

“Polemics in the Koran: The Koran’s Negative Argumentation over its Own Origin”¹

(full text, pre-print version)

Dr. Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau,
Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies (University of Groningen) & IREMAM (Aix-
Marseille University).
asboisliveau@gmail.com

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Abstract:

In this article I propose that the polemical passages in the Koran should not be addressed as if they were aiming at narrating a portion of Muḥammad’s life but as parts of the koranic argumentation about its own Origin and status. The first part of this paper shows how these polemics convey a religious debate by addressing the question of the sacred origin of the koranic text and the authenticity of Muḥammad’s prophetic role, in parallel. The second part provides an analysis of how the Koran argues about its own religious authority through these polemical passages: by meeting expectations which are described as Jewish and Christian, by refusing any attitude of denial, and by accusing the opponents of forgery. Hypotheses on the type of audiences of these passages are then exposed.

Key words:

Koran, polemics, argumentation, religious expectations, divine origin, origin, revelation, Judaism, Christianity.

Résumé en français:

Dans cet article, nous montrons que les passages dits « polémiques » du texte coranique ne sont pas tant à considérer comme partie prenante de la narration d’un épisode de la vie de Mahomet – son conflit avec des opposants – , mais comme partie prenante de l’argumentation du Coran à propos de sa propre origine et de son propre statut. En première partie, il est montré comment ces passages polémiques mettent en scène un débat religieux en abordant la question de l’origine divine du Coran et parallèlement de l’authenticité du rôle prophétique de Mahomet. En econde partie figure une analyse de la manière dont le Coran argumente à propos de sa propre autorité religieuse via ces passages polémiques : en répondant à des attentes religieuses spécifiques – décrites comme juives et chrétiennes – , en refusant catégoriquement toute attitude de déni, et enfin en accusant en retour les opposants d’avoir « forgé de toutes pièces ». Nous proposons ensuite des hypothèses sur l’identité des possibles auditoires d’un tel discours « polémique ».

¹ The content of this article was delivered in a seminar at the *Institut Français du Proche-Orient* in Damascus in July 2008 and then in a revised version at the *American Academy of Religion* Annual meeting in Montreal in November 2009. It presents results from a wider research on self-referentiality in the koranic text (PhD thesis defended in 2010 at Aix-Marseille University by Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau, and of which the two first parts have been published as *Le Coran par lui-même: Vocabulaire et argumentation du discours coranique autoréférentiel*, Leiden, Brill, 2014, 432 p. www.brill.com/le-coran-par-lui-meme).

1. Introduction

To what extent can we find clues about pre-Islamic religious concerns in the Koran? This question immediately raises other questions when it is considered that any contemporary study of the Koran is necessarily² based on the canonical text which is the product of a long process, by which the Muslim community recognized a standard text as its sacred book. Apart from the issue of the exact dates of this process, the question then becomes: To what extent does the canonical koranic text represent the pre-canonical text,³ that is, the pieces of text actually and supposedly recited by the prophet Muḥammad? Indeed, the Koran in its supposed original form – “the pre-canonical Koran” – can be defined as the recitations uttered by Muḥammad, or at least, attributed to him by Muslim traditions and subsequently by many scholars,⁴ with the issue of their initial origin as being considered divine or not remaining a matter of belief or disbelief. Even though some have argued about the prophet or his companions not only pronouncing but also writing down the text at an early period, it remains difficult to answer to the question of to what extent such a pre-canonical text is present in the actual text. However, we may possibly have something to learn from a textual study⁵ of the Koran (of the canonical Koran) and, more specifically, from the textual study of the polemical passages, a thing which may well be pre-canonical.

In the koranic text, some passages report controversies between the prophet of the Koran (Muḥammad) and his contradictors. These polemical passages of the Koran are usually understood – in traditional commentaries as well as in the “circumstances of revelation” (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) literature – as reflecting a true confrontation with Meccan

² At the present day, there is still no critical edition of the Koran from the different manuscripts available. Evidently, studies can be based on a manuscript or on of the variant readings transmitted by tradition. The on-going project *Corpus Coranicum* in Germany is aiming at producing a critical edition based on manuscripts and on descriptions of the transmitted readings.

³ On the issue of the pre-canonical Koran, cf., for instance, Angelika Neuwirth, “Vom Rezitationstext über die Liturgie zum Kanon : zu Entstehung und Wiederausflösung der Surenkomposition im Verlauf der Entwicklung eines islamischen Kultus,” in *The Qur’an as Text*, ed. Stefan Wild, Leiden, Brill, 1996, p. 69-105; and Claude Gilliot, “Le Coran, production littéraire de l’Antiquité tardive ou Mahomet interprète dans le “*lectionnaire arabe*” de La Mecque,” *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 2011 (129), p. 31-56.

⁴ Some scholars have presented hypotheses concerning other origins/sources for the Koran, for instance, a Syriac lectionary, or biblical-related texts, but this does not contradict the possibility of having been enunciated or written by Muḥammad at some later point. Cf. Claude Gilliot, article quoted in the previous note, and “Une reconstruction critique du Coran ou comment en finir avec les merveilles de la lampe d’Aladin,” in *Results of Contemporary Research on the Qur’an: The Question of a Historio-critical Text*, ed. Manfred Kropp, Beirut, Ergon Verlag, 2007, p. 33-137.

⁵ Recent trends in koranic studies show a development of literary studies. They deal with the text in its shape, its poeticity and rhythm (for instance, Thomas Hoffmann, *The Poetic Qur’an: Studies on Qur’anic Poeticity*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2007; Michael Sells, “A Literary Approach to the Hymnic Sūras of the Qur’an: Spirit, Gender, and Aural Intertextuality,” in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur’an*, ed. Issa J. Boullata, London, Routledge, 2009, p. 3-25; Angelika Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1981); in the interrelations of its vocabulary (Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung*, Tokyo, Keio Institute for Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964; Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur’an’s Self-image: Writing and Authority in Islam’s Scripture*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 2001); as well as in its argumentation (Rosaling Ward Gwynne, *Logic, Rhetoric and Legal Reasoning in the Qur’an: God’s Arguments*, London, Routledge Curzon, 2004; Dominique Urvoy & Marie-Thérèse Urvoy, *L’action psychologique dans le Coran*, Paris, Cerf, 2007) and its structure (Michel Cuypers, *Le Festin: Une lecture de la sourate al-Ma’ida*, Paris, Lethielleux, 2007; idem, *La Composition du Coran. Nazm al-Qur’ân*, Paris, éd. Gabalda, 2012; Mustansir Mir, *Coherence in the Qur’an: A Study of Islahi’s Concept of Nazm in Tadabbur-i Koran*, Indianapolis, American Trust Publications, 1986), rather than in its historical development. More recently, our colleague from IREMAM, Mehdi Azaiez, started a PhD thesis on the polemical passages of the Koran.

pagans or sometimes with Medinan Jews. This could well be so. However, I propose to look at these passages not as narratives whose aim is to report on a portion of Muḥammad's life but as an argumentation serving a more general argumentation. Indeed, these passages deserve to be analyzed textually, that is, as part of the argumentational development in the canonical text.

Therefore, the questions I propose to ask are not grounded on the fact that they may reflect an original dialogue that actually occurred in Muḥammad's lifetime, such questions as: "Why – for which historical reason – did Muḥammad's opponents accuse him of so and so, or develop such and such an argument," or "Why – for which historical reason – did Muḥammad reply to such an argument?" Rather, the textual analysis questions should be, for instance: "Why – for what purpose – does the text talk about such confrontations?" "Why – for what purpose – can we find in the text the presentation of such and such an argument put forth by Muḥammad's opponents?" and "Why – for what purpose – does the text "choose" to give a voice to all these arguments?"

2. Description of the polemical passages

An analysis of the arguments exchanged by the characters in the polemical passages shows that the accusations are about the origin of the koranic recitations as brought by Muḥammad. They consist of accusations that the recitations have an origin other than a divine one and that Muḥammad's role is other than that of a real prophet. The opponents implicitly deny the fact that God is the origin of Muḥammad's recitations by explicitly saying that they have other kinds of origins.

2.1. Muḥammad accused

There are two types of accusations. The first type of accusation is that of a supernatural non-divine origin of the koranic recitations: poetical inspiration, jinni or demonic inspiration, and sorcery. This is accompanied by allegations that Muḥammad is a poet, a man possessed by jinns, a madman, or a soothsayer, or a sorcerer:

Thou art not, by the Grace of thy Lord, [mad or] possessed (...) and thou [standest] on an exalted standard of character.⁶

Or do they say: "He is possessed?" (...)⁷

Yet they turn away from him and say: "[He is] tutored by [others]! [He is] a man possessed!"⁸

In pre-Islamic Arabia, poets, sorcerers, and soothsayers were supposed to be inspired by demons or jinns. The koranic text itself is not very clear about this, nor about the distinctions between demons, Satan(s) and jinns.

The accusation that Muḥammad could be a poet goes along with the idea that the koranic recitations could be poetry, which the text strongly denies:

We have not instructed [the Prophet] in poetry, nor is it appropriate for him: this is no less than a message and a Koran making things clear: / That it may give

⁶ Kor 68, 2, 4. See at the end of the article the Arabic text of the koranic quotations. I adapted the translation from the one by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, Ware, Wordsworth, 2000. *Mağnūn* is the term used here for "possessed by a jinni" and can also mean "insane"; this accusation can therefore be interpreted as a clear insult. Indeed, the refutations of this accusation stress, by way of contrast, the sound nature of Muḥammad. Cf. also Kor 81, 19-22.

⁷ Kor 23, 70.

⁸ Kor 44, 14.

admonition to any [who are] alive, and that the charge may be proved against those who reject.⁹

The text also impugns strongly the notion that the recitations might be of demonic origin.

This forms a denial of a satanic or jinni origin, though the text confesses that both Muḥammad's recitation and a sorcerer's words or soothsaying come from a similar supernatural origin, with the difference between them being that a sorcerer's words or soothsaying have been altered by demonic corruption, whereas Muḥammad's recitations have not been – except those that were corrected again by God in the so-called episode of the satanic verses:¹⁰

No evil ones have brought down this [Revelation]: / it would neither suit them nor would they be able [to produce it]. / Indeed they have been removed far from even [a chance of] hearing it.¹¹

The accumulation of attacks aimed at Muḥammad stresses the fact that he was insulted by the opponents and enables the text to defend him strongly.

The second type of accusation – and the most frequent: stated explicitly more than 17 times – is that of human forgery, i.e., that Muḥammad himself, or other people, could have created the koranic recitations and pretended that God was their author. To forge is to falsely attribute to someone a text which is not by him; the process of the act of “forgery” can be detailed as comprising three steps: (1) to be human, (2) to create something (a text), and then (3) to say or signify that this creation/text comes from God, not from you.

The idea is expressed in the text as a whole through the verb *iftarā* “to forge” and its synonyms *iḥtalaqa* and *taqawwala*. The verb *kaḏḏaba*, “to accuse someone of being a liar, to tell lies about someone, or to pretend falsely that someone said such and such,” is also used as well as the noun *ifk*, “a lie, imposture, forgery, mystification,” and *iḥḏtilāq*, verbal noun of *iḥtalaqa*: “This Koran is not such as can be produced by other than God; (...) / Or do they say: ‘He forged it?’ (...)”¹²

In addition, the idea of forgery is also detailed in the text through words expressing one of the steps of the act of forgery: on the one hand, to create and write, or to copy or write down what other people have dictated (step 2):

We know indeed that they say, “It is a man that teaches him.” The tongue of him they wickedly point to is notably foreign, while this is clear Arabic.¹³

The recitations are then said to be no more than “tales of the Ancients.”¹⁴

On the other hand, the other steps of the act of forgery are mentioned: first to be “only” a human being¹⁵ and second, not to have any supernatural sign or supernatural confirmation coming with the recitations (step 1). Take, for example, this passage from the sūra *The Criterion*:

But the Misbelievers say: “Naught is this but a lie which he has forged, and others have helped him at it.” In truth it is they who have put forward an iniquity and a

⁹ Kor 36, 69-70.

¹⁰ On this question, cf. Gerald Hawting, “Eavesdropping on the heavenly assembly and the protection of the revelation from demonic corruption,” in *Self-Referentiality in the Qur'an*, ed. Stefan Wild, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2006, p. 25-37.

¹¹ Kor 26, 210-212.

¹² Kor 10, 37-38. Cf. also Kor 11, 13, 35; 25, 4; 21, 5; 32, 3; 34, 43; 38, 7; 42, 24; 46, 8, 11; 52, 33.

¹³ Kor 16, 103. Cf. also Kor 25, 4-5; 44, 14.

¹⁴ Cf. Kor 25, 5.

¹⁵ Cf. Kor 6, 91; 21, 3.

falsehood. / And they say: “Tales of the ancients, which he has written down for himself: and they are dictated to him morning and evening.” / Say: “The [Koran] was sent down by Him who knows the Mystery [that is] in the heavens and the earth: verily, He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.” / And they say: “What sort of a messenger is this, who eats food, and walks through the markets? Why has not an angel been sent down to him to give admonition with him? / “Or [why] has not a treasure been bestowed on him, or why has he [not] a garden from which he could eat [fruits]?” The wicked say: “Ye follow none other than a man bewitched.” / See what kinds of examples they make for thee! But they have gone astray, and never a way will they be able to find! / Blessed is He Who, if that were His Will, could give thee better [things] than those – Gardens beneath which rivers flow; and He could give thee Palaces.¹⁶

Here we find a strong refutation of the idea that Muḥammad – or other men – could have authored the recitations and could be falsely attributing them to God. A strong denial of the idea that Muḥammad could have learned or copied “tales of the Ancients,” or other texts from foreigners, is also expressed.

2.2. The “voice of the text” replies

What should be noted too is the way the koranic text responds to, refuses, and refutes, the allegations of origins which other voices have said to be the Koran’s. The text impugns the allegations through various means:

- counter-argumentation: negation of the allegation and affirmation of the contrary;¹⁷
- acceptance of the allegations and displacement of the polemic to another matter, for instance, to the problem of the language of the recitations:

Had We [sent] this as a Koran [in a language] other than Arabic, they would have said: “Why are not its verses explained in detail? What! [A Scripture] not in Arabic and [a messenger] an Arab?” (...) ¹⁸

- turning the logic upside down. For instance, the text confirms the allegations of the opponents that Muḥammad is a mere human: “(...) Nor do I tell you: ‘I am an angel’. I but follow what is inspired to me”¹⁹

But then the text turns this into an even stronger proof that the recitations are divine. The logical argument then becomes: It is not Muḥammad, but God, who is responsible for sending down the koranic recitations, the signs, or the punishments; therefore, Muḥammad alone cannot bring down signs or angels which would “prove” the divine origin of the recitations. We thus have here an un-involvement of Muḥammad’s responsibility for what the recitations are, for what happens, etc. There is even a strong declaration made three times concerning the liability of Muḥammad that should he be guilty of forgery, God would severely punish him:

And if [the messenger] were to invent any sayings in Our name, / We should certainly seize him by his right hand, / and We should certainly then cut off the artery of his heart: / nor could any of you withhold him [from Our wrath].²⁰

¹⁶ Kor 25, 4-10.

¹⁷ Among numerous examples: Kor 10, 37; 11, 17; 21, 10; 25, 6; 26, 210-212; 52, 29; 69, 40-43. See details in Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même*, part II.C.2.2.

¹⁸ Kor 41, 44.

¹⁹ Kor 6, 50. Cf. also Kor 17, 93; 41, 6.

²⁰ Kor 69, 44-47. Cf. also Kor 11, 35; 46, 8-9.

- Refutation, and turning the allegation around to use it against the opponents. These latter are then accused of what they were accusing, especially in regard to the accusation of alteration and lies concerning God and His Scripture; this occurs at least 15 times:
 - Can ye [o ye men of Faith] entertain the hope that they will believe [in/with?] you? – seeing that a party of them heard the word of God, and perverted it knowingly after they understood it.²¹
- challenges directed towards the opponents. They are challenged to come up with recitations equivalent to Muḥammad’s recitations, and it is stated that they will not be able to meet such challenges:
 - And if ye are in doubt as to what We have sent down to Our servant, then produce a sūra like thereunto; and call your witnesses or helpers besides God, if you are true. / But ye cannot – and of a surety ye cannot – then fear the Fire (...)!²²
- mockery of the opponents’ attitude: “So they wonder that a Warner has come to them from themselves! (...)”,²³
- a threat directed towards the opponents’ attitude: “One day We shall seize you with a mighty onslaught: We will indeed revenge!”;²⁴ and
- independent affirmation that the opponents would not believe in any case, no matter what the argument, and so to address them is worthless.²⁵

This strong refutation of both types of accusations – that of a demonic or human origin – are clearly reinforced by the striking parallel between the accusations aimed at Muḥammad and the accusations aimed at the previous prophets, Moses in particular. Here are statements respectively about Jesus and about Muḥammad:

But when he came to them with clear Signs, they said, “This is evident sorcery!”²⁶
 When Our clear Signs are rehearsed to them, the Unbelievers say of the Truth when it comes to them: “This is evident sorcery!”²⁷

The text itself stresses this parallel.²⁸ Muḥammad is obliged to face exactly the same type of contestation as previous prophets have faced, except when it comes to poetry.

3. Further analysis

3.1. Such speech provides the listeners or readers of these “polemical passages” with a strong confirmation of the divine origin of the Koran – defined in pre-canonical times as “Muḥammad’s recitations” – together with a strong defense of Muḥammad’s person and prophethood. These affirmations are meant to reply to religious expectations. These expectations are based on an opposition between the sacred and the profane, between what

²¹ Kor 2, 75. Cf. also Kor 2, 79; 3, 28; 4, 46; 5, 41, 103; 6, 21, 93; 7, 36-37, 40; 11, 18; 25, 4; 29, 68.

²² Kor 2, 23-24. Cf. also Kor 10, 38; 11, 13-14; 17, 88; 52, 34.

²³ Kor 38, 4. Cf. also Kor 10, 2.

²⁴ Kor 44, 16. Cf. also Kor 74, 26.

²⁵ For instance, Kor 2, 6-7, 18; 5, 104; 6, 7, 25, 124; 34, 43; 52, 44-45. See details in Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même*, part II.C.2.2.

²⁶ Kor 61, 6.

²⁷ Kor 46, 7.

²⁸ Cf. Kor 34, 43-45.

is from God and what is from demons or humans, and thus are linked to the Jewish and Christian ideas of revelation. The text affirms this affiliation since it implies that the koranic recitations do meet these expectations. In other words, the Koran is described as a revealed Scripture of the Judaic or Christian type.

In a previous study, I showed that the word *kitāb*, “book, scripture,” in correlation with the surrounding vocabulary and argumentation, is clearly used in most of its occurrences to describe a “Scripture in the Judaic or Christian mode,” i.e. revealed by God via a prophet.²⁹ The delicate point here, is that there is in the Koran an independent definition of what constitutes a “Judaic or Christian mode of revelation.” The Koran redefines what a Judeo-Christian³⁰ Scripture is, using a concept close to but different from the main Judaic and Christian concepts, and then identifies itself with it.³¹ At what point these concepts actually did correspond to the Jewish and Christian religious standards of the time is a question which could be further debated. Here in the polemical passages, the expectations are not directly described as being Judaic or Christian but they are close to these.

What I would like to stress here is that at the same time the text strongly argues against the accusations which accompany the expectations. So there is a double movement involved: both showing that the new recitations meet religious expectations, and refuting the accusations that they do not meet these expectations. In other words, here is affirmation of a “new” religious doctrine: the idea that the muḥammadian recitations are a sacred Scripture within the logic of the Judeo-Christian doctrines. Both the confirmation of divine origin and the defense of Muḥammad lead to the qualification of his recitations as being sacred Scripture. One can note too that Muḥammad’s recitations are in the process of being called “the Koran” by the text, that is, they are in the process of being considered as a whole. And this “whole” is decisively described as a “revealed-type” Scripture.

The presence in the text of these expectations reveals a problem about the acceptance in these older religious traditions of a new Scripture, namely here the Koran. The “polemical passages” are not only “polemical” because of their probable origin in controversial dialogue which may have taken place between Muḥammad and his opponents, but they are “polemical” in the sense that they are strongly argumentative in favor of the religious authority of Muḥammad’s koranic recitations, and this not only in a hypothetical pre-canonical period of time, but at any time when a reader reads from the text. Both at the time of its composition and at the time it is read or recited, the text clearly shows that the religious authority of Muḥammad’s recitations is to be built facing hostility from these previous traditions and at the same time using the legitimacy they grant to Scriptures.

3.2. It is clear that, for the “author”³² of the koranic text, it was very important to be cautious about the way listeners or readers might conceive of the origins of the koranic recitations, and to provide the arguments against any accusations. These passages thus provide the religious knowledge necessary to impugn any such accusations.

²⁹ Cf. Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même*, esp. part I.A.1.3. & II.B.3.1.

³⁰ “Judeo-Christian” is not a term employed here in an ideological sense. I am employing it to mean “Jewish and/or Christian and/or related to Judeo-Christian sects” because the koranic text conveys such an idea: In terms of revelation and Scriptures, it considers Judaic and Christian modes as linked. Thus, I am using it only to express the Koran’s viewpoint.

³¹ Cf. Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même*, esp. part II.B.1.

³² The term “author” is used here regardless of the issue of his identity, as this issue concerns personal belief.

The parallels between the accusations aimed at Muḥammad and those aimed at the previous prophets seem to show that not only are the accusations the same but the opponents too are the same. Indeed, they even seem in some passages to be immortal. Of course this is not what is actually meant, since they had been punished by God; what the text denounces here is not so much these historical opponents at a point in time but rather their attitude. The text is attacking here the very attitude of denial aimed at the recitations. The “author” of the text is concerned with preventing any new negative attitude towards its religious affirmations.

3.3. We should point out here that in the polemical passages this disqualification of the opponents’ attitude is mostly made by means of the accusation being reversed and turned against the opponents. The text accuses the opponents of forgery. This may have led to the idea of *tahrīf*, i.e. the koranic idea of alteration of the Jewish and Christian Holy Scriptures by members of these communities. In this regard, the idea of *tahrīf* appears not so much as one of the leading ideas of the Koran’s teachings concerning the previous religions but rather only as a part of the whole argumentation concerning the Koran’s origin. It is a consequence of the koranic self-defensive speech against the opponents, not a fundamental theory.

The same could be said about the Torah and the Gospel being eventually described as similar to the Koran, – with this idea coming, in my view,³³ only as a consequence of the Koran defining itself and thus giving a new universal definition of what a sacred Scripture is, which then applies in retrospect to the Torah and the Gospel.

4. Religious background

What can we know about the pre-Islamic religious background from this study? And who had such religious expectations? To try to answer these questions, let us now consider both pre-canonical and canonical periods of time.

The polemical passages are intended for addressing an audience during the formative period of the Koran. Two audiences are to be distinguished here. The probable “first audience” consists of the listeners and opponents who may have had discussions with Muḥammad at an early period; it is not sure, though, whether this “first audience” actually existed historically. I therefore propose to focus on the “second audience,” the listeners who did listen to Muḥammad reciting his koranic recitations in a latter period. To put it another way, the “first audience” might have somehow taken part in the textual formation of the “polemical passages,” whereas the “second audience” listened to these “polemical passages” which were already forming a part of Muḥammad’s koranic recitations. This “second audience” was the audience to whom the polemical passages were addressed.

There is also another possibility, and that is that the text could be addressed to a third audience, after Muḥammad’s death, if the text had been reworked by the community during the process of canonization. What is more, the text may address any subsequent listener or reader in the future; this would all depend upon the goals of the “author” in his own day.

Concerning the “second audience,” two possibilities arise. The first one would be that the polemical passages are to be found in the Koran in order to meet the expectations of this “second audience”; this audience would have had religious expectations. This position is suggested by Alfred-Louis de Prémare in his inspiring short essay on the origins of the Koran,³⁴ even though he does not distinguish between a first and a second audience.

³³ Cf. Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même*, esp. part II.B.3.1.

³⁴ Alfred-Louis de Prémare, *Aux origines du Coran: questions d’hier, approches d’aujourd’hui*, Paris, Téraèdre, 2004.

To him, these polemical passages reflect a debate about the Koran, which took place in the formative period of Islam, sometime after Muḥammad's time – a sort of *hadith* which was created *post eventum* to defend the Koran against concurrent visions of Scriptures in a Jewish and Christian milieu in territories conquered by the Islamic state.³⁵

But there could also be a second possibility, that the “second audience” had no religious expectations, or nearly none, and that the polemical passages were there to teach them what the religious expectations are that one must have from now on, and to teach them how the Koran meets these expectations precisely. Which possibility is the most plausible? That is, did the “second audience” have religious expectations or not? It is hard to say. It is most probable that the “second audience” was composed of people of different religious backgrounds, and that the aim of the text would be both to provide religious dogmas for a pagan audience as well as to defend its status before a Jewish and/or Christian audience.

In the framework of this article we are not concerned with determining the exact group of Christians and Jews or Judeo-Christians who might have constituted the first, second or even third audience.³⁶ What is nevertheless certain is that the koranic ideas were built to respond to or to make use of religious ideas from groups who were linked to trends of Judaism or/and Christianity, and not to respond to nor to make use of ideas coming out of pagan groups.

5. Conclusion

A textual study of the “polemical” passages of the Koran shows that they consist of a strong argumentation: the affirmation of the koranic recitations as being of divine origin – and Muḥammad being a genuine prophet – by meeting “somehow Judeo-Christian” expectations as well as providing responses to the accusations that accompany these expectations. This argumentation is even further reinforced by the refusal of any attitude of denial. And this argumentation too, by means of its strong defense against opponents, generated the accusation of forgery turned around and aimed against them, thus leading to the notion of *tahrīf*, which is therefore to be understood only in terms of this argumentation about the Koran's origin. Religious expectations are clearly at stake, but it is difficult to determine whether they were those of a “second audience” listening to these polemical passages, or if they were taught by the text as the expectations one must have from now on.

A further point can be stressed: the fact that the polemical passages, which provide a teaching about the nature of the Koran – the Koran is a Scripture –, are part of a much broader argumentation found in the koranic text that includes all the “stories of the past” (about previous prophets), all the “punishment stories,” and even more so all the self-referential passages,³⁷ i.e. the speech of the koranic text on its own authoritative status. Given the strength of self-referentiality, one could ask whether, in the Islamic Scripture, the most important element is God's message itself, or the status and authority of God's message. In the polemical passages at least, what is most important is the status and authority of God's message.

³⁵ De Prémare, *Aux origines du Coran*, p. 120, 124-125, 132-133.

³⁶ Cf. for instance the interesting article of C. Jonn Block, “Philoponian Monophysitism in South Arabia at the Advent of Islam with Implications for the English Translation of ‘*Thalātha*’ in Qur’ān 4. 171 and 5. 73”, *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 23:1 (2012), p. 50-75.

³⁷ Cf. Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même*, part II.

List of the koranic quotations in Arabic (the first number, in italics, is the number of the footnote referring to the quotation).

6: سورة 68، 2، 4 : مَا أَنْتَ بِنِعْمَةٍ رَبِّكَ بِمَجْنُونٍ ... وَإِنَّكَ لَعَلَى خُلُقٍ عَظِيمٍ.

7: سورة 23، 70 : أَمْ يَقُولُونَ بِهِ جِنَّةٌ.

8: سورة 44، 14 : ثُمَّ تَوَلَّوْا عَنْهُ وَقَالُوا مُعَلَّمٌ مَجْنُونٌ.

9: سورة 36، 69-70 : وَمَا عَلَّمْنَاهُ الشِّعْرَ وَمَا يَنْبَغِي لَهُ إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا ذِكْرٌ وَقُرْآنٌ مُبِينٌ لِيُنذِرَ مَنْ كَانَ حَيًّا وَيَحِقِّ الْقَوْلُ عَلَى الْكَافِرِينَ.

11: سورة 26، 210-212 : وَمَا تَنْزَّلَتْ بِهِ الشَّيَاطِينُ وَمَا يَنْبَغِي لَهُمْ وَمَا يَسْتَظِيلُونَ إِنْهُمْ عَنِ السَّمْعِ لَمْعَزُولُونَ.

12: سورة 10، 37-38 : وَمَا كَانَ هَذَا الْقُرْآنُ أَنْ يُفْتَرَى مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ (...) أَمْ يَقُولُونَ افْتَرَاهُ.

13: سورة 16، 103 : وَلَقَدْ نَعَلُمْ أَنَّهُمْ يَقُولُونَ إِنَّمَا يُعَلِّمُهُ بَشَرٌ لِسَانُ الَّذِي يُلْحِدُونَ إِلَيْهِ أَعْجَمِيٌّ وَهَذَا لِسَانٌ عَرَبِيٌّ مُبِينٌ.

16: سورة 25، 4-10 : وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا إِنْ هَذَا إِلَّا إِفْكٌ افْتَرَاهُ وَأَعَانَهُ عَلَيْهِ قَوْمٌ آخَرُونَ فَقَدْ جَاءُوا ظُلْمًا وَزُورًا وَقَالُوا أُسَاطِيرُ الْأَوَّلِينَ اكْتَتَبَهَا فَهِيَ تُمْلَى عَلَيْهِ بُكْرَةً وَأَصِيلًا قُلْ أَنْزَلَهُ الَّذِي يَعْلَمُ السِّرَّ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ إِنَّهُ كَانَ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا وَقَالُوا مَالِ هَذَا الرَّسُولِ يَأْكُلُ الطَّعَامَ وَيَمْشِي فِي الْأَسْوَاقِ لَوْلَا أَنْزَلَ إِلَيْهِ مَلَكٌ فَيَكُونُ مَعَهُ نَذِيرًا أَوْ يُلْقَى إِلَيْهِ كَنْزٌ أَوْ تَكُونُ لَهُ جَنَّةٌ يَأْكُلُ مِنْهَا وَقَالَ الظَّالِمُونَ إِنْ تَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا رَجُلًا مَسْحُورًا انظُرْ كَيْفَ ضَرَبُوا لَكَ الْأَمْثَالَ فَضَلُّوا فَلَا يَسْتَظِيلُونَ سَبِيلًا تَبَارَكَ الَّذِي إِنْ شَاءَ جَعَلَ لَكَ خَيْرًا مِنْ ذَلِكَ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ وَيَجْعَلُ لَكَ فُصُورًا.

18: سورة 41، 44 : وَلَوْ جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا أَعْجَمِيًّا لَقَالُوا لَوْلَا فُصِّلَتْ آيَاتُهُ أَأَعْجَمِيٌّ وَعَرَبِيٌّ.

19: سورة 6، 50 : وَلَا أَقُولُ لَكُمْ إِنِّي مَلَكٌ إِنْ أَتَيْتُ إِلَّا مَا يُوْحَىٰ إِلَيَّ.

20: سورة 69، 44-47 : وَلَوْ تَقَوَّلَ عَلَيْنَا بَعْضَ الْأَقَاوِيلِ لَأَخَذْنَا مِنْهُ بِالْيَمِينِ ثُمَّ لَقَطَعْنَا مِنْهُ الْوَتِينَ فَمَا مِنْكُمْ مِنْ أَحَدٍ عَنْهُ حَاجِزِينَ.

21: سورة 2، 75 : أَفَنظَمُونَ أَنْ يُؤْمِنُوا لَكُمْ وَقَدْ كَانَ فَرِيقٌ مِنْهُمْ يَسْمَعُونَ كَلَامَ اللَّهِ ثُمَّ يُحَرِّفُونَهُ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا عَقَلُوهُ وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ.

23: سورة 38، 4 : وَعَجِبُوا أَنْ جَاءَهُمْ مُنْذِرٌ مِنْهُمْ.

24: سورة 44، 16 : يَوْمَ نَبْطِشُ الْبَطْشَةَ الْكُبْرَىٰ إِنَّا مُنتَقِمُونَ.

26: سورة 61، 6 : فَلَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ قَالُوا هَذَا سِحْرٌ مُبِينٌ.

27: سورة 46، 7 : وَإِذَا تَنَلَّىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتُنَا بَيِّنَاتٍ قَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لِلْحَقِّ لَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ هَذَا سِحْرٌ مُبِينٌ.