

Canonization of texts through linguistic archaism and higher registers: The case of the Psalter fragment from the *Qubbat al-Khaznah*, Damascus

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Resumen

Las escrituras sagradas que contienen los fundamentos de cualquier religión recurren, a menudo, al registro más elevado y arcaico de lenguas ocasionalmente utilizadas y conocidas por algunas personas en el momento y en el lugar de su predicación, con el objetivo de agregar credibilidad a lo supuestamente divino y mensajes eternos. En cuanto al fragmento de Salterio bilingüe greco-árabe encontrado por Violet en Damasco, y publicado en 1901, datado con bastante fiabilidad en el siglo VIII d. C., y posteriormente estudiado por Kahle y otros eruditos, fue motivo de nuestro argumento de que la clara persistencia en ella de rasgos neoárabes posibilitaron una especie de certificado de nacimiento del llamado árabe Nabaṭī. Pero ¿por qué este texto árabe no fue transmitido en su propio alfabeto, o en uno de los alfabetos arameos, de acuerdo con el dominio absoluto de esta lengua en toda el área del Oriente Próximo entre judíos, cristianos e incluso musulmanes fuera de la Península Arábiga? No menos desconcertante es la curiosa presencia de elementos de alto registro en medio de un texto neoárabe, que exhibe una estructura analítica más clara que la lengua de la poesía preislámica, e incluso del Corán. En esta breve revisión tratamos de arrojar algo más de luz a partir de un enfoque sociolingüístico al estudio de textos sagrados, canonizados mediante la adopción de registros superiores.

Palabras clave

Textos sagrados, Qubbat al-Khaznah, Damasco, Salterio, árabe

Abstract

Sacred writings containing the foundations of any religion are often drawn up in the highest and most archaic kind or register of languages occasionally used and known to some people at the time and in the place of its preaching, with the aim of adding credibility to supposedly divine and everlasting messages. Concerning the bilingual Greek-Arabic Psalter fragment, found by Violet in Damascus, and published in 1901, quite reliably dated in the eighth century A.D., and subsequently studied by Kahle and other scholars, it was our contention that the clear dominance in it of Neo-Arabic features turned into a kind of birth certificate of so-called Nabaṭī Arabic. But why this Arabic text was not conveyed in its own script, or in one of the Aramaic alphabets, in agreement with the absolute dominance of this later language in the whole Middle Eastern area among Jews, Christians and even Muslims outside the Arabian Peninsula? No less puzzling was the curious appearance of high register

items in the middle of a Neo-Arabic text exhibiting much more analytical structure than the language of pre-Islamic poetry or even of the Qur'ān. In this brief review of such subjects, we try to cast some additional light by introducing a sociolinguistic approach to the survey of sacred texts canonized by adoption of higher registers.

Keywords

Sacred texts, *Qubbat al-Khaznah*, Damascus, Psalter, Arabic.

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It has been a long-standing tradition, almost a rule, that sacred writings containing the tenets and foundations of any religion be drawn up in the highest and wherever available even most archaic kind or register of languages known by some, though scarcely used by most people in the region of the newly preached creed, in the assumption that such usage would add further credibility to those supposedly divine and everlasting messages.

For this practical and quite understandable reason, Hebrew continued to be used in most of the latest books of the Old Testament, when Aramaic had become dominant in the whole Middle Eastern area, Latin and Greek took several centuries to yield the ground to Neo-Latin, Neo-Greek and other younger languages in the sacred books and prayers of European Christians, and the Qur'ān exhibits only rare cases of departure from the strict rules of Old Arabic, although it is presently admitted that the Neo-Arabic type was already in Muḥammad's days the prevailing language of at least the common urban dwellers of Arabian towns, while the Bedouins appear to have remained more faithful to the features of the archaic language of poets and orators. Even outside the realm of monotheistic religions, closer to us geographically and ideologically, we would find similar examples of this trend in the preservation, for instance, of dead Sumerian in some Mesopotamian hymns, Vedic Sanscrit in later Buddhist texts, etc.

However, as every person familiar with history and its methodology knows, age and time reckoning is one of the spiniest matters historians can deal with, as the farther we retrocede in the past centuries the harder it becomes to fix dates on a given year, decade or even century, on account of conflicting chronologies, not to speak of ideological pressures to move back or forward the events in order to prove or disprove certain hypotheses. The outcome thereof being that one often comes across accusations of tampering with texts to make them appear older than they actually were by introducing archaic language in them, as well as exposure of linguistic tale-telling anachronisms, proving their younger dates and therefore their at least partial falsification and attribution to ancient ages. But, of course, in both cases, the contamination of evidence may be intentional and ideologically motivated, or

accidental, by sheer ignorance or neglect of copyists, who are known to often relapse into lower registers, to make the contexts more accessible, as well as, in the opposite direction, to occasionally try to prestige or embellish them with a more rhetorical style.

Thus, in the dire-straits of chronology, historians and linguists desperately look for truly trustworthy landmarks and scrutinize them, when one appears to be such, as is the case of the bilingual Greek-Arabic Psalter fragment, found by B. Violet in the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus, published in 1901, and subsequently studied by Kahle,¹ Blau (twice),² Hopkins,³ Haddad⁴ and ourselves in the paper “The Psalter fragment from the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus. A birth certificate of Nabatī Arabic.”⁵

Our contention has been that, on account of the quite reliable dating of this Arabic text at least in the eighth century A.D.,⁶ its transcription in the rather graphemic Greek alphabet instead of the Semitic shorthand type of scripts, together with a clear dominance in it of Neo-Arabic features, we are allowed to consider that sample as a kind of birth certificate, though issued many decades after the event, of Nabati Arabic, of which we had so far only short and isolated witnesses culled by the Abbasid grammarians from pre-Islamic and early Islamic ages, as attested by several Western scholars, listed in our two papers “Marginalia on Arabic diglossia and evidence thereof in the *Kitāb Al-Aḡānī*”,⁷ and “From Old Arabic to Classical Arabic through the pre-Islamic *koine*: some notes on the native grammarians’ sources, attitudes and goals”.⁸

At that time, however, we were merely concerned with the diachronic aspects of this linguistic issue, about which we had previously sustained a friendly and enlightening debate with Prof. Blau in the pages of the *Jewish*

¹ In *Die arabische Bibelübersetzungen. Texte mit Glossar und Literaturübersicht* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1904).

² In his *A Grammar of Christian Arabic* (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1966-67), and again in *A Handbook of Early Middle Arabic* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 2002).

³ In his *Studies in the Grammar of Early Arabic* (London: Oxford UP, 1984).

⁴ In “La phonétique de l’arabe chrétien vers 700”, with in *La Syrie de Bizance à l’Islam VII^e-VIII^e siècles*, ed. P. Canivet & J.P. Rey-Coquais (Damascus: IFEAD, 1992), pp. 159-164.

⁵ In *Eastern Crossroads. Essays on Medieval Christian Legacy*, ed. J.P. Monferrer-Sala (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007), pp. 303-320.

⁶ According to Blau, while Hopkins raises it up to 639 A.D.

⁷ In *Journal of Semitic Studies* 20 (1975), pp. 38-61, translated into Arabic by Muhammed Al-Sharkawi and published under the title of “Fi ’liziwājīyyati ’llugawīyyatiwatajalliyātihā fi kitābi ’l’agānī”, in *Al-Loghah Langue Language. Series of papers in linguistics concerning Arabic diglossia* (Cairo: Arab & African Research Group 2007), pp. 77-115.

⁸ In *Journal of Semitic Studies* 21 (1976), pp. 62-98.

Quarterly Review,⁹ with views in his case closer to those of Nöldeke and other great scholars of his generation, while ours did not coincide either entirely with them or with the extreme and opposite hypothesis launched by K. Vollers,¹⁰ antedating the extinction of spoken Old Arabic to pre-Islamic days, but accepting a certain degree of diglossia among urban and Bedouin dwellers of pre-Islamic Arabia and surrounding areas of Syria and Mesopotamia, whose populations would have been at least partially bilingual in Aramaic and Neo-Arabic.

In the meantime, we had all forsaken an important aspect of this issue, namely, the sociolinguistic one, including such questions as why this Arabic text was not conveyed in its own script, like so many other papyri of similar dates and extraction, or at least in one of the variants of Aramaic alphabets, in agreement of the absolute dominance of this later language in the whole Middle Eastern area among Jews, Christians and even Muslims outside the Arabian Peninsula.

Traditionally in the Middle East, the social infrastructure has imposed languages, while the matching superstructure commanded the choice of alphabet, as in the case of Judaeo-Arabic texts and Christian *Qarṣūnī* literature in Syriac script, which would imply that the Violet fragment was produced in an Arabic speaking milieu by a person with a strong allegiance to Greek culture or belonging to the Greek Orthodox Church, not excluding either the possibility of an Egyptian Jew or Jewish Hellenized local community, of those for whom the *Septuaginta* translation of the Bible had become a necessity.

Obviously, this definition, pitifully short of an identification, of the cultural and / or religious adscription of the author of this curious document, adds nothing to the well-known fact that Greek speakers and allegiance to variants of the Greek language, culture and way of life were common stock in the Eastern lands once conquered by the Macedonians princes, or merely visited by Greek sailors and traders, like the shores of the Red Sea and India, and that many Christians or Jews between Egypt and Bactria might have had use for a translation of the Bible into Greek and Arabic simultaneously but, in the second case, in the Greek script, with which they were more at home even than with Aramaic scripts.

⁹ Cf. our paper “On the functional yield of some synthetic devices in Arabic and Semitic morphology”, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 62 (1971), pp. 20-50, which was answered to by Blau’s “On the problem of the synthetic character of Classical Arabic as against Judaeo-Arabic (Middle Arabic)”, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 63 (1972), pp. 29-38, followed by our paper “Again on the functional yield of some synthetic devices in Arabic and Semitic morphology”, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 64 (1973), pp. 154-163, and by other written statements of both positions and authors in further occasions.

¹⁰ *Volksprache und Schriftsprache im alten Arabien* (Strasbourg, 1906, repr. Amsterdam: Oriental Press, 1981).

But there is a second sociolinguistic point in the Violet fragment never before dealt with, in spite of being in no way devoid of interest for both standard general linguists and historians of religion, namely, the curious appearance of high register items in the middle of a text which nobody would consider but Neo-Arabic, that is, exhibiting much more analytical structure than the language of pre-Islamic poetry or even of the Qur'ān. There can be little doubt that phrases like $\mu\theta\lambda\ \alpha.\beta\alpha.\iota.\acute{\upsilon}\mu$, $\beta(\eta)\alpha\nu\cdot\theta\acute{\alpha}\nu.\iota\acute{\upsilon}\mu$ and $\alpha.\beta\eta.\mu\epsilon\nu.\chi\omicron\upsilon\tau\acute{\epsilon}.\tau\eta.\acute{\upsilon}\mu$ (ie., *miṭla 'ābā'i+him* “like their fathers”, *bi+awṭāni+him* “with their idols” et *wa+bi+manḥūtāt+i+him* “with their sculptures”) are patterned after Old Arabic morphology, in spite of the minor dialectal and already old deviation meant by the lack of harmonization in the vowel of this suffix, and do preserve the genitive marker of the noun declension, entirely and characteristically forsaken in Neo-Arabic.

As said above, canonization of texts is often sought after by means of archaic language and / or higher registers but, in that case then, one must wonder why the instances of such items in the Violet fragment are so scarce. Was the author, who apparently did not ignore the rules, or at least some rules of Classical Arabic, too lazy to undertake a full-fledged style overhauling operation of the text, or was he primarily concerned with the fact that, once so treated, it might in that new garb be less understandable to his flock? Or was there a third consideration which escapes our detection in the peculiar environments of Middle Eastern communities, often at least bilingual and very demanding on respect to literal rendering of sacred texts?

While acknowledging our inadequacy to provide a clear and definite answer to that question, we have extended the scope of research to other comparable cases and found one, much younger but relatively similar, namely that of Pedro de Alcalá's versions into the Andalusí Arabic dialect of Granada of some Gospel passages and prayers, as well as of dialogues serving as guides for the administration of confession to eventual converted native speakers of that extraction. It being a moot question whether he could benefit not only from the help of excellent native correctors of both Classical and dialectal Arabic, which is asserted by himself and beyond any reasonable doubt, it is also a proven fact that in the case of prayers, he has aimed at obtaining as much correct as possible Classical Arabic, while in the suggested dialogues between the priest and the penitents, he thoroughly adheres to low registers, affording perfect mutual understanding of utterances.

Thus, for instance, his paternoster appears like this: *abéneallaḍi fi cemeguét. cudúçunizmuq; tétimalecútuq; ticúnumexiatuqfilárdiquemé fi cemé*, etc.,¹¹ i.e., *abánaallaḍi fi s+samawát, quddúsunismu+k; tátimalakút+k; tikúnumašī'atu+kfi+l'arḍikamá fi s-*

¹¹ See *Petri Hispani de lingua arabica libri duo*, ed. P. Lagarde (Gottingae, 1883, repr Osnabrück: O. Zeller, 1971), p. 31.

samá, with complete *i'rāb*, except in pausal forms and only slightly diverging from its canonical Classical Arabic wording: 'abā+nā+ 'llaḏīfī 'l+samawāti, li+yataqaddasi+ 'smu+ka, li+ya'timalakatū+ka, li+takunmašī'atu+kafī 'l+arḏikamāfī 'l+samā'i (Mat. VI:9-10).¹² By comparison, any such high register features are absent from the text of the dialogues offered as samples of confessions, e.g., in p. 48: *cereqtxéi min míta a nizbalmokbí? Agédtxéifalmamárráv fa tariq, guá ix ââtáitu li çáhibuávlalmecíquin? = saráqtsáy min mitá' an+nílsba+l+muḥbi? aǧádtšáyf+al+mamárr aw f+at+taríqwa+Iš 'atáyt+uli+šáhib+u aw l+al-masíkin?*, i.e., “did you steal something from people on the sly? Did you find something in the street or highway without giving it back to its owner or to the poor?”

Both cases, that of the Violet fragment and Alcalá's Andalusí Arabic texts partially coincide and differ, but we think that adding this sociolinguistic angle to their analysis may perhaps open a new way to delve into the complexities of texts generated in the crossroads of diverse communities and cultures.

¹² Cf. the Maltese shape of the same text, after E.F. Sutcliffe, *A grammar of the Maltese Language* (Valetta, 1936), p. 215: *Missierna, li inti fis-smewwiet, jitqaddesimek, tiġi is-saltnatiegħek, ikun li tridintkiffis-sema u-hekdafl-art.*