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Self-similarity as Form and Structure: Reading Strategies in Medieval and Contemporary Exegesis of the Qurʾān[***]

1. *Cohesion and Coherence in the Qurʾān*

The search for cohesion and coherence has become a major trend in Qurʾanic studies[1]. A growing number of scholars, indeed, maybe partly in antithesis with a past trend in which the Qurʾān was openly labelled as «strikingly lacking in overall structure»[2], has begun to study the form and structure of the Qurʾān in a systematic and methodic way, arguing that there is cohesion and coherence to be found therein[3]. In most cases this formal cohesion and/or semantic coherence has been found at the level of

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[1] For a general overview see (Rippin, 2013). Cfr. also (Friedman, 2012) and (Reda, 2010).
[2] (Crone, Cook, 1977: 18), but a plethora of other similar statements can be easily found in the whole Western scholarship on the Qurʾān. See, *e. g.*, (Nicholson, 1993: 161) «The preposterous arrangement of the Koran [...] is mainly responsible for the opinion almost unanimously held by European readers that it is obscure, tiresome, uninteresting; a farrago of long-winded narratives and prosaic exhortations, quite unworthy to be named in the same breath with the Prophetical Books of the Old Testament». For more on that see also (Khalifa, 1983: 20, ff.), and (Rippin, 2006: 239, ff.).
[3] Cfr. (Rippin, 2013: 1).

*sūra*s, seen as unities, depending on scholars and approaches, from a thematic, literary, liturgical, rhetorical or structural point of view[4].

The whole issue, actually, should, at first, be split into two, separate, orders of problems:

1. The issue of the cohesion and coherence of the individual *sūra*s.
2. The issue of the cohesion and coherence of the whole Qurʾān.

As for the cohesion and coherence of individual *sūra*s much progress has been made since Nöldeke and Bell's early refutation of the literary charachter of the *sūra*s[5]: at first, indeed, mainly with reference to the formal cohesion of Meccan (short) *sūra*s[6], but, later on, also regarding the cohesion and coherence of Medinan (long) *sūra*s[7].

As for the cohesion and coherence of the whole Qurʾān, instead, we still grope in the dark. Moreover, if we suppose, as it has been openly proposed[8], that the literary study of individual *sūra*s should be, according to a kind of inductive methodology, a first step towards the understanding of

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[4] (Rippin, 2013: 6-8).

[5] See (Nöldeke, 2013), and (Watt, Bell, 1970: *passim*). For a first critical evaluation see (Neuwirth, 1970). This 'skeptical' attitude, far from being completely abandoned, is still very productive in the works of those scholars who claim a diachronic and historical-critical approach to the Qurʾān. For them the Qurʾān is nothing more than the result of a historical process and for this same reason they expect it to be thus, logically, missing any kind of formal cohesion, see, *e. g.* the main part of the studies presented in (Reynolds, 2008). A middle ground has been recently attempted by (Klar, 2017).

[6] See, *e. g.*, (Neuwirth, 1981), and (Crapon de Caprona, 1981). Neuwirth, in particular, will maintain, even much later on, that while for Meccan (short) *sūra*s it is possible to uncover the structures that are at the basis of their ordered composition, for Medinan (long) *sūra*s the same process would not be applicable nor desirable because, these long *sūra*s, would, in her own words, «cease to be neatly structured compositions, but appear to be the result of a process of collection that we cannot yet reconstruct» (Neuwirth, 2006: 174). Cfr. also (Neuwirth, 1996: 98) «sie [the long *sūra*s] fungieren […] als "Sammel-körbe" fur isolierte Versgruppen zu sämtlichen klassischen Suren-Topoi». The study of the form and structure of short *sūra*s has continued, of course, even in the following decades with very different, although generally structuralist, approaches, see, *e. g.*, (Ambros, 1986), (Sells, 1991; 1993), (Cuypers, 1995; 1997; 1999; 2000; 2001; 2003), (Dayeh, 2010).

[7] See, *e. g.*, (Zahniser, 1991; 1997; 2000), (Robinson, 2003: 196-223; 2001), (Smith, 2001, Cuypers, 2007, Farrin, 2010, Id., 2016. Sometimes scholars have leaned on contemporary Muslim exegesis which seems to have been, during the XX century, particularly sensitive to this kind of unitary approach to *sūra*s, see, *e. g.*, (Mir, 1993) and (Boullata, 2000).

[8] See (Zahniser, 1991).

the form and structure of the whole Qurʾān[9], we must at least recognize that we are still at the beginnings (one single, but huge, example: none of the explanations given so far for the order of sūras in the Qurʾanic textus receptus is, to all effects, fully satisfying and convincing)[10].

An essential step towards the understanding of the overall structure of the Qurʾān is to be found in the seminal works of M. Mir who proposed a unitary reading of the Qurʾān based on the exegesis of the Pakistani Qurʾān commentator A. A. Iṣlaḥī and founded on the concept of *sūra*-pair[11]. According to Iṣlaḥī's view most, if not all, Qurʾanic *sūra*s occur as pairs carachterized by some kind of complementarity[12]. The *sūra*-pairs, in Iṣlaḥī's slightly rigid view, must necessarily be composed of two consecutive *sūra*s, and so *sūra* 2 is paired by him with *sūra* 3, *sūra* 4 with *sūra* 5, *sūra* 6 with *sūra* 7 and so on[13].

Despite a certain rigidity, Iṣlaḥī's methodology shows, in fact, a remarkable heuristic value for the consistency with which it explains so many stylistic, structural and thematic features of the Qurʾān[14]. Moreover this perspective was also fundamental in that it allowed scholars working on symmetry, circularity and ring structures to make a leap forward and widen their vision by applying the concept of symmetry outside of the *sūra* as well as inside, and suggesting, maybe for the first time in such a systematic way, that binarity and symmetry could be the key for the understanding of the overall structure of the Qurʾān and not only of the structure of the individual *sūra*s seen as discrete unities of the text[15]. As a result, this kind of 'structuralist' approaches based on binarity and symmetry look as the most convincing and consistent explanations given, so far, to the overall structure of the Qurʾān.

It must be also said, however, that this kind of approaches, far from being universally agreed, have been harshly criticized. The strongest criti-

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[9] (Zahniser, 80).

[10] A good *résumé* of the whole issue is in (Robinson, 2001: 256-283).

[11] See (Mir, 1983; 1986).

[12] (Mir, 1983: 24 ff.).

[13] (Mir, 1983: 24 ff.).

[14] See also (Robinson, 2001: 271-283).

[15] Several Western scholars have being, lately, working on symmetry, circularity and ring-structures. Some of them have succeeded, finally, to propose a unified view of the structure of the Qurʾān based on binarity and symmetry. See, *e. g.*, (Cuypers, 2012) and (Ernst, 2011). An example of how the concept of symmetry has been progressively extended from the internal structure of the *sūra*, to the *sūra*-pair and, finally to the overall structure of the Qurʾān can be found, *e. g.*, in the scholarly production of R. Farrin, see (Farrin, 2010; 2014b; 2014a; 2015).

cism comes from supporters of historical-critical approach that, usually, do not deny the general validity of the method[16], but rather reproaches for it a certain lack of univocity[17]. In some cases Western 'structuralist' approaches have been also criticized for being superimposing their own views over traditional Islamic perceptions of the text[18]. The late A. Rippin was probably right when he observed that it is important not to view such approaches to coherence as 'proving' the point, because there are, have been and will always be, other possible approaches to the Qurʾān[19].

The main critical point that should not be underestimated here is that, starting from M. Mir, practically all approaches to Qurʾanic Cohesion and Coherence (*naẓm*) have focused on the unity of the *sūra*, although Mir himself admits that the view of the Qurʾānic *sūra*s as unities is an innovation of nineteenth- and twentieth-century exegesis[20]. Often, as an antecedent to this kind of approach scholars refer to ʿ*ilm al-munāsaba* (the science of concordance of verses and *sūra*s) quoting mainly FaḪr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) who used to say that most subtleties of the Qurʾān are to be found in its ordered arrangement and in its internal relationships (*akṯar laṭāʾif al-Qurʾān mūdaʿa fī al-tartībāt wa-l-rawābiṭ*)[21]. According to Mir, anyway, «Rāzī views Qurʾanic *naẓm* essentially in terms of linear connection: his goal is to show that the verses of a *sūrah* are marked by continuity»[22]. In al-Rāzī's point of view, however, it is the whole Qurʾān that is perceived like a single *sūra* (*al-Qurʾān kullu-hu ka-l-sūra al-wāḥida*), and this right because of the internal relationships that bind its parts to each other (*li-ittiṣāl baʿḍi-hi bi-baʿḍin*)[23]. The proof of that, he says, is the fact that the Qurʾān often raises an argument in one *sūra*, and then reports the answer to this same argument in another *sūra* (*wa-l-dalīl ʿalay-hi anna-hu qad yaḏkuru al-šayʾ fī sūra ṯumma yaǧīʾ ǧawāba-hu fī sūra uḫrā*)[24]: it is because the Qurʾān, as a whole, is like a single *sūra* and like a single verse, indeed, that the various parts of the Qurʾān confirm each other and clarify the meaning of each other (*li-anna al-Qurʾān kulla-hu ka-l-sūra al-wāḥida wa-ka-l-āya al-wāḥida yuṣaddiqu baʿḍu-hā baʿḍan wa-yubayyinu baʿḍu-hā*

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[16] (Dye, 2014: 150).
[17] (Dye, 2014: 151).
[18] (Friedman, 2012: 130-131).
[19] (Rippin, 2013: 1).
[20] (Mir, 1993: 211).
[21] (Rāzī, 2008: IV, 110).
[22] (Mir, 2013: 20).
[23] (Rāzī, 2008: X, 719). Cfr. (Villano, 2016: 66).
[24] (Rāzī, 2008: X, 719). Cfr. (Villano, 2016: 66).

maʿnā baʿḍin)[25], consistently with the famous general rule according to which the best exegetical approach ever (*aṣaḥḥ al-ṭurūq*) is to explain the Qurʾān through the Qurʾān itself (*al-Qurʾān yufassiru baʿḍu-hu baʿḍan*)[26].

But, here is the main point: how was it possible, for medieval readers, to explain the Qurʾān through the Qurʾān itself, how was it made this pairing and explaining of Qurʾanic verses and *sūra*s? It is very likely that there were, in classical Islam, other, much more sophisticated, approaches and perceptions of the form and structure of the Qurʾān[27].

2. *A Self-Similar and Binary Book*

The Qurʾān is a self-similar and binary book (*kitāban mutašābiha maṯāniya-a*)[28]. Self-similarity is a defining feature of the Qurʾān and the high degree of inner similarity of the text has been and is still perceived by readers of every time and place[29].

Western scholarship has been often puzzled by this feature of the text: for Th. Nöldeke, by way of example, «the endless repetitions, in which the Prophet does not hesitate to use almost identical words [...] and the monotonous narratives all often make the revelations downright boring»[30]. The reasoning of R. Bell is a much more sophisticated: for him, indeed, «the reference to God's 'collecting' of the Qurʾān in 75.17 would seem to imply that Muḥammad received revelations combining (and perhaps adapting) previous revelations. This further implies that a revelation may be repeated, perhaps in slightly different terms. This becomes all the more significant when one remembers the numerous repetitions of phrases and verses throughout the Qurʾān. It may also be linked up with the pheno-menon of alternative continuations. It seems likely, then, assuming that some passages had been revealed in slightly different forms on different oc-casions, and remembered by individual Muslims in their different forms, that the 'collectors' had on their hands a formidable problem. They would not want to omit any smallest scrap of genuine revelation, and yet the total mass of material may have been so vast that they could not include

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[25] (Rāzī, 2008: XI, 295). Cfr. (Villano, 2016: 66).
[26] (Ibn Taymiyya, 1972: 93).
[27] Cfr. (Hamori, 1984).
[28] Q. 39, 23.
[29] Cfr. (Lancioni, Villano, Romani, 2016: 355).
[30] (Nöldeke, 2013: 117).

it all. This may explain some of the roughnesses in the ʿUthmānic text»[31].
J. Wansbrough goes even further explicitly stating that «particularly in the
exempla of salvation history, characterized by variant traditions, but also
in passages of exclusively paraenetic or eschatological content, ellipsis and
repetition are such as to suggest not the carefully executed project of one
or of many men, but rather the product of an organic development from
originally independent traditions during a long period of transmission»[32].

In Muslim traditional exegesis, instead, self-similarity has given rise to a
specific exegetical genre that has been called *Mutašābih al-Qurʾān* (Self-si-
milarity in the Qurʾanic text). In this peculiar exegetical genre Qurʾanic
verses and *sūra*s are paired, not much on the basis of their linear placement
along the text, but rather on the basis of their reciprocal similarity: the text
itself, by this way, is no more perceived as a chain of *logia* following the
linear order of verses and *sūra*s, but as a real jumble of structures that can
be dismantled and reassembled at any time[33].

While the first book written on this topic are probably the *Muštabahāt
al-Qurʾān* of the celebrated Kūfan grammarian and philologist al-Kisāʾī (d.
189/805)[34], this exegetical genre sees its greatest and more sophisticated
development in the period between the fourth/tenth and the seventh/thir-
teenth centuries, in the works of al-Ḫaṭīb al-Iskāfī (d. 420/1029)[35], al-Kir-
mānī (d. ca. 505/1111-2)[36] and Ibn al-Zubayr al-Ġarnāṭī (d. 708/1308)[37].
Nevertheless while for the idea of the Qurʾanic *sūra*s as unities it is true
that we are facing a groundbreaking innovation of nineteenth- and twen-
tieth-century exegesis, in this case, a not mainstream, but still uninter-
rupted, exegetical tradition directly connects those medieval readings and
perception of the form and structure of the Qurʾān to the works of con-
temporary scholars like Ḫālidī[38] and Sāmarrāʾī[39].

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[31] (Watt, Bell, 1970: 107).
[32] (Wansbrough, 2004: 47).
[33] Cfr. (Brown: 1991: 90): «Hence, it does not matter in what order you read the Koran:
it is all there all the time; and it is supposed to be there all the time in your mind or at the
back of your mind, memorized and available for appropriate quotation and collage into
your conversation or your writing or your action.»
[34] (Kisāʾī, 2008).
[35] (Iskāfī, 2001).
[36] (Kirmānī, 1977).
[37] (Ġarnāṭī, 1983).
[38] (Ḫālidī, 1992).
[39] (Sāmarrāʾī, 2000; 2009).

3. *Two practical examples*

Two practical examples will be made here to demonstrate how self-similarity can be used, in the Qurʾan, as a textual strategy to achieve Cohesion and Coherence. The first example will show how self-similarity can be useful, at a formal level, to achieve the Cohesion and Coherence of individual *sūra*s, while the second one, going beyond the borders of the single *sūra*, will show how self-similarity can be useful, at a structural level, to achieve the Cohesion and Coherence of the whole Qurʾān.

In this respect, it seems useful to remember that, according to Halliday and Hasan «Cohesion occurs [in a given text] where the *interpretation* of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another […] Cohesion is a semantic relation between an element in the text and some other element that is crucial to the interpretation of it. This other element is also to be found; but its location in the text is in no way determined by the grammatical structure. The two elements, the presupposing and the presupposed, may be structurally related to each other, or they may not; it makes no difference to the meaning of the cohesive relation»[40].

3.1. *Cohesion and Coherence in* sūrat al-kahf

The first example that will be seen here is taken from the story of Moses and Ḥiḍr in Q. 18 (*sūrat al-kahf*). It is a case of deletion (or syncope) of the formative *tāʾ* of the tenth derivative form in the verb of the possibility (*ḥaḏf tāʾ istafʿala fī fiʿl al-istiṭāʿ*). Now, the occurrences of the verb *istaṭāʿa* in the story of Moses in Q. 18 (vv. 60-82) are as follows:

67 *qāla innaka lan tastaṭīʿa maʿī ṣabran* (You will not be able to bear with me patiently)

72 *qāla a-lam aqul innaka lan tastaṭīʿa maʿī ṣabran* (Did I not tell you that you would never be able to bear with me patiently?)

75 *qāla a-lam aqul laka innaka lan tastaṭīʿa maʿī ṣabran* (Did I not tell you that you would never be able to bear with me patiently?)

78 *qāla haḏā firāqu baynī wa baynika sa-unabbiʾuka bi-taʾwīli mā lam tastaṭiʿ ʿalayhi ṣabran* (This is where you and I part company. I will tell you the meaning of the things you could not bear with patiently)

82 […] *ḏālika taʾwīlu mā lam tasṭiʿ ʿalayhi ṣabran* (these are the explanations for those things you could not bear with patience)

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[40] (Halliday & Hasan, 1976: 4, 8).

As it can be seen they all revolve around the inability of Moses to bear with patience without criticizing or objecting anything in relation to the strange behaviour of al-Ḫiḍr. This is the full story (vv. 64-82):

Q. 18: «64 Moses said, "Then that was the place we were looking for." So the two turned back, retraced their footsteps, 65 and found one of Our servants – a man to whom We had granted Our mercy and whom We had given knowledge of Our own. 66 Moses said to him, "May I follow you so that you can teach me some of the right guidance you have been taught?" 67 The man said, "You will not be able to bear with me patiently (*qāla innaka lan tastaṭīʿa maʿī ṣabran*). 68 How could you be patient in matters beyond your knowledge?" 69 Moses said, "God willing, you will find me patient. I will not disobey you in any way." 70 The man said, "If you follow me then, do not query anything I do before I mention it to you myself." 71 They travelled on. Later, when they got into a boat, and the man made a hole in it, Moses said, "How could you make a hole in it? Do you want to drown its passengers? What a strange thing to do!" 72 He replied, "Did I not tell you that you would never be able to bear with me patiently (*qāla a-lam aqul innaka lan tastaṭīʿa maʿī ṣabran*)?" 73 Moses said, "Forgive me for forgetting. Do not make it too hard for me to follow you." 74 And so they travelled on. Then, when they met a young boy and the man killed him, Moses said, "How could you kill an innocent person? He has not killed anyone! What a terrible thing to do!" 75 He replied, "Did I not tell you that you would never be able to bear with me patiently (*qāla a-lam aqul laka innaka lan tastaṭīʿa maʿī ṣabran*)?" 76 Moses said, "From now on, if I query anything you do, banish me from your company – you have put up with enough from me." 77 And so they travelled on. Then, when they came to a town and asked the inhabitants for food but were refused hospitality, they saw a wall there that was on the point of falling down and the man repaired it. Moses said, "But if you had wished you could have taken payment for doing that." 78 He said, "This is where you and I part company. I will tell you the meaning of the things you could not bear with patiently (*qāla haḏā firāqu baynī wa baynika sa-unabbiʾuka bi-taʾwīli mā lam tastaṭiʿ ʿalayhi ṣabran*): 79 the boat belonged to some needy people who made their living from the sea and I damaged it because I knew that coming after them was a king who was seizing every [serviceable] boat by force. 80 The young boy had parents who were people of faith, and so, fearing he would trouble them through wickedness and disbelief, 81 we wished that their Lord should give them another child – purer and more compassionate – in his place. 82 The wall belonged to two young orphans

in the town and there was buried treasure beneath it belonging to them. Their father had been a righteous man, so your Lord intended them to reach maturity and then dig up their treasure as a mercy from your Lord. I did not do [these things] of my own accord: these are the explanations for those things you could not bear with patience (*ḏālika taʾwīlu mā lam tasṭiʿ ʿalayhi ṣabran*).”»

According to the explanation given by Ḫalīdī[41] the comparison has to be made between vv. 78 and 82, the only two occurrences that contains a reference to the explanations (*taʾwīl*) required by Moses[42]. The first occurrence (v. 78) is found in a particularly critical point in the development of the story: after having seen al-Ḫiḍr making a hole in a boat and killing a young boy without any apparent reason and finally repair the damaged wall without asking anything from the inhabitants of the town who had just refused them the hospitality, Moses falls into a state of temporary confusion and affliction for his inability to interpret and explain those events (*waqaʿa Mūsā fī ḥayra fī taʾwīl wa-taʿlīl al-aḥdāṯ*), like if he was in a heavy spiritual and psychological concern (*ka-annahu ṣāra fī hamm nafsī wa-šuʿūrī ṯaqīl*) and so the Qurʾān chose, in the first case (v. 78), to leave the verb in its complete, heavy, form, to better adapt it to the spiritual and psychological heaviness experienced by Moses (*fa-aṯbata al-tāʾ* […] *li-yattafiqa ḏālika maʿa al-ṯiql al-nafsī allaḏī yaʿīšuhu Mūsā*)[43]. The second occurrence (v. 82), instead, is found in a completely different point of the story, when al-Ḫiḍr has already explained to Moses the reasons behind his three strange actions and now Moses is aware of the justice that there was therein (*ʿarafa Mūsā anna al-Ḫiḍr ʿalā ḥaqq wa-ṣawāb fī taṣarrufātihi al-ṯalāṯa*) and so the spiritual and psychological concern that had taken his soul, previously, now vanishes and with it also the heavy spiritual weight he has lived is finally disappearing (*wa-bi-ḏālika zāla al-hamm allaḏī sayṭara ʿalayhi wa-l-ṯiql al-nafsī allaḏī ʿāṣahu*) and so the Qurʾān chose to lighten the verb and give it in its syncopated, shorter and lighter form to better adapt the form of the text to the meaning of the story and make it formally participate in the lightening of the spiritual and psychological concern experienced by Moses (*fa-ḥuḏifat al-tāʾ min al-fiʿl tasṭiʿ li-tušārika al-taḫfīf al-nafsī ʿinda Mūsā bi-ḫiffa fī ḥurūf al-fiʿl*)[44].

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[41] (Ḫalīdī, 1992: 52-54).
[42] (Ḫalīdī, 1992: 53).
[43] (Ḫalīdī, 1992: 53-54).
[44] (Ḫalīdī, 1992: 54).

In the point of view of Sāmarrāʾī, too, the comparison has to be made between vv. 78 and 82, but his explanation is more based on formal and stylistic data. According to his point of view, indeed, the first verse (78) occurs in the linguistic and stylistic context of commentary, clarification and explanation (*maqam šarḥ wa-īḍāḥ wa-tabyīn*) and in those contexts, in Arabic, it is more appropriate the detailed and full exposition of the discourse, so this is why the Qurʾān does not delete here anything and gives the verb in its complete heavier form, while the second verse (82) is found in the context of final greetings (*maqām mufāraqatin*) and after this expression there is no more than one or two single words and then the final goodbye *(wa-lam yatakallam baʿdahā bi-kalima wa-fāraqahu)* and in Arabic it is therefore more appropriate, in these contexts, the concise and abridged style of the discourse and so this is why the Qurʾān delete, here, a letter from the verb and gives it in its syncopated, incomplete and lighter form (*fa-ḥaḏafa min al-fiʿl*)[45].

As it can be seen, while the explanation given by Ḫalīdī tends to emphasize the coherence of the text at an especially semantic level, the explanation given by Sāmarrāʾī tends to emphasize the cohesion of the text on a mainly formal level. Be this as it may, it is true that if we look at the story of Moses in Q. 18 from a stylistic point of view we can see that the weight of the sentence (*tawkīd*) related to the inability of Moses to bear with patience without criticizing the behaviour of al-Ḫiḍr goes heavier and heavier from v. 67 to v. 75 (67 *innaka lan tastaṭīʿa maʿī ṣabran* – 72 *a-lam aqul innaka lan tastaṭīʿa maʿī ṣabran* – 75 *a-lam aqul laka innaka lan tastaṭīʿa maʿī ṣabran*), until the turning point of v. 78 which introduces the end of the story and in which al-Ḫiḍr starts to give the explanations required by Moses. In this respect it would even be possible to say that the entire story of Moses in Q. 18 is built over the inability of Moses to bear with patience expressed, at a formal level, by the verb [*mā*] *istaṭāʿa* and so, just as soon as this disability begins to disappear, also the verb that was used to express this inability begins to fall apart[46]. It is also very important to stress, anyway, the continuity of these explanation with the medieval, Islamic, exegetical tradition. It was already al-Kirmānī, indeed, the first interpreter who, in a very brief and deep insight, proposed that the syncopated form of v. 82 could be lightened because it is the last derivation of all previous, similar, verbal forms (*ʿalā al-taḫfīf li-anna-hu farʿ*)[47].

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[45] (Sāmarrāʾī, 2000: 19).
[46] (Villano, 2016: 88-89).
[47] (Kirmānī, 1977: 171). Cfr. (Villano, 2016: 88).

Moreover, on a macro level, if we look at all the occurrences of the verb *istaṭāʿa* in Q. 18:

vv. 41, 67, 72, 75 *tastaṭīʿa*
v. 78 *tastaṭiʿ*
v. 82 *tasṭiʿ* (syncopated)
v. 97 *isṭāʿū* (syncopated)
v. 97 *istaṭāʿū*
v. 101 *yastaṭīʿūna*

we can notice that the two syncopated forms of the verb *istaṭāʿa* are the last form that is found in the story of Moses and the first one that is found in the immediately subsequent story of Ḏū al-Qarnayn and so, if the first syncopated form of the verb *istaṭāʾa* was useful to give Cohesion and Coherence to the single story of Moses and al-Ḥiḍr, the second one can be useful to give cohesion to the whole *sūra* in that it ties the different stories together by a sort of dovetailing[48].

3.2. *Cohesion and Coherence in Qurʾān Overall Structure*

The second example that will be made here is a case in which two very similar (*mutašābiha*), although not really identical, verses from two different *sūra*s and referred to two different stories are compared:

Q. 7, 195: «Say [Prophet], "Call on your 'partners'! Scheme against me! Do not spare me! *(quli ʾdʿū šurakāʾakum ṯumma kīdūni fa-lā tunẓirūni)*"»
Q. 11, 55: «So plot against me, all of you, and give me no respite *(fa-kīdunī ǧamīʿan ṯumma lā tunẓirūni)*.»

The first difference that is worth noticing between the two verses is the deletion of the first person suffix pronoun (*ḥaḏf yāʾ al-mutakallim*) and its substitution by a *kasra* (*wa-ʾǧtizāʾ bi-l-kasra*) in Q. 7 (*kīdūni*) and the regular mention of the first person suffix pronoun (*wa-ḏikruhā*) in Q, 11 (*fa-kīdūnī*)[49].

As a general rule, in Qurʾanic Arabic, when this kind of binary opposition is found, the first person suffix pronoun (*al-yāʾ*) is mentioned only

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[48] (Villano, 2016: 89-90).
[49] (Sāmarrāʾī, 2009: 82).

in contexts in which detailed exposition is required (*maqam iṭāla wa-tafṣīl fī al-kalām*), while its deletion occurs in contexts in which brief summary is permitted (*bi-ḫilāf al-iġtizāʾ bi-l-kasra fa-inna fīhi iġtizāʾ fī al-kalām*), except for for the cases of the pausal verse endings and of the vocative syntactical position of the names (*ʿadā ḫawātim al-āy wa-l-nidāʾ*)[50].

Now, if we look at the general context in which the two verses are found we can notice that, in Q. 11, the verse is found inside a context of big challenge and direct clash (*maqam taḥaddin kabīr wa-muwāǧaha*) and so the speaker (Hud) needs to show himself to emphasize the challenge, because it is normal that the person who wants to challenge and clash with someone else has to show up himself in the first person (*iḏ al-mutaḥaddī wa-ṭālab al-muwāǧaha lā budda an yaẓhara nafsahu*) and for this reason it is logical and appropriate to the context that the Qurʾān emphasizes, also from a formal point of view, the pronoun which denotes the first person, while in Q. 7 the context is much more general and there is no such challenge and direct clash (*wa-laysa al-amr ka-ḏālika fī al-aʿrāf fa-inna laysa fīha hāḏā al-taḥaddī*):

Q. 7: «193 If you [believers] call such people to guidance, they do not follow you: it makes no difference whether you call them or remain silent. 194 Those you [idolaters] call upon instead of God are created beings like you. Call upon them, then, and let them respond to you if what you say is true. 195 Do they have feet to walk, hands to strike, eyes to see, or ears to hear? Say [Prophet], "Call on your 'partners'! Scheme against me! Do not spare me (*ṯumma kīdūni fa-lā tunẓirūni*)! 196 My protector is God: He has revealed the Scripture, and it is He who protects the righteous, 197 but those you call on instead of Him cannot help you or even help themselves."»

Q. 11: «50 To the ʿAd, We sent their brother, Hud. He said, "My people, worship God. You have no god other than Him; you are only making up lies. 51 I ask no reward from you, my people; my reward comes only from Him who created me. Why do you not use your reason? 52 My people, ask forgiveness from your Lord, and return to Him. He will send down for you rain in abundance from the sky, and give you extra strength. Do not turn away and be lost in your sins." 53 They replied, "Hud, you have not brought us any clear evidence. We will not forsake our gods on the strength of your word alone, nor will we believe in you. 54 All we can say is that one of our gods may have inflicted some harm on you." He said,

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[50] (Sāmarrāʾī, 2009: 82).

"I call God to witness, and you too are my witnesses, that I disown those you set up as partners with God. 55 So plot against me, all of you, and give me no respite (*fa-kīdunī ǧamīʿan ṯumma lā tunẓirūni*). 56 I put my trust in God, my Lord and your Lord. There is no moving creature which He does not control. My Lord's way is straight. 57 But if you turn away, then I have conveyed the message with which I was sent to you, and my Lord will bring along another people in your place. You cannot do Him any harm: it is my Lord who protects everything." 58 And so, when Our judgement came to pass, by Our grace We saved Hud and his fellow believers. We saved them from a severe punishment.»

As it can be seen, not only in Q. 11 the Adites refuse the call of Hud and denies the signs brough by him (*fa-hum lam yaktafū bi-radd daʿwatihi wa-taṣdīq bihi*), but they also say that one of their fake gods may have inflicted some harm on Hud (*in naqūlu illā ʾʿtarāka baʿḍu ālihatinā bi-sūʾin*) causing him to challenge them, and their gods too by adding the word *ǧamīʿan* (all of you), and calling both God and his people to witness that he disowns the partners they choose instead of God (*mimmā ǧaʿalahu yataḥaddāhum wa-yataḥaddā ālihatahum* […] *fa-zāda kalimat ǧamiʿan ziyāda fī al-taḥaddī*)[51].

Moreover, also from a purely quantitative point of view, the challenge and the whole story, in Q. 11, are much longer than they are in Q. 7 and so the lengthening of the word *kīdūnī* (plot against me) is also appropriate and consistent with the length of the whole story (*fa-ǧaʿala al-kalima al-ṭawīl li-l-siyāq al-ṭawīl*)[52]. Furthermore, from a stylistic point of view, it can be noticed also that the first person suffix pronoun (*al-yāʾ*) is repeated much and much more in the story of Hud in Q. 11 than in the occurrence of Q. 7 (*taraddada ḏikr yāʾ al-ḍamīr fī Hūd fī hāḏā al-mawṭin marrāt ʿadīda wa-laysa al-amr ka-ḏālika fī al-aʿrāf*), as it can be seen in Q. 11, 54 *innī ušhidu ʾllāha* (I call God to witness) *wa-ʾšhadū annī barīʾun* (and you too are my witnesses, that I disown), 55 *fa-kīdūnī ǧamīʿan* (So plot against me, all of you), 56 *innī tawakkaltu ʿalā ʾllāhi rabbī wa-rabbakum* (I put my trust in God, my Lord and your Lord) *inna rabbī ʿalā ṣirāṭin mustaqīmin* (My Lord's way is straight), 57 *wa-yastaḫlifu rabbī qawman ġayrakum* (and my Lord will bring along another people in your place) *inna rabbi ʿalā kulli šayʾin ḥafīẓun* (it is my Lord who protects everything), while in the

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[51] (Sāmarrāʾī, 2009: 83).
[52] (Sāmarrāʾī, 2009: 83).

whole context of Q. 7 the first person suffix pronoun (*al-yā*ʾ) is mentioned only once, in Q. 7, 196 *inna waliyyiya 'llāhu* (My protector is God)[53].

Finally also, positions and syntactical relations in which words are found matter too. In Q. 7, indeed, we can observe that the particle *ṯumma* introduces the plot (*al-kayd*), while the particle *fa-* introduces the respite (*al-inẓār*), contrary to what happens in Q. 11 where the particle *fa-* introduces the plot (*al-kayd*), while the particle *ṯumma* introduces the respite (*al-inẓār*):

> Q. 7, 195 *ṯumma kīdūni fa-lā tunẓirūni*
> Q. 11, 55: *fa-kīdunī ǧamīʿan ṯumma lā tunẓirūni*

As it is well known in Arabic the particle *fa-* denotes the rapid succession of the events, while the particle *ṯumma* denotes the slowness of the succession (*wa-l-fāʾ tufīdu al-taʿqīb ammā ṯumma fa-tufīdu al-tarāḫī*) and in Q. 7, actually, the whole context, from the very beginning of the *sūra*, is always oriented towards the sudden distruction and the immediate punishment of those who deserved it on earth (*taʿǧīl al-ʿuqūbāt li-mu-staḥaqqīhā fī al-dunyā*), as it can be seen, by way of example, in Q. 7, 4: «How many towns We have destroyed! Our punishment came to them by night or while they slept in the afternoon», or in Q. 7, 95: «and then We changed their hardship into prosperity, until they multiplied. But then they said, "Hardship and affluence also befell our forefathers," and so We took them suddenly, unawares.», while in Q. 11 the context of the whole *sūra* is much more oriented towards the granting of an extension, or a delay, to humankind (*bi-ḫilāf sūrat Hūd fa-inna siyāquhā fī al-imhāl fī īqāʿ al-ʿuqūbāt*), as it can be seen, by way of example, in Q. 11, 3: «Ask your Lord for forgiveness, then turn back to Him. He will grant you wholesome enjoyment until an appointed time, and give His grace to everyone who has merit. But if you turn away, I fear you will have torment on a terrible Day», or in Q. 11, 8: «If We defer their punishment for a determined time, they are sure to say, "What is holding it back?" But on the Day it comes upon them, nothing will divert it from them; what they mocked will be all around them»[54].

Always on this same purpose, therefore, it can be noticed also that whenever in Q. 7 we find the particles *ṯumma* and *-fa* the order of the elements is always the same, while whenever we find these two same par-

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[53] (Sāmarrāʾī, 2009: 83).
[54] (Sāmarrāʾī, 2009: 84).

ticles in Q. 11 the order of the elements is always the opposite, what ends up further accentuating the impression of a very high and deep structural system underlying the Qurʾān and of a textual cohesion which seems not so much, or at least not only, pointing to the linear succession of verses, but rather to the overall structure of the text:

> Q. 7, 11: *ṯumma qulnā li-l-malāʾikati ʾsǧudū li-adama - fa-saǧadū*
> Q. 7, 95: *ṯumma baddalnā makāna ʾl-sayyiʾati ʾl-ḥasanata [...] - fa-aḥadnāhum baġtatan wa-hum lā yašʿurūna*
> Q. 7, 103: *ṯumma baʿaṯnā min baʿdihim Mūsā [...] - fa-ẓalamū bi-hā*
> Q. 7, 195: *ṯumma kīdūni - fa-lā tunẓirūni*
> Q. 11, 55: *fa-kīdūnī ǧamīʿan - ṯumma lā tunẓirūni*
> Q. 11, 61: *fa-ʾstaġfirūhu - ṯumma tūbū ilayhi*

4. *Empirically Testing of Self-Similarity*

Self-similarity — or, for that matter, ring structure — has traditionally been devised by hand by researchers subscribing to the idea. While that is natural in an euristic setting, where the researcher has to find out whether some feature is actually present in a text, it is less acceptable in the stage of testing a theory, where some way to falsify assumptions is needed in order to deem a hypothesis scientifically valid or not.

Of course, text research could not easily perform quantitative analyses of text data before computers were available. Exhaustively verifying large quantities of combinations at hand is a very tedious, sometimes empirically impossible, task, which excluded in practice actual verification.

The availability of powerful tools for automatic computing has radically changed the picture. However, in order to test a hypothesis, computational power is not enough: a formally more rigorous definition of conditions is needed in order to allow for a computer program to test them.

As a matter of fact, self-similarity has always been defined rather vaguely in literature. In most cases, it was the interpreter who decided according to his feeling whether two passages were similar or not. In the case of an automatic testing, this is of course not feasible: a computer program must follow a deterministic computing procedure, or an algorithm, in order to be able to draw results.

To this aim, we have devised a formal procedure to test self-similarity in the Qurʾān[55]. We'll review the procedure here in order to understand how it works and how it can be said to test the original hypothesis.

A first point is which level of text segmentation is chosen. As we saw earlier, several levels of similarities (*sūra*, verse, fragment) can be logically identified. However, our choice fell on the verse level, for several reasons.

First, traditional verse division is very old, since it can be found even in the arguably oldest existing copy of the Qurʾan, the Ṣanʿāʾ palimpsest[56]. Therefore, it cannot be regarded as some artifact of later scholarship: it was present, although with some differences, from the very beginning of the history of the text.

Another argument is that verse segmentation is available in a quantity of sources, even in electronic format, while an alternative segmentation would be difficult to perform independently and would require some degree of arbitrary decisions, such as when a logical unit in a *sūra* starts and when it ends. Moreover, as a general scientific rule, such a segmentation would have to be decided by somebody not involved in the analysis itself, to avoid "taint" the results.

The same issue arises with more motivated segmentations, such as what might arise from imbrication techniques: different segmentations would be tried by shifting and enlarging possible sentence-level "windows" in the text until the "best" one is chosen. Since the best solution might be what maximizes similarity, circularity would arise; any other evaluation metrics, however, could present the same kind of problems.

After all, verse segmentation is a given nobody can complain about.

Once solved the segmentation issue, another decision is about how to compute similarity between segments. There are two logical levels that might be implied in this task: word/morpheme and letter/phoneme.

The first level might seem the most appropriate: two verses are the more similar the more words or, better, morpheme (which would consider together different forms or the same word) they share. However, that would imply a number of analytical decisions, unless we take by "word" the naïve information retrieval notion of 'everything between spaces': decision that, again, would meddle in the evaluation process.

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[55] (Lancioni, Villano, Romani, 2016).

[56] The Ṣanʿāʾ palimpsest is the lower layer of a codex found in the Great Mosque of Ṣanʿāʾ, Yemen. Radiocarbon analysis shows the parchment to be likely from the first half of the 7th century AD: see (Sadeghi, Bergmann, 2010). The reconstructed text of the palimpsest shows the presence of verse segmentation, in many cases coinciding with later tradition: see (Sadeghi, Goudarzi, 2012).

On the contrary, the second level is much easier to treat: basically, two verses are the more similar the more phonemes they share. Since Arabic has a phonemical writing system, we can compute that directly at the grapheme level[57].

As a distance metrics, we use Levenshtein distance (Levenshtein , 1966). While we won't enter into details here[58], results are very interesting. 2,395 verse couple are closer than an empirically tested threshold (fixed according to judgments of external testers), out of 6,236 verses in the standard segmentation of the Qurʾān. A comparison with another religious text in Arabic from the Middle Ages, the Arabic Diatessaron, show that this level of similarity is highly significant.[59]

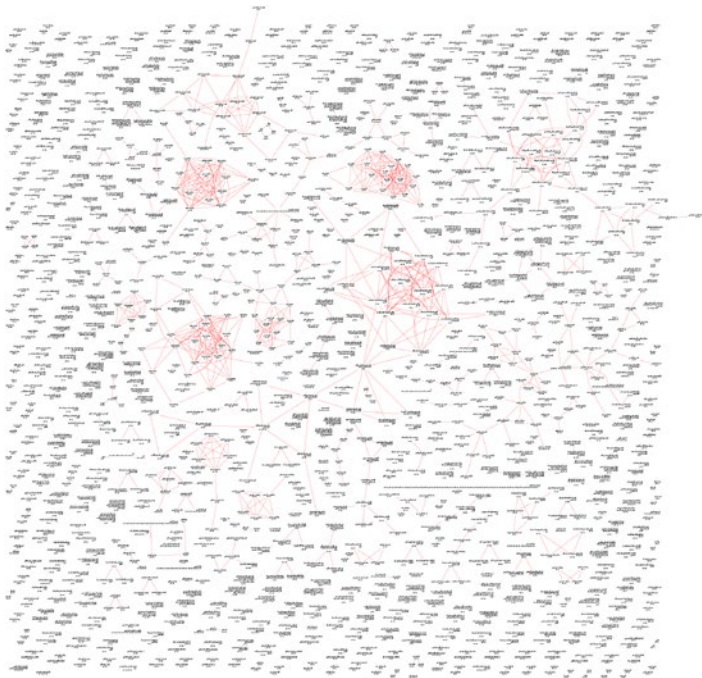The full network of verse couples is shown in Fig. 1:

Fig. 1. The self-similarity graph for the Qurʾān

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[57] Since the status of short vowels is less stable in Arabic (they are not usually written, and many variants in Qurʾanic readings derive from short vowel change), we disregard them in all our experiments.

[58] The algorithm is explained in full detail in (Lancioni, Villano, Romani, 2016).

[59] On the Arabic version of the Diatessaron, see (Lancioni, Joosse, 2016).

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