

Reimagining the Early Quranic Milieu

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Abstract. Through the interplay and alignment of structuralist-Marxist epistemology and Lacanian psychoanalysis, my purpose in this paper is to redefine the historical setting of the early quranic milieu in light of the east-Syrian monastic crisis of the early 7th century and the role played in it by the *mṣallyānē* or Messalians, a diffuse but influential group of asceticists whose recent redefinition as a purely rhetorical category I shall discuss too. Thereby I aim at deciphering the nature of the sectarian background of a religious movement that with time entailed the reversal of the very notions of centre and periphery in the context of late-antique religious identity formation. All this in the conviction that the study of emergent Islam must prove today theoretically challenging, methodologically sophisticated, and historically illuminating.

Key words. Qur’ān – Sectarian Milieu – Messalians – East Syrian Christianity– Iraq

In a forthcoming study on the eschatological kerygma of the *early* Qur’ān, Nicolai Sinai (n.d.:33) briefly mentions “two Qur’anic verses (Q 70:29 and 23:5) [which] may reasonably be regarded,” he writes, “as reflecting an original esteem of chastity that was obscured by later additions.”¹ These two verses praise “those [men] who guard their private parts.” Yet all of a sudden an abrupt exception is made: “except from their wives or their [female] slaves.”² This unexpected exception disrupts the *rhythm* of the phrase as much as it implicitly reverses, by twisting it, the very *logic* of the argument thus displayed, and hence may be regarded – as Sinai aptly underlines – as an interpolation (i.e., as an editorial addition).³

In fact, the presence of *ascetic* components in the early quranic *milieu* may be said to go beyond the mere defence of chastity or sexual modesty;⁴ but this will become apparent – I hope – through a *symptomatic reading* of several quranic passages. I take the notion of “symptomatic reading” from Louis Althusser (1970). As John Thurston (1993:638) writes, “[a]ccording to Althusser, Marx’s symptomatic reading of the classical economists found that they were answering unposed

¹ Guillaume Dye (2014:159-163) had already made a similar point.

² Lit., “or what their right hands own.” Cf. Q 23:6 and 70:30.

³ Needless to say, this complicates the alleged “rejection of celibacy” attributed to the Qur’ān as a whole, e.g., by Johanne Louise Christiansen in her otherwise suggestive unpublished study, “‘Stand in the Night, Except a Little’ – The Qur’ānic Vigils as Ascetic Training Programmes,” where she points to the plausible thematic connection of the quranic vigils with Syrian monasticism – which I shall further explore in this paper – while simultaneously maintaining, however, a conventional (Meccan) setting for them – I am grateful to her for sharing her paper prior to its publication; see also Christiansen (2016).

⁴ And the twice-repeated declaration that “with hardship [comes] ease” (Q 94:5-6).

questions dictated to them by the ideology within which they worked.” Similarly, my purpose here is to uncover the *unsaid* behind the said within a series of semantically interconnected quranic verses – an unsaid that has undergone, it would seem, a complete *foreclosure*, as it has been both repressed and obliterated.⁵

1.

To recover it in the first place I should like to call your attention to several so-called “Meccan” verses – namely, Q 17:79; 43:36; 73:1-8; 74:43; 76:26; 108:1-3⁶ – and to the *resemblances* of wording in them, which evince an akin belief in the need of, and the virtues inherent in, “praying.” In order to make their parallelisms fully patent, I shall divide these into *four* intersecting categories:

a / *On the nightly prayer and its potential personal benefits*

• Q 17:79

17:79 وَمِنَ اللَّيْلِ فَتَهَجَّدْ بِهِ نَافِلَةً لَكَ عَسَىٰ أَنْ يَبْعَثَكَ رَبُّكَ مَقَامًا مَّحْمُودًا

17:79 And in the night, do arise for prayer – for this is a gift for you. It may be that your Lord [then] raises you to a praised position.

b / *On the nightly prayer and the continuous remembrance of God*

• Q 73:1-8

يَا أَيُّهَا الْمَرْمَلُ 73:1
 2 قُمْ اللَّيْلَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا
 3 نِصْفَهُ أَوْ انْقُصْ مِنْهُ قَلِيلًا
 4 أَوْ زِدْ عَلَيْهِ وَرَتِّلِ الْقُرْآنَ تَرْتِيلًا
 5 إِنَّا سَنُلْقِي عَلَيْكَ قَوْلًا ثَقِيلًا
 6 إِنَّ نَاشِئَةَ اللَّيْلِ هِيَ أَشَدُّ وَطْئًا وَأَقْوَمُ قِيلًا
 7 إِنَّ لَكَ فِي النَّهَارِ سَبْحًا طَوِيلًا
 8 وَاذْكُرِ اسْمَ رَبِّكَ وَتَبَتَّلْ إِلَيْهِ تَبْتِيلًا

⁵ On the notion of *foreclosure*, which Jacques Lacan famously introduced in the his 1955–1956 seminar on psychoses (after the linguistic analyses of Jacques Damourette and Édouard Pichon) to translate Freud’s *Verwerfung*, see Grigg (2008:3-24).

⁶ According to the traditional chronology of the Qur’ān, Q 76 is “Medinan,” i.e., it belongs to a later textual layer. Theodor Nöldeke, however, lists it to among the “Meccan-II” *sūra*-s. He also regards Q 43 as belonging to the “Meccan-II” period (as also do Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Nora Schmid).

73:1 O you, enwrapped one!

2 Stay up through the night – except for a little while,

3 [be it] half of it, or a little less,

4 or a little more – and arrange the recitation carefully,

5 [for] we shall cast upon you an onerous word!

6 The first part of the night surely is more effective and suitable for [our] word [to descend upon you],

7 as during the day you have protracted business [to attend] –

8 nevertheless, remember your Lord's name and devote yourself to him completely!

• Q 76:26

74:25 وَأَذْكُرِ اسْمَ رَبِّكَ بُكْرَةً وَأَصِيلاً
26 وَمِنَ اللَّيْلِ فَاسْجُدْ لَهُ وَسَبِّحْهُ لَيْلاً طَوِيلاً

76:25 And remember the name of your Lord morning and evening,

26 and in the night prostrate to him and glorify him, all night long.

c / On the identification of the sinners in the afterlife as those who did not pray in their earthly lives

• Q 74:43

4:38 كُلُّ نَفْسٍ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ رَهِينَةٌ
39 إِلَّا أَصْحَابَ الْيَمِينِ
40 فِي جَنَّاتٍ يَتَسَاءَلُونَ
41 عَنِ الْمُجْرِمِينَ
42 مَا سَلَكَكُمْ فِي سَقَرٍ
43 قَالُوا لَمْ نَكُ مِنَ الْمُصَلِّينَ

74:38 Every should will be pledged for what it has earned,

39 except the companions on the right;

40 in gardens [they will] ask one another

41 about the sinners,

42 “What brought you into Hell?”⁷

43 They will say, “We were not among those who prayed”

⁷ Lit., “into Saqar.”

d / On the cleansing effect that praying has against the demons that inhabit the soul – and vice versa: on how Satan dwells, as a companion, in those who do not remember God

• Q 108:1-3

108:1 إِنَّا أَعْطَيْنَاكَ الْكَوْثَرَ
2 فَصَلِّ لِرَبِّكَ وَأَنْحَرْ
3 إِنَّ شَانِئَكَ هُوَ الْأَبْتَرُ

The common translation of these verses reads thus:

108:1 We have given you the abundance,
2 so pray to your Lord and sacrifice.
3 He who hates you is cut off [his tale].

Their rendering through the lens supplied by the more-than-probable Syriac verbs (ܕܚܘܢ *ktar*, ܒܠܕ *ngar*, ܬܒܪܐ *tbar*)⁸ encrypted in the Arabic *rasm* allows, however, for a more coherent translation:

108:1 We have given you *perseverance*,
2 so pray to your Lord and *persist* [in praying]
3 – your opponent [= Satan] will be⁹ [thereby] defeated.

• Q 43:36

43:36 وَمَنْ يَعْشُ عَنْ ذِكْرِ الرَّحْمَنِ نُقَيِّضْ لَهُ شَيْطَانًا فَهُوَ لَهُ قَرِينٌ

43:36 Whoever turns away from the remembrance of the Merciful – we allot him a satan as his companion

A few indications may prove helpful at this point.

⁸ Ad vv. 1, 2, and 3 respectively (see the three italicised verbs below). See further Luxenberg (2007:295-300). See now too Guillaume Dye's and Manfred Kropp's comments Azaiez, Reynolds, Tesei, and Hamza (eds.) (2016:444-447).

⁹ Or, alternatively, "is."

First, it should be noted that, with the sole exception of Q 74:43,¹⁰ “praying” is *not* listed in these verses alongside other things: it stands on its own as a fundamental activity whose exorcising and eschatological virtues are repeatedly underlined.

Also, it must be observed that, save in Q 17:79, which has (as a hapax) the V-form verb تَحَجَّد *tahağğad*, all other quranic references to “praying” are built on a trilateral Arabic root (ص ل و / ص ل ي *s.l.w. / s.l.y.*) whose instantiations in the corpus often echo Syriac orthography, as the letter و *w* is anomalously used in it to render the long {*a*} sound (= *ā*) that goes after the ل *l* in the noun “prayer” (*ṣalāt*), which is thus written, in contrast to classical and modern Arabic, صلوة *ṣlwt* instead of صلاة *ṣl't* – like the Syriac ܣܠܘܬܐ *ṣlwt'* (*ṣlōtā*), which has a o *w* to mark the {*o*} sound (= *ō*) of the second syllable. Modern scholars including Theodor Nöldeke (1860:255; 2011:29-30), Alphonse Mingana (1927:86, 91), Arthur Jeffery (2007:197-199) Anton Spitaler (1960:217) Richard Bell (2012:91), Günter Lüling (2003:470-471), and Robert Kerr (2012:553-614) have interpreted the quranic *ṣlwt* to be a Syriac orthographic loan – though Lüling claims that *ṣlwt* must be seen as a genuinely Arabic word belonging to the verbal stem *s.l.y./s.l.w.* (“to turn or be exposed to someone or something,” and hence, figuratively, to “worship”), which, he contends, received some impact from Syriac as to its orthography (*w* for *ā*) and meaning (“prayer”). More recently, Christian Robin (2000:52) has documented the use of this and other Syriac/Aramaic (and Hebrew) loanwords in the pre-Islamic corpus of South-Arabian (Yemenite) Jewish inscriptions. In short then, the orthography of the quranic “prayer” is not Arabic but *Syriac*.

Lastly, I should like to add that, albeit its correctness, the three-term English expression “those who pray” is too-paraphrastic a translation of the *noun* used in Q 74:43 to describe the pious, namely: the noun مصلّون *muṣallūn*, which is the Arabic equivalent of the Syriac ܡܣܠܝܢܐ *mṣallyānē*, “Messalians.”

2.

Interestingly enough, then, the texts under consideration here may be said to match the *anti-Messalian* accusations of the 5th, 6th, and 7th centuries (Pennacchio 2011, 2014; al-Jallad n.d.). The early 7th-century is particularly relevant in this respect, especially if one considers the rather serious way in which the Messalian affaire affected the *Church of the East*. For we know that after Khusraw II suppressed the Catholicate in 609, Babai the Great – whom Thomas of Marga would define in the 9th century as a “Messalian hunter” – assumed the task of supervising the monasteries of western Iran, Iraq, and northern Syria to expel from them those suspected of endorsing Messalian views, including the belief that the ἐνέργεια of intense continuous prayer is the sole means one has of driving out the demons from the soul (Bitton-Ashkelony 2013:227). Also, we know that, unlike Babai and his predecessor Gregory of Kashkar (605–9) (Reinik 2010:246 n.84), Sabrisho I (596–604) had attempted to “restore the Messalian monastic communities to the ‘Great Church.’” (Bettio-

¹⁰ See the references in Q 74:44-6, inter alia, to almsgiving and the belief in the Day of Judgment as practices likewise not fulfilled by those who did not to pray.

lo 2007:304)¹¹ In other words, the Messalian problem reached its apex in Sasanian Iran at *exactly* the time in which, presumably, the first quranic texts were composed.¹²

I am, of course, aware of the discussion on the meaning of the term “Messalianism” raised by Columba Stewart in his seminal book of 1991,¹³ which has influenced the recent work of Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony and her definition of “Messalianism” as a *rhetorical* category contradictorily applied to different targets (2013:226).¹⁴ Yet in my view Philippe Escolan’s (1999) approach, which takes Messalianism as a *diffuse* underground phenomenon within the Church of the East, cannot be ruled out as easily as Stewart and Bitton-Ashkelony do. To be sure, heresiologists reified what lacked a cut-clear definition, and polemicists used whatever terms to describe their opponents, but in order to escape their artificial categorisations one should not lose sight of a reality that cannot be reduced to a simple label.¹⁵ Thus the synods of the Church of the East of 576 and 585 point to the existence of asceticists and monks who exceedingly devoted themselves to pray,¹⁶ were reluctant to confer soteriological validity to the sacraments,¹⁷ and separated from the Sunday ecclesiastical gatherings and festivals;¹⁸ moreover, their canons established penitences for such people and commanded the bishops to have them submitted to their authority.¹⁹ As Daniel Carner observes, “[w]e are dealing [here] with a post-Constantinian ecclesiastical process of defining, consolidating, homogenizing, or rejecting forms of Christian life and expression that . . . came under the direction of

¹¹ On the implications of Sabrīsho’s policy as being possible alluded to in the Qur’ān, see Segovia (forthcoming 2019).

¹² Traditionally, the composition of the Qur’ān is taken to comprise little more than two decades: from 610 to 632, which are the years commonly assigned to the beginnings of Muḥammad’s mission and his death, respectively. Elsewhere I have argued that this timeframe must be re-assessed and broadened, as a good number of quranic texts may well be much later (Segovia 2018) and a few others earlier perhaps (on which see Lüling (2003), whose controversial hypothesis has been anything but disavowed by the recent C14 analysis of several old manuscripts; see further Reynolds (2015: 14-15).

¹³ See also Stewart (1989).

¹⁴ An interesting illustration of the *ad-hoc* use of the term “Messalian” will be found in Lunn-Rockliffe (2017).

¹⁵ Thus Fiori (2010: 463-464) persuasively argues, *pace* Stewart, that views traditionally labelled as “Messalian,” including the dismissal of baptism, are positively documented in Stephen Bar Sudhaile’s *Book of Hierotheos* (late 5th century). Cf. Fitschen (1993:352), who speaks in turn of an “amorphous movement.”

¹⁶ Due to their peculiar interpretation of Luke 18:1 and 1 Thess 5:7.

¹⁷ Basically, the eucharist and the baptism.

¹⁸ Thus constituting an anarchic and hence potentially rebel community in the very margins of the Church.

¹⁹ See “Synod of Mar Ezekiel (576 CE),” canon no. 1; “Synod of Mar Isho‘yahb I (585 CE),” canons nos. 8–9 at <http://syri.ac/synodiconorientale#synishotext>, after J.-B. Chabot’s ed. of ms. Alqosh Syr. 169/Vat.Borg.Sir. 81-82 (Chabot 1902:115-116, 144-146, 374-375, 406-407).

a . . . [specific] hierarchy with its own institutional perspective and concerns” (Carner 2002:84)²⁰ – a process that Philip Wood has carefully examined against the background of the ecclesiastical *reform* implemented in the Church of the East in the late 6th century (Wood 2013:147-148), which aimed, he writes, at shaping an “‘anti-Messalian’ [type of] Christianity” (174).

Put differently: a *post-nominalist* (or nuanced) realist use of the term “Messalian,” different from its *pre-nominalist* (or naive) realist rendition, is by all means necessary if instead of just paying attention to the rhetorically inflated writings of the Christian *heresologists* one goes on to examine the concrete, daily issues reflected in the *synodical* canons. And it could be, then, that however carefully we may want to define Messalianism, we need to bear this not-so-elusive-after-all term in mind when analysing the plausible *setting* of the Qur’ān’s early redactional layers.²¹ I am not implying that such layers need to be traced back to, and placed *inside*, monastic communities, though. Like Manichaeism, pre-reformed east-Syrian asceticism involved two human groups: the asceticists proper, i.e., the “perfect,” and their lay supporters, the “upright,” whose identity *boundaries* remain – in contrast to those of the “perfect” – unclear to us. Besides, various Manichaean features susceptible of being *associated* with the Messalian movement (e.g., the centrality of prayer, a pneumatology centred on the coming of the Paraclete, and the coupling of angelomorphic Christology and a prophetology) figure prominently in those early layers,²² which complicates the issue of defining the Qur’ān’s early milieu in an extraordinary and fascinating manner. . . . Yet I am willing to venture the guess that it was a milieu in the *limes* of a cultural region where Manichaean and Messalian ideas circulated widely and effectively. Moreover, I am inclined to view the Messalian component in the Qur’ān as a helpful interpretative tool which may shed additional light on *other* problematic aspects of corpus; cf., e.g., Epiphanius’s depiction of the Messalians as groups of men and women living and sleeping together (*Pan.* 80.3.4, 7), the gender-egalitarian point made in the *Liber Gradum* that “[to Uprightness] a man and a woman are equal, or a man and a man, or a woman and a woman” (Kitchen and Parmentier 2004:129), and Q 33:35 with its astounding statement that believ-

²⁰ See now also Berzon (2016:73-97). On the tensions between Basilian, Homoiousian, and a more anarchic type of asceticism represented *inter alios* by the Messalians, see Elm (1994:194-226).

²¹ Cf. O’Shaughnessy 1969:2.

²² For an assessment of the crucial role played by the act of praying in Manichaean ascetics, see BeDhun (2000). About everything else see Van Reeth (2012:32, 35). See also Pettipiece (2014:32-40; 2015:299-313). Other often-well-agreed-upon Manichaean elements in the Qur’ān include the transmission of God’s revelation by an angel, its writing down in a book, and the figure of a last prophet who brings the seal to the prophetic cycle. For an extensive study of other, even deeper parallelisms, see Beck (2018; 2019). See also de Blois (2004).

ing, obedient, truthful, humble, patient, submissive, and charitable men *and* women who stay chaste, fast, and remember God will be rewarded in the next life.²³

But is there any verse in the Qur’ān that may help us to place the early quranic community in Sasanian Iraq, where Messalianism was widespread, Manichaeism had – so to speak – its headquarters, and it is reported that several Arab-Bedouin groups linked to the Ḥiḡāz in the Arabian Peninsula regularly camped – especially in the surroundings of al-Ḥīra, the capital of the Nasrid kingdom, near present-day Naḡaf (Toral-Niehoff 2010; 2013; Fisher and Wood 2016), which in my view represents too the most plausible geographic setting for the early quranic community on either the eve or the wake of the Byzantine-Persian war of the 7th century?

I do think so. I am currently working, in collaboration with Gilles Courtieu (Courtieu and Segovia forthcoming 2019), on the possible background of Q 43:2-45, a passage with Messalian overtones, as I have already suggested, and whose enigmatic allusion to the “two cities” in the dual form (الْقَرِيَّتَيْنِ *al-qaryatayn*, v. 31) we interpret as a reference to Ctesiphon-Seleucia, the Sasanian capital – which was relatively close to al-Ḥīra. If our hypothesis is correct, moreover, this is the only occurrence in the Qur’ān where the *community* behind the quranic prophet is alluded in the context of prophetic polemics and theological counter-discourse – Ḥirā’ (with a slightly different spelling, therefore) being also the name of the cave near Mecca where the Islamic tradition has Muḥammad receiving his very first revelations. But I shall not reveal anything else on this puzzling matter for now...

Let me finish, then, by paying a small tribute to Robert Beulay, who in his 1987 volume on east-Syrian spirituality provides an oblique, yet exceptional, precedent for the post-quranic interpretation of the term الكَوْتَر *al-kawtar* in Q 108 as denoting a “river” of paradise, namely: Simon of Taibuthe’s assimilation of “prayer” (which is the main subject of Q 108) to an “ever-flowing fountain” (51).²⁴ Similarly, the early quranic movement might be metaphorically depicted as a *peripheral stream* of ideas that with time contributed to *subvert* the very notions of centre and periphery in the context of the late-antique Near East, thus representing a true event that not only challenged but also changed the rules of the religious game in the region. One, furthermore, whose basic substance was *asceticism* understood both as a reflexive type of sacrifice and an apocalyptic demand – before it became something else, that is: the major social-cultural bond of a new empire.

²³ Kitchen and Parmentier have called into question the alleged Messalian nature of the *Liber Gradum*, while admitting in it “echoes” of what elsewhere developed into Messalian themes. Yet these echoes cannot be neglected. Besides, Kyle Smith (2014:78) has convincingly shown that *Liber Gradum* could have been composed later than is commonly thought (in the 5th instead of the 4th century, that is) as a response to Rabbula’s intrusive regulation of Syrian asceticism, and consequently emphasised “its importance as a textual witness demonstrating how an autochthonous, and perhaps liminal, Syriac Christian community stood in struggle against an encroaching . . . style of asceticism.”

²⁴ I am grateful to Basil Lourié for this reference.

Appendix. Textual distribution of the Messalian fragments (after Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Nora K. Schmid reassessment of Nöldeke’s chronology of the Qur’ān)²⁵

Meccan Suras	Messalian fragments
Meccan I	7.89 %
i. 93, 94, 95, 97, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 111, 112?, 109?, 113?, 114?	108
ii. 81, 82, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 96	
iii a. 53, 74, 75, 77, 78, 79, 80	74:43
iii b. 51, 52, 55, 56, 68, 69, 70, 73, 83	73:1-8
Meccan II	13.63 %
1, 54, 37, 15, 50, 20, 26, 76, 44, 71, 38, 36, 19, 18, 17, 43, 72, 67, 23, 21, 25, 27	76:26, 17:79, 43:36
Meccan III	0 %
32, 45, 30, 40, 29, 16, 41, 39, 11, 14, 12, 28, 31, 42, 10, 34, 35, 7, 46, 6, 13	

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²⁵ Available online at <http://corpuscoranicum.de/kommentar/uebersicht>.

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