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. I did the same in a long article on the foundations of the et-

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ymological approach in Qur’anic studies. 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’an. 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’an*, published originally in 1938, and reissued repeatedly — most recently, in the Texts and Studies on the Qur’an. 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’an. 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. 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. 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. In this way,

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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 Qurʾān. Yet, to classify a word as foreign in the Qurʾān 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. 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 Qurʾān, is a good example of the irrelevance of etymological semantic studies as carried out regarding the Qurʾān. 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. But this is not the sum total of a philological investigation

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9Jeffery, *Foreign vocabulary*, p. 77: “… and the exegetes do not know what the reference is, though as a glance at ʿTabarī’s Tafsīr will show, they were fertile in
in Arabic of the word, is it? A glance at al-Tabari and at some lexicons, and a presumed absence of usage of the term before the Qur'an, 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 Qur'an uses the term barzakh in two distinct contexts: to speak about the separation between sweet and salt water (Qur'an 25:53; 55:20), and to speak of the duration or time (Qur'an 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 Qur'an 23:100 is such that it allows us to understand what the Qur'an is implying and trying to emphasize.\textsuperscript{10} Qur'an 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an. 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).\textsuperscript{11} Thus barzakh in Qur'an 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 Qur'an itself.”

\textsuperscript{10} Qur'an 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).

\textsuperscript{11} Qur'an 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 awak-
ened 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’anic 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’anic 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. The term is actually used in
an early rare hadith about ‘Ali who forgot a passage (barzakh) while
reciting the Qur’an — a usage that was not known to Orientalists. 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’an — or as he states
it which “could thus fit the sense of barrier in all three passages.” So is
barzakh in the Qur’an “frasang”? Or is it “barrier”? Exactly how do we
go about analyzing terms in the Qur’an if not from the Qur’anic context?
Neither Muhammad nor the people around him were using the word as
it was used in Pahlavi, that much is certain. Unless Muhammad or the
authors of the Qur’an 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.” 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

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12See the detailed analysis of barzakh in al-Wāhiḍī’s al-Basīṭ, vol. 16, pp. 64–66.
13The hadith is quoted in al-Basīṭ, who is quoting it from Abū ’Ubayd (see al-
al-‘asriyyah, 1999]), vol. 1, p. 169). It is also mentioned by al-Azhari in his Tadhkīb
al-bughah (see references in al-Basīṭ).
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 Qurʾān? Nothing, as the analysis of Jeffey 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 Qurʾān. 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 Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān is thus the issue — with reference to the Qurʾān, 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 Qurʾān.

*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 *purqāna*, “salvation,” this would be one of the most pivotal of words in the Qurʾān, tying the Qurʾān to a fundamental Christian term and concept. The problem with this understanding

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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 Qurʾān, Frederick M. Denny has to concede “that ‘salvation’ is not the key term in the Qurʾānic doctrine of salvation.” 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 Qurʾān, 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. All in all, we were reworking the Qurʾān to fit etymological musings, with utter disregard for the Qurʾānic data.

A glance at an article written on salvation in the Qurʾān which uses the Qurʾānic 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. The same situation is evident in the entry for “Salvation” in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, although it is not clear why this entry failed to acknowledge James Robson’s article. *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 Qurʾān owes its genesis to a borrowing by Muḥammad from Syriac, to which he added his own meaning. 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

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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.

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


20For an attempt to keep a Syriac etymology, see Rudi Paret, “Furqān,” *EI²*, 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 Qur’ān 8:41 (and most probably for Qur’ān 2:185; 8:29; and 25:1). However, he proposes that in other locations (Qur’ān 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 *puqdānā*, 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 Qur’ānic 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 *puqdānā* 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

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22Ibid., p. 294.
to see in furqân an item of foreign vocabulary and treated it as a genuine Arabic word. I remain unconvinced by Rubin’s arguments about furqân being “light,” since he gives the Arabic lexicon extensive authority over the meaning of the Qur’anic verse. I do take the two articles to indicate the problematic nature of the solutions offered so far on furqân. Rubin still sees furqân as “salvation” (Syriac purqānā) as operative in two instances in the Qur’ân. Both articles make abundantly clear that we have, as of yet, not offered an explanation of furqân that takes into account the Qur’anic setting.

My analysis takes an agreed-upon position as its starting point: there seem to be at least two meanings for the word furqân in the Qur’ân. This article is then divided into two major parts. I investigate the two possible meanings of the term furqân in the Qur’ân by a thorough reading of the context in which they occur. My intention is to examine the text of the Qur’ân 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 furqân is the absence of any attempt at analysing the Qur’anic context or to investigate its meaning when used to describe scripture.

Scripture as furqân, a piecemeal revelation

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

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

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25Rubin cited A.J. Wensinck’s arguments for two meanings for furqân in the Qur’ân, 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 Muhammad was claiming a revelation that did not conform to that of the former heavenly books.

In Qurʾān 25:32 the unbelievers wonder why the Qurʾān was not sent down to Muhammad in one piece: “The unbelievers ask: Why was the Qurʾān not revealed to him entire in a single revelation (jumlatan wahidah)?” Qurʾān 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, Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān was not a book like the two others, nor should they expect one.

It is thus clear that those whom the Qurʾān 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 Muhammad, 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 Muhammad’s insistence on the similarity of his career to that of Moses. That Muhammad 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 Qurʾān 4:153 informs us. 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

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

27 The People of the Book demand that you [Muhammad] 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 Qurʾān was not being revealed in one instance, they were calling into doubt its similarity to previous Scriptures. In response, the Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān tried to answer this challenge; indeed, I am arguing that the answer shaped the very nature of how the Qurʾān speaks of itself.

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

In this light, Qurʾān 17:106 takes on major significance, for it is addressing a major problem facing the claims of the revelatory status of the Qurʾān. The verse reads: “We divided (faraqaḥu or farraqnahu) the Qurʾān in order that you (Muḥammad) will read it to the people as you live among them (aḍā mukthin) and we are indeed sending it down seriati.” This is one of many places in the Qurʾān where an attempt is made to answer this challenge. The Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān, the root f-r-q and consequently the word furqān, Furqān, whether a verbal noun from farqa or more likely (as I would propose) a plural of farq or furq (in the sense of a section),

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28 A few verses before 17:106 (in 17:88–92), the Qurʾān narrates all the unreasonable requests demanded of Muḥammad, including the bringing of a book from heaven: “In this Qurʾān. 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 Qur‘ān was a piecemeal revelation. Instead of being shy about the nature of its coming into being, the Qur‘ān is thus undermining the attack on its character by making a virtue of necessity.

Connecting Qur‘ān 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”). Unfortunately, he never elaborated on what the relationship might be. But his keen sense of the Qur‘ānic language made him translate the verse in his Der Koran as “Es ist ein Koran, den wir abgeteilt (?) haben.” Paret relegates the traditional translation of the verb faraq as faṣṣala, or make clear, to a footnote where he states: “Oder klar gemacht. Der Ausdruck ist vieldeutig.” (Arberry and Abdel Haleem have “divided Qur‘ān.”) Wagendonk suggests (though only in a footnote) the possibility that furqān might mean a “Qur‘ān revealed in sections.” Nevertheless, Wagendonk, like Paret, adheres to the Syriac etymology of furqān. The failure to connect this to the bigger concerns of the Qur‘ān has prevented us from seeing the significance of a piecemeal revealed Qur‘ān for the Qur‘ānic vocabulary.

The mukth in Qur‘ān 17:106 — abiding, living with the people — is a fundamental narrative strategy in the Qur‘ān in the lives of the prophets within their communities. Noah is the archetypal prophet who lives 950 years with his people, as Qur‘ān 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 Qur‘ān 10:15–16, the demand for a different Qur‘ān or a replacement of the Qur‘ān 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 geöffnet worden ist.” 30Rudi Paret, Der Koran: Übersetzung (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1996), pp. 203–204. 31K. Wagendonk, 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 (furqānāhu) 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).

**Fasl as furqān**

The Qur’ān uses also another verb to expound on the piecemeal nature of the revelatory experience of Muḥammad. The verb fāsala, 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-s-l is about the piecemeal nature of Muḥammad’s revelatory experience. The Islamic exegetical tradition did its best to connect the root f-s-l and f-r-q, and then proceeded to neutralize both. Fortunately, the usage of the root f-s-l leaves little doubt that the verb refers to a divided Qur’ān, revealed in pieces. The exegetical tradition was too heterogeneous and contested to allow the meaning of f-s-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 (faṣāhalahu), knowingly [or on purpose], a guidance and mercy

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32The root f-s-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 yawn al-fasl, Day of Separation, for Judgment Day; God is the one who separates (judges) between people.
Walid A. Saleh

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

Practically the entire exegetical Islamic tradition understood Qurʾān 7:52 as a reference to the clear meaning of the Qurʾān. Indeed, al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), whom I consider the most systematic obfuscator of the verses that could mean a piecemeal revealed Qurʾān, 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 Qurʾān 7:52, and glosses mufassal as “distinguishing between truth and falsehood.”

There is, however, one exegete who stated the obvious, and even connected it with Qurʾān 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. His recently-published Qurʾānic commentary can show us to what degree al-Ṭabarī was attempting to shape the interpretation of the Qurʾān. Al-Māturīdī gave us such a detailed analysis of Qurʾān 7:52 that it is worth translating it in full:

It is possible to interpret fasṣalnāhu as clarified, and tafṣil as clarification. It is also possible that fasṣalnāhu means we divided the Qurʾān when we sent it down and we did not send it down in one piece (jumlatan wahidah), as God has already said in the Qurʾān, “a Qurʾān that we divided, that you read it to people” (Qurʾān 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

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33My translation.
34Even al-Zamakhsharī, al-Kashshāf, vol. 2, p. 82, mentioned only the standard interpretation of fasṣalnāhu as made clear or clarified. Al-Rāzī followed him on this; see Mafatīḥ, vol. 14, p. 100.
36Only al-Qurṭubī mentioned in passing that fasṣalnāhu here can also mean “we sent it down in pieces.” See his al-Jāmiʿ li-ḥikām al-Qurʾān (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1967), vol. 7, p. 217, on Qurʾān 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-s-l in the Qurān indicates the piecemeal manner of revelation, rather than “a clear detailed Qurān.”38 Other usages of the verb in the Qurān are far more direct in linking the manner of revealing the Qurān to the verb f-s-l. The prime example is verse Qurān 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 mufassalan. 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 mufassalan to mean a clear Qurān.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 mufassal to mean “a divided Qurān.” The verse is stating that “why should I, Muhammad, take the word of anyone else but God as a judge [over this matter], since He is the one who is sending down the Qurān in pieces, separately; ask those who know Scripture, they know that it is indeed coming down from heaven truly. O Muhammad, do not doubt.” The verse is thus about a debate between Muhammad 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.

40 As mentioned above, al-Māturīdī was the only exegete to offer the possibility that mufassal in verse Qurān 6:114 could mean a piecemeal Qurān:

وقيل: مفصولًا: مفرأ أي أرسله بالتفاقيف لم ينزل جمعًا حملًا.
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, *muṭaṣṣal*, 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 *muṭaṣṣalāt* 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 *muṭaṣṣalāt* means “known,” but this attempt is clearly half-hearted. The question is thus why can *muṭaṣṣal* in Qurʾān 6:114 only mean “clear,” while *muṭaṣṣal* in Qurʾān 7:133 can only mean “divided”? The theology of the uncreated Qurʾān left its impact on every level of the Sunni exegetical outlook, and Qurʾān 6:114 was not allowed to imply a piecemeal Qurʾān.

The root *f-s-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 Muhammad (a Qurʾān that is *muṭaṣṣal*) with the function of the *āyāt*, verses/signs in the Qurʾān which are mentioned individually, *āyāt muṭaṣṣalāt*. The root *f-s-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-s-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-s-l*. It plays a central role in connecting *f-s-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-s-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

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⁴²Similarly, the term *furarqān* 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 (fasīlin). The Qur’ān is claiming that isolating, enumerating, describing and mentioning one particular sign after another in the revelation constitutes tafsīl. 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. This is the root s-r-f, which is used in the same manner as the root f-s-l in reference to signs (āyat). Three verses, Qur’ān 6:46, 65, and 105, use the expression nuṣarrīfu al-āyat, thus punctuating the tempo of the Sūra with the other expressions from f-s-l (Qur’ān 6:55, 57, 97, 98, 114, 119, 126, and 154). Connecting the Qur’ān and its signs (āyat) with the verb s-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 (āyat) described by this verb, but so is the Qur’ān as a whole, making it fully congruent with how the verb f-s-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 s-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." He used other terms to define s-r-f, "repetition" (tardīdunā) or bringing in succession (tatābu).

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

44It is not among the verbs mentioned by Madigan.
45Al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi’ al-bayān, vol. 8, p. 212:
46Ibid., vol. 7, p. 226 (for tardīdunā); vol. 7, p. 196 (for nutābī’).
47Al-Māturīdī, Tawāṣhīt, vol. 5, p. 94.
the Qur’ān uses to describe its revelatory process. These terms, *f-r-q*, *f-s-l*, and *s-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 (*fus†silat*), from one who is all wise,” is in this regard significant, since major exegetes had to confront the possibility that the root *f-s-l* as used here is actually saying that the Qur’ān came down in a piecemeal rather than in a “clear” manner. Al-Tabari, as was his wont, did not know of any interpretation that could mean that the root describing signs (*‘ayat*) is saying that these signs came down separated from each other — and this is quite remarkable.49 However, al-Māturīdī, a contemporary of al-Tabari, provides a detailed analysis of *f-s-l* as piecemeal revelation and connects it to the root *f-r-q*. His analysis of this instance is worth quoting in its entirety:

*Fus†silat*, 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

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

وَفِيْ ضَلْلِ أَيْنَ فَرَقَتْ فِي الْإِذْرَاءِ أَنزَلْتُهَا بَعْدَ عِيٍّ عَلَى قُدْرِ الْتَوَازَعِ وَالْأَسْبَابِ فَمَنْ يَدْعُ جَمِعَةً لَّا فَرَقَتْهَا فِي أَيْنَ فَرَقَتْ فِي الْإِذْرَاءِ أَنزَلْتُهَا لَا يُحْصِنُوا لَهَا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصْصُوا وَخَصْصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا فَأَكْرَمُوا لِكُلِّ سُيُوبِهَا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَчَصُوا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا وَخَصُصُوا W...
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-Zamakhshari, and then connects Qurān 11:1 with 7:133, the verse about the ten plagues. This was unavoidable, for the root f-s-l is used extensively in the Qurān, and one cannot avoid the imperative of its lexical meaning. In this sense, al-Ṭabarî 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‘tazili mutakallim, into the picture. Apparently, al-Jubbā’ī used Qurān 11:1 as a locus classicus for arguing for the createdness of the Qurān — a use that reflects an older Mu‘tazili tradition. Al-Jubbā’ī made three arguments based on this verse to support the notion of the createdness of the Qurān. The second of them is of interest here. He used the word fussatat to argue that the Qurān was divided, which required the existence of a doer, and as such the Qurān was an object. This, then, is the smoking gun of the whole debate over furqān. A divided Qurān 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 Sunni exegetical tradition was so systematic in its efforts to conceal the relationship between a Qurān that is divided and terms that are central to the Qurān’s self-presentation.

The centrality of the root f-s-l is clear also in Sūra 10. The term is used here three times (Qurān 10:5, 24 and 37), paralleling its use in Sūra 6. In the first two instances (Qurān 10:5 and 24), the verb describes God enumerating signs (ayāt) so that people become pious or reflective. It is verse 10:37 that returns us to the concept of a divided Qurān: “Nor could this Qurān 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, Mafāth al-ghayh, vol. 17, p. 185.
53 See “al-Djubbā’ī,” EI2, s.v.
(and modern translators also) have understood the expression *tafsil al-kitāb* as “explanation” or “elucidation.” We are by now familiar with this understanding of the root *f-s-l*. A more accurate translation of this important verse — a verse that comes just before the famous *taḥaddi* 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. The root *f-s-l* was thus fundamental in answering a serious challenge to the divine origins of the Qurʾān.

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 *rattālnū tartālān* 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 Muhammad is ordered to divide (*rattil*) the Qurʾān. The usual and traditional meaning of this verb, in Qurʾān 73:4

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56 Al-Māturīdī has as usual preserved for us a dissenting interpretation, that the Qurʾān is being torn from the Preserved Tablet: اَوْ يَقُولُ مَنْ فَعَلَ مِنْ اللَّهِ الْحَنُوْنَ. See *Ṭaʿwīlāt*, vol. 7, p. 56.

57 Mention 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.” In any case, this expression is almost a *hapax legomenon*, and was hardly influential in shaping the image of the Qurʾān. When the term *tartīl* became a technical term used for a style of Qurʾān recitation, any danger emanating from the expression in Qurʾān 25:32 was sidelined.

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

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

*ثم الترتيل منصرف إلى القراءة وهم القراءة قرأنا على جبهة الصدر، إذ ما هو إلا، الله تعالى لا يوصف بالترتيب.*

The matter can only be explained by the anxiety over the divided nature of the Qurʾān.


60 Cf. Qurʾān 67:23 *إنا كن نزلنا عليك القرآن تذيلا* which is another paranomastic construction.
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 Qurʾān as a historical source. For if furqān is a deformed formation from puqdānā, what other deformities lie hidden in the Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān: its Arabic text, or the Peshitta? If such presuppositions are taken seriously, they would render the Qurʾānic 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). 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

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61 See 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.”
62 Donner, “Qurʾānic Furqān,” p. 285: “In sum, the early Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān whose main characteristic was its piecemeal revelation. They did not want anyone reading the Qurʾān to connect furqān to a process of piecemeal revelation and ultimately to a Qurʾān created, or spoken by God, at the moment in which a passage was revealed to Muhammad. Not only was an intermediary needed — the archangel Gabriel acting as the go-between — but an eternity was presupposed: what was being revealed to Muhammad had already been revealed, had already been available as an eternal, uncreated Qurʾān, co-eternal with God. To say that the controversy about the created and uncreated Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān 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: Qurʾān 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-baṭl), or “a furqān between truth and falsehood.”63 In the next appearance of furqān in Qurʾān 2:185, al-Ṭabarī would connect furqān with f-s-l, with the same numbing formula, but here the root f-s-l is itself neutralized.64

Al-Ṭabarī, however, was not satisfied with this interpretive exercise. He wanted to reconfigure the story of how the Qurʾān was revealed. Thus, in his interpretation of Qurʾān 2:185, he introduces the narratives about the Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān itself vehemently denies in

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63Al-Ṭabarī, Jāmī’ al-bayān, vol. 1, p. 284, on Qurʾān 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.

64Ibid., vol. 2, p. 146, on Qurʾān 2:185: wa-l-fasāl bayna l-ḥaqq wa-l-baṭl.
The new narrative is that the Qur’ān 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-Tabari then connects this mode of revelation (which is more akin to mere transportation) from the nearest heavens by making a reference to verse Qur’ān 56:75 (“I swear by the position of the stars”) [mawāqī’ al-najām]). 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 Qur’ān.

Looking at this verse, 56:75, “I swear by the position of the stars,” in al-Tabari’s commentary, we encounter another reiteration of this now fully formed Islamic theory of revelation of a Qur’ān coming down from the primordial tablet (al-lawh al-mahfūz), where it was always present, eternal and uncreated, to the lower heaven, where it awaited transport to Muhammad. Al-Tabari 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 Qur’ān 56:75 a reaffirmation that the Qur’ān “was sent down to the Prophet in installments (najāman), separated (mutafar-rīqa).” 67 Or “the Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān came down in installments (najāman), three verses, four verses, or five verses at a time.” 68 Or “the Qur’ān came down in its totality, and was placed

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65 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 145:

عن ابن عباس قال: أنزل القرآن كله جملة واحدة في ليلة القدر في رمضان إلى السماء الدنيا، فكان الله اذ أراد أن يحدث في الأرض شيئا أنزل منه حتى جمعه.

66 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 204.

67 Ibid., vol. 27, p. 203, on Qur’ān 56:75:

فلا اقسم على القرآن، وقالوا: أنزل القرآن على رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم جمعا متمクラス.

68 Ibid.:  

نزل القرآن في ليلة القدر من السماء الدنيا إلى السماء الدنيا جملة واحدة. ثم فرق في السين.

69 Ibid.:  

ازل الله القرآن كحومة ثلاث ايات وأربع ايات وخمس ايات.
near the positions of the stars, and then Gabriel would bring down one Sûra at a time. It did come down completely on the Night of Power."\(^{70}\) Admitting to a piecemeal revelation Qur`ân is here inconsequential, since it is a mere transportation of it from one location to another. The Sunnî tradition admits to this historical truth about the Qur`ân, 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`ân.

The interesting aspect is that the pericope 56:75–82 is clearly speaking about the Qur`ân 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`ân.\(^{72}\) Qur`ân 56:78, “in a hidden book,” moreover, was taken by most interpreters to refer to the Preserved Tablet (\(al-lawh\ al-mahfûz\)).\(^{73}\) The narrative of how the Qur`ân was revealed thus acquires scriptural support at every level of detail, a strategy needed to counterbalance the fact that the Qur`ân is full of references to its piecemeal revelatory process. What we have in al-Tabarî is a Qur`ân, descending in its totality from the original eternal book and already fully formed, into the lowest heaven, and transported in instalments to Muhammad, 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 \(f-s-l\), but rather to \(n-j-m\), which constitutes a brilliant triumph over philology by philology.\(^{74}\) So complete is this obfuscation that

\(^{70}\)Ibid.: 
أَنَّ الْقُرْآنَ نُزِلَ جَمِيعًا، فَوَضَعَ مَعَاهُ النُّجُومَ، فَجَعَلَ جِرَابٍ يَتَبَيَّنُ بَيْنِي بِالسُّوْرَةِ، وَأَنَا نُزِلَ جَمِيعًا فِي لَيْلَةِ الْقُدْرِ.

\(^{71}\)Qur`ân 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`ân, 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?”

\(^{72}\)The Islamic legal tradition kept close to the original meaning of the pericope. For references on the debate see al-Wâhidî, \(al-Basît\), vol. 21, p. 260, footnote 6, where the opinion of al-Jâṣṣâṣ is quoted.

\(^{73}\)Al-Tabarî had “the book that is in heaven”; see Ibid., vol. 27, p. 205; al-Mâturîdî has \(al-lawh\ al-mahfûz\), see \(Ta’wîlât\), vol. 14, p. 321. Al-Wâhidî clearly shows that Maqûtî already understood this verse to refer to the Heavenly Book (\(al-lawh\ al-mahfûz\), see \(al-Basît\), 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-Tabarî misleadingly paraphrases Mujâhid’s phrase, inserting: 
هو في كتاب مصون عند الله لا تنتمي شيء من أذى من غيره ولا غيرة. The expression \(al-lawh\ al-mahfûz\) is mentioned only once in the Qur`ân, in 85:22.

\(^{74}\)Thus when al-Zarkashi (d. 784/1392) in his \(al-Barbân fi`ulâm al-Qur`ân\) (Beirut: Dîr al-Ma`rifah, 1972), vol. 1, p. 228, presents the theory of how the Qur`ân was revealed, he uses the word \(munajjam\) to describe how the Qur`ân was sent down. Indeed, in the chapter on “on the manner of sending down the Qur`ân,” not once did al-Zarkashi 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 Qurān 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 Qurān 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 Qurān 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. The narrative of al-Ṭabarī includes mention of verses Qurān 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 Qurān insofar as it is tied to 56:76, since the divisions of the Qurān then become mere transportation from an already complete Qurān.

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

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since the Qurʾān was eternal, as every good Sunnī knew. All exegetes followed al-Ṭabari here, with al-Māturīdī and even al-Zamakhshari using the more expected term the Preserved Tablet (al-lawh al-mahfūz).\textsuperscript{77}

The net effect of this persistent hounding of all verses that have the roots \textit{f-r-q} and \textit{f-s-l} by the exegetical tradition is that any possibility of perceiving the Qurʾān as an ontologically piecemeal revelatory experience was off the table. The root \textit{f-s-l} was completely and effectively isolated, and prevented from implying a piecemeal Qurʾān. The root \textit{f-r-q} was contained by muddling its import through postulating a complete Qurʾān hovering above Muḥammad, the source of his revelatory experience, to which this verb was allegedly referring. It is only the encyclopedic commentary of al-Ṭazī 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 Qurʾān revealed for the occasion, necessitated by an exigency, was a Qurʾān created by an act of creation on the part of God that implied that the Qurʾān was \textit{muhdath} (new) in time.\textsuperscript{78}

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There is such restraint that our suspicion is aroused — surely al-Ṭabari should have known of a \textit{tawil} or two. It is only with the recent publication of al-Māturīdī that we are in a position to unearth what al-Ṭabari had managed to conceal from modern scholarship for the last 100 years. In his interpretation of Qurʾān 21:2, al-Māturīdī actually connected the root \textit{h-d-th} to \textit{f-r-q}, leaving no doubt as to what was at


\textsuperscript{78}The term was Qurʾānic; Qurʾān 21:2; 26:5.

\textsuperscript{79}Al-Ṭabari, \textit{Jāmiʿ al-bayān}, vol. 17, p. 2.

\begin{quote}
 يقول تعالى ذكره: ما يحدث الله من تجلي شيء من هذا القرآن للناس، ويذكرهم به ويعظهم ال
 استمعوه، وهم يشعرون لأمة قلوبهم، عن قناعة: الآية يقول ما ينزل عليهم من شيء من القرآن إلا
 استمعوه، وهم يشعرون.
\end{quote}

Al-Ṭabari mentions nothing about the root \textit{h-d-th} in the other instance of this term, Qurʾān 26:5, see vol. 19, p. 62.
A *muhdath* (new) Qur‘ān was a piecemeal Qur‘ān. To him we owe the preservation of some of the oldest Mu‘tazilī exegetical tradition that has elsewhere been lost. By the time that the connection between the Mu‘tazilī notion of a created Qur‘ān and this verse would reappear in al-Rāzī’s commentary on Qur‘ān 21:2, the dice had been cast, and it hardly had an impact on how Muslims came to understand these terms.

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 Qur‘ān remains Qur‘ān 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 Qur‘ān was called *furqān* because it came down in pieces, in chunks, while other Scriptures came down complete.” Though al-Māturīdī is willing to mention this interpretation, he rejects it, and states that he prefers the traditional one.

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80 Al-Māturīdī, *Tu‘wālāt*, vol. 9, pp. 256-257:

وَقَالَ بَعْضُهُمُ مَتَّى رَكَابُ اللَّهُ أُولُو الْقُرْآنِ اِلْبَاطِلُ فَأَخْرَجَهُ آَرَاهُ فِي كُلِّ وَقْتٍ عَلَى قَدْرٍ


82 Al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, vol. 22, p. 140:

الْمَثْلِ اِلَّـيْنِ اِلْحَدَّوْنَ عَلَى حُدُوْدٍ الْقُرْآنِ بِهِدَّ إِلَّـيْنِ الآيَةِ.

83 We still find echoes of this fear as late as in al-Qurṭubī; see his al-Jāmi‘ li-‘alām al-Qur‘ān, vol. 11, p. 266:

فَقَانَ كَانِ يَنْزِلُ سُوْرَةٌ بَعْدَ سُوْرَةٍ وَآيَةٍ بَعْدَ آيَةٍ كَمَا كَانَ يَنْزِلُ اللَّهُ عَلَى مَا ذَكَّرَهُمْ رَجُسًا عَلَى رَجُسِهِ وَخَوْدَ.

84 Al-Māturīdī, *Tu‘wālāt*, vol. 10, p. 218:

وَقَالَ بَعْضُهُمُ مَثْلِ الْقُرْآنِ فِرْقَانًا لَّا أَنْزِلَ بِالْتَّفَارِيقِ مَفْقَوْمًا وَسَأَرَّ الْكِتَابِ آنِتَاتُ جَمِيْعِهِ.

85 *Ibid.*:
A few centuries later, al-Zamakhshari not only connects furqān to the verb f-r-q in Qurʾān 17:106, but also cites a poetic line that calls the revelatory units of the Qurʾān farq (or farq) in the singular.\(^6\) 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 Muʿtaṣilī 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 most cogent and sensible of explanations. Philologically, it is the soundest.\(^7\)

Al-Rāzī connects the two terms, furqān and the verb f-r-q, in Qurʾān 17:106, clearly following in the footsteps of al-Zamakhshari here. Al-Rāzī was by then at a distance from the controversy of a created Qurʾān, 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.\(^8\)

\(^{6}\)Al-Zamakhshari, al-Kashshāf, vol. 3, p. 80:

وَالْفَرْقَانُ مَصْدِرُ فِرْقٍ بَينِ الْشَّيْيَنِ: أَذَا فَصِلَ بَيْنَهُمَا. وَهُوَ فِرْقٌ بَيْنِ أَيْنَاقِيَّةٍ وَبَيْنَ ظَهْرِهِ. أَوْ لَنَعْنِهِ لْيُقِلْ لَهُمَا وَاحِدًا فَلَكَنَّ مَفْرَوًا مَفْصُولًا بَيْنَ بَعْضِهِ وَبَعْضِهِ فِي الْإِثْرَةِ، إِلَّا ذِي الْقُوَّةِ. فَرَقَانُ لَترَأَى عَلَى النَّاسِ عِنْدَكُمْ وَزُنَّاهُ تَزَنِّيًا ( وَقَدِ جَاءَ الْفَرَقُ عِنْدَكُمْ قَالَ: وَمُرْكَبُ كَافِرُ بِالْفَرَقِ.

\(^{7}\)A Shiʿī Persian Qurʾānic 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 Qurʾān commentaries about the Arabic of the Qurʾān, which is a topic for another discussion. See his Rawḍ al-jamān, M.J. Yū-Ḥaqqī and M.M. Nāṣīḥī, eds. (Mashhād: Būnād-i Pauhẕīsẖhā-yi Islāmī, 1381/2002), vol. 1, p. 9.

\(^{8}\)Ibid., vol. 24, p. 45:

لا نزاع أن الفرقان هو القرآن وصف بذلك من حيث أنه سبئاء فرق به بين الحق والباطل في نوبة محمد صلى الله عليه وسلم وبين الخلاف والجرام. أو لانه فرق في الندول كما قال (وقرأ) فرقان لقرأ على الناس على مكت ( ونتابل أقرب لانه قال) (نزل الفرقان) وفتحة نزل ندل على التفرقة.
Later, the scholastic tradition was even more at ease with furqān being a piecemeal revelation. Ismā‘īl 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-Baydawi’s commentary, was willing to elaborate on a terse statement by al-Baydawi regarding furqān in verse Qur’ān 25:1.

We are told that the inquisition or battle over the createdness or eternity of the Qur’ān (al-mihna) was a fundamental event in early Islam. Here is an example of how profoundly this event affected the interpretation of the Qur’ān, redefining its terms and in the process reimagining its mode of revelation. In this article, I have shown how a reading of the Qur’ān without the tradition indicates that verbs and descriptions of the Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān and piecemeal recounted signs were the mode of his preaching and ministry.

**Piecemeal revelation and “steadfastness of the heart”**

The Qur’ān makes another argument for the necessity of piecemeal revelation. We have seen that in 17:106 “a Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 25:32, “the disbelievers say ‘if only he received his Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 25:32, tathbit, is another important key term in the Qur’ān about Muḥammad’s ministry. Qur’ān 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 (Qur’ān 17:73), and thus force him to invent lies about God (cf. Qur’ān 11:12; 68:9). But

واما لفظة أزل قدل على الجمع ولهذا قال في سورة آل عمران (نزل عليه الكتاب وأول النور الواكيل)...

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

Qurʾān 14:27 describes God’s speech as “the steadfast word” (al-qawl al-thābit) which is used to steady (yuthabbit) 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.” Qurʾān 14:27 comes at the conclusion of one of the most famous of Qurʾānic parables about the holy word (kalima ṭayyiba) being a wholesome tree (ṣajara 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. Qurʾān 11:120 informs Muḥammad that the stories of the prophets told to him are told so that “his heart is made steadfast” (ma nathabbitu bihi ṭu’ādaka). That this root is not only meant for Muḥammad becomes clear with Qurʾān 16:102, where doubts were being raised against Muḥammad changing his mind about some of the revelation he was receiving (Qurʾān 16:101). The Qurʾān, 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 (Qurʾān 2:250; 3:147), and in the call for steadfastness in fighting (Qurʾān 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 (Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān.

The exegetical tradition and the insurmountable

Qurʾān 17:106

Qurʾān 17:106 (“A Qurʾān we divided [farāqna] so that you proclaim to people while living with them, and we sent it down repeatedly”), was the Gordian knot for the Sunni exegetical tradition, or the ahl al-hadīth, who wanted an eternal Qurʾān. Not even al-Ṭabarī would deny that there is a possibility that this verse could mean that the Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān to 56:75. In Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān is to its
self-presentation. The sentence, “I swear by the positions of the stars,” of Qurʾān 56:75 actually has nothing to do with the Qurʾān at all, which was all the more reason to use it to refer to what could not be denied. With Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān 17:106, then furqān would not mean a piecemeal Qurʾān. This is exactly what al-Ṭabarī presents us with in his extensive explanation of Qurʾān 17:106. By redefining what the verb f-r-q means in Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān 17:106 is to report about a debate regarding the correct reading of this word. The prevalent reading was farqānuḥu, as form I of the verb (fa’ala). 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 Qurʾān, not about the manner of its revelation. This is nonsensical: farqa in form I can and actually does mean to divide, and indeed this is the sole meaning. This supposed monovalent meaning of farqa in form I is only observed in the Qurʾān, 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 ʿAbbās. This minority camp read the verb in the second form, farraqānuḥu. This reading according to al-Ṭabarī means that the Qurʾān was sent down in pieces, bit by bit, verse by verse, and story after story. But to admit to that now is inconsequential, as this coming down in pieces is now made to refer to the fact that the Qurʾān was being sent down from a nearby heavenly post, already complete.  

90 Al-Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ al-bayān, vol. 15, p. 178: أختلفت القراء في قراءة ذلك، قرأوه عامة قراء الأمصار (فقرات) بتحقيق الزائدة من فقرات، حكمنا وفصلنا وبناء.  


93 When later commentators would admit that the second reading means a Qurʾān coming down in parts, they reaffirm (and remind the reader) that “there is no dispute among Muslims that the Qurʾān came down in its totality (jumlatan waḥida) to the nearest heaven.” See al-Qurtubi, al-Jāmiʿ li-ḥakkām al-Qurʾān, 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-Ṭabarî on the validity of these two readings, right after raising the issue of the debate on the reading of \textit{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-Ṭabarî then concludes that if this is the case, then this verse can only mean that the Qur'ān is a clear, wise Qur'ān.\footnote{Al-Ṭabarî, \textit{Jāmi‘ al-bayān}, vol. 15, p. 178:} This is remarkable, for not only did al-Ṭabarî 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.\footnote{See for example al-Ṭabarî’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:} 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-Ṭabarî’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-Ṭabarî claims. A closer look at the further interpretations adduced by al-Ṭabarî 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.\footnote{See also his measured tone in his comments on Qur’ān 12:19 and 12:110.} Something does not make sense here.

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

\footnote{For the long list of authorities who stood behind the second reading see al-Wāḥidī, \textit{al-Bāṣiṭ}, vol. 13, p. 503, note 7.}
The opposite camp came back swinging: by offering the reading far-
raqunahu, in the second form, which can only mean to divide, they were
hoping to make their point. But this is already conceding too much.
Furqan 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-Tabari 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 impos-
sible to deny, and which all Muslims accepted, that the Qur’an came
down in pieces, could be easily addressed by the notion of a complete
heavenly Qur’an that is being transported in pieces to earth.

It is the Mu’tazili exegetical tradition that was aware of the game,
and insisted that the verb farasa in its first form means “divided,” and
understood furqan as a piecemeal revelation. Only Qur’an commentaries
that had an early Mu’tazili pedigree preserved for us the derivation of
furqan as a piecemeal revelation, namely, al-Maturidi, al-Zamakhshari,
Abu al-Futuhi al-Razi, and Fakhr al-Din al-Razi. Lest the reader by now
think that I have an axe to grind against al-Tabari, 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 farasa in Qur’an 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-Tabari preserves a tradition that recounts a dialogue between al-
Hasan al-Basri (d. 110/728) and Abu Rajaa’ over the reading of Qur’an
17:106.\textsuperscript{97} It seems that Abu Rajaa’ provoked al-Hasan by reading this
verse in front of him in the second form, which aroused the anger of
al-Hasan, who shot back, stating that all Muslims know that the Qur’an
was revealed in Mecca for eight years and continued to be revealed for ten
years in Medina.\textsuperscript{98} This tradition is unique in al-Tabari’s commentary
and in discussions over variant readings of the Qur’an. Once again, this

\textsuperscript{97}Most probably Mahtar b. Tahmān, Salmaan al-Basri (d. ca. 125/742); see al-
Dhahabi, Siyar al-lam al-nubala’, Shu’ayb al-Arna’ut, ed. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-

\textsuperscript{98}The tradition reads:

عن أبي رجاء قال: تلا الحسن وقرأنا فرغان اقرأه على الناس على مكث ورؤتاه تدريلاً قال: كأن الله
تبارك وتعالى ينزل هذا القرآن ببعض لما علم أنه سيكون وجدت في الناس. فلقد ثكر لنا
أبي رجاء أو نسأله عن حديثه فقلت: يا أبا سعود وقرأنا فرغان فقلت له: يا أبي رجاء، فقال:
لاس فرغان ولكن فرغان، فقرأ الحسن معتففًا، فقلت من يحدثك هذا يا أبا
سعود أسماع الله محمد؟ قال الحسن: من يحدثني له يا أبا رجاء. قال أزرع عليه بмеча قبل أن
يهاجر إلى المدينة ثمانية سنينٍ، وبالمدينة عشر سنين.
Furqān in classical Islam and in modern Qur’anic studies

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 farqa and farrqa, and insisted that it is farqa, 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’an’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 Muhammad, 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 Muhammad to refer to the same phenomenon; or most probably, a calque translation by Muhammad 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’an 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

usage it was put to in the Qurʾān is novel and has nothing to do with pirqa as such. If there is another implication from my analysis, it is to realize what little hold Christianity had on the Qurʾān or Muhammad, 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 8:29\(^\text{100}\) 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 Muhammad’s fighting expedition (Qurʾān 8:5–6, where a group (fariq) 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. Muhammad 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

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\(^{100}\) "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 (Qūrān 8:6); apparently a farīq of the believers did not want to go out to fight, as if they were being led to death (Qūrān 8:5–7); believers should simply obey the Prophet and not dissent lest they fail (Qūrān 8:20–24 and 8:46); true believers are those who fight (Qūrān 8:74); at a certain moment, God tells Muḥammad that “God and the faction who follows you is enough for you” (Qūrān 8:64). Not all the believers were keen on fighting.

It is remarkable that the munāfqūn, the now ubiquitous new group in Medina, the fifth column in Muḥammad’s community, are not taken seriously by Qūrān 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 Qūrān, which predominantly refers to communal separation. Actually, in sixteen out of twenty-three occurrences of the verb f-r-q in the Qūrān, the verb refers to intra-communal dissension.101 Indeed, Qūrān 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 Qūrān 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 Qūrān 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. Qūrān 63:8). The Islamic

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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 Qurʾānic 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.

Qurʾān 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,” 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 Qurʾān, a claim that was unprecedented, that heavenly soldiers were sent down to fight and make the believers steady in their fight (Qurʾān 8:9–12). This claim contravenes the fundamental presupposition held and firmly defended in the Qurʾān, 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. Qurʾān 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 (Qurʾān 15:8, 25:22). The appearance of angels became a new feature of battle scenes in the Qurʾān (cf. Qurʾān 3:123–124, where the angels were sent specifically for the Battle of Badr). Although soon the Qurʾān would qualify the manner of their appearance, the angels were invisible (cf. Qurʾān 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” (yawmāʾ al-ṭaqā al-jamʿāni). 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- (gather), where furqān is indicating a positive clarification of the internal composition of the Muslim camp, while jamʿāni 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.

103 Dawood’s translation with some modification.
The parallelism between the root \( f-r-q \) and \( f-s-l \) is also extended in the Qur'ān by the usage of the expression \( yawm al-fasl \) (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 \( f-s-l \) 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 (\( tamyız \)) 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 \( f-s-l \) 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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