

Various Forms of Centres of Ring Composition in the Qur'an and their Interpretation

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The study of biblical texts and, more recently, of the Qur'an and other sacred or religious texts of the Ancient Middle East, reveal an art of textual composition or «*dispositio*» which is very different from texts of the classical Greco-Roman tradition which we have inherited. This rhetoric, which we will call «Semitic», is based on a complex system of symmetries, at different textual levels. This symmetry can take three forms: 1) parallelism (AB/A'B'), 2) mirror composition, chiasmus, or inverse parallelism (AB/B'A') and 3) concentric composition where a centre links two sides of a mirror (ABC/x/C'B'A' or AB/x/B'A') or sometimes, simply A/x/A'). The Qur'an is a privileged place for the study of these forms of composition and, notably, for the study of concentric composition which is extremely frequent, above all in the upper textual levels. This form of composition is also particularly interesting because of the importance of the centre for the overall interpretation of the text. Using examples from the Qur'an, I am going to present different forms of centres and their interpretative function.

CERTAIN CENTRES CLEARLY EXPLICIT THE OVERALL MEANING OF THE TEXT

The *Fātiḥa* («*the Opening*»), the first sura of the Qur'an, is an excellent example:

– ¹	In the name	of God, the Mercy-giving,	the Merciful.
= ²	<i>Praise be</i>	<i>to God</i> , Lord	of the worlds,
– ³		the Mercy-giving,	the Merciful,
= ⁴		Master	of the Day of Judgment.

+ ^{5a}	You	<i>we worship</i>	
+ ^b	and You	<i>we ask for help</i> .	

– ⁶	<i>Guide us</i>	on the right path,	
– ^{7a}	the path	of those you have blessed,	
= ^b	not	those who incur anger,	
= ^c	nor	those who go astray.	

Without entering into all the details, it can be seen that the text is composed of three pieces: the first has two synonymic segments (1-2//3-4), the third has two antithetic segments (6-7a/b-c). At the centre there is a small piece the size of a segment. The form of the centre differs from the pieces which frame it; it is briefer and this is one of the characteristics of centres of concentric compositions. Grammatically, it is characterized by two short conjugated coordinated clauses whereas the first piece is made up of nominal sentence, without a verb and the third piece is a long complex sentence dominated by the verb «to guide». Here the centre plays the role of a «turning point» linking the two outer pieces. «We worship» refers back to the first piece which is a praise of adoration; «we ask for help» announces the final piece which is a petition to be guided along the right path and preserved from the path of «those who go astray». The centre makes the overall meaning of the text clearly explicit. Thus the *Fātiḥa* does not present itself as a revelation, as does the rest of the Qur'an, but as a liturgical prayer at the beginning of the Book under the two main and complementary forms of prayer: adoration and petition.

THE QUOTATION

Quotations are often found in the centre. The following example is taken from Sura 5, v.44-47.

^{44a} Surely, <i>we sent down</i>	THE TORAH,
^b IN WHICH THERE IS GUIDANCE AND LIGHT.	
^c <i>JUDGE</i> by it	THE PROPHETS who submitted,
^d for those who are Jews,	
^e and	THE RABBIS AND SCHOLARS
^f according to <i>what they kept safe</i> of	GOD'S BOOK
^g and were witnesses of. ^h Do not fear people, ⁱ fear (God),	
^j and do not sell my verses at a giveaway price.	
^k AND WHOEVER DOES NOT JUDGE ACCORDING TO <i>WHAT GOD HAS SENT DOWN,</i>	
^l THOSE ARE THE UNBELIEVERS.	

^{45a} And <i>we have prescribed</i> for them therein:
^b <i>'Life for life, eye for eye, nose for nose, ear for ear, tooth for tooth, and for wounds, retaliation.'</i>
^d And whoever would give alms of this, ^e this will be an expiation for him.
^f AND WHOEVER DOES NOT JUDGE ACCORDING TO WHAT GOD HAS SENT DOWN,
^g THOSE ARE THE EVILDOERS.

^{46a} And <i>we have made walk</i> in their footsteps	JESUS SON OF MARY,
^b confirming <i>what was before him</i> of	THE TORAH.
^c And we have given him	THE GOSPEL,
^d IN WHICH THERE IS GUIDANCE AND LIGHT,	
^e confirming <i>what was before it</i> of	THE TORAH,
^f as guidance and exhortation for the pious.	
^{47a} And let <i>JUDGE</i>	THE PEOPLE OF THE GOSPEL
^b according to <i>what God has sent down therein.</i>	
^c AND WHOEVER DOES NOT JUDGE ACCORDING TO <i>WHAT GOD HAS SENT DOWN,</i>	
^d THOSE ARE ^e THE PERVERSE.	

Here the Qur'an states very explicitly that it is quoting: «We (= God) have prescribed for them (the sons of Israel) therein (in the Torah)». The quotation comes from the Book of Exodus (21, 23-25) and its parallels in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The whole «passage» is an invitation to the Jews and Christians who live in Muslim cities to judge according to the juridical principle that God established in their Scriptures: the Torah and the Gospels. According to the Qur'an, this principle is none other than the law of retaliation, quoted in the centre: the Gospel, again according to the Qur'an, is supposed to assume the same principle as the Torah. Here the quotation makes explicit what is said indirectly in the outer parts (in red ink). It will be noticed that here too, the central part is briefer than the parts which frame it. I will return to this example a little later.

The following central quotation (5,32) is introduced by the same verb : «We have prescribed» (*katabnā*). Except for the clause «not for another soul or for the corruption on the earth», it literally repeats the *Mishna Sanhedrin* IV,5.

Therefore we prescribed for the children of Israel that «whoever kills a soul – not for (another) soul or for corruption on the earth – it is as though he had killed the whole of humanity, and whoever makes to live, it is though he had made the whole of humanity live».

THE QUESTION

Often the centre contains a question addressed to the conscience of the reader/listener. It is up to him to respond. A striking example can be found at the centre of sura 12, the sura of «Joseph». The whole sura is constructed as a long chiasmus with twelve sequences put into two inversed series of six sequences: ABCDEF//F'E'D'C'B'A'. In sequence F, Joseph finds himself in prison and addresses his two fellow prisoners encouraging them to convert to the monotheistic faith. This discourse, almost at the centre of the sura, is constructed in a concentric way A/x/A'. In the first piece (A), Joseph relates his own conversion to the religion of his fathers; in the third piece (A'), he invites his fellow prisoners to do the same. The terms which correspond to one another in the outer pieces (A and A') are indicated by their colours. The centre poses a brief question — but one central to Islam — challenging his fellow prisoners and, beyond them, the readers/listeners of the Qur'an, to choose between polytheism and monotheism. This discourse of Joseph obviously is not contained in the Bible. It redirects the Biblical story of Joseph along a new path, making him a prophet of Islam.

^{37a} I have forsaken *the religion of a people who do not believe in God*^b and they are deniers of the hereafter. ^{38a} And I follow the religion of *my fathers*, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. ^b It is not for us to associate anything with God. ^c That is a favor of God to us and to the people. ^d **BUT MOST OF THE PEOPLE DO NOT SHOW GRATITUDE.**

^{39a} **O my two fellow-prisoners,
are various Lords better or God the One, the Victorious?**

^{40a} You do not serve besides Him but names^b which you have named, you and *your fathers*. ^c God has not sent down any authority for them. ^d The judgment is only God's. ^e He has commanded that you serve none but Himself ^f That is *the right religion*. ^g **BUT MOST OF THE PEOPLE DO NOT KNOW.** (12,37-40)

MAXIM

There are many instances in the Qur'an where the centre contains a maxim – often of great wisdom, theological, ethical or legal implications.

WISDOM MAXIMS

In the centre of sura 91 («The Sun»), there is a sentence of wisdom, characteristic of this genre, which opposes the happiness and the misery of mankind.

¹ By the sun and the brightness of it! ² By the moon when it follows it! ³ By the day when it reveals the splendor of it! ⁴ By the night when it veils it! ⁵ By the heaven and what built it! ⁶ By the earth and what spread it out! ⁷ By the soul and what has **LEVELED** it ⁸ and inspired it its wickedness and its piety!

⁹ **Truly, he will be successful who purifies it!**
¹⁰ **and truly, he will fail who corrupts it!**

¹¹ The Thamūd denied in their rebellion ¹² when the most miserable of them was deputed. ¹³ And said to them the Messenger of God: «The she-camel of God and her drink!» ¹⁴ Then they denied him and they hamstrung her. So crushed them their Lord for their sin and **LEVELED** them. ¹⁵ And He fears not its consequence.

The outer parts have as final term «He leveled it/them» interpreted in two different ways. In the first part (7), it means «ordered» the soul. God puts the soul in equilibrium between wickedness and piety. The soul will have to decide between them. In the third part (14), it means «flatten». God crushes out the People of Thamud because of their sin. This is given as an historical-legendary example of wickedness, corruption and failure.

The central part sets forth the essential message of the sura: moral purity assures the prosperity of the soul while corruption condemns it to failure.

The centre makes the meaning of the outer pieces explicit. Note should be made of its concise form in a brief antithesis between two contradictory moral attitudes and their consequences. Very often in the Qur'an, there is an antithesis at the centre: it was the same thing in the example of the Joseph sura and in the quotation from the *Mishna*.

THEOLOGICAL MAXIMS

The question Joseph poses to his fellow prisoners is, at the same time, a theological maxim expressed in the form of a question: «Are various Lords better or God the One, the Victorious?» The characteristics of the centre can be multiple.

Sura 92 («The Night») is composed concentrically in the following way: ABCD/x/D'C'B'A'. The outer parts which frame the centre describe the conduct of the good and the evil and their eschatological destinies. The short central part (a bi-member segment) announces the theological truth this destiny implies: it is God who guides and who decides in the life here below and in the life to come.

A ¹ By the night when it veils, ² by the day when it shines ³ by what created the male and the female, ⁴ verily your effort is diverse.

B ⁵ As for him **WHO GIVES** and **FEARS** [God] ⁶ and testifies the best [thing], ⁷ We will ease for him the ease.

C ⁸ And as for **him who is niggardly and considers himself self-sufficient** ⁹ and **COUNTS FALSE** the best [thing], ¹⁰ We will ease for him the difficulty,

D ^{11a} and his wealth will not profit him, ^b when he perishes (*TArADDĀ*).

¹² Surely Ours is the guidance.

¹³ And surely Ours is the last [life] and the first.

D' ¹⁴ I warn you of a fire [that] flames (*TAIAZZĀ*).

C' ¹⁵ None shall reach it but **the most miserable** ¹⁶ who **HAS TURNED FALSE** and turned away.

B' ¹⁷ And shall avoid it **WHO MOST FEARS** [-God] ¹⁸ **WHO GIVES** his wealth to purify himself.

A' ¹⁹ And no one has with him any boon for which he should be rewarded, ²⁰ except the seeking of the face of his Lord, the Most High. ²¹ And, assuredly, he will be satisfied.

CENTRE OF THE PASSAGE 5, 65-71

Central maxims are sometimes in sharp contrast with the verses that frame them. Verse 69, which puts forth one of the most open and tolerant theological

positions of the Qur'an, is in stark contrast with the polemic verses directed at the People of the Scriptures (Jews and Christians) which frame it.

^{69a} Surely, those who believe, ^b and those who practice Judaism, and the Sabiens and the Christians, ^c whoever believes in God and the Last Day, ^d and does good works, ^e there is no fear for them and they will not be afflicted.

This obviously poses a serious question of interpretation. The centre should be considered as the key to the interpretation of the text: it has a scope which is permanent and universal whereas the outer parts allude to particular historical circumstances which oppose the peoples of the Scripture to the prophets sent by God. Perhaps the centre is a later addition. In any case, however, it opens a perspective of salvation for Jews and Christians.

LEGAL MAXIMS

The law of retaliation (5, 45), quoted above as an example of «quotation in the centre» is obviously a major legal sentence.

ETHICAL MAXIMS

^{45a} And we have prescribed for them therein:
^b «**Life for life, eye for eye, nose for nose, ear for ear, tooth for tooth, ^c and for wounds, retaliation**».
^d **And whoever would give alms of this, ^e this will be an expiation for him.**
^f And whoever does not judge according to what God has sent down,
^g those are the evildoers.

Alongside the quotation of the law of retaliation, in the same verse 5,49, can be found the following pronouncement: «And whoever would give alms for this, this will be an expiation for him». The law of retaliation is presented first as a legal reference, imposing a proportion between the fault and the punishment. But the legal level is immediately transcended by a superior ethic of generosity which encourages the renouncement of this same law.

The quotation of the *Mishna* in sura 5, 32 which we studied above as an example of a «quotation in the centre» is, at the same time, of great ethical importance.

³² Therefore we prescribed for the children of Israel that «whoever kills a soul — **not for (another) soul or for corruption on the earth** — it is as though he had killed the whole of humanity, and whoever makes to live, it is though he had made the whole of humanity live.»

This sentence is found at the centre of a sequence whose first passage tells of the murder of Abel by Cain and the final passage relates a series of very severe punishments (which will be codified in the *shari'a*).

^g Surely, to them came our messengers with proofs, ^h then, truly, many of them on earth were exploiters. ^{33a} **The retribution for those who fight God and his Messenger ^b and who strive to sow corruption on the earth ^c will be that they will be killed or they will be crucified, ^d or that will be cut off their opposing hands and feet, ^e or that they will be banished from the earth: ^f this will be for them a disgrace in the present, ^g and for them, in the hereafter, a huge punishment, ^{34a} except for those who repent before you have caught them, ^b and know that God is forgiving, compassionate.**

The incise in the quotation of the *Mishna* lets it be understood that there are exceptions to the prohibition of murder, but the sentence of the *Mishna* remains a fundamental ethical rule.

IN SUMMARY

In Semitic rhetoric, concentric compositions have a certain number of formal characteristics which distinguish them from the pieces of the text that frame them. Most often, it is from the centre that the meaning of the entire structure can be discerned.

Abstract

Semitic rhetoric is mainly concerned with what the Greco-Roman rhetoric meant by «dispositio». Of the three forms of composition used in Semitic rhetoric, namely parallelism, mirror (or chiasmic) construction and concentric composition (or ring composition), the latter is of particular interest for the interpretation, by the fact that the centre of the composition is frequently an interpretive key to the entire text. It is so sometimes explicitly, in the form of a sentence, other times indirectly, in the form of a question or a parable, leaving it to the reader to find the answer of the question or the symbolic meaning of the parable. The Qur'an appears increasingly as a privileged text for the study of Semitic rhetoric. Examples of centres will be given from different chapters of the Qur'an, showing the various forms that centres can take, and their significance for the interpretation.