



## The Origins of the Great Significance of Writing in the Arab-Muslim Culture

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**Abstract.** – This article considers the underlying reasons for the great importance of writing in the Arab-Muslim culture. In the first part, on the basis of sources belonging to the classical religious tradition of Islam, the origin of writing and its primordial functions are explained. The analysis of the source corpus showed that the high status of writing should be linked with its divine character (writing as the domain of God who, by the use of writing, creates the entire existence, records human deeds, and embodies His Word). In the second part, this classical discourse is interpreted from the perspective of 1), the cultural process of the adoption of writing; 2), possible cultural diffusion; and 3), the Koranic concept of the relation of God to humans. [*Arabic writing, Arab-Muslim culture, word anthropology, heavenly books, Koran*]

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133–157; *Pomiędzy rajem a piekłem. Tradycja judeochrześcijańska a Koran* (together with A. Mrozek and M. Teperska-Kłasińska). *Estetyka i Krytyka* 23.2011.4: 183–204; *Żebracy, włóczęgdy i oszuści na arabsko-muzułmańskim Wschodzie X–XIV wieku*. Kraków 2006.

... drawing a line from right to left, which is the direction of Arabic calligraphy, man is moving from the periphery to the heart which is also located in the left side of the body, and ... in concentrating upon the writing of words in beautiful forms man is also bringing back the dispersed elements of his soul to their centre (Nasr 1987: 34).

### Introduction

Writing occupies a unique position in the Arab-Muslim culture to this day. Academic works on Arabic writing, irrespective of the adopted research perspective, consistently mention terms such as the “elevated position of the written word” (Weitzel 2005: 217), “exalted status of writing” (Bloom 2009: 336), “primacy of the written word” (Welch 1979: 23); the written word has constantly held “an important place” (Weitzel 2005: 214), enjoyed “incomparable prestige” (Sourdrel-Thomine 1978: 1113) and played “a very special role” (Schimmel 1984: 1). Some researchers even speak of the sacredness of writing, thereby highlighting the existence in the world of Islam of the conviction that it is of divine provenance or contains an element of divinity: “Arabic writing, even more so than the lan-

guage, became a sacred symbol of Islam” or “[i]n Islam, sacredness became a characteristic element in writing” (Rosenthal 1961: 17).

The specific role of writing in the Arab-Muslim culture manifests itself in the human attitude towards it, which should include honour, reverence, and respect (*ikrām*<sup>1</sup>, *maḥabba*, *taʿzīm*) (As-Subkī 1975/2: 564). Such an attitude leads to particular consequences, which can be traced predominantly within classical legal and artistic discourse.<sup>2</sup>

In the field of the former, the various cases of the use of writing have been discussed,<sup>3</sup> the situations legally qualified, in which writing concerned both the contents connected with revelation or God himself, as well as the secular contents.<sup>4</sup> An exemplification of such considerations can be the legal prohibition of writing down a “[secular] story and the like” (*qiṣṣa wa-naḥwahā*) on a sheet of paper containing the name of God.<sup>5</sup> By analogy, writing any text on a sheet of paper could have been prohibited, as from the written letters one can also create the name of God (which in this way will appear among the secular contents). The considerations also headed in another direction – whether one can, for example, write “words of unbelief and evil acts” (*kalimāt al-kufr wa-l-qabāʾih*). For the lawyers the situation was clear since letters were supposed to serve a proper purpose, i.e., to be employed to write down the Koran, the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad, and other beneficial knowledge (*ʿilm nāfi*).<sup>6</sup> Some more puritan *alīms* (the scholars of the reli-

gious sciences), before taking into their hands the blank sheet of paper, had performed ritual ablutions because of the potential contents which could be written there. Finally, the matter of stepping on texts was addressed (woven into carpets or written on sheets of paper left on the ground). The argumentation swung back to the objective for which the letters were created. In this way, even stepping on an unwritten sheet of paper, if it was a conscious act, was qualified as forbidden (see also Ritter 1955: 295; 2003: 307).

The legal stance neither did obstruct the practical use of writing nor the development of scientific literature and the belles lettres and the use of writing in art: its value was appreciated as a means for the transfer and consolidation of knowledge, and over time the informative function of writing took on an aesthetic element. Attention was paid to the beauty of Arabic writing (the particular letters) and the almost infinite possibilities of creating new forms.<sup>7</sup> After the aesthetic function had dominated the pragmatic, writing became art. Calligraphy had won an extremely privileged position among other fields of art. Admired and respected, it also had a sacred character (not only because of the hallowed nature of the writing itself but also because of the traditional linking of the origins of calligraphy itself to the person of Ali<sup>8</sup>).

The importance of writing (and calligraphy) had translated into the value of the handwritten book.<sup>9</sup> At all stages of its historical development, the Arab-Muslim civilisation was characterised by a particular love of the book, which manifested itself not only in proliferate writing activity<sup>10</sup> but also in the development of the art of the book, libraries, bookshops, and the respect towards the profession of the copyist itself and its paramountcy over other crafts.

After the rise and consolidation of calligraphy (around the 8th/9th century) the decorative function of writing began to be used in the fields of architec-

1 In this article, the ALA-LC transcription is used, with the exception of those Arab terms, which are long rooted in the English language and written in the simplified transcription.

2 I omit here some speculations that originated mainly in Sufis' circles, and which concerned the mystical value of the letters of the Arabic alphabet, the mystical dimension of the calligraphy, as well as their numerical value. Among others, Annemarie Schimmel (1984: 77–114) writes about this.

3 The examples below were taken from the collection of legal opinions by as-Subkī (d. 1355), in which he presents the legal stance of the Shafiites (1975/2: 563–565), although this stance can be considered as representative for the other schools (Rosenthal 1961: 16).

4 In Islam, the understanding of the notions *sacrum* and *profanum* is different from the Christian vision which, influenced by the Greco-Roman culture, had adopted the dualistic model of human existence. God is presented in the Koran as the Creator of all things, and, therefore, each element of reality is the reflection of its divine being. Nevertheless, one can notice some spheres (of life and human action), which can be interpreted as *profanum*, which shows that not everything created by God must be considered as *sacrum* (see Wiederhold 2004).

5 Concerning the respect paid to the sheets of paper with the written name of God see Ritter (1955: 270, 295; 2003: 282, 307) and Schimmel (1984: 82).

6 In legal discourse it was assumed that each thing has its use, serves some objective. It is inscribed in the nature of things or determined by the law (*sharīʿa*).

7 The beauty, and also the process of the writing itself and the stationery had become the motif, inspiration, and subject of many poetic works (Schimmel 1984: 115–148).

8 Among others, through the blood ties of Ali with the Prophet calligraphy was to become religiously legitimised (Renard 1996: 126).

9 One needs to remember that the first written texts were the Koranic texts, and it was the Koran, that became the prototype of the handwritten book.

10 Of course, writing down the revelation itself entailed the necessity of the development of studies on the Koran from various perspectives. Moreover, the intellectual curiosity, that characterised the Arabs from the moment of moving beyond the Arab Peninsula as the result of conquests, led to studies on the basis of the ancient Middle East heritage. Therefore, the thirst for knowledge was also an important reason behind such a fast and rich development of the literature.

ture and artistic craft. Once again, the development of ornamentation based on writing was to a large extent the consequence of its sacred character.<sup>11</sup>

This article is the reflection on the causes of this great importance attached to writing in the Arab-Muslim culture. In the first part, I will consider how in the view of the classical religious tradition of Islam<sup>12</sup> the origin of writing is explained and which primordial functions it performs. Through this analysis, I intend to demonstrate that the two elements of the traditional discourse about writing, i.e., the conception of its origins and its primordial functions, had determined that it appertains to the realm of the divinity, thereby elevating its status in the Arab-Muslim culture. In the second part, I would like to propose an interpretation of the cultural mechanisms described earlier, which had led to such a vision of writing.

### Arabic Writing – The Traditional View of Its Origins and Primordial Functions

In the religious tradition of Islam, the origins and functions of writing are all strictly connected with God and it is this conviction that had influenced its status. The common conviction of God as the Creator of writing was mainly the consequence of the faith in God as the one, absolute Creator of all things. The whole universe, the whole creation owes its existence to God. The Koran highlights this affirmation repeatedly, as, for instance: “God is the Creator of all things”<sup>13</sup> (39:62), “It was He who created all that is on the earth for you” (2:29), “This is how God creates what He will: when He has ordained something, He only says ‘Be,’ and it is” (3:47).

In the exegetical discourse, the attention was paid to the fact that the divine origin of writing is

presented by 96:4: “Your Lord is the Most Beautiful One who taught [by means] of pen.” The classical commentators emphasise that the “pen” is the great blessing and gift of God for man. Thanks to it, he could write down but also receive knowledge about the revelation.<sup>14</sup>

The Koranic vision of writing as the domain of God points mainly to the divine origin of writing: writing first and foremost is the activity of God (and the angels subordinated to Him) and not of man. God acting through writing, not only conceives the whole creation but also records human deeds.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the theological discourse introduces the idea of God who uses writing for the “embodiment” of His Word. These three activities of God find their expression in the heavenly book (*kitāb*).<sup>16</sup> In other words, the book exists in the three different aspects. Thus, by accentuating a given aspect of the book in the classical exegetical and theological discourse, the path was opened to a different concept for the primordial function of writing. However, each of the three concepts of the book invariably led to a reality beyond the world. In their description, elements of writing appear repeatedly: the “letters,” the “pen,” the “book,” “writing,” “erasure (of the written text),” “drying up (of the pen),” “creaking (of the pen)” and so on.

### The Creation of the Whole Existence (the Writing = the Representation of God’s Authority)

The cosmogonic contents contained in the Koran and Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad link writing with the creation, which is close to the idea of destiny – deciding on the course of the people’s life and the world’s history. The majority of the exegetes agree that the first thing that was created by God was the pen (*qalam*). In the Prophet’s tradition there exist a lot of variants of the account in which

11 Also the iconoclasm, that prevailed in the art of Islam from the first years of the 8th century, had its part in the development of the non-figural decorative art, including ornamentation based on writing.

12 Apart from the foundational texts – the Koran and the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad – in this article I have used also the classic exegeses of the Koran (*tafsīrs*) representative for the main current of the Sunni theology: aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 923) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), representing the type of the tradition-based exegesis (*tafsīr bi’l-ma’t’hūr*), al-Qurṭubī (d. 1272), whose approach is the combination of *tafsīr bi’l-math’ūr* and the opinion-based exegesis (*tafsīr bi’r-ra’y*), and the comment of Fakhr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī (d. 1209), filled with rich philosophical and theological reflection. Finally, I have occasionally referred to other sources, for example, the work dedicated to the theological issues, *Nihāyat al-iqdām fī ‘ilm al-kalām* of ash-Shahrastānī (d. 1153).

13 In this article I have made use of the translation of the Koran by Abdel Haleem (2004).

14 aṭ-Ṭabarī (2001 / 1422 A.H./24: 527), henceforth ṬB; al-Qurṭubī (2006 / 1427 A.H./22: 377–379), henceforth QB; ar-Rāzī (1981 / 1401 A.H./30: 78), henceforth RZ.

15 The Koranic references to “writing” and “book” are not coherent in that they do not create a coherent intellectual entirety. On the one hand, it is probably the result of the evolution of the views of Muhammad himself; on the other hand, the variety of the sources, that had influenced the Koran or even contributed to it. At the same time, one needs to remember that the oral cultures are characterised by a lack of sensitivity to contradictions, and this was precisely the Arab culture before Islam and in its first years, where despite the adoption of writing it remained only the support of speech for a long time.

16 Studying the use of the noun *kitāb* and the verb *kataba* in the Koran (also in the meanings different than discussed in this article) is in concordance with Kassis (1983: 661–668).

God orders the created pen to “Write!” (*uktub*).<sup>17</sup> In response to the question of the pen and the content of the writing, God answers that it writes what was and that what will be until the Day of Judgement.<sup>18</sup> Writing had been linked to the preserved tablet (*lawḥ mahfūz*). The whole reality was written on it (al-Ghazālī 2005 [1426]: 897; ṬB 2001/16: 629–631).

The preserved tablet was mentioned in the Koran only once, in 85:21–22: “His is truly a glorious Qur’an [written] on a preserved Tablet.” On the basis of this verse, two interpenetrating and complementing concepts emerged, from which the one sees the tablet as a means through which God’s will executes itself in the creation. The exegetes also define a tablet understood in this way by the Koranic term *umm al-kitāb*, literally “mother of the book.” According to the second concept, there is the heavenly archetype of the Koran on the tablet; moreover, it is the archetype of all revelations which God had directed to humans (as discussed below). In this context, the Koranic terms are used synonymously: *umm al-kitāb* or *kitāb makhnūn*, literally “a hidden book.”

According to some exegetes, in the verse “*wa-huwa qur’ān<sup>un</sup> majīd<sup>un</sup> fī lawḥ<sup>in</sup> mahfūz<sup>in</sup>*” the word *mahfūz* is read with the declension ending *-un* instead of the foregoing *-in*, and so *mahfūz<sup>un</sup>* becomes the attributive of *qur’ān*: “a glorious Koran, preserved on a tablet.” He is preserved (hidden) only for those who are clean enough to approach him (compare 56:77–79: “this is truly a noble Qur’an, in a protected Record [*kitāb makhnūn*] that only the purified can touch”), this category is usually related to the angels, which have to guard him against alteration.<sup>19</sup>

In accordance with the Prophet’s tradition, the tablet is supposed to have been created by God in white pearl. Its edges are decorated with pearls and the bottom and top are covered with a red hyacinth. The tablet is filled with the writing of the light from which the divine pen (*qalam min nūr*) is made. God looks at the tablet three hundred and sixty times each day and whatever God wills then happens; the

tablet rests next to God’s throne, in the highest seventh heaven or – according to some accounts – lies upon the brow of the angel Isrāfīl.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the archetypes of past things, present things, and things to come were created on the basis of writing. Thanks to this, the creation is still kept alive. It can be said that God’s activity connected with creation represents the full authority of God or, in other words, the writing on the tablet (in the book) coincides with the exercise of God’s authority (Madigan 2001: 244).

### The Recording of Human Deeds (the Writing = the Representation of God’s Knowledge)

There exists a book/record, similar to the tablet/book, in which God writes down the deeds of man. It seems to be one of the aspects of the heavenly book, although it is not fully clear whether it can be identified with the preserved tablet. In the Koranic comments there frequently appears the explanation that it has to do with the book of deeds (*kitāb al-a’māl*), in which all actions are written down, both good and bad that are committed by every human during his life.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, one needs to remember that the preserved tablet, as the tablet of all things, also contains the list of the deeds that were and will be committed by the people. Al-Qurṭubī tried to explain this dependence in the comment to 49:18: “The record of their deeds will be laid open (*wuḍi’a al-kitāb*) and you will see the guilty, dismayed at what they contain, saying, ‘Woe to us! What a record (*kitāb*) this is! It does not leave any deed, small or large, unaccounted for!’ They will find everything they ever did laid in front of them: your Lord will not be unjust to anyone.” According to him, the word – the “book” (*kitāb*) – in this verse refers to two referents: to individual books of people’s deeds (*kutub al-a’amāl*), which they will be holding in their hands on the Day of Judgement and to the foundation of the Final Judgement – the preserved tablet, which will be then raised and the whole creation will be looking at their deeds written there (in English translation, the meaning of the book as the tablet is not clear because of translating *al-kitāb* as “the record of their deeds”).<sup>22</sup>

God as the omniscient is aware of every human

17 During the creation two kinds of action are visible – beside the activity of the writing itself, it is the command to write (*amr*), given by God to the pen. *Amr* (from the Aramaic *ma’amra*, meaning simultaneously the creative power of God, His providence, and the revelation of His word in the Biblical context) can be understood as the force emanating from God, the creative ability bringing things out from non-being by the use of writing (Gaudefroy-Demombynes 1957: 298).

18 ṬB (2001/23: 141); Ibn Kathīr (2000/1421/14: 80), henceforth IK; QB (2006/22: 379); RZ (1981/30: 78); Juynboll (2009: 38).

19 ṬB (2001/24: 286); IK (2000/8: 366); QB (2006/22: 200); RZ (1981/31: 126).

20 ṬB (2001/24: 687); IK (2000/8: 365 f.); QB (2006/22: 199 f., 378); RZ (1981/31: 125 f.).

21 RZ (1981/21: 135; /31: 106 f.); ṬB (2001/14: 525; /15: 285; /16: 394); IK (2000/9: 150, 441; /14: 288); QB (2006/5: 443).

22 According to the account of the traditionist Nu’aym b. Hammād (d. ca. 843), beside the tablet at the Day of Judgement



deed, word, gesture, and thought. God knows about everything that takes place on earth, the smallest thing will not escape his attention (compare 10:61). This knowledge is accumulated by God in the form of writing. God records both the good deeds – “If anyone does good deeds and is a believer, his efforts will not be ignored: We record them for him” (21:94, see also 9:120–121) – and the bad: “God has certainly heard the words of those who sneer, ‘So God is poor, while we are rich.’ We shall record everything they say – as well as their killing of prophets in defiance of all that is right – and We shall say to them, ‘Taste the torment of the scorching fire’” (3:181, see also 4:81, 19:79, 18:49).

It can be concluded from the above excerpts of the Koran that God, in a way, fully records the deeds that the people commit. Nevertheless, some passages exist indicating that at the Final Judgement every human being – explained, among others, by al-Qurtubī – will have his own individual book/record of the deeds that he will be reading; thus, reporting to God on his entire life. “Whoever is given his record (*kitāb*) in his right hand will have an easy reckoning and return to his people well pleased, but whoever is given his record (*kitāb*) from behind his back will cry out for destruction – he will burn in the blazing Fire” (84:7–11). “We have bound each human being’s destiny to his neck. On the Day of Resurrection, We shall bring out a record (*kitāb*) for each of them, which they will find spread wide open, ‘Read your record (*kitāb*) ...’” (17:13–14, see also 4:81, 19:79, 18:49).

It is mainly God’s concern to record the deeds, but God can also make use of the angels, who as the servants of God perform various functions, including recording human deeds. “No sooner do We let people taste some mercy after some hardship has afflicted them, than they begin to scheme against Our revelations. Say, ‘God schemes even faster.’ Our messengers (*rusul*) record all your scheming” (10:21). “Do they think We cannot hear their secret talk and their private counsel? Yes we can: Our messengers (*rusul*) are at their sides, recording everything” (43:80). “Over you stand watchers (*ḥāfiẓūn*), noble recorders who know what you do: the good will live in bliss, and the wicked will burn in the Fire” (82:10–14). Similarly, in the Sunna of the Prophet, one can find accounts demonstrating that the angels record the words and deeds of every human, for example: “On Fridays, at every door of the mosque, there will be angels who write down the arrival of every single person on a sheet ...” (Juynboll

2009: 608, 301). Similar to the word *rusul* (sing. *rasūl* – “messenger”), the word *ḥāfiẓūn* (sing. *ḥāfiẓ* – “guarding, watching,” “guardian, watcher”) relates to the angels (*malā’ika*). The Koran writes directly that God had designated them as the messengers (*rusul*) (35:1). To sum up, this activity of God (represented by God Himself or delegated to the angels who fully obey Him) connected with writing represents the full knowledge of God on whatever exists and is happening (Madigan 2001: 244).

It is worth mentioning that the concept of the book was included in the theological discussion on predestination and human free will. On the one hand, the Koran presents God as the omniscient and also the almighty Creator and the Ruler of all things while, on the other hand, it is man who is responsible for his deeds. The Koran does not give clear answers; therefore, in the history of the theological thought there emerged many concepts of predestination and of boundaries of freedom of the human will.<sup>23</sup> It can be said that it was the deterministic interpretation that had prevailed in the considerations. It would be difficult to agree that there exists some entity apart from God that acts completely independently.<sup>24</sup> The main attribute of God, responsible for the deterministic concept, was His knowledge. Being the eternal and irrevocable Omniscience, a person’s fate should be determined in every detail. In other words, the concept of God’s omniscience contributed to the maximum extent to the reinforcement of the idea of determinism (Rosenthal 2007: 124, 127). Therefore, it was pointed out that God not only determines the birth (for instance, 80:19), the sustenance (*rizq*) on earth (e.g., 89:15–16, 51:22), defines the period of earthly life (*ajal*), and also the life after death (e.g., 56:60, 70:38–41) but also everything committed during a person’s life, including his actions (e.g., 6:59, 9:51). According to one of the variants of the account in the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, after 120 days from conception “an angel is sent down who will breathe the breath of life therein. He is ordered to write down

there will be brought sheets of paper (*suhuf*) on which are written the deeds of particular people (QB 2006/13: 297 f.).

23 The problem of predestination is not the subject of this article; therefore, will not be discussed here. Only those passages of the Koran and the Sunna will be quoted, in which in the context of the predestination the idea of writing appears (without presenting in exhaustive manner the theological stances on their interpretation).

24 One should remember that in the theological dispute the advocates of indeterminism acknowledged God’s absolute power over the order of the nature, accepted the Koranic concept of predestination of a man’s life span (*ajal*), and – to a large extent – the predestination of a man’s sustenance (*rizq*). In principle, the only difference between the advocates of determinism and indeterminism concerned the concept of the predestination of human deeds (Wolfson 1976: 613 f.).

four decrees: the sustenance (of the foetus), its term of death, its deeds and (the degree of its) hardship or happiness (in life) ..." (Juynboll 2009: 96). Moreover, the other account signified permanence and determination of human destinies from ancient times, in which the Prophet had said, "The pen has already dried up" (*wa-qad jaffa al-qalam*) or – in another variant – "The pens have been lifted and the pages have dried" (*rufi'at al-aqlām wa-jaffat aṣ-ṣuḥuf*) (at-Tirmidhī 1417 A.H.: 567). However, the verse 13:39 was problematic: "God erases or confirms whatever He will, and the source of Scripture (*umm al-kitāb*) is with Him". In the exegetical narration itself, there appear the traditions used in various theological concepts concerning the destiny and the free will. In the exegeses we have interpretations indicating that on the basis of the attitude of the believer God can forgive him his trespasses. He "erases" then the sins from their record of sins (*dīwān as-sayyi'āt/adh-dhunūb*) and "confirms" the good deeds in the record of good deeds intended for them (*dīwān al-ḥasanāt*) (QB 2006/12: 93, compare TB 2001/13: 564f.).

The majority of the classical commentators quoted traditions, interpreting the "erasing" as an opportunity to alter the course of events for a moment that can be subject to change according to God's will. In this way, there was also an attempt to reconcile the concept of the cyclical determination of someone's fate for the coming year (*laylat al-qadr*), according to the verses 97:1–5 and 44:3–5. Therefore, for instance, at-Ṭabarī and after him al-Qurṭubī and Ibn Kathīr speak about two books: one in which God makes changes and the other one which is permanent. On "a blessed night" (44:3–4), whatever exists on the preserved tablet and concerns the following year, it is written down by the angels and, in a way, imported to the world as the course of things.<sup>25</sup> During his ascent into heaven (*mi'rāj*) Muhammad supposedly heard the creaking of the angels' pens, noting down God's decrees (Juynboll 2009: 692). Nonetheless, each year God can change someone's fate and order the angels to amend it in written form. What remains permanent in the narration of all the exegetes is someone's fate after death (damnation or eternal happiness). There exist traditions after which, in accordance with God's will, the *ajal* appointed to a particular person (i.e. the appointed span of life) and the allocated *rizq* (the sustenance) can be subject to change.<sup>26</sup> Hence, it seems that they

both exist on the tablet in the form of an endless number of variations from which, by decree of God, one is written down cyclically by the angels (the nature of this writing is not clear).

Considering the above, we may say that the divine creation is incessant, a peculiar *creatio continua*, happening at every moment of the world's existence, where the combinations of the letters on the tablet are a paradigm for the endless forms of existence, action, and the course of events on earth.

### The Inlibration<sup>27</sup> of the Word of God (the Writing = the Embodiment of the Word of God)

Writing, preserving the revelation of God, and providing a foundation for the Muslim *umma* began to be perceived not only as a tool for the transmission of the Word of God but also for its materialisation. The sacredness of the Word of God had been, in a way, transferred to writing and combined with it. The theological discussion on the ontic status of the Koran refers to such conclusions. The Koran – according to the content that it conveys – existed prior to the revelation in the form of the heavenly archetype described as *lawḥ mahfūz* (85:22), *kitāb maktūb* (56:77, 78), *umm al-kitāb* (43:4, 13:39). On the basis of this Koranic message, in early Islam the conviction was held that the Koran had been created by God prior to the creation of the world. With time (although it is difficult to determine exactly when) the idea arose that this pre-existent Koran is uncreated. In turn, this idea was related to the discourse derived from the Christian influence concerning the doctrine of the Trinity involving the divine, eternal attributes co-existing with God. The Word of God, which means the pre-existent heavenly archetype of the Koran, was acknowledged as exactly such an attribute (Wolfson 1976: 241, 244). During those discussions, the problem regarding the relation of the Word of God (in the meaning of the pre-existent Koran) to the revealed Koran was also addressed. From the point of view of these considerations, the stance is important which portrays the conviction that there was an inlibration of the Word of God (compare the incarnation of Christ as the pre-existent Word of God).

Among the theologians, who shared the conviction about the uncreated pre-existent Word of God as His attribute, some were convinced that the archetype of the Koran (i.e., the uncreated Word of

25 TB (2001/13: 560f.; 2001/24: 547); QB (2006/12: 88; 2006/21: 391); IK (2000/8: 167; 2000/14: 407).

26 TB (2001/13: 559–561); QB (2006/12: 88–90); IK (2000/8: 163f.); RZ (1981/19: 66).

27 The term "inlibration" in the meaning of "the embodiment" of the Word of God was borrowed from H. A. Wolfson (1976).

God) consists of the letters and words and in this form was inliterated to the written Koran (Wolfson 1976: 251; El-Bizri 2008: 136). For instance, ash-Shahrastānī (d. 1153) presents the stance of the Hanbalites in such a manner: “There is the agreement to the fact that what is between the bindings [of the Book] is the Word (*kalām*) of God and whatever we read, hear and write is the very Word of God. And therefore [the individual] words (*kalimāt*) and letters (*hurūf*) must be the very Word of God. As there exists the agreement that the Word of God is uncreated, therefore [the individual] words [and letters] are eternal and uncreated” (as-Shahrastānī 2009 [1430 AH]: 302). It is clear from the above passage that in every text of the Koran (whether recited, remembered, or written down) the Word of God is “embooked” – in other words, what is written and recited by the believers is identical with the absolute attribute of God. Thus, every Koran on earth has two natures – a created and an uncreated one. The distinction of letters and words is present in the archetype of the Koran (i.e., the uncreated Word of God); therefore, we are dealing with the inliteration of the uncreated, individual letter and word in every letter and word in the earth’s Koran (Wolfson 1976: 252).

Similarly, in the discourse in favour of the created Koran (already placed by God on the preserved tablet before the creation of the world) some of the theologians, among them the majority of the Mutazilites, were in favour of the inliteration (Wolfson 1976: 268). In this way, it can be seen that in the classical theological discourse the concept of the embodiment of the Word (the perception of the Koranic text as the visible form of the Word on earth) was present (Nasr 1987: 17 passim). The first sign written down by God was to be the diacritical mark in the letter *bāʾ* (ـَ). This is the first letter of the first Koranic sura (starting the invocation “In the Name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy” (*Bism-i llāhi-r-raḥmāni-r-raḥīm*)).

In view of the above, the sacredness of writing turns out to be mediated. This is the result of the fact that it not only was used for the writing of God’s message but also that each letter of the Arabic alphabet refers directly to the absolute Reality. Thus, the writing has its metaphysical fixing in God. The source of the sacredness is not the writing itself, but the Word present in it. The sacredness of the Word had been “put” in its material representation.

## The Great Significance of Arabic Writing – The Interpretative Discourse

In the course of the discussion on the causes of the status of writing presented here, I propose to look at it from three points of view, as the consequence of 1), the cultural regularity in the context of the adoption of writing that leads one to see God’s inspiration in its origins; 2), the interaction of the cultures, including the probable adoption and development of the motifs and religious doctrines existing in earlier cultures; and 3), the concept of the relation between God and man present in the Koran. The causes mentioned here are not mutually exclusive, but they interpenetrate and complement themselves.

### Writing as a Divine Gift – A Cultural Regularity

Following the assumptions of the orality/literacy theory<sup>28</sup> in these considerations, I assume that writing (being the work of man) is able to make substantial changes in culture (and, thus, also influence its creator). The changes in oral culture, occurring after the adoption of writing and after its interiorisation, have a mental as well as institutional dimension. In the latter respect, the influence of literacy can be observed in the legal, religious, economic, and political institutions. In other words, the consequence of literacy (in its early form) is the change of the organisation of society and the possibility of a multilevel civilisational development. Writing becomes part of being human and is not perceived as anything external. However, in the history of the development of cultures and civilisations, at the junction of orality and literacy the perception of writing was quite different.

As Walter J. Ong notes (2005: 91), “[w]hen a fully formed script of any sort, alphabetic or other, first makes its way from outside into a particular society, it does so necessarily at first in restricted sectors and with varying effects and implications.” In communities for whom the technology of writing was a new phenomenon, the ability to separate the word from the speaker and link it with some object

28 The basics of this theory were created in the 1960s as a result of the research conducted independently from one another on the systems of communication from the perspective of their influence on culture. Authors among others were mainly Walter J. Ong, the American Jesuit, whose wide range of research can be included in the current literature of philosophy, religion, and anthropology (Ong 1985, 1999, 2005 [1982], but also Eric Havelock (1963, 1986), the American classical philologist, and the British anthropologist Jack Goody (1986, 1987).



was difficult to imagine. It simply seemed impossible; therefore, writing (which at first appeared in limited circles) began to be regarded as the abode of the supernatural. Thus, it was treated with piety and also frequently with fear. It was the manifestation of divine action and its source was sought in God's inspiration. Therefore, as a divine gift, it must have had some kind of supernatural force capable of influencing man, his environment, or the course of events (Ong 2005: 91; Schniedewind 2005: 24). Thus, writing was linked with magic; at first, it took the form of spells, curses, or beseeching by which one communicated with the supernatural reality.<sup>29</sup>

In some communities, especially in those of little literacy, the use of writing was perceived as a real danger; thus, the concept of an intermediary between "the reader" and the text had been formed (Goody and Watt 1963: 13, 15 f.; Ong 2005: 91 f.). "When – as Joseph Vendryes writes (1996: 332) – it had been stripped of its magical character, writing still retained its aura of fear and respect, and men have persisted in their superstitious awe of the written word."

In the early civilisations, mainly in their preserved myths, one can understand how writing was perceived by a given culture, as well as the ideas on its origins and functions. The conviction of the divine origin of writing constitutes undoubtedly a cultural regularity.<sup>30</sup> Its exemplification can be the mythological threads of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and also India and China. In Mesopotamia, the goddess of writing, knowledge, and counting, and the protectress of the writers was the Sumerian goddess Nidaba. In the Babylonian tradition, the god of writing, the scribe of Marduk, and the keeper of the tablet of destinies (see below), in turn, was Nabu. Named as "the unrivaled scribe," he was worshipped as the inventor of writing and the scribe of gods (Senner 1989: 10).<sup>31</sup> In ancient

Egypt, the majority of the sources point to Thoth as the creator of writing and also as the writer of other gods. Thoth was considered as the god of wisdom, who was to pass on to people the secrets of the art of writing. Similarly, in Greek mythology one can find various references to the origins of writing. Its inventor was to be Hermes, the son of Zeus and Pleiad Maia, the god of roads, travellers, traders, and messenger of the gods. The invention of the part of the letters was ascribed to the goddesses of fate, the Moirai (Latin: Parcae; Rose 1933). In turn, Aeschylus (d. 456 B.C.) presented writing as the invention of Prometheus for the benefit of human beings (on the other traditions see Hard 2004: 298). Additionally, Hindu mythology links the rise of the writing with a divine action. The Hindu goddess Saraswati is depicted as the wife of God Brahma in the "Brahmanas," considered as the inventor of the Sanskrit and the Devanagari letters, the patroness of the arts and sciences (Dowson 2000: 295; Williams 2003: 257). Finally, in the culture of China, Cangjie, the legendary hero of many mythical stories, was linked with writing. According to part of the narration, the four-eyed Cangjie would observe the elements of the animated and non-animated nature, various tracks left by the birds and animals and he discovered that the natural phenomena can be represented by the use of signs. In this way, he was thought to have invented the Chinese characters (Yang and An 2005: 84).

Although the observations of Vendryes and Ong quoted earlier relate to the primitive oral cultures, "the oral cultures [were] untouched by writing" (Ong 2005: 31), this regularity can also have its use in the context of the Arab culture (the northern and central Arabian tribes) before Islam, which can basically be considered as an oral type of culture. By "basically" I mean that the dominant form of the transmission of the cultural contents was the oral tradition, whereas the technology of writing was known but of little significance.

Awareness of writing and its knowledge, although very limited, arose mainly from cultural influences, which the Arabs were surrounded by in the sense of both external and internal influences. Through the presence of Jewish communities (with an intellectual base) in the central part of the Arabian Peninsula (and also in southern Yemen) and Christian communities (not only on the fringes of the Peninsula but also most probably in the central regions) the Arabs realised that both of these religious groups had their own scriptures. Moreover, in

29 Goody (2005: 230); Schniedewind (2005: 24); Vendryes (1996: 331).

30 Arno Borst, in the context of research on the sources of the variety of languages, focused on the fact that in ancient societies, which became historical societies, there existed a common core of mythical narrations referring to the god (gods) as the creators of speech. According to him (1995: 15–31), these narrations, similar to the Biblical myth about the tower Babel, which presents God as the giver of languages, result from the archaic ontology relevant to *homo religiosus*, where the religion is the justification for every existence. It is a vision analogic to the vision of writing as a divine gift for man (Senner 1989: 10).

31 In Mesopotamia, several deities were linked with writing. This state of affairs resulted from the political, social, and cultural changes that were taking place in this area, entailing some changes in the primacy of the deities in the then pantheon, their prerogatives, and also the semitisation of some

names starting from the 2nd century B.C. (Bottéro 1992: 216 f.).



connection with the trading route running across the west coast of the Arabian Peninsula from the south of Arabia to the Mediterranean world, which also crossed Mecca, and the commerce lasting until at least the 1st century A.D. (see Crone 2004: 12–50), a cultural exchange definitely had taken place.

Prior to the formation of the Arabic script as we know it today, the northern Arabs had been using the alphabet borrowed from the south Arabian language for the writing of their north Arabian dialects. In the further course of their history, they had made use of the Nabatean variant of the Aramaic script, which eventually gave rise to the Arabic script (Bellamy 1989: 93). Around the 7th century, a two-track evolution of the Arabic script could be observed. This hypothesis is proposed, taking into account, on the one hand, the preserved receipt from 22 A.H./A.D. 643<sup>32</sup> and (although impossible to verify) data from the biography of the Prophet,<sup>33</sup> and, on the other hand, the fact that the earliest preserved relics – excerpts of the Koran dating from the post-‘Uthmānic period, coins, inscriptions carved in stone usually on tombstones – are characterised by some monumentality. What does this two-track evolution of the Arabic script mean? The italics were used only for practical purposes, connected with some elements of everyday life (for instance, in commercial transactions). The relative ability of its usage was characteristic mainly for the urban centres, although quantitatively it had a very limited range. However, monumental writing lacking of diacritical signs developed in remembrance of a culture once transmitted orally, for example, the poetry, the *ka-hins*’ prophecies, the proverbs, *ayyām al-‘Arab* narratives (Jones 2003a: 589–591; 2003b: 3 f.).

Returning to the subject of the divine origin of writing, it may perhaps be pertinent to point out that the difference undoubtedly existing between the ideas of the ancient mythologies and the ideas relevant to the Arab-Muslim tradition lies both in the order of the creation and the creative power of the writing itself. The sacredness of writing in the Arab-Muslim culture does not only result from the fact that it is created by God but also because it is the

first in the order of the creation; it is itself the model for the world and the tool in the hands of God. In this context, I would thus point to the diffusion from one religious tradition to another.

### *Divine Writing – The Diffusion of the Motif*

The motif of divine writing also is known in the Judaic tradition,<sup>34</sup> where the Hebrew script, similarly to the Arabic, has divine roots. According to Leslie Baynes (2012: 30 f.):

The paradigmatic example of divine writing in the Hebrew Bible is the tablets of the law or testimony.<sup>[35]</sup> The narratives that relate the creation of these tablets vary, and one of the most important variations is the identity of their writer. Exod 34:27–28 claims that Moses wrote them, while Exod 24:12, 31:18, 32:15–16, and 34:1 identify their writer as God.

... In making the claim that God wrote the tablets, which are the source of authoritative law for the ancient Israelites, Exodus asserts the absolutely unimpeachable authority of their torah. The fact that the tablets come from God and form the basis for Israel’s covenant with him makes them natural models for later heavenly books.

The attribution of the authorship of the writing to God Himself reverberated in the Jewish tradition, in which writing as a divine domain functions in the form of the heavenly books (or tablets) – of deeds and fate.<sup>36</sup>

### *The Book of Deeds*

The book of deeds is linked invariably with the idea of God’s Judgement<sup>37</sup> in the Jewish tradition and rarely appears on the sheets of the Hebrew Bible. In the book of Isaiah, Jhwh announces that He

32 This concerns the bilingual receipt on the papyrus confirming the receipt of 65 sheep to ensure the livelihood of the Arab expeditionary force from the Upper Egypt. The Arabic text is written in italics, it has diacritical signs for the six letters (although in the whole text there also appear letters without signs), partially long vowels, and several examples of *alif maqṣūra* (further on the papyrus, see Jones 1998; 2003b: 15).

33 See, among others, the document of the Constitution of Medina and the information about the letter from the Prophet Muhammad with the regulations concerning the preparation of the ambush on the Mecca caravan in the Nakhla oasis in 2 A.H. (Jones 2003b: 5–7).

34 I will not elaborate here on the possible antecedents of the cultural contents connected with writing and present in the ancient Middle Eastern cultures such as Egypt or Mesopotamia, but the allusions are clear.

35 In Exod 24:12, these are “the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment”; in Exod 31:18 “the two tablets of testimony, tablets of stone”, and in Exod 32:15 “the two tablets of the testimony”.

36 In the Jewish tradition these are not the only subtypes of the heavenly books. In this article only those are mentioned which seem to constitute parallels to the heavenly books/tablets in the Arab-Muslim tradition. For more on the motif of heavenly books in Judaism see Hossfeld and Reuter (1999: 339 f.), Paul (1973), Baynes (2012: 3–134).

37 This idea seems to have its origin in the tradition of ancient Egypt, from which it was to be transferred into the religions of the Mediterranean world (Hossfeld and Reuter 1999: 339), although the conviction that the deeds of men are preserved in the form of writing on tablets also existed in ancient Mesopotamia (Jasnos 2011: 107).

has all the guilts written before him (Isa 65:6),<sup>38</sup> while in the vision of Daniel appears the image of the Judgement, on which “the books were opened” (Dan 7:10).

In the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament,<sup>39</sup> the motif of the heavenly book of human deeds is more frequent. One can find it in 1 Enoch and in the Book of Jubilees and in 2 Enoch, the Testament of Abraham, and the Apocalypse of Zephaniah. Finally, references to the book of deeds can be also found in 4 Ezra – 6:20 and 2 Baruch – 24:1. For exemplification, one may quote the most representative passages. So, in 1 Enoch,<sup>40</sup> in the Book of Dreams (83–90), in which Enoch is presented with some visions concerning the future history of the world and Israel (and which Enoch passes to his son Methuselah), God appoints an angelic scribe, charged with the task of writing down the deeds of the angels portrayed in the form of the shepherds who graze sheep – the faithful Israelites. The shepherds eliminate not only those sheep which “erred and went many ways” or “forsook the house of the Lord” (89:51, 54)<sup>41</sup> and are to be punished at God’s command, but also the righteous ones. The book of the written deeds of the shepherds not only serves as judgement but also functions as remembrance (God retreats at some point and becomes absent, therefore, He must have the writing to know what happened after the appointment of the shepherds for grazing sheep, 89:56).

In turn, the Book of Jubilees<sup>42</sup> clearly refers to

this motif in the case of the story of Joseph, which was not set here in the context of the Judgement. Since 39:6 refers to the sin of adultery that the wife of Potifar wanted to commit in her desire to seduce Joseph: “[T]he sin will be recorded against him in the eternal books continually before the Lord” (see also 4:17–24). In turn, in 4:23–24 it is Enoch who as the heavenly scribe writes down the deeds of every person: “... behold there [i.e., in the Garden of Eden] he writes the condemnation and judgement of the world, and all the wickedness of the children of men.”

In 2 Enoch,<sup>43</sup> during his heavenly journey, Enoch sees the angels in the sixth heaven “who record all human souls, and their deeds, and their lives before the face of the Lord” (19:5). In the highest heaven he is brought before the Face of God, undergoes transformation, and becomes the heavenly scribe, omniscient as God, who also records the deeds of man (for instance, 40:10; 50:1; 53:2).

However, regarding the Testament of Abraham<sup>44</sup> preserved in two slightly different editions, in both of them the heavenly book of human deeds is introduced. In version A (the longer) the book of deeds appears at the scene of the Judgement, entrusted to Abel: on the table before Abel lies a huge book, while two angels standing at the table with papyrus, ink, and pen in their hands write down human deeds – on the right side the good ones, on the left the bad. The connection of the angels with the book is not clear; the deeds that the angels write down (most likely continuously) should be eventually incorporated into the book. Version B (the shorter) replaces the angels by a cherub, who at the scene

38 Translations were made after the “The English Standard Version Bible and Apocrypha” (2012).

39 This notion refers to the religious texts which come from the period of the intertestamental literature and were not included in the Hebrew Bible (the apocrypha, the period of the rise about 200 B.C. – A.D. 120). The books stylistically and thematically are similar to Biblical texts, however, they are not considered to be canonical, and their authorship is traditionally ascribed to personages from Biblical history (the pseudepigrapha, the period of the rise about 300 B.C. – A.D. 120) (Charles 1964/1: vii–viii; Rubinkiewicz 1999: 4f.).

40 The Book 1 Enoch was created in the region of Judea and it is a complex work. It is assumed, that it was written partly in Aramaic and partly in Hebrew. It has been fully preserved in Ethiopian (*ge’ez*). It consists of five parts; particular parts, and even some passages of the work were created in a different period (the oldest was probably known to the priestly editor of the Pentateuch, while the youngest dates back to the end of the 1st century A.D.). The manuscripts do not have an official title; the unofficial one was given on the basis of the main character – the book contains various records and visions connected with the prophet Enoch.

41 Unless otherwise indicated, I quote the translation of R. H. Charles (1964).

42 The Book of Jubilees constitutes a paraphrase of Genesis and the first chapters of the Book of Exodus and presents the history of Israel in the form of the seven 17-year-cycles

(jubilees). It was written around the 2nd century B.C. in Hebrew (preserved fully in its Ethiopian translation), in Palestine, most probably in Jerusalem.

43 2 Enoch constitutes the development of the text of the Book of Gen. 5, 21–32. In the first part, the journey of Enoch through the seven heavens was described, then the life of his successors Matusal and Nir, and the whole ended with the story of the birth of Melchizedek. The work was written in Greek. 2 Enoch was probably created within some Jewish sects (maybe in Alexandria) around the 1st century B.C. There is also a different theory according to which the author was not a Jew but a Christian monk from Byzantium from about the 9th century.

44 The Testament of Abraham is the description of a journey that Abraham took at his request before death visiting the heaven and earth with the Archangel Michael. The opinion prevails that the text was written in Greek about A.D. 100. Additionally, some translations of the work into other languages are known, among others Arabic, Coptic, Ethiopian. There are two versions of the text – a longer one (A) and a shorter version (B), which probably must have been created on the basis of one earlier text. Egypt is considered to be the book’s origin. The author of the book could have been a Jew from the Pharisaical or the Essene circles.

of the Judgement brings the two books along with Enoch, who presents the sins of the soul judged by Abel. Here the books of deeds mainly remind the soul about the actions committed.

Whereas in the Apocalypse of Zephaniah<sup>45</sup> appear two legions of angels, the angels of the Lord and the angels of the accuser, of which the former first write down the good deeds, while the latter write down the bad: "These are the angels of the Lord Almighty. They write down all the good deeds of the righteous upon their scrolls as they watch at the gate of heaven. ... Also the angels of the accuser who is upon the earth, they also write down all the sins of men upon their scrolls. They also sit at the gate of heaven. They tell the accuser and he writeth them upon his scroll so that he might accuse them when they come out of the world (and go) down there" (3:6–9) (Charlesworth 1983).

Books of good and bad deeds also appear in the vision of Baruch (24:1),<sup>46</sup> while a book of bad deeds is seen in the vision of Ezra<sup>47</sup> (6:18–20). Both in 2 Baruch, and also in 4 Ezra, similarly as in the Book of Daniel, it is not clear to whom the books belong and who will open them.

Following the existence and the context of the motif, one can observe that in the Book of Isaiah the book of deeds was in the hands of God Himself. In the apocryphal and pseudepigraphic literature it is in the hands of the angels and written down by Enoch, the heavenly scribe. The book of deeds is present in the context of the Final Judgement – a reward or a punishment. In some writings (the Testament of Abraham and the Apocalypse of Zephaniah) heavenly books are instead connected with the conduct of individual people rather than groups of "good" and "bad."

45 The Apocalypse of Zephaniah was created between 100 B.C. and 70 A.D. probably in Egypt in Jewish circles, although later it could have been reworked by a Christian writer. The original language could have been Greek. The Apocalypse has been fragmentarily preserved in the Coptic manuscripts Akhmimic and Sahidic and in the quotations of Clement of Alexandria. The Akhmimic version does not mention Zephaniah, but presents the Observer led through the heavens by the Angels of the Lord. The text ends with an apocalyptic vision of the end of the world and the Final Judgement.

46 In 2 Baruch, God predicts the destruction of Jerusalem, shows the fates of the just and the sinners, the judgement, and the coming of the Messiah and the reconstruction of Zion. The Apocalypse of Baruch was probably created in the region of Palestine, in Hebrew, in the first half of the 2nd century A.D.

47 The text describes the seven visions of Ezra, the latter of which, the essential one for this research, presents among others a list of signs prior to the end of the world. The text was created about A.D. 100 in Hebrew or Aramaic in Palestine, in Pharisees circles.

## The Book of Fate

The idea of the heavenly book of fate has its origin in the ancient Mesopotamia (Paul 1973: 345; Hossfeld and Reuter 1999: 339), where in the epic "Enuma Elish" – the story of creation – appears a tablet of destinies as the attribute of the supreme God's authority. Mother Goddess Tiamat had rewarded her consort Qingu with it:

She gave him the tablet of destinies,  
had him hold it to his chest, (saying)  
"As for you, your command will not be changed,  
your utterance will endure" (Foster 1996: 359).

The one in possession of the tablet of destinies had the power to determine the destiny of the world and wielded control over it. The god who defeated Tiamat and Qingu and appropriated the tablet, was Marduk (from the 2nd century B.C., the supreme god of the Babylonians and the patron of Babylon). During the New Year celebration God Marduk determined the fates of the king and his subjects for the coming year. Apart from Marduk, the tablet is also connected with the character of the earlier mentioned Nabu, who at some point was perceived as the oldest son of Marduk. He would write down the destiny of people and gods and also the events that were to follow. Whatever had been written on the tablet was irrevocable (Baynes 2012: 47–49; Schniedewind 2005: 25 f.).

In the Hebrew Bible, the tablet (in the form of a book) of fate appears only twice, i.e., in one of the psalms, "Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them" (Ps 139,16) and in the prophet Daniel's, "but I will tell you what is inscribed in the book of truth" (Dan 10:21). Due to the lack of the sufficient data, it is not completely certain whether the motif of the heavenly book of fate was directly taken from Mesopotamia, although it seems highly likely because of the presence of Jews in Babylon in the post-exilic period (Schniedewind 2005: 26).

The motif of the tablet of fate was used widely in the Book of Jubilees and in 1 Enoch and the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Book of Jubilees seems to be particularly important in this context, as it is itself in a way a copy of the heavenly tablets, which predominate the Mosaic Torah, for what had been written on the tablets precedes the Torah. On God's comment, the angel reads to Moses what exists on the heavenly tablets. Moses proceeds to record it precisely and in this manner the Book of Jubilees becomes the earthly version of a heavenly archetype. On the tablets elaborated by God one can find the whole



existence, from the moment of Creation (and possibly before Creation) until the time of its end: “What is first and what is last and what is to come during all the divisions of time which are in the law and which are in the testimony and in the weeks of their jubilees until eternity – until the time when I descend and live with them throughout all the ages of eternity” (1:26). Since God had planned the path of life for the man, so He foreordained his fate: “And the judgement of all is ordained and written on the heavenly tablets in righteousness – even (the judgement of) all who depart from the path which is ordained for them to walk in ...” (5:13). At the same time, the Book of Jubilees emphasises that on the heavenly tablets was written the law of God – eternal and unalterable, comprehensive and expressing fully the absolute truth (see, among others, 3:8–14; 4:32; 6:17; 15:25–26; 16:28–29; 28:6–7; 30:8–9).

There is no doubt that the Book of Jubilees was known and respected in Qumran (where a dozen copies of the Jubilees were found); therefore, the scrolls also contain the idea of heavenly tablets in form of the book of fate (4Q180 1, 3–4; 1QH<sup>a</sup> IX.24; 4Q417 2 I.14–18) (García Martínez 2000/1: 158, 371; /2: 859).

Finally, the motif of the tablet/book of fate appears in 1 Enoch (81:1–4, 93:2, 103:2–3, 106:19, 107:1; 108:7). Despite the fact that in the majority of the contexts the heavenly tablets were presented as the records of all the deeds committed by the whole humanity, the predetermination of the deeds on these tablets transforms them into a book of fate.

Comparing the functioning of the book in both of these religious traditions, the undisputed correspondence of the motif itself is visible as well as the correspondence of some of its aspects. In the case of the Koranic book of deeds – like the Jewish tradition – it appears mainly in the context of the Final Judgement. Similarly, the writing of its pages is the activity of God or of the angels subordinated to Him. In the Koran, the deeds are considered to be completely committed by people, and references to the individual book of every single person rarely appear. The preserved tablet still functions as the archetype of all existence based on the divine writing. In this way, the preserved tablet approaches the heavenly tablets/books of fate of the Jewish tradition. Finally, the preserved tablet, containing the archetype of the Koran, resembles the heavenly tablets, on which there is the archetype of the Torah (Law) – the revelations transmitted to men by the prophets, constituting the source of divine law.

Although it is impossible to indicate the direct text correlation between the Koran and the apocryphal and pseudepigraphic literature of the Old Tes-

tament and the Hebrew Bible, the incorporation of the motif seems probable. This is supported by the fact that, firstly, there is an accordance of some structural features of the Arab and Jewish cultures (as Semitic cultures), thanks to which the adoption of the hypothesis of the diffusion of the cultural contents, including those connected with writing, is much more trustworthy than conjuring a hypothesis of their independent development. Secondly, I would proffer as an argument the presence of Jewish communities on the Arabian Peninsula before the appearance of the Prophet Muhammad and the undoubted contacts that the Prophet (as well as other Arabs) had with the Jews during his life.

It is generally accepted that the first Jewish communities in the Arabian Peninsula (mainly in Al-Hijaz) consisted of immigrants from Palestine, fleeing from the Titus persecution in A.D. 70 and after the fall of the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135 C.E.<sup>48</sup> It is not known, whether the Jews proselytised and to what extent the Arabs who converted to Judaism were also adherents of the Judaism. At the time of the prophetic activity of Muhammad, the Jews were mainly living in the northern oases of Al-Hijaz, mainly Yathrib, and also Tayma, Khobar, and Fadak. Yathrib then was thought to have a population consisting of 50 percent Jews (Paret 2008:12; Gil 2004: 8 f.).<sup>49</sup>

The Jews were mainly involved in trade, handicraft, and banking. They knew Arabic and in this language they communicated with the Arabs, although the Torah itself was not translated into Arabic. As R. Paret writes (2008: 13), “they practised their own rituals and were the aware holders of the special history of salvation and – always – wanted to be someone special.” It is unknown how well they knew the religious texts and the Talmudic tradition; however, they took care to retain religious distinctiveness, observed the rules of the Law, and practised the Jewish religious rituals. Therefore, many elements of the religious heritage of the Jews reached the Arabs, thus, constituting the foundations for new emerging ideas (Rodinson 2002: 60 f.). This

48 The origins of the presence of Jews in the Arabian Peninsula is not clear. The Arab and Talmudic sources present various traditions: they place the arrival of the Jews after Noah's flood, at the time of the campaign of Moses against the Amalekites, in the times of King Solomon, the destruction of the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar II, and so on. Some specialists agree that the origins of the Jews' residence on the Peninsula do in fact fall within the Biblical period (Gil 2004: 6 f.; Maszkowski 2009: 51 f.).

49 Also in the south, in Yemen, at the beginning of the 6th century, Judaism had gained a special meaning under the rule of the Himyarite King Dhu Nuwas, who made Judaism the state religion and began persecuting the Monophysite Christians.



may have also been the case with the motif of divine writing.

Thirdly, the presence of the communication routes and the associated trade running through the Arabian Peninsula enabled a perpetual exchange of cultural ideas. The dissemination of the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament throughout the Middle East in the context of the Arabian Peninsula could have meant the relative knowledge of some narrations, ideas, and motifs. The probability of this knowledge existing (even through the oral tradition) among the Jews on the Peninsula grows, if one realises that the rise of the Koran and Jewish literature discussed here are separated by at least a few centuries. The idea of heavenly books/tablets, which was present in the cultural milieu of the then Middle East, must have also covered the Arabian Peninsula.

### *The Incarnation – The Influence of the Christian Doctrine*

As a result of the conquests, led by the Arabs outside the Arabian Peninsula, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad vast areas were incorporated into the emerging Arab-Muslim Empire in a very short time. To the north, Syria and Palestine were captured. Moving east, Mesopotamia fell while the march westwards ended with the capture of Egypt and then North Africa. These areas, where Christianity had been present for some centuries, fell under Islamic rule resulting in a clash of various concepts and the developing of schools of thought. Christian and Muslim relations were reinforced by the fact that, at first, the Christians were employed by the empire in administration. Many of them were educated people, familiar with the administrative procedures of the country, who additionally in a short time managed to learn Arabic.

Already during the reign of the Umayyads (661–750), even before *‘ilm al-kalām* (the speculative theology), an independent branch of knowledge had separated itself and the various problems concerning the faith, responsibilities of man, free will, salvation, the nature of the Koran, divine attributes, and their relation with the divine essence were discussed. Theological and philosophical Christian thought had an unquestionable influence on the reflections of Muslim thinkers, although it is worth remembering that this is not about the Christian roots of Muslim theology but more about the influence on the formation of some concepts or convictions that afterwards would become the object of polemics within the *mutakallimūn* themselves. At the beginning of the 20th century de Boer (1903: 41 f.) wrote:

[T]he doctrinal system has certainly been determined the most by Christian influences. In Damascus the formation of Muslim Dogmas was affected by Orthodox and Monophysite teaching, and in Basra and Bagdad rather perhaps by Nestorian and Gnostic theories. Little of the literature belonging to the earliest period of this movement has come down to us, but we cannot be wrong in assigning a considerable influence to personal intercourse and regular school-instruction. ... The similarity between the oldest doctrinal teachings in Islam and the dogmas of Christianity is too great to permit any one to deny that they are directly connected.

This conviction was reinforced and the majority of the latter researchers took the same stance (Wolfson 1976: 60–64).

Within the Church, Christological disputes erupted quite early. Already by the 4th century, the Church was shaken by the question, whether God the Father and the Son of God were of one essence, or if the Son of God was created and subjected to the Father (this issue was settled by the “The First Council of Nicaea” in 325 condemning the teachings of Arius). More than 100 years later, “The Council of Chalcedon” settled the dispute concerning the relation of the uncreated Word of God in the meaning of the eternal Christ to the person of Christ. At this council, the opinion regarding the incarnation of the Eternal Christ (pre-existent) was accepted as a result of which He adopted two natures (in the person of the Son of God, the two natures – human and divine – are inseparable and impossible to confuse). However, in time some Christians (mainly from the Persian areas) had separated from the Byzantine State Church and, supported by Nestorius, the ex-patriarch of Constantinople, attempted to impose the view that Jesus was just a man whose course of life brought him closer to God, so that he absorbed His essence.

The conviction of some Muslim theologians about the eternity of the Koran is similar to the Christian one referring to the eternity of the Logos. The controversy as to whether the pre-existent Koran is created or uncreated is analogical to the dispute revolving around the essence of Christ. It can be presumed that likewise in the discussion on the nature of the Koran, the Christian truth about the incarnation had its influence: the problem concerned whether the revealed Koran has one or two natures; whether it was only man-made or also divine – in other words whether the pre-existent Koran was embooked into the revealed Koran (Wolfson 1976: 246).

The argument for the knowledge of the Christological disputes can be the fictitious dialogue between the Christian and the Muslim, “Disputatio Sa-

raceni et Christiani” (The Discussion of a Christian and a Saracen) written by Saint John of Damascus (d. 749), who as his father and grandfather was said to have worked in the Damascene administration until about 716 when he entered the St. Saba monastery (Mar Saba). In “Disputatio” the Muslim asks: “How did God come down into the womb of a woman?”, while the Christian answers in accordance with the doctrine: “For you know that Christ was two-fold [in nature], but one in person” (Voorhis 1935: 268 f.).

The theological discussion around the problem of the inlibration gave a new value to writing in the Arab-Muslim culture. Its sacredness started to result not only from the writing per se (that is, that the source of the power is the writing itself), but also that the Word is sacred, for which writing had become the material representation; the power of writing had resulted from the power of the Word written by it.

### The Koranic Concept of the Relation between God and Man

The Koranic approach to the relation of God and man, in my opinion, also contributed to the perception of writing as the domain of God in the Arab-Muslim culture, although it undoubtedly occurred indirectly. This concerns the determination of the particular role for man by the Koran (in his relation with God), that determined the boundaries of human activity and behaviour.

The God depicted in the Koran is a supreme entity and neither something nor somebody is like Him. Every other reality, including human, is His creation and as such will always remain subordinate to Him. Nonetheless, the Koranic thought leans over man, devotes a lot of attention to his duties, destiny, salvation, etc. For the sake of God as the Absolute Reality, the Koran always approaches the existence of man and his life with respect to Him.

And thus, the four types of relationships between God and man are established in the view of the Koran: the ontological, the ethical, the communicative, and the Lord-servant relation (Izutsu 2008: 77 f.). In the ontological relation, God appears to be the only and absolute Creator. The one who created the Heavens and the Earth, the day and night, the Sun and Moon, brought man to life, the angels, the jinn, the animals, the birds, and all the plants (6:102; 13:3; 14:32–33; 24:45; 51:47–48; 80:25–32). The existence of God’s creation, including human, was fully subjected to the authority of God and controlled according to His will. In the place of the im-

placable, unfeeling, and impersonal destiny (*dahr* – literally the time with all its content that is the source of whatever happens to man, both the good and the bad), which had governed the life of the pre-Islamic Arabs, divine rule had appeared. From now on, only God decides about the birth of the man and the time of his death, the condemnation or salvation, about each and every event, however minor. The Koran subjects the whole life of man to the absolute control of the unrestricted will of God.<sup>50</sup>

In the ethical relation, God, on the one hand, reveals himself as a gracious, merciful, and forgiving God, to whom the only possible answer that a man can give is gratitude leading to faith (*īmān*). On the other hand, its opposite is ungratefulness, resulting in unbelief (*kufṛ*), and God becomes the implacable judge of those, punishing severely, wrathful, and vengeful. Man should constantly store in himself the fear of God (2:48; 5:4; 6:15; Izutsu 2008: 254–263).

In the communicative aspect, God is the one who takes the initiative and acts through signs (*ayāt*) and sends the revelation (*waḥy*), which is a particular kind of sign (3:118; 6:157; 7:132–133; 20:22–23; 26:192–195; 79:20).<sup>51</sup> Man answers God by worshipping Him (e.g., 2:21) taking the signs to be the truth. Such an attitude leads then – as with gratitude – to faith (*īmān*). Refusing the signs of God and considering them as falsehood – as with ungratefulness – provokes unbelief (*kufṛ*; Izutsu 2008: 150). However, choice and action are not here the expression of self-determination: “is not, in reality, choosing anything by himself for himself. His very act of responding to God’s guidance in either way is the necessary result of God’s Will” (Izutsu 2008: 152). Furthermore, Anna Mrozek-Dumanowska (1967: 161, 165) states: “God had fore-ordained the human to happiness or condemnation, had paralysed his every reflex of will and every initiative, had made futile the effort leading to the self-improvement” and “The scope of ‘God’s creativity’ does not leave a place for any activity of the

50 The pre-Islamic fatalism probably had influence on the Koranic conception of the omnipresent God. An exemplification here may be the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, present in the majority of the canonical collections of Sunni traditions, in which God orders that the men do not curse time (*dahr*) for whatever happens to them, as it is God who is this *dahr* (ṬB:21.97, the comment to the verse 45:24).

51 *Aya* (pl. *ayāt*) – sign of God’s power and manifestation of His will. Among the signs one can distinguish, 1) remarkable events; 2) natural signs (creation of the heaven and earth, wind, rain, the multitude of languages and colours of the skin etc.); 3) verbal signs, i.e., the words of God is revealed in the form of the Koran; and 4) verbal signs revealed in the other scriptures (Fatani 2006: 87 f.).

human himself. As even clothing, food, beverages, wealth or poverty, happiness or unhappiness – all this comes directly from God.”

God is also the Lord (*rabb*). In this respect, man enters into a relation with Him as a servant (*‘abd*), whose attitude is marked by obedience, servitude, and humility. This attitude is mainly demonstrated by following the path determined by the Lord, who appears here as the absolute sovereign (6:153; 19:65). Man, in order to address the challenge, follows the example of the Prophet Muhammad (e.g., 33:36). Not only the Prophet but also the early *umma* and the outstanding figures begin to constitute the main point of reference for the way of life and the actions of man. All the life energy of man concentrates, in this way, on following the authorities, a more perfect recreation of the standards set by the tradition (Mrozek-Dumanowska 1967: 140, 143).

In all the relations, the two attributes connected with God’s action turned out to be important: the attributes of omnipotence and an unlimited will. As a consequence, relations marked by them elicit the specific ideal of a human being. If he wants to give God a positive answer, he has to acknowledge Him as the only Creator and the Giver of life, he has to answer Him on His call and follow the path to salvation indicated by Him, demonstrating full obedience to His decrees, adopt the attitude of a servant, and show a reverent fear and gratitude as well as a fear of condemnation (Izutsu 2002: 185–187; 2008: 79).

The cultural consequence of the Koranic relationship between God and man, among others, had been deprived of originality and ingenuity (see Von Grunebaum 1971: 221, 241), formalising all human activity and subjecting it to the purposes precisely defined by God. In the context of writing, discussed here, this does not mean that man could not be its creator or active user but that the Koranic vision of the relation of God and man had limited the field of human activity and did not perceive the manifestations of culture (including writing) as the result of the creative possibilities of man and the tool of his action.

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