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The Qur'ān's Self-References to its Arabic Register

Kur'an'ın Kendi Arapçılığına Yaptığı Vurgu

Muhammed COŞKUN

Doç. Dr. | Assoc. Prof.

Marmara Üniversitesi, İlahiyat Fakültesi, Temel İslam Bilimleri Bölümü, Tefsir Anabilim Dalı

Marmara University, Faculty of Theology, Department of Basic Islamic Sciences, Tafser

İstanbul | Türkiye

muhammed.coskun@marmara.edu.tr

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2811-6403>

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The Qur'ān's Self-References to its Arabic Register

Abstract

The Qur'ān, a central religious text of Islam, is unique in its theological content and its self-referential linguistic features, which invite in-depth scholarly analysis. Among the most notable of these self-referential aspects is the frequent description of the Qur'ān as "Arabic" (Qur'ānan 'Arabiyyan) in many verses. While this attribute may seem self-evident, as the Qur'ān was revealed in Arabic to the Arabs of 7th-century Hijaz, the text's recurring emphasis on its "Arabicness" raises important questions. Why does the Qur'ān repeatedly highlight its linguistic identity, a fact that its original audience would not have questioned? This inquiry lies at the heart of this study, which aims to explore the rhetorical and theological significance of this emphasis on the Qur'ān's Arabic nature. The primary objective of this research is not merely to address why the Qur'ān was revealed in Arabic—this being a natural choice given the native tongue of its first audience—but to understand why the Qur'ān repeatedly underscores this aspect. The text itself, through expressions like "an Arabic Qur'ān" (Qur'ānan 'Arabiyyan) and "in clear Arabic language" (lisānun 'Arabiyyun mubīn), reveals a deliberate rhetorical strategy. The study contends that this repetitive self-description is not a mere reiteration of the obvious but serves deeper theological, communicative, and rhetorical purposes. Historically, the question of the Qur'ān's Arabic nature has been approached from various angles by scholars from both the classical Islamic tradition and contemporary Western academia. Classical Islamic scholars, in this context, appear to have devoted the discussion primarily to whether or not the Qur'ān contains non-Arabic words. Western academics, on the other hand, tend to evaluate the linguistic features of the Qur'ān within the broader context of the Near East—in other words, they focus on the issue of how surrounding cultures and languages may have influenced the Qur'ān. However, despite these efforts, a significant gap remains in the literature regarding the Qur'ān's internal rationale for emphasizing its Arabic language. Much of the existing scholarship centers around linguistic purity and the influence of foreign languages but neglects the Qur'ān's own theological and rhetorical objectives. This study seeks to fill this gap by turning attention away from linguistic purity and external influences, focusing instead on the Qur'ān's self-referential emphasis on being "Arabic". This study aims to fill this very gap by drawing attention not to issues of linguistic purity (i.e., whether the Qur'ān contains foreign words) or external influences, but rather to the polemical context behind the Qur'ān's self-referential emphasis on being in Arabic. According to this perspective, the Qur'ān's frequent emphasis on its Arabic nature serves as a response to the reluctance, skepticism, and objections of its initial audience in 7th-century Hijaz regarding the acceptance of the Prophet's human nature. Thus, the Qur'ān's emphasis on Arabic presents a significant rhetorical strategy tied to the theological concerns of the revelation context and the communicative function of the sacred text within those circumstances. To achieve this, the study employs a layered methodology combining textual analysis, historical context, and comparative analysis with other religious traditions. Textual analysis examines key Qur'ānic verses that highlight the Arabic nature of the text, scrutinizing their linguistic and rhetorical features. Historical analysis explores the social, cultural, and religious dynamics of 7th-century Hijaz, contextualizing the Qur'ān's message in its historical moment. Comparative analysis situates the Qur'ān within the broader framework of other religious traditions, particularly those that, like the Qur'ān, used the native language of their audience. By examining these dimensions, the study aims to uncover the underlying motivations behind the Qur'ān's repeated self-description as Arabic and its significance within the broader framework of Islamic theology and communication. This research contributes to Qur'ānic studies by offering a fresh perspective on the issue of Arabicness in the Qur'ān, moving beyond linguistic debates to explore the deeper, theological significance of this feature. The study argues that the Qur'ān's emphasis on its Arabic nature addresses both the theological concerns of its time and the broader communicative function of religious scripture, offering valuable insights into the Qur'ān's engagement with its initial audience.

Keywords: Tafsir, Qur'ānic Studies, Western Scholarship, Biblical Context, A'jamī, The Hermeneutical Horizon of Arabs, Non-Celestial Prophet.

Kur'an'ın Kendi Arapçılığına Yaptığı Vurgu

Öz

Kur'an, İslam'ın temel dinî metni olarak sadece teolojik içeriğiyle değil, aynı zamanda kendine referansta bulunan ifadeleriyle de derinlemesine bir akademik incelemeyi gerektirmektedir. Bu bağlamda Kur'an'ın kendine referansta bulunan ifadeleri içinde en dikkat çeken, birçok ayetinde kendisini "Arapça Kur'an" (Qur'ānan 'Arabiyyan) olarak tanımlamasıdır. Bu özellik, ilk muhatapları olan 7. yüzyıl Hicaz Arapları için doğal bir gerçek olsa da Kur'an'ın sürekli olarak kendi "Arapçılığına" vurgu yapması önemli soruları gündeme getirmektedir. Kur'an, neden kendisinin "Arapça" olduğunu sıkça vurgular? Bu soru, bu çalışmanın temel amacını oluşturan, Kur'an'ın Arapçaya olan bu vurgusunun retorik ve teolojik anlamını keşfetmeye yönelik bir araştırma için zemin hazırlamaktadır. Bu araştırmanın temel amacı, Kur'an'ın neden Arapça olarak vahyedildiği sorusuna odaklanmak değil, daha ziyade Kur'an'ın neden bu özelliğini sürekli olarak vurguladığı sorusunu anlamaktır. "Arapça bir Kur'an" ve "açık Arapça dilinde" (lisānun 'Arabiyyun mubīn) gibi ifadelerle yapılan vurgular, bilinçli bir retorik stratejisinin izlerini taşımaktadır. Bu çalışma, bu tekrar eden kendini tanımlamanın sadece belirgin bir gerçeği

yinelemek olmadığını, daha derin teolojik, iletişimsel ve retorik amaçlara hizmet ettiğini ileri sürmektedir. Tarihsel olarak, Kur'an'ın Arapça oluşu hem klasik İslam geleneğinde hem de çağdaş Batı akademisinde farklı açılardan ele alınmıştır. Klasik İslam alimleri bu bağlamda konuyu Kur'an'da Arapça olmayan kelimelerin bulunup bulunmadığı tartışmasına hasretmiş görünmektedir. Batılı akademisyenler ise Kur'an'ın dilsel özelliklerini daha geniş Yakın Doğu bağlamı içinde değerlendirmekte, diğer bir deyişle çevre kültür ve dillerin Kur'an üzerindeki etkisi meselesine odaklanmaktadır. Ancak, mevcut literatürde Kur'an'ın kendi Arapçalığını tekrar tekrar vurgulamasının derindeki gerekçeleri üzerine herhangi bir tartışma bulunmamaktadır. Mevcut çalışmalar çoğunlukla Kur'an'ın yabancı kelime içerip içermediği ve içeriyorsa bu durumun Kur'an üzerinde çevre kültür ve dillerin etkisinin olup olmadığı konusu ile ilgilidir. Bu bağlamda, söz konusu çalışmalar meselenin nüzul bağlamındaki karşılığını tespit etme noktasını göz ardı ediyor görünmektedir. Bu çalışma, işte bu boşluğu doldurmayı amaçlamakta ve dilsel saflık (yabancı kelime içerip içermeme) ve dışsal etkilerden ziyade, Kur'an'ın Arapça olarak kendisini vurgulayan öz tanımlamasının ardındaki polemik bağlamına dikkat çekmektedir. Buna göre Kur'an'ın sıklıkla kendi Arapçalığına yaptığı bu vurgu, 7. yüzyıl Hicaz'ında yaşayan ilk muhataplarının, peygamberin insan olmasını kabul etme konusundaki isteksizlik, kuşku ve itirazlarına bir cevap mahiyetindedir. Dolayısıyla Kur'an'ın Arapçaya olan vurgusu, nüzul koşullarının teolojik endişeleri ve dinî metnin bu koşullar içerisindeki iletişimsel işleviyle ilgili önemli bir strateji sunmaktadır. Araştırma, çok katmanlı bir metodoloji kullanarak, metin çözümlemesi, tarihsel bağlam ve diğer dinî geleneklerle karşılaştırmalı analizle bu soruyu ele almaktadır. Metin çözümlemesi, Kur'an'ın Arapça olmasına vurgu yapan ilgili ayetleri metin içi bağlamı çerçevesinde incelemekte ve bu ayetlerin dilsel özelliklerini detaylıca analiz etmeyi içermektedir. Tarihsel analiz, söz konusu ayetleri 7. yüzyıl Hicaz'ındaki sosyo-kültürel ve dinî bağlamda ele alarak, Kur'an'ın mesajının ilk muhataplarına nasıl hitap ettiğini araştırmayı kapsamaktadır. Karşılaştırmalı analiz, Kur'an'ı benzer dinî metinlerle, özellikle de ilk muhataplarına kendi dillerinde hitap eden diğer kutsal kitaplarla karşılaştırarak, bu söylemin ortak yönlerini ve kendine özgü yönlerini incelemektedir. Bu üçlü yaklaşım, Kur'an'ın kendisini "Arapça" olarak tanımlama konusundaki sık ve ısrarlı vurgusunun arkasındaki sebepleri ve bu vurgunun dinî metnin geniş teolojik bağlamındaki yerini anlamaya yönelik kapsamlı bir çerçeve sunmaktadır. Bu araştırma, Kur'an'ın Arapçalığına yapılan vurguya dair yeni bir bakış açısı sunarak, literatürdeki boşluğu doldurmayı amaçlamakta ve sadece dilsel tartışmalardan öte, bu özelliğin hem polemik boyutunu hem de daha derin teolojik anlamlarını ortaya koymayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tefsir, Kur'an Araştırmaları, Batılı Akademisyenler, Kitâb-ı Mukaddes Bağlamı, A'cemî, Arapların Anlama Ufku, Beşer Peygamber.

Introduction

The Qur'ân, as the central religious text of Islam, is not only unique in its theological content but also in its linguistic structure, which invites profound scholarly exploration. Revealed in the 7th century in the Arabian Peninsula, the Qur'ân is considered by Muslims to be the literal word of God, delivered to the Prophet Muhammad in the Arabic language. This choice of language, however, is not merely a historical or cultural coincidence but carries significant theological and rhetorical weight. The Qur'ân's consistent self-description as "Arabic" (Qur'ânan 'Arabiyyan) in numerous verses raises questions that go beyond a simple assertion of the language of its revelation. Why does the Qur'ân repeatedly emphasize its Arabic nature, a fact that would have been self-evident to its original audience? What theological, rhetorical, or communicative purposes does this repeated emphasis serve? These questions form the crux of this study, which seeks to explore the deeper significance of the Qur'ân's self-referential focus on its Arabic language.

The Qur'ân's Arabic nature has been a subject of considerable discussion across various scholarly traditions. Classical Islamic scholars, such as al-Shāfi'ī (d. 204/820), Abū 'Ubayda (d. 209/824), al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), Ibn Fāris (d. 395/1004), and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), discussed the linguistic purity of the Qur'ân, examining its relationship with other languages and the presence of foreign words. These discussions largely focused on the Qur'ân's status as a miraculous text in its linguistic perfection and its unique use of Arabic as a means of communication between God and humanity. In contrast, Western scholars, such as Robert Hoyland, Stefan Wild, Nicolai Sinai, Peter Webb, and Jan Retsö, have explored the Qur'ân's linguistic context within the broader environment of the Near East, considering the influences

of surrounding languages and cultures. However, despite these valuable studies, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding the Qur'ān's internal rationale for emphasizing its Arabic language. Most scholarship has focused on linguistic purity and external influences, but few have examined the theological, rhetorical, and communicative functions of this repeated self-reference.

This study aims to fill the gap mentioned above by shifting the focus from linguistic concerns and external influences on the Qur'ān's self-referential emphasis on its Arabic nature. The research contends that the Qur'ān's repeated assertion of its Arabic language is not merely a reflection of historical fact or linguistic choice but a deliberate rhetorical strategy that serves multiple purposes. First, it addresses the theological concerns of its initial audience, particularly the Meccan polytheists who, in their objections to Muhammad's prophethood, questioned why God did not send angels as messengers if He wished. The Qur'ān's emphasis on its Arabic nature can thus be seen as a response to this skepticism, reinforcing the authenticity and divine origin of the message by connecting it to the linguistic and cultural identity of the Arab people. Second, this self-description plays a key role in shaping the Qur'ān's relationship with its audience, creating a sense of immediate accessibility and relevance. By highlighting the language in which it was revealed, the Qur'ān presents itself as a communication that speaks directly to the people it was meant for, without the need for intermediaries.

Moreover, the study explores how this linguistic emphasis aligns with broader theological themes in the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān often stresses that it was sent down in a clear and understandable language (*Lisānun 'Arabiyyun mubīn*), which suggests that the clarity and accessibility of the message are essential for its reception and understanding. This aspect of the Qur'ān's Arabic nature is not only a linguistic characteristic but also a theological statement: the message of Islam, as conveyed through the Qur'ān, is meant to be understood by all, in the language that the original recipients could fully grasp. The Qur'ān's insistence on its clarity and linguistic accessibility challenges the idea that divine communication must be abstract, esoteric, or inaccessible. In this sense, the Qur'ān's Arabic nature becomes a key element in its broader theological agenda of making God's message clear and direct to the people.

To understand these dynamics, this study employs a multi-layered methodology grounded in established methodological literature. First, textual analysis is used to examine the rhetorical and linguistic features of key Qur'ānic verses referring to the Arabic nature of the text. In this study, textual analysis follows the dual approach of linguistic and intertextual analysis, as articulated by Fairclough, who emphasizes that "textual analysis necessarily involves analysis of the form or organization of texts," including texture, grammar, and intertextual structures that connect texts to broader discursive formations.¹ Second, historical contextualization is employed to situate these verses within the socio-cultural environment of 7th-century Arabia. Understanding historical texts requires careful attention to the contexts of production and reception, as well as the specific concerns of the intended audience.² Third, this study adopts a comparative approach, particularly in relation to other sacred texts that, like the Qur'ān, make use of the native language of their community. This comparative lens, as McKee suggests,

¹ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London: Longman, 1995), 188-189.

² John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of History* (London: Routledge, 2015), 195.

involves identifying “recurring patterns of meaning within and between texts” allowing us to trace the broader functions of linguistic self-referentiality in religious discourse.

1. Textual and Historical Context

The Qur’ān’s self-references to its Arabic register are extant in eleven verses that are linked with various contexts.³ Among these, is the phrase Arabic Qur’ān’ (*Qur’ānan ‘Arabiyyan*) directly mentioned in seven verses⁴ while the expression ‘Arabic language’ (*lisānan ‘Arabiyyan*) is encountered three times.⁵ In addition, there is a different formula for the same topic in another verse in which God says that if he revealed the Qur’ān in another language, people would object, saying “If only its verses were clear! What? Foreign speech to an Arab?” (*Law lā fuṣṣilat āyātuh, a-a‘jamiyyun wa-‘arabī.*)⁶

Aside from the subject eleven verses explicitly containing the phrase ‘Arabic Qur’ān’ or its derivatives, some other verses touch upon the same topic indirectly. Foremost among them is the emphasis on the Qur’ān being made easy for people to understand. Alongside many verses describing the Qur’ān as ‘*mubīn*’ (clear, easily understandable), Sūrat al-Qamar repeats the following sentence four times with the same words “*We have made this Qur’ān easy for people to understand. Is there no one taking heed?*” (*wa-laqaḍ yassarnā l-Qur’āna lil-dhikri fa-hal min muddakir*)⁷ after recounting the narratives themed the destruction of communities that nurtured enmity towards the prophets in history.

Now, taking Fuṣṣilat 41/44 as a basis, one can conclude that the difference between ‘*arabī*’ and a ‘*jamī*’ is the distinction between lucidness and obliqueness or between clarity and ambiguity. However, looking at al-Naḥl 16/103⁸ in which the dichotomy between ‘*arabī*’ and a ‘*jamī*’ [non-Arabic] is constructed in a quite different way, we can realize that the issue is not as clear-cut and simple as that. According to narrations, Meccan pagans who denied that Prophet Muhammad received the Qur’ān through revelation from God claimed that he learned the Qur’ān from a Christian slave living in Mecca.⁹ If the Christian slave mentioned in this claim lived in Mecca and had such an interaction with Prophet Muhammad, then he must also have been speaking Arabic in a way that Prophet Muhammad could understand. Hence, it should not matter if his native language is other than Arabic. To put it differently, If the slave could not speak Arabic, on the other hand, then the Meccan polytheists should never have made such a claim. So why then does the Qur’ān ground the reason that this Christian slave’s native language is not Arabic to refute the claim of beforementioned aginners? There must be something overlooked here: either the word a ‘*jamī*’ in this verse must not refer to a non-Arabic language, or there must be a completely different background behind the issue.

According to Peter Webb, this verse presents Prophet Muhammad as grasping both the ‘*arabī*’ of the Qur’ān and the a ‘*jamī*’ of the ‘man’ mentioned, implying that the segregation between

³ al-Jumu’a 62/1. Yūsuf 12/2; al-Ra’d 13/37; al-Naḥl 16/103; Ṭāhā 20/113; al-Shu’arā 26/195; al-Zumar 39/28; Fuṣṣilat 41/3, 44; al-Shūrā 42/7; al-Zukhruf 43/3; al-Aḥqāf 46/12.

⁴ Yūsuf 12/2; al-Ra’d 13/37; Ṭāhā; al-Zumar 39/28; Fuṣṣilat 41/3; al-Shūrā 42/7; al-Zukhruf 43/3

⁵ al-Naḥl 16/103; al-Shu’arā 26/195; al-Aḥqāf 46/12.

⁶ Fuṣṣilat 41/44.

⁷ See. al-Qamar 54/17, 22, 32, 40.

⁸ Lit. “We know very well that they say, ‘It is a man who teaches him,’ but the language of the person they allude to is a ‘*jamī*’ [non-Arabic], while this revelation is clear Arabic [wa-hādhā lisānun ‘arabiyyun mubīnun].” (al-Naḥl 16/103)

⁹ See. Abū Ja’far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl al-Qur’ān*, critical ed. ‘Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī, 26 Volumes (Cairo: Dār Hajr, 2001), 14/364-365; Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Anṣārī al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi’ li-aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, critical ed. ‘Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī, 24 Volumes (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risāla, 2006), 10/177-178.

a *jamī* and *‘arabī* concerns not disparate languages, but rather diverse modes, messages, and messengers.

The Qur'ān's association of *‘arabī* with *lisān* (language) and *mubīn* (clear) disclose a conception of 'Arabic' as signifying an idiom possessing miraculous purity and clarity, conveying the sacred message, and prompting its listeners to comprehend and respond by embracing Islam.¹⁰

The first point to accentuate here is that when these elements are considered together, it will be clear that the Qur'ān makes a strong effort to present itself as an understandable text. However, for this observation to be meaningful, it should prompt us to contemplate and investigate the underlying reasons for such an effort. Otherwise, we would merely state the obvious, which lacks academic value. Therefore, it is necessary to identify and understand the most plausible reason behind 'the Qur'ān's self-references to its Arabic language.' Although this reason is related to the Qur'ān's effort to present itself as 'an understandable text,' the point that remains unclear at this stage is as follows: what is the reason for Qur'ān's salient and repetitive declaration of itself as an understandable scripture? Was it receiving objections from its audience in this regard? To formulate the question in a broader context: why would a text frequently emphasize its own comprehensibility? What is the need for this? By following the trail of these and similar questions and attempting to piece together the available data like pieces of a puzzle, we can hope to uncover the semantic domain of *Qur'ānan 'Arabiyyan* within both the Qur'ānic corpus and its historical context.

During the discourse on the subject, Sinai's assessment partially alludes to this matter:

Specifically with regard to the proposal to interpret Q 16/103 and 26/195 as maintaining that the Qur'ānic revelations are "clearly in Arabic" rather than "in clear Arabic," the former interpretation raises the question why the Qur'ān's Arabicness would be a pertinent feature to highlight at all, if not for the ready comprehensibility entailed by it.¹¹

Although Sinai's observation is valid, it does not fully address the question. Whether '*Qur'ānan 'Arabiyyan*' means 'clearly in Arabic' or 'in clear Arabic,' the question of why the Qur'ān frequently needs to emphasize its comprehensibility remains unanswered in both cases. Yet, we do not have clear evidence of the Qur'ān's initial audience raising objections against its comprehensibility. If such an objection had existed, it would likely have been frequently voiced and caused various levels of problems. Therefore, it is not easy to assume that the first interlocutor might have had difficulty in understanding the Qur'ān.

The second point to highlight is that all of these verses trace to the Meccan period. This, as I will discuss later on, significantly problematizes the approaches of some Western scholars. Because they think that the emphasis on the 'Arabic Qur'ān' is related to the presence of non-Arabic (Jewish and Christian) communities or Arab monotheists (Arap Christians) living in the Ḥijāz. However, for this idea to be consistently maintained, the existence of a significant Jewish or Christian community in Mecca needs to be proven. Nevertheless, apart from a few minor findings, we do not have sufficient data on this matter.

¹⁰ Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 118.

¹¹ Nicolai Sinai, *Key Terms of the Qur'an: A Critical Dictionary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 152.

2. Perspectives in Islamic and Western Scholarship

2.1. Classical Islamic Tradition

Interpreting verses that mention the 'Arabic Qur'ān', classical exegetes seem to have generally focused on whether there are non-Arabic words in the Qur'ān. In other words, they never interested in the question of why the Qur'ān describes itself in this way. According to them, when the Qur'ān mentions its Arabic nature, it seeks to emphasize the principle that revelation is sent to every prophet in their own language.¹² In this regard, some classical scholars believe that there are no non-Arabic words in the Qur'ān. The prominent figures such as al-Shāfi'ī (d. 204/820), Abū 'Ubayda Ma'mar b. al-Muthannā (d. 209/824), al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and Ibn Fāris (d. 395/1004) are seen among them.¹³ Furthermore, Abū 'Ubayda said, "*Whoever claims that there is a word in the Qur'ān that is not Arabic has uttered a very serious (dangerous) statement.*"¹⁴ On the other hand, according to some other classical scholars, while age-old prophets were sent only to their own communities, the last prophet was sent to all communities and therefore, his Scripture should embody words from all languages. Scholars such as Abū Maysara 'Amr b. Shuraḥbīl (d. 63/683), Sa'īd b. Jubayr (d. 94/713) and Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 114/732), among others, hold this view.¹⁵ Ibn al-Naqīb (d. 698/1299) associated the presence of non-Arabic words in the Qur'ān with the principle of "sending every prophet in their own language"¹⁶ and said:

The superiority of the Qur'ān over other divine books lies in the fact that while those books were sent only to their own communities, the Qur'ān was sent to all nations. Therefore, those books contain words only in the language of the people they were sent to, whereas the Qur'ān contains words from all languages.¹⁷

Likewise, al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), based on the belief that the Qur'ān contains all knowledge of the past and future, is of the opinion that it should involve a selection of words from all languages.¹⁸

In summary, there are two opposing claims regarding the foreign vocabulary of Qur'an. The former asserts that there is no non-Arabic word in the Qur'ān, while the latter claims that it contains words from all languages. However, both claims seem to reflect specific inclinations rather than strong theories based on evidence. Yet, there are some other views beyond these two extreme poles. For example, Ibn 'Aṭīyyah (d. 514/1147) in his exegesis titled *al-Muḥarrar al-Wajīz* includes the following expressions, which Jeffery mistakenly attributed to al-Tha'ālībī (d. 875/1471):

¹² See for example: Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 13/6-7, 557, 14/364-370; Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 32 Volumes (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1999), 24/532, 27/617; Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, 11/241, 12/83-84.

¹³ Jalāl al-Dīn 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Abī Bakr al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, critical ed. Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-Qur'āniyya. 7 Volumes (Medīna: Mujaḥma' al-Malik Fahd li-Ṭibā'at al-Muḥṣaf al-Sharīf, 2005), 3/935.

¹⁴ See. Abū 'Ubayda Ma'mar b. al-Muthannā, *Majāz al-Qur'ān*, critical ed. Fuad Sezgin, 2 Volumes (Cairo: Maktaba al-Khanjī, nd.), 1/17.

¹⁵ See. Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 1/14-15.

¹⁶ See the mentioned principle, Ibrāhīm 14/4.

¹⁷ Contrary to the information provided in the editor's footnote, Ibn al-Naqīb's text (*Muqaddima Tafsīr Ibn al-Naqīb*) does not have these expressions even with different wording. Most likely, al-Suyūṭī is referring to a work other than the Introduction (*Muqaddima*) of Ibn al-Naqīb that is available to us today; see. Jalāl al-Dīn 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Abī Bakr al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, critical ed. Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-Qur'āniyya, 7 Volumes (Medīna: Mujaḥma' al-Malik Fahd li-Ṭibā'at al-Muḥṣaf al-Sharīf, 2005), 3/938; Ibn al-Naqīb, Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Sulaiman, *Muqaddimat tafsīr Ibn al-Naqīb fī 'ilm al-bayān wa-l-ma'ānī wa-l-badī' wa-l-jāz al-Qur'ān*, critical ed. Zakaria Sa'īd 'Alī (Cairo: Maktabah al-Khanjī, nd.), 5-8.

¹⁸ Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, 3/938.

The Qur'ān is in plain Arabic containing no word which is not Arabic, or which cannot be understood without the help of some other language. For these (so-called foreign) words belonged to the (language of the) ancient Arabs, in whose tongue the Qur'ān was revealed, after they had contact with other languages through commercial affairs and travel in Syria and Abyssinia, whereby the Arabs took over foreign words, altering some of them by dropping letters or lightening what was heavy in the foreign form. Then they used these words in their poetry and conversation so that they became like pure Arabic and were used in literature and thus occur in the Qur'ān.¹⁹

This approach, while not as extreme as the previous two, does not offer a novel inference for addressing our question. Because the availability of foreign words in the Qur'ān is out of scope for this research. Instead, it focuses on the Qur'ān's self-references to its own language.

Another example of this kind, though in a separate way, is al-Shāṭibī (d. 790/1388) who made significant contributions to the principles of Islamic law (fiqh) and interpretation (tafsīr) methodology. For his perspective on the Arabic nature of the Qur'ān is quite different from that of the abovementioned names. According to him, the Arabic nature of the Qur'ān means that it was revealed within the linguistic, stylistic, and conceptual framework of the Arabs, and therefore it should be understood within this framework. In other words, the Qur'ān is a book speaking within the hermeneutical 'horizon of Arabs' (*Ma' hūd al-' Arab*), and when interpreting it (or deriving rulings from it), one should not go beyond this horizon. By the 'horizon of Arabs,' al-Shāṭibī refers to the cultural and intellectual environment of the seventh-century Arabs of the Ḥijāz, who were the primary audience of the Qur'ān.²⁰ Perhaps al-Shāṭibī's approach indicates the potential risks of interpreting the Qur'ān with the terminology of later-imported sciences such as logic and philosophy. This idea also connotes the quest/principle of intentionalism in 'romantic hermeneutics', advocating for the necessity and possibility of understanding the Qur'ān as its initial audience did.

al-Shāṭibī's approach appears quite noteworthy and offers in-depth perspective for the discussion from a hermeneutical perspective. However, if we used al-Shāṭibī's approach to understand the verses containing the emphasis on 'Arabic Qur'ān', the conclusion would be as follows: Frequently emphasizing its Arabic nature by addressing the Meccan pagan Arabs, the Qur'ān intends to say -as if they were trying to interpret the Qur'ān from another culture, "*You should understand this Qur'ān within the horizon of the Arabs.*" I suppose al-Shāṭibī himself would not have wanted to accept this logical conclusion. Therefore, it is clear that his interpretation, like the two extreme interpretations mentioned earlier, is not functional and reasonable in explaining the emphasis on the 'Arabic' nature of the Qur'ān.²¹

¹⁹ See. Abū Muḥammad 'Abd al-Ḥaqq b. Ghālib Ibn 'Aṭīyyah, *al-Muḥarrar al-wajīz fī tafsīr al-kitāb al-' azīz*, critical ed. Majmū'a min al-Bāḥithīn/Committee, 10 Volumes (Qatar: Wizārat al-Awqāf, 2015), 1/188-189. Since al-Tha'ālibī's *al-Jawāhir* is a summary of Ibn 'Aṭīyyah's *al-Muḥarrar*, the same expressions are included there as well. In fact, al-Tha'ālibī expresses this clearly by saying (ع ج) at the beginning of this paragraph. And we know for sure that the letter (ع) is an abbreviation used for Ibn 'Aṭīyyah in al-Tha'ālibī's *al-Jawāhir*. Unfortunately, Arthur Jeffery seems to have missed this point; see. Abū Zayd 'Abd al-Rahmān b. Muḥammad al-Tha'ālibī, *Tafsīr al-Tha'ālibī al-musammā bi-al-jawāhir al-ḥisān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, critical ed. 'Alī Muḥammad Mu'awwaḍ-'Ādil Aḥmad 'Abd al-Mawjūd, 5 Volumes (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā al-Turāth al-' Arabī, 1997), 1/17; Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 10.

²⁰ See. Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. Mūsā al-Lakhmī al-Shāṭibī, *al-Muwāfaqāt fī uṣūl al-sharī'a*, critical ed. Abū 'Ubayda Mashūr b. Ḥasan Ālu Salmān, 4 Volumes (Khobar: Dār Ibn 'Affān, 1994), 2/101-103.

²¹ Michael Carter delineates these perspectives into seven distinct categories in greater detail. As this segment does not constitute the core focus of my study, I will not delve into such depth. The critical point from my perspective is that none of these perspectives address the principal issue of this paper, namely, the rationale behind the recurrent emphasis on the Qur'ān

2.2. Western Qur'ānic Scholarship

Western scholars of Qur'ānic studies do not have a single and standard view on this issue. Many of them only touch upon it indirectly through other topics and have not formed any opinion. For example, Arthur Jeffery (d. 1959), who specializes in foreign words mentioned in the Qur'ān, has not focused, specifically on this point. The reason for this 'apathy' seem to stem from long-lasting and entrenched endeavor that aims for attaining a Judeo-Christian 'Urtext' for the Qur'ān. Indeed, in such matters, they simply find the narration of classical Islamic tradition 'unreliable' and exclude it from the equation. Although the influence of the excessively skeptical approach put forward and defended by revisionists such as John Wansbrough (d. 2002) and Patricia Crone (d. 2015) has waned in recent years, as Angelika Neuwirth aptly notes, many of their critical observations remain challenging,²² and some of the leftovers of this attitude still persist among Western scholars.²³ That is why when they can relate any theme of the Qur'ān to Jewish-Christian culture, they believe they fully understand the subject. This phenomenon is also apparent in the subject matter of this article, concerning 'the Qur'ān's self-references to its Arabic language.' As previously discussed, given that this issue has been examined within the classical Islamic tradition in relation to the presence of foreign (non-Arabic) words in the Qur'ān, many Western scholars tend to address it within this framework and utilize it as evidence to bolster the argument that the Qur'ān has an Urtext based on Jewish-Christian scriptural evidence. Jeffrey's insights may provide further elucidation on this point:

In his young manhood Muhammad was greatly impressed by this higher civilization and particularly by the religion of the great Empire of Rōm, and there can be no serious doubt that his conception of his mission, as he first clearly outlined it for himself, was to provide for the Arabs the benefit of this religion and in some measure this civilization.²⁴

However, this is not the place to discuss the views of the revisionist school on this issue. Therefore, I will confine myself here to focus on scholars who delve into the question of 'why' the Qur'ān identifies itself as 'Arabic,' or those who contribute insights and perspectives conducive to addressing this inquiry. At this juncture, we can refer to the prominent figures such as Robert Hoyland, Stefan Wild, Nicolai Sinai, Peter Webb, Jan Retsö, and Ahmad al-Jallad. Retsö argues that since *'arabī* and *a'jamī* are used as antonyms, the term *'arabī* was intended to serve as evidence of the divine nature of its message and therefore could not refer to the vernacular:

The point of the argument is that the message is of non-human origin because it is recited in the *'arabī* language, and the person who was said to teach the Prophet did not use or master that language.²⁵

being in Arabic; see. Michael McCarter, "Foreign Vocabulary", ed. A. Rippin-Jawid Mojaddedi, *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān Second Edition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2017), 130–150.

²² See. Angelika Neuwirth, "Structural, Linguistic and Literary Features", *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane McAuliffe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 97–113.

²³ For instance, Tomasso Tesei, in his article mentioned below, tries to defend the idea of "multiple Qur'ānic authors" by relying on scant reasoning and arbitrary interpretations of select passages from a few chosen surahs, devoid of any standard methodology; see. Tomasso Tesei, "The Qur'ān(s) in Context(s)" *Journal Asiatique* 309/2 (2021), 185–202. On the other hand, in his scholarly work titled "Creating the Qur'an," Stephen Shoemaker endeavors to revive the highly revisionist approach previously advocated by J. Wansbrough, albeit with nuanced adjustments; see. Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur'an* (California: University of California Press, 2022).

²⁴ Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary*, 38.

²⁵ Jan Retsö, *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads* (London-New York: Routledge, 2003), 46.

Retsö posits that the Qur'ānic language, termed 'arabī, is juxtaposed not with Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek—the tongues of preceding scriptures— but rather with a'jamī, which likely represents an early form of what is presently recognized as Arabic, and hence, “the revelation is 'arabī, not because otherwise it would have been incomprehensible, but to make people believe.”²⁶

Peter Webb's perspective, elements of which I have briefly outlined above, aligns closely with Retsö's views on this subject.²⁷ Influenced by Fred Donner's assertion that Islam could not have originated from Arab 'national' sentiment,²⁸ Webb seeks to support his own theory that Arab identity emerged only after the formation of the Islamic state. Consequently, he argues that the term 'arabī is merely an adjective meaning 'clear' or 'pure' while its opposite, a'jamī, refers to something 'nonsensical' or a 'sullied message'.²⁹ But the problem with the interpretations of both Retsö and Webb, Hoyland argues, is that they uncritically accept the Qur'ān's own polemical vision. Hoyland asserts that Muhammad (as Hoyland prefers to attribute rather than the Qur'ān itself) advocates for the use of 'arabī in divine revelation by elevating its status while denigrating a'jamī. However, the very fact that *the Qur'ān* needs to make this argument suggests *the Qur'ān* was aware that many in its audience believed divine messages should be conveyed in the a'jamī language. This is evident in Q. 41/44, which begins with “If We had made it an a'jamī recitation,” clearly responding to critics who questioned why his revelation was not in a'jamī, which was presumably seen as the standard.

Although I agree with Hoyland's critique of Retsö and Webb in general, I still think that what he calls 'evident in Q. 41/44', namely that many in Qur'ān's first audience, Meccan pagans, believed divine messages should be conveyed in the a'jamī language is not 'evident' at all. Moreover, Hoyland even argues that the verb 'fuṣṣilat' in Q. 41/3, means 'to translate' or 'arabī rendering, and therefore the Q. 41/3 (kitābun fuṣṣilat āyātuhu Qur'ānan 'arabiyyan) can be understood as “a book whose verses have been fuṣṣilat into/as an Arabic recitation.” This may be seen as exaggerated speculation on just one word, but Hoyland states very clearly his general and final conclusion as follows:

What Muḥammad's interlocutors would seem to have wanted, then, was something like the Jewish Targums, the periphrastic and interpretative texts that helped Aramaic-speaking Jews read the Hebrew Bible.³⁰

However, for such a possibility to be considered reasonable, it is necessary to assume and even prove that there was a distinct Jewish or Christian community among the first interlocutors of the Qur'ān in Mecca. Otherwise, assuming that Meccan pagan Arabs, who do not believe in the Hebrew Bible nor the Christian Bible at all, made such a demand, would be nothing more than baseless speculation. Even if the existence of a Christian or Jewish community in Mecca is proven, this interpretation will still be nothing more than speculation. Careful examination reveals that these verses appear only in Meccan surahs and are completely absent from the Medinan Qur'ān. This shows that the issue is entirely related to the pagan Arabs of Mecca.

²⁶ Retsö, *The Arabs in Antiquity*, 47.

²⁷ See. Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 118-120.

²⁸ See. Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad, and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), 2010.

²⁹ See. Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 118-119, Cf. Robert Hoyland, “‘Arabī and a'jamī in the Qur'ān: The Language of Revelation in Muḥammad's Hījāz”, *Scripts and Scripture: Writing and Religion in Arabia circa 500–700 CE*, 105–15, ed. Fred M. Donner-Rebecca Hasselbach-Andee, (Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 2022), 111.

³⁰ Hoyland, “‘Arabī and A'jamī in the Qur'ān”, 112.

Otherwise, the issue would have continued to be discussed in Medina, where the Jewish community had significant influence.

Regrettably, this is not the sole instance of speculation in Hoyland's otherwise excellent article, which reflects significant effort and merits a thorough examination. Discussing the use of the words 'arabī and a'jamī in the Qur'ān in an article, Hoyland rejects the views of Retsö and Webb and notes that the word 'arabī may indicate a lingua franca that became increasingly widespread in the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula.³¹ More importantly, according to Hoyland, the word a'jamī does not refer to the vernacular, contrary to the claims of Webb and Retsö, but to a specific religious language known in the region. According to him, the most suitable candidate for this language is Aramaic.³² I will discuss Hoyland's conclusion while explaining my own opinion. But I would like to draw attention to the surprise that Hoyland aroused in me when he precisely and meticulously identified the exact question I am discussing in this article, stressing that the frequent emphasis on the 'arabī language of the Qur'ān and its clarity and the pejorative tone toward the a'jamī language suggests a polemical agenda.³³ However, the answer given by Hoyland, who identified such an important question, seems very quick and careless:

Presumably, some in Muḥammad's audience were questioning whether 'arabī was an appropriate language for a divine revelation; should not a language that had already conveyed scripture have been used, a language such as Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic? And it seems to me that it is this viewpoint that Muḥammad was attempting to refute.³⁴

The simple question that comes to mind at this point is: Why would the Meccan pagan addressees of the Qur'ān be disturbed by Muhammad delivering his message in Arabic? Why would the fact that the religious texts in the surrounding cultures were in Greek, Syriac, Hebrew, or Aramaic lead them to make such an objection? Conversely, wouldn't this situation require them to be proud that the Qur'ān is in Arabic, even if they do not believe it?

Although their starting points are different, al-Jallad and Sinai somehow reach the same conclusion as Hoyland. They argue that the word 'arabī refers to vernacular and ultimately relates to the intelligibility of the Qur'ān. Especially al-Jallad not only defends his own opposing view but also meticulously critiques Retsö's arguments. Sinai, on the other hand, is content with al-Jallad's view.³⁵ Arguably, it seems likely that al-Jallad did not focus sufficiently on a strong idea that Retsö might have noticed which is to contextualize the Qur'ān's self-designation as 'arabī within the historical circumstances of it. It would be overly bold to claim that al-Jallad ignores or fails to recognize the historical context of the Qur'ān. Nevertheless, Retsö's approach appears as a meaningful attempt to explain, within the context of that time, why the Qur'ān emphasizes its 'arabī nature so often. In my view, al-Jallad's insistence on highlighting the connection between the emphasis on the *Arabicness of the Qur'ān* and its *intelligibility* represents a direct approach that raises another issue while attempting to solve one. Since he, in clear contradistinction to the perspectives advanced by Retsö and Webb, contends that the Arabicness of the Qur'ān does not connote a distant, divine register exclusive to a select group of holy individuals. Instead, the Qur'ān emerges as a monotheistic proclamation in the

³¹ Hoyland, "'Arabī and A'jamī in the Qur'ān", 106-107.

³² Hoyland, "'Arabī and A'jamī in the Qur'ān", 113.

³³ Hoyland, "'Arabī and A'jamī in the Qur'ān", 106.

³⁴ Hoyland, "'Arabī and A'jamī in the Qur'ān", 106.

³⁵ Sinai, *Key Terms of the Qur'an*, 512.

vernacular.³⁶ At this juncture, it seems only natural to expect from al-Jallad or any scholar who associates the term *‘arabī* (*Arabicness of the Qur'ān*) with ‘intelligibility’ to also provide an explanation for the reason behind the frequent emphasis of this theme in the Qur'ān. Indeed, al-Jallad seems to have appreciated the necessity of making an explanation on this point, and his explanation is not to be dismissed lightly:

Here, the Qur'ān is stating clearly that its language is meant to be understood by the audience. This fits well the interpretation that the current scripture is distinguished from its predecessors by the fact that it is in an intelligible vernacular and *does not require the intercession of a holy man to decipher its meaning*.³⁷

The necessity of ‘holy men’ (religious scholars) to understand a holy book depends on whether a religious tradition has developed around that particular ‘Holy Book.’ Therefore, comparing the intelligibility of the newly revealed Qur'ān to its first recipients with the Torah’s lack of direct comprehensibility -revealed a few thousand years ago- seems anachronistic. If, as al-Jallad asserts, the Qur'ān implicitly critiques the Torah’s lack of direct comprehensibility, this critique inevitably extends to the extensive ‘traditional Islamic sciences’ that have evolved around the Qur'ān over centuries. The consensus within Islamic scholarship is that the Qur'ān is not readily accessible to the layperson. This is most compellingly evidenced by an extensive corpus of commentary, comprising hundreds, even thousands, of volumes. Indeed, this phenomenon occurs naturally in all texts. As they become increasingly distant from the historical and social contexts of their origins, their capacity for direct comprehensibility diminishes, necessitating the mediation of expert commentators. For instance, it is unlikely that anyone today could read and fully grasp the Babylonian creation myth *Enūma Eliš* or even Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* without consulting secondary literature. In this context, it would be inaccurate to assert that the Qur'ān differs from previous holy books in terms of ‘comprehensibility.’ However, the Qur'ān distinctly diverges from previous holy books by emphasizing its own ‘comprehensibility’ in this manner. Additionally, while previous holy books seldom, if ever, reference their own language in such a way, the Qur'ān does so repeatedly:

Thus, in contrast to the Bible and the New Testament, the Qur'ān is highly preoccupied with the language in which is revealed. The pronounced self-reflexivity of the Qur'ānic recitation and its meta-linguistic interest in its own medium are a unique feature in the history of revealed scripture.³⁸

Since this wonderful conclusion reached by Stefan Wild is not followed up with the question “*But why does the Qur'ān differ from previous books in this regard,*” which is precisely the question I am attempting to answer, his wonderful article remains incomplete. As long as this question remains unanswered, all other analyses concerning the concepts of *‘arabī* and *a‘jamī* are of secondary importance.

Before concluding this section, it is pertinent to note that Retsö’s starting point and inferential method are notably challenging, particularly due to their departure from conventional academic acquis. Compared to the established rules of scientific data analysis, it does not provide the

³⁶ Ahmad Al-Jallad, *The Damascus Psalm Fragment: Middle Arabic and the Legacy of Old Ḥigāzī* (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2020), 74.

³⁷ Al-Jallad, *The Damascus Psalm Fragment*, 74.

³⁸ Stefan Wild, “An Arabic Recitation: The Meta-Linguistics of Qur'ānic Revelation,” *Self-Referentiality in the Qur'ān*, ed. Stefan Wild, 135–157 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006), 156.

necessary conditions. It hence cannot lead to the desired conclusions, as al-Jallad resplendently pointed out, but it prompts us to think in that way with its inspiring and eye-opening point of view, a point that Wild partially expresses.³⁹ If we do not embrace bold interpretations, as Retsö does, and instead place excessive emphasis on the literal structure of the Qur'ānic text, we may have difficulty comprehending why the Qur'ān describes itself in this manner, particularly during the Meccan period. This difficulty could result in unreasonable interpretations. Indeed, Sinai appears to have met such an issue, suggesting that the emphasis on the Meccan surahs indicates that the Qur'ān of that period was a localized discourse directed solely at the Arabs. Indeed, Sinai perceives the absence of such emphasis in the Qur'ān during the Medina period as the foundational element for the emergence of the concept of 'universal Islam' within subsequent Muslim cultural discourse adding "*even though the Qur'ān itself nowhere envisions a global missionary effort aimed at converting all humans to membership of the Qur'ānic ummah.*"⁴⁰

3. Alternative Thesis: Arabic Qur'ān and Human Prophet

If we are to consider the Qur'ān's emphasis on its 'Arabic' nature solely in response to the Meccan pagan Arabs, but rather as a communication aimed at the Jewish or Christian communities, then it becomes essential to prove the existence of a Jewish or Christian presence in Mecca and its immediate vicinity. Only with such verification could the plausibility of such an interpretation be entertained. As far as I know, there was no Arabic Gospel in the hands of Arab Christians during the pre-Islamic period. Arab Christians seem to have accessed the Gospel through Aramaic or Syriac translations during that period. Naturally, this had a limiting effect on access to religious knowledge within the Christian community and diminished religious motivation. One can imagine that Arab Christians of that era, in a way, viewed themselves as second-class members of the global Christian community. If these observations are correct, then the Qur'ān's characterization of itself as 'Arabic' could be interpreted as a move aimed at persuading such an Arab Christian community, and in my opinion, this would be a very meaningful interpretation. However, the question of why this emphasis in the Qur'ān was not continued during the Medina period will remain unanswered. Nevertheless, we can ignore this for now for the sake of the argument and look at the situation more closely.

Most likely, the Meccan society at the time of Islam's emergence was not completely unaware of Christianity or, more generally, monotheism. We have certain data showing that Meccan polytheists were familiar with many biblical concepts. As Hamilton Gibb pointed out, for Prophet Muhammad to ask his Meccan interlocutors, "*Do you not know what is in the Scriptures of Moses, and of Abraham?*"⁴¹ would only lead to a meaningful dialogue if they were familiar with those subjects.⁴² Besides, it is known that there used to be individuals like Waraqah b. Nawfal, and 'Uthmān b. al-Ḥuwayrith who had affinity with Christianity.⁴³ There are even mentions of Quss b. Sā'ida, possibly Christian priest, Bishop of Najrān,⁴⁴ spoke about beliefs in the afterlife and monotheism at the 'Ukāz fair near the city of Tāif. According to Jawād 'Alī, despite the eagerness of figures like Louis Cheikho, who are inclined to attribute everything from the pre-

³⁹ Wild, "An Arabic Recitation," 152.

⁴⁰ Sinai, *Key Terms of the Qur'an*, 514-515.

⁴¹ See. Al-Najm 53/36-37. Lit. "Has he not been told of what is in the Tablets of Moses and of Abraham, who kept faith?" (*Am-lam-yunabba' bi-mā fi-ṣuḥufi Mūsā wa-lbrāhīm alladhī waffā.*)

⁴² Hamilton A. R. Gibb, "Pre-Islamic Monotheism in Arabia", *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam*, ed. F. E. Peters (London-New York: Routledge, 2017), 307-312.

⁴³ See. Aḥmad b. Abī Ya'qūb b. Ja'far b. Wahb Al-Ya'qūbī, *Tārīkh al-Ya'qūbī* (Najaf: Manshūrāt Maktabah al-Ḥaydariyyah, 1964), 1/227; Jawād 'Alī, *al-Mufaṣṣal fi tārīkh al-'arab qabla l-Islām*, 10 Volumes (Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm li'l-Malāyīn, 1993), 6/590.

⁴⁴ See. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary*, 22.

Islamic era to Christianity, to accept this information as true, the accuracy of this information still needs to be tested.⁴⁵ In any case, it seems certain that the inhabitants of Mecca during that period were aware of Christian culture. Nevertheless, the presence of some individuals in Mecca who had varying degrees of connection with Christianity, or the possibility that Meccan elites, through their trade journeys to places like Hira, Petra, Damascus, Palestine, Yemen, and Abyssinia, may have encountered different Christian groups and learned certain concepts and beliefs of Christianity from them, does not imply *the existence of an independent Christian community in Mecca*. Hugh Goddard briefly summarizes this as follows:

However, in the Hejaz in the west, whilst there is evidence of the presence of Christianity, it is not thought to have been significant amongst the Indigenous population of the area.⁴⁶

In this case, we have no logical reason to think that the relevant statements are directed towards Jews or Christians. All the verses that specifically emphasize that the Qur'ān is in Arabic are known to have been revealed during the Meccan period. During this period, the majority of Qur'ān's audience consisted of the pagan Arabs of Mecca. Therefore, the emphasis on the Arabic language must have had significance within the religious and cultural system of the Meccan pagan Arabs. Hence, it would be more correct for us to seek the rationale behind this emphasis by considering the religious and cultural system of the Meccan pagans.

According to the conclusion clearly expressed by Hoyland and implied by Jallad and Sinai, the Meccan polytheist Arabs must have wanted to have an 'Aramaic Qur'ān,' just like the Aramaic 'Targum' of Christians and Jews. In my perspective, this notion likely stems from the constriction experienced within the confined space dictated by a narrow literal approach to the Qur'ānic text, which leaves little room for other interpretations. The Meccan polytheistic Arabs were renowned for their deep-seated pride in their beliefs and cultural heritage, making it inconceivable that they would entertain the notion of desiring an 'Aramaic' sacred text in emulation of the Jews, given their profound attachment to their own language and historical legacy.

Now, if the Meccans did not object to the Qur'ān being in Arabic, then why does the Qur'ān often describe itself as being in Arabic and justify this with the idea of being 'easily understandable?' (*mubīn*)⁴⁷ The Meccan Arabs understood the Qur'ān with ease, and we lack evidence of any objections to the contrary. It would be illogical for a prophet, introducing a new belief system to society, to proclaim/utter incomprehensible concepts or employ a language that they would struggle to grasp. Such circumstances would provide a convenient pretext for interlocutors unwilling to relinquish their existing religion. Had the Qur'ān utilized a language unintelligible to the Meccans, they would have wielded it as a potent weapon against the prophet, significantly undermining his message.

⁴⁵ See, 'Alī, *al-Mufaṣṣal*, 6/616-617.

⁴⁶ Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2000), 15-17. Cf. David. D. Grafton, "The Identity and Witness of Arab Pre-Islamic Arab Christianity: The Arabic Language and the Bible", *HTS Theologisches Studien/Theological Studies* 70/1 (2014). (The most convincing research to date has demonstrated that if there were Christians in Mecca, they were more than likely slaves from other Arab Christian tribes who had been sold to owners then in Mecca rather than an established community.)

⁴⁷ See here for an example of a very competent article on the Qur'ān's description of itself as comprehensible (*mubīn*); see. Devin Stewart, "Mubīn and Its Cognates in the Qur'ān", *Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association* 8/1 (2023): 115-156.

After our preceding discussions, we can now outline three robust propositions:

- (i) The Qur'ān's self-identification as 'Arabic' does not stem from any request for a text in Aramaic or another language.
- (ii) The Qur'ān's characterization of itself as 'Arabic' is integral to its depiction as 'comprehensible/mubīn.'
- (iii) The Qur'ān's portrayal of itself as 'comprehensible/mubīn' does not serve as a response to its addressees perceiving it as incomprehensible.

Therefore, we need to look for another reason behind why the Qur'ān presents itself as a clear and 'understandable' book. I think the best candidate for this is the Meccan pagan Arabs objecting to the prophethood of an ordinary person. This theme is often discussed in the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān states that they objected by saying, "*What, an ordinary human being will guide us?*" (*a-basharun yahdūnana*)⁴⁸ and that they said, "*If God wanted to send us a prophet, he would have chosen an angel for this purpose.*"⁴⁹ The Qur'ān responds to them by saying,

The only thing that kept these people from believing, when guidance came to them, was that they said, 'How could God have sent a human being as a messenger?' Say, if there were angels walking about on earth, feeling at home, we would have sent them an angel from Heaven as a messenger.⁵⁰

One of the most possible reasons behind this objection is that the concept of prophethood was a contentious issue for the pagans of Mecca. In fact, the version of polytheistic belief in the seventh-century Ḥijāz was based on the principle of not seeing direct communication between God and humans as possible. According to this belief, God is a supreme being who cannot be directly accessed. Therefore, Meccan pagans sought intermediary sacred beings to reach Him.⁵¹ We at least know that this is how the polytheistic belief described in the Qur'ān was.⁵² This is probably why the pagan Meccans did not think it was possible for a human being to communicate directly with God, and therefore they thought that there must be an angel to mediate between them and God. The Qur'ān insists that all the previous prophets were 'people' (*rijāl*) who are mortal like everyone else,⁵³ walked in the markets (for preaching, selling, buying etc.), ate, and had children.⁵⁴ (Similarly, the Qur'ān states that Jesus and Mary "ate food" to emphasize that they do not have any divine characteristics and that they are only human.⁵⁵) It even depicts in a very interesting way what the situation would be like if an angel were to be sent:

They say, 'Why was no angel sent down to him?' But had We sent down an angel, their judgment would have come at once with no respite given. Indeed, if We had sent an angel as a messenger, we would still have sent him in the form of a man, so increasing their confusion.⁵⁶

⁴⁸ al-Taghābun 64/6.

⁴⁹ al-Mu'minūn 23/24; Fuṣṣilat 41/14.

⁵⁰ al-Isrā 17/94-95.

⁵¹ Regarding the Meccan pagans seeing their idols as intermediaries to reach a higher supreme god; see. Watt, W. Montgomery, "Belief in a 'High God' in Pre-Islamic Mecca", *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam*, ed. F.E. Peters (London-New York: Routledge, 2017), 307-312.

⁵² As an example, see. al-Zumar 39/3 (As for those who choose other protectors besides Him, saying, 'We only worship them because they bring us nearer to God.')

⁵³ See. al-Anbiyā 21/7-8.

⁵⁴ See. al-Furqān 25/20.

⁵⁵ See. al-Mā'idah 5/75.

⁵⁶ al-A'rāf 7/8-9.

Given the contextual distinction of the Qur'ān's frequent portrayal of itself as 'understandable' (*mubīn*) and 'Arabic' ('*arabī*') solely during its Meccan phase, rather than in Medina, one could infer that this emphasis and repetition potentially serve as a response to the desire for an angel prophet. Thus, the Qur'ān tells them that if an angel prophet is sent, the message will be incomprehensible and that it is inappropriate to send an angel prophet instead of sending a human prophet who speaks to them in their own language ('*arabī*') and in a way they can understand (*mubīn*). In this instance, we undertake an interpretation of the term '*arabī*' that transcends its literal definition, which some may perceive as a disadvantage. Nonetheless, through this approach, we are able to intertwine focal points such as 'understandability' and 'Arabicness' ('*arabī*') within a meaningful narrative, thereby constructing a cohesive narrative framework.

Conclusion

In exploring the Qur'ān's repeated emphasis on its Arabic nature, I have traversed through various scholarly perspectives, historical contexts, and textual analyses. This journey illuminated the complexity of this lingual phenomenon and its deeper implications. Throughout my analysis, I navigated through diverse scholarly perspectives, from classical Islamic commentators to contemporary Western scholars, each offering valuable insights into the Qur'ānic text and its linguistic nuances. Yet, amidst the scholarly discourse, the essence of the Qur'ān's emphasis on its Arabic nature, one of the key characteristics that differentiate the Qur'ān from previous holy books, remains ambiguous, especially the reason behind this emphasis.

I acknowledged the Qur'ān's self-description as 'Arabic' ('*arabī*') and 'understandable' (*mubīn*) within its verses, raising the question of why such emphasis was deemed necessary. Classical Islamic tradition and Western Qur'ānic scholarship offered divergent explanations, each reflecting unique ideological frameworks and interpretive lenses. Yet, amidst this diversity, no consensus emerged, underscoring the multifaceted nature of the issue. Our examination then delved into the textual and historical contexts of the Qur'ān, particularly during its Meccan phase. Here, the significance of addressing the Meccan polytheists' objections to the notion of a human prophet emerged as a compelling explanation for the Qur'ān's emphasis on its Arabicness and clarity. The Meccans, steeped in their pagan beliefs, found the concept of direct divine communication through a non-divine intermediary challenging, leading them to demand an angelic messenger instead. The Qur'ān's insistence on its Arabicness and clarity thus served to refute this objection, asserting the accessibility and understandability of its message in a language familiar to its very human audience.

In conclusion, while the Qur'ān's self-reference to its Arabicness may initially appear enigmatic, a nuanced understanding reveals its profound significance within the socio-cultural milieu of its time. By foregrounding its Arabic clarity, the Qur'ān refutes objections regarding its own authenticity and affirms its accessibility to all, a stance that should be seen as a consequence of the Qur'ān being the final and most recent revelation, rather than as a critique of the lack of clarity in previous holy books. Thus, unraveling the mystery of the frequent emphasis on the Qur'ān's Arabic nature, I uncover linguistic intricacies and profound insights into its enduring relevance and universal appeal.

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