

What Are We to Do With the Categorized Division in “Meccan” and “Madinan” Suras?

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 sura’s title in contemporary editions of the Koran.

It all begins with a double postulate: on the one hand, the Islamic idea that Muhammad simply dictated the Koranic text as is; on the other, the ideological postulate according to which every « religion » necessarily begins as a « spiritual » phenomenon. The latter postulate finds its origin exclusively in the West and reflects 19th century scientism. It remains a prevalent strain of thought in the modern West in whose view every « religion » is in and of itself basically good and true (« everybody can make up his or her truth »), but becomes dangerous to the extent that it structures itself and develops in the forms of various extremisms (« what matters is to leave it up to everyone to do as they wish »).

Moreover, our Western rationality wants to classify everything; this gives it the illusion of understanding everything. Islamologists accordingly have categorized the suras of the Koran and their verses in two supposedly distinct periods in the life of the « Prophet » of Islam: first, the so-called « spiritual » period, controversial but peaceful, taking place in Mecca; second, the violent and warful period during which Islam structured itself, the so-called Madinan period. Taking at face value the « Prophet’s biography » (*Al-Sirat Al-Nabawiyah*, by Ibn Hisham) custom designed on caliphal order two centuries after the alleged events, Muslim scholars interpret the combats fancied in *Al-Sirat Al-Nabawiyah* and portraying the opposition of Meccan to « believers » (Muslims) as the reason behind a presumed change of attitude on Muhammad’s part. Yet, the best of (oriental or occidental) scholars are not fooled. They know quite well that they cannot make up for the scarcity of sources by way of fanciful imagination – significantly enough, the sources predating *Al-Sirat Al-Nabawiyah* have (to these days) been the object of systematic destructions.

Thus, there would exist two « well-established » bodies of « revelations » in the Koran: the first body, or « Meccan » suras, which it would seem appropriate to refer to as the « nice » suras; and the second, or « Madinan » suras, which it would in turn seem appropriate to refer to as the « brutal » suras, insofar as they heartily recommend to wage war and kill. The latter are assumed to postdate the former in virtue of the ideological postulate above mentioned. It does not occur to the average Westerner’s mind that a certain « religious » system may have begun by turning *submission* (in Arabic, *al-islam*) into an end in itself (in fact, the only end for mankind as a whole in the sight of « God »), and may consequently keep on promoting all the means conducive to achieving that end as legitimate. The above sketched and spurious division in two bodies of suras is strongly emphasized on in current Korans (sometimes under the headings « pre-Hegira » [= Meccan suras] and « post-Hegira » [= Madinan suras]). All it succeeds in doing, looking at it from the point of view of the uninformed reader, is to give each sura an appearance of historical content.

The Koranic text itself does not validate the imaginary categorization in two types of suras. We admittedly are dealing with a compilation of assorted, yet coherent texts in regard to their meaning. Let us take a look at a few examples.

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 former have taken it up to give sura 105 its title, *Al-Fil* (« The Elephant »), while the latter, for lack of any other significant indication, have made it to refer to the year of Muhammad's birth. No source whatever enables us to know the age at which this war chief actually died (probably in 632). Be that as it may, a South-Arabic calendar was invented in which the so-called « year of the Elephant » would coincide with 570, in such a way that one can have divine inspiration conveniently come down upon Muhammad around 610 – another round number – when he reaches 40 years old (being thereby neither too old nor too young to take over the mission to follow). These « data », coming straight out of our Western rationalist imagination, have subsequently been taken up in official Islamic parlance. In truth, however, the only historical date we possess relative to Muhammad's life concerns the expedition he led, *not against Mecca*, but much further North-West, towards Jerusalem. He was defeated in 629 nearby the Jordan by the Byzantines, who have kept the memory of the event.

This sura of « the Elephant » is considered of a pacific nature, the verb « *to kill* » (*qatala*) is not found in it under any form. It has been classified as « Meccan. » However, it does seem to allude to a legendary war which God Himself is said to take part in. This could hardly be mistaken for a trivial detail.

Let us now consider the following verses from another, longer sura, also classified as « Meccan »: **s.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* [explanations of this word in a future item]
(31a)... God leaves in error whom He pleases and guides whom He pleases (34a).

This sura does not call to **killing**, at least not directly. The verb occurs in its passive form. It is thus alleged to be "Meccan". One may wonder how and by whom *the kafarers* (*unbelievers*) mentioned about *will be killed*. Whose task is this supposed to be? God Himself (as in sura 105)? His *subjected* believers? The actual difference between the above suras and the so-called *Madinan* suras is, in reality, hardly striking. On the whole, it basically lies in the more explicit fashion in which the latter express the message the former already intend to convey in the first place. Let us only turn to the following and scarcely ever cited passage, extracted from **sura 61:**

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

In this peculiar verse, which has given its name (*The Battle Ranks*) to the whole sura, the verb [to love in the Koranic text](#) occurs for the last time. Recall that its preceding occurrences point instead to « *those God **does not love**,* » those, that is, who « spread disorder upon the earth, » in brief, those deemed unworthy to actually share in this life. What emerges is a vision of God that Islamologists have called a « strict monotheism, » holding it up in opposition to Christianity which they accordingly downplay as an « unexacting monotheism. » This vision, for Christians, is an offensive travesty. Indeed,

Islamic « monotheism » has nothing « strict » to it. It is a warlike and post-Christian « monotheism. » For the faithful of Islam, however, such a vision of God is necessarily decisive in accounting for what they believe Islam to be about (just like the vision Christians have of God inevitably informs the heart of their faith), regardless, let us dare say, of the genuine compliance of some among them to open up to others and call for friendship with them. Nourished and shaped through and through by its « monotheistic » vision, the Koranic text stands as profoundly consistent with itself, despite the obscure passages one frequently comes across with.

It is therefore in vain that Muslims, Christians, and others, keep setting such-and-such sura in opposition to another in subject matters of violence or « peace. » Moreover, no one proves as violent and intolerant as those who take upon themselves to establish « peace » and tolerance. As for the word « peace, » it actually scarcely appears in the Koran. An example is found in sura 25, verse 63, with reference to what the « believers » or « servants of God » are to say when addressed by the « ignorant. » But, what does this « peace » truly amount to?

Another approach is necessary, namely, to start from the following question: where on earth does the idea that God has commissioned His « believers » to extirpate evil from the world and establish His « peace » come from?

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[Home Page](#)