

Religious poetry from the Quranic milieu: Umayya b. Abī l-Ṣalt on the fate of the Thamūd¹

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Abstract

Unlike most ancient Arabic poetry, the poems attributed to Umayya b. Abī l-Ṣalt treat subjects that are also prominent in the Quran, such as creation, eschatology, and episodes from Biblical history. The authenticity of this corpus has, however, been the subject of some controversy. After a critical survey of previous scholarship, this article examines one particular passage from the Umayya corpus dealing with the destruction of the ancient tribe of Thamūd, which, it is argued, is likely to be pre-Quranic. The article then proceeds to highlight the crucial differences, both in content and in literary format, that exist between Umayya's retelling of the Thamūd narrative and its earliest Quranic version, and concludes with a number of general remarks on the Quran's religious milieu as reflected in Umayya's literary output.

Keywords: Quran, pre-Islamic Arabia, Ancient Arabic poetry, Thamūd, Umayya b. Abī l-Ṣalt, Punishment legends

Introduction

To call the Quran “a text without context”,² as F. E. Peters has done, is to draw attention to the fact that in spite of the substantial Judaeo-Christian literature which can be meaningfully compared with specific Quranic passages, such intertexts are usually separated from the Quran by a significant linguistic and geographic gap: they are written in Hebrew, Greek, Syriac or Ethiopic, and they come from regions which, on the basis of contemporary means of travel, would have been a journey of several weeks away from the Hijaz, the Quran's putative place of origin.

It is because of this elusiveness of the Quran's immediate cultural context that the figure of Umayya b. Abī l-Ṣalt is relevant to Quranic studies: for unlike most of ancient Arabic poetry, the poems attributed to him treat subjects that are also prominent in the Quran, such as God's creation of the world, the deluge, God's heavenly throne, the last judgement, paradise and hell, as well as Biblical figures such as Noah and Moses. Umayya is said to have been a contemporary of

- 1 Parts of this article were originally presented at the conference “Religious culture in late Antique Arabia”, convened by Kirill Dmitriev and Isabel Toral-Niehoff and held at the Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin, 25–27 June 2009. I am grateful to Tilman Seidensticker for his encouraging remarks on a preliminary draft of this piece, and to Behnam Sadeghi for kindly suggesting various stylistic improvements and clarifications.
- 2 F. E. Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 259.

Muhammad – probably a somewhat older one – from al-Ṭāʾif, a town about a hundred kilometres to the south-east of Mecca,³ and is often described as a pre-Quranic monotheist, i.e., a *ḥanīf*.⁴ If the poetry transmitted under his name were genuine, it would consequently allow us a tantalizing glimpse into the way Biblical traditions were framed in Arabic in the Quran’s immediate environment.⁵

The present article is interested in using some of the material attributed to Umayya for precisely this purpose. Based on Umayya’s rendition of the destruction of the Thamūd, an ancient Arabic legend also recounted in the Quran, I will attempt to characterize the nature of the Biblical material that was in circulation in the Quranic milieu, and highlight some of the crucial differences, in both content and literary format, that exist between Umayya’s version of the Thamūd narrative and that of the Quran. I shall begin with a number of introductory remarks about previous scholarship on Umayya and the ever-popular problem of authenticity.

1. A brief survey of previous research

Although no proper *dīwān* of Umayya’s literary output has survived, poetic fragments ascribed to him are found in a wide spectrum of works from such diverse genres as Quranic exegesis, lexicography and historiography. This scattered corpus has attracted a certain measure of scholarly attention from the first decades of the nineteenth century. After Alois Sprenger first introduced the figure of Umayya to Western scholarship,⁶ Clément Huart wrote an article in 1904 that labelled the poetry attributed to Umayya a “source” of the Quran.⁷ Huart was unreservedly optimistic about the authenticity of these texts, and in cases of obvious overlap with the Quran generally held the Quran to be dependent on Umayya. Subsequently, a first systematic attempt to gather all of the available

3 According to Tilman Seidensticker (“The authenticity of the poems ascribed to Umayya b. Abī l-Ṣalt”, in Jack R. Smart (ed.), *Tradition and Modernity in Arabic Language and Literature* (Curzon: Richmond, 1996), 87–101, see p. 88), Umayya “must have died before the Muslim occupation of al-Ṭāʾif in 8 A.H. because he is not mentioned in the historical reports about this event”. For a survey of the biographical information see Friedrich Schulthess, “Umajja b. Abi-ṣ Ṣalt”, in Carl Bezold (ed.), *Orientalische Studien Theodor Nöldeke zum siebzigsten Geburtstag*, vol. 1 (Gießen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1906), 71–89, see pp. 72–6.

4 On the historicity of the *ḥunafāʾ* see Uri Rubin, “Ḥanīfiyya and Kaʿba: an inquiry into the Arabic pre-Islamic background of *dīn Ibrāhīm*”, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13, 1990, 85–112.

5 This article will assume the traditional dating and localization of the Quranic corpus as an early seventh-century text from Western Arabia. For an attempt to vindicate this assumption against diverging views see Nicolai Sinai, *Fortschreibung und Auslegung* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 23–58.

6 Alois Sprenger, *Das Leben und die Lehre des Moḥammad nach bisher grösstenteils unbenutzten Quellen* (Berlin: Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1861–65), vol. 1, 76–81 and 110–19 (quoted after Seidensticker, “Authenticity”, 100, n. 13).

7 Clément Huart, “Une nouvelle source du Qorān”, *Journal Asiatique* 10/4, 1904, 125–67.

material was made by Friedrich Schulthess,⁸ and in the 1970s, two more editions have appeared in the Arabic world.⁹

Huart's article inspired a number of further publications of a generally more sceptical nature, the most important of which was a German monograph by Israel Frank-Kamenetzky, published in 1911, which attempted to identify all the parallels between the corpus of poetry ascribed to Umayya and the Quran, and then proceeds on this basis to distinguish between genuine poems and pseud-epigraphic ones.¹⁰ Although Frank-Kamenetzky's conclusions were approved by no less an authority than Nöldeke,¹¹ scepticism came to prevail: in 1926 Tor Andrae devoted a number of pages in his study on *The Origin of Islam and Christianity* to the poetry attributed to Umayya, and emphatically propounded the view that all of these texts had only emerged in Islamic times, as a poetic distillation of early Islamic exegesis and popular storytelling.¹² In spite of a 1939 book by Joachim Hirschberg (*Jewish and Christian Doctrines in Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Arabia*) which devotes considerable space to Umayya,¹³ Western research appears to have tacitly adopted Andrae's position, according to which all biblically-inspired poetry attributed to Umayya ought to be viewed as pseud-epigraphic; in contemporary Quranic scholarship, the Umayya corpus is hardly ever used as intertextual background material that might help gauge the extent to which Jewish and Christian lore was known in pre-Quranic Arabia. In 1996 the issue was taken up again in an article by Tilman Seidensticker who, while admitting that some of the material was in all likelihood spurious, emphasized that a certain number of poems could responsibly be considered to be authentic.¹⁴ Unfortunately, Seidensticker's measured evaluation of the problem has only partially succeeded in rekindling the debate,¹⁵ although

- 8 Friedrich Schulthess (ed. and trans.), *Umajja ibn Abi ṣ Ṣalt: Die unter seinem Namen überlieferten Gedichtfragmente* (Leipzig: Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1911).
- 9 Bahja 'Abd al-Ghafūr al-Ḥadīthī, *Umayya b. Abī ṣ-Ṣalt: Ḥayātuhū wa-shī'ruhū* (Baghdad: Maṭba'at al-'ānī, 1975); 'Abd al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Satīlī, *Dīwān Umayya b. Abī l-Ṣalt* (Damascus: al-Maṭba'a at-ta'āwuniyya bi-Dimashq, 1977).
- 10 Israel Frank-Kamenetzky, *Untersuchungen über das Verhältnis der dem Umajja b. Abi ṣ Ṣalt zugeschriebenen Gedichte zum Qorān* (Kirchhain: Max Schmiersow, 1911).
- 11 Theodor Nöldeke, "Umajja b. AbiṣṢalt", *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 27, 1912, 159–72 (quoted from Seidensticker, "Authenticity", 90).
- 12 Tor Andrae, *Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum* (Uppsala: Almqvist, 1926), 48–56.
- 13 J. W. Hirschberg, *Jüdische und christliche Lehren im vor- und frühislamischen Arabien: Ein Beitrag zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Islams* (Krakow: Nakładem polskiej akademii umiejętności, 1939).
- 14 Seidensticker, "Authenticity".
- 15 Two recent publications by Gert Borg discuss individual poems attributed to Umayya, among them no. 27 in Schulthess, which is briefly discussed below ("Umayya b. Abī al-Ṣalt as a poet", in U. Vermeulen and D. De Smeets (eds), *Philosophy and Arts in the Islamic World* (Leuven: Peeters Press, 1998), 3–13); "The divine in the works of Umayya b. Abī al-Ṣalt", in G. Borg and E. de Moor (eds), *Representations of the Divine in Arabic Poetry* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2001), 9–23). Although both pieces offer some introductory remarks on the issue of authenticity, Borg's general approach is to bracket the problem of ascription as unsolvable and then proceed to a literary analysis of the respective texts. James E. Montgomery ("Salvation at sea? Seafaring in early Arabic poetry", in Borg and de Moor (eds), *Representations of the Divine*,

Seidensticker himself has recently returned to the issue and provided a distinctly helpful survey of different scholars' assessments of individual poems ascribed to Umayya.¹⁶

2. The problem of authenticity

When glancing through the poems attributed to Umayya, it quickly becomes clear that at least some measure of scepticism is warranted, as many of the poems do indeed look like a pastiche of standard Quranic terminology. Poem no. 27 of the Schulthess edition (= al-Saṭfī, no. 63) provides a representative example of such cases (all passages which employ Quranic diction, or variants thereof, have been underlined;¹⁷ see the Arabic text in the appendix):

- ¹God of the inhabitants of the world¹⁸ and of the entire earth and lord of the firm mountains (cf. 41: 10 and elsewhere),
- ²who built them, and also built seven strong [heavens] (Q 78: 12) without visible pillars (Q 13: 2 and 31: 10) and without men [i.e. helpers];
- ³and who made them even and adorned them (Q 15: 16 and elsewhere) with the light of the shining sun and the moon (cf. Q 10: 5)
- ⁴and of shooting stars that sparkle in its darkness; its missiles are sterner than arrowheads (Q 72: 8).
- ⁵He has split the earth, so that springs poured forth from it (cf. Q 7: 160 and 79: 31) and rivers of sweet and clear water,
- ⁶and he has blessed its regions (Q 41: 10) and caused to flourish in it the crops and cattle which are there (Q 2: 205).
- ⁷Inevitably, one day every long-lived one and every being in the world comes to its end,

25–47), discusses one of the poems describing Noah's Ark and the Deluge (Schulthess, no. 29 = al-Saṭfī, no. 62) and juxtaposes it with the relevant Quranic passages.

- 16 Tilman Seidensticker, "Die Authentizität der Umayya Ibn Abī ṣ-Ṣalt zugeschriebenen Gedichte II", forthcoming in *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 161, 2011 (this article also includes a helpful correlation of the differing systems of numbering used by Schulthess and al-Saṭfī).
- 17 For a detailed documentation of the respective Quranic verses see Frank-Kamenetzky, *Untersuchungen*, 10–12 (note that Frank-Kamenetzky still cites the Flügel edition of the Quran!).
- 18 In the Quran it makes sense generally to translate *rabb al-ālamīn* with "lord of the inhabitants of the world" (cf. verses such as Q 29: 10 and 28, 26: 165, or 7: 80, where it is clear that *al-ālamīn* refers to persons); since the poem presently discussed is likely to be dependent on the Quran (see below), I have also adopted this rendering in my translation of the poem (similarly, in v. 9 below the word *maqāmi* has been translated in accordance with Q 22: 21). On similar Judaeo-Christian epithets that predate the Quran – such as *ribbôn ha-ōlamīm* (Hebrew), *basileus tōn aiōnōn* (Greek), or *egzī'a k'ellu 'ālamāt* (Ethiopic), where the plural refers to the two "worlds", i.e. this world and the Hereafter – see Theodor Nöldeke and Friedrich Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. 1: *Über den Ursprung des Qorāns* (Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1909), 112, n. 2.

- ⁸and vanishes after it has been new, and becomes worn out, except for Him who remains, *the holy one* (Q 59: 23 and 62: 1), *full of majesty* (Q 55: 78).
- ⁹The evildoers are led naked to a place where there are *rods* (Q 22: 21) and a *warning punishment* (Q 79: 25).
- ¹⁰They call out: “*Woe is us* (Q 37: 20), long-lasting woe!”, and they cry out in their *chains* (Q 40: 73 and elsewhere).
- ¹¹They are *not dead* (Q 35: 36 and elsewhere), so that they would be able to rest and all of them *roast* in the ocean of *the Fire* (Q 88: 4 and elsewhere).
- ¹²The *God-fearing*, however, inhabit a *home* of sincerity (16: 30 and elsewhere), and enjoy a *life of bliss* (cf. Q 88: 8, 101: 7, and elsewhere) *in the shade* (Q 76: 14 and elsewhere).
- ¹³There they possess *what they desire* (Q 16: 57 and elsewhere) and wish for of delight and of consummate joy.

In this poem, the ratio of Quranic terminology to the remainder of the poem is evidently very high: only one verse out of thirteen does *not* contain Quranic phraseology. Moreover, the Quranic material is taken from a wide variety of surahs that belong to all four major periods of the Quran’s genesis.¹⁹ The poet hence appears to have been familiar with passages from different parts of the Quran and to have used whatever Quranic material came to his mind. By contrast, the assumption that the poem really does stem from Umayya would require that more than two dozen Quranic surahs drew, over a period of approximately two decades, from one single poem by Umayya – decidedly the less likely hypothesis.

In other poems attributed to Umayya, dependence on the Quran is even more pronounced and may occasionally take on a somewhat comic aspect (no. 46: 1–3 Schulthess):

- ¹To the Lord of the Throne they will be presented – he knows what is public and what is said in secret –
- ²on the day when we come to Him, the compassionate Lord – *His promise will surely come about* (cf. Q 19: 61);
- ³on the day *when you come to Him* – as He has said – *alone* (Q 19: 95), when He will not leave out a righteous one nor one who has strayed.

Here, the third verse comes close to a formal citation of the Quran: “on the day when you come to him alone (*fardan*)” clearly reflects Q 19: 95 (*wa-kulluhum ātihi yauma l-qiyāmati fardā*). Moreover, the verse is not merely used, the employment of *fardan* is also explicitly marked as a citation of something that “God has said”, i.e. as a quotation from the Quran.²⁰ In this verse even a pretence of the poem being a pre-Quranic text is no longer upheld. As an aside, this raises the interesting question of whether in certain circles the retrospective fabrication of *hanīf*-style poetry of the kind also ascribed to other supposed

19 On the lasting merit of Nöldeke’s attempt to distinguish four subsequent textual clusters within the Quranic corpus see Nicolai Sinai, “The Qur’an as process”, in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx (eds), *The Qur’an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’ānic Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 407–39.

20 As can be gathered from Seidensticker, “Authentizität”, this observation is also made by Nöldeke (“Umaiya b. Abiṣṣalt”, 164).

pre-Islamic monotheists might not have been a literary diversion rather than a genuine attempt at forgery.

In spite of the substantial uncertainty that adheres to much of the poetry ascribed to Umayya, it is nevertheless improbable that both he and the literature transmitted under his name have been fabricated from scratch. First, it is likely that some historical memory of him must have existed, which could then be used as a peg on which to hang later poetry. As a matter of fact, the first 22 texts collected in the Schulthess edition are conventional ancient Arabic poetry, such as panegyrics on a Meccan noble by the name of Ibn Ju'dān (no. 13 Schulthess). Ibn Hishām's *Sīra* attributes to Umayya a lament on the Meccans slain at Badr,²¹ which gives credence to reports that Umayya was opposed to the early Islamic community based at Medina. But if Umayya had just been a minor poet who produced conventional *fakhr* and *madīh* poetry, then why was he credited, albeit falsely, with religious poetry? The most likely answer to this is that Umayya must have possessed at least a certain reputation as a poet treating religious, and more particularly, Biblical subjects. This assumption is borne out by the fact that apart from the two categories of poems just mentioned – conventional secular poetry and Quranic pastiches – the Umayya corpus also comprises a third class of texts: poetry that deals with Biblical material, yet does not conspicuously overlap with the Quran. It is the texts belonging to the first and the third class that Israel Frank-Kamenetzky, in his 1911 study on Umayya, considered to be authentic, while the second category should probably be viewed as later expansions of the corpus that were possible because the latter already included a certain amount of biblically inspired texts. *Prima facie*, then, the criterion Frank-Kamenetzky used in order to distinguish the authentic core of Umayya's poetry from later additions appears entirely reasonable: the more remote a poem from the Quran, the more likely it is to be authentic; on the other hand, if it exhibits a high density of Quranic elements, and if these amount to entire phrases and concatenations of words rather than isolated expressions, then there is a strong possibility that the poem is later.

This general principle stands in need of certain qualifications, however. First, as many earlier scholars have observed, the evaluation of whether or not a given piece from the Umayya corpus can be held to be authentic must not only take into account the density of Quranic elements it displays, but also whether it overlaps with later Islamic amplifications of the Quran's frequently terse treatment of a certain narrative or issue. It is particularly on these grounds that Seidensticker argues for the inauthenticity of (pseudo-)Umayya's rendition of the Annunciation of Mary (no. 38 Schulthess = no. 79 al-Satī) in which "the Qur'an is not only quoted or paraphrased but occasionally interpreted in agreement with the *tafsīr*":²²

Again, it cannot be ruled out with complete certainty that the Umayya, rather than the Quranic, text could have been chronologically earlier, since narrative

21 Al-Satī, no. 8. The poem – which apart from a few variants is not included in Schulthess' edition – is generally accepted as authentic, see Nöldeke, "Umaiya b. Abiṣṣalt", 161–2.

22 Seidensticker, "Authenticity", 91 (following Frank-Kamenetzky, *Untersuchungen*, 38 and 48).

details that the later Islamic tradition grafted onto the Quran might in fact have derived from pre-Quranic Jewish and Christian traditions; Umayya's poem about Mary could therefore be dependent on these latter rather than on their subsequent Islamic appropriation. Hence, one might conclude, the text may well be genuine.²³ Indeed, the fact that Islamic amplifications of Quranic narratives draw on pre-Quranic midrash literature has been demonstrated in Norman Calder's analysis of the Quranic story of Abraham's sacrifice (cf. Q 37: 102–11).²⁴ Interestingly, a poetic rendering of the narrative, expanded by some of the midrashic motifs that later entered Islamic exegesis, is also attributed to Umayya (Schulthess, no. 29: 9–21), and is accepted as authentic both by Frank-Kamenetzky and by Nöldeke.²⁵ This stands in striking contrast to the fact that Frank-Kamenetzky at least rejects the poem about Mary (no. 38 Schulthess) as spurious: although in both cases there is considerable overlap between a text attributed to Umayya, on the one hand, and the Quran *as well as* later *tafsīr*, on the other, Frank-Kamenetzky arrives at diametrically opposed assessments of the two texts, considering one to be inauthentic and the other to be genuine. Clearly, methodological consistency requires that one's evaluation of the two poems be harmonized in some way, or that significant differences between them be pointed out.

In order to avoid such an impasse between contradictory scholarly intuitions about texts like no. 29 and no. 38, it is probably advisable to say that although these poems perhaps cannot be shown conclusively to be inauthentic, any argument to the contrary that would try positively to establish that they are authentic is also open to serious (and in my view, much greater) doubt. Methodologically, this would seem to require that one refrains from using poems like the one about the Annunciation of Mary as intertextual background material for the historical-critical study of the Quran. The texts that we can safely juxtapose with the Quran are those that stem from what has been labelled above as the third category of texts ascribed to Umayya, namely poems that deal with Biblical material but which do not conspicuously overlap with passages from the Quranic corpus. It is important to point out that this principle of caution, although dictated by scholarly sobriety, comes at a certain price, as it will necessarily make the difference between Umayya's poetry and the Quran appear to be much greater than it would turn out to be if one were to go out on a limb, so to speak, and work with texts such as no. 29 and 38. The degree to which the Quranic texts will come across as "original" or innovative will therefore be directly proportional to the degree of scholarly risk one is willing to take.

Before turning to Umayya's treatment of the Thamūd narrative, it may be helpful to offer a brief thematic outline of at least those poems which historical-critical students of the Quran can, in my view, safely use for intertextual

23 This possibility is entertained in Borg, "Divine", 9–10, and has also been argued in a paper presented by Cornelia Horn at the conference "Religious culture in late antique Arabia", Berlin, 25–27 June 2009.

24 Norman Calder, "From midrash to scripture: the sacrifice of Abraham in early Islamic tradition", *Le Muséon* 101, 1988, 375–402.

25 Frank-Kamenetzky, *Untersuchungen*, 43 and 48, and Nöldeke, "Umaiya b. Abiṣṣalt", 166 (I owe this reference to Tilman Seidensticker).

comparison. Two general thematic categories may be discerned in this corpus. First, there is a good deal of material on creation and cosmology. It is noteworthy that the texts do not contain a genuine creation narrative modelled on the Biblical book of Genesis, as one can find in a poem by the Christian ‘Adī b. Zayd which has recently been studied both by Kirill Dmitriev and Isabel Toral-Niehoff;²⁶ the texts rather go over different aspects of the finished cosmic structure as it presently operates.²⁷ This basic perspective is somewhat reminiscent of the Quran, which also focuses on nature’s operations in the present rather than on how God has originated the world in the mythic past.²⁸ The second major topic is Biblical history, with a consistent focus on figures from the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, in particular Noah (no. 32: 24–36 and no. 28: 9–13 Schulthess). This predominance of Old Testament figures can also be observed in the early Quranic recitations.²⁹

In another respect, however, Umayya and the early Quranic surahs betray considerably different theological and anthropological concerns. For whereas

26 See Isabel Toral-Niehoff, “Eine arabische poetische Gestaltung des Sündenfalls: Das vorislamische Schöpfungsgedicht von ‘Adī b. Zayd”, in Dirk Hartwig et al. (eds), *‘Im vollen Licht der Geschichte’: Die Wissenschaft des Judentums und die Anfänge der kritischen Koranforschung* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2008), 235–56; Kirill Dmitriev, “An early Christian Arabic account of the creation of the world”, in Neuwirth, Sinai and Marx (eds), *The Qur’ān in Context*, 349–87.

27 For example, we have two somewhat hazy references to the idea that everything that exists in our world corresponds to a supernatural prototype (no. 25: 2 and no. 34: 5 Schulthess), there is a passage on the names and features of the seven heavens (no. 25: 15–22 Schulthess), the daily course of the sun and the moon are described (no. 25: 39–48), and the divine throne is mentioned several times (cf. no. 25: 23–6, no. 25: 29, no. 26, and no. 34: 4 Schulthess). Interestingly, one verse (no. 25: 45b Schulthess, on which see Hirschberg, *Lehren*, 96–8, and Cornelia Schöck, “Die Träger des Gottesthrones in Koranlegung und islamischer Überlieferung”, *Welt des Orients* 27, 1996, 104–32, see pp. 112–3; I owe this reference to Tilman Seidensticker) restates the famous verse Ezekiel 1: 10, where the carriers of the divine throne are likened to a man, a lion, a bull, and an eagle (subsequently interpreted as symbols of the four Evangelists). The fact that such a reference is absent from the Quran corroborates the fact that at least part of the Umayya corpus rests on non-Quranic sources, and may thus well be pre-Quranic.

28 While references to divine “creation” (*kh-l-q*) of the world, and in particular of man, already appear during the early Meccan period (cf. Q 96: 1.2 and 75: 37–9), in these early texts divine creation is clearly understood in the sense of God’s ongoing maintenance of the present cosmic order rather than in a parallel to the first chapters of the Book of Genesis. This is evident from the fact that God’s creation of man, as alluded to in these early passages, is always connected with the development of the embryo in the maternal womb rather than with the creation of Adam and Eve. It is only in Q 55: 14 – which is to be dated towards the end of the early Meccan period (see Sinai, “Qur’an as process”, 424) – that the creation of Adam from dust (Genesis 2: 7) is for the first time alluded to in the Quran.

29 While Abraham and Moses are mentioned already in the earliest stratum of the Quran (see, for example, Q 87: 18.19 and also the allusions to Pharaoh in 85: 17–8 and 73: 15–6, where, however, Moses is not named), Noah first appears in 54: 9–16 and 37: 75–82, which Nöldeke dates to the Middle Meccan period. It is only well into the Middle Meccan period, in Q 19 that the roster of Quranic protagonists is extended to include New Testament figures like Jesus, Mary and Zacharias. See Sinai, *Fortschreibung*, 103.

the primary interest of the earliest Quranic surahs is in the eschatological collapse of the world and the resurrection of the dead (rather than explicit monotheism), as Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje argued as early as 1886,³⁰ eschatology is much less prominent in the poetry of Umayya. Although one text contains descriptions of hell and of paradise (no. 41: 1–9 Schulthess, see no. 75 al-Saṭfī), the end of the world and the resurrection are only briefly alluded to in the poems which can be considered authentic with some degree of certainty. And even Umayya's portrayal of hell concludes with a rather consolatory perspective: "They float upon it [hell] like particles of rubbish, if the compassionate Lord does not grant forgiveness" (no. 41: 5 Schulthess). There is thus a strong emphasis on God's mercy – in striking contrast to the early Quranic surahs' "theology of rupture", where man in general (*al-insān*) is vigorously accused of ingratitude towards God and of his failure to fulfil basic requirements of social solidarity.³¹

3. The destruction of the Thamūd: a comparison of Umayya no. 34 and Q 91

Against this general background I now propose to examine one particular passage from the Umayya corpus, taken from poem no. 34 of the Schulthess edition (see nos. 31 and 30 in al-Saṭfī's edition; the Arabic text is included in the appendix), and compare it to an early Quranic surah, Q 91 (*al-Shams*). Both texts describe the destruction of the ancient people of Thamūd that re-appears in later Quranic surahs.³² Before examining Umayya's rendition of the Thamūd legend in more in detail, however, it is worth taking a brief glance at the overall structure of the poem as reconstructed by Schulthess:

- vv. 1–4: exhortation to praise God (Praise God, for he is worthy of praise . . .); God's power to bring to life stones and the dead; the heavenly throne.
- vv. 5–10: God's creation: everything that exists corresponds to an eternal prototype; animals created by God.
- vv. 11–13: the Plagues of Egypt (ants, locusts, empty years, dust).
- vv. 14–19: Pharaoh and his army drown in the Red Sea.
- vv. 20–22: the Israelites in the wilderness.
- vv. 23–32: Thamūd
- vv. 33–40: description of a rain spell

It should be noted, however, that the version offered by Schulthess is pieced together from seven different fragments which may not all go back to one and the same author.³³ The fact that the Thamūd passage is likely to be authentic, as argued below, does not therefore mean that this also applies to the rest of the poem; as a matter of fact, at least the section that retells the drowning

30 See Sinai, "Process", 426–7.

31 See Sinai, "Process", 425–6.

32 See inter alia Q 54: 23–31, 26: 141–59, or 11: 61–8.

33 While Schulthess chose to arrange these fragments in the chronological order of Biblical history, to which the fate of the Thamūd is then appended, al-Saṭfī proposes a slightly different and much less persuasive ordering (with vv. 14–22 of the Schulthess edition coming before vv. 12–3).

of Pharaoh (34: 14–19 Schulthess) should probably be considered post-Quranic, since it does not include any narrative elements that conspicuously diverge from the Quran and in two instances even contains what appear to be poetic restatements of Quranic passages.³⁴ The section on God’s creation (vv. 5–10), on the other hand, can lay a much stronger claim to going back to Umayya himself, as it significantly differs from the Quran: the passage begins with a reference to the notion that everything that exists corresponds to a supernatural prototype, an idea also alluded to in another poem that is probably authentic (no. 25: 2 Schulthess)³⁵ but not found in the Quran; and as the objects of divine creation it lists mainly wild animals (bees, crocodiles, antelopes, gazelles, lions, elephants and wolves, but also pigs and roosters), whereas Quranic affirmations of God as the creator of the world (usually referred to as “*āyāt* passages”³⁶) are always markedly anthropocentric, insofar as they portray the world as a habitat that is above all geared to the needs of man.³⁷ In spite of the fact that Umayya shares with the Quran recognition of God as the creator of the world, his interest in wildlife rather than in nature as subjugated to human needs (as in agriculture or cattle breeding) is much closer to more conventional ancient Arabic poetry than to the Quran.³⁸

The upshot of this brief review of the poem in its entirety is that in spite of the fact that the seven fragments exhibit the same metre (*khafīf*) and rhyme (*īrā / ūrā*) and do appear to match up thematically, and in spite of the fact that Frank-Kamenetzky takes the entire poem to be authentic,³⁹ the text as reconstituted by Schulthess is the result of an extended process of gradual growth around an authentic nucleus that consisted at least of vv. 5–10 and vv. 23–32 (see below), and probably also the brief reminiscence of the Plagues of Egypt in vv. 11–13 which are also not particularly Quran-like. The fact that God’s creation of the world and the destruction of the Thamūd were apparently dealt with in the same poem is clearly significant, as it shows that certain themes that appear intimately linked in the Quran – where God’s power to punish the evil is frequently substantiated with his power to create and maintain the world – appear to have fused with each other already in the poetry of Umayya.

34 Cf. Pharaoh’s statement in Umayya 34: 15 (*qāla innī ana l-mujīru ‘alā n-nāsi wa-lā rabba lī ‘alayya mujīrā*) and the phrase *wa-huwa yujīru wa-lā yujāru ‘alaihi* from Q 23: 88, and Umayya 34: 19 (“And he called to God, yet his call was not granted after his transgressions; so he became a sign, *fa-šāra mushīrā*”) and Q 10: 90–92: “But as he [Pharaoh] was drowning he cried, ‘I believe there is no God except the one the Children of Israel believe in. I submit to Him.’ / ‘Now? When you had always been a rebel, and a troublemaker! / Today we shall save only your body as a sign (*āya*) to all posterity. [...]”.

35 See Hirschberg, *Lehren*, 80.

36 See Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur’an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 1996), 109–12, on the basis of Angelika Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1981), 192–6.

37 See, for example, Q 80: 24–32 or 55: 10–12.

38 On the opposition of Quranic descriptions of nature to notions of space prevalent in Arabic literature, where the natural environment is frequently depicted as inhospitable, desolate, and obstructing the hero or even threatening his very survival, see Angelika Neuwirth, “Geography and the Qur’ān”, in Jane McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 293–313 (in particular see pp. 300–2).

39 See Frank-Kamenetzky, *Untersuchungen*, 44 and 48.

Let us now zoom in on the Thamūd passage of the poem:⁴⁰

- ²³Like Thamūd, who arrogantly slew religion (*tafattakati d-dīna*) and the hamstrung mother of the camel colt;
²⁴a camel of God that was freely grazing the land and taking turns [with the camels of the Thamūd] in returning to the water.
²⁵Then came upon her accursed Aḥmar, [swift] like an arrow, with a sharp sword, and said: “You shall be hamstrung!”
²⁶Then he cut her tendon and her shin-bone, and it [= the sword] penetrated to the bone and broke.
²⁷The colt saw that his mother had forever left it after it had been accustomed to her affection and care.
²⁸It came to a rock and stood upon it, emitting into the sky a thundering sound that ascended to the rocks.
²⁹It uttered a cry, and the camel’s cry against them was: “May they be utterly destroyed!”
³⁰So they were struck, except for the swift woman; she was from among their servants, and she was lame.
³¹[She was like] the peeled-off skin of a fruit; she was sent in order to tell the people of Qurḥ about them, that they had been scattered.
³²They gave her to drink after she had delivered the message, and then she died. And thus God in the end repaid a despicable one.

Before we are entitled to use this text as an intertextual background to the Quranic treatment of the Thamūd story, however, we have a little dating problem to solve: is the poem really pre-Quranic? Prima facie this would seem to be the case, as the text is one of those poems that has biblically inspired subject matter yet does not show overt terminological overlap with the Quran; Israel Frank-Kamenetzky therefore considers it to be genuine.⁴¹ In order to facilitate comparison with the earliest Thamūd narrative in the Quran,⁴² the following synopsis can be drawn up:

Umayya no. 34 (Schulthess)

- ²³Like Thamūd, who arrogantly
slew religion and the hamstrung
mother of the camel colt;
²⁴a camel of God that was freely grazing
the land and taking turns [with the
camels of the Thamūd] in returning to
the water.

Surah 91⁴³

- ¹¹In their immoderation, the Thamūd
called [their messenger] a liar,

40 On the translation of vv. 30–31 see the emendations to Schulthess’ translation that are proposed in Andrae, *Ursprung*, 53.

41 Frank-Kamenetzky, *Untersuchungen*, 44 and 48.

42 As I have argued in an earlier article, Q 91 ought to be assigned to the second sub-group of the early Meccan period (Sinai, “Process”, 423).

43 The translation of this Quranic passage, as that of all others, is taken – with slight modifications – from M. A. S. Abdel Haleem’s translation (*The Qur’an*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

- ²⁵Then came upon her accursed Aḥmar,
[swift] like an arrow, with a sharp
sword, and said: “You shall be
hamstrung!”
- ²⁶Then he cut her tendon and her
shin-bone, and it [the sword]
penetrated to the bone and broke.
- ²⁷The colt saw that his mother had
forever left it after it had been
accustomed to her affection and care.
- ²⁸It came to a rock and stood upon it,
emitting into the sky a thundering
sound that ascended to the rocks.
- ²⁹It uttered a cry, and the camel’s cry
against them was: “May they be utterly
destroyed!”
- ³⁰So they were struck, except for the
swift (woman); she was from among
their servants and was lame.
- ³¹[She was like] the peeled-off skin of a
fruit; she was sent in order to tell the
people of Qurḥ about them, that they
had been scattered.
- ³²They gave her to drink after she had
delivered the message, and then she
died.
And thus God in the end repaid a
despicable one.
- ¹²when the wicked one among them
appeared.
- ¹³The messenger of God told them:
“God’s camel – leave her to drink!”
- ^{14a}But they called him a liar and
hamstrung her;
- ^{14b}their Lord destroyed them for their
crime and levelled them to the
ground;
- ¹⁵He does not have to fear the
consequences of it.

The most striking point of divergence between both renditions of the Thamūd legend – noted in 1906 by E. Power⁴⁴ – is the absence in the Umayya text of a messenger, a *rasūl allāh*, who instructs his people to leave the camel unharmed, yet is disobeyed. Conversely, the Umayya version also contains various elements absent from the Quranic one (notably, the little camel’s curse and the escape of a maid of the Thamūd who announces their fate to the inhabitants of nearby Qurḥ⁴⁵). Yet Tor Andrae, in spite of these important discrepancies between Umayya and the Quran, nevertheless refuses to accept the authenticity of the text.⁴⁶ His reason for doing so is because even though our poem does not overlap with the Quran, it does overlap with traditions one finds in Islamic exegesis of the Quran. In particular, Andrae draws attention to a long report

44 E. Power, “Umayya Ibn Abi-s Salt”, *Mélanges de l’Université Saint Joseph* 1, 1906, 197–222, see p. 212

45 Cf. Huart, “Nouvelle source”, 153–4, and Power, “Umayya”, 212.

46 Andrae, *Ursprung*, 52–3.

contained in al-Ṭabarī's commentary ad Q 7: 73 (tradition no. 14820) that is attributed to Ibn Ishāq:

We were told by Ibn Ḥumaid, who said: We were told by Salama on the authority of Ibn Ishāq, who said: When God had annihilated 'Ād and their time had been over, Thamūd flourished after them and they were made to follow them in the land; so they settled there and spread out. Then they disobeyed God. And when their corruption had become evident and they worshipped things other than God, he sent Ṣāliḥ to them [...].

This introduction is followed by a lengthy narrative: during one of their pagan festivals, the Thamūd challenge Ṣāliḥ to prove his prophetic authority by making a camel come forth from a rock. After having accomplished this, Ṣāliḥ instructs them to leave the camel unharmed and to allow it to take turns in drinking with their own camels. However, one of the women of Thamūd called 'Unayza conspires against Ṣāliḥ and brings in Aḥmar from nearby Qurḥ in order to organize the slaying of the camel. When Aḥmar has carried out the deed, Ṣāliḥ announces that a divine punishment is about to befall the Thamūd, and retreats to Palestine when the threat is fulfilled.

All of them, young and old, perished, except for a lame servant girl of theirs who was called "al-Zurai'a" [apparently corrupted from *al-Dharī'a*, "the swift one"]; she was an unbeliever and extremely hostile to Ṣāliḥ. God set her feet free after she had witnessed the entire punishment, and she left faster than anything that had ever been seen, until she came to the people of Qurḥ and told them about the punishment she had seen and how it had struck the Thamūd. Then she asked for something to drink, which she was given; and after she had drunk, she died.

Here, just as in Umayya, there is mention of a lame slave girl who manages, by the help of God, to escape from the disaster in order to tell the people of Qurḥ about it, and then dies after having delivered the news. According to Andrae, the parallel between Umayya and the narrative from al-Ṭabarī indicates that the poem attributed to Umayya is actually dependent on Islamic *tafsīr* traditions and must therefore be inauthentic. Yet Andrae's argument is hardly convincing. For the report from al-Ṭabarī, unlike the poem, does accord a very prominent position to the prophet Ṣāliḥ, as the anonymous "messenger" from surah 91 comes to be called in later Quranic texts (for example, in the Middle Meccan verse Q 26: 142). It is therefore much more likely, I think, that the narrative from al-Ṭabarī is an attempt to integrate the Quranic account of the destruction of the Thamūd with an older Arabian version of the same event that lacked reference to a messenger figure, but included other details that the early exegetes found illuminating or interesting. From its sheer length, it is clear that the Ibn Ishāq version of the destruction of the Thamūd attempts to present a unified and exhaustive account of what befell the Thamūd, an account that blends different strands of tradition. The poem attributed to Umayya, on the other hand, is very probably representative of one particular such tradition, as it contains virtually no Quranic

elements.⁴⁷ The Thamūd story, then, is really a case where the later *tafsīr* tradition reworks pre-Quranic material and uses it to flesh out Quranic narrative.⁴⁸ It is thus likely that the Thamūd passage ascribed to Umayya is indeed pre-Quranic, since the hypothesis that the Thamūd poem was produced only after the advent of Islamic scripture is difficult to square with explaining how the poem could have remained so strikingly untouched by what the Quran has to say on the subject. The possible rejoinder, that even a chronologically post-Quranic poem may not have derived from the Quran, hardly appears convincing given that Quranic wording is so clearly reflected in some of the obviously spurious material attributed to Umayya.

What, then, may be said about the relationship between Umayya 34 and surah 91? First, a general observation about the historical placement of the Thamūd. As can easily be observed, the Quran has a stock list of former peoples that have been punished by God on account of their sins; the Quran adduces these historical examples of a limited intervention of God *in history* in order to show that God is able also to bring about a universal judgement *at the end of history*. Throughout the early and middle Meccan periods, the cycle of these “punishment legends”⁴⁹ can be seen to grow; later surahs give a list of up to seven episodes (cf. surah 26). As the early surah 89 demonstrates, however, at the beginning of the Quran’s genesis the list only encompasses three elements: ‘Ād, Thamūd, and Pharaoh. Umayya’s poem shows that a link between the fate of the Thamūd and the Exodus narrative (as represented by the probably authentic allusion to the Plagues of Egypt in vv. 11–13) had already been established in popular lore before the Quran – i. e., the assimilation of Biblical and native Arabian history was already under way by the time the Quran emerged.⁵⁰ Similarly, some sort of linkage between the punishment and destruction of ancient peoples like the Thamūd and hymnic affirmations of divine creation (vv. 5–10) also appears to pre-date the Quran, as remarked above.

Let us now turn to a comparison between the Thamūd passages from Umayya 34 and surah 91. The most important discrepancy, the absence of a messenger

47 Perhaps one might anticipate the objection that the above reasoning rests on an argument from silence: after all, it might just be the case that the author of Umayya no. 34 is so thoroughly familiar with the Quranic versions of the Thamūd story that he explicitly mentions only those aspects of the story as known to him that are absent from the Quran. Yet this hypothesis, although not completely impossible, does strike one as rather unlikely. I will therefore proceed on the assumption that Umayya no. 34 is authentic.

48 It may be worth pointing out explicitly the essential difference between the Thamūd poem on the one hand and the poems on Mary and the sacrifice of Abraham (see above) on the other: whereas in the latter two cases the texts attributed to Umayya overlap with both with the Quran and with *tafsīr*, in the former case there is only overlap with the exegetical tradition, and conspicuous divergence from the respective Quranic accounts. In my view, this makes it more likely that, in the case of the Thamūd poem, we are indeed confronted with a pre-Islamic version of the story that is independent of the Quran, whereas such a conclusion is far less certain with respect to the poems on Mary and Abraham’s sacrifice.

49 The most recent in-depth study of the Quranic punishment legends is David Marshall, *God, Muhammad and the Unbelievers: A Qur’anic Study* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999).

50 Cf. also the verse by ‘Adī b. Zaid cited by Andrae, *Ursprung*, 46, where the ‘Ād and Thamūd are linked with the people of Noah that appear in slightly later Quranic punishment lists or cycles such as Q 53: 50–52 and Q 54: 9–42.

figure from the poem, has already been mentioned. According to Umayya, the Thamūd – or rather the individual Aḥmar – commit a cultic transgression: they violate a sacred animal, and their ensuing destruction is the result of a curse called down on them by the slain camel’s little colt. Although according to surah 91, the action that brings about their punishment is the same – namely, the hamstringing of a camel – the Quranic retelling pictures it as an act of disobedience to an explicit command given by a divinely authorized prophet: the messenger tells them to leave the camel to drink (v. 13), but they go on to hamstring her nevertheless (v. 14a). It has been noted by Horovitz that the Quranic punishment legends display a constellation of protagonists that corresponds to the situation in which Muḥammad found himself: namely, the confrontation between a messenger commissioned by God to deliver certain commands or warnings, and his unbelieving audience who calls him a liar and refuses to obey him, and is wiped out as a consequence.⁵¹ With regard to many Biblically inspired punishment legends, such as the stories of Noah and of Moses, this constellation already underlies previous Judaeo-Christian versions or can at least be easily projected upon them. The Arabian Thamūd tradition, however, was apparently a different case: it is reasonable to conclude that the figure of a messenger cast on the precedent of Noah appears for the first time in the Quran. Hence, although we have seen that the stories of Pharaoh and of the Thamūd had already been connected to each other before the Quran, it is only in the Quran that the Thamūd narrative comes to display the basic plot structure that is also at the heart of the other Quranic punishment legends: the constellation of a messenger facing a recalcitrant audience that is punished as a result. This is also why the Quranic version considerably downplays the importance of Aḥmar (who only appears under the general label “the wicked one”, *ashqā*, in v. 12): as v. 14a states, “they [that is, all of the Thamūd] called him [the messenger] a liar and hamstrung her [the camel]”. The Thamūd are thus collectively guilty of repudiating their messenger and of killing the sacred camel; the “appearance of the wicked one among them” (v. 12) only triggers their crime. There can be no doubt that this insinuation of collective guilt results in a much tighter structural correspondence between the Thamūd narrative and the other Quranic punishment legends, on the one hand, and between the Thamūd narrative and the situation of Muḥammad, on the other. A comparison of Umayya 34 and surah 91 thus affords us a valuable glimpse into how the Quran reorganizes existing narrative lore in order to harness it for the expression of its own prophetology and thereby gives additional coherence to an existing tendency – the assimilation of Biblical history and native Arabian lore.

Another striking difference between Umayya 34 and surah 91 is the fact that the Quranic version only supplies an almost laconic and decidedly undramatic outline of the basic events. Whereas Umayya’s version has two climactic moments (the killing of the camel and the curse of the surviving colt), the Quranic account has none: the messenger says, “Do X”, the people disobey, they are punished – and that is the end of the matter. There are no digressive descriptions of the act of hamstringing, there is no mention of a camel colt,

51 Josef Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1926), 11.

and the text is not concerned with clarifying how news of the events was passed on if all of the Thamūd were supposedly killed. There is thus no surplus information in the Quranic version; it is more a plot synopsis than an actual narrative, as all elements that might create some kind of suspense are omitted. The emphasis is very clearly not on narrative entertainment or literary skill as displayed by means of descriptive snapshots, as in Umayya, but rather on the general message it contains. This is already evident from the fact that the Quranic Thamūd passage follows a statement about the respective fates of the good and the wicked: “He who purifies his soul succeeds, and he who corrupts it fails” (vv. 9.10); the following story is obviously meant to serve as an illustration of, and hence is subordinate to, this general truth. That the story is seen from an ideological rather than a purely narrative perspective is also apparent from the thorough paraenetic encoding of the story: the persons and their actions are not referred to by their proper names or by elaborate descriptions, as would have been customary in ancient Arabic poetry, but rather in ethical-religious terms that unambiguously pinpoint their moral standing – the narrative opens with a condemnation of the Thamūd as having “called [their messenger] a liar”, and Aḥmar becomes merely “a wicked one among them”. Even the messenger is not named. The first time he is called Ṣāliḥ is probably in surah 26 with its long cycle of punishment legends; since there all the other messengers are named, it is clear that the Thamūdīc messenger, too, has to be given a proper name⁵² – which turns out to be a highly generic one, too: “righteous one,” which may be viewed as functioning as the implicit contrary to “the wicked one”, *ashqā*.

4. Umayya and the Quranic milieu

The remainder of this article will attempt to extend some of the observations made so far in view of the question of what Umayya’s religious poetry might teach us about the religious situation in Late Antique Arabia, and more particularly about the religious milieu from which the Quranic corpus has emerged. First, can we sketch a profile of the traditions that have fed into the Biblically inspired poetry of Umayya, and can we thus arrive at a more substantial picture of the nature and provenance of the Biblical material circulating in sixth-century Hijaz? Hirschberg has argued that there is a persistent presence of Rabbinic traditions in Umayya,⁵³ but caution about his results is warranted, as many of the parallels he points to could perhaps also be found in Syriac Christian sources. The fact that even in discussing a Christian poet like ‘Adī b. Zaid, Hirschberg refers almost exclusively to Rabbinic works suggests that he may not have worked through the relevant Christian works with the same diligence and that pending further study we should hesitate to view Umayya as specifically influenced by the Rabbinic tradition.⁵⁴

52 Cf. Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 18.

53 See the haggadic parallels adduced in Hirschberg, *Lehren*, 79–162.

54 Research currently undertaken by Joseph Witzum at Princeton University suggests that many of the narrative traditions that are usually labelled “haggadic” are also very prominent in Syriac homiletic literature.

Let us briefly examine an example of the way Umayya recycles pre-existing traditions. According to verse 32: 25 Schulthess (“dark clouds enveloped the water”), which belongs to a fragment on the Deluge that Frank-Kamenetzky – correctly, in my view – accepts as genuine,⁵⁵ it was dark while Noah was on the Ark. As Hirschfeld observes,⁵⁶ this detail is attested already in the Ethiopic Apocalypse of Enoch, in the Rabbinic tradition (Genesis Rabbah), and also in later Ethiopic literature.⁵⁷ Whereas the Apocalypse of Enoch mentions the absence of light during the Deluge only incidentally,⁵⁸ the context in Genesis Rabbah is a critical discussion of the etymology of Noah’s name that is put forward in Genesis 5: 29, where the Hebrew name *Nōāḥ* is connected to *yēnaḥāmēnū*, “he shall comfort us”. Apparently the Rabbis are dissatisfied with this explanation, as the name and the verb only partially share root consonants, and one of the alternative explanations suggested is that the name Noah reflects the fact that during the Deluge, “the planets did not function”, i.e. they *rested* (*lānūāḥ* in Hebrew), or perhaps did function but “made no impression”.⁵⁹

As this brief survey of the intertextual background to Umayya 32: 25 shows, Umayya’s allusion to the darkness that prevailed during the Flood is much closer to how that particular detail appears in the Book of Enoch: it is treated simply as a narrative detail that heightens suspense rather than being endowed with an exegetical function, as in Genesis Rabbah. In view of this it is more likely that Umayya’s reference to the darkness during the Flood derives from narrative traditions similar to what we find in the Book of Enoch rather than from sophisticated exegetical discussions of the sort one encounters in Genesis Rabbah, which again casts doubt on Hirschberg’s emphasis on the “haggadic” background of Umayya’s poetry.

It is striking that the very different functions performed by a single narrative detail in Umayya and in Genesis Rabbah is reminiscent of the very different ways, analysed above, in which the Thamūd story is used by Umayya and in the Quran: whereas Genesis Rabbah and the Quran employ narrative for the purpose of explaining the Bible or of formulating theological truths, in Umayya the very same narrative lore appears unharnessed from any exegetical or theological anchoring – probably because the respective traditions had undergone a

55 Frank-Kamenetzky, *Untersuchungen*, 38 and 48.

56 Hirschberg, *Lehren*, 119.

57 Hirschberg refers to the Ethiopic *Book of Adam and Eve*, translated by August Dillmann as *Das christliche Adambuch des Morgenlandes* (Göttingen: Dieterichsche Buchhandlung, 1953), 106. The Syriac *Cave of Treasures*, to which the Ethiopic *Book of Adam and Eve* is closely related, does not mention that darkness prevailed during the Flood.

58 R. H. Charles (trans.), *The Ethiopic Apocalypse of Enoch* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1917), ch. 89: 3.4: “And I saw again, and behold fountains were opened on the surface of that great enclosure, and that water began to swell and rise upon the surface, and I saw that enclosure till all its surface was covered with water. / And the water, the darkness, and mist increased upon it; and as I looked at the height of that water, that water had risen above the height of that enclosure, and was streaming over that enclosure, and it stood upon the earth”.

59 Cf. Jacob Neusner (trans.), *Genesis Rabbah*, 3 vols (Atlanta: Scholar’s Press, 1985), vol. 1, 273 (Parashah 25).

prolonged process of oral retelling⁶⁰ and diffusion among persons more interested in their narrative value than in their usefulness for scriptural interpretation or for illustrating a novel theological message. The milieu we find documented in Umayya's poetry was therefore at once confessionally uncommitted, yet well acquainted with orally transmitted versions of Judaeo-Christian narrative lore.⁶¹ It is a milieu where a significant amount of Biblically-based notions and narratives were in circulation and constituted a sort of freewheeling *savoir sauvage* that due to its origin could easily be put in the service of Biblically inspired moralizing – yet the considerable theological potential of such traditions only appears to have been re-actualized in the Quran: it is only in the Quran (as the above analysis of the Quranic retelling of the Thamūd story has tried to show in some detail) that we again find a sustained attempt to subordinate this material to a consistent theological outlook, to reharass it, as it were.

A second general remark that I would like to make about the relationship between Umayya and the Quranic milieu concerns the issue of literary format. Especially when compared to the Quran, Umayya, in spite of his treatment of Biblical subjects, comes across as very much bound to the structural conventions of ancient Arabic poetry. For example, he uses the conventional meters, and his poems exhibit single rhymes, whereas the Quran lacks metre and at least in its early stratum employs changes of rhyme patterns as an effective means to mark off different subsections of a particular surah.⁶² Umayya is traditional also in the way in which he renders Biblical stories: there is a general emphasis on highly detailed description (cf. for example no. 34: 26, cited above) and an extensive use of simile and metonymy that very much ties in with the literary sensibilities that govern the rest of ancient Arabic poetry.⁶³

60 The tradition, reported by Ibn Qutayba, that Umayya's familiarity with Judaeo-Christian traditions was "derived from the ancient scriptures", i.e. from literary, rather than oral, sources (Montgomery, "Salvation", 25–6) is almost certainly a later conjecture as to how he came by his knowledge of Judaeo-Christian tradition. That Umayya did not in fact have first-hand exposure to the written text of the Bible is also suggested by the fact that according to Umayya 32: 26, the Deluge lasted only seven days and not forty, as Genesis 7:17 states (Hirschberg observes that Umayya here is in agreement with ancient Near Eastern accounts of the Deluge, cf. Hirschberg, *Lehren*, 120); once again, the Biblical text has as it were vanished from sight – it is the narrative in itself that is important.

61 This insight tends to get blurred by speaking of the "pagan" environment of the Quran, since "pagan" is generally understood in the sense of both "confessionally uncommitted to" and "ignorant of" the Biblical tradition. One might also add that this milieu seems to have been confined to towns, cf. Hirschberg, *Lehren*, 14.

62 See Neuwirth, *Studien*, 91–115.

63 See in general Thomas Bauer, *Altarabische Dichtkunst: Eine Untersuchung ihrer Struktur und Entwicklung am Beispiel der Onagerepisode*, 2 vols (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992), vol. 1, 172–204. I would submit that Umayya's adherence to customary literary conventions is also the major reason why his poetry displays such a striking interest in animal scenes (for example, Umayya's retelling of the story of Noah includes an excursus on how the dove was granted her necklace as a reward for having informed Noah about the retreat of the waters; see no. 29: 7–8 Schulthess): for an ancient Arabic poet, elaborate descriptions, particularly of animals, are a major opportunity to demonstrate his poetic skill. Less likely is E. Power's attempt to explain this stylistic feature with Umayya's "special love for animals" (see Power, "Umayya", 205).

Thus, what set the Quranic texts apart from Umayya are both their ideological “tightness”, i.e. their thoroughgoing imposition of a theological moral on the freewheeling narrative lore on which they draw, and their literary innovativeness. Both aspects are bound up with a third: the Quranic texts’ consistent self-stylization as divine speech through the employment of the divine voices (encapsulated both in the use of first-person pronouns and second-person addresses of the Quranic messenger and his listeners). By contrast, the claim to be based on supernatural revelation is completely absent from Umayya’s poetry, whose voice is uniformly that of a poet rather than a prophet.⁶⁴ It is significant, I believe, to appreciate the intimate link between all three features: it is because the Quranic recitations both deploy a repertoire of literary forms that is substantially different from the established conventions of ancient Arabic poetry and rigidly infuse the narratives and notions they appropriate from their immediate milieu with a theological message that their insistence to derive from divine revelation could be perceived as credible by (some of) their addressees.

Arguably, if we are to explain historically the emergence of the Quran, then, it is above all these three core features – rather than the fact that the Quran, just like Umayya, uses material familiar from earlier Judaeo-Christian literature – that stand in need of some kind of historical explanation. Unfortunately, as valuable as Umayya’s poetry might be, it does not appear to be very helpful in this respect. It is likely that at least with respect to the issues of the Quran’s literary format and its sustained claim to derive from supernatural revelation, the oracles attributed to pre-Islamic soothsayers, the *kuhhān*, may prove to be more germane than ancient Arabic poetry, even poetry of the unconventional sort exemplified by Umayya.⁶⁵

64 The tradition, found in the *Kitāb al-aghānī* (Cairo 1963, vol. 4, 129; I owe this reference to Borg, “Divine”, 10, n. 5), that Umayya at least for a certain period believed himself to have been chosen as the prophet of the Arabs is rather improbable, or at least cannot be substantiated by the character of his purported literary output.

65 Although certain parallels between the early Quranic surahs and ancient Arabic oracles (such as the use of introductory oaths that often refer to celestial bodies like the sun and the moon or to cosmic oppositions like light and darkness) have frequently been observed (see, for example, Robert G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam*, London: Routledge, 2001, 220–1), a systematic study of such oracles as transmitted in later Islamic literature – in particular as to their authenticity – still remains an urgent desideratum. Methodologically, such a study might be able to employ, in suitably adapted form, some of the criteria employed in Tilman Seidensticker’s examination of the authenticity of pre-Islamic *talbiya* formulae, see Seidensticker, “Sources for the history of pre-Islamic religion”, in Neuwirth, Sinai and Marx, *The Qur’ān in Context*, 293–321.

Appendix: Arabic texts

Schulthess, no. 27

- ١ إله العالمين وكلّ ارضٍ وربّ الراسيات من الجبال
- ٢ بناها وابتنى سبعا شداداً بلا عمدٍ يُرَيْنَ ولا رجال
- ٣ وسواها وزيتها بنور من الشمس المضئية والهلال
- ٤ ومن شهب تلالاً في دجها مرا ميا أشدّ من النصال
- ٥ وشقّ الارض فانجست عيوناً وأنهاراً من العذب الزلال
- ٦ وبارك في نواحيها وزكّي بها ما كان من حرثٍ ومال
- ٧ فكلّ معمرٍ لا بدّ يوماً وذي دنيا يصيرُ الى زوال
- ٨ ويفنى بعد جدته ويبنى سوى الباقي المقدس ذى الجلال
- ٩ وسيق المُجرمون وهم عُراة الى ذات المقامع والنكال
- ١٠ فنادوا ويئنا ويلاً طويلاً وعجوا في سلاسلها الطوال
- ١١ فليسوا ميتين فيشترىحوا وكلهم ببخر النار صالى
- ١٢ وحلّ المتفون بدار صدق وعيش ناعم تحت الظلال
- ١٣ لهم ما يشتهون وما تمّموا من الأفراح فيها والكمال

Schulthess, no. 34: 23–32

- ٢٣ كتمود التي تفنكت الدين عتياً وأمّ سقب عقيرا
- ٢٤ ناقة ليله تسرخ في الارض وتنتاب حول ماءٍ مديرا
- ٢٥ فاتاها أحمير كأخي السهم بعضبٍ فقال كوني عقيرا
- ٢٦ فأبت العرقوب والساق منها ومضى في صميه مكسورا
- ٢٧ فرأى السقب أمه فارفته بعد ألف حية وظورا
- ٢٨ فأتى صخرة فقام عليها صغقة في السماء تغلو الصخورا
- ٢٩ فرغا رغوّة فكانت عليهم رغوّة السقب دمروا تدميرا
- ٣٠ فأصيبوا إلا الذريعة فانت من جواريهم وكانت جرورا
- ٣١ سنفة أرسلت تخبر عنهم اهل فرح بأن قد أمسوا ثغورا
- ٣٢ فسقوها بعد الحديث فماتت وانتهى ربنا وأوفى حقيرا