

Sorting Out the “Meccan” Surahs on One Side, the “Medinan” Ones on the Other?

Might there be two Korans, or even two successive Muhammad? The question is not as absurd as it may sound at first, especially if one pays sufficient attention to prevailing Islamologic discussions or to the notes attached to each surah’s title in contemporary editions of the Koran.

It all begins with a double postulate: on the one hand, the Islamic idea that Mu *hammad* simply dictated the Koranic text as it is; on the other, the ideological postulate according to which every “religion” necessarily begins as a “spiritual” phenomenon – to later become a “political one. Applied to Islam, this postulate of Western thought implies a classification between the surahs deemed peaceful and spiritual and alleged to have been “revealed” in Mecca, and the so-called “post-Hegira” alleged to have “come down” to Medina in a purported context of confrontations with the Meccans – and thus violent and warlike, essentially dealing with *waging war and killing*.

Thus the idea got into the head of modern scholarship of categorizing the Koran’s surahs in two distinct periods reflecting the alleged life of the “Prophet of Islam”. The rational approach would rather have been to first ask oneself whether the “biography” manufactured by special caliphal order two centuries after the alleged events (the *Sirat Al-Nabawiyah*, by Ibn Hishâm) could at all be taken at face value, before giving credence to a capsizing of Meccan attitude (?) concerning Muhammad (that would have been the true incentive of the Hegira to Madinah in 622). Be that as it may, the most capable Islamologists are not remotely fooled. They know quite well that one cannot make up for the scarcity of reliable sources by way of fanciful imagination – significantly enough, the sources predating the *Sirat* have in effect been the object of systematic destructions (and the destruction of the past continues today).

Let us remark in passing that a serious question arises: does not this classification provide a perfect alibi to dodge the question as to the real meaning of the Koranic text? In effect, rather than ask whether violence is not advocated as simply a means among others to achieve the pursued goal – that is, *submission* (i.e. *al-islâm* in Arabic) –, one tries to justify it on the basis of a supposed defensive attitude toward the Meccans. Additionally, the Muslim always sees himself as a victim (from violence inflicted by others). Couldn’t then the classification between “Meccan” and “Medinan” surahs finally be but a necessary part of the justification of Islam by itself, a piece of propaganda to which Westerners themselves have contributed?

In any case, the Koranic text does not support the imagined opposition between two types of surahs, some labeled “peaceful” and other “violent”. What we are dealing with is a compilation of disparate texts in dire need of sorting, providing serious criteria. The degree of assumed violence is an absurd criterion. Let us take an example of a “peaceful” surah:

Here is sura 105 (only of 5 verses):

Have not you seen how your Lord dealt with the companions of the Elephant? (verse 1)

Did He not make their treacherous plots come to an end in confusion? (2), and sent against them birds in flocks, (3) striking them with stones of baked clay? (4)

So He turned them like straw eaten up. (5)

The elephant alluded to therein has had a great impact on both Islamic and Western commentators. The first have made it up to be the title of the surah itself, while the second have seen in it an indication relating to Muhammad’s birth. In fact, by virtue of a mysterious calendar South-Arabian (?), it has been decreed that the “Prophet of Islam” was born in a year of the Elephant corresponding to 570, in such a way as to enable the storyline to bring the inspiration down on Muhammad in 610, when he turned 40 years of age – in order words, without him being either too old or too young for the divine mission which he is proclaimed to have

accomplished. In reality, no historical indication whatsoever allows anyone to know how old this warchief was, not even at the time of his death in 632 (however, even this date is uncertain, some alternative sources referring to 634). The only available piece of historical dating relates to the expedition he incited (which had nothing to do with Islamic tradition) *not against the Mecca*, but toward Jerusalem: the Arabs were defeated in 629 near the Jordan by the Byzantines. Otherwise, the dates of his biography come straight out of the Western rationalist imagination – and are then reused in Islamic talks.

This surah of “the Elephant” is classified as “Meccan” because the verb “to kill” (*qatala*) is not found in it under any form. One would therefore label it a “peaceful” surah, notwithstanding the fact that it also goes as far as involving God in a war! That an allusion is made in passing to a legendary war is altogether another question – all the same, the Muslim reader sees therein a reference to a real war.

Let us now consider verses from another, longer surah, also classified as “Meccan”, **surah 74:**

Surely, he reflected and determined (verse 18). May he **be killed** as he determined! (19) Yes, may he **be killed** as he determined! (20)...

And We have set none but angels as wardens of the Fire (Hell). And We have fixed their number only as a trial for those who kafar (31a)... God leaves in error whom He pleases and guides whom He pleases (34a).

In these verses the verb **to kill** occurs in the passive form; but it still stands as a clear (reiterated) call to carry it out. Indeed how will *the kafarers* here mentioned *be killed*? Whose task is this supposed to be? God Himself (as in surah 105)? Or, maybe, His *subjected* believers? Thus to classify this surah as “peaceful” (and therefore Meccan) is nothing short of taking people for fools.

In order to better understand what is at stake here, let us look at a verse - very seldom cited - from a surah classified as “post-Hegira”, **surah 61:**

Surely God **loves** those who **go so far as to kill** (verb *qatala*, *to fight to death*) in His way [= for His cause’s sake], in battle ranks. (4a)

In this peculiar verse, which has given its name to the whole surah (*The Battle Ranks*), the verb to love is ascribed a positive meaning as it applies to God, whereas its use in the Koranic text is usually negative: it is primarily a question of all “*whom God does not love*”, specifically those who “sow disorder upon the Earth”. In short, there are on the one hand those deemed not to be wanted and whom God accordingly does not love; and, on the other, those whom God does love **because they are ready to kill the former**.

The end therefore justifies the means, as in any ideological system. Would this not precisely be that dream of a pure world (not exclusive to the Koran, but in any case fundamental to Koranic thought), which the distinction between “Meccan” and “Medinan” surahs would like to becloud? Some Islamologists have glimpsingly begun to discern the nature of the problem by speaking of Islam as a “strict monotheism” (by opposition to Christianity, conceived as “non-strict monotheism”). According to them, monotheism would in itself be a system of intolerance eventually leading to the extermination of non-members, and thus, for example, to the Soviet and Nazi genocides. Such a view identifies a truth but, at the same time, loses it to a great deal of misunderstanding. A certain historical connection does exist between biblical revelation and totalitarian horrors (modern or Islamic). But such a connection is made up of post-Christian counterfeits. And any attentive reader of the Bible (Old or New Testament) can be trusted to figure this out.

In conclusion one cannot, in the Koran, oppose surahs set apart as violent to others that are not. The text expresses a global and coherent vision, not of violence in and for itself, but of peace to be imposed – that is, to be imposed by *all* means. Something we appear to be reluctant to acknowledge.

Translated by Sébastien Renault