



Vol. 3, Issue. 1 (Series 9), Summer 2025, pp.1-18
The Meaning of Sūrah: A Linguistic and Interreligious Approach

Ahmad Pakatchi*

* Associate professor, Department of Quranic Linguistics, Faculty of Quranic Studies, Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, Tehran, Iran.
Email: apakatchi@gmail.com

 orcid.org/0000-0002-6471-2555

Abstract

The meaning of sūrah was an enigma for both early Quranic commentators and modern orientalists. Although many theories have been suggested, they are not generally convincing to scholars, and the question of its origin remains. This essay classifies and re-examines all those theories, critically evaluating them. Using materials and techniques from comparative Semitic linguistics, in addition to information from Abrahamic religions studies, the essay attempts to move beyond previous limitations. A special technique applied in this regard is using the context of Biblical chaptering in Syriac and Ethiopian Christian milieus to develop a model. This model could help explain the process by which sūrah emerged through a Syriac-to-Arabic borrowing. This argument enables us to confirm the suggestion that the word is derived from Syriac šūrāyā and further received a semantic contamination from the Hebrew pārāšāh.

Keywords: Quranic divisions, Biblical chapters, Kephalaia, Shūraya, Psalms, Syriac loanwords.

Received: May 18, 2025

Revised: June 16, 2025

Accepted: July 10, 2025

Article type: Research Article

Publisher: Imam Sadiq University



[10.30497/ISQH.2025.248592.1056](https://doi.org/10.30497/ISQH.2025.248592.1056)

© The Author(s).

How to cite: Pakatchi, A. (2025). The Meaning of Sūrah: A Linguistic and Interreligious Approach. *Interdisciplinary Studies of Quran & Hadith*, 3(1), 1-18. doi: 10.30497/isqh.2025.248592.1056

Introduction

Sūrah is the title used for any of the 114 divisions of the Holy Qur'an and is well-established in Islamic religious terminology. It also enjoys widespread usage in the common culture of Muslim communities. Due to the special and unique status of this term, some authors writing in European languages have preferred to use the original word *sūrah* rather than translating it as "chapter" or using equivalent terms. The word *sūrah* appears in the Holy Qur'an nine times in the singular form and once in the plural. For audiences—both contemporary and historical—the meaning of the term has been intuitively understood. It is recognized as one of the 114 parts of the Qur'an, and this understanding arises automatically. The fact that early exegetical literature contains no debate about the meaning of *sūrah* conveys a clear message: there was no doubt or ambiguity among early commentators regarding its significance.

However, beginning in the transitional period from the 2nd/8th to the 3rd/9th century, scholarly discussion on the term began to emerge, and the debate remained active for approximately a century and a half. After that, most references simply repeat the theories proposed during that earlier period, often with only minor revisions. More recently, alongside renewed interest in the structure of the Quranic text, the meaning of the word *sūrah* has once again become a subject of inquiry. In these modern debates, the automatic understanding of the term has been set aside, and scholars have recognized that clarifying the lexical value of *sūrah* may contribute to a deeper understanding of the Qur'an's structure and internal divisions. If a lexical and pre-terminological usage of the word could be identified in Quranic Arabic, it would resolve much of the ambiguity—but such usage has not been detected. Similarly, if the word *sūrah* or a cognate were found in Jewish or Christian terminology related to divisions of the Holy Bible, the issue would be clarified. In that case, it could be considered one of the religious terms borrowed from pre-Islamic Abrahamic traditions, as is the case with many other terms of Hebrew, Syriac, or Geez origin. However, efforts to establish such a precedent within Judeo-Christian contexts have not yet yielded satisfactory results.

Nevertheless, the answer must lie in one of two possibilities, as there is no third option for the development of a term. Any term in any language either emerges from a native lexeme through historical linguistic processes or is borrowed directly from another culture and language. Therefore, this research returns to examine both possibilities, evaluating the various scholarly suggestions and seeking a more evidence-based and justifiable solution. The central question of this study is to uncover the original meaning of *sūrah*.

In terms of methodology, this investigation employs comparative religious inquiry on one hand and Semitic linguistic analysis on the other, alongside the interpretive traditions of Quranic sciences.

A. In Sake of Arabic Roots

As mentioned before, no debates were recorded regarding the origin of the word *sūrah* or its lexical meaning until the middle of the 2nd/8th century. In fact, it was in the transitional years from that century to the next that a struggle arose in this regard, centered in Iran and Iraq. The two sides of this struggle were Abū ‘Ubaida Ma‘mar ibn al-Muṭannā (d. 209/824), a scholar of Basra, and Abu-l-Haiṭam al-Rāzī (d. 226/841), a scholar of Ray, adjacent to the present capital of Iran, Tehran.

A characteristic common between the two figures was the fact that neither was Arab by origin, and both lived far from Hijaz, the sphere of revelation. Abū ‘Ubaida was a *mawla* (adherent) of the Arabian tribe Taym (Ibn Qutaiba, 1960, p. 543), while Abu-l-Haiṭam was Iranian. Both were more engaged in theoretical deductions and speculative inductions in their scientific approach to the Arabic language in general and Quranic vocabulary in particular.

The exact dates of their theories are not recorded, but from Abū ‘Ubaida’s reference to the counter theory, it seems that Abu-l-Haiṭam’s theory was presented before the compilation of Abū ‘Ubaida’s work *Mağāzāt al-Qur’ān*.

Abu-l-Haiṭam al-Rāzī’s Theory

What we know of Abu-l-Haiṭam’s theory is through a quotation by al-Azharī, who had reliable access to his teachings. According to al-Azharī, Abu-l-Haiṭam based his theory on the idea that the root of *sūrah*

is $\sqrt{S'R}$, with a hamza, in which the second consonant loosened to a semivowel—an occurrence traditionally called *tashīl al-hamza*. He believed that this loosening of the hamza occurred due to frequent usage, similar to the cases of *mal'ak* > *malak* and *nabī'* > *nabiyy* (al-Azharī, 2001, Vol. 8, p. 37).

According to this formulation, Abu-l-Haiṭam believed that the Quranic *sūrah* was called so because every *sūrah* is “a portion of the Qur'an.” He supported this idea by explaining that God revealed the Qur'an to the Prophet portion by portion and separated these portions. He also mentioned that God distinguished each *sūrah* from the ones before and after by a heading and an ending (al-Azharī, 2001, Vol. 8, p. 36).

There are three points in this theory that are subject to criticism. First, as with similar cases of hamza loosening in Quranic vocabulary, it would be expected that some reciters of the Qur'an would pronounce the hamza, but in fact, there are no traces of such recitation for any of the ten usages of the word in the Qur'an. Second, Abu-l-Haiṭam cited frequency of usage as the reason for dropping the hamza, stating:

“إنها لما كثرت في الكلام وفي كتاب الله، ترك فيها الهمز” While its usage became frequent in conversations as well as in the divine book, the hamza was left out.”

However, there is no evidence of *sūrah* being used in this meaning in everyday Arab speech. As A.T. Welch noted, apart from etymology, the fact that the earliest usage of the word *sūrah* occurred in the Qur'an “is the most plausible assumption” (Welch, 1997, p. 885).

The third criticism concerns semantic context. Abu-l-Haiṭam rendered the origin to $\sqrt{S'R}$ and considered it equivalent to \sqrt{FDL} , saying:

“من أسأرتُ سورة، أي أفضلتُ فضلاً” “I left behind a remainder, i.e., I gave an excess.”

This equivalency is questionable because the exact value of *su'r* (سور) is not neutral—it has a pejorative meaning. It refers to the remainder of something consumed, especially food or drink, and is therefore not appropriate for Quranic *suwar*. Despite the fact that Abu-l-Haiṭam's theory is frequently repeated in exegetical and lexical sources, there has been no significant effort to address its deficiencies (see Ibn Qutaiba, 1978, p. 34; Ibn al-Anbārī, 1992, p. 6; al-Sam'ānī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 58; Rāḡib al-Iṣfahānī, 1961, p. 248).

Abū ‘Ubaida’s Theory

We are familiar with the work of Abū ‘Ubaida, titled *Mağāzāt al-Qur’ān*, which reflects his metaphorical thinking. Seeking the origin of *sūrah*, he proposed a metaphorical formulation, stating that the word *sūrah* means “a row of stones/bricks” in a building. He explained that just as each row is placed atop the previous one in a building, each *sūrah* in the Qur’an follows the previous one. He also pointed out a morphological difficulty: the normal plural form of *sūrah* (as a row of bricks) is *sūr*, while the plural used in the Qur’an (11:13) is *suwar* (Abū ‘Ubaida, 1955, Vol. 1, pp. 3–4).

Although Abū ‘Ubaida quoted Abu-l-Haiṭam’s theory as a second alternative, his tone suggests that his own theory was preferred. This is why later authors presented it as his definitive position (Ibn al-Ğawzī, 1984, Vol. 1, p. 50; al-Zabīdī, 1994, Vol. 6, p. 553).

Al-Azharī criticized this theory, referring to morphological rules and noting that the origin referring to rows of bricks requires the plural form *sūr*, while the Qur’an uses *suwar*, according to the consensus of all reciters (al-Azharī, 2001, Vol. 8, p. 36). It is worth mentioning that al-Ṭabarī claimed that *sūr* could be used as a plural for Quranic *suwar* according to regular templates (al-Ṭabarī, 1985, Vol. 1, p. 46), but this remains a syllogistic claim.

This theory was widely quoted by later scholars, sometimes with slight changes in wording but without essential revisions. These quotations began with Ibn al-A‘rābī (d. 231/846), Ibn Qutaiba (d. 276/889), and Ibn al-Anbārī (d. 328/940), who were prominent figures in Arabic studies (see Ibn al-A‘rābī, quoted in Ibn Sīda, 2000, Vol. 8, p. 608; Ibn Qutaiba, 1978, p. 34; Ibn al-Anbārī, 1992, p. 61). The theory continued to be repeated in exegetical and lexicographical resources through later centuries.

Ibn al-A‘rābī’s Theory

Although Ibn al-A‘rābī quoted Abū ‘Ubaida’s formulation, it seems that his preferred choice was a third suggestion. He pointed out that *sūrah* in Arabic means “dignity, privilege, sublimity,” and believed that the Quranic *suwar* were named so because of their sacredness and dignity (al-Zabīdī, 1994, Vol. 6, p. 553).

Further, Ibn al-Anbārī, while quoting the three theories mentioned above, presented an additional one based on the same lexical background. He suggested that *sūrah* may be called so because of its greatness and completeness (Ibn al-Anbārī, 1992, p. 61). Although he considered this suggestion parallel to Ibn al-A‘rābī’s theory, it is more of a revision and extension.

Further Theories

An extension of Abū ‘Ubaida’s theory is another metaphor based on the similarity between Quranic *sūrah* and a town wall (*sūr*, سُور). According to this formulation, the Quranic *sūrah* is called so because it surrounds content like a wall surrounds an area (al-Ṭabarī, 1985, Vol. 1, p. 46). This suggestion was repeated by Rāḡib al-Iṣfahānī and became widespread among later commentators and lexicographers (Rāḡib al-Iṣfahānī, 1961, p. 248).

After four centuries, we come to al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), in his comprehensive work on Quranic sciences, who attempted to quote earlier theories in full. Among the known theories, he added a formulation quoted from an unknown author, introduced with the phrase *qīla* (قِيلَ), meaning “it was said.” According to this theory, the word *sūrah* is derived from the verb *tasawwur* (تَسَوَّرَ), a Quranic lexeme meaning “to climb, to compose.” He explained that the Quranic *sūrah* is called so because the Qur’an is a composition of *suwar* (al-Suyūṭī, 1967, Vol. 1, p. 186). This theory became the most widespread explanation for the origin of *sūrah* in the later centuries, eventually dominating earlier formulations.

Of course, the difficulties and incompatibilities in the earliest theories prompted scholars to seek better answers. However, these newer ones often appear more forced in their analysis and weaker in their arguments than the older ones. As an overview, one can state that the file remains open, and none of these theories are satisfactory enough to definitively resolve the challenge.

Finally, it is worth quoting the conclusion of Arthur Jeffery, who stated, “The Muslim authorities are quite ignorant of the origin of the word” (Jeffery, 1938, p. 181).

B. In Sake of Judeo-Christian Roots

As shown by Arthur Jeffery, the first attempt to seek a non-Arabic origin for the term *sūrah* is that of Theodor Nöldeke in his well-known book, *Geschichte des Qorans* (1860). He used material prepared by Johannes Buxtorf, a famous Westphalian orientalist, master of rabbis, and professor of Hebrew language. Buxtorf, in his work *Lexicon Brevi Rabbinico-Philosophicum* (A brief lexicon for Rabbinic terms), originally published in Basel, registered the words שורה/שורה (*šūr, šūrah*) meaning “lines, rows” in a wide lexical usage. Gesenius mentioned this word referring to “a row of olives or vines” (Gesenius, 1955, p. 1004), and Nöldeke pointed out that in Hebrew vocabulary, it means any row of persons or objects (Nöldeke, 1909, Vol. 1, p. 31). After discussing the general lexical meaning, Buxtorf pointed out a special usage of the word as a technical term in the combination שורות הספר (*šūrōt ha-sēfer*), which means “lines of books,” according to Rabbinic terminology (Buxtorf, 1824, p. 565).

Returning to Nöldeke, he considered this Rabbinic term and suggested that the Quranic term *sūrah*, in its original application, could be analyzed as “a line in a heavenly book,” but he stated that this latter meaning is only traceable in recent Hebrew (Nöldeke, 1909). This implies that such usage may be influenced by Arabic, which does not help in tracing the etymology of a Quranic term. On the other hand, the older usages of the word are too far removed to be relevant to the Quranic *sūrah*.

Nevertheless, Nöldeke’s theory gained wide acceptance among Orientalists, as Jeffery (1938) lists several scholars who repeated and agreed with this suggestion. Of course, there were also scholars who opposed it, such as P. de Lagarde, who believed that there are serious difficulties with this theory (Jeffery, 1938, p. 181). Margoliouth also precisely stated that this theory “seems to violate a sound law” (Margoliouth, 1919, p. 538).

A second theory is that of P. de Lagarde (1889), who, using Buxtorf’s data and revising it, suggested that the origin of *sūrah* could be found in the Hebrew word שרה, which means *kanon* (Jeffery, 1938, p. 181). Jeffery criticized it due to the doubtful nature of the proposed origin and stated that “one cannot place much reliance on this derivation” (Jeffery, 1938).

As a third theory, Hirschfeld (1902) suggested that the word *sūrah* is a corrupted form of the Hebrew word סִדְרָה (*sidrāh*). He explained that it is a synonym of סֵדֶר (*seḏer*), which is a term for sections of the books in the Masoretic text of the Old Testament. Nöldeke cited this theory and said that it is a thinkable suggestion (Nöldeke, 1909, Vol. 1, p. 31). Jeffery (1938) criticized this theory because it is based on the hypothesis that *sidrāh* was misread as *sūrah* due to the resemblance between the Hebrew letters ד (dālet) and ו (vāv). It should be added that in Mandaicism, the Mandaic word *sidrā* is used for chapters of the sacred book *Gnīzā Rabbā* (Drower & Macuch, 1963, pp. 318–319). Even for non-Muslims, it is unlikely that the written form of a Hebrew word would be the origin of a Quranic borrowing (Jeffery, 1938, pp. 181–182).

The fourth theory is that of Margoliouth, published in his article about the Qur'an in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (1919). He hesitantly proposed the origin to be the Syriac word ܫܒܪܬܐ (*sbartā*), meaning “preaching, Gospel, message.” He pointed to its use in the title of Mark: “the Holy Gospel, preaching (*sbartā*) of Mark” (Margoliouth, 1919, p. 539).

The title is: ܫܒܪܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܢ ܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ i.e., “The Holy Gospel, the annunciation of Mark the evangelist” (*Syriac New Testament*, title of the 2nd Gospel, p. 61).

The word ܫܒܪܬܐ is registered in Syriac lexicons with the meaning “tidings, good tidings, the Gospel” (Payne Smith, 1903, Vol. 2, p. 359; Brockelmann, 1895, p. 218). This word is derived from the verbal root ܫܒܪ (*SBR*), meaning “to hope, to trust, to confide, to expect” (Brockelmann, 1895; Payne Smith, 1903). It is evident that this application is more compatible with a sacred book as a whole and not its internal sections, as seen in its usage for the Gospel of Mark. Furthermore, there is no justification for dropping the phoneme /b/ without support from correspondence rules.

The fifth theory was suggested by Richard Bell (1926). In discussing some challenge (*taḥaddī*) verses, he stated that the sense required for *sūrah* in this context is something like “revelation” or “scripture.” He assumed the root to be the Syriac word ܫܘܪܬܐ (*sūrṭā*), meaning “writing, a portion of scripture.” He added that this word has two

variants with the same meaning: ܣܘܪܬܐ (*sūrtā*) and ܣܘܪܬܐ ܥ (*ṣūrtā*) (Bell, 1926, p. 52). Some years later, he introduced the form ܣܘܪܬܐ ܥ (*ṣūrtā*) as the main form and agreed that Arabic *sūrah* cannot be a normal Arabization of the word based on correspondence rules, although it is more compatible with the form ܣܘܪܬܐ (Bell, 1953, p. 52). These three words are not variants of one lexeme but are derived from different roots, and Bell adjusted the meanings to fit his theory.

The word ܣܘܪܬܐ (*sūrṭā*) means “line, lineament, tip, letter, character, written” (Brun, 1895, p. 419); “prick, wound; character, letter” (Costaz, 2002, p. 237), derived from the root √srṭ, meaning “to fall (skin), to delineate, to write” (Brun, 1895, p. 419); “to prick; to draw, to write, to trace” (Costaz, 2002, p. 237). Its Arabic cognate is *saṭara* (سَطَرَ), which appears with metathesis. This root relates more to the physical act of writing and is not relevant to content. Furthermore, the existence of a cognate in Arabic weakens this suggestion as the origin.

The word ܣܘܪܬܐ ܥ (*ṣūrtā*) means “image, form, type, figure, picture, writing,” and is cognate with Arabic *ṣūrah* (صورة) and Hebrew *ṣūrah* (צורה) (Brun, 1895, p. 548; Costaz, 2002, p. 300), derived from the root √šwr, common to Syriac, Arabic, Hebrew, and South Arabian languages, meaning “to shape, to form, to design, to paint” (Maškūr, 1979, Vol. 1, p. 498; Zammit, 2002, p. 260). Where this word is used for writing, it refers to the shape of written characters, not content. Both meanings are far from the oral nature of the Qur’an, and neither word is compatible with correspondence rules to be the origin of Arabic *sūrah*. The form ܣܘܪܬܐ (*sūrtā*), which seems phonologically more compatible, is not a standard Syriac word recorded in classical dictionaries.

The sixth theory is that proposed by Jeffery (1938) himself, which refers to a Syriac origin. He suggested that *sūrah* is derived from the Syriac word ܣܘܪܐ (*sūrā*), which means “writing” and has a sense very similar to the English “lines” (Jeffery, 1938, p. 182; see also Costaz, 2002, p. 222). This suggestion may be criticized because of the Quranic context in which the term *sūrah* is applied. Its usage in verse 24:1, as well as in verses connected with the challenge (*taḥaddī*), is more relevant to the oral nature of the Qur’an than to the written.

As the seventh theory, we should refer to the recently suggested probability by Angelika Neuwirth (2006). She cautiously proposed that the word *sūrah* may be derived from the Syriac ܫܪܝܐ (*šūrayā*), meaning “beginning, opening” (Costaz, 2002, p. 382), which is also used for short psalms sung before the reading of scripture (Neuwirth, 2006, p. 167). Brun (1895) also mentions that the word ܫܪܝܐ has been used as a religious term for “liturgic anthems” (p. 699). The word is also connected with ܫܪܝܐ (*šrayā*), meaning “separation, breaking,” as well as a spectrum of related meanings (Brun, 1895, p. 699; Costaz, 2002, p. 382). According to correspondence rules, it is normal for Syriac /š/ to change to Arabic /s/. Therefore, this theory is the most relevant and justifiable, although Neuwirth modestly proposed it with prudential doubt and without detailed justification.

However, the effort to find a foreign origin for *sūrah* over more than a century has been disappointing. One century ago, Margoliouth (1919) considered *sūrah* an enigmatic name for the chapters of the Qur’an, “of which no satisfactory account has as yet been given” (p. 538). More recently, Neuwirth (2006) stated again that “the term *sūrah* is difficult to trace. None of these etymologies however is totally convincing” (p. 167).

C. Similar Concepts in Judaism and Christianity

It is an evident fact that in three of the ten usages of the word *sūrah* in the Qur’an, the theme is a challenge to deniers (*taḥaddī*) (Qur’an 2:23; 10:38; 11:13). In all three verses, the context shows that they are addressed to the People of the Scripture (*Ahl al-Kitāb*), i.e., Jews and/or Christians. Apart from this point, it is not expected from pagan Arabs (*Ummiyyīn*) to bring expressions similar to the Qur’an, because it was not their practice over centuries, and they never had such enthusiasm for possessing a scripture.

The issue of challenge, as explained by Richard Bell, is based on the argument that if they do not accept the divine origin of the Qur’an, they are required to bring *suwar* or a *sūrah* like it (Bell, 1926, p. 51). Such an argument is meaningful when addressed to believers in previous scriptures. This is not the only point that can be understood from the challenge verses. An important point, to which Bell also referred, is the

fact that the Qur'an "must have been using a word which they understood in the sense in which it was meant to be understood" (Bell, 1926, pp. 51–52).

A result of this point is the fact that *sūrah* was not just a lexical word innovated by the Qur'an as a term that might hinder its proper understanding by the addressees. It is expected to be a religious term known to them beforehand and used in Jewish and/or Christian communities living in Arabia at the time. Thus, the term was borrowed by the Qur'an, as is the case with many other religious terms borrowed from other Abrahamic communities. Based on this argument, the preferred way to solve the enigma is to seek its origin in the religious terminology of the pre-Quranic Judeo-Christian context.

In Judaism, there are two kinds of divisions for scriptures considered as chapters. In antiquity, centuries before the appearance of Islam, the Hebrew scriptures were divided into chapters named *pārāšot*, the plural form of the term פְּרָשָׁה (*pārāšāh*). This term refers to a division in the Masoretic text of the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Bible. The basis of this division was the distribution of the text into numerous parts for reading in weekly worship. Parallel to *pārāšot*, there was another division of the Old Testament created for ritual purposes and the triennial cycle of reading practiced by Palestinian Jews. These divisions were called *sedārīm*, and each was a *seder* (סֵדֶר). Semantically, *pārāšāh* means "exact statement," from the root √prš, meaning "to divide, to separate, to make distinct" (Gesenius, 1955, p. 831; Jastrow, 1903, Vol. 2, p. 1241). Regarding *seder*, it means "order, sequence," from the root √sdr, meaning "to arrange, to order" (Gesenius, 1955, p. 690). The main difference between the two systems of chaptering is that *pārāšot* is a thematic division, while *sedārīm* is only a quantitative division without special attention to themes. Compared to the Quranic division, it is *pārāšot* that shows more similarities to the Quranic *suwar*, while *sedārīm* is more relevant to quantitative partitions like *juz'* and *hizb*.

In the Christian sphere, dividing the Bible into thematic chapters began with the Byzantines. These chapters were called by the Greek word *kephalaia*, the plural form of *kephalaion* (κεφαλαῖον), which literally means "heading" (Liddell & Scott, 1996, p. 944). There are discussions about the time of the appearance of this chaptering, but it is not later

than the 5th century, a century before the rise of Islam. This division is thematic, and from a quantitative standpoint, there are no specific limits. Thus, a significant difference in chapter length can be observed. Chaptering into *kephalaia* was applied to both the Old and New Testaments. Among all the books included, the greatest variation in length is observed in Psalms. Psalm 117 is the shortest chapter in the Bible, while Psalm 119 is the longest.

Islamic sources also contain references to the application of *sūrah* as a term relating to pre-Islamic scriptures. A unique account from the first generations of Muslim scholars is a narration about the usage of *sūrah* for Psalms in early Islam and seemingly before that. It is a brief account narrated by Abū Šālih from Ibn ‘Abbās, which says: “God revealed Psalms to David including 150 *suwar*, in Hebrew language” (al-‘Aynī, *‘Umda*, Vol. 16, p. 6).

Further, there is a narration from Qatāda (d. 118/736), the famous scholar of Basra and one of the prominent disciples of Ibn ‘Abbās, which says: “People narrated to us that the Psalms includes 150 *suwar*, which are all sermons and praises of God” (Ibn Ḥaḡar, 1959, Vol. 6, p. 455; al-Suyūṭī, 1967, Vol. 1, p. 230). This content is repeated by several later commentators and historians (Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, 2003, Vol. 2, p. 261; al-Mas‘ūdī, 1965, Vol. 1, p. 69; al-Zamaḡṣarī, 1947, Vol. 1, p. 72). We know that the number of chapters is exactly 150 in the canonical Psalms of the Hebrew Old Testament. Later, it is worth mentioning that Ibn Ṭāwūs (d. 664/1266), the famous Shi’a author, when quoting some chapters of David’s Psalms, called them *suwar* (Ibn Ṭāwūs, 1950, pp. 49–53).

Returning to current Christian terminology, we should mention that the concept of *kephalaia* not only expanded among Christians of West Asia, Egypt, and Ethiopia, but also borrowed forms of it were in common use in their languages, including:

- Syriac: ܩܦܠܐܢ (*qefalē’on*) (Costaz, 2002, p. 326)
- Coptic: κεφαλαιον, κεφαλεον (*kefalaion, kefaleon*) (N.A., *Coptic Language*, pp. 47–48)
- Geez: ክፉለ (*kəfl*), ክፉሌ (*kufāle*) (Leslau, 1991, p. 276)

Regarding etymology, *kephalaion* is derived from the Greek word κεφαλή (*kefalē*), meaning “head” (Liddell & Scott, 1996, p. 945).

It is worth mentioning that, based on a reverse etymology in Geez, a triconsonantal verbal root $\sqrt{\text{kl}}$ emerged, meaning “to distribute, to divide, to separate, to distinguish...” (Leslau, 1991, p. 276). This reverse etymology reveals a semantic phenomenon in the milieu of the Geez language: a contamination of the meaning “to divide” with the meaning “heading,” as the origin of *kefalaion*. This phenomenon may be analyzed as the influence of the Jewish chaptering term *pārāšāh* on Christian *kephalaia*. In general, Judeo-Christian blending is common in Ethiopian culture.

Despite the widespread use of customized forms of the Greek word *kephalaion* in different Christian communities, there were also trends to interpret *kephalaion* as a local word. For example, among Sogdian Christians in Central Asia, the common equivalent was *parwārt* (Gharib, 1995, p. 292), cognate to Middle Persian *fragard* (Faravašī, 1967, p. 151). Also, with limited usage, the Coptic word $\pi\omega\pi$ (*jōj*), meaning “head,” was used in the sense of “heading,” as an equivalent to *kephalaia* (Crum, 1939, p. 799). In the following lines, we will show that such an event may have occurred in Syriac-Arabic as well.

Although what we know about pre-Islamic Jewish and Christian communities in Arabia is very limited, a similar blending to that found in Geez seems to have occurred with the term *sūrah*. This blending is believed to have been initiated by Arabic-speaking Christians of the pre-Islamic era, based on a borrowing from Syriac. It is likely that *sūrah* was an Arabicized form of the Syriac word ܫܘܪܐ (*šūrayā*), meaning “beginning, opening” (Costaz, 2002, p. 382), which was proposed by A. Neuwirth as a probable origin, albeit with caution and without firm confidence (Neuwirth, 2006, p. 167).

What may support this probability is the fact that this Syriac word is etymologically related to ܫܪܐ (*šraya*), meaning “breaking, separation, untying” (Costaz, 2002, p. 382). Both words are derived from the verbal root ܫܪ (*šR*), meaning “to terminate, to loosen, to destroy, to abolish; to open, to dismiss” (Costaz, 2002, p. 381). Once again, we observe a blending of the meanings “to divide” and “beginning (> heading)” within a single triconsonantal root. While in Geez this blending occurred with a word of Greek origin, in Syro-Arabic *šūrayā/sūrah*, it occurred with a word of Syriac origin.

Conclusion

Regarding the lexical root of the Quranic *sūrah*, there is a wide range of scholarly controversy. While some scholars trace its origin to a pure Arabic root, others consider it a loanword derived from various languages and traditions. This survey re-examined those opinions from both a linguistic and lexicographical viewpoint, alongside a contextual analysis of its usage in the Holy Qur'an. Ultimately, we can conclude that the word *sūrah* is unlikely to have been a common Arabic word in daily use. Rather, it appears to have been a pre-Islamic religious term known among the People of the Scripture, and is therefore reasonably expected to be a loanword. According to the investigations presented in this survey, *sūrah* was a religious term circulated among Arabic-speaking Christians in the region. Its origin is most plausibly the Syriac word *šūrayā*, meaning "beginning, opening," which corresponds to the Christian Greek term *kephalaion*. However, it seems that this was not merely a straightforward borrowing. Instead, a semantic blending occurred between the meaning of "beginning" and that of "breaking, separation," both supported by the same triconsonantal root in Syriac. This secondary blended meaning appears to reflect the influence of Jewish terminology for scriptural divisions, particularly the term *pārāšot*.

References

- The Holy Qur'ān*. (n.d.). [Classical work].
- The Holy Bible*. (n.d.). [Classical work].
- Abū Ḥayyān al-Ġarnāṭī. (2001). *Al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ* (ʿĀdil Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Mawḡūd et al., Eds.). Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya.
- Abū ʿUbaida, M. ibn al-Muṭannā. (1955–1962). *Maḡāzāt al-Qurʾān* (Muḥammad Fuʾād Sezgin, Ed.). Cairo: Maktaba al-Ḥanḡī.
- al-ʿAynī, M. ibn Aḥmad. (n.d.). *ʿUmdat al-Qārī*. Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāṭ al-ʿArabī.
- al-Azhārī, M. ibn Aḥmad. (2001). *Tahḏīb al-luġa* (Muḥammad ʿIwaḍ Murʿib, Ed.). Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāṭ al-ʿArabī.
- Bell, R. (1926). *The origin of Islam in its Christian environment*. London: Macmillan & Co.
- Bell, R. (1953). *Introduction to the Qurʾān*. Edinburgh: University Press.
- Brockelmann, K. (1895). *Lexicon Syriacum*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; Berlin: Reuther & Richard.
- Brun, J. (1895). *Dictionarium Syriaco-Latinum*. Beirut: Typographia PP. Soc. Jesu.
- Buxtorf, J. (1824). *Lexicon breve Rabbinico-philosophicum*. In *Lexicon Hebraicum et Chaldaicum* (Reprint of 1607 ed.). Glasgow: Typis et cura Andreae et Joannis M. Duncan.
- Costaz, L. (2002). *Dictionnaire syriaque-français / Syriac-English dictionary* (3rd ed.). Beirut: Dar el-Machreq.
- Crum, W. E. (1939). *A Coptic dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Drower, E. S., & Macuch, R. (1963). *A Mandaic dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Faravašī, B. (1967). *Farhang-e Pahlavi*. Tehran: Bonyād-e Farhang-e Iran.
- Gesenius, W. (1955). *Hebrew and English lexicon of the Old Testament* (E. Robinson, Trans.; F. A. Brown, S. R. Driver, & C. A. Briggs, Eds.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Gharib, B. (1995). *Sogdian dictionary*. Tehran: Farhang Publications.
- Ibn al-Anbārī, M. ibn Qāsim. (1992). *Al-Zāhir fī maʿānī kalimāt al-nās* (Ḥātim Ṣāliḥ al-Ḍāmin, Ed.). Beirut: Muʾassisa al-Risāla.
- Ibn al-Ġawzī, ʿA. ibn ʿAlī. (1984). *Zād al-Masīr*. Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī.
- Ibn Ḥaġar al-ʿAsqalānī, A. ibn ʿAlī. (1959). *Fath al-Bārī* (Muḥammad Fuʾād ʿAbd al-Bāqī & Muḥibuddīn al-Ḥatīb, Eds.). Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa.
- Ibn Qutaiba, ʿA. ibn Muslim. (1960). *Al-Maʿārif* (Ṭirwat ʿAkkāša, Ed.). Cairo: Wizārat al-Ṭaqāfa wa-l-Irṣād al-Qawmī.

- Ibn Qutaiba, 'A. ibn Muslim. (1978). *Tafsīr ḡarīb al-Qur'ān* (Aḥmad Ṣaqr, Ed.). Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya.
- Ibn Sīda, 'A. ibn Ismā'īl. (2000). *Al-Muḥkam wa-l-Muḥīt al-A'zam* ('Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Hindāwī, Ed.). Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya.
- Ibn Tāwūs, 'A. ibn Mūsā. (1950). *Sa'd al-Su'ūd*. Najaf: al-Maktaba al-Haydariyya.
- Jastrow, M. (1903). *A dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi and the Midrashic literature*. London/New York: Luzac/Putnam.
- Jeffery, A. (1938). *The foreign vocabulary of the Qur'ān*. Baroda: Oriental Institute.
- Leslau, W. (1991). *Comparative dictionary of Ge'ez (Classical Ethiopic)*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Liddell, H. G., & Scott, R. (1996). *A Greek-English lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Margoliouth, D. S. (1919). Qur'an. In J. Hastings (Ed.), *Encyclopaedia of religion and ethics* (Vol. X). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.
- Maškūr, M. J. (1979). *Farhang-e taṭbīqī*. Tehran: Bonyād-e Farhang-e Īrān.
- al-Mas'ūdī, 'A. ibn Ḥusain. (1965). *Murūḡ al-dahab* (Yūsuf As'ad Dāḡir, Ed.). Beirut: Dār al-Andulus.
- Muqātil ibn Sulaymān. (2003). *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Aḥmad Farīd, Ed.). Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya.
- N.A. (n.d.). *Coptic language: English dictionary*. Web-published.
- Neuwirth, A. (2006). Sūra. In J. D. McAuliffe (Ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (Vol. V). Leiden/Boston: Brill.
- Nöldeke, T. (1909). *Geschichte des Qorāns* (F. Schwally, Ed.). Leipzig: Dietrich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung Theodor Weicher.
- Payne Smith, R. (1903). *A compendium Syriac dictionary* (J. Payne Smith, Ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Rāḡib al-Iṣfahānī, Ḥ. ibn Muḥammad. (1961). *Al-Mufradāt* (Muḥammad Sayyid Kīlānī, Ed.). Cairo: Maktaba Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī.
- al-Sam'ānī, M. ibn Muḥammad. (1997). *Tafsīr* (Yāsir ibn Ibrāhīm & Ġunaim ibn 'Abbās Ġunaim, Eds.). Riyadh: Dār al-Waṭan.
- al-Suyūṭī, 'A. ibn Abī Bakr. (1967). *Al-Itqān* (Muḥammad Abu-l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, Ed.). Cairo: Maktaba Miṣr al-Ġadīda.
- The Syriac New Testament*. (1915). (J. Murdock, Trans., 9th ed.). Boston: H. L. Hastings and Sons.
- al-Ṭabarī, M. ibn Ġarīr. (1985). *Ġāmi' al-bayān*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.
- Welch, A. T. (1997). Sūra. In C. E. Bosworth (Ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd ed., Vol. IX). Leiden: Brill.

al-Zabīd

al-Zabīdī, M. M. (1994). *Tāğ al-‘Arūs* (‘A. Šīrī, Ed.). Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.

al-Zamaḥṣarī, M. ibn ‘Umar. (1947). *Al-Kaššāf*. Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tiğāriyya al-Kubrā.

Zammit, M. R. (2002). *A comparative lexical study of Qur’anic Arabic*. Leiden, Boston, & Köln: Brill.

