

DMITRY FROLOV

**Two in One and One in Two:
An Observation on the Composition of the Qur'ānic Text**

Abstract

The article analyzes two opposite but related phenomena. First, when two sūras are treated as one integrated text by Muslim commentators. Second, when the text of a sūra is styled as two autonomous texts each one with its opening oath formulas and its own contents. The analyses of these facts show that: 1) all the phenomena studied belong to the early Meccan period and are concentrated in the last section of the Qur'ānic text traditionally called *Al-Mufaṣṣal*; 2) the borders between the sūras were not absolute and invulnerable as different alternative decisions were rather freely discussed by Muslim scholars, and this gives us an insight in the process of the compilation of the Qur'ānic text; 3) The compilation of the sūras and the compilation of the book were not two successive steps, as is commonly believed, but – at least in some cases – a simultaneous process where decisions were taken at the same time about the number and contents of sūras and of their place in the book.

In the course of my study of the composition of the *Qur'ān* I came across a peculiar phenomenon which I want to present and discuss here. This phenomenon is not totally unknown but all its implications for the composition of the *Qur'ān* are somehow overlooked. I call this phenomenon “two in one and one in two”.

Two in one

There are cases when Muslim scholars have reasons to speak and actually speak about two adjacent sūras being in fact one structural element of the book.

The first example is *Al-Fātiḥa* (“The Opening”, no. 1) and *Al-Baqara* (*The Cow*, no. 2), the first being something like the opening prayer for the second (the request and the answer).

In reciting the verses of the first sūra, the believer asks for guidance (*hudā*) to the straight path (*ṣirāṭ mustaqīm*): *ihdinā aṣ-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm* (1:6).

The *Qurʾān* itself provides the immediate response to this prayer in the beginning of *Al-Baqara*:

“*Alīf-lām-mīm*. That is the Book, wherein is no doubt, a **guidance** (*hudā*) to the godfearing...”

The existence of this link between the *Al-Fātiḥa* and the *Al-Baqara* is mentioned by many Muslim commentators.¹ Some go as far as to state that it actually makes them a unit containing two sūras rather than two independent texts.² This supposition is supported by the fact that *Al-Baqara* also has a concluding prayer (2:286) and the two prayers in fact play the role of frame elements for the text of the second sūra.³

The second example is *The Daybreak* (*Al-Falaq*, no. 113) and the *Men* (*An-Nās*, no. 114) tied together by the common occasion for delivering (the magic used against the Prophet by a Jew or his daughters which made him ill). The story told by the authorities on *asbāb an-nuzūl* – we do not discuss here its authenticity or probability – in some versions contains such a detail as a rope with eleven knots which is exactly the number of verses in the last two sūras of the *Qurʾān*. Two angels brought a revelation containing these two sūras to the Prophet. With each verse he read one knot untied and at the end Muḥammad was completely cured.⁴

The third example is *The Spoils* (*Al-Anfāl*, no. 8) and *The Repentance* (*At-Tawba*, no. 9) which the compilers of the ‘Uḥmān’s *Vulgata* first thought to make one sūra but then decided against it. As-Suyūṭī in his *Itqān* quotes a tradition included practically in every *ḥadīth* collection where ‘Uḥmān answers a question of Ibn ‘Abbās who wanted to know why sūra no. 8 which is much shorter than the next sūra was put before with no *Basmala* between the two. ‘Uḥmān said that although the *The Spoils* was delivered in the beginning of the Medinan period and *The Repentance* at the end of it, “the story in both of them is the same” (*al-qīṣṣa fīhimā wāḥida*). At first he decided to make them

¹ See Ibn al-Zubayr al-Ġarnāṭī, *Al-Burhān fī tartīb suwar al-Qurʾān*, Ar-Ribāt 1990, p. 190; Ġalāl al-Dīn as-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qurʾān*, Al-Qāhira 1978, vol. 2, p. 142; idem, *Tanāsūq ad-durar fī tanāsūb as-suwar*, Bajrut 1986, pp. 64–65.

² This might be an explanation for the well-known fact that Ibn Maṣ‘ūd seemed not to include the *Fātiḥa* in his compilation of the *Qurʾān*, judging by the information given by Ibn an-Nadīm and As-Suyūṭī, although there are evidence that he knew this prayer. It is possible that he considered it to be the opening of the *Baqara* and not an autonomous sūra and included the *Fātiḥa* into the former under its heading. As a result the name of the first sūra does not appear in the list of sūras in his compilation preserved by Ibn an-Nadīm and As-Suyūṭī.

³ See about this in more detail: Dmitry Frolov, *The Role of Prayers in the Composition of the Qurʾān* (to appear in the Proceedings of the 24th Congress of UEAI, “Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta” in 2011).

⁴ See, i.e., Ġalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī, *Lubāb an-nuqūl fī asbāb an-nuzūl*, Al-Qāhira n.d., pp. 504–505.

one sūra but then did not dare as the Prophet never explicitly said so, so he simply put them together and did not write the *Basmala* over the second one.⁵

The fourth example are sūras 93 and 94. As-Suyūṭī quotes Fahr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī who in his commentary relates the opinion of such prominent figures as Ṭāwūs and the Umayyad caliph 'Umar Ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz who considered these two sūras to be one integrated text or one sūra.

But the most interesting case is the pair of *The Elephant* (*Al-Fīl*, no. 105) and *Al-Qurayš* (no. 106). The second one begins with the preposition (*ḥarf al-ğarr*) *li-: li-ṭāfi qurayš...* "For the composing of Qurayš..." and this creates a problem which is the starting point in the discussions between the commentators. According to the rules of the Arabic grammar the function of the prepositions is to connect something preceding them with something succeeding them, mostly verbs with nouns, but in this case there is nothing preceding the preposition. More than that nothing can be postulated as hidden in mind (*muḍmar*) or implicit (*muqaddar*) in the position before this preposition unlike many other cases, among them *Basmala* in the beginning of the *Fātiḥa*.

Three alternative solutions were proposed.

One – the sūra has a "round-up" composition where the beginning of it is tied up with its end. In other words one can read – and understand – the text in a reversed order as well: "So let them serve the Lord of this House who has fed them against hunger and secured them from fear/ for the composing of *Al-Qurayš*, their composing for the winter and summer caravan!". This rather fantastic explanation, nevertheless put forward by such scholars as Az-Zamakhṣarī and As-Suyūṭī, makes the verbs "fed" (*aṭ'ama*) and "secured" (*āmana*) govern the use of the preposition. As to the meaning everything fits well, but other examples of such circular structure of the text are nowhere to be found except maybe in modern literature.

Another solution, proposed by Aṭ-Ṭabarī, is that *lām* is not a preposition, but an exclamation particle (*lām at-ta'ağğub*). In this case the translation of the beginning of the sūra will be something like that: "How wonderful is the composing of *Qurayš*...". This hypothesis which looks reasonable enough remained unpopular because the particle used is definitely a preposition, and that makes such reasoning pure speculation.

The third solution which interests us most of all – the second sūra is part of the preceding sūra but for some reasons the text was cut into two parts and the second part was made a separate sūra. This solution consists of two statements.

The first statement is: "These two sūras initially are one text" and it is intended to solve the linguistic problem mentioned above.

The second statement is: "The text was for some reason subsequently cut into two and made two sūras" and the search for a reason incorporates a solution to another problem, this time a historical one. The reason for such a decision proposed by some

⁵ See As-Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 1, p. 62. See also p. 80 where As-Suyūṭī quotes discussions about whether these two texts are one sūra or two. Such early authorities as Abū Rawq, Muğāhid and Sufyān at-Ṭawrī considered them to be one sūra.

commentators was as follows: there is a Tradition in which Muḥammad says that the Qurayš was given seven favors, one of them being a sūra devoted exclusively to them and speaking only of them. So if the text had not been cut into two, this statement of the Prophet would have turned into false one which is unthinkable. What is remarkable is that the argumentation and the reasons why one text has been cut into two look very common sense and technical.

The number of examples allows us to surmise that Muslim scholars of different ages and trends did not consider the borders of the sūras as absolutely invulnerable and were not totally against discussing these borders and putting forward different points of view in this respect. The possible implications of this fact can somewhat change our picture of the structure of the book.

One in two

The opposite phenomenon has to do with sūras modeled as two texts which look like two autonomous sūras put under one heading. Such examples are also not infrequent in the *Qurʾān*. At least six sūras are structured like this. They are nos. 56, 69, 74, 81, 84, 86.⁶ In all these texts the second part is autonomous thematically and has a standard “oath” introduction so frequent in the beginning of sūras.

The oath introduction is one of the most popular in the *Qurʾān*. It occurs in 23 sūras (nos. 36, 37, 38, 43, 44, 50, 51, 52, 53, 68, 75, 77, 79, 85, 86, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 95, 100, 103).⁷ All these texts are Meccan, more precisely – early Meccan. Most of them (nineteen sūras) fall into the section of the *Qurʾān* which is traditionally called *Al-Mufaṣṣal* or “The Partitioned”, as well as all examples of the same introduction in the second part of a sūra. The overwhelming means of expression for oath is particle *wa-* (*wāw al-qasam*), but twice the verb *uqsimu* “I swear” is used instead (nos. 75 and 90), both times in combination with *lā* “no”. Both oath patterns are used as introductions to the second parts of the abovementioned sūras only the distribution is different. Four times the phrase *lā uqsimu* “No, I swear” is used, and twice – the *wa-* phrase (sūras 74 and 86).⁸

If we look closely at the six passages in the Appendix, we can make at least three observations:

First, we can see that any text of this group could have been a sūra of its own, with no less right in respect to its contents and form than, say, sūras 98, 103 or 108.

⁶ The texts of the second parts of these sūras in Arberry’s translation are given in the Appendix to the paper.

⁷ As-Suyūṭī in *Itqān* in the chapter on the introductions of sūras (*fawātih*) speaks only of 15 sūras, but his data does not include sūras which begin with a combination of letters (*ḥurūf muqattaʿa*) + oath series, as well as sūras where oath is expressed not by *wāw al-qasam*, but by the verb *uqsimu*, with an accompanying word *lā* “no”, see *Itqān*, vol. 2, pp. 135–136.

⁸ This sūra is unique in one more aspect. Both parts of it begin with oath expressed by the same phrase *wa-as-samāʾi*... “By heaven...”.

Second, the contents of each one of them have very vague connection with the contents of the first part, to say the least. Still, they have a very definite function in the structure and composition of these sūras. The first parts of them speak about what can be called *gayb* “hidden knowledge”:

- sūra 56 – eschatology and creation;
- sūra 69 – history (stories of perished nations) and eschatology,
- sūra 74 – eschatology;
- sūra 81 – eschatology;
- sūra 84 – eschatology;
- sūra 86 – creation and eschatology.

The key word is eschatology to which sometimes stories about creation or historical events are added. In other words the first parts give information about facts which no one can check from his own experience. A person has to believe in them, and the second parts verify this information by stressing that it is a revealed truth and whoever believes in it will be rewarded and whoever considers it a lie will be punished.

It seems that by finding this functional, not thematic, link between the two parts of these sūras we touch upon a certain compilation technique repeatedly used to form a Qur'ānic chapters which definitely have a form of sermons. We cannot exclude that originally autonomous texts delivered independently from each other, were first combined orally in the process of preaching and then were put to writing.

Third, they are very much alike in their message which concentrates round two themes very important for the whole *Qur'ān*, especially in the early Meccan stage: the truth of the Revelation and the punishment and reward. Contrariwise pictures of the Creation and of the Last Day catastrophe so frequent in the early Meccan sūras are significantly absent from them.

The first theme is additionally accentuated in them by using the recurring formulas and key words like *qur'ān karīm* (56:77), *al-qur'ān* (84:21), *kitāb maktūn* (56:78,) *qawl rasūl karīm* (69:40, 81:19), *qawl faṣl* (86:13), *naḍīr* (74:36), *taḍkīra* (74:49, 54). Also the six texts taken together contain a refutation of all the three main accusations addressed to Muḥammad by its opponents: he is not a poet, nor soothsayer (*kāhin*), see sūra 69, nor possessed (*maḡnūn*), see sūra 81.

It turns out that these six texts form not only syntagmatic relations with first parts, being something like a certificate of their authenticity, but also paradigmatic relations with each other, accentuating a theme, which was very important, or even crucial, in the early stage of Muḥammad's mission.

Conclusions

Our observations can be summarized in several points:

- 1) All the discussed phenomena are concentrated in the last section of the *Qur'ān* called *Al-Mufaṣṣal* (sūras 50–114), where short texts revealed mostly in the early Meccan

period are gathered.⁹ As-Suyūṭī quotes Ibn Ḥağar al-‘Asqalānī who said that it is possible that the group of *Al-Mufaṣṣal* sūras in the process of compilation was formed before the rest of the *Qur’ān*.¹⁰ In other words the group is a collection of Muḥammad’s sermons of the early period made of a combination of different revealed passages which fitted each other to convey the message.

- 2) The borders between the sūras were not absolute and invulnerable as different alternative decisions were rather freely discussed by Muslim scholars, and this gives us an insight in the process of the compilation of the Qur’ānic text.
- 3) The compilation of the sūras and the compilation of the book were not two successive steps, as is commonly believed, but – at least in some cases – a simultaneous process where decisions were taken at the same time about the number and contents of sūras and of their place in the book. The facts we presented support this hypothesis, but as Muslims often say, “Allāh knows better”.

Appendix. Texts of the autonomous second parts of the six sūras

56:75–96:

No! I swear by the fallings of the stars
 (and that is indeed a mighty oath, did
 you but know it)
 it is surely a **noble Koran**
 in a **hidden Book**
 none but the purified shall touch,
 a sending down from the Lord of all Being.
 What, do you hold this discourse in disdain,
 and do you make it your living to cry lies?
 Why, but when the soul leaps to the throat of the dying
 and that hour you are watching
 (And We are nigher him than you, but you do not see Us)
 why, if you are not at Our disposal,
 do you not bring back his soul, if you speak truly?
 Then, if he be of those brought nigh the Throne,
 there shall be repose and ease, and a Garden of Delight;
 and if he be a Companion of the Right:
 ‘Peace be upon thee, Companion of the Right!’
 But if he be of them that cried lies, and went astray,
 there shall be a hospitality of boiling water

⁹ The exception is the short Medinan sūras also placed at the end of the codex (sūras 57–66, 98). But all the sūras studied belong, as we stated above, to the early Meccan period.

¹⁰ See As-Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 1, p. 83.

and the roasting in Hell.
 Surely this is the truth of certainty.
 Then magnify the Name of thy Lord, the All-mighty.

69:38–52:

No! I swear by that you see
 and by that you do not see,
 it is the **speech of a noble Messenger**.
 It is not the speech of a **poet**
 (little do you believe)
 nor the speech of a **soothsayer**
 (little do you remember).
 A sending down from the Lord of all Being.
 Had he invented against Us any sayings,
 We would have seized him by the right hand,
 then We would surely have cut his life-vein
 and not one of you could have defended him.
 Surely it is a Reminder to the godfearing;
 but We know that some of you will cry lies.
 Surely it is a sorrow to the unbelievers;
 yet indeed it is the truth of certainty.
 Then magnify the Name of thy Lord, the All-mighty.

74:32–56:

Nay! By the moon
 and the night when it retreats
 and the dawn when it is white,
 surely it is one of the greatest things
 as a **warner** to mortals.
 to whoever of you desires to go forward or lag behind.
 Every soul shall be pledged for what it has earned,
 save the Companions of the Right;
 in Gardens they will question concerning the sinners,
 'What thrust you into Sakar?'
 They shall say, 'We were not of those who prayed, and
 we fed not the needy,
 and we plunged along with the plungers,
 and we cried lies to the Day of Doom,
 till the Certain came to us.'
 Then the intercession of the intercessors shall not profit them.
 What ails them, that they turn away from the **Reminder**,
 as if they were startled asses fleeing before a lion?

Nay, every man of them desires to be given scrolls unrolled.
 No indeed; but they do not fear the Hereafter.
 No indeed; surely it is a **Reminder**;
 so whoever wills shall remember it.
 And they will not remember, except that God wills;
 He is worthy to be feared, worthy to forgive.

81:15–29:

No! I swear by the slinkers,
 the runners, the sinkers,
 by the night swarming,
 by the dawn sighing,
 truly this is **the word of a noble Messenger**
 having power, with the Lord of the Throne secure,
 obeyed, moreover trusty.
 Your companion is not **possessed**;
 he truly saw him on the clear horizon;
 he is not niggardly of the Unseen.
 And it is not the word of an accursed Satan;
 where then are you going?
 It is naught but a Reminder
 unto all beings,
 for whosoever of you who would go straight;
 but will you shall not, unless God wills,
 the Lord of all Being.

84:16–25:

No! I swear by the twilight
 and the night and what it envelops
 and the moon when it is at the full,
 you shall surely ride stage after stage.
 Then what ails them, that they believe not,
 and when the **Koran** is recited to them they do not bow?
 Nay, but the unbelievers are crying lies,
 and God knows very well what they are secreting.
 So give them good tidings of a painful chastisement,
 except those that believe, and do righteous deeds –

theirs shall be a wage unfailing.

86:11–17:

By heaven of the returning rain,

by earth splitting with verdure,
surely it is a **decisive word**;
it is no merriment.
They are devising guile,
and I am devising guile.
So respite the unbelievers;
delay with them awhile.