ON THE ARABIAN ORIGINS OF THE QUR'ĀN: THE CASE OF AL-FURQĀN

URI RUBIN
TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

Abstract

This article draws attention to hitherto unnoticed Arabic texts in which the word furqān features as a genuine Arabic term denoting 'dawn' or 'morning'. It suggests that this genuine Arabic word is reflected in the Qur'ān, especially in those passages in which the term furqān stands for revealed scriptures. The Qur'ān calls these scriptures furqān in the sense that they are a guiding light that leads one out of darkness. The SyriaclAramaic connotations of the term as encountered in other Quranic passages — mainly those referring to Moses — are also discussed, and their origin in the Syriac and Aramaic translations of the Book of Exodus is further clarified. The article shows that in these translations the Syriac / Aramaic purqān stands for redemption through separation, and this seems also to be the meaning of the Quranic furqān of Moses. The conflation of the Arabic and the Aramaic furqāns in the Qur'ān is also demonstrated, and finally the evidence of the tafsīr is analysed. It is shown that the exegetes are aware of the targumic sense of furqān (redemption through separation), but they tend to prefer the sense of the local Arabian furqān (light of dawn), so much so that they have derived from the sense of light as opposed to darkness a series of secondary meanings revolving around the idea of separation of truth from falsehood.

Introduction

In a recent study of the Quranic term furqān, E.M. Donner proposes a new etymology for this term. In some cases he accepts its derivation from the Aramaic / Syriac word purqānā ('salvation'), as long assumed by many modern scholars, but argues that in other cases this derivation does not fit the Quranic context and suggests the Syriac puqādnā as a possible origin for those cases.¹

This means that according to Donner, the origin of the Quranic furqān is exclusively Aramaic/Syriac (either purqānā or puqādnā),

and indeed from the very outset he gives up any attempt at finding Arabian origins for the term, asserting that, ‘furqān is not, to my knowledge, attested in early Arabic texts in contexts clearly independent of the Qurʾān.’ A similar argument against the Arabian origin of the word was already presented by A. Jeffery who said that ‘...there seems to be no evidence of the use of the word in Arabic earlier than the Qurʾān’.3

But some scholars have not been so sure of the exclusively non-Arabian origin of the Quranic furqān. For example, A.J. Wensinck spoke of two distinct words in the Qurʾān. One is the Syriac purqānā, meaning ‘salvation’ or ‘deliverance’, and the other is a genuine Arabic word meaning ‘distinction’, which the Qurʾān uses for ‘revelation’.4 But Wensinck’s view was altogether rejected by Jeffery who said that ‘Wensinck seems to have been unduly influenced by the theories of the native commentators’.5

Wensinck, however, seems to have been correct in his basic assumption, although he was unable to provide sufficient evidence for the Arabian origins of the Quranic furqān. In what follows, such evidence is provided, which enables us to better understand the etymological history of the Quranic furqān.

The Genuine Arabian furqān

To begin with, the word furqān occurs in the available Arabic sources in contexts that are clearly independent of the Qurʾān. The lexicographer al-Azhārī (d. 370/980) adduces an utterance attributed to an unidentified ‘Bedouin’ (aʿrābī), who reportedly said: ‘I went on having sex with her (aḍfīzu bihā) until the furqān was shining (ilā an saṭāʿa l-furqān)’. The word furqān is glossed by the words: ʿay al-sabar, ‘that is to say, dawn’.6 The same utterance is recorded also in the Lisān al-ʿarab by Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1311),7 and in the Tāğ al-ʿarūs by al-Zabīdī (d. 1205/1790).8

2 Donner ‘Quranic Furqān’, 280.
3 Arthur Jeffery, The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾān (Baroda 1938), 228.
4 A.J. Wensinck, s.v. ‘Furqān’, EL (old edition), II, 120.
5 Jeffery, Foreign Vocabulary, 228, Note 4.
ON THE ARABIAN ORIGINS OF THE QUR'AN

Needless to say, nothing is Quranic here. The recourse to the 'Bedouin' is a typical method used by the lexicographers in order to illustrate the significance and context of a given indigenous Arabic word or term. In this particular case, al-Azhari adduces the quotation from the Bedouin in order to illustrate the meaning of the verb da'afa ('to have sexual intercourse with'), and furqan occurs here as a normal, though not necessarily widely-current, word for the light of dawn.

A modified variation of the same utterance appears in al-Marzūqi’s (d. 421/1030) al-Azmina wa 'l-ammkina, in a chapter dealing with Arabic terms describing the blackness of night. Since the sexual context is now irrelevant, the utterance of the Bedouin can be rephrased in a less offending manner. This time the Bedouin says: ‘I went on acting wildly (ata'asa) in the darkness of night (al-bawalwal), till the furqan shone (sata'a)’. When asked what al-bawalwal was, the Bedouin said: ‘The darkness of night’. When asked what the furqan was, he said: al-subh (‘morning’).9

Furqan in the sense of ‘dawn’ recurs in a poetic verse recorded by al-Azhari as part of a report of Abu 'Ubayda (d. 210/826). Its first hemistich runs as follows: Fa-sabbabat qabla adhāni al-furqan: ‘They [i.e. the camels?] rose up early in the morning, before the call (adhān) to the furqan prayer’. Abu 'Ubayda explains that furqan is subh, ‘morning’.10 The passage from Abu 'Ubayda recurs in Lisan al-'arab, and in Tāj al-'Ariṣ.11

Here too the context — although clearly Islamic — is entirely non-Quranic. Furqan appears again in the sense of ‘dawn’, this time signalling the time of a well-known morning prayer, its legal time lasting from the crack of dawn till just before sunrise.

More insight into the significance of the word furqan in the sense of ‘dawn’ is provided by al-Zabidi. Among the various meanings of the word, he records the report of the renowned Basran philologist Abu ‘Amr b. al-'Ala (d. 154/771), who says that furqan means ‘morning’ (subh) or ‘dawn’ (sabah), and notes that from this stems the expression: ‘The furqan is shining (sata'a)’, as well as the saying: ‘This is brighter (abyad) than the furqan’.13

10 Al-Azhari, Tahdhib al-lugha, s.v. ‘b.d.’ [XIV, 206].
11 Lisan, s.v. ‘b.d.’ [I, 224, col. 3].
12 Tāj al-'Ariṣ, s.v. ‘b.d.’ [I, 43].
13 Ibid., s.v. 'f.r.q.' [VII, 45-6]. See also E.W. Lane, An Arabic-English Lexicon (2 vols., repr. Cambridge 1984), s.v. 'f.r.q.' [2385 col. 3]; Suliman Bashear, ‘The Title Fārūq and its Association with 'Umar I’, Studia Islamica 72 (1990), 50.
Elsewhere al-Zabīdī says that when signifying ‘dawn’, *furqān* is a metaphor (*wa-huwa majāz*),\(^\text{14}\) probably meaning that the word does not stand for dawn itself, only describes its function. Since the root *f.r.q.* signifies ‘division’, it seems that *furqān* is taken here as a verbal noun denoting splitting of darkness as light breaks through it.

Another form derived from the root *f.r.q.*, and which is likewise associated with dawn, is *faraq*. The expression *faraq ‘l-subh* is explained by the lexicographers as signifying ‘the crack of dawn’. They say that it was called *faraq* because it has become separated (*fāraqa*) from the darkness of night.\(^\text{15}\) In some Arab dialects, the form *faraq* was interchangeable with *falaq*. Qurṭub (Muḥammad b. al-Mustanīr [d. 206/821]) says that the Arabs of the Tamīm used to say *faraq ‘l-subb*, while all others said *falaq ‘l-subb*.\(^\text{16}\)

The affinity between *faraq* and *falaq* is also noted by al-Zamakhshāri (d. 538/1143) in his comments on Q 113:1. In this verse the ‘Lord of the *falaq*’ is invoked for protection. Al-Zamakhshāri explains that *falaq* and *faraq* denote ‘morning’ (*subh*), because night is split and separated from it (*yujlaqu ‘anhu wa-yufraqu*). He goes on to note that from here stems the saying: ‘The *furqān* is shining (ṣaṭa‘a l-*furqān*)’, i.e. ‘the dawn has risen’ (*tala‘a l-*fajr*).\(^\text{17}\)

In sum, the above texts assert the existence of the word *furqān* in the local, or indigenous, Arabic of early, and possibly, pre-Islamic times. It functioned as a metaphor of ‘dawn’, in the sense of splitting of, or separation from, darkness, much like the forms *faraq* and *falaq*.

### The Quranic *furqān*

At this point the question arises whether the Quranic *furqān* might reflect this local Arabian *furqān*, rather than the Syriac/Aramaic one. It seems that the sense of ‘dawn’ or ‘separation from darkness’ fits particularly well into those passages in which the term *furqān* stands for, or describes, a revealed scripture. That these passages may reflect a local Arabian *furqān* was already suggested by Wensinck (see above), and in view of the above data we are able to see more clearly the relationship between this genuine Arabic word and the Quranic notion of revelation. The idea behind the term *furqān* as a revealed scripture seems to be that the scripture is a source of guiding light.

\(^{14}\) Tāj al-‘arūs, s.v. ‘d.f.x.’ [IV, 46].

\(^{15}\) Lisān, s.v. ‘f.r.q.’ [V, 3400 col. 1]. See also Lane, *Lexicon*, 2385 col. 1.


that leads one out of the darkness of ignorance. This seems to be the case in Q 25:1 in which furqân stands for the Qurʾān that has been revealed to Muhammad: ‘Blessed is he who sent down the furqân upon his servant that he may be a warner to all beings’. This verse seems to say that God sent down to the Prophet an illuminating message which enables him to warn people and show them the light of guidance. This verse is contained in a sura which, according to the traditional Islamic chronology of the Qurʾān, was revealed in Mecca. The same recurs in sūras defined as Medinan. Thus in Q 2:185 the month of Ramaḍān is mentioned as the time when the Qurʾān was sent down, in order to bring ‘guidance to men and clear signs of the guidance and of the furqân’. The explicit combination in this verse between furqân and guidance as two complementary aspects of the ‘clear signs’ is best understood when the furqân is perceived as light.

The word furqân appears side by side with guidance also in Q 3:3–4 [Medinan]: ‘He has revealed to you the book with truth, verifying that which is before it, and he revealed the Torah and the Gospels (Injil) aforetime, a guidance for the people, and he sent down the furqân …’

Guidance goes hand in hand not merely with the term furqân but also with a more explicit word for light, i.e. nur. This is the case in Q 42:52 [Meccan] in which the book revealed to Muḥammad is said to have come as ‘light, guiding thereby whom we please of our servants’. The word ‘light’ (nur) as standing for the guiding message sent down to Muḥammad appears in further passages, Meccan (Q 7:157) as well as Medinan (Q 4:174; 5:15–16; 64:8). The guiding book itself is described as kitāb munir, ‘luminous book’ (Q 22:8), which is also how books revealed to previous prophets are described (Q 35:25 [Meccan]; 3:184 [Medinan]). The book, or the Torah, that was revealed to Moses is also described as ‘light and guidance’ (Q 6:91 [Meccan]; 5:44 [Medinan]), and so is the Injil revealed to Jesus (Q 5:46 [Medinan]).

The term furqân, then, as a name for, or description of, revealed scriptures, fits perfectly well into the Quranic symbolism of light. In fact, the association between furqân, as standing for the Qurʾān, and light continued into post-Quranic times. This is indicated by the phrase munir al-furqān (‘the luminous furqān’) by which the Qurʾān was sometimes referred to by Muslims in the first Islamic era.\(^{18}\)

But in the Qurʾān the word furqān is not just a guiding light. When made part of God’s address to Muḥammad this local Arabian

word seems to have acquired further meanings which had come into the Qurʾān from the Syriac/Aramaic. Western scholars already noted the Syriac/Aramaic parallel of the Quranic āra,[19] but have not yet provided the exact relationship between the two.

The Syriac/Aramaic connotations of the word āra reached the Qurʾān together with the image of Moses. The latter brought in a āra of his own, which consisted of a combination of two ideas: redemption and division.

The history of this combination begins in biblical Hebrew, with the word ār (םָדָע). This word means ‘redemption’, as for example in Ps. 111:9: ‘He [i.e. God] sent redemption (ār) unto his people’.20 However, the same word occurs also in Exod. 8:19 [23] where it is something which God sets between his own people and the people of Pharaoh. God says to Pharaoh: ‘I will set ār between my people and your people’. The context is the redemption of the Israelites from the swarms of flies which will not reach the Israelites in the Land of Goshen, because, as stated in the previous verse, God has set apart the Land of Goshen from the rest of Egypt. This context has lent the word ār the sense of ‘division’, as if implying that the Israelites are redeemed when set apart from their foes.

This is indeed how the Hebrew ār of Exod. 8/18 [23] was perceived in the Syriac/Aramaic translations. In the Peshīṭta (Syriac Bible) ār is rendered purṣā (‘distinction’), which God will make between the Israelites and the Egyptians.21 In the Aramaic translation known as Targum Neophyti, ār is translated purqān (‘redemption’). God says to Pharaoh: ‘And I will set purqān between my people and your people’.22 Since purqān is set here between the two parties, it signifies redemption that comes from division or separation. In the Targum Onkelos, ār is again purqān, but here an extended paraphrase is provided. God says to Pharaoh: ‘I will make purqān for my people, and on your people I shall bring a plague [of flies]’.23 The same paraphrase appears in the Pseudo-Jonathan.24

---

19 E.g. Jeffery, Foreign Vocabulary, 225–9; EJ2, s.v. ‘Furān’ (R. Paret); Arne A. Ambros, A Concise Dictionary of Konanic Arabic (Wiesbaden 2004), 212; EQ s.v. ‘Names of the Qurʾān’ (Mustansir Mir); Donner, 286–8.
20 See also Ps. 130:7.
21 Ch. Heller, Peshīṭta in Hebrew Characters with Elucidatory Notes, Part II: Exodus (Berlin 1929), 78.
22 Alejandro Díez Macho, Neophyti 1. Tomo II. Éxodo (Madrid 1970), 47.
23 Israel Drazin, Targum Onkelos to Exodus (New York 1990), 97.

426
This targumic furqān by which God discriminates between the Israelites and the Egyptians, seems to be the origin of the Quranic furqān of Moses. It occurs in Q 21:48 [Meccan], which reads: 'We gave to Moses and Aaron the furqān and a light and a reminder for the God-fearing'. The close association between furqān and light (diya’) in this verse retains the basic sense of the local Arabian furqān ('dawn'), but the fact that here it is given to Moses and Aaron in particular seems to allude to the targumic significance of the term as used for Exod. 8/19 [23]. The Qur’an, however, does not use it in any specific context of the life of Moses, so that it retains a general meaning of deliverance through separation. Hence the Quranic verse demonstrates a conflation between the local Arabian significance of furqān and the targumic one.

The same conflation is demonstrated in Q 2:53 [Medinan] where the furqān is only given to Moses: 'We gave Moses the book and the furqān that you might be guided'. The furqān of Moses has been associated here with the guiding book that was revealed to him, a link which again combines the targumic furqān of Moses with the local Arabian one.

In Q 8:41 (Medinan) the word furqān seems to retain its pure targumic sense ('redemption by separation') although now it is something that is given to the Muslims instead of to Moses. This verse alludes to 'that which we sent down to our servant, on the day of the furqān, the day on which the two parties met...'. The day of the furqān seems to stand for an Islamic military victory over the unbelievers [at Badr], and the jurqān is evidently the ‘distinction’ which God made between the 'two parties', i.e. believers and unbelievers, which resulted in the redemption of the party of the latter. This is exactly the sense of the targumic furqān of Moses. The Qur’an itself seems to be aware of the relationship between the Islamic victory and the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt, because the locution ‘the two parties’ (al-jam’an) recurs in Q 26:61 where it stands for the Israelites and the Egyptians who chase them.25 It is noteworthy that the following passage (Q 26:62–3) describes the parting of the sea, for which the roots f.l.q. and f.r.q. are being used: The sea is ‘split asunder’ (insalahqa), and each ‘part’ (firq) of it stands like a huge mountain. This implies a new connotation of the idea behind the Quranic furqān of Moses: it is not merely division between Israelites and Egyptians as in the targumic furqān, but also the parting of the sea which assured the deliverance of the Israelites. In the Aramaic Bible

25 This has already been noted by Donner, p. 289.
purqān already features in connection with the redemption of the Is-
raeilites from Pharaoh's army,26 and this may well be the origin of the
implied relationship between the Quranic furqān of Moses and the
parting of the sea.

Another Medinan verse referring to furqān is Q 8:29 which de-
defines the reward for piety: 'O believers, if you fear God, he will give
you furqān and do away with your evil deeds and forgive you...'. A
solid basis for assessing the furqān here is provided in a parallel
Medinan verse, Q 65:2, in which God says: '...and whoever fears
God, he will give him a way out (makhraj)'. The reward for piety is
here makhraj which replaces furqān. The idea is repeated in Q 65:4,
and this time the reward for piety is 'alleviation' (yusr): '...and who-
ever fears God he will give him alleviation in his affair'. If makhraj
and yusr be taken as synonymous with furqān, then the latter seems
to denote a way out from hardships, much like the targumic furqān.

In sum, the Quranic furqān reflects two basic etymological clusters,
a local Arabian one which revolves around morning light as signifYing
splitting of, or separation from, darkness, and a targumic one which
revolves around redemption achieved through division or separation.
The local Arabian furqān can be discerned in passages in which this
term conveys the sense of guidance, and is equated with a revealed
book. The targumic furqān is discerned where this term is related to
Moses, as well as to a victory of the Muslims over their foes.

The Tafsīr

In Islamic tafsīr the two etymological channels are reflected very
clearly, but as is already the case in the Qur'ān, the two are not al-
ways kept apart.

As for the targumic furqān (redemption through separation), it is
preserved in some interpretations of Q 8:29 in which, as seen above,
the term furqān is a reward for piety, and is probably synonymous
with makhraj and yusr, and denotes alleviation of worldly hardships.
The exegetes are aware of the relationship between furqān and
makhraj,27 as they explain it as 'redemption' (al-najāt) and 'victory'
(al-nasr).28 Or as Ikrima (d. 105/723) and al-Suddī (d. 128/746)
reportedly said: 'He gave you furqān, i.e. redemption, which means

26 Ibid., 289.
27 See the traditions in al-Tabari, Jāmi' al-bayān fi tafsīr al-Qur'ān (30 vols.
that God separates you from whom you fear, and so you are redeemed.\textsuperscript{29}

The targumic fuqr\={a}n is especially conspicuous in the exegesis of passages alluding to events in the life of Moses. Al-M\={a}wardi (d. 450/1058) provides in his comments on Q 2:53 several interpretations for the fuqr\={a}n given to Moses, one of which is ‘victory (na\={s}r), by which God has distinguished between Moses and Pharaoh, till he saved (an\={j}\={a}) Moses and his people and drowned Pharaoh and his people’.\textsuperscript{30} Another interpretation on al-M\={a}wardi’s list takes fuqr\={a}n to stand for the splitting of the sea before the Israelites.\textsuperscript{31} This is inspired by the Quranic usage of the root fr.q. for the parting of the sea (see above).

The targumic fuqr\={a}n is reflected also in the interpretations of Q 21:48 in which the fuqr\={a}n is given to Moses and Aaron. Al-M\={a}wardi has recorded the interpretation of al-Kal\={b}i (d. 146/763), to the effect that this fuqr\={a}n stands for victory and redemption (al-na\={s}r wa l-naj\={a}); God has given victory to Moses and his supporters and destroyed Pharaoh and his followers.\textsuperscript{32}

But in spite of the survival of the targumic fuqr\={a}n in the tafs\={i}r, the exegetes tend quite naturally to prefer the local Arabian sense of fuqr\={a}n (‘light of dawn’), and they endeavour to apply it to all the Quranic occurrences of the term, including those in which the term retains the targumic sense of redemption through division or separation.

This is most conspicuous in some further interpretations of Q 8:29, in which fuqr\={a}n is promised as a reward for piety. The exegetes reinterpret the term as ‘light’, and take its synonymous makhr\={a}j to denote separation from some kind of mental darkness. For example, al-Ghaz\={a}l\={i} (d. 504/1111) writes in his Ihy\={a}’ ul\={u}m al-d\={i}n, that the fuqr\={a}n promised to the believers in Q 8:29 was explained as denoting ‘light (n\={u}r) by which truth (al-haq\={a}) is distinguished from falsehood (al-b\={a}\={s}il), and by which one gets out from doubts (wa-yukhraju bihi min al-shubuh\={a}t)’.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{29} Al-W\={a}h\={i}di, ‘Ali b. Ahmad, al-Wasi\={s} f\={i} tafs\={i}r al-Qur\={a}n al-majid (ed. ‘Adil Ahmad ‘Abd al-Mawj\={u}d et al., 4 vols. Beirut 1994), II, 454.
\textsuperscript{30} Al-M\={a}wardi, al-Nukat wa l-\={u}y\={u}n f\={i} tafs\={i}r al-Qur\={a}n (ed. ‘Abd al-Maq\={s}\={u}d b. ‘Abd al-Rah\={i}m, 6 vols. Beirut 1992), I, 121. See also al-Bayd\={a}w\={i}, An\={w}\={o}r al-tanzil wa l-as\={r}\={a}r al-ta’wil (2 vols. Beirut 1988), I, 62.
\textsuperscript{31} Al-M\={a}wardi, Nukat, I, 122. See also Ibn al-Jawz\={i}, Z\={a}d al-mas\={i}r, on Q 2:53 [I, 81]; al-Bayd\={a}w\={i}, on Q 21:48 [II, 72].
\textsuperscript{32} Al-M\={a}wardi, Nukat, III, 450. See also Ibn al-Jawz\={i}, Z\={a}d al-mas\={i}r, V, 355.
\textsuperscript{33} Al-Ghaz\={a}l\={i}, Ihy\={a}’ ul\={u}m al-d\={i}n (5 vols. Cairo 1967), III, 31.
ON THE ARABIAN ORIGINS OF THE QUR'ÂN

Ghazālī's words evince a reformulation of the idea of furqān and makhraj, which now are no longer redemption from worldly hardships, but rather 'a way out from doubts'. This shift from the worldly to the spiritual meaning is evidently inspired by the local Arabian sense of furqān as light of dawn; it is encountered already in the comments of Muqātīl b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) on Q 8:29. Muqātīl defines the term furqān as a makhraj ('way out') which leads one out of shubuhāt ('doubts'). Muqātīl has applied the same meaning to other Quranic occurrences of furqān in which it stands for a revealed scripture. This is seen in his comments on Q 2:185, 3:4, and 25:1.

Ghazālī's words also show how the exegetes have elaborated on furqān as 'light', adding to it a further secondary meaning derived from the root f. r.q., i.e. 'distinction between truth and falsehood'. This derivation, too, is encountered already in earlier sources. In his comments on Q 8:29, al-Ālūsī (d. 1270/1853) says that by giving furqān to the believers God puts into their hearts 'guidance and light' (ḥidāyatān wa-niʿrān) by which 'you shall distinguish between truth and falsehood'. He traces this interpretation, which obviously draws on the local Arabian sense of furqān, back to Ibn Jurayj (d. 150/767) and Ibn Zayd (d. 182/798).

A similar interpretation appears in some earlier tafsīr compilations. Al-Tha'lābī (d. 427/1035) quotes Ibn Zayd who reportedly said that furqān in Q 8:29 is the distinction within the hearts of the believers between truth and falsehood.

The earliest appearance of this interpretation can be traced back to 'Urwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 941/713). This can be done thanks to Ibn Abī Ḥātim (d. 327/938) who has recorded in his Tafsīr a tradition of Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/768) which the latter quotes from 'Urwa, through the latter's nephew, Muḥammad b. Ja'far b. al-Zubayr. 'Urwa is said to have explained the term furqān of Q 8:29 as denoting 'distinction (fasāl) between truth and falsehood, by which God brings into light (yuṣbirū) your truth (ḥaqqakum) and extinguishes (yuṭṭirū) the falsehood (bāṭil) of those who disagree with you (man khulafakum)'.
ON THE ARABIAN ORIGINS OF THE QUR'AN

Ishaq, but without an isnād. Its terminology of light shows how the basic meaning of the local Arabian furqān (‘light of dawn’) was extended to denote the light of truth as distinct from the darkness of falsehood.

The sense of distinction between truth and falsehood was the one which the exegetes liked most, and they applied it even to cases in the Qur'ān in which furqān is explicitly related to Moses, i.e. reflecting the targumic purqān. They could do it quite easily because the Quranic furqān of Moses already combined the ideas of redemption and separation. For example, al-Māwardi records in his comments on Q 21:48 an interpretation of Ibn Zayd to the effect that the furqān of Moses and Aaron stands for the ‘proof’ (burhān) which distinguished between the truth (haqq) of Moses and the falsehood (bāṭil) of Pharaoh. This is also how Muqatil already interprets the furqān given to Moses in Q 2:53. He says that it stands for ‘victory (naṣr), when God separated between truth and falsehood. He gave victory to Moses and destroyed Pharaoh’.43

Furthermore, in some interpretations the furqān of Moses and Aaron (Q 21:48) was entirely detached from the conflict with Pharaoh, and was equated with the Torah; as such it was explained as marking separation of the lawful from the unlawful. This interpretation was reported on the authority of Mujāhid (d. 104/722) and Qatāḍa (d. 117/735).44 It changes the meaning of the furqān of Moses from redemption to guidance, thus transforming it from targumic into local Arabian. Similarly, the furqān given to Moses in Q 2:53 was interpreted as the Torah which distinguishes between truth and falsehood. This view was reported on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās.45

The sense of distinction between truth and falsehood also permeated the expression yawm al-furqān of Q 8:41. Muqatil explains it as

---


44 Al-Māwardi, Nukat, III, 450. See also Ibn al-Jawzī, Zād al-masār, V, 355. And see the traditions in al-Ṭabarī, Taṣfīr, on Q 21:48 [XVII, 26].

45 Al-Māwardi, Nukat, I, 121. See also Ibn al-Jawzī, Zād al-masār, I, 81. And see the traditions in al-Ṭabarī, Taṣfīr, on Q 2:53 [I, 225–6].
standing for 'the day of victory, on which God has separated truth from falsehood, and gave victory to the Prophet and defeated the polytheists at Badr'.

Likewise, the *furqān* promised to the believers in Q 8:29 was interpreted as victory which separates the follower of truth (*al-mubiqq*) from the follower of falsehood (*al-mubtil*).

The sense of 'division between truth and falsehood' was especially appropriate for all those Quranic passages in which the term *furqān* stands for, or describes, a revealed scripture, and such an interpretation appears indeed in the various commentaries on these verses.

Finally, another kind of elaboration on the basic meaning of light as inherent in the local Arabian *furqān* is seen in the interpretation of al-Zamakhshari of Q 8:29. Among the various optional explanations, al-Zamakhshari adduces the interpretation of *furqān* in the sense that 'God will give you fame and will spread your reputation and achievements all over the earth' (... *yushhiru amrukum wa-yabuththu sitakum wa-āthārakum fi aqtar al-ard*). Al-Zamakhshari adds that this is derived from the saying: 'I did so and so till the *furqān* shone (sata'a)', i.e. the dawn rose (ay tala'a 'l-fajru).

Apart from a censured allusion to the above saying of the Bedouin, this interpretation shows another direction in which the sense of light was elaborated on. Here it symbolizes fame and reputation. Such derivation seems to be inspired by the saying (*mathal*): *ashhar min farrāq al-subh*, 'more famous than the crack of dawn'. The same interpretation has been repeated by al-Baydawi (d. c. 685/1286) on Q 8:29, as well as by al-Ālūsī.

**Summary and Conclusion**

The above study has demonstrated that the word *furqān* is not an exclusively non-Arabic loanword, as held by many, but has also pure

---


47 Al-Baydawi, I, 381.

48 See the traditions to that effect in al-Ṭabarī, *Ṭafsīr*, on Q 2:185 [II, 85]; 3:4 [III, 111]; 25:1 [XVIII, 136].


51 Al-Baydawi, I, 381.

52 Al-Ālūsī, IX, 196.
Arabian roots, discerned in non-Quranic texts in which it stands for the light of dawn. The Qurʾān employs it mainly to describe revealed scriptures in their capacity as origin of guiding light. But the targumic (Syriac/Aramaic) connotations of the Quranic furqān are also present in passages in which furqān is related to Moses, and denotes ‘redemption by division or separation’.

The exegetes of the Qurʾān are aware of the significance of furqān as ‘redemption’, but they prefer to interpret the Quranic furqān in the sense of ‘distinction between truth and falsehood’. This is not merely a sterile manipulation designed to provide false Arabian origins to a non-Arabic loanword, as held by many, but is rather an honest exegetical effort revolving around the genuine sense of light as inherent in the purely local Arabian furqān.

This means that even when faced with cases of loanwords, one must never give up the quest for the Arabian origins of the Qurʾān. They are certainly out there, waiting to be unveiled.

53 See e.g. Donner, 299 n. 45, who suggests that ‘furqān as a verbal noun of faraqa “to separate, discriminate”, which we find in dictionaries, is itself a product of the exegetical work of early Qurʾānic scholars grappling with these Qurʾānic verses’. 