



Ascetic and Nonascetic Layers in the Qur'an: A Case Study

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Abstract

Using the methods of redaction criticism, this article analyzes two Qur'anic parallel passages, Q 23:1–11 and Q 70:22–35, and the chronology of their redaction. Relying on discernable traces of editorial work, it argues that these texts of instruction, which initially exhorted their audience to live a pious and ascetic life, have known a process of rewriting, which substantially softened the ascetic injunction of continence present in the earliest versions. This analysis might shed light on the background and development of the Qur'an and early Islamic piety.

Keywords

Qur'an – early Islam – asceticism – Syriac Christianity – redaction criticism – prayer – continence

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Strictly speaking, the Qur'an is not a book but a *corpus*, namely, a gathering of texts: (1) which were not originally intended to be put together in a codex, nor composed with this goal in mind; (2) which are heterogeneous, as they belong to a variety of literary genres, and sometimes express divergent ideas, even if some ideas and concerns remain central throughout the whole text; (3) which are, in some cases, independent, and in others, are not — there are indeed numerous Qur'anic parallel passages that reuse, rewrite, or correct other passages. This is true not only for narratives, but also for other literary genres, like texts of instruction and edification, as we will see in this article.¹

¹ For the Qur'an as a corpus, see de Prémare 2004: 29–46; Dye forthcoming a.

This last point is particularly significant, since it entails that there is — as in the Gospels — a “synoptic problem” in the Qur'an. As a text that is both *composite* and *composed*, with various layers and parallel passages, the Qur'an is therefore particularly apt to be studied with a method fruitfully employed in biblical and New Testament studies called “redaction criticism” (*Redaktionskritik*). Relying on various significant criteria, such as tensions, contradictions, style changes, breaks of the literary genre or in the themes developed inside a text, the presence of various ways of introducing and staging the speech of various characters, etc., this method endeavors to reconstruct, at least in part, one or several previous states of a text, and studies the successive redactions/editions that gave the text its final form.²

The examination of such an editorial process is an unavoidable methodological step in any historical or scholarly use of the Hebrew Bible, the Gospels, and the Qur'an. Structural and synchronic approaches might shed some light on the latest versions of the texts under scrutiny, but they are usually not able to use such texts as historical sources, since they might easily mix various historical stages of textual development in their analysis.³ In fact, examining only its final form restricts in many respects the information that can be deduced — from a literary and historical viewpoint — from a text or a corpus (Müller, Pakkala, and ter Haar Romeny 2014: 11). Redaction criticism thus opens a window into the history of the community/communities centered around the Qur'an. Obviously, texts are human artifacts and manufactured products. Making a text in late antiquity (and not only then) is not gratuitous: it is done for some reason, implementing a specific program, or taking a stand in relation to particular ideas, people, or groups, within a specific context (Destro and Pesce 2016: 13). Moreover, if the process of writing a text is meaningful, then the process of rewriting or reusing texts inside a corpus is also very significant.

² Of course, redaction criticism does not presuppose that any kind of tension, contradiction, style change, etc., is an example of an editorial work or rewriting — only some are. It is also important to bear in mind that redaction criticism can be applied to the Qur'an. It is sometimes said that redaction criticism could be applied to the books of the Hebrew Bible, whose texts were composed and reworked for centuries, whereas it could not be applied to the Qur'an, whose genesis is much shorter. However, the genesis of the Qur'an and the genesis of the Gospels took roughly a similar amount of time, and the Gospels are very successfully studied with the tools of redaction criticism. For an excellent presentation and vindication of redaction criticism (on the Hebrew Bible, but it remains relevant in other contexts), see Müller, Pakkala, and ter Haar Romeny 2014: 1–18; and Pakkala 2013. For a vindication, and an application of the tools of redaction criticism to the Qur'an, see Dye forthcoming a, forthcoming b.

³ On the relations between synchronic and diachronic methods, see Dye 2014: 153–155.



Asceticism and Poverty in the Qur'an

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Abstract

While the Qur'an approves of ascetic practices such as fasting and vigils, it does not insist on them. Nonetheless, Sloterdijk's *You Must Change Your Life* may help us to identify an ascetic "training program" within the Qur'an. This has as its main elements: hijra, in the sense of an ongoing attitude of separation and exile; jihad, in the sense of training for and engaging in combat, again as an ongoing attitude; and poverty, not in the sense of voluntarily undergoing deprivation, but of benefaction on a heroic scale recalling pre-Islamic Arabia. How do we contextualize this program and the Qur'anic environment in general? While the historical narratives about Muhammad and the early community have plenty to say about these elements, they do not adequately account for the way they appear in the Qur'an. We propose instead to use the chronological order of suras first proposed by Weil and Nöldeke, not to establish chronology but to identify diverse communities of reception within the Qur'an, specifically with regard to poverty and generosity. The result is a simultaneous contrast and balance between values and practices based on reciprocity on the one hand, and requital/reward on the other. Asceticism thus has a central role in a uniquely Qur'anic system of economic and moral exchange.

Keywords

asceticism – poverty – Qur'an – hijra – jihad

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One of the participants in our collective project, Mette Bjerregaard Mortensen, has observed elsewhere that while the Qur'an encourages its audience to engage in practices of an ascetic character, such as late-night vigils, it does not impose asceticism, renunciation, or voluntary poverty in a thoroughgoing way (Mortensen 2017: 9). She also observed that ascetic practices and ideals are connected, more closely than we often think, to the Qur'anic category of

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muhājirūn (emigrants). These observations have provided me with a starting point for this contribution. The article by Anders Klostergaard Petersen at the beginning of this issue has also challenged me to rethink these matters further.¹

In the following pages I wish to identify poverty as part of a broad ascetic program within the Qur'an, but not in the way we usually think about these things. Asceticism has long been a preoccupation of historical sociology and the study of religion. Accordingly, it has been discussed by a series of distinguished thinkers extending at least from Durkheim and Weber down to our own time. Poverty has also received attention from sociologists (Simmel 1971), but has been of special interest to historians. Partly for this reason, discussions of poverty have tended to have a more empirical character. With this in mind we may take as a starting point a rather direct approach to asceticism and poverty that has been deployed by historians (e.g., Geremek 1994). This approach builds upon a simple contrast between "voluntary" and "involuntary" poverty. The former condition results, at least in principle, from conscious choice on the part of the actors in question. The latter is the condition of persons subjected to significant (though varying) degrees of deprivation and incapacity, precisely not as a result of choice on their part. We may consider this "involuntary poverty" as a result of natural and objective factors, or alternatively as an outcome and expression of social and constructed ones. Many historians and sociologists have preferred to focus on the latter of these pairs, but the interplay between them remains important for understanding both poverty and asceticism in many historical environments, including the late antique and early Islamic Near East.

If the aspect of asceticism that we associate with "voluntary poverty" has a minor role in the Qur'an, the opposite is true of "involuntary poverty." Aiding the poor (*al-fuqarā'*), the weak (*al-mustaḍ'afīn*), and members of related categories, is a primary activity for the community addressed in the Qur'an.² Moreover, the thematic areas not only of poverty, but also of generosity and

¹ I wish to thank Drs. Klostergaard Petersen and Bjerregaard Mortensen for bringing me into this project and for subsequent comments and advice. I also wish to thank Dr. Laura Feldt and the anonymous reviewer for *Numen* for a number of helpful comments and suggestions. In particular, Dr. Feldt alerted me to the recent article by Johanne Louise Christiansen (2019), which I have not yet been able to absorb completely. In what follows, translations from the Qur'an are my own.

Due to the tragically untimely death of Michael Bonner, he did not have a chance to complete the final proofreading of his article. Final proofreading has been completed by Anders Klostergaard Petersen, who takes responsibility for all possible blemishes in the correction of Michael Bonner's article.

² This Qur'anic phenomenon thus corresponds to Durkheim's view of asceticism as "culturally affirmative by imbuing culture with an ideal foundation entailing individual members