation in the Qur'ān, Frederick M. Denny has to concede “that ‘salvation’ is not the key term in the Qur'ānic doctrine of salvation.”¹⁶ Etymology is not only unhelpful; it is creating problems which do not really exist. The article is a fascinating attempt to square the circle, for if *furqān* is salvation, then we have a problem; yet it is not the term for salvation in the Qur'ān, and only by an elaborate typological exegesis is it possible to connect *furqān* with anything resembling salvation. This typological exegesis was first offered by Richard Bell, where he connected *furqān* with the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt.¹⁷ All in all, we were reworking the Qur'ān to fit etymological musings, with utter disregard for the Qur'ānic data.

A glance at an article written on salvation in the Qur'ān which uses the Qur'ānic text to offer an internal understanding of this concept shows that *furqān* is not an operative word in the cluster of words that deal with salvation. *Furqān* is not mentioned even once in the article.¹⁸ The same situation is evident in the entry for “Salvation” in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, although it is not clear why this entry failed to acknowledge James Robson's article.¹⁹ *Furqān* is not salvation, yet the etymology proposed by scholars tries to present this meaning as unshakable.

Jeffery's entry for *furqān* gives us the major analysis of the term up to 1938, solidifying the consensus that it is related to salvation, and that the origin of the word as used in the Qur'ān owes its genesis to a borrowing by Muḥammad from Syriac, to which he added his own meaning.²⁰ This resulted in a layering of semantic complexity that hinted at an infelicity of usage rather than the sophistication of his teaching. Recently, two articles have been published on the term, one by Fred M. Donner, and the second by Uri Rubin, which reopened the debate on the meaning of *furqān*. It is interesting that the two articles are diametrically opposed in their presuppositions and are paradigmatic of our field. Donner's article takes the etymological argument to an absurd extreme, thus showing

¹⁶Frederick M. Denny, “The problem of salvation in the Quran: key terms and concepts,” in A.H. Green, ed., *In quest of an Islamic humanism: Arabic and Islamic studies in memory of Mohamed al-Nowaihi* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 1984), p. 197. Denny does plead with the reader that he did not intend to be flippant in making this statement.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 202–203 for references to Bell's theory (based, one might add, on al-Ṭabarī's analysis).

¹⁸James Robson, “Aspects of the Qur'ānic doctrine of salvation,” in *Man and his salvation: studies in memory of S.G.F. Brandon* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1973), pp. 205–219.

¹⁹Maurice Borrmans, “Salvation,” *EQ*, s. v.

²⁰For an attempt to keep a Syriac etymology, see Rudi Paret, “Furqān,” *ET*², s.v.

that building on the traditional etymological analysis can only lead to more outlandish postulations. In this article, Donner retains the Syriac *purqana*, salvation, as the preferred derivation for Qurʾān 8:41 (and most probably for Qurʾān 2:185; 8:29; and 25:1). However, he proposes that in other locations (Qurʾān 2:53; 3:3; and 21:48), *furqān* is actually “a garbled derivation of Aramaic *puqdānā*.”²¹ In another instance, he calls the etymology “deformed.”²² This is certainly one of the strangest of etymological musings, since there is no paleographic or etymological foundation for this claim. Etymology is not guesswork. We know that one word is derived from another because of strict rules of phonetic and morphemic transformation. We are to believe that a mistake while learning Syriac offered Donner an insight into the (deformed) etymology of *furqān*, from *p-q-d* — itself a bizarre way of carrying out etymological investigations. This is an analysis of an Arabic word (*furqān*), written in Arabic script, investigating its meaning through using its supposed double Syriac origin, as it was written in Syriac. Then it claims that this Syriac word was originally *pūqdānā*, which was then garbled into *pūrqānā*, and finally written by Muslims in Arabic as *furqān*. But there are two consonants in each word that are unrelated and it is impossible to conflate *p-q-d* and *p-r-q*; to his credit, Donner describes this derivation as garbled and deformed, but then blames the tradition for creating this mess. Muḥammad, or his followers, or later transmitters, did not know how to read the text they were transmitting. The scenarios offered as to what could have happened for this now supposed conflation between the two Syriac words in an Arabic text are outlandish, to say the least. We are left here without any meaningful historical analysis, let alone a proper etymological analysis. The article, however, illustrates where etymological studies end up when practiced in an uncritical manner, freed of any restrictions or rules relevant to etymological derivations. Earlier, Watt had expressed his hesitation about this Syriac etymology because it could not fully explain the Qurʾānic usage of the term. He was forced to conclude that “the interpretation of the verses mentioning the Furqān is highly speculative.” We can see how cavalier this new reading of *furqān* as *pūqdānā* is.²³ We are back to the theory of a tradition which did not know its inception, misunderstood its scripture, and garbled it when copying from a foreign script.

Rubin’s article²⁴ returns us to the position of Fleischer, who refused

²¹Fred M. Donner, “Qurʾānic Furqān,” p. 292.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 294.

²³W. Montgomery Watt and Richard Bell, *Introduction to the Qurʾān* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), p. 146. Notice here that despite Watt’s hesitation, he is still unable to dispense with *furqān* as some sort of salvation.

²⁴Uri Rubin, “On the Arabian origins of the Qurʾān: the case of al-Furqān,” *Journal*

to see in *furqān* an item of foreign vocabulary and treated it as a genuine Arabic word.²⁵ I remain unconvinced by Rubin's arguments about *furqān* being "light," since he gives the Arabic lexicon extensive authority over the meaning of the Qur'ānic verse. I do take the two articles to indicate the problematic nature of the solutions offered so far on *furqān*. Rubin still sees *furqān* as "salvation" (Syriac *purqānā*) as operative in two instances in the Qur'ān. Both articles make abundantly clear that we have, as of yet, not offered an explanation of *furqān* that takes into account the Qur'ānic setting.

My analysis takes an agreed-upon position as its starting point: there seem to be at least two meanings for the word *furqān* in the Qur'ān. This article is then divided into two major parts. I investigate the two possible meanings of the term *furqān* in the Qur'ān by a thorough reading of the context in which they occur. My intension is to examine the text of the Qur'ān in order to offer a meaning for the term from how it is used in its context. The remarkable aspect of all the studies on *furqān* is the absence of any attempt at analysing the Qur'ānic context or to investigate its meaning when used to describe scripture.

Scripture as *furqān*, a piecemeal revelation

In several instances in the Qur'ān, scripture is described as *furqān*. Why would this term be used, and in what way does using it fit in with the theology of the Qur'ān or its polemical setting? It is my contention that the term *furqān* was part of a larger effort on the part of the Qur'ān to argue for its divine nature and defend itself against its detractors. It is one term of many used in the Qur'ān to speak about the nature of scripture, or at least the unique position of the Qur'ān vis-à-vis the Torah. Thus the term was a polemical one, used for a polemical purpose: to defend the Qur'ān against the accusation that it was a fraudulent fabrication of Muḥammad.

Muḥammad's opponents were incessant in their demand for some sort of a sign, a miracle, to be convinced that Muḥammad was a messenger of God as he claimed, and that his Qur'ān was a revelation. One of the demands was for a book from heaven revealed to Muḥammad in one piece, whole, complete (*jumlatan wāḥida*). At the heart of this demand lies the notion of the Torah revealed on Mount Sinai. Muḥammad set

of Semitic Studies 54 (2009): 421–433.

²⁵Rubin cited A.J. Wensinck's arguments for two meanings for *furqān* in the Qur'ān, one of which is Arabic.

himself up for such a challenge: but when he compared his career to that of Moses, he was lacking on all levels of comparison. This demand for a Sinai-like revelation of a scripture was actually an accusation because Muḥammad was claiming a revelation that did not conform to that of the former heavenly books.

In Qur'ān 25:32 the unbelievers wonder why the Qur'ān was not sent down to Muḥammad in one piece: “The unbelievers ask: Why was the Qur'ān not revealed to him entire in a single revelation (*jumlatan wāḥidah*)”²⁶; Qur'ān 6:1–7 assails the unbelievers for their intransigence, only to conclude that even if a book written on parchment were sent down in one piece, the unbelievers would still claim that it is merely magic: “If we sent down to you a book inscribed on real parchment and they touched it with their own hands the unbelievers would still assert: This is but plain sorcery.” Finally, Qur'ān 6:154–157 informs us about the Meccans’ thinking regarding holy books: they were given to two previous communities (Jews and Christians), but not to them. Had a book been given to them, they would have become believers. The underlying argument is that the Qur'ān was not a book like the two others, nor should they expect one.

It is thus clear that those whom the Qur'ān calls unbelievers had requested such a complete book. This demand for a complete book sent down from heaven has its background in the tablets of Moses or in the common notion of the Sinaitic model of giving the Torah. The Meccans, when confronted with the prophetic claims of Muḥammad, asked for signs that had characterized the prophets before him. A book sent down from heaven was one of the signs that they were asking for, and it is not an unreasonable demand in light of Muḥammad’s insistence on the similarity of his career to that of Moses. That Muḥammad was unable or refused to produce a book was a clear indication to them that he was not a prophet, and that his revelations were fabricated — and not really a book. The demand for a complete book from heaven was made not only by the unbelievers, but also by the People of the Book, as Qur'ān 4:153 informs us.²⁷ This demand must have been unsettling because it was tied to the very nature of revelatory authority. Holy texts did come from heaven, and they usually came down in book-form, complete, to the prophet concerned — that much Muḥammad and his opponents agreed upon. This was not a mere tongue-in-cheek demand

²⁶Most translations are from *The Koran*, N.J. Dawood (London: Penguin Books, 1999), unless stated otherwise.

²⁷“The People of the Book demand that you [Muḥammad] make a book come down to them from heaven, but they demanded even more than that of Moses when they said, ‘Show us God face to face,’ and were struck by the thunderbolt for their presumption” (Abdel Haleem’s translation).

for wealth or gardens or some miraculous transformation in the usual order of physical events — the usual demands made of Muḥammad. Not only were they demanding a miracle, but by pointing to the fact that the Qur'ān was not being revealed in one instance, they were calling into doubt its similarity to previous Scriptures. In response, the Qur'ān would mount a sustained theological defense of its revelatory character and it would center its defense around this point in particular. It is not hard to discover how and where the Qur'ān tried to answer this challenge; indeed, I am arguing that the answer shaped the very nature of how the Qur'ān speaks of itself.

The etymological approach to the Qur'ān has produced a truncated analytical approach where musings about the origins of a word became the route to understand the Qur'ān. We are thus incapable of determining the main concerns of the Qur'ān, or how it polemically defined itself against the torrent of accusations contesting its status as divine scripture. As is typical of Qur'ānic discourse, it usually admits to the accusation only to defend itself against the charge, branding it as unreasonable or argumentative. The Qur'ān, when accused of not coming down in “one piece” (the *in toto* revelation model), admits to that. Thus in Qur'ān 25:32 cited above, after the accusation of not being sent down in one piece, the Qur'ān states: “Indeed thus (*kadhālika*), and we sent it down in pieces (*rattalnāhu tartīlan*).”

In this light, Qur'ān 17:106 takes on major significance, for it is addressing a major problem facing the claims of the revelatory status of the Qur'ān. The verse reads: “We divided (*faraqnāhu* or *farrāqnāhu*) the Qur'ān in order that you (Muḥammad) will read it to the people as you live among them (*‘alā mukthin*) and we are indeed sending it down seriatim.” This is one of many places in the Qur'ān where an attempt is made to answer this challenge.²⁸ The Qur'ān argues that it was being sent down in pieces because a prophet must proclaim his revelation as he lives among the people he wants to guide. In this verse we can see the connection between the word *Qur'ān*, the root *f-r-q* and consequently the word *furqān*. *Furqān*, whether a verbal noun from *faraqa* or more likely (as I would propose) a plural of *farq* or *furq* (in the sense of a section),

²⁸A few verses before 17:106 (in 17:88–92), the Qur'ān narrates all the unreasonable requests demanded of Muḥammad, including the bringing of a book from heaven: “In this Qur'ān, We have set out all kinds of examples for people, yet most of them persist in disbelieving. They say, ‘We will not believe for you [Muḥammad] until you make a spring gush out of the ground for us; or until have a garden of date palms and vines, and make rivers pour through them; or make the sky fall on us in pieces, as you claimed will happen; or bring God and the angels before us face to face; or have a house made of gold, or ascend the sky — even then, we will not believe in your ascension until you send a real book down for us to read.’ Say, ‘Glory to my Lord! Am I anything but a mortal, messenger?’” (Translation by Abdel Haleem.)

is thus a description of the nature of this revelation. The Qurʾān was a piecemeal revelation. Instead of being shy about the nature of its coming into being, the Qurʾān is thus undermining the attack on its character by making a virtue of necessity.

Connecting Qurʾān 17:106 with the word *furqān* is not as unusual as it might first appear, nor is it something new in modern scholarship. Rudi Paret in *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz* explicitly says that the verb *faraqa* used in this verse might refer to *furqān* (“Vielleicht wird damit aber auch auf dem Terminus Furqān angespielt”).²⁹ Unfortunately, he never elaborated on what the relationship might be. But his keen sense of the Qurʾānic language made him translate the verse in his *Der Koran* as “Es ist ein Koran, den wir abgeteilt (?) haben.”³⁰ Paret relegates the traditional translation of the verb *faraqa* as *faṣṣala*, or make clear, to a footnote where he states: “Oder klar gemacht. Der Ausdruck ist vieldeutig.” (Arberry and Abdel Haleem have “divided Qurʾān.”) Wagtendonk suggests (though only in a footnote) the possibility that *furqān* might mean a “Qurʾān revealed in sections.”³¹ Nevertheless, Wagtendonk, like Paret, adheres to the Syriac etymology of *furqān*. The failure to connect this to the bigger concerns of the Qurʾān has prevented us from seeing the significance of a piecemeal revealed Qurʾān for the Qurʾānic vocabulary.

The *mukth* in Qurʾān 17:106 — abiding, living with the people — is a fundamental narrative strategy in the Qurʾān in the lives of the prophets within their communities. Noah is the archetypal prophet who lives 950 years with his people, as Qurʾān 29:14 clearly indicates. The verb used here is *labitha*, a verb that appears several times to denote the physical life of the flesh-and-bones prophet, a human being like us, among his people. Indeed, in Qurʾān 10:15–16, the demand for a different Qurʾān or a replacement of the Qurʾān is tied to the act of revealing it publicly, and its veracity is tied to the notion of having lived and abided with the people before it was revealed:

²⁹Rudi Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1989), pp. 308–309: “Schwierig ist die Deutung des Ausdrucks *faraqnāhu*. Vielleicht ist damit gemeint, dass der Koran nicht gleich vollständig, sondern in Abschnitten, Stück um Stück geoffenbart worden ist.”

³⁰Rudi Paret, *Der Koran: Übersetzung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1996), pp. 203–204.

³¹K. Wagtendonk, *Fasting in the Koran* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968), p. 64, note 1, “Possibly Mohammed associated the concept *Furqān* with the fact that the Koran was revealed in sections. Cf. 17:106 (107): “We have divided it (*faraqnāhu*) so that thou mayest recite it gradually for the people.” Cf. 25: 32(34) (which belongs in the same context), where approximately the same thing is said in answer to the question of the unbelievers, as to why the Koran could not have been revealed in its entirety.”

When our clear revelations are recited to them, those who entertain no hope of meeting us say to you: 'Give us a different Qur'ān or change it.' Say: 'Had God pleased, I would never have recited it to you, nor would He have made you aware of it. A whole lifetime I dwelt (*labithtu*) among you before its coming. Will you not understand?'

The dramatic depiction of Noah's life in Sūra 71, where a desperately despondent Noah complains to God that he has been preaching "day and night" (71:5), preaching publicly (71:8) then secretly (71:9), is an elaborate emphasis of the concept of *labth*, abiding. Sūra 71 transforms abiding into discrete acts indicating the necessity of being with the people, so much so that Noah's people end up complaining that his preaching is nothing but tediously long and unending argumentation (Qur'ān 11:31).

Faṣl as *furqān*

The Qur'ān uses also another verb to expound on the piecemeal nature of the revelatory experience of Muḥammad. The verb *faṣala*, to "divide," "separate," would become a central term in describing the nature of the Qur'ān. This term is not "foreign," and therefore it escaped the attention of modern scholars. Meanwhile, the Islamic exegetical tradition has attempted to sever any connection with, and in most cases eradicate, the possibility that *f-ṣ-l* is about the piecemeal nature of Muḥammad's revelatory experience. The Islamic exegetical tradition did its best to connect the root *f-ṣ-l* and *f-r-q*, and then proceeded to neutralize both. Fortunately, the usage of the root *f-ṣ-l* leaves little doubt that the verb refers to a divided Qur'ān, revealed in pieces.³² The exegetical tradition was too heterogeneous and contested to allow the meaning of *f-ṣ-l* as a piecemeal Qur'ān to disappear. There was a certain level of philological professionalism that undermined theology in the *tafsīr* tradition.

Qur'ān 7:52 reads: "We have brought to them a book which we divided (*faṣṣalnāhu*), knowingly [or on purpose], a guidance and mercy

³²The root *f-ṣ-l* is used forty-three times in the Qur'ān, in many contexts. The more concrete usages of the term are: a turning with the soldiers to a destination (Qur'ān 2:249| see also 12:94 for a caravan of camels); a separation between married couples (Qur'ān 2:233); weaning of a child (Qur'ān 31:14; 46:15); the rest is mostly used with books, signs, and God. A group of verses uses the expression *yawm al-faṣl*, Day of Separation, for Judgment Day, God is the one who separates (judges) between people.

to a believing people.”³³ The usual translation is to understand the term *faṣṣalnāhu* as “make clear, elaborate” or such other terms that are related to the clear meaning of the Qur’ān. The verse is actually structured to parallel Qur’ān 17:106; Qur’ān 7:52 states that the Qur’ān has been divided intentionally, ‘*alā ‘ilmīn* (or knowingly, paralleling the term *kadhālika* in Qur’ān 17:106), precisely because it was meant as a guidance and mercy for the believers. Once more, the disputed nature of the Qur’ān, its descent in pieces, is presented as necessary for God’s plan of salvation.

Practically the entire exegetical Islamic tradition understood Qur’ān 7:52 as a reference to the clear meaning of the Qur’ān.³⁴ Indeed, al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), whom I consider the most systematic obfuscator of the verses that could mean a piecemeal revealed Qur’ān, consistently treated the root *f-s-l* when used in reference to revelation, as a verb that means “to make clear, distinguish between truth and falsehood.” For example, al-Ṭabarī brings no traditional interpretations on Qur’ān 7:52, and glosses *mufaṣṣal* as “distinguishing between truth and falsehood.”³⁵ There is, however, one exegete who stated the obvious, and even connected it with Qur’ān 17:106. Al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944), for reasons that I will not explain here, was able to escape the pull of the Sunnī orthodoxy of central Islamic lands.³⁶ His recently-published Qur’ānic commentary can show us to what degree al-Ṭabarī was attempting to shape the interpretation of the Qur’ān. Al-Māturīdī gave us such a detailed analysis of Qur’ān 7:52 that it is worth translating it in full:

It is possible to interpret *faṣṣalnāhu* as clarified, and *tafṣīl* as clarification. It is also possible that *faṣṣalnāhu* means we divided the Qur’ān when we sent it down and we did not send it down in one piece (*jumlatan wāḥidah*), as God has already said in the Qur’ān, “a Qur’ān that we divided, that you read it to people” (Qur’ān 17:106) — meaning that we divided it when we sent it down according to events, so that they know the judgment and the rule of each verse according to the event that it was revealed for. Or they are relieved

³³My translation.

³⁴Even al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, vol. 2, p. 82, mentioned only the standard interpretation of *faṣṣalnāhu* as made clear or clarified. Al-Rāzī followed him on this; see *Mafātīh*, vol. 14, p. 100.

³⁵Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, vol. 8, p. 203: *mufaṣṣilan — mubayyinān fīhi al-ḥaqq min al-bāṭil*.

³⁶Only al-Qurṭubī mentioned in passing that *faṣṣalnāhu* here can also mean “we sent it down in pieces.” See his *al-Jāmi‘ li-ahkām al-Qur’ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1967), vol. 7, p. 217, on Qur’ān 7:52. It is not clear whence al-Qurṭubī derived this interpretation.

of the need to know the details about each verse, but the group of verses that are revealed related to an event is their guide to connect the verse with the ruling. Or God could have revealed it piecemeal to facilitate knowing the rules and regulations since it is easier for minds to remember these if it was revealed in pieces (*bi-l-tafārīq*).³⁷

My argument is that the root *f-ṣ-l* in the Qur'ān indicates the piecemeal manner of revelation, rather than “a clear detailed Qur'ān.”³⁸ Other usages of the verb in the Qur'ān are far more direct in linking the manner of revealing the Qur'ān to the verb *f-ṣ-l*. The prime example is verse Qur'ān 6:114, which reads:

Am I to seek a Judge other than God, while He is the one who sent down to you the book *mufaṣṣalan*. Those who have the Book [Jews and Christians] know that it is sent down from your God rightly; be not from the doubtful then.

All exegetes except al-Māturīdī took *mufaṣṣalan* to mean a clear Qur'ān.³⁹ The verse as it is explained in the exegetical tradition and as it is translated by modern translators is unacceptable. The real import of the verse can only be appreciated when we take *mufaṣṣal* to mean “a divided Qur'ān.” The verse is stating that “why should I, Muḥammad, take the word of anyone else but God as a judge [over this matter], since He is the one who is sending down the Qur'ān in pieces, separately; ask those who know Scripture, they know that it is indeed coming down from heaven truly. O Muḥammad, do not doubt.” The verse is thus about a debate between Muḥammad and his people over this divided Scripture of his. He is not willing to concede to the argument that the Book must come down in one piece. God is the judge, and He is the one who is sending it thus; ask previous scriptural communities.⁴⁰ To read the verse in any other way is to render it meaningless and actually mysterious.

³⁷ Al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, vol. 5, p. 362.

³⁸ See Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur'ān's self-image: writing and authority in Islam's scripture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 160–165. Madigan does not entertain the possibility that *f-ṣ-l* could mean a Qur'ān revealed in pieces. He is unwittingly following the traditional line.

³⁹ See for example al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 8, p. 8; al-Wāḥidī, *al-Basīṭ*, vol. 8, pp. 383–384; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, vol. 2, p. 46; al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, vol. 13, p. 167.

⁴⁰ As mentioned above, al-Māturīdī was the only exegete to offer the possibility that *mufaṣṣal* in verse Qur'ān 6:114 could mean a piecemeal Qur'ān:

وقيل: مفصلا: مفرقا أي أنزله بالتفاريق لم ينزله مجموعا جملة.

The point here is not that this is another possible meaning for the term. This is actually the sound philological reading. Qurʾān 7:133 uses the same form of the root, *mufaṣṣāl*, to describe the serial occurrence of the ten plagues of the Egyptians. Here, the exegetes are not in any doubt that the meaning of the term *mufaṣṣalāt* means coming one after the other. Al-Ṭabarī had no choice but to admit that the term means that the plagues “have been divided, and one was made to follow the other.”⁴¹ He does not entirely concede the point, mentioning an interpretation that *mufaṣṣalāt* means “known,” but this attempt is clearly half-hearted. The question is thus why can *mufaṣṣal* in Qurʾān 6:114 only mean “clear,” while *mufaṣṣal* in Qurʾān 7:133 can only mean “divided”? The theology of the uncreated Qurʾān left its impact on every level of the Sunnī exegetical outlook, and Qurʾān 6:114 was not allowed to imply a piecemeal Qurʾān.

The root *f-ṣ-l* was also used in relation to the verses of the Qurʾān, the signs, the *āyāt*. This is the more prevalent use of the term in the Qurʾān, where it functions to justify the piecemeal nature of the revelatory experience of Muḥammad (a Qurʾān that is *mufaṣṣal*) with the function of the *āyāt*, verses/signs in the Qurʾān which are mentioned individually, *āyāt mufaṣṣalāt*. The root *f-ṣ-l* as used for signs (*āyāt*) is actually central to the claims of the Qurʾān about what it is. So significant is this argument that the term appears at or near the beginning of five Sūras (Qurʾān 9:11, 10:5, 11:1, 13:2, and 41:3).⁴² In all these instances, the term is used to describe the *āyāt*, the verses of the Qurʾān (or the signs).⁴³ The tradition has conditioned us to assume that *f-ṣ-l* when used with “signs” means “clear,” “manifest,” or “detailed” — but never “separated from each other.” It is now time to analyze the real meaning of this term.

Sūra 6 is crucial for our understanding of *f-ṣ-l*. It plays a central role in connecting *f-ṣ-l* and “signs,” in making the argument that the Qurʾān was revealed in parts, and in asserting that the “signs” were presented one by one. This is precisely what humanity needed in order to be guided or convinced. It is God’s mercy and benevolence that He is willing to reveal the signs individually. Sūra 6 has eight instances in which the root *f-ṣ-l* is used; four of them are in relation to signs (*āyāt*, Qurʾān 6:55, 97, 98, 126), two in relation to books (Qurʾān 6:114, in reference to the Qurʾān, and Qurʾān 6:154 in reference to Moses’ Book), and one

⁴¹Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 9, pp. 39–40.

⁴²Similarly, the term *furqān* appears at the beginning of two Sūras, Qurʾān 3:4 and 25:1. The beginnings of Sūras have a special declarative value; hence the usage of the two terms there is of special importance.

⁴³There are other instances where this expression occurs: Qurʾān 7:32, 174; 10:24, 37; 12:111; 30:28; 41:44.

instance in reference to God who revealed that which is illicit (Qur'ān 6:119). Finally, Qur'ān 6:57 declares God to be the best of dividers (*fāṣilīn*). The Qur'ān is claiming that isolating, enumerating, describing and mentioning one particular sign after another in the revelation constitutes *tafṣīl*. As such, not only is its manner of revelation important in guiding humanity, but also its rhetorical strategy. God is revealing his book over time, taking pains to describe each sign individually — e.g. that the stars guide humans at night is a sign, the fact that humans are of the same origin is a sign — and both these examples are revealed separately.

Also, Sūra 6 has another term that has so far escaped scrutiny, since it is neither central in Islamic theology nor in the etymological debates.⁴⁴ This is the root *ṣ-r-f*, which is used in the same manner as the root *f-ṣ-l* in reference to signs (*āyāt*). Three verses, Qur'ān 6:46, 65, and 105, use the expression *nuṣarrifū al-āyāt*, thus punctuating the tempo of the Sūra with the other expressions from *f-ṣ-l* (Qur'ān 6:55, 57, 97, 98, 114, 119, 126, and 154). Connecting the Qur'ān and its signs (*āyāt*) with the verb *ṣ-r-f* is not confined to Sūra 6; it is actually not uncommon in the Qur'ān. It is a central expression in Sūra 17 (Qur'ān 17:41, 89). It appears once in five other Sūras: Qur'ān 7:58; 17:54, 20:113, 25:50, and 46:27. Not only are signs (*āyāt*) described by this verb, but so is the Qur'ān as a whole, making it fully congruent with how the verb *f-ṣ-l* is used (Qur'ān 17:41, 89). What does this expression mean? The tradition was not overly exercised about this term. It was not anxious to redefine or control the meaning of the verb, or its import. Philology and literary analysis were allowed a free hand in this case, because nothing was theologically at stake. In his interpretation of Qur'ān 7:58, al-Ṭabarī states that *ṣ-r-f* means that God makes clear the signs “verse after verse, and brings forth argument after argument, and we give parables, parable after parable.”⁴⁵ He used other terms to define *ṣ-r-f*, “repetition” (*tardīdunā*) or bringing in succession (*tatābu'*).⁴⁶

When al-Māturīdī explained *ṣ-r-f*, he uses the same term as al-Ṭabarī, “repetition” (*nuraddid*), leaving no doubt that this understanding was widespread, uncontroversial, and almost unanimous.⁴⁷ Al-Zamakhsharī likewise used the same verb (*nuraddiduhā*), “we repeat them,” and added another synonym, *nukarriruhā*.⁴⁸ The verb *ṣ-r-f* is another term that

⁴⁴It is not among the verbs mentioned by Madigan.

⁴⁵Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 8, p. 212:

يقول: كذلك نبين آية بعد آية، وندلي بحجة بعد حجة، ونضرب مثلا بعد مثل.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, vol. 7, p. 226 (for *tardīdinā*); vol. 7, p. 196 (for *nutābi'*).

⁴⁷Al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt*, vol. 5, p. 94.

⁴⁸Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, vol. 2, p. 58, on Qur'ān 7:58.

the Qur'ān uses to describe its revelatory process. These terms, *f-r-q*, *f-ṣ-l*, and *ṣ-r-f*, were made fundamental to the self-definition of the book-in-becoming. The Qur'ān is at pains to argue two things: that it was a revelatory experience, a *wahy*, and at the same time a book — an endless attempt to square a circle that left it exposed to challenge. Hence, the creativity of its arguments.

Qur'ān 11:1, “This is a Scripture whose verses are perfected, then set out clearly (*fuṣṣilat*), from one who is all wise,” is in this regard significant, since major exegetes had to confront the possibility that the root *f-ṣ-l* as used here is actually saying that the Qur'ān came down in a piecemeal rather than in a “clear” manner. Al-Ṭabarī, as was his wont, did not know of any interpretation that could mean that the root describing signs (*āyāt*) is saying that these signs came down separated from each other — and this is quite remarkable.⁴⁹ However, al-Māturīdī, a contemporary of al-Ṭabarī, provides a detailed analysis of *f-ṣ-l* as piecemeal revelation and connects it to the root *f-r-q*. His analysis of this instance is worth quoting in its entirety:

Fuṣṣilat, that is, the verses were sent down separately, pieces were sent down after pieces according to events and occasions. The Qur'ān did not come in totality, for had it come down in one sum, they would have needed to know for each (verse) its reasons and subject matter, and (to distinguish between) rules that are of limited validity and the rules that are of general import. However, if it came down at different times, according to events and occasions, they would know how to connect verses to occasions, without the need for elaboration or commentary.⁵⁰

Al-Zamakhsharī gives a similar interpretation, stating: “or the verses were revealed in separation, and did not come all together.”⁵¹

⁴⁹Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 11, pp. 179–180.

⁵⁰Al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt*, vol. 7, p. 125:

وقيل فصلت، أي فرقت في الانزال. أنزل شيء بعد شيء على قدر النوازل والاسباب، فلم ينزل جملة،
لانه لو انزل جملة لاحتاجوا الى ان يعرفوا لكل سببه وشأنه وخصوصه وعمومه. فاذا انزل متفرقا في
أوقات مختلفة على النوازل والاسباب وعرفوا ذلك على غير اعلام ولا بيان.

⁵¹Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, vol. 2, p. 257:

أو فرقت في التنزيل ولم تنزل جملة واحدة.

It is, however, with the interpretation offered by al-Rāzī that we are made aware of the real issue of contention. Al-Rāzī offers the interpretation of al-Zamakhsharī, and then connects Qur'ān 11:1 with 7:133, the verse about the ten plagues.⁵² This was unavoidable, for the root *f-ṣ-l* is used extensively in the Qur'ān, and one cannot avoid the imperative of its lexical meaning. In this sense, al-Ṭabarī was not overlooking an interpretation; he was obfuscating, and deliberately misleading the reader by refusing to offer both a possibility that is linguistically in the realm of the reasonable (and is actually the only valid one), but also an interpretation that was already championed within the tradition. The real surprise, and actually the real revelation in al-Rāzī's interpretation, is when he brings al-Jubbā'ī (d. 303/915), the great Mu'tazilī *mutakallim*,⁵³ into the picture. Apparently, al-Jubbā'ī used Qur'ān 11:1 as a *locus classicus* for arguing for the createdness of the Qur'ān — a use that reflects an older Mu'tazilī tradition. Al-Jubbā'ī made three arguments based on this verse to support the notion of the createdness of the Qur'ān. The second of them is of interest here. He used the word *fusṣilat* to argue that the Qur'ān was divided, which required the existence of a doer, and as such the Qur'ān was an object.⁵⁴ This, then, is the smoking gun of the whole debate over *furqān*. A divided Qur'ān revealed in a piecemeal fashion was an argument used for one of the most contentious of Muslim debates, and victory was not about to be conceded to the Mu'tazilīs by *ahl al-sunna*. It is only with this realization that we are able to understand why the traditional Sunnī exegetical tradition was so systematic in its efforts to conceal the relationship between a Qur'ān that is divided and terms that are central to the Qur'ān's self-presentation.

The centrality of the root *f-ṣ-l* is clear also in Sūra 10. The term is used here three times (Qur'ān 10:5, 24 and 37), paralleling its use in Sūra 6. In the first two instances (Qur'ān 10:5 and 24), the verb describes God enumerating signs (*āyāt*) so that people become pious or reflective. It is verse 10:37 that returns us to the concept of a divided Qur'ān: "Nor could this Qur'ān have been devised by anyone other than God. It is a confirmation of what was revealed before it and an explanation of the Scripture — let there be no doubt about it — it is from the Lord of the Worlds" (Abdel Haleem's translation). All commentators

⁵² Al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, vol. 17, p. 185.

⁵³ See "al-Djubbā'ī," *EI*², s.v.

⁵⁴ Al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, vol. 17, p. 186:

الثاني ان قوله (ثم فصلت) يدل على انه حصل فيه انفصال وافتراق، ويدل على ان ذلك الانفصال والافتراق اما حصل بجعل جاعل وتكوين مكون و ذلك ايضا يدل على المطلوب.

(and modern translators also) have understood the expression *tafṣīl al-kitāb* as “explanation” or “elucidation.”⁵⁵ We are by now familiar with this understanding of the root *f-ṣ-l*. A more accurate translation of this important verse — a verse that comes just before the famous *tahaddī* demand of the Qurʾān that others bring forth a Sūra similar to it — is: “Nor could this Qurʾān have been fabricated and foisted on God, rather, this Qurʾān confirms previous Scriptures, and is a work that divides the Book” (i.e. that it is coming down in divisions that belong to a Book in process of formation). The point raised by this verse is that the Qurʾān’s accusers are claiming that it is fabricated, since it is at variance with previous Scriptures and did not come into the world in the same manner — but that this can be explained by the fact that it, the Qurʾān, is reaffirming the truth of previous Scriptures and that while it is appearing in a divided form, these are all divisions that belong to a Book.⁵⁶ The root *f-ṣ-l* was thus fundamental in answering a serious challenge to the divine origins of the Qurʾān.⁵⁷

Paranomastic construction:

We sent it down ‘sendingly,’ we divided it ‘dividingly’

It is in the light of this anxiety of the Qurʾān about its not being an *in toto* revelation that we should examine other expressions in the Qurʾān which emphasize its piecemeal revelatory process. Most significant of those is Qurʾān 25:32, where the expression *rattalnāhu tartīlan* occurs. This can only mean a Qurʾān that is coming down in pieces, something that the commentators could not deny. But this expression was inconsequential in shaping the Islamic notion of the revealed Qurʾān. Here, the tradition would use another verse to undermine the import of Qurʾān 25:32 — Qurʾān 73:4, where Muḥammad is ordered to divide (*rattil*) the Qurʾān. The usual and traditional meaning of this verb, in Qurʾān 73:4

⁵⁵Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 11, p. 117; al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt*, vol. 7, p. 56.

⁵⁶Al-Māturīdī has as usual preserved for us a dissenting interpretation, that the Qurʾān is being torn from the Preserved Tablet: *أو يقول: مفصل من اللوح المحفوظ*. See *Taʾwīlāt*, vol. 7, p. 56.

⁵⁷Mention should be made of Sūra 41, where the root also plays a major role, appearing in the second verse and then in verse 44. Qurʾān 41:44 is a pivotal verse in this Sūra, where the Qurʾān is attempting to answer another of the accusations against the Qurʾān, as to why it is not “foreign,” that is, not revealed in any of the “scriptural” languages.

is to “recite.”⁵⁸ In any case, this expression is almost a *hapax legomenon*, and was hardly influential in shaping the image of the Qur'ān. When the term *tartīl* became a technical term used for a style of Qur'ān recitation, any danger emanating from the expression in Qur'ān 25:32 was sidelined.

The other expression, *nazzalnāhu tanzīlan* (Qur'ān 17:106; Qur'ān 76:23 in relationship to the method of sending down the Qur'ān, and Qur'ān 25:25 for angels) has been studied by F. Leemhuis. He makes clear that the D stem of *n-z-l* in Qur'ān 17:106 and its formation of a paranomastic construction can only mean that the expression was intended to mean “to send down successively.”⁵⁹ It is not the place here to revisit this important verb (*n-z-l*) in the Qur'ān, and it is unfortunate that Leemhuis's study has not been cited or built upon.⁶⁰ But the paranomastic construction in this verse which was emphasizing that the Qur'ān was *faraqnāhu* (or *faraqnāhu*), i.e. divided in pieces, leaves no doubt that the manner of how the Qur'ān was being revealed was at the heart of a debate about how Scripture is given to humanity.

The Islamic exegetical tradition and the problem of the meaning of *furqān*

The etymological analysis of *furqān* as carried out in Qur'ānic studies is not only problematic philologically, confusing as it does etymology with semantics, but it is based on the notion of a confused Muḥammad (as Wagtendonk would have it) or a confused Qur'ānic paleographic

⁵⁸Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 29, pp. 126–127. Note that al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt*, vol. 16, p. 191, has some trouble coming to grips with this order to Muḥammad, and then states that the Qur'ān should not be described by this term (apparently forgetting about Qur'ān 25:32):

ثم الترتيل منصرف الى القراءة وسمى القراءة قرآنا على جهة المصدر، اذ ما هو كلام الله تعالى لا يوصف بالترتيل .

The matter can only be explained by the anxiety over the divided nature of the Qur'ān.

⁵⁹F. Leemhuis, *The D and H stems in Koranic Arabic: a comparative study of the function and meaning of the fa'ala and 'af'ala forms in Koranic usage* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), p. 24.

⁶⁰Cf. Qur'ān 67:23 نزلنا عليك القرآن تنزيلا which is another paranomastic construction.

tradition (*pace* Donner).⁶¹ This is remarkable, for we are presuming that the tradition did not make sense *ab initio*. This is radically different from saying that later generations misunderstood the text. Rather, we are to assume that Muḥammad himself, or the first generation who received his preaching, did not know what they were talking about. So counterfactual is this scenario that it is impossible to proceed with these assumptions. The presupposition that a borrowed word is in principle a word — because it was not a “native” word — that posed difficulties to the native speaker is unfounded. Someone who mangles a foreign word to mean something that they need to say is not the same thing as using the word incorrectly. Rather, it becomes a “new” word in a new language.

If we submit to the premise of what I call the radical etymological fallacy scenario, in which Muḥammad or the tradition was supposedly passing down material in a different language that they did not understand, then we have to admit to a far graver corollary of such an approach — the uselessness of the received text of the Qur’ān as a historical source. For if *furqān* is a deformed formation from *puqdānā*, what other deformities lie hidden in the Qur’ān awaiting discovery through a graduate student’s eureka mistake while learning Syriac? If this were so, one cannot discount the idea that “native” Arabic words in the Qur’ān whose “clear” meaning we take for granted are not also in reality words that were originally Syriac, and were garbled by Muḥammad or by the tradition in the process of making them conform to the norms of the Arabic language. What exactly is the reference for the Qur’ān: its Arabic text, or the Peshitta? If such presuppositions are taken seriously, they would render the Qur’ānic text unintelligible, for it is then indecipherable.

The exegetical Islamic tradition, not surprisingly, has fared even worse in this atmosphere; in etymological studies it is invoked only to be ridiculed. One finds here, in the handling of the Islamic exegetical tradition, layers of presuppositions that are fundamentally flawed. The first is that exegetes ought to have known what the text says, and if their understanding was patently wrong, then they knew not what they were doing. They were not charlatans but worse, groping in the dark, or engaging in guesswork (as Donner describes them).⁶² But Muslim exegetes had other concerns, and they answered to a different paradigm. In the case of *furqān*, not only did they know what it meant, but they wanted us not to know. They were not guessing, they were erecting an

⁶¹See K. Wagtendonk, *Fasting in the Koran* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968), p. 63: “but as it was not an Arabic word the meaning was probably not completely clear to him.”

⁶²Donner, “Qur’ānic Furqān,” p. 285: “In sum, the early Qur’ān commentators offered a wide variety of explanations — one might more honestly call them guesses — as to the meaning of furqān.”

edifice with far-reaching tentacles that was intended to obliterate any notion that could arise of a Qur'ān whose main characteristic was its piecemeal revelation. They did not want anyone reading the Qur'ān to connect *furqān* to a process of piecemeal revelation and ultimately to a Qur'ān created, or spoken by God, at the moment in which a passage was revealed to Muḥammad. Not only was an intermediary needed — the archangel Gabriel acting as the go-between — but an eternity was presupposed: what was being revealed to Muḥammad had already been revealed, had already been available as an eternal, uncreated Qur'ān, co-eternal with God. To say that the controversy about the created and uncreated Qur'ān was on the mind of the exegetes is an understatement. Certainly, they were not aware of a Syriac etymology for *furqān*, if such an etymology ever existed, but they actually did know what the Qur'ān was saying, and they did not want it to say that. The notion that a tradition ought to read a text plainly is misguided, since there are always other far more important concerns that ultimately influence the interpretative process.

I examine al-Ṭabarī as a paradigmatic example of what the tradition was trying to do with *furqān*, and then contrast it with al-Māturīdī's approach to show what al-Ṭabarī was aware of and trying to hide. Other exegetes will be pulled into the discussion to highlight aspects of the complicated exercise aimed at concealing the import of *furqān*. The discussion here will cover the five instances where *furqān* is related to revelation or is revelation: Qur'ān 2:53; 2:185; 3:4; 21:48, and 25:1. In discussing these five occurrences of *furqān*, al-Ṭabarī did not even contemplate explaining *furqān* as anything but “a separation between truth and falsehood” (*farraqa* [or *faraqa*] *bihi bayna al-ḥaqq wa-l-bāṭil*), or “a *furqān* between truth and falsehood.”⁶³ In the next appearance of *furqān* in Qur'ān 2:185, al-Ṭabarī would connect *furqān* with *f-ṣ-l*, with the same numbing formula, but here the root *f-ṣ-l* is itself neutralized.⁶⁴

Al-Ṭabarī, however, was not satisfied with this interpretive exercise. He wanted to reconfigure the story of how the Qur'ān was revealed. Thus, in his interpretation of Qur'ān 2:185, he introduces the narratives about the Qur'ān being sent down “in one sum” (*jumlatan wāḥidah*), from the highest heaven to the nearest heaven, thus — with a straight face — reaffirming that which the Qur'ān itself vehemently denies in

⁶³Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 1, p. 284, on Qur'ān 2:53. This notion of *furqān* as a separation between truth and falsehood, a criterion, will eventually reassert itself and become the way out for modern scholars unhappy with the etymological (Christian salvation) analysis. See Daniel Madigan entry “Criterion” in *EQ*, where he mainly discusses the term *furqān* as understood by the Islamic exegetical tradition.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 146, on Qur'ān 2:185: *wa-l-faṣl bayna l-ḥaqq wa-l-bāṭil*.

25:32.⁶⁵ The new narrative is that the Qurʾān was sent down in its entirety to the nearest heaven (the one with the stars), and there it would wait, and come down in pieces as the need arose until it was finally reconstituted on earth. Al-Ṭabarī then connects this mode of revelation (which is more akin to mere transportation) from the nearest heavens by making a reference to verse Qurʾān 56:75 (“I swear by the position of the stars” [*mawāqīʿ al-nujūm*]). This fleeting reference is puzzling at first. Inspecting the interpretation of this verse shows the complexity of the cover-up carried out by the Sunnī tradition in its attempt to neutralize the meaning of *f-r-q* in the Qurʾān.

Looking at this verse, 56:75, “I swear by the position of the stars,” in al-Ṭabarī’s commentary, we encounter another reiteration of this now fully formed Islamic theory of revelation of a Qurʾān coming down from the primordial tablet (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*), where it was always present, eternal and uncreated, to the lower heaven, where it awaited transport to Muḥammad. Al-Ṭabarī offers several explanations for this verse, and although he ultimately sides with the one that is more literal (i.e. that God was swearing by the stars),⁶⁶ he gives the most prominence to the one that sees in Qurʾān 56:75 a reaffirmation that the Qurʾān “was sent down to the Prophet in installments (*nujūman*), separated (*mutafarriqa*).”⁶⁷ Or “the Qurʾān came down on the Night of Power (*laylat al-qadr*) from the highest heaven to the lowest heaven in one piece (*jumlatan wāḥidah*); then it was divided over years.”⁶⁸ Or “the Qurʾān came down in installments (*nujūman*), three verses, four verses, or five verses at a time.”⁶⁹ Or “the Qurʾān came down in its totality, and was placed

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 145:

عن ابن عباس قال: انزل القرآن كله جملة واحدة في ليلة القدر في رمضان الى السماء الدنيا، فكان الله اذا اراد ان يحدث في الارض شيئا انزل منه حتى جمعه.
عن ابن عباس قال: انزل القرآن في ليلة القدر من السماء العليا الى السماء جملة واحدة، ثم فرق في السنين بعد. قال وتلا ابن عباس هذه الاية (فلا أقسم بمواقع النجوم) قال نزل مفرا.
عن الشعبي قال: بلغنا ان القرآن نزل جملة واحدة الى السماء الدنيا.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 204.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 27, p. 203, on Qurʾān 56:75:

فلا أقسم بمنازل القرآن، وقالوا: أنزل القرآن على رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم نجوما متفرقة.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*:

نزل القرآن في ليلة القدر من السماء العليا الى السماء الدنيا جملة واحدة. ثم فرق في السنين.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*:

انزل الله القرآن نجوما ثلاث ايات واربع ايات وخمس ايات.

near the positions of the stars, and then Gabriel would bring down one Sūra at a time. It did come down completely on the Night of Power.”⁷⁰ Admitting to a piecemeal revelation Qur'ān is here inconsequential, since it is a mere transportation of it from one location to another. The Sunnī tradition admits to this historical truth about the Qur'ān, that it was revealed over a twenty-two year span, yet prevents this aspect from having any bearing on the theology of the created Qur'ān.

The interesting aspect is that the pericope 56:75–82 is clearly speaking about the Qur'ān as a book in its earthly manifestation.⁷¹ The interpretative tradition, however, understood it to refer to the heavenly book, and made the daring move of connecting the oath with the stars to the manner of revealing the Qur'ān.⁷² Qur'ān 56:78, “in a hidden book,” moreover, was taken by most interpreters to refer to the Preserved Tablet (*al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz*).⁷³ The narrative of how the Qur'ān was revealed thus acquires scriptural support at every level of detail, a strategy needed to counterbalance the fact that the Qur'ān is full of references to its piecemeal revelatory process. What we have in al-Ṭabarī is a Qur'ān, descending in its totality from the original eternal book and already fully formed, into the lowest heaven, and transported in installments to Muḥammad, akin to the regular payments of a debt, for him to collect. This theory of revelation has no scriptural connection to the root *f-r-q*, or *f-ṣ-l*, but rather to *n-j-m*, which constitutes a brilliant triumph over philology by philology.⁷⁴ So complete is this obfuscation that

⁷⁰*Ibid.*:

ان القرآن نزل جميعا، فوضع بمواقع النجوم، فجعل جبريل يئتي بالسورة، وانما نزل جميعا ليلة القدر.

⁷¹Qur'ān 56:75–82: “I swear by the positions of the stars, and were you knowledgeable you would know that this is a solemn oath, that this is a majestic Qur'ān, in a hidden book, untouched but by the pure, sent down from the Lord of the worlds. Are you to belie this proclamation, and make your livelihood through telling lies?”

⁷²The Islamic legal tradition kept close to the original meaning of the pericope. For references on the debate see al-Wāḥidī, *al-Basīṭ*, vol. 21, p. 260, footnote 6, where the opinion of al-Jaṣṣāṣ is quoted.

⁷³Al-Ṭabarī had “the book that is in heaven”; see *Ibid.*, vol. 27, p. 205; al-Māturīdī has *al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz*, see *Ta'wīlāt*, vol. 14, p. 321. Al-Wāḥidī clearly shows that Muqātil already understood this verse to refer to the Heavenly Book (*al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz*), see *al-Basīṭ*, vol. 21, p. 259. The early understanding that this referred to a book that was kept away from dust and sand was drowned out by a flood of other interpretations, so that it became ineffectual. Al-Ṭabarī misleadingly paraphrases Muḥāhid's phrase, inserting: *هو في كتاب مصون عند الله لا يمسه شيء من أذى من غبار ولا غيره*. The expression *al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz* is mentioned only once in the Qur'ān, in 85:22.

⁷⁴Thus when al-Zarkashī (d. 784/1392) in his *al-Burhān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rīfah, 1972), vol. 1, p. 228, presents the theory of how the Qur'ān was revealed, he uses the word *munaḥḥam* to describe how the Qur'ān was sent down. Indeed, in the chapter on “on the manner of sending down the Qur'ān,” not once did al-Zarkashī use the root *f-r-q*.

modern scholars were sent on a wild goose chase after the meaning of *furqān*. The canard that the exegetical tradition was unaware of what it was doing, or engaging in guesswork, untethered to a rigorous discipline, or simply incapable of understanding the Qurʾān is not only problematic: we end up paying heavily for this attitude. The exegetical tradition is certainly not atomistic, or unable to take into consideration the bigger picture. Here is an example of a tentacle connecting the earliest part of the massive Qurʾān commentary of al-Ṭabarī to its final parts.

The other important pericope that would pull all of the disparate elements of this structure into a coherent unit and reflect the depth of this far-flung structure of reimagining how the Qurʾān was revealed is Sūra 97 (in particular, 97:1), where the term “Night of Power” (*laylat al-qadr*) appears (“We sent it down on the Night of Power”). Here, al-Ṭabarī connects all the verses that have a direct bearing on this theory, both those used positively and those that could cause danger to the structure, in order to harmonize all of the verses into a smooth narrative.⁷⁵ The narrative of al-Ṭabarī includes mention of verses Qurʾān 56:76, 17:106, and 44:4. This is by now a well-honed technique of redefining a troubling verse by associating it with another, with the result that both end up meaning the same. Thus, verse 17:106 is no longer about a piecemeal Qurʾān insofar as it is tied to 56:76, since the divisions of the Qurʾān then become mere transportation from an already complete Qurʾān.

Qurʾān 44:4 is an opaque verse that uses the root *f-r-q* in reference to deciding matters when sending down the Book (“In that night we separate (*yufrāqu*) every wise matter”). The whole opening of this Sūra (Qurʾān 44:1–6) is a convoluted statement that connects sending down the book with the manner of its piecemeal revelation. Al-Ṭabarī ties Qurʾān 44:4 to Qurʾān 97:1, constructing a circularity of interpretation that would ensure that no pericope in the Qurʾān could function independently to undermine the theory of a complete *ab initio* Qurʾān.⁷⁶ He also uses the term *umm al-kitāb* (mother of the book) to connect it to the verse that mentions this expression in order to ensure that all of these terms mean the same thing (Qurʾān 13:39 and 43:4). There is an eternal heavenly book that has the Qurʾān already inscribed on it,

⁷⁵For a typical example see al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 30, p. 258:
عن ابن عباس: قال: نزل القرآن كله جملة واحدة في ليلة القدر في رمضان الى السماء الدنيا، فكان
الله اذا اراد ان يحدث في الارض شيئاً أنزل منه حتى جمعه.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, vol. 25, p. 107:
انزل الله هذا القرآن من أم الكتاب في ليلة القدر ثم أنزله على الانبياء في الليالي والايام وفي غير
ليلة القدر.

since the Qur'ān was eternal, as every good Sunnī knew. All exegetes followed al-Ṭabarī here, with al-Māturīdī and even al-Zamakhsharī using the more expected term the Preserved Tablet (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*).⁷⁷

The net effect of this persistent hounding of all verses that have the roots *f-r-q* and *f-ṣ-l* by the exegetical tradition is that any possibility of perceiving the Qur'ān as an ontologically piecemeal revelatory experience was off the table. The root *f-ṣ-l* was completely and effectively isolated, and prevented from implying a piecemeal Qur'ān. The root *f-r-q* was contained by muddling its import through postulating a complete Qur'ān hovering above Muḥammad, the source of his revelatory experience, to which this verb was allegedly referring. It is only the encyclopedic commentary of al-Rāzī which spells out for us the fear that haunted the Sunnī tradition regarding these two roots that allows us to get to the root of this grand maneuver. A Qur'ān revealed for the occasion, necessitated by an exigency, was a Qur'ān created by an act of creation on the part of God that implied that the Qur'ān was *muhḍath* (new) in time.⁷⁸ The Sunnī tradition would employ every trick in its interpretative arsenal in order to prevent this notion from having a scriptural Qur'ānic foundation. The Mu'tazilī tradition would not be allowed the advantage of arguing for its doctrine using the Qur'ān itself.

What I am stating is not speculation: it is clear from Qur'ān 21:2 (“Whenever they receive a new (*muhḍath*) revelation from their Lord, they listen to it mockingly”) and from the way it was treated in the exegetical tradition. Al-Ṭabarī is so laconic when he interprets this verse that he fails to find any authority who had anything to say about it.⁷⁹ There is such restraint that our suspicion is aroused — surely al-Ṭabarī should have known of a *ta'wīl* or two. It is only with the recent publication of al-Māturīdī that we are in a position to unearth what al-Ṭabarī had managed to conceal from modern scholarship for the last 100 years. In his interpretation of Qur'ān 21:2, al-Māturīdī actually connected the root *ḥ-d-th* to *f-r-q*, leaving no doubt as to what was at

⁷⁷ Al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt*, vol. 13, p. 291; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, vol. 3, p. 500.

⁷⁸ The term was Qur'ānic; Qur'ān 21:2; 26:5.

⁷⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 17, p. 2:

يقول تعالى ذكره: ما يحدث الله من تنزيل شيء من هذا القرآن للناس، ويذكرهم به ويعظموا استمعوه وهم يلعبون لاهية قلوبهم. ... عن قتادة: الآية يقول ما ينزل عليهم من شيء من القرآن الاستمعوه وهم يلعبون.

Al-Ṭabarī mentions nothing about the root *ḥ-d-th* in the other instance of this term, Qur'ān 26:5, see vol. 19, p. 62.

stake.⁸⁰ A *muhdath* (new) Qurʾān was a piecemeal Qurʾān. To him we owe the preservation of some of the oldest Muʿtazilī exegetical tradition that has elsewhere been lost.⁸¹ By the time that the connection between the Muʿtazilī notion of a created Qurʾān and this verse would reappear in al-Rāzī’s commentary on Qurʾān 21:2, the dice had been cast, and it hardly had an impact on how Muslims came to understand these terms. Al-Rāzī informs the reader that the Muʿtazilīs had used this verse to argue for the createdness of the Qurʾān.⁸² It mattered little by then, as the Sunnī tradition has triumphed, and it could afford to allow Muʿtazilī opinions to reappear only to be demolished — an intellectual exercise that they were proud to carry out.⁸³

Did the exegetical tradition ever see in *furqān* a term that means piecemeal revelation, as one would expect if — as I am claiming — its philological meaning is so blatantly at hand? The most prominent occurrence of the term *furqān* in the Qurʾān remains Qurʾān 25:1, a prominence that ensured that the tradition gave this Sūra the name “Furqān.” It is here that we would expect to find an extensive discussion of the term *furqān*, and rightly so. Not for al-Ṭabarī, however, who tactically has little to say about *furqān* as such here. It is with his contemporary al-Māturīdī that we encounter the first instance of the tradition betraying itself; apparently, some exegetes did state that “the Qurʾān was called *furqān* because it came down in pieces, in chunks, while other Scriptures came down complete.”⁸⁴ Though al-Māturīdī is willing to mention this interpretation, he rejects it, and states that he prefers the traditional one.⁸⁵

⁸⁰Al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt*, vol. 9, pp. 256–257:

وقال بعضهم: محدث لان الله أنزل هذا القرآن بالتفريق وأحدث انزاله في كل وقت على قدر الحاجة، فعلى ما نزل بالتفريق أحدثوا هم يعني الكفرة تكذيبه وردة على ما ذكر فزادتهم رجسا على رجسهم ونحوه.

⁸¹Al-Zamakhsharī is oblivious to any echo of this early Muʿtazilī debate. See *al-Kashshāf*, vol. 2, p. 562 on Qurʾān 21:2, and vol. 3, p. 104 on Qurʾān 26:5.

⁸²Al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, vol. 22, p. 140: المعتزلة احتجوا على حدوث القرآن بهذه الآية.

⁸³We still find echoes of this fear as late as in al-Qurṭubī; see his *al-Jāmiʿ li-ahkām al-Qurʾān*, vol. 11, p. 266:

فانه كان ينزل سورة بعد سورة وآية بعد آية كما كان ينزله الله تعالى عليه في وقت بعد وقت لا ان القرآن مخلوق.

⁸⁴Al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt*, vol. 10, p. 218:

وقال بعضهم: سمي القرآن فرقانا لانه انزل بالتفريق مفرقا، وسائر الكتب أنزلت مجموعة.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*: لكن الوجه فيه ما ذكرنا بدءا وهو أقرب وأشبه.

A few centuries later, al-Zamakhsharī not only connects *furqān* to the verb *f-r-q* in Qur'ān 17:106, but also cites a poetic line that calls the revelatory units of the Qur'ān *farq* (or *furq*) in the singular.⁸⁶ This verse of poetry is of utmost significance, for it shows that early Muslims did understand *furqān* as a plural for *farq*, a pericope. Here are all the elements to make sense of *furqān*. This interpretation, however, was always sidelined, or to be more accurate, was rarely allowed to appear by the more established narrative — a narrative that was fashioned in order to prevent its competitor from ever being contemplated or gaining traction. Were it not for al-Māturīdī's preservation of what is in essence a Mu'tazilī tradition, we would not have realized that *furqān* as piecemeal revelation is as venerable as it is; indeed, I am arguing that this is the only possible meaning of the term. Al-Ṭabarī and the Sunnī tradition in general were surprisingly effective at hiding this interpretation. As I have shown, the Sunnī tradition positioned its antidotes at every level of the Qur'ān, for every verse that could refer to a piecemeal revelation.⁸⁷ The exegetical tradition's problem was not a lack of philological expertise, but precisely the opposite: a runaway philological science that could wreak havoc on fundamental dogmas.

Al-Rāzī connects the two terms, *furqān* and the verb *f-r-q*, in Qur'ān 17:106, clearly following in the footsteps of al-Zamakhsharī here. Al-Rāzī was by then at a distance from the controversy of a created Qur'ān, and his analysis is as terse as it is cogent. Freed from the cultural fear that had haunted the tradition, he felt at ease to elaborate on this understanding of *furqān* as piecemeal revelation. Al-Rāzī states that the meaning of *furqān* as a piecemeal revelation is actually the most cogent and sensible of explanations. Philologically, it is the soundest.⁸⁸

⁸⁶Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, vol. 3, p. 80:

والفرقان مصدر فرق بين الشئين: اذا فصل بينهما. وسمي به القران لفصله بين الحق والباطل. أو لانه لم ينزل جملة واحدة ولكن مفروقا مفضولا بين بعضه وبعض في الانزال، الا ترى الى قوله { وقرانا فرقناه لتقرأه على الناس على مكث ونزلناه تنزيلا } وقد جاء الفرق بمعناه قال : ومشركي كافر بالفرق.

⁸⁷A Shīrī Persian Qur'ān commentator, Abū al-Futūḥ al-Rāzī (d. ca. 525/1131), would give preference to *furqān* as piecemeal revelation when he interpreted the origins of the term. We are not accustomed to consult Persian Qur'ān commentaries about the Arabic of the Qur'ān, which is a topic for another discussion. See his *Rawḍ al-jinān*, M.J. Yā-Ḥaqqī and M.M. Nāṣiḥ, eds. (Mashhad: Bunyād-i Pazhūhishhā-yi Islāmī, 1381/2002), vol. 1, p. 9.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, vol. 24, p. 45:

لا نزاع ان الفرقان هو القران وصف بذلك من حيث انه سبحانه فرق به بين الحق والباطل في نبوة محمد صلى الله عليه وسلم وبين الحلال والحرام. او لانه فرق في النزول كما قال {وقرآنا فرقناه لتقرأه على الناس على مكث} وهذا التأويل أقرب لانه قال {نزل الفرقان} ولفظة نزل تدل على التفريق

Later, the scholastic tradition was even more at ease with *furqān* being a piecemeal revelation. Ismāʿīl b. Muḥammad al-Qunawī (d. 1195/1781) one of the leading scholars of 18th century Istanbul, who wrote one of the most voluminous super-commentaries on al-Bayḍāwī's commentary, was willing to elaborate on a terse statement by al-Bayḍāwī regarding *furqān* in verse Qurʾān 25:1.⁸⁹

We are told that the inquisition or battle over the createdness or eternity of the Qurʾān (*al-mihna*) was a fundamental event in early Islam. Here is an example of how profoundly this event affected the interpretation of the Qurʾān, redefining its terms and in the process reimagining its mode of revelation. In this article, I have shown how a reading of the Qurʾān without the tradition indicates that verbs and descriptions of the Qurʾān as being revealed in piecemeal manner are an essential component of its self-definition. Indeed, this is presented as a defining element of the mode of Muḥammad's career, crucial for his preaching role, where a piecemeal Qurʾān and piecemeal recounted signs were the mode of his preaching and ministry.

Piecemeal revelation and “steadfastness of the heart”

The Qurʾān makes another argument for the necessity of piecemeal revelation. We have seen that in 17:106 “a Qurʾān we sent down in piecemeal that you may read it to the people while living with them and we have sent it down repeatedly,” the reason given is to emphasize the need of being with and living among the people one is attempting to convert. In Qurʾān 25:32, “the disbelievers say ‘if only he received his Qurʾān in one sum,’ we have sent it not so, in order to steady your heart, and we have sent it in sections,” another reason is given by the Qurʾān for why it was coming down in pieces: a psychological reason, the need to give Muḥammad support and succor in his ministry as a prophet. The verb used in Qurʾān 25:32, *tathbīt*, is another important key term in the Qurʾān about Muḥammad's ministry. Qurʾān 17:73–82 is a pericope that deals with the temptations facing Muḥammad to soften his stance in order to win over his clan. They want to seduce him (Qurʾān 17:73), and thus force him to invent lies about God (cf. Qurʾān 11:12; 68:9). But

واما لفظة أنزل فتدل على الجمع ولذلك قال في سورة آل عمران {نزل عليك الكتاب وأنزل التوراة والإنجيل} .

⁸⁹Al-Qunawī, *Hāshiyat al-Qunawī ‘alā tafsīr al-imām al-Bayḍāwī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2001), vol. 14, p. 6.

God made Muḥammad firm (*thabbatnāka*, 17:74) lest he incline to them. God then ordered Muḥammad to pray and recite the Qur'ān at night. The pericope ends with God stating that the Qur'ān which is being sent down is “a cure” for the believers.

Qur'ān 14:27 describes God's speech as “the steadfast word” (*al-qawl al-thābit*) which is used to steady (*yuthabbīt*) the hearts of the believers: “God firms (steadies) those who believe by his steadfast word both in this life and in the life to come, and he leads astray the wicked. God does as He pleases.” Qur'ān 14:27 comes at the conclusion of one of the most famous of Qur'ānic parables about the holy word (*kalima ṭayyiba*) being a wholesome tree (*shajara ṭayyiba*) whose roots are firm (*thābit*) and whose branches are spread out in heaven. The parable is made coherent by the use of the root *th-b-t*, which is used three times in three verses. Qur'ān 11:120 informs Muḥammad that the stories of the prophets told to him are told so that “his heart is made steadfast” (*mā nuthabbitu bihi fu'ādaka*). That this root is not only meant for Muḥammad becomes clear with Qur'ān 16:102, where doubts were being raised against Muḥammad changing his mind about some of the revelation he was receiving (Qur'ān 16:101). The Qur'ān, however, will also steady the believers in their faith. The root *th-b-t* will become fundamental in battle cries in the fighting phase of Muḥammad's career (Qur'ān 2:250; 3:147), and in the call for steadfastness in fighting (Qur'ān 8:11, 12, and 45). Indeed, almsgiving and spending on the needy become the self-fulfilling act of becoming more steadfast in one's faith (Qur'ān 2:265). This continuous use of this term in the second phase of Muḥammad's career shows to what degree this notion was central in the arguments of the Qur'ān.

The exegetical tradition and the insurmountable Qur'ān 17:106

Qur'ān 17:106 (“A Qur'ān we divided [*faraqnāhu*] so that you proclaim to people while living with them, and we sent it down repeatedly”), was the Gordian knot for the Sunnī exegetical tradition, or the *ahl al-ḥadīth*, who wanted an eternal Qur'ān. Not even al-Ṭabarī would deny that there is a possibility that this verse could mean that the Qur'ān was coming down in a piecemeal fashion. Of course al-Ṭabarī was not naïve enough to shrink from this notion; indeed, he had no problem attaching the notion of the piecemeal revelation of the Qur'ān to 56:75. In Qur'ān 56:75, however, there is no verb *f-r-q*, and no danger of highlighting how fundamental the notion of the piecemeal nature of the Qur'ān is to its

self-presentation. The sentence, “I swear by the positions of the stars,” of Qur’ān 56:75 actually has nothing to do with the Qur’ān at all, which was all the more reason to use it to refer to what could not be denied. With Qur’ān 17:106, it was impossible to disconnect *furqān* from the root *f-r-q*. But if the tradition redefined the verb *f-r-q* in Qur’ān 17:106, then *furqān* would not mean a piecemeal Qur’ān. This is exactly what al-Ṭabarī presents us with in his extensive explanation of Qur’ān 17:106. By redefining what the verb *f-r-q* means in Qur’ān 17:106, one controlled what *furqān* meant.

The first issue that al-Ṭabarī discusses when he begins his interpretation of the verb *f-r-q* in Qur’ān 17:106 is to report about a debate regarding the correct reading of this word. The prevalent reading was *faraqnāhu*, as form I of the verb (*fa‘ala*).⁹⁰ This reading (he went on to claim) means “we made it firm, detailed, and clear.” Here is the decisive step, then — to claim that the prevalent reading can only mean that the verb *f-r-q* is about the clarity of the Qur’ān, not about the manner of its revelation. This is nonsensical: *faraqa* in form I can and actually does mean to divide, and indeed this is the sole meaning.⁹¹ This supposed monovalent meaning of *faraqa* in form I is only observed in the Qur’ān, and only in this verse. The Arabic lexicons, obliging when it comes to this verse, not wishing to undermine the exegetes’ effort, are abundantly clear that there is no such restriction in meaning. Al-Ṭabarī then mentions the minority reading, which according to him was only reported by Ibn ‘Abbās. This minority camp read the verb in the second form, *farraqnāhu*. This reading according to al-Ṭabarī means that the Qur’ān was sent down in pieces, bit by bit, verse by verse, and story after story.⁹² But to admit to that now is inconsequential, as this coming down in pieces is now made to refer to the fact that the Qur’ān was being sent down from a nearby heavenly post, already complete.⁹³

⁹⁰Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, vol. 15, p. 178:

اختلفت القراء في قراءة ذلك، فقرأته عامة قراء الأمصار (فرقناه) بتخفيف الراء من فرقناه. بمعنى أحكمناه وفصلناه وبيناه.

⁹¹See for an example al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-‘arūs*, vol. 26, pp. 279–300.

⁹²Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, vol. 15, p. 178:

وذكر عن ابن عباس انه كان يقرأ بتشديد الراء (فرقناه) بمعنى نزلناه شيئاً بعد شيء وآية بعد آية وقصة بعد قصة.

⁹³When later commentators would admit that the second reading means a Qur’ān coming down in parts, they reaffirm (and remind the reader) that “there is no dispute among Muslims that the Qur’ān came down in its totality (*jumlatan wāhida*) to the nearest heaven.” See al-Qurtūbī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-ahkām al-Qur’ān*, vol. 10, p. 339, where he also refers the reader to Sūra 2 and his discussion there (vol. 2, p. 297).

This at first looks like the usual run-of-the-mill discussion, were it not for the editorial comments adduced by al-Ṭabarī on the validity of these two readings, right after raising the issue of the debate on the reading of *f-r-q*. He comes out fully in support of the first form of the verb, because consensus stands behind it, and it is forbidden to dissent on issues of faith and the Qur'ān. Al-Ṭabarī then concludes that if this is the case, then this verse can only mean that the Qur'ān is a clear, wise Qur'ān.⁹⁴ This is remarkable, for not only did al-Ṭabarī not hold back his remarks till he had finished his interpretation of the pericope, as is his wont, but his sanctimonious discourse on the validity of one reading over the other is uniquely suspicious.⁹⁵ There is hardly anything at stake here; reading verbs in the Qur'ān in the first or second form is neither rare nor problematic. It certainly does not provoke anathemization. What is at stake, then? Another red flag is al-Ṭabarī's attempt to downplay the significance and the magnitude of the authorities who stood behind the second reading; it turns out the second reading has a long list of authorities behind it, and not only Ibn 'Abbās, as al-Ṭabarī claims. A closer look at the further interpretations adduced by al-Ṭabarī himself shows that Qatādah and Ibn Zayd read it in the second form. Other commentators have a long list of authorities who also read it in the second form.⁹⁶ Something does not make sense here.

What was going on? *Furqān* as a verbal noun (*maṣḍar*, as the tradition understood its derivation) can only come from the verb *f-r-q* in form I (*fa'ala*). By redefining the verb *f-r-q* in its form I in the *locus classicus* that explicitly stated why the Qur'ān is *furqān*, to mean something other than “to come in pieces,” any connection between this meaning and *furqān* is thus severed. What we have here is an attempt to control the derivation of *furqān* by detaching *f-r-q* in form I from any meaning that has to do with piecemeal revelation.

⁹⁴Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 15, p. 178:

وأولى القراءتين بالصواب عندنا، القراءة الاولى لأنها القراءة التي عليها الحجة مجمعة ولا يجوز خلافها فيما كانت عليه مجمعة من أمر الدين والقرآن. فإذا كان ذلك أولى القراءتين بالصواب فتأويل الكلام: وما أرسلناك الا مبشرا ونذيرا وفصلناه قرانا وبيناه وأحكامنا لتقرأه على الناس على مكث.

⁹⁵See for example al-Ṭabarī's measured and dispassionate discussion of a similar variant reading in Qur'ān 13:39. The fact of the matter is that many verbs in forms I and II have the same meaning; see *ibid.*, vol. 13, p. 172:

فإذا كان ذلك كذلك فالتثنية به أولى، والتشديد أصوب من التخفيف، وإن كان التخفيف قد يحتمل توجيهه في المعنى الى التشديد والتشديد الى التخفيف لتقارب معنيهما.

See also his measured tone in his comments on Qur'ān 12:19 and 12:110.

⁹⁶For the long list of authorities who stood behind the second reading see al-Wāḥidī, *al-Basīṭ*, vol. 13, p. 503, note 7.

The opposite camp came back swinging; by offering the reading *faraqnāhu*, in the second form, which can only mean to divide, they were hoping to make their point. But this is already conceding too much. *Furqān* is not derived from the second form of *f-r-q*, and as such the opposite camp was not gaining much. Enough authorities read it this way and there was no possibility of denying its existence; al-Ṭabarī could undermine it by a talk about consensus, and that is what he did. The inconvenient truth that this reading pointed at, and which was impossible to deny, and which all Muslims accepted, that the Qurʾān came down in pieces, could be easily addressed by the notion of a complete heavenly Qurʾān that is being transported in pieces to earth.

It is the Muʿtazilī exegetical tradition that was aware of the game, and insisted that the verb *faraqa* in its first form means “divided,” and understood *furqān* as a piecemeal revelation. Only Qurʾān commentaries that had an early Muʿtazilī pedigree preserved for us the derivation of *furqān* as a piecemeal revelation, namely, al-Māturīdī, al-Zamakhsharī, Abū al-Futūḥ al-Rāzī, and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. Lest the reader by now think that I have an axe to grind against al-Ṭabarī, let me say here that it is thanks to him that we have an anecdote that shows the depth of the debate over the reading of *faraqa* in Qurʾān 17:106, and that there were authorities who saw *f-r-q* in the first form to mean the same as the second form; they insisted that the reading is the first, and the meaning is the same.

Al-Ṭabarī preserves a tradition that recounts a dialogue between al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) and Abū Rajāʾ over the reading of Qurʾān 17:106.⁹⁷ It seems that Abū Rajāʾ provoked al-Ḥasan by reading this verse in front of him in the second form, which aroused the anger of al-Ḥasan, who shot back, stating that all Muslims know that the Qurʾān was revealed in Mecca for eight years and continued to be revealed for ten years in Medina.⁹⁸ This tradition is unique in al-Ṭabarī’s commentary and in discussions over variant readings of the Qurʾān. Once again, this

⁹⁷Most probably Maṭar b. Ṭahmān, Salmān al-Baṣrī (d. ca. 125/742); see al-Dhahabī, *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ*, Shuʿayb al-Arnaʿūṭ, ed. (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Risālah, 1981), vol. 5, pp. 452–453.

⁹⁸The tradition reads:

عن ابي رجاء قال: تلا الحسن (وقرانا فرقناه لتقرأه على الناس على مكث ونزلناه تنزيلاً) قال: كان الله تبارك وتعالى ينزل هذا القرآن بعضه قبل بعض لما علم انه سيكون ويحدث في الناس، لقد ذكر لنا انه كان بين أوله وآخره ثماني عشرة سنة. قال سألته على نسخة فقلت: يا ابا سعيد (وقرانا فرقناه) فثقلها أبو رجاء، فقال الحسن: ليس فرقناه ولكن فرقناه، فقرأ الحسن مخففة. قلت من يحدثك هذا يا ابا سعيد أصحاب محمد؟ فقال الحسن: فمن يحدثنيه (!)
قال: أنزل عليه بمكة قبل ان يهاجر الى المدينة ثماني سنين وبالمدينة عشر سنين.

tradition would be odd or meaningless if we did not grasp what is behind the debate. Al-Ḥasan was clearly annoyed at the invention of a difference in the meaning of *faraqa* and *farraqa*, and insisted that it is *faraqa*, but that the meaning is the same in any case.

The meaning of *furqān*

It is now worth summarizing my analysis of what *furqān* means when it refers to scripture, or is in proximity to scripture. *Furqān* refers to the piecemeal revelatory nature of scripture, in particular to the Qur'ān's manner of revelation. There are two possibilities of its derivation. The first and most commonly acknowledged is that it is a verbal noun from the verb *f-r-q*. This is how the tradition understood it, but the problem arose from the tradition's insistence on defining the root *f-r-q* to mean "made clear." The problem is easily solved when we realize that the verb *f-r-q* does mean divided, and *furqān* as a verbal noun is a derivation that does fit the rules of Arabic grammar and is a very plausible one. I am, however, of the opinion that it is a plural of *farq* (or *furq* or *firq*), meaning "pericope," as al-Zamakhsharī suggests, though he does not fully articulate it. I choose this second scenario because of the usage of the same root in Jewish Aramaic. My analysis so far might incline some to think that I am opposed to "influences" on Muḥammad, which would be a mistake. What I am against is shoddy philology. We have here either evolutionary conversion, which is very plausible, where a Semitic root was used by Judaism and Muḥammad to refer to the same phenomenon; or most probably, a calque translation by Muḥammad of a Jewish concept already at hand. *Pereq*, the Jewish Aramaic term, in one of its usages referred to a section of reading or of a text.⁹⁹ This etymology was suggested very early in the study of the term *furqān*. The problem was to speak of derivation, when most probably it was a calque translation. Given that we are talking about two Semitic languages here, which share the same root, the confusion arose from attempting to "derive" *furqān* from *pirqe*. But the insight was nevertheless correct. The irony is that suggesting this connection did not prompt scholars to take a closer look at why the Qur'ān resorts to this term. As this article shows, an etymology is at best a footnote, at worst a calamitous distraction to what remains our only task, which is to investigate the text on its own terms. Even if *furqān* is a calque translation of *pirqe*, the

⁹⁹See David M. Goodblatt, *Rabbinic instruction in Sasanian Babylonia* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975), pp. 170–196.

usage it was put to in the Qurʾān is novel and has nothing to do with *pirqe* as such. If there is another implication from my analysis, it is to realize what little hold Christianity had on the Qurʾān or Muḥammad, and the degree to which the Qurʾān is permeated with Jewish paradigms. The recent trend to invert this reality is not only polemically motivated (which is unfortunate), but unfounded.

Furqān in Qurʾān 8:29 and Qurʾān 8:41

There remain two other verses in the Qurʾān in which the word *furqān* occurs (Qurʾān 8:29, 41). Many scholars seem to see in these two particular cases the best fit for *furqān* as salvation in the Syriac sense. In one instance, the meaning of salvation could be entertained (Qurʾān 8:29). Yet, once again, I propose a different meaning here, based on material from the Qurʾān. Qurʾān 8:29¹⁰⁰ comes at the end of a series of verses enjoining the believers to stand fast with the Prophet, apparently in the midst of internal dispute about Muḥammad’s fighting expedition (Qurʾān 8:5–6, where a group (*farīq*) is unwilling, and **acts** as if dragged to their death). Qurʾān 8:15 enjoins the believers not to desert in battle; Qurʾān 8:20–21 enjoins the believers to obey the Prophet, and warns them not to be like those who said “we obey” and did not. The reference here is to the obstinate Jews who disobeyed Moses (cf. Qurʾān 2:93 where the same formula is used against the Jews of Moses, also Qurʾān 4:46). Qurʾān 8:24 again asks the believers to obey the Prophet when he calls them to that which “makes them alive” — a euphemism for war if ever there was one. Qurʾān 8:27 demands that believers do not betray God or the Prophet. It is after this litany of warnings that Qurʾān 8:29 promises the believers that if they fear the Lord he will find a *furqān*, or occasion a *furqān* for them.

Qurʾān 5:20–26 tells the story of how most of the Israelites refused to comply with Moses’ orders to fight in order to enter the Promised Land. Moses then asks God to separate him from his reprobate people who had refused to fight with him. The verb used here to refer to this separation is *faraqa*. Muḥammad was likewise having a hard time with his followers because some were not willing to fight, and he felt the need for a separation between those who wanted to fight and those who did not. I suggest that *furqān* when used in reference to battles in the Qurʾān refers to intra-communal separation. The battle of Badr was

¹⁰⁰“O believers, if you fear God he will find you a *furqān* and absolve your sins; God’s bounty is great.”

not only a victory over the Meccans, but a victory over the wavering faction among the Muslims who were unhappy about the idea of fighting as a way of life. Sūra 8 (where these two instances of *furqān* appear), which is a commentary on the momentous victory of Badr, is peculiarly subdued in tone and more concerned with establishing the authority of Muḥammad than with celebrating the victory. The general tone of the Sūra is reproachful: believers are arguing (Qur'ān 8:6); apparently a *farīq* of the believers did not want to go out to fight, as if they were being led to death (Qur'ān 8:5–7); believers should simply obey the Prophet and not dissent lest they fail (Qur'ān 8:20–24 and 8:46); true believers are those who fight (Qur'ān 8:74); at a certain moment, God tells Muḥammad that “God and the faction who follows you of the believers is enough for you” (Qur'ān 8:64). Not all the believers were keen on fighting.

It is remarkable that the *munāfiqūn*, the now ubiquitous new group in Medina, the fifth column in Muḥammad's community, are not taken seriously by Qur'ān specialists. They were a major headache to Muḥammad and a force to be reckoned with in his attempt to establish his authority in Medina (cf. Sūra 63). As a group they were known, yet what set them apart? Understanding the *furqān* of Sūra 8 as denoting a separation between the two factions among the believers according to their willingness to fight is based on the prevalent use of the verb *faraqa* in the Qur'ān, which predominantly refers to communal separation. Actually, in sixteen out of twenty-three occurrences of the verb *f-r-q* in the Qur'ān, the verb refers to intra-communal dissension.¹⁰¹ Indeed, Qur'ān 9:56 states: “They swear they belong to you (or are part of you) — they are not of you; they are a faction that are secessionist (*qawm yafraqūn*).” Sūra 9 is one of the most vehement in the Qur'ān in attacking the pacifist sector in Muḥammad's camp — those pacifists are not counted among the Muslims for they are *qawmun yafraqūn*. The traditional interpretation of verb *faraqa* here is “to fear;” yet all through Sūra 9 this group is accused of not standing with Muḥammad and refusing to take part in fighting with him, and a more accurate interpretation would be “to secede.” The wording of Qur'ān 9:56 can only mean: “They say they are from you, they are not from you, they are a group unto their own.” The final statement is a conclusion of the preceding argument. Blachère translated this phrase as “ils sont des gens qui font secession.”¹⁰² A faction that was willing to expel Muḥammad from Medina, and states that they are the mighty is hardly cowardly (cf. Qur'ān 63:8). The Islamic

¹⁰¹Instances where the verb *f-r-q* is referring to intra-communal dissensions are: 2:136, 2:285, 3:84, 3:103, 3:105, 4:150, 4:152, 5:25, 6:153, 6:159, 9:56, 20:94, 30:32, 42:13–14, and 98:4. See Qur'ān 9:107 where the fear of breaking up Muslims (*tafrīqan bayna al-mu'minīn*) is expressed.

¹⁰²Régis Blachère, *Le Coran* (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve & Larose, 1980), p. 220.

tradition was not willing to admit the degree to which Muḥammad had to accommodate the opposition in Medina, and that his control of Medina was a very slow process. It is under the influence of this Qur'ānic usage of the root *f-r-q* that the Muslims later chose to denote a secessionist sect as *firqa*. The *furqān* on the day of Badr was a separation between those willing to fight and those unwilling to fight. There is no doubt here that *furqān* was a verbal noun (*maṣdar*) from *f-r-q*.

Qur'ān 8:41, "Know that one-fifth of your spoils shall belong to God, the Prophet, the Prophet's kinsfolk, the orphans, the destitute, and the traveler in need: if you truly believe in God and what we sent down on our servant on the day of *furqān*, the day when the two armies met. God has power over all things,"¹⁰³ remains to be explored. We first need to determine what was sent down on that day. A close reading of Sūra 8 points to a momentous claim in the Qur'ān, a claim that was unprecedented, that heavenly soldiers were sent down to fight and make the believers steady in their fight (Qur'ān 8:9–12). This claim contravenes the fundamental presupposition held and firmly defended in the Qur'ān, that God does not occasion a physical miracle that upends the habitual world, such as the sending of angels, or making them appear to humanity (cf. Qur'ān 15:7–8, 17:8, 23:24, 25:21, 41:30, 43:60). The failure of Muḥammad to bring forth angels was a major point of contention, such that God promises destruction if his hand is forced, tying the appearance of angels to the end of the world (Qur'ān 15:8, 25:22). The appearance of angels became a new feature of battle scenes in the Qur'ān (cf. Qur'ān 3:123–124, where the angels were sent specifically for the Battle of Badr). Although soon the Qur'ān would qualify the manner of their appearance, the angels were invisible (cf. Qur'ān 9:26, 9:40 here supporting Muḥammad alone, 33:9).

The only thing that was sent down on the Battle of Badr were angels, and that is what 8:41 is alluding to, and demanding that the believers accept as fact. This is where the heft of the verse is, and not the phrase "day of *furqān*." The phrase, day of *furqān*, is qualified by the parallelism that came after it: "the day the parties met" (*yawma 'ltaqā al-jam'āni*). *Furqān* here is referring to the division of the believers into those who were willing to fight and those who were not. The parallelism between the two phrases is a brilliant pun on the root *f-r-q* (divide) and *j-m-ʿ* (gather), where *furqān* is indicating a positive clarification of the internal composition of the Muslim camp, while *jam'āni* is referring to the warring camps. This verse so beloved by scholars who work on the etymology of *furqān* has actually the most straightforward usage of this term.

¹⁰³Dawood's translation with some modification.

The parallelism between the root *f-r-q* and *f-ṣ-l* is also extended in the Qur'ān by the usage of the expression *yawm al-faṣl* (the day of separating the saved from the damned, i.e. on Judgment Day, an expression used repeatedly in the Qur'ān; see Qur'ān 37:21; 44:40; 77:13,14,38; 78:17) and the Day of Furqān, which is an earthly event. Qur'ān 30:58 actually uses the root *f-r-q* instead of *f-ṣ-l* for the judgment meted out on Judgment Day, “when the Hour comes, on that day they will be divided (*yatafarraqūn*).” The two roots were constantly called upon to function in tandem and reinforced each other.

The Qur'ān in Medina was using new terms and concepts to refer to the need for classifying (*tamyīz*) the believers, in order to know who is worthy of God's grace (Qur'ān 3:179 and 8:37). The reference here is clearly to those who refused to fight. The need to distinguish between believers and hypocrites (resisters) was paramount in Medina.

Implications

If there are any implications to be drawn from this study, it is that the text of the Qur'ān has been reliably transmitted and hardly tampered with. The Qur'ān was at pains to emphasize its piecemeal revelatory emergence, a mode of self-presentation that suffused its words, phrases and theology. The early Islamic tradition (that of *ahl al-sunna* in particular), having been convulsed by the controversy over the created and uncreated Qur'ān, set out to redefine the Qur'ān's mode of revelation as presented there. This is not unusual and is indeed predictable in a culture where the canon was closed and impossible to change. One used exegesis to redefine a closed text, since the Qur'ān was no longer answering to new developments. The magnitude of the cover up is immense, so immense that we have been unable to see through the fog of words that stood between us and the Qur'ān. The tradition wanted us to believe that all the adjectives given to the Qur'ān ended up saying the same thing: the Qur'ān is clear, eloquent, clear again and very clear, so much so that no one has so far been able to see that the root *f-ṣ-l* is about its coming down in *firaq*, pieces. The moment we turn away from the tradition, and hopefully remain inside the confines of the Arabic language, the picture becomes clear.

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