Andrew Bannister, *An Oral-Formulaic Study of the Qur'an*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014, 332 pp., ISBN 978-0-7391-8357-1.

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Orality is not memorization. Orality is not illiteracy. Orality is not merely textual analysis minus the text. Rather, orality is the state of a mind in a culture in which literacy is not assumed, and therefore priority must be given to recollection, adaptability, and familiarity. From this it has been long noted that the oral mind begets performances that are composed of predesigned phrases and formulas, which can be quickly manipulated by the speaker in order to present a very complicated (and perhaps long) recital immediately as the specific situation demands. While writing and reading may well exist in such a culture, they are neither the technologies nor the techniques used for the production of novel materials. Instead, the bard, poet, storyteller, or singer in a deeply oral milieu pulls from a vast store of stock expressions, clusters of thought, and previously known tropes and so can “compose” a complicated verbal performance off the cuff.

According to the standard narratives of Islamic origins, the Qur’ān is an oral performance, coming out of the mouth of an unlettered prophet and addressed to a more-or-less unlettered people. Such claims are ubiquitous in Islamic devotional scholarship and most historical-critical scholarship, as well. And yet, as noted correctly by Andrew BANNISTER, the larger, nearly century-old study of orality, oral cultures, and oral performance have left the Qur’ān itself almost untouched. While the majority of academic studies on the Qur’ān and on Islam note the Qur’ān’s supposed orality, very few seem “to take orality seriously” (29).

There have been a handful of scholars who have approached early Islamic materials through the study of oral-formulation – Reuven FIRESTONE, Norman CALDER, Michael ZWETTLER, Mary BATESON, and Alan DUNDES – but one would expect this list to be quite a bit longer. Given that it is widely known that the Qurʾān is a series of oral performances, and that the Qurʾān itself underscores that it is re-presenting “the ancients’ tales” (Q 26:6; 69:49–43) (57), it is curious that the disciplines of orality and early Islamic studies are not considerably closer.

BANNISTER’S *An Oral-Formulaic Study of the Qurʾān* attempts to explain why this is. He divides the study of the Qurʾān into two camps. First are the traditionalist scholars, for whom the Qurʾān is a direct revelation from the divine. As such, the composition of the Qurʾān is not a question worth asking, for the human mind has only relayed the text; it played no part in its creation. “For traditionalist scholars, the Qurʾān is often treated as a *sui generis*, unique and unsullied by contact with other traditions” (43). Second are critical scholars who are more often than not attempting to explain the Qurʾān’s likeness to older texts via chains of influence, editing, or copying. This approach finds Qurʾānic parallels in the biblical and para-biblical materials in circulation in Late Antiquity, but rarely identifies a direct borrowing from one text into the received Qurʾān corpus. “Ultimately the problem with source critical approaches is that they tend to approach the Qurʾān as a text, treat Muḥammad as an author and construe whatever influence acted upon him as literary” (28). To this, BANNISTER offers an alternative approach to Qurʾānic studies. “Hard-critical approaches offer us at best, a few pieces of the jigsaw – for example, they are extremely helpful in their emphasis that the origins and transmission of the Qurʾān are considerably more complex than the Islamic tradition, taken at face value, would have us believe. But perhaps rather than reject that tradition entirely, there are ways to work within it, or to use it as a launching point for critical enquiry; a third way, as it were, between the extremes of naïve traditionism and radical revisionism” (25).

BANNISTER’S “third way” suggests we may move forward by acknowledging the Qurʾān’s historical setting in the biblicist world of Late Antiquity, but increasing the role of orality and oral-formulation in our studies of the Qurʾān’s composition and function. The Qurʾān isn’t pulling from texts, but rather the wide and ever-shifting oral storyworld of its primary milieu. Studying the Qurʾān through the use of oral forms, can, BANNISTER claims, explain this process better than traditionalism or hard-critical approaches.

He offers the example of the Adam and Iblis story, which appears seven times in the Qurʾānic corpus (Q 2:30, 34; 7:11–18; 15:28–44; 17:61–64; 18:50; 20:116–117, and 38:71–85). The accounts of Adam’s creation, interactions with the proto-Satan figure, and the latter’s unwillingness to bow down are well-known in Late Antiquity materials, both Jewish and Christian. But none of the pre-Islamic versions

of the story are exactly identical to the Qur'ān's either. And more so, the seven variants of the story found in the Qur'ān also show degrees of independence from one another in length, theme, and function. Approaching this information from a traditionalist line makes the Qur'ān's author seem peculiarly redundant. And for the hard-critic, who sees all likenesses as signs of borrowing, the intra-Qur'ānic variants are unexplained. But BANNISTER argues convincingly that the study of orality can make headway here. "In short, this is a book about method and its intention is to set out, develop, and test a methodology. If it can be demonstrated that oral-formulaic analysis can be successfully applied to the Qur'an, it opens the door for light to be shed on a wide array of critical questions concerning the Qur'an and its origins" (31).

By running the Qur'ānic variants of the Adam and Iblis story through a computer-generated program for the analysis of oral materials, BANNISTER unearths some fascinating results. There is a "common core" (30) of thoughts that appear in every retelling of a given story, regardless of length or complexity. To wit, the variants are stable despite their variations. Also, the degree of stability is higher at the beginning and ending of each variant, which again is a sign of oral re-formulation. (Openings and closings of oral performances are slightly more standardized than the body of the same performances.) Having strongly consistent themes, relatively standard openings and closings, and rather malleable contents allows the oral bard the ability to "produce" long, intricate performances quickly and as the situation demands. BANNISTER has demonstrated that the seven instances of Adam and Iblis in the Qur'ān are such cases of oral production. They are a reciter's performance variants; a tale told seven times.

More interesting still, BANNISTER expands his computer oral-formulaic analysis to run over the entire received text of the Arabic Qur'ān, with the hope of overcoming any selection bias in working with the variants of the Adam and Iblis accounts alone. Again, his results are very striking. BANNISTER identifies "an overall formulaic density for the entire text of between 23.55 % and 52.18 % depending upon the parameters configured for the computer analysis tool" (163). Indeed, only one sūra in the Qur'ān seems to have no oral formulas at all, the short sūra 108 (150). The rest consistently exceed the standard threshold for oral-formulaic composition of 20 % formulas, even after various controls are applied. BANNISTER then analyzes the ten "most formulaic" sūras according to his results (sūras 61, 64, 45, 98, 29, 30, 31, 42, 58, and 10).

BANNISTER'S study does have some slight issues. For instance, there is a repeated transliteration issue regarding Ḥijāz (which is always incorrectly spelled as Hijāz). BANNISTER also does not seem to account for the variants within early Qur'ānic manuscripts, which may impact his results. Especially of note is BANNISTER'S observation that if the typical chronology of the text from short Meccan

to long Medinan sūras holds – as most scholars would agree with their various provisos – the Qur’ān seems to be growing more formulaic over time, not less so. BANNISTER is confused by this result, but it seems perfectly in line with the findings of other oral formulaic studies on other corpuses. As the Qur’ānic message becomes more fixed over the course of the narrator’s career, oral formulaic usage would increase to alleviate the strain on individual memory while simultaneously allowing longer, more complicated, and more specific material to be arranged quickly. Lengthier materials would demand more use of stock phrase and trope, not less. These minor concerns aside, BANNISTER has presented some very encouraging results suggesting a new avenue for studying the Qur’ān through the lens of orality and oral cultures.