

# Theology of Prophecy in Dialogue

A Jewish-Christian-Muslim Encounter

Zishan Ghaffar | Klaus von Stosch (Eds.)



## Theology of Prophecy in Dialogue

# Beiträge zur Koranforschung

*Edited by*

Zishan Ghaffar, Angelika Neuwirth, Klaus von Stosch

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Zishan Ghaffar, Klaus von Stosch (Eds.)

# Theology of Prophecy in Dialogue

*A Jewish-Christian-Muslim Encounter*



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## Transliteration

The present volume adheres to Brill's simple Arabic transliteration system and uses rendered Arabic words such as Qur'an instead of Qur'ān, etc. For certain contributors, we primarily maintain their original sources of quotations such as āyah: āyāt, Sūrat: Sūrah or Muhammad as Muḥammad, because anyone with basic knowledge of Arabic can easily read and conveniently understand.





# Introduction

## *Theology of Prophecy in Dialogue: A Jewish-Christian-Muslim Encounter*

*Zishan Ghaffar and Klaus von Stosch*

The Qur'anic approach to prophecy challenges Jewish and Christian perspectives for various reasons. First, the Qur'an seemingly presents a few concrete features of prophets that are only partially in harmony with Biblical tradition. Moreover, the selection of prophets within the Qur'an is seemingly idiosyncratic and confusing from the Jewish and Christian perspectives. On the one hand, a few of the most important Biblical prophets, such as Isaiah<sup>1</sup> and Jeremiah, do not appear by name in the Qur'an. However, Biblical figures that are called prophets are not recognised as such in the Bible. For example, the Bible presents Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as patriarchs, while it features David and Solomon as kings instead of prophets.

However, the selection of the prophets in the Qur'an may be explained by considering the Qur'anic dialogue along with the Rabbinic literature and patristic tradition, such as the Syriac *Mêmrê*, especially those by Jacob of Serugh.<sup>2</sup> Jacob seemingly considers prophets very similarly to the Qur'an. The Biblical prophets selected by the Qur'an are also seemingly typologically interpreted in terms of Christ in the sermons of the Church Fathers. Jonah's night in the belly of the whale is interpreted as a prefiguration of Holy Saturday. Similar to Jesus, Job is understood as a suffering servant of God, while the claim of Jesus as the Messiah can only be upheld if he is understood in the tradition of David. Conversely, prophets, such as Isaiah or Jeremiah, are never interpreted typologically in terms of Christ.

However, not only indications of entanglements exist between the Qur'an and the Syriac Fathers but also certain interactions occur between the Qur'an and Rabbinic texts. Thus, the Qur'an is considered to be deeply intertwined in interreligious debates in Late Antiquity and the current understanding of the historical meaning of Qur'anic intervention still must be deepened in light of this dialogue. Hence, the basic objective of this book is to promote a historically situated understanding of Qur'anic prophetology. This concept includes

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1 For Isaiah in Muslim tradition see Günther, "Wehe dieser sündigen Gemeinde, die nicht weiß, ob ihr Gutes oder Böses widerfährt": Jesaja, ein alttestamentlicher Prophet und seine Botschaft in der islamischen Tradition."

2 See Griffith, *Syriac Mêmrê and the Arabic Qur'ân: Late Antique Biblical Exegesis in Counterpoint*.

not only the textual elements of Qur'anic proclamation but also the contextualisation of the prophetic figure of Muhammad within the wider political and religious developments of Late Antiquity. Thus, we pose the question of how major historical events and political developments (e.g. the Roman-Persian war) formed the Qur'anic concept of prophetology in general and its understanding of eschatology and apocalypticism in particular.

Within the context of Islamic exegesis, such a strong intertextual reference to the development of the understanding of the prophets is not uncontroversial. The Islamic prophetology of scholastic theology is not only oriented towards the Qur'an but also views numerous normative points of reference in tradition for its thinking. Accordingly, this book is not only about an independent Islamic theological prophetology but also historical exploratory investigations whose relevance for Islamic theology still needs to be determined. Only initial reference points are noted for Jewish theological thinking as well.

However, even if many implications for Islamic and Jewish theology must remain open in this book, a better historical understanding of the development of Qur'anic ideas evidently challenges traditional Christian methods for addressing the prophets. The Qur'an seemingly reacts to the typological readings of the prophetic figures in the preaching of the Church Fathers and establishes prophetology as a form of counter-discourse to Christology. Today, many Christians know that a typological reading of the Biblical prophetic literature can easily be understood in a supersessionist manner. Hence, the Qur'anic typological reading of the Biblical tradition is not only a challenge for the Christian tradition but may also be understood as a call for a new understanding of the role of the prophets.

Currently, no systematic theological attempt exists in Christianity to develop a theology of prophecy that considers the proprium of Christian theology along with the insights of Israel theology on the intrinsic value of prophecy. Nevertheless, a Christian prophetology of this type should be able to draw on the potential of prophetic accounts to broaden the Christian view of Jesus Christ. From the perspective of Christian doctrine, Jesus is evidently the fulfillment of all humanity and prophecy. However, as limited beings, humans will never come to a final knowledge of the unlimited and, therefore, must assume that many dimensions of Jesus Christ exist which they have not understood fully or will never fully understand in their Christologies. Certain aspects will always exist in the accounts of the prophets that Christians have not yet recognised in Jesus Christ, which, nevertheless, represent God's Word to them. If Jews articulate why they challenge the Christian reading of Christ as a fulfillment of the prophetic figures in the Bible, then Christians may be able to learn from these interventions to rebuild Christology in a non-supersessionist manner.

For Catholics, recent developments in magisterial theology encourage their recognition of the intrinsic value of the Jewish tradition and discovery of the prophets as a source of theological knowledge. For example, the 2015 Vatican document of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews clearly states that the Catholic Church needs to appreciate Judaism today. Accordingly, a document from the first magisterial reception of *Nostra Aetate* in 1974 precisely emphasizes this point when it states the following:

The crucial and new concern of this document consists in becoming acquainted with Judaism as it defines itself, giving expression to the high esteem in which Christianity holds Judaism and stressing the great significance for the Catholic Church of dialogue with the Jews [...].<sup>3</sup>

This statement emphasizes not only – as is typically the case – the importance of ancient Israel for the Church and the emergence of the Church from Israel but also the appreciation for Judaism today. First, this aspect requires willingness to engage in dialogue and to carefully listen. And then it needs a willingness to learn from Judaism today. The Christian theological evaluation at the end of the book occurs precisely due to such an attitude towards Judaism and Islam.

If Muslims present the Qur'anic way of reading the prophetic tradition as a non-supersessionist model, then Christians may be inspired to reframe their typological interpretations. Therefore, the Qur'anic approach to prophetology can be extremely helpful for the current debates on the reorientation of the Christological reading of the Old Testament, because it could provide ideas on maintaining the specificity of the prophets within a typological approach. At the same time, such approaches could render visible the function of typological discourses without a promise-fulfillment scheme. Conversely, Muslims may learn from the Jewish and Christian understanding of the prophetic tradition in terms of understanding their tradition as a constructive partner within a discourse with Judaism and Christianity.

This book is intended to be the first step of a larger research project that endeavours to achieve a better historical understanding of Qur'anic prophetology. It has three objectives. First, it aims to reframe Muslim prophetology based on a close reading of the Qur'an in dialogue with Christian and Jewish

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3 Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, 'The Gifts and the Calling of God are irrevocable' (Rom 11:29). A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of 'Nostra aetate' (No. 4), in: <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo-crrr/documenti-della-commissione/en.html>. The respective number is cited, here 4.

texts from Late Antiquity. It also intends to develop a Christian prophethood that is responsive to Qur'anic interventions and to the Jewish critique of the typological reading of the prophets. Lastly, it attempts to explore constructive Jewish readings of the prophetic tradition for Jewish thought today.

The book aims to generate an advanced level of dialogue and exchange of ideas in the three dimensions. In the first part, the authors address the Rabbinic concepts of prophecy to explore their potential contribution to Jewish thought today as well as challenge Muslim and Christian theologies of prophecy and provide background information for Qur'anic interventions.

Charlotte E. Fonrobert examines the manner in which Rabbinic tradition addresses prophecy. The author follows two texts, namely, a tannaitic account and a later Babylonian Talmudic sugya and demonstrates the interplay between the vanishing and permanent powers of the prophetic spirit in the Talmudic tradition. She illustrates how pessimism and optimism of the historical and epistemological types alternate.

Holger Zellentin examines the miracles of Jesus as described in the Qur'an and Toledot Yeshu. He argues that the Qur'an presents Jesus in a prophetic context, which not only criticises imperial Christianity but also challenges polemical Jewish accounts of Jesus. He interprets that the Qur'an provides insights into Rabbinic disagreements about Jesus. Zellentin aims to analyse the Qur'an as a literary work from Late Antiquity, specifically in comparison with the Babylonian Talmud. Additionally, Zellentin seeks to re-examine the discussions between Jews and Christians by exploring the Qur'anic portrayal of Jesus. It helped to address several inconsistencies in the manuscripts of Toledot Yeshu.

In an article, Elisa Klapheck analyses how the teaching of the seven female prophets highlights a few lesser known, even suppressed, elements, which can, however, only be unlocked by those that possess the knowledge and skills of Rabbinical hermeneutics. She writes, 'But once the code is cracked, it today provides us with the seeds of a Rabbinic gender theory as the condition for an alternative messianic prophetic paradigm'.

Catherine Hezser's article is dedicated to the role of Moses as a prophetic predecessor of Jesus and Muhammad in early Islam. Her focus on Moses as a typological figure subsequently prompts a postulation to his connection with eschatological imagination. In this context, the author examines the various motives associated with Moses and their representation in the Christian, Jewish and Muslim traditions. At the same time, the author offers a summary of contemporary research on the subject.

The second part of the book discusses Qur'anic concepts with a special focus on their relationships with Syriac and Rabbinic intertexts.

Fatima Tofighi puts forward an important proposition that the symbolism of the story of Balaam occurs in *Sūrat Al-A'raf*. Tofighi agrees with Muslim exegetes who identified the protagonist of the *Sūrat* as Balaam and argues that the Qur'an reacts to the question of the possibility of a gentile prophet. The concept being demonstrated is that although prophethood is essentially a matter of divine will, a person needs to possess a number of character traits for the fulfillment of prophethood. Therefore, the story of Balaam is used to set the conditions of prophethood and establish the boundary between true and false prophecies. Additionally, Tofighi argues that *Sūrat Al-A'raf* is related to the question of the relationship between prophecy and genealogy and dismisses any link between the two.

Angelika Neuwirth and Dirk Hartwig examine the role of Iblīs and evil in the Qur'anic story of Adam. They comprehensively explore the context and the particular purpose and function of the story of Iblīs in the Qur'an at the time of revelation. Their observation indicates that the story significantly differs between Meccan and Medinan surahs. The central focus of the new understanding of the Meccan community about evil is rebellion. Although the story is narrated again, the focus in the Medinan period is shifted towards the primordial tragedy of man in which Adam reappears with dignity. The authors concluded that the Qur'anic message presents a new perception of humanity, which is primarily determined using epistemic instead of moral standards.

Saqib Husain draws attention to the manner in which verses 17–48 of *Sūrat Šād* present excerpts on David, Solomon and Job and proceeds to discuss previous interpretations of these verses prior to putting forward his reading. An important suggestion is the proposition by Hussain of the unity of *Sūrat Šād*, which is evident from lexical repetitions that span across prophetic stories as well as occur outside of them. Thus, the argument is that stories are linked and complement on another and should be understood in light of the *Sūrat Šād* as a whole.

Starting with underlining the limits of prophetic knowledge, as demonstrated in the Qur'an, Zishan Ghaffar scrutinises the prophethood of Muhammad in Late Antiquity and the anti-apocalyptic nature of his prophetic wisdom. He highlights the Qur'anic statements on knowledge against the background of Syriac material and focuses on illustrating the resistance of the Qur'an to all forms of apocalyptic discourses, which is notable in the early Meccan surahs. The historical context of the Roman-Persian war is central to the arguments of Ghaffar.

Ali Aghaei attempts to demonstrate that establishing a basis in pre-Islamic traditions is not necessary for all aspects of Biblical narrations in Muslim sources. The cornerstone of this argument is the existence of Islamic traditions

that do not contain any fitting parallel to pre-Islamic traditions, although they resemble pre-Islamic haggada in terms of content and form. Aghaei proposes that oral tradition serves to explain the philological and conceptual difficulties of Biblical text as well as to broaden and elucidate theological issues.

Nora Schmidt discusses body and wisdom in relation to the prophecy of Joseph in the Qur'an. The author also reflects on the narrative of Lady Wisdom, who seemingly plays an allegorical role in the life of Joseph. She also raises questions of methodological interest for Qur'anic studies, while introducing considerations from Old Testament studies. From a hermeneutical point of view, Schmidt argues that Lady Wisdom can be understood as the one who accomplished the transmission process of stories related to Joseph.

Suleyman Dost contends that the *Arabian context* of early Islam cannot be reduced to geographical, ethnical and linguistical categories, regardless of how doing so may be tempting. Dost's analysis reveals a different interpretation of the term *Arabian*, which originates from the early days of western critical scholarship and defines the Arabian more by its absence than its presence. Dost's major argument states that pre-Islamic Arabian inscriptions can offer an important contextualisation of the engagement of the Qur'an with polytheists and with Judaism and Christianity.

Finally, the book presents two Christian endeavours to develop a Christian theology of prophecy beginning with the New Testament or using a number of Qur'anic insights in the Joseph narrative.

Klaus von Stosch demonstrates the relational aspect of Christology and finds that it is represented in the Qur'an. Jesus and his Biblical type, Joseph, can be experienced as our brothers and not only as figures of absolute authority. He particularly emphasizes the function that Qur'an places upon itself, that is, as a bridge. For its proclaimer, the Jewishness of Jesus reinforces his venerability. The Qur'an exemplifies this concept by dismissing and condemning the attempt to elevate Joseph above his brothers and, consequently, the Church above Israel. Their harmonious reconciliation entails the true beauty of Joseph's story in the Qur'an.

Christian Blumenthal approaches the phenomenon of prophecy from the perspective of New Testament studies, which concentrate on the Letter of Jude. The distinctive multi-faceted nature of the ways in which prophecy is approached in Early Christianity forms the background against which the Letter of Jude renders it. Eventually, the author provides a few parallels to the Qur'an, such as Q 111 and Q 85:4–6, which are compared to the Letter of Jude with regard to the question of whether or not they form together an anticipatory judgement sermon.

In the end, we would like to thank all who helped in the realisation of this book. First, we must mention the Federal Ministry of Research in Germany and the German Research Foundation, which funded the conference that was held in 2021 as a preparation for this book. We also thank Dr. Martina Kayser for her great cooperation with the publisher and Dr. Cordula Heupts for her work on the project. A special thanks goes to Dr. Elizaveta Dorogova, Dr. Abdul Basit Zafar and Leonhard Banowski, who undertook all formal corrections in the book and together with Kemal Kikanovic, the summarisation of the articles. We also acknowledge support for the publication cost by the Open Access Publication Fund of Paderborn University.

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*Zishan Ghaffar and Klaus von Stosch*





**PART I**

***Rabbinic Concepts of Prophetology***



# Prophecy in Classical Rabbinic Tradition

## *Endings and Transformations*

Charlotte E. Fonrobert

In the context of this collection of papers I have been tasked with discussing rabbinic perspectives on “prophecy,” ideas and approaches reflected in the vast library of late antique Jewish texts that we have come to think of as “rabbinic literature,” a literature that spans several centuries (first through the seventh century CE approximately), and the two imperial worlds of Late Antiquity, namely the Roman Empire and the Sasanian Empire to the East. There, on the Eastern side of the Roman *limes*, the latest and the greatest of the rabbinic compilations was shaped, namely the so-called Babylonian Talmud or *Bavli*. Of course, I am certainly not the first scholar to undertake this particular task. Indeed, to many scholars of rabbinic thought and theology the question about the role of ‘prophecy’, about the mode of the prophetic, that is so essential to Biblical literature and its theology, is at the very core of understanding the rabbinic project, at the core of the question of Jewish continuity or continuities, and of the conversation with Christian (and Islamic) theologies.

It seems that with very few exceptions, the literature of the rabbis of late antiquity is simply not populated with contemporaneous figures, men, or women, that are either identified as prophets, or that a reader or student of this literature today would recognize as such, however s\*he may identify the ‘prophetic.’ Evidently, the rabbinic sages have a lot to say about the Biblical prophets (*nevi'im*),<sup>1</sup> including Biblical women that are identified as prophetesses. They devote ample amounts of energy to decoding the biblical prophetic texts known to them as *Nevi'im* or Prophets and ask how a Biblical prophet may have deserved to receive the gift of prophecy (*nevu'ut*).<sup>2</sup> However, in their own intellectual and cultural world the rabbinic sages seem to avoid prophetic

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1 As we will have occasion to consider in this paper, rabbinic literature from tannaitic traditions onwards divides Biblical prophets into the *nevi'im rishonim* (the first or early prophets) and the *nevi'im acharonim* (the later or last prophets, e.g., tSotah 13:3). The former are those aligned with the period of the First Temple in Jerusalem (e.g., mSotah 9:12, see below, and elsewhere in the Mishnah), the latter group refers to the early post-exilic prophets Haggai, Zekhariah, and Mal'akhi, on which see below.

2 E.g., bSanh 39b with respect to Ovadiah. Evidently, there is no real difference between the abstract noun *nevu'ut* or prophecy or *nevu'ah*, both in use in rabbinic texts. In Biblical literature only the latter appears, and here only rarely, e.g., in Neh. 6:12, where *nevu'ah* refers

claims and, if ‘prophetic’ evokes anything like charisma, they generally stay clear of modes of the charismatic, at least certain instantiations thereof. Instead, this literature is shaped by voices of the sages (of the *hakhamim*) and their disciples (*talmidei hakhamim*), and their primary mode of engaging and – in a manner of speaking – channeling the divine is the study of Torah, *talmud Torah*. In Talmudic literature, prophets were prophets, and sages will be sages, or so it seems.

Nonetheless, reflections on prophecy and the mode of the prophetic are of course not entirely absent. In this paper, I will briefly sketch the intellectual and theological shifts from prophet to scholar, by focusing on two rabbinic traditions, the first an early tannaitic tradition attributable to the early 3rd century CE, and the other discourse in the later Babylonian Talmudic discussion comparing prophets and sage.

### The End of Biblical Prophecy in Early Rabbinic Tradition

The trope that dominates the literature about the notion of the prophetic in the rabbinic tradition of late antiquity is the very end, or disappearance of ‘prophecy.’<sup>3</sup> By the time of the rise of the rabbinic sages in the late first century CE and onwards, the figure of the prophet seems to have receded into the past at least to these. Indeed, the mode of learning that the rabbinic scholars and their disciples came to favor as a form of piety and intellectuality seems to be predicated on the burial of the figure of the Biblical prophet in the folds of distant memory. Generations of scholarship have been devoted to the question of how much such protestations by writers in the late so-called second Temple period and the early rabbinic texts reflect an “actual”, intellectual and historical-religious development, and perhaps even decline of prophecy “itself” in the Jewish culture of the Mediterranean, as well as to the question of what became not only of the figure of the prophet but of the very phenomenon of the prophetic.

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to the prophetic statement itself, and 2 Chron. 15:8 and 9:29. The former, *nevi’ut*, emerges in rabbinic literature only.

3 Sommer, “Did Prophecy Cease?,” 31–47, see 31 n.2; for scholarship that preceded him, bearing variations of the trope: Urbach, “When Did Prophecy Cease?,” 1–11; Overholt, “The End of Prophecy,” 103–15; Greenspahn, “Why Prophecy Ceased,” 37. The theme is part of many histories of Jewish theology, and theologies of early Christianity.

The *locus classicus* in the early rabbinic textual tradition for this discussion is a much-discussed formulation whose earliest version arguably is recorded in the Tosefta<sup>4</sup>:

When the latter prophets (*nevi'im achronim*) died, [that is] Haggai, Zechariah, and Mal'akhi, the holy Spirit (*ruach ha-kodesh*) parted from Israel.  
(Tosefta Sotah 13:3)<sup>5</sup>

This unattributed tradition notes matter-of-factly that the holy spirit (*ruach ha-kodesh*) departed (*paska*) from "Israel" with the death of the group of Biblical prophets known to this tradition as "the later" or "last" prophets.<sup>6</sup> Here the three post-exilic<sup>7</sup> prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Mal'achi, whose writings were part of the Biblical prophetic literature known to the early rabbinic sages, are identified as the *last* of the prophets, that is, the end of an era that was defined by those known as prophets.

This early rabbinic tradition is found in a larger collection of traditions identifying ruptures in the religious (hi)story of the people of Israel, most of them moments of decline.<sup>8</sup> A specific event, such as prominently the destruction of the Temple, or the death of certain personalities of note, such as the death

4 As a collection, the Tosefta redaction is commonly dated to the mid-third century CE, although it may contain earlier traditions. The most extensive analysis to date of this Toseftan tradition has been provided by Kuhn, *Offenbarungsstimmen im antiken Judentum* and more recently glossed by Stefanie Bolz's dissertation *Rabbinic Discourse on Divination in the Babylonian Talmud*.

5 Following msVienna, see Lieberman, "The Tosefta," repr., 231. Ms. Erfurt has only slight and arguably insignificant variations. I characterize this text as *locus classicus* because parts of it are repeatedly cited and glossed in the later Talmudic traditions on both sides of the *limes*, in the Babylonian Talmud in most extensively bSotah 48b and its parallel bSanhedrin 11a, and parts of it in bYoma 9b, as well as in the Palestinian Talmud at pSotah 9:14, 24b-c.

6 The Mishnah refers to the "early" or "first prophets" in a number of contexts, including ours (mSotah 9:12; and mYoma 5:2, mTa'anit 4:2) without identifying the members of this early group. According to mSotah 9:12, the *urim and tumim* (Exodus 28:30) lost their divinatory power with the death of the "early prophets." In the later Talmudic discussion of this passage a fourth century Babylonian sage (*amora*) is cited as defining this group as (biblical) prophets other than Haggai, Zechariah, and Mal'achi, "since these are the 'latter' prophets" (bSotah 48b). The Bavli then proceeds to cite our longer extended early tradition preserved in the Tosefta as a proof-text.

7 Late 6th and early 5th century CE.

8 In the Mishnah, the latter part of the ninth and final chapter of *Sotah*, with its parallels and additions in the same treatise in the Tosefta, which provides a much longer collection extending through several chapters through the final 15th chapter. Neither one is arranged tightly along chronological lines.

of the prophets or later of significant sages, are accompanied by the loss of other important aspects of Israelite and subsequently rabbinic culture.<sup>9</sup> For example, the end of the Sanhedrin led to the end of singing at (Jewish) wedding feasts (mSotah 9:11), the death of the early prophets led to the ceasing of the *urim* and *tummim*, and the destruction of the first Jerusalem Temple led to the ceasing of the mythical Shamir-worm (both mSotah 9:12), and so on. Here, the Tosefta in its own collection of similar traditions adds our tradition cited above according to which the death of the latter prophets – missing from the Mishnah's narration – led to the departure of the holy spirit (tSotah 13:3), which – as we shall see momentarily – is in turn tied to the earliest stages of the rabbinic movement.

The dictum thus notes a fundamental, seemingly epochal, shift in the collective existence of Israel, marked as a spiritual or theological shift.<sup>10</sup> 'Before,' or 'till then,' the holy spirit was with Israel, and 'after' (the death of these prophets) it departed. The metaphorical concept of the departure of the holy spirit from Israel is then linked with the death of these prophets, who in retrospect were the last ones in a line of prophetic speakers (or for that matter prophetic texts). And – we should emphasize – the causal, rather than coincidental relationship between the two events – death of the last prophets and departure of the holy spirit – is not entirely clear. Nonetheless, it seems that the presence of the *ruah ha-kodesh* among the people as whole is presented as a condition for the presence of prophets, and – equally possible – as long as there were prophets, (collective) Israel had the *ruah ha-kodesh* among them. The prophets could be prophets only because of the presence of the holy spirit among 'Israel' as a whole. With the prophets' death the people of Israel lost the presence of the holy spirit among them.

9 In the Mishnaic chapter, this list is opened with an acknowledgement of the discontinuation of the Biblical Temple ritual of the bitter waters for the *sotah* (the suspected adulteress) the mSotah 9:9, triggering a longer list of other such discontinuities.

10 We should note that the Toseftan collection includes a tradition of an earlier departure of the holy spirit (*ru'ah ha-kodesh*) tied to an extended exegesis of the story of the Biblical prophet Elijah. Here the Toseftan narrator holds that "till Elijah was hidden away, the holy spirit was plentiful among Israel" (tSotah 12:5), proven by the many "sons of prophets" mentioned in the Biblical story (2 Kings 2:1–16). Eventually, so the Toseftan narrator cum exegete holds that the holy spirit "was removed" from them (ibid.). This would make the departure noted in 13:3 a less epochal shift. However, in the earlier historical moment, the holy spirit "was removed" (*nistalkah*) from them, i.e., from those collective anonymous prophets specifically, but not (yet) from "Israel" as a whole.

However, the departure of the holy spirit, aka the death of the last prophets, is not the end of the story, as is the case with some of the earlier moments of decline. What comes to fill the void, according to this tradition, is the widely discussed *bat kol*:

When the latter prophets (*nevi'im acharonim*) died [that is] Haggai, Zechariah, and Mal'achi, the holy Spirit (*ruach ha-kodesh*) parted from Israel.

But even so, they 'were made to hear'<sup>11</sup> a *bat kol*.

(Tosefta Sotah 13:3)

The *bat kol* is perceived as a (heavenly) medium of an auditory nature<sup>12</sup>, something akin (*bat*) to a voice (*kol*). Not just a voice, the *bat kol* might appear subject of her own speech and not merely as medium.<sup>13</sup> Our Toseftan narrator renders the '*bat kol*' and hearing her<sup>14</sup> as something lesser than the presence of the holy spirit, expression of potentially an inferior era with respect to the era of the prophets. Long ago Saul Lieberman has argued – following a later gloss of this tradition in the Talmudic discussions – that the *bat kol* should be understood as even lesser than a voice, as something akin to an echo (*havarah*).<sup>15</sup> Whatever is precisely imagined by the concept of the *bat kol*,<sup>16</sup> she indicates

11 The causative (*hifil*) form of the verb ("hear") here is awkward. The talmudic citations of this tradition render the verb as *mishtamshim*, as in "they used to make use of" or – so Lieberman – "consult" a *bat kol*; Lieberman, "Hellenism in Jewish Palestine", 195. Bolz follows Saul Lieberman, rendering *mashmi'im* like *mishtamshin* from the parallel versions in the Babylonian Talmud and translates "they would make use of a bat kol," 73. Also Kuhn, *Offenbarungsstimmen im antiken Judentum*, 304. n.5. However, in tSotah 13:4 the verb is simply "they heard". See below, n. 16.

12 Considering the extended treatments of the *bat kol* in the literature it would be ludicrous to attempt a general definition. The referent of the concept, whether as heavenly and even divine voice, or as intermediary entity to be consulted shifts in different textual context. Suffice it to say that the term is coined only by the rabbis, drawing on the many auditory connections with the divine in Biblical literature. Like the *ruah ha-kodesh*, the *bat kol* is also feminine, at least by grammatical gender.

13 This has led a number of scholars to consider the *bat kol* as one of the hypostasized divine intermediaries that populate the late antique cosmos, following the Greek *logos*, the Aramaic *memra* of the Targumim and many others.

14 The grammatical gender of the *bat kol* is feminine which has been important to Jewish feminism even since the rise of Jewish feminist theology in the 70's and 80'. For these reasons I will refer to the *bat kol* in the feminine.

15 See Lieberman, "Hellenism in Jewish Palestine." He bases his understanding on geonic and mediaeval commentaries.

16 Here I disagree with Lieberman, who connects the use of *bat kol* here with mYevamot 16:6 where it simply means hearsay, and even echo in mountains, rendered by him as "a voice



a relationship of relative loss, of a lesser instantiation of the presence of the holy or divine, with respect to the *ruach ha-kodesh* of the prophetic era. Still, inferior as she may be to the holy spirit, the *bat kol* as heavenly voice is understood as *nonetheless* (“even so”) carrying over from the spirit-filled era that had enabled prophetic speech of the likes of Haggai, Zechariah, and Mal’achi. The holy spirit may be gone, and prophets may be no more, but *even so*, a voice remains to communicate with ‘them’, most likely the rabbinic sages.<sup>17</sup> Like the prophets of old, it maintains a connection with the divine.

Speaking almost as if historians of religion, then, in the late second century CE, the early rabbinic narrators of this tradition claim that the connection with the divine, captured by the notion or perhaps even textuality known as prophetic (*nevi'im*) in the Biblical tradition had long since ceased, namely with the end of the first Temple period, and at best the very early Biblical post-exilic period. The presence of the holy *spirit* among the people collectively (‘Israel’ as a whole) signifies an era, over and long gone. For the rabbinic sages who narrate and record this tradition, since the first Babylonian exile ‘Israel’ had to settle not even with merely a (divine?) voice, but perhaps with even lesser than that, an echo of a voice. To put it differently: the prophets of old channeled something substantive of the divine, a *ruach* or spirit, that they shared with Israel as a whole, a *presence* of the divine. That presence is what is lost, a divine presence now twice removed. No longer a *ruach*, and no longer with everyone, but only a voice, something akin to a voice, bridging the absence.

But the tradition recorded in the Tosefta does not stop here either. It continues with a narrative or significant incident (*ma'aseh*) – again perhaps even of epochal significance – that seems to be intended to spell out and intensify the implication of the collective loss of the holy spirit:

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or a word heard without seeing the person who uttered it ...” *ibid.*, 194. However, in our context a metaphysical character of sorts adheres to the *bat kol* as will be clear from the following story: Kuhn, *Offenbarungsstimmen im antiken Judentum*, 320. See also Bolz, who carefully distinguishes between the various formulations (“the divine voice came forth and said,” “they heard,” etc.). At the very least this phrasing also indicates to her a “divine revelatory voice,” Bolz, “Rabbinic Discourse on Divination in the Babylonian Talmud,” 75.

<sup>17</sup> The referent of the personal pronoun ‘them’ is not immediately transparent, but from the continuation of the tradition it appears to be the (collective) sages.

It happened (*ma'aseh*) that the sages gathered in the attic of the House of Gurya<sup>18</sup> in Jericho when a *bat kol* came forth<sup>19</sup> and said to them: There is here a person ('*adam*') among you who would be worthy of the holy spirit (*ruach ha-kodesh*), but his generation (*doro*) does not deserve such.

They turned their eyes towards Hillel the Elder.

And when he died, they said about him:

Woe for this humble one, woe for this pious one, a disciple of Ezra.

(Tosefta Sotah 13:3)

The early rabbinic sage, Hillel the Elder, known as a quasi-mythical founder of the rabbinic movement in the Talmudic rabbis' own imagination, who would have lived in the first century CE, could theoretically have channelled the holy spirit, could thus have been like a prophet of old, but the spiritual state of his generation prevented that. The narrative presents a powerful equivocation: Hillel, the individual sage, is *sub specie aeternitatis* on the level of the prophets 'of old', but even he could not capture the spirit of the holy (as did they), due to the moral inferiority of his generation, collectively. And all this is conveyed by the *bat kol*, the heavenly voice, the very entity that is the left-over after the collective loss of the holy spirit and heard by the rabbinical sages in their assembly. The plot signals a "something other than the era of the (Biblical) prophets" for the narrators of this tradition, but at the same time theological continuity between the prophets and the leading sage. Theoretically, Hillel is like the prophets of old, worthy (*ra'ui*) like them, to channel the divine. But in practice, he cannot, and cannot be perceived as such by his contemporaries, because his "generation" is simply not worthy thereof. But they all know immediately, and intuitively, who is intended by the *bat kol*'s pronouncement: they turn their eyes to him. His death, then, in this mythologizing narrative does not present an epochal rupture, such as the death of the last of the prophets when the holy spirit departed. Instead, he is mourned for his outstanding human qualities,

18 Perhaps evoking the name of a well-known family in Jericho, see Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-Fshutah*, VIII:736. For the House of Gorya in Jericho cp. the famous incident in mentioned mShabbat 1:4 and tShabbat 1:6 where the schools of Hillel and Shammai assemble in the upper chambers of Hanania ben Hizkiya ben *Garion* (or Gorion or Garon). Ancient names are common-sensically subject to multiple spellings in medieval manuscripts, and there is no way to ascertain whether the "house of Gurya" has the same historical referent as does mShab 1:4.

19 צִתָּהּ in Ms Vienna. One ms version (msErfurt) has שָׁמְעוּ or 'they heard'. See the discussion by Bolz, "Rabbinic Discourse on Divination in the Babylonian Talmud," 74ff. She suggests that the difference is significant, since the former indicates that the *bat kol* has her own agency, while the latter suggests a chance utterance overheard by the rabbis. The former thus would appear as a divine revelatory statement, while the latter points in the direction of cledonomanancy.

his humility and piety, and for being “a student of Ezra,” the paradigmatic scribal scholar in rabbinic Judaism, a Biblical figure who stands for a very different type of authority than the prophets of old. This characterization already points towards continuity with Biblical, or at least *late* Biblical tradition. Hillel, the first century C.E. rabbinic sage, a founding figure in so many respects, is represented as a disciple of Ezra, of the mode of piety conveyed by Ezra (historically speaking preceding him by at least four centuries). Hillel could have been a prophet, but he is not. Instead, he is a disciple (*talmid*) of the archetypal Biblical scribe. The eulogy on his death-bed is for having been an outstanding disciple, not for being a would-be prophet who could not fulfil that promise.

This entire plot is duplicated in the immediately following narrative about Samuel the Little (*Shmu'el ha-Katan*), another late first century CE sage<sup>20</sup>:

Again (*shuv pa'am*, my emphasis) ‘they’ were sitting in Yavneh and heard a *bat kol* saying: there is here a person (*'adam*) who is worthy (*ra'ui*) of the holy spirit, except that the generation is not worthy.

And they turned their eyes to Samu'el the Little.

And when he died, they said about him:

Woe for this humble one, woe for this pious one, a disciple of Hillel the Elder.

(tSotah 13:4)

The emphasis on the duplication (*again – shuv pa'am*) points to the continuity not only of the *bat kol*'s divine pronouncements, but also of inspired leadership within the rabbinic movement. The location shifts from the mythical House of Gurya to the equally mythical Yavneh, both founding moments in the rabbinic movement.<sup>21</sup> Samuel the Little replicates Hillel's human qualities, his humility and piety, and as Hillel's disciple, he is the next link in the chain, just as the Hillel was Ezra's.<sup>22</sup> At the end of the narrative, the students of Samuel the Little, without the mention of a *bat kol*, try to pronounce a similar eulogy

20 Samuel the Little is a well-known personality in rabbinic memory, as per Talmudic tradition he is associated with the formulation of the daily prayer liturgy which forms the backbone of the individual life of every religious Jewish man (bBer 28b) in rabbinic tradition, and since the rise of Jewish feminism of Jewish women as well.

21 For the myth of Yavneh as the founding rabbinic council in the first century and its various Talmudic afterlives see Cohen, “The Destruction”; Boyarin, “A Tale of Two Synods.”

22 Here the famous chain of transmission from Mishnah Avot comes to mind as an intertext, which starts at Mt. Sinai and Moses, has the prophets (*nevi'im*) early on between the elders and “men of the great assembly”. Samu'el the Little is not mentioned in that tradition, as one of Hillel's disciples.

over the death of Rabbi Yehudah ben Bava (early 2nd century CE), except that “the times became too troubled.”<sup>23</sup>

This final phrase has the narrative about the *bat kol*, announcing a person worthy of the holy spirit, a prophet-like leader, exhaust itself in the persecutions connected with the Bar Kokhba war of the mid-second century CE. To that end, the narrative about Samuel the Little inserts and reports a pronouncement on his deathbed, an utterance that remarkably poses as prophetic speech in style:

[Like his students, Samuel the Little] also spoke at the hour of his death:  
 “Shim’on and Yishma’el for the sword,  
 their colleagues for execution,  
 the rest of the people for plunder  
 and multiple troubles will follow after this.”  
 And in the Aramaic language he said it.  
 (tSotah 13:4)

Samuel here is said to predict on his deathbed the troubles that will come upon not only rabbinic leaders but the people as whole. In doing so he draws on Biblical prophetic paradigms<sup>24</sup> and the *targumic* translations of Biblical prophetic language. In the sequence of our narrative, his little prophetic speech truly presents a powerful moment of ambiguity and equivocation. That is, in the midst of the extended reflection on the end of the prophetic mode, the loss of the holy spirit, and the contraction of the divine spirit into all but a voice, Samuel the Little, a sage, is made to prophesize and to announce the collective troubles that are to come, drawing on prophetic diction. In the entire rabbinic library this presents one of the few, and perhaps altogether unique moments of a rabbinic sage waxing prophetic. As if the narrator of our tradition could not quite let go of the possibility of the persistent prophetic mode of old, and allowed it to break forth one more time, even if only on the deathbed of the sage, speaking to his students in the process of eulogizing him.

23 End of tSotah 13:4. Bolz has “but time struck it down”, 74. Kuhn has rendered “but because the hour was confused” (they could not do a public eulogy), Kuhn, *Offenbarungsstimmen im antiken Judentum*, 304f. He makes references to the later Talmudic version according to which no public grief was allowed for those executed by the Roman government.

24 Compare for instance Jer. 15:2.

## Talmudic Variations on Prophetic Transformations

As noted above, the Toseftan narrative built around the dictum about the departure of the holy spirit is cited in various contexts in later Talmudic discussions, first and foremost in the relevant context of discussing the Mishnaic chapter in Talmud Sotah.<sup>25</sup> In bSotah 48b the framing of the mostly exegetical discussion is to identify the referent of the “early prophets” mentioned in the Mishnah (mSotah 9:14), whose death is said to have rung in the end of the *urim* and *tummim*. After suggesting (and rejecting) that the Mishnah might have intended David, Samuel, and Solomon as referents for “early prophets”, the Talmudic discussion there settles on all (Biblical) prophets other than Haggai, Zekharyah, and Mal’akhi from our Toseftan text tradition as the referent for early prophets.<sup>26</sup>

Rather than turning to these discussions, none of which add up to much beyond extended glosses to some of the details of the earlier narrative,<sup>27</sup> I want to turn here to another famous Talmudic *sugya* or unit of discussion that presents a concentrated effort to gauge the place of the prophetic in rabbinic culture and its scholastic inclinations. In the early tannaitic textual framing discussed above, we have traced a generally pessimistic outlook according to which the historio-theological conditions for prophecy declined, i.e., the theory that the presence of the spirit of holiness among collective ‘Israel’ had ceased with the death of the last of the prophets. Historiographically we would identify this as the early post-exilic or Second Temple period, leaving the narrator’s contemporary context fairly bleak and ending somewhere in the midst of “the troubled times,” or as the Talmudic gloss would have it, the times when “the kingdom executed” Jews, i.e., the Bar Kokhba war. According to that tannaitic perspective only traces of what had hitherto been thought of as the presence of the holy remained, in the auditory access to the divine through a *bat kol*. More than an ongoing guarantor of the presence of the divine, the *bat kol* in that context appears as a sorry substitute,<sup>28</sup> a mere thread of connection to

25 The Babylonian Talmud cites our tradition in its entirety, from the death of the later prophets to the Bar Kokhba war in bSotah 48b with parallel version in bSanhedrin 11a. The Palestinian Talmud cites various fragments ad loc at pSotah 9:14, 24b–c.

26 In bSanhedrin 11a the text tradition is cited in a context which mentions Samuel the Little and his supposed humility, upon which our text tradition is cited as a further demonstration of this sage’s humility.

27 Such as the explanation of troubled times as the (Bar Kokhba) wartimes, when eulogies could not be presented for those executed by the government, situating the narrative in a martyrological context (bSotah 48b).

28 Thus, very strongly the Talmudic narrative bYoma 9b.

the prophetic era of old. We have also noted the narrators' ambiguity about this development as decline, since at least one of the sages featured in the narrative is made to speak in prophetic mode, or to "prophesize."

In the extended Talmudic discussion that I wish to present here if only briefly, the rabbinic narrators take a slightly different approach, in that they explicitly compare prophet and sage, and connect prophecy (*nevu'ah*) to the wisdom or scholarship of the sages. While some aspects of the *sugya* have been discussed and cited variously, especially the dicta around which the *sugya* is structured, the *sugya* itself has been side-lined, even though it is precisely in the arrangement and discussion of the dicta that Talmudic theology comes into its own.

As a *sugya*, this text is one of the central texts in the Babylonian Talmud on the question of the role of prophecy, arguably the *central* one, hence the selection for our purposes. The *sugya* (bBava Batra 12a-b) is populated heavily by named rabbinic sages, attributed, that is, to famous Amora'im ranging from the earlier (Rabbi Yohanan) to the latest (Mar bar Rav Ashi) generations of that period of Talmudic learning.<sup>29</sup> Relatively brief, it is structured around two equally well-known dicta.<sup>30</sup> The first opening dictum, attributed to Rabbi Avdimi from Haifa (fl. late 3rd century CE), holds that: "From the day that the Temple (*beit ha-mikdash*) was destroyed, prophecy (*nevu'ah*) has been taken from the prophets (*nevi'im*) and given to the sages (*hakhamim*)" (bBava Batra 12a). According to the second dictum, attributed to Rabbi Yohanan (fl. earlier in the 3rd century CE), "from the day that the Temple (*beit ha-mikdash*) was destroyed, prophecy (*nevu'ah*) has been taken from the prophets and has been given to fools and children" (bBava Batra 12b). Both of these Amoraic dicta follow the earlier tannaitic rhetorical pattern familiar from the chapters of Tractate Sotah in that they correlate a historical event (the destruction of the Temple)<sup>31</sup> with a loss or shift in Israel's 'sacred' history. Which Temple, the

29 Rabbi Yohanan, one of the early post-mishnaic sages in Syro-Palestina in the Roman Empire would be dated to the third century CE, while Mar bar Rav Ashi, the son of Rav Ashi featured here would be dated to the latter 5th century in the Sasanian Empire. For introductory purposes to individual Talmudic sages, Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch* remains still the most useful reference work.

30 Both dicta are cited in the various studies dealing with the holy spirit, the *bat kol*, or prophecy, e.g., Kuhn, *Offenbarungsstimmen in antiken Judentum*, 312f. and literature cited there.

31 Although in these Amoraic cases it is entirely clear which Temple, first or second, the dicta refer to, although generally *beit ha-mikdash* refers to the Second Temple.

first or second, is intended is not immediately transparent,<sup>32</sup> and arguably this distinction is not important to this *sugya*. Prophecy – here *nevu'ah* – is quintessentially connected with the “institution” of the sanctuary. Or, put differently and perhaps more accurately, prophet and the conformity of prophecy and prophets, are dependent on the existence of the sanctuary. The Temple as sanctuary roots the holy spirit among ‘Israel’, allowing the prophets to ‘own’ prophecy, and to be legible and interpretable. The two dicta present two variations on the theme of the transference of prophecy to categories of people who at first sight appear as anything but prophets, certainly compared to the Biblical prophets of old. In its discussion, the Talmudic *sugya* positions both dicta side by side non-exclusively, without dismissing either one as necessarily inferior, although certainly Rabbi Yohanan’s dictum has provoked much more puzzlement. In rabbinic tradition, therefore, both remain potentially valid options for the path that the prophetic mode took.<sup>33</sup>

The Talmudic discussion especially of Rabbi Avdimi’s dictum is worth a brief analysis for our purposes here, since it arguably touches upon the fundamental stakes of the Babylonian Talmud’s project as a whole.<sup>34</sup> In brief, the question at the core of the Talmud’s project essentially is how to conceptualize the source of the (rabbinic) sage’s knowledge, her knowledge of Torah, of interpreting Torah, and of transmitting Torah. Differently put, in the Talmudic discussion the question is not really or not only a theological question, trying to cultivate access to the divine or revelation, albeit that perhaps also. Rather, the question is about epistemology and the production of knowledge. Prophet and sage present two types of access to the source of knowledge production.

Said Rabbi Avdimi from Haifa:

“From the day that the Temple (*beit ha-mikdash*) was destroyed, prophecy (*nevu'ah*) has been taken from the prophets (*nevi'im*) and given to the sages (*hakhamim*).”

[Anon.]: Is this to say that a sage is not a prophet?

[Anon.]: This is what he [Rabbi Avdimi] said:

32 See Schäfer, *Die Vorstellung vom Heiligen Geist in der rabbinischen Literatur*, 100, who insists the passage has in mind the first Temple, contra Marmorstein a.o.

33 Pace Schäfer who surmises that R. Yohanan polemicizes with his dictum against Rav Avdimi.

34 This touches upon a methodological issue as well, namely on how to read and use Talmudic texts and discussions for intellectual histories. For my hermeneutic approach in this paper, I hold that when individual dicta are embedded in Talmudic discussions it is that framework which determines the resonance of the dictum in Talmudic culture.

Even though it [i.e., prophecy] was taken from the prophets [*nevi'im*], from the sages [*hakhamim*] it was not taken. (bBava Batra 12a)

First, the anonymous Talmudic discussants<sup>35</sup> question the import of Rabbi Avdimi's formulation of his dictum, since his phrasing would seem to suggest that the prophets (the *nevi'im*) had a gift, a form of knowledge, prophecy or *nevu'ah*, that at least originally was theirs and only subsequently – with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple – was transferred to the sages (*hakhamim*). Prophecy (*nevu'ah*) is detachable from the prophets, their gift taken and passed to others: "Is this to suggest that a sage is not a prophet!?" Accordingly, Rabbi Avdimi would seem to be proposing that a "sage" is something other and potentially even lesser than a "prophet," and only secondarily receives prophetic knowledge. Apparently, this is not acceptable to the anonymous Talmudic discussants, and they suggest rephrasing Rabbi Avdimi's dictum: "This is really what he wants to say: 'even though [prophecy/ *nevu'ah*] was taken from the prophets, from the sages it was not taken". In this version of the dictum, both sages and prophets, both types of (divine) knowledge, exist originally coequally, and both have the same source of knowledge, namely, *nevu'ah* or prophecy, but only the prophets lose it and disappear (with the destruction of the Temple). Here, prophecy itself or *nevu'ah* does not disappear altogether. Rather, the existence of sages who always already had prophecy before and after the destruction underwrite the continuity of prophetic wisdom (aka Torah) both before and after the destruction.

The *sugya* continues with adding a different emphasis to the comparison of sage and prophet:

Said Amemar: A sage is better (*'adif*)<sup>36</sup> than a prophet, since it is said [in Scripture]:

"And a prophet [has a] heart of wisdom" (Ps. 90: 12). Which is dependent on which? You must say that the lesser is dependent on the greater.

According to this late 4th and early 5th century Babylonian sage, it is not just that sages and prophets shared prophecy as a source of knowledge prior to the destruction. Rather, by definition the sage is superior to the prophet, which

35 By and large, Talmudic text historians assume that the anonymous voice(s) of the Talmud is/ are what lend the discussions and narratives anthologized in the Talmud its final Gestalt. The anonymous voice in the *sugya* here seems like a later discussion of Rabbi Avdimi's dictum. However, although the academic consensus tends towards dating the group(s) of sages behind the anonymous voice, the *stammaim*, to the latest layer of the Talmudic redaction, this cannot be taken for granted.

36 Some mss. have "greater than".



Amemar proves with a deliberate misreading of the verse from Psalm 90.<sup>37</sup> A prophet has a heart of wisdom from which he derives his prophetic knowledge. Since the heart – here the seat of wisdom – is at the root of knowledge, wisdom or *hokhmah* which the rabbis generally associate with Torah knowledge is that from which the prophet derives his knowledge, not the other way around. Amemar’s dictum – that the sage and her mode of knowledge production is preferable to that of the prophet is what underwrites the self-understanding of rabbinic learning.

And now the Talmudic discussion proceeds to providing three variations of proofs that show that indeed “prophecy was not taken from the sages:

Said Abbaye:

you should know [that this is correct, i.e., that prophecy was not taken from sages]<sup>38</sup>, because a great man teaches a matter, and [this matter coincides with something that] is also taught [independently] in the name of a different great man accordingly.

Said Rava: And why would this be surprising [such as to consider this proof of the sages’ prophetic gifts]? May be these two were born under the same [astro-nomical] constellation. Rather,

you should know [that it is correct, i.e., that prophecy was not taken from sages], because a great man teaches a matter, and [this matter] is also taught [independently] in the name of Rabbi Akiva ben Yosef.

Said Rav Ashi: And why would this be surprising [such as to consider this proof of the sages’ prophetic gifts]? May be with regard to such a matter they were born under the same constellation. Rather, said Rav Ashi:

You should know [that is correct, i.e., that prophecy was not taken from sages], because a great man teaches a matter, and it is also taught [independently] as a *halakhah* that was given to Moses on Sinai accordingly.

Anon.: And perhaps he was like a blind person with a skylight?

Anon.: But did the sage now provide reason?

This vignette of a talmudic discussion (aka *sugya*) moves the analysis from the Palestinian source, i.e., Rabbi Avdimi’s dictum, to a discussion between Babylonian rabbinic scholars, Abbaye, Rava, and Rav Ashi. Each of these three beautifully arranged proofs are attributed to three of the greatest names and scholars in Babylonian Talmudic scholastic lore, namely Abbaye (fl. first half of 4th century) and his interlocutor, colleague and rival Rava (same period),

37 The verse is actually a plea to God (attributed to “Moses, man of God” as ‘author’ of this psalm) “that we may get (*navi*) a heart of wisdom.” Morphologically, the verbal form can be read as the noun ‘prophet’ (*navi*) which from the context is clearly a misreading, since the poem is not concerned with prophets.

38 Following the mediaeval commentator, Rashi.

and two generations later Rav Ashi (fl. late 4th and early 5th century CE).<sup>39</sup> Each of these three great Talmudic scholars suggest they can demonstrate the presence of 'prophecy' among rabbinic sages, in the past and by implication also in their present. Each of their proofs present variations of the same pattern, namely that a teaching of a (generic but) great scholar coincides with another 'source' of knowledge of Torah, taught and preserved independently elsewhere, namely: either a colleague; or a teaching by Rabbi Akiva, among the greatest and perhaps the greatest teacher of Mishnaic times; or finally a source that goes back to Moses at Mt. Sinai.<sup>40</sup> The arrangement of the proofs is one of intensification: surely, the first coincidence of a teaching of a matter of law is not surprising, as indeed two colleagues share the same intellectual universe. According to the anonymous Talmudic voice, in such a case, coincidence of independently taught knowledge may not be a coincidence, and, therefore, not a sign of prophecy, or the presence thereof. Two great minds simply think alike. Interestingly, therefore, the anonymous Talmudic voice is one of skepticism with respect to identifying scholarly insight as prophecy. The same is true for the seeming coincidence between present and past 'sources' of knowledge: even if one's teaching were to coincide with an independently established teaching by Rabbi Akiva, clearly the greatest rabbinic mind of all times, the hypothetical later Talmudic sage still inhabits an intellectual universe shared with Rabbi Akiva. The same talmudic skepticism as for the previous case holds: such coincidence hardly should count for prophecy. The third and last proof, however, looks as if it might hold: the coincidence of a current sage's teaching with an (independently sourced) teaching that is identified as a source rooted in the revelation at Sinai. Surely in such a case a coincidence is not just that, since the later scholar cannot be said to inhabit the same intellectual universe as the source of all revealed knowledge of Torah, other than by prophetic intuition. But even this is questioned as a proof of scholastic prophecy, since the Talmud's anonymous voice of skepticism suggests that even in such a case, a scholar may have been lucky, chancing upon the proverbial needle in the haystack, which in turn is rejected as a possibility. The final note of the discussion and its seeming rationalism is worthy of a mediaeval Maimonides: If indeed the sage "provides reason" for his teaching, we may accept such a coincidence

39 For Abbaye and Rava, see Kalmin, "Friends and Colleagues, or Barely Acquainted?," 125–58, a.o. As far as Rav Ashi is concerned, inner-Talmudic tradition (bBava Metzia 86a; bBava Batra 157b, a.o.) accords him with a crucial role in the very formation of the Talmudic tradition.

40 On the importance of the latter as a source of law in rabbinic literature, see Hayes, "Halakhah Le-Moshe miSinai in Rabbinic Sources."

as proof of scholastic prophecy. In other words, since the scholar can provide reasoning for his intuition, he cannot be said to merely have “found” a teaching like one given to Moses by sheer luck. His ability to expand on his own intuition is what is on the level of the prophetic. But even here, we should note, some skepticism holds, since the Talmudic voice formulates this point only as a question, not as an assertion.

To summarize this segment of the *sugya* then: the Talmudic editors or arrangers of the *sugya* do agree that prophecy was not taken from the sages, from those who populate the Talmudic world. ‘Prophecy’, we might say, has turned into a form of ‘scholastic prophecy.’ A sage who coincidentally teaches something that is otherwise also identified as ‘teaching that was given to Moses at Sinai’ may prove that Talmudic sages and scholars are (still) prophets, and that prophecy has morphed into scholarship. Even if individual sages are not recognizable as prophets, the enterprise of scholarship and learning as such has in some way absorbed the prophetic.

The second part of the *sugya* turns to Rabbi Yohanan’s dictum, cited above: “from the day that the Temple (*beit ha-mikdash*) was destroyed, prophecy (*nevu’ah*) has been taken from the prophets and has been given to fools and children” (bBava Batra 12b). This dictum seems to be presented as an alternative to the one with which the *sugya* started out. Prophecy differently lives on – potentially – in fools and children. For its discussion of this dictum the Talmud switches genre, from theoretical discourse to narrative, as for both ‘fools’ and ‘children’ as post-destruction vessels of prophecy the *sugya* introduces an incident from the lives of the sages to illustrate the point. In both cases, the fool and the child respectively – overheard by Babylonian sages – predict a future event that is correctly interpreted by the respective sages. In the first case, the fool divines in encoded form the next head of the rabbinic academy, which the listener – Mar bar Rav Ashi – understands to be himself, causing him promptly to do everything to ensure the fulfillment. The second case, involving the (unnamed) daughter of Rav Chisda (fl. 4th century C.E.), is even less a case of divination. As her father is teaching two prominent students, Rava and Rami bar Hama, he prompts his daughter who happens to be present to choose her future husband, upon which she chooses both. And indeed, we are told by the narrator, she ends up marrying Rami bar Hama first, and upon his death Rava. Both narratives deserve a closer reading than space allows me here. The question to be raised here briefly is just what we are to make of the relationship between the two parts of the Talmudic discourse on the remains of prophecy after the destruction of the Temple. One is inclined to read the first part of the *sugya* on the relationship between prophecy and sagely wisdom with greater seriousness, prompted already by its discursive

character as theoretical reflection on rabbinic epistemology. Is the second part, making fools and children with seemingly random albeit timely pronouncements latter-day prophets in the sense of predicting future events correctly, a polemic against the first part of the *sugya*, as Peter Schaefer would have it?<sup>41</sup> Perhaps, the second part complements the first, in that it underlines the skepticism that we have already elicited from that discussion. “The” Talmud, that is, its anonymous editorial voice, remains hesitant about identifying scholastic knowledge, the knowledge produces in an academic context of studying Torah, as the product of a prophetic gift, and it certainly never identifies any particular scholarly intuition as such. Turning the fool’s and the child’s (pseudo-) divinatory pronouncements into potential instantiations of *nevu’ah* can then be read as lending support to that skepticism.

### Conclusion

Through two extensive texts, one an early tannaitic narrative, the other a later Babylonian Talmudic *sugya*, we have been able to trace both the thesis of the disappearance of prophecy (or the departure of the holy spirit from collective Israel) and the persistence of the prophetic (*nevu’ah*) in the scholastic culture of the Talmudic scholars and their disciples. The former is a pessimistic expression of a general view of historical decline, much as the narrative ends in the Bar Kokhba war. The latter is anything but pessimistic: Although prophets as such may have disappeared, and the canon has closed on the books of the prophets, scholars continue to bear the prophetic along, although the prophetic may have been much transformed into the mode of the scholarly.

The prophetic in rabbinic analysis is not merely something underwritten by institutions, whether by the Israelite monarchy, or by the existence of the Jerusalem Temple, and the prophetic is also not merely about announcing future events. Rather, it has to do with the theological notion of maintaining a connection with the divine, and with the epistemological problem of ascertaining the source(s) of rabbinic knowledge. The intricate interplay between these two is what lies at the heart of the project of rabbinic Judaism.

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41 See, n. 32 above.



# Jesus' Miracles in the Qur'an and in Toledot Yeshu

Holger Zellentin

There is no lack of studies on the many ways in which the Qur'an presents Jesus as a prophet, and as a central precursor to the prophet Muhammad.<sup>1</sup> In particular, Heikki Räisänen, Ryann Craig and Guillaume Dye have pointed out that the Qur'an's Jesus narratives stand as close to the Acts of the Apostles as they do to the broader Christian Gospel tradition.<sup>2</sup> Yet Jews critical of what eventually became Christianity equally developed an image of Jesus. Taking up many of the narratives given in Acts and in the Gospels, they bequeathed us two late antique bodies of testimonies. The first one is constituted by the diverse and multiform classical rabbinic literature, whose date of redaction spans the third to the seventh century CE, which considers Jesus' heritage in a dialectical way through the lens of the Talmudic tradition.<sup>3</sup> The second one is constituted by a much more raucous genre, which started to form around the sixth century CE at the latest, yet continued to thrive unabatedly up to early modern times: the fluid para-rabbinic Jewish collection of satirical

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- 1 While many aspects of the Qur'anic Jesus have seen much interest recently, the most perceptive comprehensive study in my view remains Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, esp. 3–40; for further literature see idem, Robinson, "Jesus," see also Reynolds, "The Islamic Christ," 185–88, and notes 2, 11 and 24 below.
- 2 See Räisänen, "The Portrait of Jesus in the Qur'an," Craig, "The Qur'anic Cross and the Lost Substitute," and Dye, "Mapping the Sources of the Qur'anic Jesus."
- 3 On the image of Jesus in the Talmudic tradition see e.g. Murcia, *Jésus dans le Talmud et la littérature rabbinique ancienne*, cf. also Jaffé, "History of a Marginal Disciple."

counter-Gospels I will refer to as the *Toledot Yeshu tradition*.<sup>4</sup> The few studies of the Qur'anic Jesus that have considered the Jewish tradition have focused only on the former, Talmudic body of evidence, delivering middling results.<sup>5</sup> It may therefore be high time to explore the value of the latter, polemical part of the Jewish tradition, whose importance for the way in which the Qur'an impugns Jewish claims about Mary's unchastity and Jesus' execution is also emphasized by Sean Anthony in a study currently in preparation.<sup>6</sup>

In the following, I will argue that the Qur'an's list of Jesus' divinely approved miracles in Q 3 *Sūrat Āl Imrān* 49 and in Q 5 *Sūrat al-Mā'ida* 110 – esp. the creation and vivification of clay birds, the healing of the blind and of the leper, and the revival of the dead – responds not only to Christian but also to the polemical Jewish narratives, which ascribe a list of the same miracles to Jesus. By emphasizing that God allowed him to perform miracles, the Qur'an not only undermines Christian claims of Christ's divinity, but also dismisses Jewish claims that Jesus awed his audience by means of magic. The fullness of the Qur'anic Christ, hence, only comes to light if one considers it in dialogue with both its Jewish and its Christian audience, especially in Medina.<sup>7</sup>

4 Among the many fine studies on *Toledot Yeshu*, which tend to highlight its vibrant mediæval developments, see e.g. Goldstein, *A Judeo-Arabic Parody of the Life of Jesus*, Barbu and Deutsch (eds.), *"Toledot Yeshu" in Context*, and Schäfer, Meerson and Deutsch (eds.), *Toledot Yeshu ("The Life Story of Jesus") Revisited*.

5 See Mehr, "Is the Quran Supersessionist?" and Mevorach, "Qur'an, Crucifixion, and Talmud." In my view, both Mehr and Mevorach, commendable as their studies could have been, hold the telescope the wrong way around when it comes to Jewish literature, since the Babylonian Talmud, just like the Qur'an, critically recontextualizes the narrative, juridical and exegetical excesses preserved in the *Toledot Yeshu* tradition. In other words, the parallels between the Bavli and the Qur'an that Mehr and Mevorach rightly highlight are only incidental to the way in which both texts more directly react to the *Toledot Yeshu* tradition, as I argue in a study currently in preparation, yet see Stökl Ben-Ezra, "On Some Early Traditions in *Toledot Yeshu* and the Antiquity of the "Helena" Recension."

6 See Anthony, *Toledot Yeshu and the End of Jesus' Earthly Mission in the Qur'an* and see note \* above. The first Western scholar to make the connection between the two corpora may have been Philip Alexander, a most careful reader, who pondered whether Q 5:110, Q 6:16 and Q 4:156 may be "direct allusions to the *Toledot Yeshu*" only to reject this idea, see idem, "The *Toledot Yeshu* in the Context of Jewish-Muslim Debate," in Schäfer, Meerson and Deutsch (eds.), *Toledot Yeshu ("The Life Story of Jesus") Revisited: A Princeton Conference*, 155. At the time of Alexander's writing, however, the critical study of the *Toledot Yeshu* tradition had been hindered by the lack of a scholarly edition of the texts, which has since been provided by Michael Meerson and Peter Schäfer, see Schäfer and Meerson, *Toledot Yeshu*.

7 On the Qur'an's engagement with both a Jewish and a Christian audience, especially in Medina yet plausibly already in Mecca, see Zellentin, "*banū isrā'īl, ahl al-kitāb, al-yahūd wa-l-naṣārā*"; cf. the stronger emphasis on the Jewish tradition, at least for the Meccan period, in Sinai, "Qur'anic Monotheism and the Meccan Israelites."

I will begin with a close reading of Q 43:63–65, which, in the context of its engagement of the Meccan pagans, constitutes the Qur'an's first portrayal of Jesus as a prophet and legal reformer sent to the Israelites. The Qur'an then reuses the Meccan literary segment formed by its response to the pagans' view of Jesus, in Q 43, in order to develop its image of Jesus in two Medinan passages, Q 3:49 and Q 5:110, which more fully recount Jesus' miracles in the context of his role as partial abrogator of the Torah.<sup>8</sup> Here, the Qur'an responds to both a Jewish and a Christian image of Jesus, as I will seek to illustrate by first reading the Medinan passages within their Qur'anic context, and then in dialogue with late antique Christian and Jewish narratives, especially stemming from the Gospels, the Didascalia Apostolorum, the Clementine Homilies, and the Toledot Yeshu tradition.<sup>9</sup> The Qur'an's subtle and effective textual triangulation presents Jesus as a human prophet who is neither divine nor a magician, yet, along with Moses, a model for all of the Qur'an's prophets and thereby a precursor to Muhammad. I will conclude by revisiting the growing body of evidence that allows us to anchor many aspects of the Toledot Yeshu narratives – though likely none of the extant full versions – in Late Antiquity, long before the date of its earliest textual witnesses.

### Jesus' Wisdom and the Disputes of the Israelites in the Meccan Surah Q 43 al-Zukhruf

Q 43 *Sūrat al-Zukhruf* stems from the Meccan period and testifies to Muhammad's intense dialogue with his Meccan pagan audience. Apparently, the prophet's interlocutors had previously compared "the son of Mary" (*bnū maryam*) to "our gods" (*ālihatunā*), to the former's detriment (Q 43:57–58).<sup>10</sup> The Qur'an, in turn, clarifies that Jesus should by no means be compared to any divinity real or imagined: rather, he was just an "exemplar for the Children of Israel" (*mathalan li-banī isrā'īl*), yet a special one, himself

8 On the chronology of the Qur'an see Sinai, *The Qur'an*, esp. 40–58 and 111–137.

9 The Clementine Homilies and the Didascalia Apostolorum are two Christian texts originally written in Greek and eventually translated into Syriac (only partially attested for the Homilies) that have proven essential for an exploration of the legal and prophetological context of the Qur'an, as I have previously argued in Zellentin, *The Qur'an's Legal Culture* and Zellentin, *Law Beyond Israel*.

10 On the rhetorical strategy of the Qur'an's engagement of the Quraysh in Q 43, see Hussain, *Wisdom in the Qur'an*, 141–73; Saleh, "Meccan Gods, Jesus' Divinity," 92–111; Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity*, 300–305, and the related arguments in Neuwirth, "Imagining Mary – Disputing Jesus," 383–416.



constituting “knowledge of the hour” (*wa-innahū la-‘ilmun li-l-sā‘ati*) (verse 59–61).<sup>11</sup> After a brief warning about Satan’s attempts to keep the Meccans away from the divine truth, the Qur’an then relates for the first time how Jesus addressed the Israelites in a way that is partially common to many of its apostles and prophets and partially unique to Jesus and to Muhammad alone:

- |       |   |   |
|-------|---|---|
| 43:63 | When Jesus came with the clear proofs,<br>he said, “I have certainly come to you<br>with the wisdom,<br>(and) in order to make clear to you some<br>of the things that you differ about.<br>So be wary of God and obey me.” | <i>wa-lammā jā’a ‘isā bi-l-bayyināti<br/>qāla qad ji’tukum bi-l-ḥikmati<br/><br/>wa-li’ubayyina lakum ba’da lladhī<br/>takhtaliḥūna fīhi<br/>fa-ttaqū llāha wa’aṭī’ūn.<br/>Inna llāha huwa rabbī<br/>wa-rabbukum<br/>fa-‘budūhu hādhā širāṭun<br/>mustaqīmūn.<br/>Fa-khtalafa l-aḥzābu min<br/>baynihim<br/>fa-wayḥun li-lladhīna ḡalamū min<br/>‘adhābi yawmin alīm.</i> |
| 43:64 | Indeed God is my Lord and your Lord;<br><br>so worship Him. This is a straight path.”   |   |
| 43:65 | But the factions differed among<br>themselves.<br>So woe to the wrongdoers for the<br>punishment of a painful day.  |   |

The passage then continues with a warning about the eschatological “hour” in verse 66, closing a narrative frame that was opened with Jesus’ presentation as himself constituting “knowledge of the hour” in verse 61. Likewise, Jesus’ insistence to the Israelites that “God is my Lord and your Lord” should be read in response to the Meccan’s attempt to compare Jesus to their own divinities in the preceding verses 57–58: Jesus had made it clear to the Israelites that he is a mere human messenger, the Qur’an argues. Any comparison between the Meccan gods and Jesus is doubly misguided: the gods are mere idols and the son of Mary a mere messenger.<sup>12</sup> What sets Jesus apart is his “wisdom,” a term

11 On the basis of variant reading traditions or the text’s broader logic, most traditional and modern readers reject the most literal understanding of the phrase, namely that Jesus himself constitutes “knowledge of the hour,” see e.g. Hayes, “The Treasury of Prophecy,” 210 note 4, Reynolds, “The Muslim Jesus,” and Neuwirth, “Imagining Mary – Disputing Jesus,” 400. A more satisfying reading is offered by Hussain, who accepts the phrase’s literal meaning and interprets it as the Qur’an’s attempt to overwrite the widely attested Christian theme of Jesus as constituting “knowledge of God,” see Hussain, *Wisdom in the Qur’an*, 155–64.

12 As Neuwirth has noted, verses Q 43:64–65 are likely the basis of the similarly worded rejection of Jesus’ sonship in Q 19 *Sūrat Maryam* 36–37. Here, the same words are added after Jesus’ soliloquy in the cradle, in verses 29–33, see Neuwirth, *The Qur’an and Late Antiquity*, 300–305, and the related arguments in Neuwirth, “Imagining Mary – Disputing Jesus,” and cf. Dye, “Mapping the sources of the Qur’anic Jesus,” 162–63.

that designates an innate, yet God-given sense of natural morality that allows, inter alia, for the correct understanding of divine law.<sup>13</sup> Jesus' wisdom, however, led to the fact that the Israelites began to "differ" as a result of his coming, leading to their split into two factions, one of which became "the Jews" and the other "the Christians."<sup>14</sup> Their "differing" focused on Jesus' messianic persona as much as on his abrogation of the Sabbath and of some food laws through his "wisdom," which, as the Medinan Qur'an will indicate, is equivalent to "the Gospel."<sup>15</sup>

Every single element of Jesus' words in verses Q 43:63–64 will be repeated and expanded upon in the later, Medinan retellings of Jesus' coming in Q 3 and Q 5, as we will see below.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, we must take note that the Meccan passage about Jesus in Q 43 shares much with the Qur'an's depiction of the "coming" of many other Arabian and Israelite apostles and prophets. Identifying these broadly shared prophetological tropes will allow us to set these matters aside for the current inquiry in order to highlight what, exactly, is unique about Jesus in his Meccan and Medinan context, with the latter one prominently featuring his miracles.

A dense web of inner-Qur'anic references in our passage Q 43:63–65 weave it into an overwhelming wealth of both Meccan and Medinan material. Since an analysis of this web would distract from the purpose of this article, a few examples for the way in which the Qur'an uses Jesus in its prophetological discourse must suffice. To begin with Jesus' closing pronouncement, for example, in verse 63, we should note that the statement *fa-ttaqū llāha wa-atī'ūni*, "so be wary of God and obey me," is used as a refrain in the late Meccan surah Q 26, and is here uttered verbatim by, respectively, Noah (verses 108 and 110), Hūd, the apostle to the 'Ād (verses 126 and 131), Šālīḥ, the apostle to the Thamūd (verses 144 and 150), and then once by Lot (verse 163) and once by Shu'ayb, the apostle to the inhabitants of Aykah (i.e. the Midianites, verse 179). Hence, Jesus' closing command to the Israelites in Q 43:63 teaches us much about the way in which the Meccan surahs establish a cohesive prophetological model

13 See Hussain, *Wisdom in the Qur'an*, 303–4, and Sinai, *Key Terms of the Qur'an*, 228–33.

14 See Zellentin, "*banū isrā'īl, ahl al-kitāb, al-yahūd wa-l-naṣārā*," esp. 75–82.

15 On Jesus' partial abrogation of Israelite law in the Qur'an see Zellentin, *The Qur'an's Legal Culture*, esp. 155–174, Zellentin, *Law Beyond Israel*, esp. 35–281 and Pregill, *The Golden Calf between Bible and Qur'an*, 412–14; for late antique Jewish and Christian views of Jesus' abrogation of the law see Zellentin, "One Letter *Yud* Shall Not Pass Away from the Law," 204–58.

16 For the sake of brevity, we will only be able to refer in passing to the important Medinan verse Q 61:6, which equally expands Q 43:63–65 by connecting Jesus to Muhammad, foreshadowing Q 3:48, and by explicating the charge of magic against Jesus, foreshadowing Q 5:110.

that portrays Arabian next to Israelite prophets. Yet Jesus' command to "be wary of God and obey me" may tell us nothing unique about his role in particular.<sup>17</sup> Given the relative chronology of the surahs, however, it is not inconceivable that the Qur'an employs Jesus as the type on which all other prophets are modelled.<sup>18</sup>

The same holds true, generally, for the way in which Q 43:63 describes Jesus as having "come" with "clear proofs" (*jā'a. ... bi-l-bayyināti*), a concept immediately repeated when he then addresses the Israelites by stating that "I have certainly come to you with the wisdom" (*qad ji'tukum bi-l-ḥikmati*). Jesus' repeated "coming" (ultimately going back to Matt. 5:17 and serving as a key marker of his literary mission throughout late antique Jewish and Christian literature) highlights his foundational prophetological role.<sup>19</sup> The "coming" of the prophets, which the Qur'an depicts by using the highly frequent and almost interchangeable verbs *atā* and *jā'a*, is the most basic way by which it describes the mission of many of its apostles and prophets. The prophets bring "clear proofs," *bayyināt* (sg. *bayyina*), which serve the essential purpose of clarifying God's message to groups of humans or to humanity as a whole; these proofs are mainly verbal yet include supernatural ones.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, the wording of Q 43:63, that a messenger "came with clear proofs," is commonplace in a number of late Meccan surahs that focus on Arabian prophets, and also occurs in a few Medinan ones that focus on Israelite prophets who bring a variety of textual "proofs":

- In this vein, the verses Q 7:101, Q 10:13 and 74, Q 30:9 and 47 and Q 35:25, for example, just like verse Q 43:63 about Jesus, combine the verb *jā'a*, "to come," with the expression *bi-l-bayyināti*, "clear proofs" (see also Q 64:6), describing a series of anonymous messengers.

17 Importantly, the Qur'an's "Arabian" prophets fade into the background in the Medinan period. On the Qur'an's prophetology more broadly, see Goudarzi, "The Second Coming of the Book" and Griffith, "Script, Text, and the Bible in Arabic," 131–56.

18 The role of typology in the Qur'an has been explored in a 2015 conference titled "Typology – Strategies of Reenactment and Fulfillment in the Milieu of the Qur'an and its Exegesis"; Islam Dayeh and Angelika Neuwirth are currently preparing the proceedings for publication. On Jesus' particular role as a prophet in the Qur'an, see note 1 above. Zishan Ghaffar has alerted me to the fact that Thomas J. O'Shaughnessy considers Q 43:64 (and its many parallels) to be based on John 20:17, see O'Shaughnessy, "The Qur'anic 'My Lord and Your Lord' Verses," 273–80.

19 Note that both verbs *atā* and *jā'a*, when concatenated with *bi-*, can equally be translated as "to come with," in the sense of "to bring," see Ambros and Procházka, *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic*, 19–20 and 65. On the usage of "coming" in late antique Jewish and Christian literature see note 15 above.

20 See Sinai, *Key Terms of the Qur'an*, 149–58, as well as Stewart, "Mubīn and Its Cognates in the Qur'an," 115–56.

- Likewise, the late Meccan verse Q 14:9 relates that prophets “came with clear proofs” to the “people of Noah, and ‘Ād, and Thamūd,” a list to which the Medinan verse Q 9:70 adds “the people of Abraham and the inhabitants of Midian and the towns that were overturned.”<sup>21</sup>
- The late Meccan verse Q 29:39 states that Moses, in his role as a prophet to the Egyptians, “came with clear proofs” to Korah, Pharaoh and Hāmān, whereas the late Meccan verses Q 40:28 and 34 also mention Moses’ as well as Joseph’s “coming” to the Egyptians (see also *ibid*, verses 22, 50 and 83).<sup>22</sup>
- A few Medinan verses then transfer the same language of “coming with clear proofs” to other Israelite prophets besides Jesus: in Q 2:92, for example, Moses thus came with clear proofs to the Israelites, who still took up the Calf in his absence (see also Q 4:153, Q 20:72, Q 29:39, and Q 40:28), and in Q 5:32 and Q 3:183–184, unnamed apostles thus came to the Israelites in the past.<sup>23</sup>

In light of these examples, to which adjacent ones could be adduced with ease, it may not be an exaggeration to say that Jesus’ words in Q 43:63 (alongside its retellings in Q 3 and Q 5), describing his “coming with clear proofs,” constitutes a fundamental expression of the Qur’an’s prophetological model, and as such would not set Jesus’ mission apart from that of any other apostle. Again, however, in light of the relative chronology of the surahs, it would seem that Jesus here forms the type, and all later Israelite and Arabian prophets the antitype conceived of in his image. Notably, the Meccan Jesus, while himself *constituting* “knowledge of the hour” as discussed above, performs no miracle other than bringing divine proof; it is only in its Medinan retellings of Jesus’ mission that the Qur’an explicates Jesus’ supernatural deeds. While the Qur’an expands Jesus’ role as offering a series of unique miracles, elsewhere reserved for the realm of God alone, these wonders also have a specific history in Jewish and Christian narratives about Jesus. Understanding the Qur’an’s portrayal of Jesus’ miracles first within its own framework of references, and secondarily against the broader historical background, as I hold it intended its original audience to do, significantly sharpens its message to Jews, to Christians, and to those pagans that equally knew about the competing late antique Jesus narratives.

21 The literature on the so-called “punishment stories” in the Qur’an is reviewed in Stewart, “Wansbrough, Bultmann, and the Theory of Variant Traditions in the Qur’ān,” 29–34.

22 On the Qur’an’s distinctive version of these stories see Sinai, “Inheriting Egypt,” 198–214.

23 Many of these unnamed messengers to the Israelites, according to the Qur’an, suffer greatly at their hands, in line with Jewish and Christian narrative precedent, see Hawting, “Killing the Prophets and Stoning the Messengers” and Reynolds, “On the Description of the Jews as ‘Killers of the Prophets’ in the Qur’ān.”

### Jesus' Miracles in the Medinan Surah Q 3 *Āl 'Imrān*

The Medinan passage Q 3 *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān* 48–53 dramatically expands the Meccan passage Q 43:63–65. Hence, even if their subject matter does not directly concern us here, it is important to note that the prequel and sequel of Q 3:48–53 equally engage aspects of the prequel and sequel of Q 43:63–65:

- Q 3:48–53, for example, is preceded by the narrative of Mary's birth (verses 35–41) and itself constitutes part of the annunciation of Jesus (verses 42–51). This central Qur'anic narrative, with parallels in the Meccan surahs Q 16, Q 21, Q 23 and the Medinan surahs Q 3, Q 4, Q 5, and Q 66, constitutes a dramatic expansion of what may well be implied by the briefest of phrases "son of Mary," in Q 43:57.<sup>24</sup>
- The sequel of Q 3:48–53, in turn, in verses 54–55, relates the Israelites "plotting" against Jesus, followed by God raising him towards Himself (also paralleled in the Medinan passage Q 4:157–58 about the death of Jesus). The culmination of this narrative sequel, God's warning to the Israelites, in Q 3:55, that at the end of days "I will judge between you (*fa-aḥkumu baynakum*) concerning that about which you used to differ" (*fī-mā kuntum fīhi takhtalifūn*), once again constitutes an elaboration of the conclusion of the Meccan Jesus narrative in Q 43. Here, we learned that upon Jesus' coming, the Israelites "differed ... among themselves" (*fa-khtalafa ... min baynihim*), followed by a warning about their fate on judgement day (Q 43:65, paralleled in Q 19:37); Q 3:54–55, in turn, emphasizes the result of the Israelites' "differing" on "judgment day" and, through the narrative of Jesus' ascension, connects his coming to this event.<sup>25</sup>

Both the prequel and the sequel of Q 3:48–53 can therefore already be understood as an elaboration of an emerging central theme, itself first expressed in Q 43:63–65: the disputes among the Israelites that arose with Jesus' coming. In Q 3, we learn that these disputes concerned all aspects of Jesus' life, mission, and legal teaching, and will last until Judgment Day; they equally extended to the role of Jesus' mother Mary, and to the narratives concerning Jesus' ascension. With this, we can turn to the Medinan retelling of Jesus' coming in Q 3, which focuses on the legal implication of the dispute of the Israelites and

24 On these narratives, see e.g. Muna Tatari and Klaus von Stosch, *Mary in the Qur'an* as well as note 10 above.

25 The "ascension" of Jesus figures prominently in both Jewish Christian literature, albeit to opposite means, see Reynolds, "The Muslim Jesus" and Anthony, *Toledot Yesu and the End of Jesus' Earthly Mission in the Qur'an*. On the relationship of Q 19 and Q 43 see note 12 above.

on the interpretation of Jesus' miracles. I highlight repeated key terms and phrases by using *italics* in the English, and *roman* in the transliterated Arabic:

- 48 And (God) will teach (Jesus) the  
Scripture and the wisdom  
and the *Torah* and the Gospel,  
49 and (Jesus will be) an apostle to the  
Children of Israel,  
(and Jesus will declare,) "*I have*  
*certainly come to you with a sign from*  
*your Lord:*  
I will create for you out of clay the  
likeness of a bird, then I will breathe  
into it, and it will become a bird,  
*by God's leave*  
And I heal the blind and the leper and I  
revive the dead,  
*by God's leave*  
And I prophecy to you<sup>P</sup> what you eat  
and what you store in your houses.  
There is indeed a *sign* in that for you,  
should you be faithful.  
50 and (I will be) confirming that which is  
before me of the *Torah*,  
and to make lawful for you<sup>P</sup> some of  
what was forbidden to you.  
*I have come to you with a sign from your*  
*Lord;*  
so be wary of God and obey me.  
51 Indeed God is my Lord and your Lord;  
so worship Him. This is a straight path."  
52 And when Jesus sensed their repudia-  
tion, he said,  
'Who will be my helpers toward God?'  
The Disciples said, 'We will be God's  
helpers.  
We have faith in God,  
and bear witness that we are *muslimūn*  
53 Our Lord, we believe in what You have  
sent down, and we follow the apostle,  
so write us among the witnesses.'
- Wa-yu'allimuhu*  
*l-kitāba wa-l-ḥikmata*  
*wa-l-tawrāta wa-l-injīl.*  
*Wa-rasūlan ilā banī isrā'īla*  
  
*annī qad ji'tukum bi-āyatin min*  
*rabbikum*  
  
*annī akhluqu lakum mina l-tīni*  
*ka-hay'ati l-ṭayri fa-anfukhu fīhi*  
*fā-yakūnu ṭayran*  
*bi-idhni llāhi*  
*wa-ubrī'u l-akmaha wa-l-abraṣa wa-uḥyi*  
*l-mawtā*  
*bi-idhni llāhi*  
*wa-unabbī'ukum bi-mā ta'kulūna wa-mā*  
*taddakhirūna fī buyūtikum*  
*inna fī dhālika la-āyatan lakum in kun-*  
*tum mu'minīn.*  
*Wa-muṣaddiqan li-mā bayna yadayya*  
*mina t-tawrāti*  
*wa-li-uḥilla lakum ba'ḍa lladhī ḥurrima*  
*'alaykum*  
*wa-ji'tukum bi-āyatin min rabbikum*  
  
*fa-ttaqu llāha wa-aṭī'ūni.*  
*Inna llāha rabbi wa-rabbukum*  
*fa-'budūhu hādhā širāṭun mustaqīm.*  
*Fa-lammā aḥassa 'isā minhumu l-kufra*  
  
*qāla man anṣārī ilā llāhi*  
*qāla l-ḥawāriyyūna naḥnu anṣāru llāhi*  
  
*āmannā bi-llāhi*  
*wa-shhad bi-annā muslimūn.*  
*Rabbanā āmannā bi-mā anzalta*  
*wa-ttaba'nā l-rasūla*  
*fā-ktubnā ma'a l-shāhidīn.*

The passage Q 3:48–53 as a whole, just as its prequel and sequel, should be understood as a dramatization of the Meccan narrative in Q 43. The Medinan retelling repeats many of the elements of the Meccan version either verbatim or with slight alterations in order to create a similar core narrative, with a few

important additions that lead to the Qur'an's fuller portrayal of Jesus' mission as both confirming and abrogating law based on his wisdom, now expanded through "the Gospel," confirmed by Jesus' miracles.<sup>26</sup>

In the Medinan retelling in Q 3:50–51, Jesus ends his initial address to the Israelites with the words "so be wary of God and obey me. Indeed God is my Lord and your Lord; so worship Him. This is a straight path," the very phrase we encountered in Q 43:63–64 (paralleled in Q 19:36–37). Jesus' subordinate relationship to God, as well as his apostolic authority, thus remains firmly in the focus of the Medinan retelling of Jesus' coming; both aspects inform the passage as a whole by establishing how God gave Jesus the authority to amend the law He gave to the Israelites, and how Jesus became the founder of an apostolic community endorsed by the Qur'an, in principle.

The Medinan retelling expands Jesus' "coming" with "wisdom in order to make clear to you some of the things that you differ about," as it was described in Q 43:63, in ways that were indicated only fleetingly in the Meccan verses. Whereas Q 43 simply posits the reality of Jesus' "wisdom," Q 3:48 now clarifies that it was God who taught (*wa-yu'allimuhu*) Jesus the Scripture (*al-kitāb*) and the wisdom (*al-ḥikmah*), the Torah (*al-tawrāh*) and the Gospel (*al-'injīl*). This rephrasing serves three purposes.

- First, in line with Q 61:6, Q 3:48 again connects Jesus to Muhammad, who is at one point announced as an Abrahamite messenger whom God will equally "teach ... the Book and wisdom" (*wa-yu'allimuhumu l-kitāba wa-l-ḥikmata*, Q 2:129), and who will in turn "teach Scripture and wisdom" (*wa-yu'allimukumu l-kitāba wa-l-ḥikmata*) to the Meccan pagans (Q 2:151, see also Q 3:164 and Q 4:113).
- Second, the verse apparently expands the purview of Jesus' mission beyond the implementation of "wisdom" to include not only "the Scripture," but also "the Torah and the Gospel" as well.
- Third, the verse thereby prefigures Jesus' abrogation and confirmation of Torah through the Gospel that will be explicated in Q 3:50, thereby forming a legal frame around the miracles listed in verse 49.

In order to understand the relationship of Scripture and wisdom to the Torah and the Gospel, we should note the parallelism the Qur'an creates between "Scripture and wisdom" on the one hand and "the Torah and the Gospel" on the other: our surah, indeed, states that God teaches Jesus Scripture, i.e. the Torah,

26 On the Qur'an's notion of "the Gospel" see Sinai, *Key Terms of the Qur'an*, 103–7 and Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, 54–126.

and wisdom, i.e. the natural morality innate to the Gospel. The two pairs have very similar, if not identical referents.<sup>27</sup>

This insight allows us to focus on the relationship between the Torah and the Gospel, or more specifically between the Torah and Jesus, as our passage spells out in its legal climax, verse Q 3:50. Here, Jesus announces that he will be “confirming that which is before me of the Torah (*wa-muṣaddiqan li-mā bayna yadayya mina t-tawrāti*), and to make lawful for you, some of what was forbidden to you” (*wa-li-’uḥilla lakum ba’da lladhī ḥurrima ‘alaykum*; see also Q 61:6). I suggest that the “confirmation” of the Torah through the Gospel simply parallels the “confirmation” of Scripture through wisdom, which includes the abrogation of some legal provisions. It is important to note that Q 3:50 constitutes a conceptually stable yet lexically divergent rephrasing of Jesus’ statement to the Israelites in Q 43:63, that he came to “make clear to you some of the things that you differ about.” While the retelling of Q 43:63 in Q 3:50 leaves only a single word, “some” (*ba’da*), in its place, a careful contextual reading of the passage shows that Jesus’ confirmation and abrogation of the Torah remains an attempt to “clarify” to the Israelites “some of the things they differ” about, mainly regarding the food laws and the Sabbath.<sup>28</sup>

Now the idea that God repeatedly calls for a *muṣaddiqan li-mā bayna yadayhi*, of “a confirmation of what was before it,” or, more literally, “what is in between its hands,” is a central Qur’anic concept. The idea is already prominent in a few Meccan suras, where the phrase tends to describe the relationship of the Qur’an to the Torah given to Moses, as specified in Q 35:31, Q 46:12 and 30, and in Q 6:92. It is clear that the Qur’an understands itself as reaffirming, for the Qur’anic community, the vast majority of the laws it understands the Israelites initially to have received from God. The same idea, that God’s revelation to Muhammad “confirms” previous revelation, is equally expressed in the Medinan passage Q 2:97. Other Medinan surahs broaden the concept of “confirmation” in order to include the way in which Jesus and the Gospel “confirm” the Torah by partial abrogation just like Muhammad and the Qur’an, in turn, will “confirm” both Moses and Jesus, both the Torah and the Gospel.<sup>29</sup>

27 This has been astutely observed by Hussain, in dialogue with classical exegesis, in Hussain, “Wisdom in the Qur’an,” 284–85, see already Muqātil, *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 3:800, and the previous note.

28 See note 14 above.

29 On the Qur’an’s concept of “confirmation” of previous revelation see Sinai, *Key Terms of the Qur’an*, 467–70, for late antique precedents, see note 15 above.



Jesus' miraculous "signs" in Q 3:49 prepare the audience for the "sign" of his "confirmation of the Torah" in verse 50. The impression may hence arise that the Qur'an recounts the natural miracles in Q 3:49 – which were completely absent in Q 43 – in order to legitimize Jesus' legal intervention. While this certainly is the case to a degree (as a Syriac Christian precedent to this type of reasoning in the Didascalia Apostolorum discussed below will reconfirm), a closer analysis shows that in effect, we are rather dealing with two types of miracles, one physical and one textual, which actually reinforce each other by pointing to Jesus' divine legitimization for both of them.

A focus on the passages' internal repetitions guides the way towards this conclusion. In Q 3:50, Jesus closes the announcement of the partial confirmation and partial abrogation of the Torah by repeating verbatim the purpose of his coming with which he already opened his speech and introduced his miracles in verse 49: *annī qad jī'tukum bi-āyatin min rabbikum*, "I have come to you with a sign from your Lord." The repeated Median phrase creates a narrative frame that fuses and develops two elements that marked the way Jesus' "coming" was twice described in Q 43:63, as discussed above. Jesus' "coming," hence, is the focus of the passage in Q 3:48–53 as well, and the extraordinary fact that he himself announces his mission to the Israelites is presented in even sharper profile. The verbatim repetition of Jesus' announcement of his "coming" in Q 3:49 and 50, and the slight change from "clear proofs" (*bayyināt*) to "signs" (*āyāt*, in line with Q 61:6), moreover, develops the nature of Jesus' means of prophetic authentication and creates a narrative frame around two types of "signs" that mark the Qur'an, one concerning God's creation, and one His revealed guidance.

The Qur'anic Arabic term *āyah*, "sign" namely, can denote textual segments of revelation – including normative guidance – as much as cosmic, historical, and miraculous signs.<sup>30</sup> The underlying unifying logic of this protean usage, which in many ways reaches back to the Hebrew Bible and to its Jewish and especially its Christian interpretations, is that God has created both the physical world and Scripture in a way that the former and the latter can function as confirmatory signs for each other.<sup>31</sup> In Q 3:49–50, the two types of Jesus' "signs" – miraculously confirming his status as a prophet and legally amending the Torah – are thus closely interlinked, the former ones setting the stage for the latter one.<sup>32</sup>

30 See Sinai, *Key Terms of the Qur'an*, 118–128.

31 See Decharneux, *Creation and Contemplation*, 43–50.

32 Accordingly, the phrase closing the list of Jesus' miracles, *inna fī dhālika la-āyatan lakum*, "there is indeed a sign in that for you, should you be faithful" in Q 3:49, elsewhere in a

Jesus' *āyah* in verse Q 3:50, indeed, consists of his confirmation and partial abrogation of the Torah. The term *āyah* in this verse should perhaps be translated as "normative guidance."<sup>33</sup> The *āyāt* Jesus brings from "your Lord" in verse 49 are of a different nature, constituting "miracles" in the sense of temporarily suspending natural conditions. Q 3:49, accordingly, describes the miracles performed by Jesus, besides his speaking from the cradle, as mentioned in the prequel (in Q 3:46): the creation and vivification of clay birds, the healing of the blind and of the leper, the revival of the dead, and the prophecy regarding "what you eat and what you store in your houses." If considered in detail, Jesus' miracles here give manifold proof of his status as an apostle that will also legitimate the "sign" of his legal interventions. Indeed, Q 3:49–50 portrays Jesus as performing tasks usually reserved to the Creator and Lawgiver alone.<sup>34</sup> A close reading of verse 49 illustrates how far this affinity goes:

- *I will create for you.* God alone is the creator of the world and its animals; the verb *khalaqa*, exceedingly common in the Qur'an, elsewhere describes God's actions. Jesus' phrasing, *annī akhluqu lakum*, "I will create for you," moreover, strongly evokes the promise to Mary just a few verses earlier, that God *yakhluqu mā yashā'u*, "will create whatever He wants" (Q 3:47, see also Q 5:17–18).
- *out of clay.* Jesus' announcement, *annī akhluqu lakum mina l-ṭīni*, "I will create for you out of clay," most closely resembles God's announcement to the angels, *innī khāliqun basharan min ṭīnin*, "I am about to create a human being out of clay" in Q 38:71; on God's creation of humans from clay see also Q 6:2, Q 7:12, Q 17:61, Q 23:12, Q 32:7, Q 37:11 and Q 38:76.
- *the likeness of a bird ... and it will become a bird.* Jesus' creation of *ka-hay'ati l-ṭayri*, "the likeness of a bird," closely recalls the way in which God shows Abraham how He gives life to the dead by vivifying four dedicated birds (*ṭayr*) in Q 2:260.
- *then I will breathe into it.* Jesus' announcement that he will *anfukhu fīhi*, "breathe into it," closely resembles the way in which God describes how He in turn had created Jesus, *fa-naḥakhnā fīhā min rūḥinā*, "We breathed into it,"

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Medinan surah describes the Ark of the Covenant and God's *Sakina*, a parallel that once again links Jesus to Moses, as well as to God himself (see Q 2:248).

33 Sinai, *Key Terms of the Qur'an*, 128.

34 Jesus' proximity to God in these verses has previously been discussed by authors such as Robinson (see idem, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, 155) and Hussain (see idem, *Wisdom in the Qur'an*, 162), yet had long been the subject of Muslim Christian polemics as evidenced, e.g., in the anonymous *Letter from Cyprus* and Ibn Taymiyya's *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, see Pink, "Ibn Taymiyyah, the Bible and the Qur'an," 123–39.

- i.e. into Mary's chaste private parts, "Our spirit" (Q 21:91, see also Q 66:12).<sup>35</sup> The proximity extends to God's creation of humans from clay, which He brought to life by having *wa-nafakhtu fihi min rūhī*, "breathed into him of My Spirit," Q 38:72, see also Q 15:29.
- *And I heal*. Healing, typically denoted by the verb *yashfī*, is usually God's domain (Q 26:80), yet can also derive from the use of His twofold creation, such as the Qur'an (Q 17:82) or honey (Q 16:69). The verb here employed, *abra'a* (in form IV), in the apparent meaning of "healing someone" is unique to our passage Q 3:49 (and its parallel in Q 5:110), yet once again the root *br'* – in other verbal forms, with diverging meanings – tends to describe God's intervention in His creation, for example in the statement in Q 57:22 that "no affliction visits the earth or yourselves but it is in a Scripture before We create it" (*min qabli an nabra'ahā*, in form I), see also Q 2:54 and Q 59:24.<sup>36</sup>
  - *the blind and the leper*. The nouns *akmaha* and *abraṣa* are again unique to Q 3:49 (and its parallel in Q 5:110); the regular term for a blind person in the Qur'an is *a'mā* (see e.g. Q 48:17 and Q 24:61).<sup>37</sup>
  - *and I revive the dead*. Jesus' phrase, *uhyi l-mawtā*, "I will revive the dead," can again be tied to Abraham's question to God, preceding the miracle of the birds, *kayfa tuhyi l-mawtā*, "how You give life to the dead" (Q 2:260). Indeed, reviving the dead is one of the central miracles attributed to God in the Qur'an, with dozens of attestation of the phrase such as *wa-annahū*

35 Dye aptly notes that the Qur'an successively relegates the agency of God's Spirit with respect to the creation of Adam and Jesus, see Dye, "Mapping the Sources of the Qur'anic Jesus," 168–69. It should be noted in this context that the Clementine Homilies, which see Jesus as a son of God at the same time as cautioning against claiming him to be divine, argue that anyone inspirited by the "breath of God" could plausibly argued to be divine, chief of all Jesus, see Clementine Homilies 16:15–16, see also note 60 below. The Qur'an's focus away from the presence of God's spirit observed by Dye may thus have a broader context.

36 The passage's usage of the root *bry*, equally attested in the sense of "health" in Hebrew, distinctly recalls the usage of the same root's *af'el* form in Jewish Palestinian and Babylonian Aramaic (rather than in Syriac, as Stefanie Rudolf has pointed out to me), see Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period*, 112 and idem, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods*, 244; see also the next note and note 53 below.

37 The root the Qur'an here employs, *kmh*, is well attested in Syriac as well as in Christian Palestinian and Samaritan Aramaic, but not in Hebrew, Jewish Palestinian or Babylonian Aramaic, see Sokoloff and Brockelmann, *A Syriac Lexicon*, 629–30. Since the Qur'an elsewhere employs different words to denote the blind and tends to employ loanwords and hapax legomena with higher frequency when engaging Jewish and Christian traditions, it may use the present Aramaisms as a stylistic device to indicate that it here engages an Israelite tradition, see also the previous note and note 53 below.

*yuhyi l-mawtā*, "He gives life to the dead," see e.g. Q 22:6, Q 42:9, Q 75:40 and Q 77:26.

- *And I prophecy to you<sup>P</sup>*. Jesus' phrase *unabbī'ukum*, "I will prophecy to you," clearly marks him as a divinely apportioned messenger, connecting him to all previous apostles since God first teaches Adam and then instructs him to "prophecy for them" (*anbī'hum*, i.e. to the angels, in Q 2:33). Again, the fact that Jesus himself announces his prophecy is exceptional and connects him to God and His messenger: similar wording is elsewhere uttered by God (see e.g. Q 29:8, Q 31:15, see also Q 26:221) and by Muhammad (see e.g. Q 3:15, 5:60, and Q 22:72). The most common usage of the adjacent phrase "He will prophecy to you," it should be noted, depicts God's eschatological "prophecy" announcing their past deeds to the resurrected humans on judgment day. The portrayal of Jesus, hence, evokes phrases such as "He," i.e. God, "will inform you what you used to do," *fa-yunabbī'ukum bi-mā kuntum ta'malūna* (Q 5:105, see also Q 6:60 and Q 9:94), in line with Jesus acting as an eschatological witness elsewhere in the Qur'an (see Q 4:159, and cf. Q 5:117).
- *what you eat and what you store in your houses*. While the expression *fī buyūtikum*, "in your houses," is not uncommon (see e.g. Q 3:154, Q 10:87, Q 16:80, Q 24:17), the miracle of Jesus' prophecy instructing the Israelites "what they eat" (*bi-mā ta'kulūna*) and "what they store" has no clear precedent in the Qur'an; a possible reference to an eschatological reckoning for the Israelite's unlawful eating and storing of Manna will be explored below.<sup>38</sup> Jesus' prophecy does vaguely evoke the way in which the Qur'an portrays Joseph as instructing the Egyptians what they will eat (*mimmā ta'kulūna*) and what they will *preserve* for the lean years to come; the respective passage in *Sūrat Yūsuf*, however, uses rather different imagery and vocabulary (see Q 12:47–48). Regardless, if read alongside the Joseph story, Jesus' "sign" could be read predictively: he "prophecies" to the Israelites how they will

38 One could certainly read the Israelites' "eating" in an eschatological way, e.g. along with Q 4:10, "they eat fire into their belies" (*ya'kulūna fī buṭūnihim nāran*); for an eschatological use of "storage" see the next note. Alternatively, another Qur'anic passage, Q 24:61, equally connects the phrase *buyūtikum*, "your houses," to the phrase *an ta'kulū*, "if you are eating," reminiscent of Jesus' prophecy in Q 3:49 of what you will "eat ... in your houses" (*bi-mā ta'kulūna ... fī buyūtikum*, if such were the intended meaning). Intriguingly, the same verse Q 24:61 also evokes "the blind" (*al-a'mā*) alongside "the lame" (*al-a'raj*) and "the ill" (*al-marīḍ*), and is given so that "God clarifies the signs to you"<sup>P</sup> (*yubayyinu llāhu lakumu l-āyāt*), offering an additional thematic affinity to Jesus' "signs" of "healing" "the blind" and "the leper" in Q 3:49, see also notes 36 and 37 above. Yet the verse Q 24:61 regulates commensality between healthy and sickly members of the community (akin to Q 48:17) and bears hardly any lexical or semantic explanatory potential for Jesus' final miracle in Q 3:49.

sustain themselves, just as Joseph ensured the availability of food in Egypt, and just as God provides for the Israelites in the desert (see Q2:57, Q 7:160, and Q 20:80) or for humanity more broadly (see e.g. Q 4:85, Q 6:14, Q26:79, Q 34:15, Q41:10, Q 43:32 and Q 51:57).<sup>39</sup> By contrast, if read in light of the passage's narrative framing – Jesus' confirmation and abrogation of the Torah in verse 50, already introduced in verse 48 – it could even be read prescriptively: Jesus "prophecies" the partial abrogation of the Israelite food laws, which will govern what they store in their houses. Both readings, and even their combination, seem contextually defensible, and both, we will see, can be linked to late antique narratives about Jesus.<sup>40</sup>

The Qur'an indeed presents Jesus as performing actions that make him comparable to God's creation of Adam at the beginning of human history, to God's sustenance of humanity throughout their life by maintaining their health, to His resurrection of the dead after the end of it, and to either the eschatological judgement (for unlawfully having eaten and stored Manna?) or to God's role as a law-giver.<sup>41</sup> The Qur'an emphasizes that Jesus acted "with God's leave" (*bi-idhni llāhi*), which reinforces Jesus' own emphasis that "God is my Lord and your Lord; so worship Him," in verse Q 3:51. The phrase "with God's leave" is

39 The Qur'anic verb *iddakhara*, "to store," common in later Arabic, is once again a hapax in the Qur'an, though attested in ancient South Arabian epigraphy (see Stein, *Die altsüdarabischen Minuskelschriften auf Holzstäbchen aus der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek in München*) and in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry (see e.g. 'Adī b. Zayd, *Diwān*, 61), to which Nadja Abuhussein has drawn my attention). The poem of 'Adī b. Zayd, is heavily invested in Christian imagery ("monk," "church") and the "storing" here describes the deeds accumulated for an eschatological reckoning. The Qur'an, however, firmly tethers the "storing" that occurs to actual food, a usage closer to the verb's quotidian ancient South Arabian usage.

40 The Qur'an uses the verb *nabba'a bi-*, "to prophecy something," once before with reference to a (putative) body of food laws that are then abrogated, namely the Meccan ones. In Q 6:142–143, the Qur'an commands the Meccans to "eat" (*kulū*) the animals which God provides for them, and then challenges them to "prophecy to me (*nabbiūni*) with knowledge" should their own prohibitions be truthful. The point, here, of course, is that the Meccan food laws lack divine backing; on the Christian context of the Qur'an's antinomian Meccan tendencies see Sinai, "The Qur'an's Dietary Tetralogue," 113–46. Note also that in Q 54:28 the messenger to the Thamūd is instructed to "prophecy to them" (*wanabbi'hum*) how to divide water between themselves and the sacred she-camel.

41 Hussain understands Jesus' miracles in Q 3:49 as tracing the human development from birth to maturity, death, resurrection, and final judgment, which has much to commend it, even if the nature of the resulting parallel between God "informing" humans about their past moral conduct on the Day of Judgement – a very common Qur'anic motif, as noted above – and Jesus "informing" the Israelites about their food would need further explanation, see Hussain, "Wisdom in the Qur'an," 162–163, and see note 39 above on eschatological "storage."

not uncommon in the Qur'an, yet its repetition in the same verse is unique to Jesus.<sup>42</sup> We will see that all of Jesus' miracles which the Qur'an recounts have a vibrant pre-history in late antique Jewish and Christian narratives, with which the Qur'an expects its audience to be at least partially familiar. Before turning to the late antique context of Jesus' miraculous and legal signs, however, a few comments on the Medinan retelling of Jesus' miracles in Q 5:110–115 are in order.

### Jesus' Miracles in Q 5 Sūrat al-Mā'ida

In Q 5:110–115, the Qur'an gives an account of Jesus' miracles that is clearly based on Q 3:46 and 49, using much of the same vocabulary, which Q 5 places in a slightly divergent narrative frame. The narrative shift from Jesus to God that permeates the passage in Q 5, along with the omission of Jesus' prophecy about food, may suggest that Q 3, as the *lectio difficilior*, is the older version.<sup>43</sup>

Q 5 bookends the report of the miracles with a narrative frame that opens, in Q 5:109, with a dramatization of God gathering and questioning of all of his apostles, concluding with their admission of ignorance and their statement that “indeed, You are the Knower of the unseen” (*innaka anta 'allāmu l-ghuyūb*). The same narrative frame then closes – after the passage on Jesus' miracles in Q 5:110–115 here under scrutiny – with God's inquiry as to whether or not Jesus said to the people to take him and his mother as gods (Q 5:116–118). After offering a firm denial of the charge, Jesus, like the other apostles, emphasizes his ignorance and repeats, verbatim, the apostles' statement that “indeed You are the Knower of the unseen” (Q 5:116: *innaka anta 'allāmu l-ghuyūb*).<sup>44</sup> We can thus already see that the passage detailing Jesus' miracles in Q 5 is, even more so than in Q 3, forcefully responding to the danger of taking the account of Jesus' unique powers to be a sign of his divinity. The retelling of Jesus' miracles in Q 5 diverges from Q 3 in several other ways that further reinforce the heightened focus on God's power:

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- 42 The phrase *bi-idhni llāhi*, “with God's leave,” occurs nineteen times in the Qur'an; the usage here is in line with the more general statement that “an apostle may not bring a sign except by God's leave” in Q 13:38 and Q 40:78.
- 43 Whatever the merit of this particular reasoning, Q 5 is generally understood to post-date Q 3, a view shared by Sinai, see note 8 above.
- 44 The Qur'anic concept of God as the knower of *al-ghayb*, the “hidden,” or “unseen” (see also Q 9:78 and Q 34:48) has deep roots both in the pagan Arabian and in the Christian tradition, see Sinai, *Key Terms of the Qur'an*, 541–44.

- In Q 5:110, it is not, as in Q 3:49, Jesus, but God himself who recounts how Jesus was born, how he spoke in the cradle (see Q 3:46) and how He gave him the power to perform the signs in question, already shifting the focus on the narrative towards God.
- In Q 5:110, accordingly, it is not Jesus who portrays the miracles as having occurred “by God’s leave” (*bi-idhni llāhi*), a more common phrase as we have seen above. Rather, it is God Himself who emphasizes that Jesus’ miracles occurred “by my leave” (*bi-idhni*), a rendering of this phrase unique to this verse alone. Moreover, God repeats that he gave His permission not only after the vivification of the bird and after the resurrection of the dead, as in Q 3:49, but already after the creation of the bird from clay and then again, once more, after the healing of the blind and the leper, creating a fourfold repetition that internally structures verse Q 5:110 by means of a recurring refrain in a more heavy-handed way than the twofold repetition we have seen in Q 3:49.
- In Q 5:110, Jesus is described not so much as “reviving” the dead (“and I revive ...” *wa-uḥyi*) but as “bringing” them “forth” (“and when you brought forth ...,” *wa-idh tukhriju*). The substitution of the verbs lessens Jesus’ affinity to God’s often-repeated eschatological role as reviver of the dead during the resurrection (even if the verb “to bring forth,” *akhraja* also once describes God’s actions to vivify both dead land and plausibly humans, see Q 7:57).
- In Q 5:110, we learn of an additional miracle performed not by Jesus but by God Himself, who reminds him of the moment “when I held off the Children of Israel from you” (*wa’idh kafaftu banī isrā’īla ‘anka*). Since the verb *kaffa*, “to hold off, to restrain,” clearly indicates restraint from causing physical harm through violence (Q 4:77, 84, 91 and Q 5:11), the passage here most likely references God’s salvation of Jesus by elevating him when the Israelites “plotted” against him alluded to also in Q 3:54–55 and spelled out in more detail in Q 4:157–158.<sup>45</sup>
- Q 5:110 then inserts the phrase “Yet when he brought them clear proofs, they said, ‘This is clear magic,’” (*‘in hādhā illā siḥrun mubīnun*) already uttered against Jesus in Q 61:6. The charge is a common one against God’s prophets in the Qur’an such as Moses (see Q 27:13); it is, e.g., verbatim levelled against Muhammad in Q 6:7, Q 34:43, and Q 37:15.
- Jesus’ final miracle, described in Q 5:111–114, equally revolves around food, yet rather than predicting to the Israelites “what they eat” (*bi-mā ta’kulūna*) and “store in their houses,” as in Q 3:49, Jesus here heeds a request of his

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45 On the Qur’anic verses and their late antique contexts see note 25 above.

disciples who demand a table from the sky from which they desire to eat (*nurīdu an na'kula*); their willingness to act as witnesses (given unconditionally in Q 3:53 and in Q 61:14) apparently depends on this miracle.

To conclude our reading of Jesus' "natural" miracles, then, we can see that the narratives in Q 3 and Q 5, despite their close connection, follow slightly divergent trajectories: Q 3:49, in line with Jesus' emphasis on his own subservience to God in verse 51, seems addressed to an audience with whom the Qur'an negotiates Jesus' legal role as confirming and abrogating the Torah – the primary addressee here seem to be both, Christians and Jews. The key message regarding Jesus' miracles in Q 3, as in Q 43, seems to be that Jesus is an apostle whose "sign" of a legal intervention is as divinely sanctioned as his supernatural signs. Q 5, by contrast, treats the legal status of Jesus as settled (see Q 5:46–47), thereby freeing up the retelling of Jesus' miracles for a different purpose.<sup>46</sup> Q 5, indeed, places the focus on the speech and actions of God Himself, in my view the hallmarks of a retelling focused on the sovereignty of the Creator; Jesus is thereby already relegated to a more passive position. At the same time, however, Q 5, by introducing the theme of the accusation of magic in verse 110 (in line with Q 61:6), seems again to address not only those who would believe in Jesus' divinity, namely the Christians, but also those who would be likely to ascribe Jesus' miracles to witchcraft, namely the Jews. In light of the inner-Qur'anic reading of Q 3:48–53 and Q 5:110–114, we can now turn to the relationship between the Qur'an's portrayal of Jesus' signs and their late antique Jewish and Christian precedents.

### Jesus' Signs in Late Antiquity

We have seen that Q 3:49 and Q 5:110 introduce Jesus' miracles alongside his confirmation and abrogation of the law, which itself constitutes another sign. Along with speaking in the cradle in Q 3:46 and Q 5:110, Jesus' miracles are the creation and vivification of clay birds, the healing of the blind and the leper, the vivification of the dead, and, lastly, in Q 3:49, the prophetic announcement of what people eat and what they store in their houses, replaced in Q 5 by the miracle of the food on the heavenly table (in verses 111–114). Our understanding of the first and the last miracle in the Qur'an's list – speaking in the cradle and prophecying about food – should primarily be understood within the context

46 On the legal implications of Q 5:44–47 see Zellentin, "What Is 'within Judaism' According to the Quran?," 282–308.



of the Christian tradition and can only secondarily benefit from our present consideration of the Qur'an's engagement of Jewish narratives.

To begin with Jesus' speaking in infancy, we should note that in its original context in Q 19:27–36, this miracle serves to prove the innocence of Mary against the accusation of unchastity; it is followed by the statement that it is not for God "to take a son," clearing Him, as well, as it were, from the charge to have engendered offspring. While the accusations against Mary are a central theme in the New Testament as well as in both the Talmudic and the polemical Jewish traditions about Jesus, the specific image of a baby infant revealing his true father has a clear Christian pedigree.<sup>47</sup> However, neither Q 3 nor Q 5 retain the narrative punchline of Q 19, the infant Jesus speaking as proof of Mary's chastity. In the miracle's Medinan retelling, the focus shifts to the infant Jesus speaking as such. Since the late antique precedents to this motif are both common and rather vague, I will exclude the first miracle from the present consideration.<sup>48</sup>

Jesus' association with food, likewise, is a central theme in the Gospels, and his feeding the multitudes was received both in the Christian and the Jewish tradition, in Toledot Yeshu.<sup>49</sup> Jesus' food miracle according to Q 5:110–116, the table from the sky, has long been associated with Peter's vision in the Book of

47 Perhaps most intriguingly, a comparable narrative of a speaking infant clearing a saint from the charges of both unchastity and fatherhood is associated with the church father Ephrem, in the Syriac version of his life, which dates to the middle of the sixth century CE, see Amar, *The Syriac Vita Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian*, 14 as discussed by Nestor Kavvadas, who points to further parallels in the (earlier) work of Romanos Melodos and Jacob of Serugh, see Kavvadas, "A Talking New-Born (Q 19:30), Aaron's Sister (Q 19:28), Mary Who Is Not God (Q 5:116)," and see already Canart, "Le nouveau-né qui dénonce son père." On Mary's unchastity in the Talmudic and the polemical Jewish traditions about Jesus see Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 15–24, and Anthony, "Toledot Yeshu and the End of Jesus' Earthly Mission in the Qur'an."

48 The fact that newborns can be able to speak and perform tasks is a widespread trope, the Rabbis, for example, suggest that the antediluvian babies would easily assist their mothers in cutting their umbilical cords or battle – and speak – with demons, see *Leviticus Rabbah* 5.1, composed at the turn of the fifth century CE. We should also note that Hippolytus, at the turn of the third century CE, reports that Valentinus claims to have had a vision of an infant claiming "I am the logos," offering another relevant, if somewhat remote precedent for the Qur'anic miracle of the speaking baby Jesus, see Hippolytus, Ref. VI, 40, 2 (ed. Wendland, 173). The speaking Jesus in the Arabic Infancy Gospel, however, seems to post-date the Qur'an, see Gero, "The Infancy Gospel of Thomas," 74.

49 On Jesus feeding the multitudes see e.g. Matt. 14:13–21 and 15:32–39 and the parallels in Mark 6:31–44 and 8:1–9, Luke 19:12–17 and John 6:5–14, see already Ahrens, "Christliches im Qoran," 173. For Toledot Yeshu see note 70 below.

Acts 10, and has alternatively been linked with the Eucharist.<sup>50</sup> The Christian tradition, moreover, associates Jesus with food in three specific ways that could have the potential to help us contextualize and to comprehend the “predictive” and the “prescriptive” reading of the last sign in Q 3:49 already developed above:

- Based on the Gospel of John, Christians often portrayed Jesus as “the bread of life,” and as the antitype of the biblical Manna, the “bread from heaven” (see e.g. John 6:31). The Israelites transgressed God’s commandment to eat, rather than store, the Manna (see Exod. 16), for which the Holy Spirit requited them according to a rabbinic tradition. Jesus may therefore be portrayed as prophetically informing them about this specific misdeed at the eschaton, a plausible – if difficult to substantiate – context for reading of the miracle that would depict Jesus’ role during the eschaton.<sup>51</sup>
- In light of the common linkage between Joseph and Jesus in Syriac literature, one could speculate if the Qur’an understands Jesus’ prophecy regarding food in light of Joseph’s announcement of the way the Egyptians are to eat and preserve their food.<sup>52</sup>
- A parallel to Jesus’ teaching in the Qur’an on “what you eat” and how *not* to store food is found in a prominent passage of the Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 6:25–26 and its parallel, Luke’s Sermon on the Plain.
- As indicated above, Jesus’ (partial) abrogation of the food laws, finally, employs a central role in late antique Jewish and especially Christian literature, a fact which would provide better ways to read Jesus’ final miracle in a prescriptive way.

All four parallels, intriguing as they may be, remain too vague to allow us to answer the question of whether Jesus’ final miracle should be read in its legal

<sup>50</sup> See Goudarzi, “The Eucharist in the Qur’an.”

<sup>51</sup> According to Midrash Tanhuma *Beshallah* 24, another Jewish text whose late antique core is both evident and difficult to reconstruct, the Holy Spirit informs the Israelites about the Manna they have wrongly stored in their tents. The Qur’an mentions the sending of Manna twice by referring to an unspecified sin (see Q 2:57 and Q 7:160) and in a third passage explicates that the Manna comes with specific “bounds therein,” evoking the prohibition of storing Manna in Exod. 16 (see Q 20:80–82); my gratitude to Nadja Abuhussein for suggesting the possible connection between Jesus’ prophecy and Manna in the Qur’an.

<sup>52</sup> Ephrem, for example, understands Joseph’s prediction of the abundance of grain to the everlasting life offered through Jesus as the bread of life, see Heal, “Joseph as a Type of Christ in Syriac Literature,” 43. On the Qur’an’s tendency to “overwrite” such typological readings see Rizk, “The Joseph Story in the Qur’an and in the Syriac Tradition.”

context, in the context of divine provision, or as referencing Jesus' role during the eschaton. I will therefore also bracket last miracle for the present purposes.

The late antique Jewish and especially Christian testimony of Jesus' three remaining miracles – the vivification of birds, his healing, and the resurrection of the dead – is overwhelmingly rich, and even the broadest of descriptions would surpass the scope of this study. In its stead, we will first briefly look at the combination of Jesus' role as a lawgiver with a discourse on miracles in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*. Then, more significantly, we will consider the miracles found in Q 3:48–50 and Q 5:110 as *lists* both in the context of the Jewish and the Christian Jesus traditions. In short, Jesus' agglomerative announcement of miracles goes back to the synoptic Gospels themselves, which in turn build on the prophecies of Isaiah. The emphasis on the divine authority with which Jesus performed his miracles, and more specifically the combination of a list of signs with a comment regarding God's authority, is an element shared between the Qur'an and the Clementine Homilies. The one source whose cognates of Jesus' "miracles" stand closest to the Qur'an is the Toledot Yeshu tradition. Despite the proximity of the Qur'an to late antique narratives, however, there are hardly any signs of literary "dependence" on written or even on oral sources of any sort – even in the cases where the Qur'an seems to use Aramaicisms to describe Jesus' miracles, the words used in the Gospels and in their Jewish and Christian interpretation differ. Instead, I surmise that the Qur'an responds to an environment formed by oral discussion, into which it inserts itself forcefully by retooling shared themes and motifs according to its own prophetological paradigms.<sup>53</sup>

The *Didascalia Apostolorum* is an essential text in our attempt to situate the Qur'an within late antique Christian culture more broadly, as I have previously sought to illustrate.<sup>54</sup> Comparable to Q 3:48–50, the *Didascalia* equally reads Jesus' confirmation and partial abrogation of the Torah (as the text understands

53 The Qur'an uses two Aramaicisms, based on the roots *bry* and *kmh*, when describing Jesus "healing" "the blind," see notes 36 and 37 above. The Peshitta translation of the Gospels, as well as the Jewish and Christian reports of Jesus' miracles as discussed below, by contrast, use the Hebrew and Aramaic roots *rpy/h* and *'sy* to depict Jesus' acts of healing, and the Hebrew and Aramaic roots *'wr* and *swm / sm'y/h* to depict the blindness of those healed. While the issue requires more attention, the discrepancy indicates that we are not dealing with the Qur'an's literary "dependence" on either the Peshitta or the Toledot Yeshu narrowly defined (and certainly not with its dependence on the extant manuscripts) but with an unrestricted Qur'anic reaction to (likely oral) Jewish and Christian traditions, purposely indicating their Israelite origin through its use of Aramaicisms.

54 See note 9 above.

Jesus' coming in Matt. 5:17) in the context of his miracles, albeit within a diverging narrative and hermeneutical framework:

And again our Saviour, when he cleansed the leper, sent him to the Law (*lwt nmws' shdrh*) and said to him: "Go, show yourself to the high priest, and offer the offerings (*wqrb qwrbn'*) of your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them" (Matt. 8:2–4)" that he might show that He does not abrogate the Law (*dl' shr' nmws'*, Matt. 5:17), but teaches what is the Law and what the second legislation (*tnyn nmws'*). Indeed, he (Jesus) said thus: "I am not come to abrogate the Law nor the prophets, but to fulfil them (*l' tyt d'shr' nmws' wl' nby' l' d'ml' nwn*, Matt. 5:17). The Law therefore is not abrogated (*nmws' hkyl l' mshtr'*), but the second legislation is temporary, and is abrogated (*tnyn nmws' dyn dzbn' hw wmsht'r*).<sup>55</sup>

In the Didascalia, Jesus' healing the leper serves as the narrative backdrop that illustrates the difference between the parts of the Torah that Jesus abrogates and those he leaves intact. The Qur'an encapsulates the same linkage by listing the healing of the leper as one of the two types of "signs" – supernatural and legal – that authenticate each other, similarly reinforcing the partial abrogation of the Torah.<sup>56</sup> Despite the patent literary discrepancy, the affinity in legal argumentation remains clear: both the Qur'an, in Q 3:48–50, and the Didascalia relate Jesus' healing of a leper to his confirmation and abrogation of the Torah. The Didascalia therefor represents an argumentative rather than a literary precedent to the Qur'an's understanding of Jesus' miracles: the Qur'an also portrays Jesus as applying "Scripture" through "Wisdom," i.e. "the Torah" through "the Gospel," making clear to the Israelites what they differ about.

When it comes to the Qur'an's wording, the issue of the agglomeration of miracles in Q 3:48–50 and by Q 5:110 offers a few Christian and Jewish literary pathways that been given little attention in previous scholarship. Matt. 11:5 (along with its close parallel Luke 7:22) offers the best point of departure. In this passage, in the rendering of the Syriac Peshitta, Jesus himself announces

55 Didascalia Apostolorum 26, based on Vööbus, *The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac I–IV, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 401–2 and 407–8, 224 (translation) and 242–243 (text), reflecting Vööbus' emendations. The phrase, "and abrogated," is missing in the Latin, which simply states: "lex ergo indestructibilis, secundatio autem legis temporalis," see Connolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, 219.

56 The Qur'an, of course, does not mention Jesus' endorsement of the purificatory sacrifice in the Jerusalem Temple that was incumbent upon a healed leper (according to Lev. 14:10–32). For both texts, this ritual has lost its relevance following the destruction of the Temple. Note that the parallel of Matt. 8:1–4 and Luke 5:12–16 in Mark 1:40–45 has the healed man disobey Jesus' command. On the historical context of the Gospel narrative see Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death*, 55–68.

that through his work, “the blind see (*smy’ hzyn*), and the lame walk (*whgyr’ mhlkyn*), the lepers are cleansed (*wgrb’ mtdkyn*), and the deaf hear (*whrsh’ shm’yn*), and the dead rise up (*wmyt’ qymyn*) and the poor hope (*wmskn’ mstbryn*).” The Gospel passage, in turn, echoes Scriptural verses from Isaiah such as 35:5–6 (“the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped, then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing with joy”) and 61:1–2 (“because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed”), which Jesus more or less reads out loud in Luke 4:18–19.<sup>57</sup> Matt. 11:5 and Luke 7:22 stand close to the Qur’an: Matthew and Luke, just like Q 3:49, have Jesus *himself* announce his miracles, and in both the Gospels and the Qur’an, Jesus heals the blind *and* the leper *and* resurrects the dead (with the last miracle not named in Isaiah 35). Notably, the Qur’an follows the very same order of signs as do Matthew and Luke, allowing us to suggest that the Qur’anic list of signs, though phrased distinctly, stands in a specific literary tradition, rather than reflecting the vast discourse on Jesus’ miracles more generally.<sup>58</sup>

Another late antique point of departure for Q 3:49 concerns the issue of the divine power through which Jesus performs his miracles. This key element in the Qur’an is already debated in the synoptic Gospels, where Jesus handily turns around the accusation that he is working in collusion with Beelzebul – an occasion which, in the end, allows him to establish his authority (see e.g. Mark 3:22, Matt. 12:24, Luke 11:15, see also John 8:48 and 10:20).<sup>59</sup> Yet the specific combination of the list of Jesus’ miracles with a brief reference to God’s authority we find in the Qur’an echoes not only the Gospels but more specifically so a passage in the Clementine Homilies, a second Christian text that has proven essential for contextualizing the Qur’an, especially regarding Jesus’ status as non-divine prophet in this text.<sup>60</sup> The respective passage has been preserved

57 Note that similar lists of miracles also occur in Mandaic texts, as noted by Ahrens, who rightly dismisses them from his considerations based on their difficult dating, see Ahrens, “Christliches im Quran,” 174.

58 On the Qur’an and specific literary Gospel traditions see e.g. Reynolds, “Biblical Turns of Phrase in the Qur’ān,” 45–69.

59 Acts 2:22 specifies that God Himself performed the miracles *through* Jesus, as discussed by Dye, “Mapping the Sources of the Qur’anic Jesus,” 166–167. Especially in light of the close parallel with the Clementine Homilies and the stark counter-narrative in Toledot Yeshu discussed below, I am not persuaded by Dye’s attempt to read the Qur’anic miracles more closely aligned with Acts; it is rather striking that the Qur’anic Jesus remains the author of the miracles, despite their proximity to God’s own creative powers as discussed above.

60 The relevance of this passage for the Qur’an’s portrayal of Jesus has been identified by Hussain, see *idem*, *Wisdom in the Qur’an*, 161. On the importance of the Clementine

in both Greek and in its Syriac translation and proclaims the following about Jesus, here in the latter rendering:

"And in order for it to be believed that he did these things (i.e. announcing the kingdom of God) filled with divinity (*d'lhwt' ml' hw*'), he worked many wonders (*tdmrt'*), signs (*w'twt'*), and portents (*wnys'*) by command alone, as if his authority were from God (*'yk dshwlt'nh mnh d'lh' ytwwhy hw*'). He made the deaf to hear (*ldwg' 'bd dnshmw'n*), the blind to see (*wlsmy' dnhzwn*), and the maimed and the lame to be strengthened (*wlpshyg' wlhgyr' dnshtrrwn*). And he drove out every infirmity (*wkl kwrhn rdp*), and the dead who were brought near to him rose (*wmyt' d'tqr bw lh qmw*), and lepers from afar, by merely seeing him, were healed and cleansed (*wgrb' mn rwhq' blhwd dhz'why 't'syw w'tdkyw*')."<sup>61</sup>

This list of miracles, here (at one point called *'tw't'*, "signs," a Syriac cognate to the Arabic *āyah*, "sign," in Q 3:49) again has Jesus heal the blind *and* the leper *and* resurrecting the dead, i.e., as in the Qur'an, even though the list is somewhat longer and gives a different order than the one we find in the Gospel of Mathew and in the Qur'an. The passage, furthermore, does not have Jesus announce his healings himself. Yet by broaching the central issue of the ultimate origin of the power that allows for these miracles, it stands closer to the Qur'an in a different way than the Matthean original. Just as Q 3:49 and especially Q 5:110, the passage from the Clementine Homilies emphasizes that the miracles are performed "as if his authority were from God" (*'yk dshwlt'nh mnh d'lh'* or, in the Greek, "since he had received authority from God," ὥς παρὰ θεοῦ εἰληφώς τὴν ἐξουσίαν), evoking the Qur'anic phrase "by God's leave" (*bi-idhni llāhi*).<sup>62</sup> Even if the formulation in the Syriac is (purposefully?) more ambiguous than the one in the Qur'an, here again, I would suggest that we are dealing with an argumentative precedent for the Qur'anic passage, as in the case of the Didascalia Apostolorum. In neither case does the Qur'an seem to stand in a specific literary continuity with either Christian text other than perhaps the Gospels. In both cases, moreover, the comparison with the Christian precedents marks both the Qur'an's continuity with late antique legal reasoning as

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Homilies for the Qur'an see notes 9 and 35 above, on the status of Jesus see Clementine Homilies 2:4–6 and 3:11–30 and Zambon, "The True Prophet in the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies," 156–76.

61 Clementine Recognitions 1:6, cited according to Paul de Lagarde, *Clementis Romani Recognitiones syriace*, 5; for the parallel in the Clementine Homilies 1:6, which adds the element of the expulsion of demons (πάντα δαίμονα φυγαδεύει) but broadly follows the same text otherwise, see Rehm and Strecker, *Die Pseudoklementinen I: Homilien*, 25–26.

62 See Hussain, "Wisdom in the Qur'an," 161.

much as its own distinct prophetological portrayal of Jesus as fully human, yet close to God.

The emphasis on Jesus' authority in the Clementine Homilies finds its negative counterpart in the Toledot Yeshu tradition, the "polemical" strand of the late antique Jewish reports about Jesus. In one of its *Early Oriental* (Pilate) versions for example, attested in manuscript *New York JTS* 8998, Jesus falsely claims that he gained possession of the magical books of Balaam, the son of Beor, but then changes his story to allege that these books came from John the Baptist (who acknowledges the charge while at the same time distancing himself from Jesus).<sup>63</sup> Toledot Yeshu thus portrays Jesus as a magician – the charge voiced in Q 5:110 and already in Q 61:6 – and, importantly, also tends to agglomerate the miracles Jesus himself announces, as in the Gospel of Matthew, in the Clementine Homilies, and in Q 3:49:

There is a man, named Yeshua', and he misled the people of the world by way of sorcery (במעשה המכשפים)... And the people were sitting before him, and he was telling them: "I will cure you (אני ארפא אתכם), and I will resurrect the dead (ואפתח עיני סומים)." And he also said to them, "I am God" (אלוה אני). And they fell prostrate before him.<sup>64</sup>

The list shares three of the Qur'anic miracles, even if it does not indicate the specific diseases Jesus seeks to heal. In two further details, it is echoed by the Qur'an even more closely than the Gospel of Matthew: firstly, Jesus announces his miracle in the first person; secondly, Jesus' claim that "I will vivify the dead," אני אחיה מתים, stands linguistically and semantically closer to the Qur'an's *wa-uhyi l-mawtā*, in Q 3:49 (yet not in Q 5:110) than Matthew's phrasing that "the dead rise up," as quoted above.<sup>65</sup>

In addition, we should note that Jesus' announcement of his own divinity, which results in people worshipping him (in this and other versions of Toledot

63 See Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. I, 138–40 (translation) and vol. II, 60 (text). The manuscripts of Toledot Yeshu can be classified based both on their provenance and their content; I combine both systems classifications for ease of reference. For an overview of the provenance of the Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts see Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, 28–39, for a recent discussion of the two main versions of Toledot Yeshu tradition as identified by Riccardo di Segni – the so-called "Pilate" and "Helena" versions, named after the role Pontius Pilate and Queen Helena play in the narrative – with an emphasis on the importance of the Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts, see Goldstein, *A Judeo-Arabic Parody of the Life of Jesus*, 1–16.

64 Manuscript *New York JTS* 8998 cited according to Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. I, 138 (translation) and vol. II, 60 (text).

65 On the phrase in Toledot Yeshu see Evans and van Putten, "I Am the Messiah and I Can Revive the Dead."

Yeshu), offers a close narrative precedent to God's questioning Jesus whether he has "said to the people, 'Take me and my mother for gods besides God,'" which Jesus strongly denies, regarding his own persona, in Q 5:116–120, as discussed above. Jesus' denial in the Qur'an thus primarily seems to reject the Jewish depiction of Jesus himself proclaiming his divinity in Toledot Yeshu, and only secondarily so the Christian ascriptions of Christ as divine, usually in the third person. With regards to Mary's divinity in the same passage, however, the focus shifts: negating the divinity of Mary is a theme the Qur'an shares with East Syrian heresiology.<sup>66</sup>

As we have seen, the Toledot Yeshu tradition, here and throughout, charges Jesus to have performed his signs with the help of magic. Whereas this charge is expressed only in general terms in the canonical Gospels, in pagan and patristic polemics, and in the Babylonian Talmud, it is so acutely evoked in the Qur'an that a reaction to the narrative preserved in the Toledot Yeshu tradition seems highly plausible.<sup>67</sup> We can therefore infer that the Toledot Yeshu tradition may be as important for the contextualization of Jesus' miracles in Q 3:49 and Q 5:110 as the Gospel of Matthew, the Didascalia Apostolorum, and the Clementine Homilies.

Missing from the Christian lists of miracles based on the Gospel of Matthew is the way in which Jesus takes clay and models it into birds. This motif is clearly attested not only in the Qur'anic narrative about Abraham in Q 2:260 but also in the pre-Qur'anic *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, which in its Syriac translation uses the term *ṭyn* for clay, a cognate to the Qur'an's Arabic *ṭīn*.<sup>68</sup> When it comes

66 See Babai the Great, *Liber de unione*, 138, as discussed by Stosch, "Jesus and Mary in Surāt Al-Mā'ida (Q 5)," see also Kavvadas, "A Talking New-Born (Q 19:30)" and Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, 33–48 on the potential relevance of Sefer Zerubbabel for the Qur'an's depiction of Mary.

67 While the charge of magic is a common theme throughout late antiquity and especially in the Qur'an, the latter's double rejection of Jesus' status as either divine or as a magician is more specific than the Qur'an's depiction of charges of magic levelled against Moses or Muhammad, noted above. On the charge of magic and Jesus' miracles in Toledot Yeshu see Bohak, "Jesus the Magician in the 'Pilate' Recension of Toledot Yeshu," 81–98 and Schäfer and Meerson, *Toledot Yeshu*, 64–75; on the charge in the Babylonian Talmud see Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, esp. 34–40, on pagan and patristic polemics see e.g. Šedina, "Magical Power of Names in Origen's Polemic Against Celsus."

68 Quoted according to Burke, "The Infancy Gospel of Thomas from an Unpublished Syriac Manuscript," 267. On the broader context of Jesus' miracle in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, see also Gero, "The Infancy Gospel of Thomas," 46–80 and Gribetz, "Jesus and the Clay Birds," vol.2, 1021–1048. Note that in the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus' creation occurs on the Sabbath, which is also portrayed as causing a legal problem when Jesus heals on the Sabbath in the canonical Gospels, see e.g. Matt. 12:10–12, Mark 3:2–4 and Luke 6:6–9. The Qur'an's emphasis, especially in Q 5:110, that all these miracles occurred with God's



to *lists* of miracles, the Toledot Yeshu tradition is the only late antique precedent of which I am aware that includes the vivification of birds along with other signs, as is the case in the Qur'an. One of its versions, just like the Qur'an, even begins its list of Jesus' (illegitimate) miracles with the vivification of birds, whereas the subsequent miracles do *not* feature in the Qur'an. Another version, however, offers a list that fully, if neither exclusively nor consecutively, pre-empt the list given in the Qur'an. Hence, a closer look at the Toledot Yeshu tradition in its entirety, along with the sources thus far discussed, may help us gain a better understanding of Jesus' miracles in the Qur'an.

In the rather idiosyncratic *Byzantine* (Pilate/Helena) manuscript *St. Petersburg RNL EVR 1.274*, the vivification of birds occurs as the first of a list of Jesus' miracles, i.e. of magical feats, which otherwise bear little resemblance to those listed in the Qur'an. Here, Jesus seeks to convince his audience of his messianic status, as follows:

Before them he made shapes of birds (צִיּוּרֵי עֲפוֹת) and caused them to fly. He also split a river of water and passed through it on dry land. They were also in want of bread (וְהָיָה לָהֶם לֶחֶם), and he satisfied them with one loaf of bread (בִּיעָם בֶּכֶר לֶחֶם). He made water (taste) like wine in their mouths. And he dyed clothes in the water inside a bowl in the house (בְּבֵית), like the color that the dyer (requested) at his time (of work), and he took (the clothes) out dyed, and all of the men and women were carrying them [...]. Men came to capture him and to turn him over for judgment, and he darkened the house (וְהַחֲשִׁיד הַבֵּית) before their eyes and escaped. Thus he did with his magic (בְּכַשְׁפוֹתָיו), and he led all of those places astray after him. When all of Israel heard this, they sought to remove the evil from Israel but could not.<sup>69</sup>

This list of miracles evokes two intriguing details pertaining to our discussion. Most significantly, the miracle of the birds is the first in a longer list, both in the Qur'an and in this manuscript of Toledot Yeshu. Moreover, Jesus, here makes "shapes of birds" (צִיּוּרֵי עֲפוֹת), a phrase not lexically yet semantically conspicuously similar to the formulation "in the likeness of a bird" (*ka-hay'ati l-tayri*) found in Q 3:49 and Q 5:110. While the addition of the "shape" in this Toledot Yeshu manuscript, to the best of my knowledge, does not have any parallel in the late antique Jewish or Christian tradition, it may well reflect a much

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permission, could extend to indicate the permissibility of Jesus' actions on the Sabbath, whose breaking the Qur'an problematizes elsewhere (see Q 2:65, Q 4:47 and 154, Q 7:163) without clearly abrogating it (see Q 16:124), see also note 15 above.

69 Manuscript *St. Petersburg RNL EVR 1.274* cited according to Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, 158 (translation) and vol. II, 74 (text). This manuscript uniquely combines elements of the "Pilate" and the "Helena" versions, adding further elements in direct contact with Byzantine Christianity.

later emendation under the influence of the Qur'an itself, which could have occurred during the mediaeval retellings of the miracle; a single attestation does not suffice for the present purposes. In the Byzantine manuscript, moreover, the birds are not specifically made of clay as in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas and in the Qur'an, and the remainder of the miracles – an idiosyncratic mix of biblical and para-biblical allusions – bears little relationship to the Qur'an.<sup>70</sup>

By contrast, three other Hebrew and Aramaic versions of the Toledot Yeshu that attest to the miracle of the vivification of the birds point out that the initial models were made “of clay” (טינא/טיט), conforming to the Infancy Gospel of Thomas and to the Qur'an.<sup>71</sup> Crucially, while there is no full cognate to the Qur'an's list of miracles, the same three Toledot Yeshu manuscripts come very close to doing so:

- In the *Ashkenazi A* (Helena) manuscript *Strasbourg BnU 3974*, a manuscript of special relevance for the present purposes, the agglomerative healing of a cripple and a leper is narratively followed by Jesus' announcement – soon thereafter realized – that “I will vivify the dead” (וְאֲנִי אַחִיָּה מֵתִים), as in the Byzantine manuscript discussed above), by his claim that “I am the Son of God” (אֲנִי בֶן אֱלֹהִים), and by his vivification of clay birds.<sup>72</sup>
- In the related *Ashkenazi B* (Helena) manuscript *New York JTS 2221*, Jesus answers a request for a sign (אֵימָה, a cognate of Arabic *āyah* and Syriac *ʿtwt* as mentioned above) with the agglomerative healing of the blind and the crippled, which is then followed by his announcement that “I am the Messiah

<sup>70</sup> The other miracles in this tradition – splitting water and passing over dry land, feeding the multitudes, turning the taste of water to wine, dying clothing, and darkening a house, offer a conglomerate of motifs known from the Hebrew Bible, the canonical Gospels, and later, plausibly post-Qur'anic Gospel traditions, none of which are essential for the present purpose, on feeding the multitudes see note 49 above.

<sup>71</sup> See manuscripts *Strasbourg BnU 3974*, *New York JTS 2221* (where the people make the birds that Jesus vivifies), and *New York JTS 2343*, see Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. I, 172, 193, 210, 245 (translation) and vol. II, 87, 102, 117 (text). Note that the badly damaged Judaeo-Arabic fragment RNL Evr.-Arab. II: 2035 equally reports a miracle concluding with “flying off,” apparently depicting the vivification of the birds, see Goldstein, *A Judeo-Arabic Parody of the Life of Jesus*, 88–89.

<sup>72</sup> Manuscript *Strasbourg BnU 3974* cited according to Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. I, 171–172 (translation) and vol. II, 86–87 (text); on the manuscript's importance see Stökl Ben-Ezra, “On Some Early Traditions in *Toledot Yeshu* and the Antiquity of the “Helena” Recension,” 43–58.

and I have the ability to ... vivify the dead" (להחיות ... שיש יכולת) (מחיים) and by his vivification of birds of clay.<sup>73</sup>

- The *Late Yemenite* (Helena) manuscript *New York JTS* 2343 follows both versions very closely.<sup>74</sup>

In their agglomeration of miracles, these three manuscripts of Toledot Yeshu stand closer to the Qur'an than either the Infancy Gospel of Thomas or the tradition based on the Gospel of Matthew we have seen in the Clementine Homilies.

The miracles described in the Qur'an therefore combine some motifs preserved in the Christian tradition with others found in the Toledot Yeshu tradition, maintaining, challenging, and reconfiguring aspects of both traditions according to its own prophetological paradigm. I would thus propose that a careful reconstruction of retrievable aspects of the late antique Toledot Yeshu tradition offers a challenging, yet essential method to understand what the Qur'an's intended audience, and partially also its historical audience, had previously learned about Jesus. In addition to the reports about Jesus' miracles (and his execution as discussed by Anthony), there are more than a few details of the Toledot Yeshu tradition that would explain how the Qur'an pursues a rectification not only of the Christian but also of the Jewish record. For example, it should be noted that alongside the Clementine Homilies, the Toledot Yeshu tradition is one of the few texts that emphasizes Jesus' prophethood alongside his messianic status and his partial abrogation of the Torah, if only to deny these claims.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, the depictions of Christians as *noşryn/noşrym* throughout the Toledot Yeshu tradition – and likely throughout the Jewish Middle East more broadly – would solve the long-standing puzzle of why the Qur'an would refer to Christians with an Arabic cognate of this term, *naşārā*, rather than with any of the terms Christians themselves would have used.<sup>76</sup>

73 Manuscript *New York JTS* 2221 cited according to Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. I, 191–193 (translation) and vol. II, 101–102 (text).

74 See Manuscript *New York JTS* 2343 in Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. I, 208–210 (translation) and vol. II, 116–117 (text).

75 Importantly, the *Early Yemenite* (Pilate) manuscript *New York JTS* 6312 connects Jesus' rejection of the Oral Torah to his claim of prophethood and his magic, see Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. I, 148–149 (translation) and vol. II, 67 (text), see also note 81 below.

76 This important matter cannot be treated here in the necessary detail, yet see the important brief summary by Bar-Asher Siegal, "Nazarenes (נוצרים) in Rabbinic Sources." For the Qur'an's term, see also Griffith, "The Qur'an's 'Nazarenes' and Other Late Antique Christians", de Blois, "Naşrānī (Ναζωραῖος) and Ḥanīf (Ἐθνικός)" and Zellentín, "*banū Isrā'īl, ahl al-kitāb, al-yahūd wa-l-naşārā*," esp. 75–87.

Hence, only in light of the Qur'an's trialogue with both Jewish tradition – specifically as preserved, yet not necessarily embodied, by the mediaeval Toledot Yeshu manuscripts – on the one hand, and the Christian tradition – with special emphasis on the Gospel of Matthew, the Didascalia Apostolorum, and the Clementine Homilies – on the other, can we appreciate the fuller message conveyed by the expansion of Q 43 *al-Zukhruf* 63–65 first in Q 3 *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān* 48–53 and then in Q 5 *Sūrat al-Mā'ida* 110–15. The Qur'an, in short, maintains the list of miracles found in the Christian and especially in the Jewish tradition, connects these miracles to Jesus' confirmation and partial abrogation of the Torah found in the Jewish and especially in the Christian tradition. At the same time, it forcefully rejects the polemical portrayal of Jesus as both a magician and as having proclaimed his own divinity as most clearly expressed in Toledot Yeshu, albeit again with ample Christian precedent. Its message can most fully be reconstructed as fully engaged with both the Jewish and the Christian narratives about Jesus.

How best to account for the affinities between Jesus' miracles in the Qur'an and in the Toledot Yeshu tradition in light of the late date of the latter's manuscripts? I have long resisted the temptation of exploring this question for the simple reason that many of the textual elements of Toledot Yeshu clearly post-date the Qur'an. The many important studies of the dynamic development of Toledot Yeshu as a narrative throughout the Jewish Middle Ages and into Early Modernity leave no doubt about this fact, and preclude any simplistic reading of the Qur'an in light of the Jewish lives of Jesus.<sup>77</sup> For the present purposes, we should note that “the Ishmaelites,” *הישמעלים*, in other words the Muslims, are mentioned as followers of Jesus in a couple of Toledot Yeshu manuscripts, and that the *Ashkenazi A* (Helena) manuscript *Strasbourg BnU 3974* refers to a contemporary of Muhammad, the Jewish poet Eliezer ben Qalir, as a figure of the past, albeit in the manuscript's – textually always very vulnerable – conclusion.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, the *Early Yemenite* (Pilate) manuscript *New York JTS 6312*, again in its final paragraph, even reflects aspects of the Qur'an itself:

77 See note 4 above and notes 82 and 87 below.

78 The “Ishmaelites” appear in *Ashkenazi B* (Helena) manuscript *New York JTS 2221*, see Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. I, 202 (translation) and vol. II, 109 (text), as well as in *Late Yemenite* (Helena) manuscript *New York JTS 2343*, see Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. I, 215 (translation) and vol. II, 122 (text). For the mention of Eliezer ben Qalir see the *Ashkenazi A* (Helena) manuscript *Strasbourg BnU 3974* in Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. I, 184 (translation) and vol. II, 95 (text). Note the discussion of an Islamicate emendation in a manuscript belonging to the “Pilate” version below.

But among the people who erred after him (i.e., Jesus) were those who believed and those who did not believe (מהם מאמינים ומהם מאמינים). And then, some of those people who did not believe arose and made for themselves a religion (דת), saying, “It is written, ‘Your new moon festivals and assemblies I hate’ (Isa. 1:14).” And they erred after his (i.e. Jesus’) words, and made a writ (כתב) for themselves, and they are those *nosrim* (הנוצרים) in every time and place. And the gossip has spread in every foolish nation (עמא טפשא), and they called his name ‘Isa ben Miriam (עיסא ב' מרים). And this is the matter concerning which the gentiles (הגוים) say, “The angel came and blew into her womb, and she gave birth to this son” (המלאך בא ונפח בבית הרחם). ... The story of *Yeshu ha-Nošri* and what has become of him is complete.<sup>79</sup>

This passage – to reiterate, located at the very end of the manuscript, a location most easily amendable in any tradition – is heavily invested in Qur’anic vocabulary:

- The employment of the phrase “believers and non-believers” is unusual in Jewish parlance yet shares much with the description of the Israelites in the Qur’an, see e.g. Q 2:253.
- Jesus’ name עיסא ב' מרים, “Isa ben Miriam,” is almost an exact transliteration of the Qur’an’s name of Jesus, *‘Isā ibn Maryam*.<sup>80</sup>
- The image of an angel speaking to Mary may reflect the Christian Gospel narrative (see Luke 1:35) as much as Q 3:42. Yet the image of an angel blowing into Mary’s womb finds its closest counterpart in the distinctive Qur’anic phrase about Mary, “who guarded the chastity of her private parts, so We blew into it of Our spirit” (*fa-nafakhnā fihi min rūḥinā*) according to Q 21:91 and Q 66:12. The Hebrew נפח used in Toledot Yeshu even constitutes a cognate to Arabic *nafakha* here employed.<sup>81</sup>

There is then, in my mind, no doubt that Toledot Yeshu tradition, as it continued to develop, began to integrate aspects of the Qur’an and of Islam more broadly. Toledot Yeshu, in effect, could easily be updated to constitute a polemic not

79 Cited according to manuscript *New York JTS 6312* in Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. I, 154 (translation) and vol. II, 70 (text).

80 An epigraphic precedent for the Qur’an’s name for Jesus, *‘Isā*, has recently been published by Al-Jallad and Al-Manaser, “Pre-Islamic Divine Name ‘sy and the Background of the Qur’anic Jesus.”

81 Note the interesting parallel to the case of Mary’s impregnation in the *Ashkenazi A* (Helena) manuscript *Strasbourg BnU 3974*, which has Nestor proclaim that “apostates are those who say that Yeshu is God, for he was born by a woman (ישו אלוה), (והוא ילוד אשה כופרים שאמרים ישו אלוה), (6) but the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the same way as was the case with the prophets (אבל שרתה בו רוח הקדש כמות הנביאים), see Meerson and Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. I, 182 (translation) and vol. II, 94 (text), see also note 75 above.

only against Christian but also against Muslim beliefs about Jesus – all one had to do was to add the Ishmaelites to the *nošrim* or, as in manuscript *New York JTS 6312*, add a Qur'anic reference to broaden the target of satire beyond the Christian Gospels.<sup>82</sup>

Yet it does not follow that the miracles in Toledot Yeshu were told in light of the Islamic Scripture rather than the other way around, and we should not even exclude the *early Yemenite* and the *Ashkenazi A* and *B* manuscripts, or any other of the reasonably early traditions, reflecting either the Pilate or the Helena version, from consideration when studying the Qur'an. A disinterested and broad look at the cumulative evidence rather allows us to identify select motifs of Toledot Yeshu as late antique, especially those that are separately attested in various local and literary strands of the tradition. These prove essential for any attempt to reconstruct the knowledge the Qur'an's diverse intended and historical audiences had of Jesus.

It is, moreover, easy to point to robust evidence for the late antique – i.e. pre-Qur'anic – provenance of much of the Toledot Yeshu tradition. It goes without saying that in the sense of a Jewish counter-Gospel tradition, Toledot Yeshu inevitably takes us as far back as the formative period of the Gospels themselves. The canonical Gospels already seek to contradict accusations such as the claim that Christ's body was merely hidden by his disciples.<sup>83</sup> It is true that full-blown versions of a Jewish "Gospel," or rather a Gospel parody, have been preserved only in mediaeval manuscripts, the earliest Aramaic fragments stemming from the tenth century CE. Yet few, if any, written witnesses to the classical rabbinic tradition are late antique, either, and the debate about their pre-Qur'anic nature has largely been settled.<sup>84</sup> Yet, the existence of a late antique Toledot Yeshu *tradition* – that substantial parts of the narrative already entered circulation in the sixth century CE at the very latest, even if not exactly in the form in which it was later preserved – can be deduced from the following three facts:

- First, the Aramaic language of the earliest Toledot Yeshu manuscripts that were found in the Cairo Geniza is clearly late antique. Exactly how ancient is

82 On the importance of Toledot Yeshu in the Islamic world – and its divergences from European polemics – see Goldstein, "A Polemical Tale and its Function in the Jewish Communities of the Mediterranean and the Near East" and Alexander, "The Toledot Yeshu in the Context of Jewish-Muslim Debate."

83 See, e.g., Alexander, "Narrative and Counternarrative."

84 On the dating of Toledot Yeshu see note 4 above, see also Sarit Kattan Gribetz, "Toledot Yeshu," 154–74, arguing for a late date, and Barbu, "L'Évangile selon les Juifs." The earliest witness to the rabbinic literature may be the Rehov inscription, see Fine, "The Rehov Inscriptions and Rabbinic Literature."

as much under dispute as the language's provenance: according to one opinion, we are dealing with a text that was originally composed in Palestine in the third century CE and repeatedly updated, whereas a more straightforward case has been made for a "Babylonian," i.e. Mesopotamian text from the turn of the sixth century CE. Yet there is no dispute about the fact that the language used in these fragments pre-dates the Qur'an at least by several decades, if not by several centuries.<sup>85</sup>

- Second, we do have numerous late antique *Christian* responses to Toledot Yeshu, meaning that several post-canonical Christian Gospels and other stories engage various aspects of the same Jewish Gospel parody. Notably, the Christian responses seek to turn the Gospel narrative back on its feet after the Jewish tradition had turned it on its head, in this way pre-empting a narrative strategy similar to the one we see in the Qur'an. Many of the references in Toledot Yeshu, moreover, fit a fifth century CE context rather well.<sup>86</sup>
- The third argument, perhaps weaker than the first two yet methodologically important, concerns the extraordinary narrative diversity of the various extant Toledot Yeshu manuscripts. Even a cursory glimpse at both the striking commonalities and divergences between the earlier Toledot Yeshu manuscripts that have been paleographically and linguistically classified as either more broadly *Oriental*, or as more specifically *Yemenite* or *Byzantine*, especially when equally read in light of the *Ashkenazi A* and *B* tradition, strongly points to a burgeoning diversity of traditions already in Late Antiquity. While we can trace instances of late transmission within the Jewish community, the sheer scale of diversity amidst clear commonality suggests that some individual narrative motifs are indeed more likely to be pre-mediaeval. Inversely, of course, the broad attestation and burgeoning development of the tradition itself may well explain the same

85 See Smelik, "The Aramaic Dialect(s) of the Toldot Yeshu Fragments," Sokoloff, "The Date and Provenance of the Aramaic Toledot Yeshu on the Basis of Aramaic Dialectology," 13–26 and Horbury, "A Critical Examination of the Toledot Yeshu."

86 See Stökl Ben-Ezra, "Who Is the Target of Toledot Yeshu," 359–80, Stökl Ben-Ezra, "On Some Early Traditions in Toledot Yeshu and the Antiquity of the "Helena" Recension," Piovaneli, "The Toledot Yeshu and Christian Apocryphal Literature," 89–100 and Gero, "The Nestorius Legend in the Toledot Yeshu," 108–20 pace Schaefer and Meerson, *Toledot Yeshu*, 111–13. A similar reading of a Coptic homily attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem as responding to the Toledot Yeshu tradition has been suggested by Anthony, "Toledot Yeshu and the End of Jesus' Earthly Mission in the Qur'an."

ecotypification of the narratives, so this last argument will have to be substantiated or rejected through further research.<sup>87</sup>

As a consequence of the first two arguments, along with the study here presented, I would seek to dispel an overly positivist focus on the manuscripts of Toledot Yeshu that deprives one of an important late antique source. Based both on 14C dating and on philology we only recently have gained certainty of what the Islamic tradition has claimed all along, namely that the Qur'an itself is a late antique text. We now may have to revisit the entirety of the Toledot Yeshu tradition and try to reconstruct which of its motifs may predate the Qur'an based on philology alone, along the lines Anthony proposes regarding Jesus' execution, and I myself have put forward regarding his miracles. The Qur'an, it turns out, may help us better appreciate the Jewish tradition, and vice versa: in light of the present considerations, I would also suggest revisiting the intriguing possibility that both the Qur'an and the Babylonian Talmud may, each in their own way, offer *corrections* to the polemical Jewish traditions regarding the life of Jesus we find in Toledot Yeshu. While the path is not an easy one, the rewards of doing so may allow us to learn much about the diversity of the Jewish tradition, about the Jewish-Christian debate throughout the first millennium, and about the Qur'an's forceful intervention into it.

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87 Miriam Goldstein, as part of her recent study of the Judeo-Arabic manuscripts of Toledot Yeshu, urged for a revaluation of the literary development of the two main branches of Toledot Yeshu in all extant ancient languages, see Goldstein, *A Judeo-Arabic Parody of the Life of Jesus* and Goldstein, "Jesus in Arabic, Jesus in Judeo-Arabic." Given that many of the Judaeo-Arabic versions were translations from earlier, Aramaic versions, a further study of this corpus may prove essential for the further study of the relationship of the Qur'an to the Jewish tradition, see also Bohak, "A New Genizah Fragment of Toledoth Yeshu in Aramaic."





# Queen Messiah

## *The Talmudic Teaching of the Seven Women Prophets*

*Elisa Klapheck*

### **Women Prophets in a Rabbinical Vision of History**

The Sages taught: Forty-eight prophets and seven women prophets prophesied on behalf of the Jewish people, and they neither subtracted from nor added onto what is written in the Torah introducing no changes or additions to the mitzvot, except for the reading of the Megillah which they added as an obligation for all future generations. ... Who were the seven women prophets? Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah, and Esther. (B. Megillah 14a)<sup>1</sup>

The above citation is found within the context of a sweeping messianic vision of history. The endpoint of the rabbinical understanding of history is, of course, always the salvation of the Jewish people – the redemption of Israel – and, concurrently, the redemption of humankind. But something here feels slightly different from what we might generally expect from the messianic course of history. Perhaps this variant, as this chapter will explore, explains why the rabbis focus so explicitly on women – more exactly, on seven women prophets.

These women are not just auxiliaries, subsumed under the great office of Biblical prophecy, which is mostly performed by men. They stand for themselves, on equal footing with their male colleagues, yet constituting a prophetic line of their own. The number seven is not just any digit. It is *the* holy number. Seven symbolizes completion. Seven indicates, for example, the Shabbat, the holy seventh day, which structures the sacred aspects of time and space. In the Jewish tradition, Shabbat offers a first taste of redeemed messianic time. The Torah calls not only the seventh day “Shabbat,” but also the festival of Pesach (Lev. 23:11). Accordingly, the Torah, in the two versions of the decalogue (Exod. 20: Deut. 5), provides two explanations for the commandment to keep the Sabbath. One is God’s completion of creation and his resting on the seventh day; the other is God’s leading the Israelites out of Egypt, out of the dark house of slavery, from a tight place into freedom.<sup>2</sup> Hence the path to freedom is also under the sign of seven.

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<sup>1</sup> All translations in this paper from the Torah and rabbinic literature are based on Sefaria.org.

<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew word for Egypt, Mitzrayim, is often interpreted religiously as “doubly narrow” or “doubly oppressive”: Mi = from; ‘zar = tight; ayim = ending for something doubled.

As far as women prophets are concerned the goal of prophetic lineage must already have been reached. There are already seven women prophets, and therefore, their line has reached its end. On the men's side, there are "only" 48 prophets. If the holy number seven is also applied here, there is still one prophet missing: the 49th who would complete the sum of seven times seven. All women prophets have come, but we are still waiting for a 49th male prophet.

Most likely, he shall be the Messiah.

The rabbinic sages in the Talmud don't come to the same conclusion concerning what we should expect from him.<sup>3</sup> Some hope for a world after the world, a veritable paradise; others are more circumspect and content themselves with a vision of the end of subjugation and oppression. Some expect God to send the Messiah without the aid of human beings. Others believe that the messianic era will arrive bit by bit when people act in a way that pleases God. Some believe in the coming of a Mashiah ben David – a direct descendent of King David. Others assume a more general rabbinical era.

Perhaps, the completed line of women prophets can give us a more accurate idea of the messianic era. Or perhaps the assignation of seven women prophets expresses a messianic conception that is different from that which Jews of the time were used to. And, this idea could only be made clear by pinpointing the messianic role of these women. One might think that the teaching of the seven women prophets simply spans a smaller version of the messianic arc represented by the 48 plus one male prophets. If that were the case, the two sides must be seen as mirroring one another – seven women prophets on one side, and 48 prophets on the other. The more easily graspable number of seven is clearer than a disparate mass of 48. And perhaps the completion of the messianic lineage in the figure of the seventh woman prophet, Esther, can give us an idea of how the attainment of the messianic era through the 49th prophet might look.

That could be the case, but I do not think so. I see no reason why the line of women prophets should exactly mirror the male line of prophecy (if such a line exists at all). Instead, I see the teaching of the seven women prophets as an additional rabbinic innovation in order to express something not yet said – an innovation necessary because it could not be said by focusing only on men prophets. Something new was being created, an independent idea that necessitated the inclusion of women. They had to be part of it! And to motivate women, they needed to be provided with authority, an authority expressed through the seven women prophets, who show that women too were needed

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3 On the rabbinical controversy about what to expect from the coming of the "Messiah," see for example in the B. Sanhedrin 90aff., esp. 97aff.

to fulfil the rabbinical understanding of messianic history. The key to this new, or at least additional, understanding, I would like to propose, can be found through an awareness of the goal achieved by the seventh woman prophet, the Jewish/Persian Queen Esther, and shedding light backwards onto the other women prophets who preceded her.

In the Biblical story, Esther saves her people from Haman's attempts to obliterate them, shifting the course of the messianic scenario. The Talmudic rabbis say it themselves: while the stories of the other six prophets can be read within the framework of the Torah, they did not add a message differing from the one already found within the Torah. But with Esther, a new book with a controversial message was added to the Biblical canon: the Book of Esther. Jews are obliged to read this text on Purim.

The Sages taught: Forty-eight prophets and seven women prophets prophesied on behalf of the Jewish people, and they neither subtracted from nor added onto what is written in the Torah introducing no changes or additions to the mitzvot, except for the reading of the Megillah [the Book of Esther], which they added as an obligation for all future generations. (B. Megillah 14a)

For the rabbis, the Book of Esther was a controversial text. God does not play any ostensible role within the book.<sup>4</sup> Esther's brave acts alone save the Jewish people from destruction. The fact that God made no appearance as the all-powerful lord who determines the fate of Israel was reason enough for the rabbis to hesitate to add the story to the Biblical canon. What is more, Esther was married to a Persian man, not exactly making her a good role model for Jewish girls, even if he was a king. She also had a heathen name – Astarte, Esther, Ishtar – the name of the goddess of love and war in the Mesopotamian cultures. Esther saved the Jewish people, but not in the way that they were saved from Egypt, through the outstretched arm and strong hand of God. The Babylonian Talmud grants us insight into the fact that the Book of Esther was only accepted after resistance.<sup>5</sup> The rabbis deserve all the more recognition for granting it canonical status. The Books of the Maccabees, as a comparison, the foundation of the victorious story of Chanukkah and the rededication of the temple, did not make it into the Biblical canon, but were relegated by the rabbis to the apocrypha. Even more astounding than the fact that the

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4 Elsewhere, the rabbis do see a divine presence, or rather "absence," indicated in Esther's name. It resonates for them a negative theology, as the name Esther should be understood as: "*Anochi haster astir panai*" ("Yet, I will keep my countenance hidden") (Deut. 31:18). See B. Chulin 139b.

5 B. Megillah 7a.

Book of Esther was incorporated into the Tanakh, the Hebrew bible, is her additional valorization through the teaching of the seven women prophets, in which Queen Esther becomes the crowning seventh prophet. I contend that the seven women prophets represent nothing less than a new messianic paradigm, a “counterprophecy” – a vision of history not necessarily opposed to but different from the widespread expectation of a Mashiah ben David, a messiah stemming from David’s lineage.

This new paradigm, culminating in the prophet Esther, is most certainly closely related to the historical situation of Jews in Persia. Esther, the Jewish Persian queen, acts as a symbol for that community. She stands for the Jewish population of Persia, so well-integrated that non-Jews did not even recognize them as Jews. When Haman tells the king about the Jewish people, who have their own laws, the king is not even aware that such a people existed in his kingdom. The Book of Esther indeed reflects a historical reality that may have also existed at the time the Babylonian Talmud was in the final editing stages – the period of the Sassanid empire in sixth and seventh century Persia. Without denying the difficulties that the Jewish population faced, the flourishing of Talmudic culture at that time was surely due to the spiritual and material prosperity that Jews in Persia were able to achieve thanks to the relatively tolerant policies of the Sassanids. Great Talmudic scholars such as Mar Samuel frequented the house of the imperial family and were able to secure far-reaching Jewish autonomy. A Jewish queen at the palace, in an alliance with a Persian king, was a politically feasible idea.

The comfortable material situation of Jews in Persia is also echoed in the larger Talmudic discussion within which the teaching of the seven women prophets appears. Even for rabbinical standards, it is an unusually long passage.<sup>6</sup> The *galut*, the Jewish ‘exile’, was commonly perceived as an adverse experience. As in other Talmudic discourse on the rabbinic understanding of history, here, too, the large empires of antiquity – Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia – are described in the main as doing violence against Israel and bringing exile and suffering to the Jews. But strikingly, the discussion also reflects another kind of Jewish life in exile. It is called “abundance” (*revaya*) and indicates an era of economic prosperity that provided satisfaction of all basic needs, even comfort and room for celebration:

Rabbi Ḥanina bar Pappa introduced this passage with an introduction from here: “You have caused men to ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; but You brought us out into abundance” (Ps. 66:12). “Through fire”; this

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6 B. Megillah 9b-17a.

was in the days of the wicked Nebuchadnezzar who cast the righteous into the furnace. "And through water"; this was in the days of Pharaoh who decreed that all newborn males be cast into the water. "But You brought us out into abundance"; this was in the days of Haman where abundant feasts played a pivotal role in their peril and salvation. (B. Megillah 11a)

Yet abundance here is not necessarily only positive for the Jews. Life under prosperous conditions has its own dangers. Clearly, the Babylonian Talmud is referring in this verse to those contemporary readers who have settled into relatively convenient situations in the Jewish diaspora, such as the Jews in Persia.

By bestowing the status of the seventh woman prophet onto the Jewish/Persian Queen Esther, the rabbis show their awareness of the specific historical situation, which necessitates a messianic paradigm different from that of other eras of oppression and poverty. Not only is there no mention of God in the Book of Esther, but the salvation of the Jews in this story does not fit into the usual messianic logic. The messianic celebration at the end of the story, after Haman and his followers have been defeated, is not because the Jews have returned or will return to the land of Israel. In fact, there is no mention of a return at all. Rather, they celebrate because they have improved their status within Persian society. It is nothing less than a step toward emancipation. The diaspora ceases to be only exile. And all of that is represented by a woman – Queen Esther. Politically speaking, Esther, stands for the positive potential of a diasporic Jewish life. Her status as the seventh prophet offers a female alternative to male prophetic perspectives, which envision the re-establishment of a Jewish state or a re-building of the Temple in Jerusalem, both institutions represented by male hierarchies.<sup>7</sup> Naturally, this messianic alternative would not be possible without female protagonists.

### The Seven Women at First Biblical Glance

Let us begin by examining the first six women prophets and looking for shared characteristics that might substantiate the thesis of an intrinsic line of prophecy.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> This fits well with those theories that connote the diasporic experience of the Jews, especially Jewish men, as feminine. See for example Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora*; Braun and Brumlik, *Handbuch jüdische Studien*, 255–76; esp., Ist Israel weiblich? Die Grundlehre des Judentums in der Konstruktion der Geschlechter, 257–261.

<sup>8</sup> I can highly recommend on this topic Brenner, *The Israelite Woman*.

Sarah – Miriam – Deborah – Hannah – Abigail – Huldah

Each one of these women represents a Biblical era.

- Sarah evokes the beginning in the era of the patriarchs and matriarchs in the Book of Genesis.
- Miriam embodies the time of nation-building starting with the Book of Exodus, as she belonged to the generation that was rescued from slavery in Egypt and received the Torah at Sinai.
- Deborah stands for the era of the Judges and the decentralized Israelite tribes in the land of Canaan.
- Hannah lived at the cusp of the political transition from a nation of tribes ruled by God alone to a kingdom united under the Kings – Saul and David – anointed by Hannah's son Samuel.
- Abigail represented the final embracing of the kingdom by turning away from her husband, the landowner Nabal, and marrying David, the future king.
- Huldah supported King Josiah in establishing a central administration with Jerusalem and the temple at its heart, although she knew of the end of the Jewish kingdom and the coming of the Babylonian exile.

Esther perfectly completes the paradigm shift inherent to this line of women prophets. She becomes a queen positioned within the Babylonian (Persian) exile.

It is clear that the Talmudic rabbis deliberately constructed the teaching of the seven women prophets so that it could make a statement that goes beyond the information found within the Tanakh. That it truly is an innovative construct can be seen in the simple fact that four of the seven women prophets are not designated as such in the Tanakh. It was the rabbis who elevated them to the status of prophets. Of the seven women, only Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah are explicitly called *nevia* – woman prophet – in the bible.

- “And Miriam the prophet, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand.” (Exod. 15:20)
- “Deborah, wife of Lappidoth, was a prophet; she led Israel at that time.” (Judg. 4:4)
- “So the priest Hilkiah, and Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan, and Asaiah went to the prophet Huldah – the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah son of Harhas, the keeper of the wardrobe – who was living in Jerusalem in the Mishneh, and they spoke to her.” (2 Kings 22:14)

The fact that the Talmud adds four more women, calling each one a prophet, shows that the rabbis were creatively constructing a prophetic vision of history by drawing on the proven principle of seven. They could have composed a line

of twelve. The number four would also have been imaginable for a feminine construct, corresponding with the four mothers (Sarah, Rebekkah, Leah and Rachel). But the rabbis chose the principle of seven. There can be no other reason than the fact that seven – like the Shabbat – has overtones of a messianic dimension.<sup>9</sup> Seven women are connected to build a line of messianic salvation. Although not called prophets in the Tanakh, Sarah, Hannah, Abigail, and Esther were all very important female Biblical figures. It is easy to imagine that Sarah and Hannah, the first two, were revered as prophets. In the case of Abigail and even more so in the case of Esther, the connection is less obvious, at least at first Biblical glance.

Let us first look at the three women that each are explicitly denoted as “prophet” in the bible: Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah. Unlike the male prophets, there is no mention in the Tanakh that any of these women were appointed as prophets by God. They were prophets of their own accord. Neither does the bible give any reason for what makes them prophets. They simply are. In contrast to the Tanakh, the Talmudic rabbis do substantiate their claims, justifying what makes each of these women a prophet. And through the line that the rabbis thus create, they make it possible to subtly indicate a suppressed moment in the history of Israel. Their messianic alternative enables a critical inner-Jewish awareness of those who were made invisible, but nevertheless existed. But we shall return to that in the next section.

Let us begin by noting the shared characteristics of the first six women prophets as can be extrapolated at a first glance into the Tanakh. Each of these women had a moment in her life where she stood up in opposition to a male authority who had a direct influence over her.

- Sarah rejects Abraham’s relationship with her maid, Hagar, and Ismail, their son. She demands that Abraham send the two of them away. God supports Sarah and tells Abraham to listen to her: “In all that Sarah has said to you, hearken to her voice.” (Gen. 21:12)
- Miriam resists Pharaoh’s murderous decree by setting her baby brother into the river in a basket so that he may be saved by Pharaoh’s daughter: “And his sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him.” (Exod. 2:4)
- Deborah warns General Barak that although he will win the battle against Sisera, he will not be its hero. That honor will be reserved for a woman, namely Yael the Kenite: “Very well, I [Deborah] will go with you [Barak],” she answered. ‘However, there will be no glory for you in the course you are

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9 This also applies to the Seven Noahide Commandments, ensuring a place in the messianic world to come for all non-Jews who keep the Noahide standards (see B. Sanhedrin 56a).



taking, for then the Eternal will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.” (Judg. 4:9)

- Hannah does not listen to her husband, who believes that his devotion to her is more important than her desire for a child, even more important than “seven sons.” She goes again to the sanctuary, this time alone, to pray to God. Her prayer is answered and she gives birth to Samuel, who will later become high priest. (1 Sam. 1–2)
- Abigail looks down on her husband and takes the opportunity of his conflict with David to change sides. (1 Sam. 25)
- Huldah self-assuredly speaks with King Josiah’s emissaries. She shows no respect, calling him only “the man” and lets him know that his demise is coming. (2 Kings 22)

Admittedly, the rabbis are very critical of the self-confidence of these women. In their discussion of the teachings of the seven women prophets, they are especially harsh in their opinion of Deborah and Huldah.

Rav Naḥman said: Haughtiness is not befitting a woman. And a proof to this is that there were two haughty women, whose names were identical to the names of loathsome creatures. One, Deborah, was called a hornet, as her Hebrew name, Devorah, means hornet; and one, Huldah, was called a marten, as her name is the Hebrew term for that creature. From where is it known that they were haughty? With regard to Deborah, the hornet, it is written: “And she sent and called Barak” (Jud. 4:6), but she herself did not go to him. And with regard to Huldah, the marten, it is written: “Say to the man that sent you to me” (2 Kings 22:15), but she did not say: Say to the king. (B. Megillah 14b)

But the rabbinical criticism of Deborah’s and Huldah’s “haughtiness” does not diminish their prophetic status. It does not matter that the women do not exhibit the modest and reserved behavior that patriarchal values demand of them. Rather, these seven women are distinguished by their exceptional expressiveness. Sarah “laughs,” not a joyful laugh, but a skeptical and suffering laugh. Miriam and Deborah, two of the figures named as women prophets in the bible, “sing” when they rejoice that their prophecies came true. Hannah “prays” loudly and emotionally. Abigail and Huldah “speak,” drastically and bluntly, they completely disregard power and honor in their defense of the truth. The general standards to which women are held are not important in their cases. Whether or not they are mothers or have borne sons is of no account. Although she is called “a mother in Israel,” no children of Deborah are mentioned in the Tanakh. Miriam’s maternal status is unclear. Perhaps Horus was her son? But then who was her husband? It is also not written that Huldah had any children, nor, later, Esther.

## Rabbinical Justifications for the Prophetic Status of Women in the Tanakh

The line connecting all seven Biblical women in a messianic prophetic lineage is only conceivable as a rabbinic creation. And its originality can only be uncovered by examining the reasons given by the rabbis for the prophetic status of the seven Biblical women. Again, I shall look only at the first six women prophets and discuss Esther separately in the following section.

The explanations of why, from a Talmudic viewpoint, the respective women are accorded the status of prophet are surprisingly different from what we might assume at first Biblical glance. In their exegesis, the rabbis do not derive the prophetic moment for each woman from the narratives of their stories, but from hermeneutic interpretations of the plain text. In their *Pardes*, or Biblical hermeneutics, the rabbis in these cases take the approach of *remez* – the unexpected sign that reveals a hidden, additional meaning within a word or sentence.<sup>10</sup>

To establish Sarah's prophetic legacy, the rabbis equate her with Iscah.

Sarah, as it is written: "Haran, the father of Milcah, and the father of Iscah" (Gen. 11:29). And Rabbi Yitzhak said: Iscah is in fact Sarah. And why was she called Iscah? For she saw [*sakhta*] by means of divine inspiration, as it is stated: "In all that Sarah has said to you, hearken to her voice" (Gen. 21:12). Alternatively, Sarah was also called Iscah, for all gazed [*sokhin*] upon her beauty. (B. Megillah 14a)

On the surface, Iscah is introduced in the Tanakh as Sarah's cousin or perhaps even half-sister (Gen. 11:29). But the rabbis interpret the name "Iscah" as denoting Sarah's prophetic attribute. In the Torah, Iscah is part of the branch of Abraham's family who remained in Haran – in the northern area of Paddan Aram – and did not go with Abraham further south to Canaan. We can only try to unravel the reasons why the rabbis began the teaching of the seven women prophets by equating Sarah and Iscah. I surmise that it has something to do with the Aramaic culture, the apex of which includes the Babylonian Talmud, written mostly in Aramaic. Equating Sarah and Iscah points beyond the land of Canaan toward Haran and Paddan Aram – toward the Aramaic culture out of which Abraham and the children of Israel emerged. Iscah provides Sarah with another, more international side. For the Talmudic rabbis, it also explains Sarah's exceptional beauty.

<sup>10</sup> Pardes, or PaRDeS, is an acronym of the four rabbinical approaches to Biblical exegesis: P, *p'shat*, the simple or explicit meaning; R, *remez*, the hidden or alluded meaning; D, *d'rash*, the interpretation; and S, *sod*, the mystical and secret meaning (B. Chagigah 14b).

The rabbinical explanations for Miriam are easier to understand since her status as prophet is discussed in more detail. Unlike Sarah, she is explicitly called a prophet in the Torah:

And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand.  
(Exod. 15:20).

Here, too, the rabbis first look at Miriam's name, or rather the fact that she is linked to Aaron and called "Aaron's sister." Was she really Moses's sister? the rabbis seem to wonder. Her name, Miriam, is told only relatively late in the Torah, namely, in the moment when Pharaoh's horses and riders are drowning in the sea. There she is called "Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron." Earlier in the narrative, it states only that Moses had a "sister," whose name is not given.

[The Gemara asks: Was she the sister only of Aaron,] and not the sister of Moses? Why does the verse mention only one of her brothers? Rav Nahman said that Rav said: For she prophesied when she was the sister of Aaron, i.e., she prophesied since her youth, even before Moses was born, and she would say: My mother is destined to bear a son who will deliver the Jewish people to salvation. And at the time when Moses was born the entire house was filled with light, and her father stood and kissed her on the head, and said to her: My daughter, your prophecy has been fulfilled.<sup>11</sup> (B. Megillah 14a)

Much more so than in the case of Sarah or the other women prophets, the rabbis emphasize a distinguishing moment in which Miriam proved to be a true prophet. She was able to see the salvatory, messianic scenario in its entirety.

But once Moses was cast into the river, her father arose and rapped her on the head, saying to her: My daughter, where is your prophecy now, as it looked as though the young Moses would soon meet his end. This is the meaning of that which is written with regard to Miriam's watching Moses in the river: "And his sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him" (Exod. 2:4), i.e., to know what would be with the end of her prophecy, as she had prophesied that her brother was destined to be the savior of the Jewish people. (B. Megillah 14a)

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11 Incidentally, a direct connection can be made here to Mary in the New Testament and to Mary in the Koran. In the Koran, Maryam—the mother of Jesus—is called the "sister of Aaron." Mary in the New Testament is aware of the nativity, the messianic hope of the birth of a child. Her namesake Miriam set the paradigm "My mother will give birth to a child that will be the redeemer of the Jewish people" (Shemot Rabbah 1:23). In the New Testament, it is Mary herself who brings the savior into the world. Nevertheless, it is the same figure. This should lead us to consider whether Mary in the Gospels and Maryam in the Koran are derived from Miriam.

For Miriam, standing at a distance and seeing from afar is the key prophetic moment. She sees not only that her baby brother is saved by Pharaoh's daughter on the other bank of the river, but in this prism of personal salvation, she sees the salvation of the Jews as a whole.

In the case of Deborah, while she is also called a "prophet" in the Tanakh, the rabbis go to extraordinary lengths to justify this denotation in a manner very different from what we might expect. Nevertheless, they do not negate Deborah's authority.

With regard to Deborah, it says: "And she sat under a palm tree" (Judges 4:5). The Gemara asks: What is different and unique with regard to her sitting "under a palm tree" that there is a need for it to be written? Rabbi Shimon ben Avshalom said: It is due to the prohibition against being alone together with a man. Since men would come before her for judgment, she established for herself a place out in the open and visible to all, in order to avoid a situation in which she would be secluded with a man behind closed doors. (B. Megillah 14a)

She was hence able to judge "as a woman" even if she therefore had to choose a very public place – under a palm tree. Still, men came to her to receive her judgements. Yet, neither Deborah's work as a judge nor her political and military achievements are enough to justify her prophetic status. In Deborah's case, too, the first thing the rabbis look at is her name and it is here that they see the key to her status as a prophet. Or, more exactly, in the addendum to her name: "wife of Lappidot." That which at first glance seems to be no more than an acknowledgment of Deborah's social status, proves for the rabbis to be a meaningful sign of the historical vision that they see connected to the teachings of the seven women prophets.

Deborah was a prophetess, as it is written explicitly: "And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth" (Judges 4:4). The Gemara asks: What is the meaning of "the wife of Lappidoth"? The Gemara answers: For she used to make wicks for the Sanctuary, and due to the flames [*lappidot*] on these wicks she was called the wife of Lappidoth, literally, a woman of flames. (B. Megillah 14a)

Nothing that Deborah "prophetically" stated in the bible cements her status, but solely an assumed act hidden in her name, hinting at the shrine: "For she used to make wicks for the Sanctuary." That is all.

Thus, only by hermeneutical means, by interpreting the meaning of these names, do the rabbis illuminate a hidden sign which unveils the prophetic status of these women and moreover underlines the messianic connection of seven otherwise unrelated Biblical protagonists. Their choice of Sarah, Miriam and Deborah, however, is not only linked by the hermeneutical detail of their

names. It cannot be a coincidence that all three are also linked to a greater cultural horizon, represented by a non-Jewish or non-Israelite woman. Sarah's prophetic status comes from "seeing" and is according to the rabbis linked to Iscah, who stayed back in Paddan Aram. Miriam is fully recognized by the rabbis as a prophet for the reasons stated in the Torah. But her prophecy is also linked to the actions of an Egyptian woman, Pharaoh's daughter, who finds the basket containing baby Moses on the other bank of the river. Deborah too has a partner who does not belong to the people of Israel: Yael the Kenite, who in the end defeated Sisera. I cannot imagine it is only by chance that these three women, through their collaborating women partners, point toward Israel's place in a larger cultural horizon. Rather, this can only be an integral part of the vision that the rabbis saw connected to the teaching of the seven women prophets. If it is true that their vision of history consciously constituted a messianic alternative made possible by women prophets, this vision most surely also includes non-Jewish or non-Israelite women.

The first three women prophets point to a world beyond Canaan. Let us now turn to Hannah. Only on the surface does it seem that through her intimations of a greater cultural horizon including Arameans and Egyptians, other tribes in Canaan ceased to be revealed in the rabbinic hermeneutics. On the contrary, with Hannah, the rabbis can, by means of hermeneutics, manifest a cultural split that had doomed the cosmopolitan international heritage of Israel to invisibility. While Deborah's name points toward a sanctuary – which in the era of the Judges cannot yet be the temple in Jerusalem – Hannah's prophecy points toward the anointment of the future kings of Israel. In her story, too, the rabbis emphasize a cultic detail.

Hannah was a prophetess, as it is written: "And Hannah prayed and said, My heart rejoices in the Lord, my horn is exalted in the Lord" (1 Sam. 2:1), and her words were prophecy, in that she said: "My horn is exalted," and not: My pitcher is exalted. As, with regard to David and Solomon, who were anointed with oil from a horn, their kingship continued, whereas with regard to Saul and Jehu, who were anointed with oil from a pitcher, their kingship did not continue. This demonstrates that Hannah was a prophetess, as she prophesied that only those anointed with oil from a horn will merit that their kingships continue. (B. Megilla 14a)

With Hannah, we have the first reference to a division. Her prophecy is linked to an anointment with oil. However not that of a priest in the temple, but of kings. Here a distinction is made between the line of David and Salomon as opposed to the line of Saul and Jehu. The latter were not anointed with oil

from a horn, pointing toward the temple of Jerusalem, but only with oil from a profane pitcher. For the rabbis, this explains why their kingdom was doomed to perish.

Here we begin to see what else is included in the teaching of the seven women prophets. Discreetly, at the latest with their exegesis of Hannah, the rabbis touch on the northern kingdom that was lost to Biblical history. According to critical historical bible studies, King Saul – a Benjamite – is a mythic symbol for the northern kingdom of Israel. This is all the truer of his successor Jehu, who in the Book of Kings is anointed by Elijah. This northern empire, “Israel,” which, according to archeological findings must have been an economically successful, cosmopolitan kingdom, was destroyed by Assyria in 722–720 BCE. To this day, it is associated with the “ten lost tribes” that will arise again in the course of salvation through the Messiah. On the other side, King David, a Judean, represents the southern kingdom of Judah, which was destroyed at the end of the sixth century BCE, but whose upper classes survived Babylonian exile as Jews were able to return to Jerusalem.

To me, it is clear that Hannah’s prophecy speaks of the survival of the house of David, while keeping alive the memory of the northern kingdom as well – from Saul to Jehu. I come to this conclusion because of the reason given for the prophetic status of the next woman prophet in the line: Abigail. According to rabbinic exegesis, the core of Abigail’s story is respect for King Saul. In the Biblical narrative, Abigail is devoted to David from the beginning, yet from the Talmudic viewpoint, she rejects David’s identification with the throne so long as Saul is sitting upon it. And she also rejects David’s desire for herself. With this she is implicitly (and before the fact) criticizing the “bloodguilt” that David will later enter with Bathsheba.

Abigail was a prophetess, ... David said to her: Nabal, your husband, is a rebel against the throne, as David had already been anointed as king by the prophet Samuel, and Nabal refused his orders. And therefore, there is no need to try him, as a rebel is not accorded the ordinary prescriptions governing judicial proceedings. Abigail said to him: You lack the authority to act in this manner, as Saul is still alive. He is the king in actual practice, and your seal [*tivakha*] has not yet spread across the world, i.e., your kingship is not yet known to all. Therefore, you are not authorized to try someone for rebelling against the monarchy. David accepted her words and said to her: “And blessed be your discretion and blessed be you who have kept me this day from coming to blood guiltiness [*damim*]” (1 Sam. 25:33). The Gemara asks: The plural term *damim*, literally, bloods, indicates two. Why did David not use the singular term *dam*? Rather, this teaches that Abigail revealed her thigh, and he lusted after her, and he went three parasangs by the fire of his desire for her, and said to her: Listen to me, i.e., listen to me

and allow me to be intimate with you. Abigail then said to him: "Let this not be a stumbling block for you" (1 Sam. 25:31). By inference, from the word "this," it can be understood that there is someone else who will in fact be a stumbling block for him, and what is this referring to? The incident involving Bathsheba. And in the end, this is what was, as indeed he stumbled with Bathsheba. This demonstrates that Abigail was a prophetess, as she knew that this would occur. (B. Megillah 14a–b)

Abigail's rejection of David is twofold – once out of respect for King Saul, and once because she recognizes David's adulterous desire.

Let us look at the inherent connection between Hannah and Abigail as constructed by the rabbis. Could Hannah's allusion to Saul and Jehu, and so to the destruction of the northern kingdom, be seen as a reference to a historical trauma whose repercussions were still felt in the Talmudic era? Or were the rabbis dealing with this trauma by, through Hannah's mention of the northern kingdom, recalling another Jewish exile unrelated to Jerusalem and the temple? Perhaps their concern was not the former northern kingdom, which had no longer existed for around one thousand years by the Talmudic era, but for the many who had been "lost." Strikingly, the Talmudic rabbis directly linked the prophecy of the following and sixth woman prophet, Huldah, with the salvation of the ten lost tribes. They do so by asking where exactly Huldah's colleague, the prophet Jeremiah, was at the time.

Huldah was a prophetess, as it is written: "So Hilkiah the priest and Ahikam and Achbor and Shaphan and Asaiah went to Huldah the prophetess" (2 Kings 22:14) as emissaries of King Josiah. The Gemara asks: But if Jeremiah was found there, how could she prophesy? Out of respect for Jeremiah, who was her superior, it would have been fitting that she not prophesy in his presence. The Sages of the school of Rav say in the name of Rav: Huldah was a close relative of Jeremiah, and he did not object to her prophesying in his presence. The Gemara asks: But how could Josiah himself ignore Jeremiah and send emissaries to Huldah? The Sages of the school of Rabbi Sheila say: Because women are more compassionate, and he hoped that what she would tell them would not be overly harsh. Rabbi Yoḥanan said a different answer: Jeremiah was not there at the time, because he went to bring back the ten tribes from their exile. (B. Megillah 14b)

Jeremiah has left to bring back the ten tribes, i.e. the people of the northern kingdom Israel. Here we can see that the Biblical and rabbinical critique of David might encompass a more far-reaching skepticism against the Davidic line. This is perhaps what is expressed through Huldah's actions. I believe that the teaching of the seven women prophets indeed contains hope for a messianic alternative to the Davidic paradigm. And I see it proven in the fact that the line of the seven women prophets culminates in the figure of Esther.

### Was Esther a Jew? – Malka bat Shaul

Esther is of course considered to be a Jewish queen. But was Esther a Jew? The discussion in the Talmud itself points out that there had been a shift in the meaning of the word “Jew.” If the starting point is the twelve Israelite tribes, then Esther was not Judean or a member of the tribe of Judah. Although her uncle is introduced as a “Yehudi,” a Jew, he is called a “Benjamite” in the next breath:

“There was a certain Jew in Shushan the castle, whose name was Mordecai the son of Yair the son of Shimei the son of Kish, a Benjamite” (Esther 2:5).

Did Mordecai have a double identity? In the Biblical understanding of history, the kingdom of “Israel” is made up of the sons of Rachel: Joseph and his sons Ephraim and Menashe, as well as Benjamin, who was Rachel’s youngest son. To them were added the other tribes of the northern kingdom, except for Judah’s line. Judah was Leah’s son. His descendants made up the population of the southern kingdom, Judea. Both kingdoms – Israel and Judah – were destroyed. The northern kingdom, Israel, was remembered as the ten lost tribes, which would return when Israel was reunited by the Messiah. The exiled members of the southern kingdom, Judah, survived as Jews and, around sixty years after the destruction of Jerusalem, were given permission by the then Persian kings to rebuild their temple. The Biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe their return and the political reestablishment of the province of “Judea” in the Persian Empire. At that time, after the period in exile, the term “*Yehudi*” – Judean or Jew – had become a new national identity. All descendants of those who once lived in Israel or Judea became known as “*Yehudim*” – as Jews. “Jew” thus became an umbrella term for all survivors of the exile.

The doctrine of the ten lost tribes might then be a compromise with those who did not agree to this new, unified denotation, those, who did not feel themselves as “Jews” in the new sense. For the tribes were not truly lost, or no longer identifiable. Clearly, as we can see in the Book of Esther, Benjamites still existed, members of a tribe that had been part of the northern kingdom. If we wanted to be precise, we could say that with Esther, Persia was given a Benjamite queen. But this is not the message of the story of Esther. Mordechai is “*ha-Yehudi*” – the Jew! The Book of Esther underlines the Jewish identity of Mordechai and Esther, but this identity no longer describes membership in a tribe; it is supratribal, almost in the modern sense *political* identity. This new identity is not necessarily linked to a national state. One of its main features is its fluidity. One can be more than only Jewish. Double or even



multiple identities are typical of existence in the Diaspora. Esther is not only of Benjamite descent, but she is also at the same time a Jew. Her diasporic identity, however, does not restrict her to these two denotations alone. Esther is also a resident of Persia. This is mirrored in her two names: her Hebrew name, Hadassah, and her Persian name, Esther/Astarte. And the rabbis are aware of the multiplicity of Diaspora identities in their discussion of Esther's names.

"And he [Mordechai] had brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther" (Esther 2:7). She is referred to as "Hadassah" and she is referred to as "Esther." What was her real name? It is taught in a *baraita* that the Sages differed in their opinion as to which was in fact her name and which one was a description: Rabbi Meir says: Esther was her real name. Why then was she called Hadassah? On account of the righteous, who are called myrtles [*hadassim*], and so it states: "And he stood among the myrtles [*hahadassim*]" (Zech. 1:8). (B. Megilla 13a<sup>12</sup>)

Clearly, the story of Esther and Mordechai is a counternarrative to the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The latter describe the return of the Jews from Persia (previously Babylon) to Jerusalem at the end of the Babylonian exile. Esther and Mordechai, however, represent those whose families did not return to Jerusalem. For them, judging by the Biblical narrative of the Esther story, the land and the temple were not even recognizable as a lodestar, at least not as far as the exact wording of the story of Esther goes. Its horizon is the Persian kingdom, there is no intimation of an alternative life in another country.

Esther and Mordechai must be seen as Benjamites. Their tribe has not been lost. This implicit message in the teaching of the seven women prophets embeds Jewish identity within a larger context. There are more Jews in the world than we know. They live among and are connected to other peoples and only on the surface are they invisible. In the Talmudic discourse on the teaching of the seven women prophets, the rabbis draw a direct line from Mordechai and Esther to the former Biblical King Saul. He was the founder of the united kingdom of Israel and also a Benjamite.

"There was a certain Jew in Shushan the castle, whose name was Mordecai the son of Jair the son of Shimei the son of Kish, a Benjamite" (Esther 2:5). (B. Megillah 12b)

Saul, who was from the tribe of Benjamin, did not kill the Amalekite king Agag (1 Sam. 15:8), from whom Haman was later born. (B. Megillah 13a)

By mentioning the Amalekite king Agag, the rabbis place the story of Esther in a much larger context. For them, it is about the great and unending war that

12 This discussion of her name continues for many verses.

Amalek, the incarnation of evil, continued to wage against Israel, and hence also against God.<sup>13</sup> Amalek, the desert tribe that also ambushed escapees from Egyptian in the Book of Exodus (Exod. 17), stands for evil itself in the Jewish tradition, which rises in every generation and tries to exterminate Israel. In Deuteronomy, Moses warns the Israelites:

Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt – how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. Therefore, when your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget! (Deut. 25:17–19)

It would of course also be possible to explore here whether the eternal war with Amalek is directly linked to the messianic hope at the end of days. But in my opinion, it is sufficient to note that from both the Biblical and the rabbinical viewpoint, Esther stood the test and was victorious over Amalek (in the guise of Haman), even without direct intervention by God. More astonishing about the Talmudic rabbis' understanding of history however is that they trace Esther's line back even further – namely to the matriarch Rachel. Or, if we look at this the other way around, from Rachel, the mother of the Benjamites, descended King Saul in later generations and from him, again after many generations, descended Esther.

This teaches that in reward for the modesty (*tzniut*) shown by Rachel she merited that Saul, who was also modest, should descend from her, and in reward for the modesty shown by Saul, he merited that Esther should descend from him.<sup>14</sup> (B. Megillah 13b)

As said, in their discussion of the prophet Huldah, the rabbis mention the prophet Jeremiah's intervention in favor of the ten tribes. In the Book of Jeremiah, his biographical data includes the fact that his family comes from "Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin" (Jer. 1:1). In a well-known quote from Jeremiah on Rachel, the matriarch of the Benjamites, who was crying for her children in exile, the prophet holds up the idea that the northern kingdom only seems to have been lost.

13 See Klapheck, "Ein jüdisch-feministisches Selbstverständnis nach der Shoah."

14 Rachel also represents solidarity with her sister Leah, who was not loved by Jacob. Leah gave birth to Judah. Here too, we can see the rabbinical understanding of history. Rachel's modesty expresses Israel's restraint as regards the dominance of Judah.

Thus said the Eternal: A cry is heard in Ramah – Wailing, bitter weeping – Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted. For her children, who are gone. Thus said the Eternal: Restrain your voice from weeping, Your eyes from shedding tears; For there is a reward for your labor – declares the Eternal: They shall return from the enemy's land. And there is hope for your future – declares the Eternal: Your children shall return to their country. (Jer. 31:15–17; see also *Lamentations Rabbah*, Petichta 24)

In that case Rachel's children – Joseph and Benjamin – who represent the former northern kingdom of “Israel,” are not lost after all. What is more, according to the Talmudic interpretation of the Book of Esther, this reappearance would not occur only at the “end of days,” but in their Persian here and now. And the catalyst would not be a Mashiah ben David, a Messiah son of David, but a Malka bat Shaul, a Queen daughter of Saul.

### A Messianic Alternative to the Son of David

My thesis is that the teaching of the seven women prophets offers a messianic alternative to the doctrine of the Davidic Messiah from the royal line of Judah. And that this alternative does not insist upon waiting until the end of days but is available now and offers salvation already today. Because this redemption is not fixated on the state or on a temple – the classical fields of male representation in Biblical patriarchal society – the rabbis construed a messianic alternative in the form of a line of prophetic women. It is a vision that allows for a multicultural Jewish identity and encompasses non-Jewish partners and political emancipation, bringing a taste of messianic times to the secular Persian here and now.

Whether or not this went hand-in-hand with a rise in status for real Jewish women at the time is questionable. But we can safely assume that cohesion in Jewish diaspora communities also depended upon the cooperation of the women. The teaching of the seven women prophets provided additional motivation for women to keep Jewish traditions alive and ensure the continuation of the Jewish people in the diaspora. Yet the construction of a line of prophetic women did more: it also made it possible to speak about an inner-Jewish trauma. Through the order of the women and the rabbinical reasons given for their status as prophets, the rabbis were subtly addressing a painful subject: the forgetting of groups that supposedly no longer existed – the “ten lost tribes.” Moreover, this critique seems to be directed not only against the Assyrians, who caused the fall of the northern kingdom. It also expresses criticism of a

well-known inner-Jewish dynamic, embodied by a rigid religious understanding that defines who is a Jew within narrow confines – ignoring, marginalizing, and making invisible all other Jews. The messianic aim of the line of the seven women prophets was that the descendants of the northern kingdom should no longer be considered as obliterated, but rather their salvific historical impact upon contemporaneous diasporic reality should be recognized. These women did not live with a homogenous “Jewish” exile identity that drew solely from the ideas of loss and the wish to return to a former era. Instead, a Jewish mixture of multiple identities speaks through them, anchored in a multilayered, multiethnic, international world. Unlike the messianic doctrine of Mashiah ben David, the Messiah from the Jewish, Davidic line who will appear at the end of days, the teaching of the seven women prophets show us that true, if only partial, salvation is possible in today’s reality, as it was in Esther’s day. This salvation – which can be understood as rescue and as secular emancipation – is nevertheless situated in the context of an eternal struggle against evil, denoted by “Amalek.” In this struggle, bravery is key, for there is no promise that God will help, although the struggle is on his behalf.

In the Book of Esther, Esther can be seen as a “secular queen,” and yet in the rabbinical discussion she can be recognized at the same time as a “messianic queen.” Esther unites both qualities – secular and messianic. But what makes her a prophet? The bible itself does not designate her as such. It is only the Talmudic rabbis who first see a prophet in her. Yet they name just one singular moment that proves this status:

Esther was also a prophetess, as it is written: “And it came to pass on the third day that Esther clothed herself in royalty (*va-tilbash Esther malchut bigdey malchut*)” (Esther 5:1). It should have said: Esther clothed herself in royal garments. Rather, this alludes to the fact that she clothed herself with a divine spirit of inspiration (*ruach hakodesh*). (B. Megillah 15a)

The passage quoted is from the moment in the story of Esther in which she is preparing for the banquet with the king. The rabbis note that the word *malchut*, royal, is doubled: *va-tilbash Esther malchut bigdey malchut*. As a queen, she clothes herself in royal garments and at the same time in a kind of meta-royalty. For the Talmudic rabbis, as a result, King Ahasuerus in one singular moment recognizes the two dimensions of royalty within Esther: on the one hand she is royal as his wife, whom he has made queen, but she also holds a royalty of her own, independent of himself, the king. The rabbi’s interpretation of this passage in the book of Esther is as follows:

During the banquet Esther said to Ahasuerus: "For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to be annihilated. (...)" (Esther 7:4). Then said the king Ahasuerus and said to Esther the queen" (Esther 7:5). The Gemara asks: Why do I need it to say "said" and again "said"? Rabbi Abbahu said: At first, he spoke to her through the translator, who would interpret on his behalf, because he thought that she was a common woman of lowly ancestry. Once she told him that she came from the house of Saul, immediately it says: "And said to Esther the queen." Ahasuerus himself spoke to her, as if she had royal lineage, she was a woman befitting his status. (B. Megillah 16a)

Ahasuerus, the rabbis believe, recognizes in Esther the royal descendant of King Saul. That makes her a queen in her own right – even without her royal Persian wedding. She is a descendent of an anointed king.

From the line of the seven women prophets, we can infer that the Talmud is offering no less than an alternative to the doctrine of the Davidic Messiah. But there is also another possible viewpoint. Is prophecy connected to a messianic vision? Not necessarily. The line of the seven women prophets leads to the rabbinic discussion of Queen Esther – a Benjamite queen, a queen in the Diaspora, queen of the lost tribes. Her rescue of the Jews does not lead back to the Holy Land, but forward to the emancipation of the Jews in the Persian diaspora. Perhaps it is possible to say that an alternative path of Israelite/Jewish prophecy is laid out here, one that leads in a new direction. A non-messianic direction that does not aim primarily at a physical return to Jerusalem but to the betterment of political conditions in the here and now.

In the rabbinical interpretation, the salvation that became possible through Esther's acts (without the help of God), is equally important to the liberation of the Israelites from pharaonic oppression (with God's help). The rabbis compare Esther's scroll with the Song of the Sea (*shirat ha-yam*) and with Hallel, the psalms of praise that are recited on the feasts of pilgrimage.

On what basis did they add this mitzva [reading the Esther scroll on Purim]? Rabbi Hiyya bar Avin said that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korḥa said that they reasoned as follows: If, when recalling the exodus from Egypt, in which the Jews were delivered from slavery to freedom, we recite songs of praise, the Song of the Sea and the hymns of *hallel*, then, in order to properly recall the miracle of Purim and commemorate God's delivering us from death to life, is it not all the more so the case that we must sing God's praise by reading the story in the Megilla? The Gemara asks: If so, our obligation should be at least as great as when we recall the exodus from Egypt, and let us also recite *hallel* on Purim. The Gemara answers: *Hallel* is not said on Purim, because *hallel* is not recited on a miracle that occurred outside Eretz Yisrael. (...) Rav Nahman said an alternative answer as to why *hallel* is not recited on Purim: The reading of the Megilla itself is an act of reciting *hallel*. Etc. (B. Megillah 14a)

For the rabbis, this explains why the Book of Esther was added to the Tanakh as an alternative version of rescue from that in the Torah.

The Sages taught: Forty-eight prophets and seven women prophets prophesied on behalf of the Jewish people, and they neither subtracted from nor added onto what is written in the Torah introducing no changes or additions to the mitzvot, except for the reading of the Megillah which they added as an obligation for all future generations. (B. Megillah 14a)

In light of the rabbinical interpretation, the addition of the Book of Esther leads back to King Saul, whose disqualification was perhaps only superficial, and states that the redemption of the Jews is not possible without the inclusion of those who were given up for “lost.” Seen in this way, the teaching of the seven women prophets points toward something that has been suppressed. It contains a witness to a protest of, if not resistance against, the general messianic doctrine of Mashiah ben David. Like a secret doctrine however, it can only be shared with those able to decode it using rabbinical hermeneutics. But once the code is cracked, it today provides us with the seeds of a rabbinic gender theory as the condition for an alternative messianic prophetic paradigm.

### Conclusion – a “Counterprophecy”

The Talmudic teaching of the seven women prophets is a “counterprophecy” to the male representatives of the prophetic office. This raises the question of whether the teaching of the seven women prophets is a genuine Jewish-rabbinic construction or whether it corresponds to a model of counterprophecy that can be found also in other Abrahamic religions. A possible answer to this question may be supplied by Christian theological approaches to the role of Mary as a quasi-prophetess who brings about redemption/salvation without the support of a man, only by her ability to envision a future Messiah brought forth out of herself. There are Catholic theologies that see the figure of a real human being as the “Mother of God” as the prerequisite for an *a priori* worldly-secular quality of Christianity. I can imagine that the role of Maryam in the Qur’an could also serve as a basis for a female “counterprophecy” vis-à-vis the prophecies of Mohammed. The Qur’an refers to Maryam as “Aaron’s sister” (Q 19:28). This identifies her as the prophetess Miriam, who rejoiced with the Israelite women in the desert over Pharaoh’s downfall (Exod. 15:20). And at the same time, the Qur’an sees the “sister of Aaron” as the Mary of the New Testament who gives birth to the messianic prophet Jesus. In linking both and naming them “sister,”

it seems to me that the Qur'an too constructs a female lineage from the time of the Exodus (Miriam) to the time of the Second Temple (Mary). And perhaps the female partners of Jesus too, just as of Mohammed could be interpreted not so much as assistants, enabling a male prophet, but rather raise a voice of their own, shifting subtly the prophetic focus of their male counterpart. It is not upon me to apply a model of a female counterprophecy to other Abrahamic religions, yet the Talmudic teaching of the seven women prophets invites contemporary prophetology to a new theological approach acknowledging a counter-prophetic dialectic already anchored in scripture expressed by women exercising prophetic abilities, which received deep respect in the religious tradition they helped to enable.

*Translated by Laura Radosh*

# From Lawgiver to Prophet

## *The Transformation of the Image of Moses in Late Antiquity*

Catherine Hezser

In the Exodus narrative of the Hebrew Bible Moses is presented as the divinely sanctioned “national” leader of Israelites, who led them out of the oppressive situation they found themselves in as migrants in Egypt (Exod. 3:16–22) and conveyed to them a set of legal rules concerning all aspects of life, endorsed by the claim of divine revelation (Exod. 19 and 34). In later Jewish and rabbinic consciousness, this latter aspect predominates: the Torah was given to Moses at Sinai – Moses is the intermediary through whom God delivered his Torah to his people.<sup>1</sup> In their focus on Torah study, interpretation, and application rabbis considered themselves to stand in a direct line of sages that could be traced back to Moses at Sinai.<sup>2</sup> Their “oral” Torah was linked to the “written” Torah, rabbinic halakhah continued and expanded biblical law.<sup>3</sup> Like Moses, late antique rabbis’ main role was that of “lawgivers”, who tried to regulate the behavior of their fellow-Jews not only in cultic but also in inter-personal relationships resembling Roman civil law.<sup>4</sup>

In the Qur’an, Muhammad appears as a prophet succeeding and superseding Moses (Musa) and Jesus, whose prophecy he is believed to have completed.<sup>5</sup> Moses is mentioned 136 times, indicating this “paradigmatic prophet”’s prominence in Qur’anic “biblical reminiscence”.<sup>6</sup> Angelika Neuwirth has argued that the Qur’an can only be understood properly when read in the context of late antiquity, that is, as emerging out of a late antique milieu in which Jewish and Christian perceptions of Moses circulated orally, in writing, and

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1 See the contributions in Brooke, Najman, and Stuckenbruck, *The Significance of Sinai*.

2 Neusner, *Judaism When Christianity Began*, 110: “... the Torah given at Sinai included more than just the words written on the tablets, but also Scripture, the Mishnah, the Talmud, and Aggadah – and even what the experienced students in the future are going to conclude”.

3 Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*, 39.

4 On rabbis and Roman law see Hezser, “The Mishnah and Roman Law.”

5 On Moses’ relationship to Jesus and Muhammad in Islam see Wolf, “Moses in Christian and Islamic Tradition,” 105f.; Ghaffar, “Einordnung in die koranische Prophetologie,” 176–226 esp. 206–9. On Moses in Islam see especially Wheeler, *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis*; Sukhiashvili, “Moses in the Qur’an.” On prophetology in the Qur’an see Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, 62–89, and on Moses in particular *ibid.*, 77–80.

6 Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, 80, 77.



in artistic representations. In this vein, Hartmut Bobzin writes: "In summary, then, the Qur'an's portrayal of Muhammad's prophethood is characterized by a typological association with the figure of Moses. The way Moses is portrayed owes much to Judaism and to Jewish Christianity ... Just as Jewish Christianity regarded Jesus as a prophet who confirmed and completed Moses' prophecy, the Qur'an views Muhammad as having completed Moses' work".<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Zishan Ghaffar sees "Muhammad as Moses redivivus" in the Qur'an and emphasizes the "typological permeability" of the representations.<sup>8</sup> According to Griffith, Moses is presented "as a model for Muhammad" as far as his "prophetic career" as a "messenger" of God and revealer of divine scriptures is concerned.<sup>9</sup>

In this paper I shall argue that the Islamic view of Moses stands in line with the late antique transformation of Moses' image in patristic literature and Byzantine art, particularly of the fourth to sixth centuries. The Christian appropriation and transformation of Moses coincides with a de-emphasis on Moses in synagogue and funeral art of that time. While the Christian *traditio legis* replaced Moses at Sinai with Christ on a mountain and the Torah with an open scroll that was probably meant to represent Jesus' gospel, the figure of Moses is absent in late antique synagogue art in the Land of Israel and appears only in the earlier third-century Dura Europos synagogue paintings. In a recent article, Armin F. Bergmeier has argued that in the late antique context the *traditio legis* "was understood as a visualization of the Old Testament prophecy at Isa. 2:2–4. These verses predicted the coming of the new Messiah and the spreading of his Law across the world in a time of peace ...".<sup>10</sup> This iconographic motif had its heyday in the fourth and fifth centuries and is represented in a number of early Byzantine churches.<sup>11</sup> In the Qur'an, the receipt of the Decalogue (sura 17:39) puts Muhammad "as *nabiy* typologically on the same level as Moses".<sup>12</sup> Other often-used Christian motifs of that time period were Moses at the burning bush, which symbolized the transfiguration and was linked to apophatic theology, and Moses drawing water from the rock.<sup>13</sup> The Qur'an is similarly interested in signs and symbols and, according to Ghaffar, evinces a veritable

7 Bobzin, "The 'Seal' of the Prophets," 581.

8 Ghaffar, "Einordnung in die koranische Prophetologie," 198, 206. My translation from the German text.

9 Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, 77–78.

10 Bergmeier, "The *Traditio Legis* in Late Antiquity," 27–52.

11 See *ibid.*

12 Ghaffar, "Einordnung in die koranische Prophetologie," 209. My translation from the German.

13 Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis*, 91 (transfiguration) and 198 (apophatic theology).

“sign theology” (“Zeichentheologie”).<sup>14</sup> Miracles serve to legitimize and authorize divine messengers (cf. sura 40:23: “Certainly We sent Moses with Our signs and a manifest authority”).

While the most common third- to fourth-century Christian catacomb depictions of Moses emphasize the miraculous aspects of the biblical narrative (Moses drawing water from a rock; Moses performing his miracle while the Egyptian flee in disorder), Christian sarcophagus decorations show Moses on panels together with a selection of other “Old” and “New” Testament scenes and personages, that is, they integrate him into Christian salvation history. By the late fourth century the *traditio legis* motif already appears in sarcophagus reliefs that convey the notion that Christ is the “true” lawgiver, not only replacing Moses in his traditional role but also changing the nature of the “law” itself. The law-focused biblical tradition associated with Moses has been transformed into a tradition that presents Christ as the fulfiller of biblical prophecies and revealer of new spiritual truths that are meant to guide his believers’ lives. In the middle Meccan suras of the Qur’an, Muhammad becomes the new identification figure for Muslim communities and his message reflects a “spiritual reorientation”.<sup>15</sup>

### 1. Dura Europos Synagogue: Moses as a Communal Identification Figure

Motifs based on the biblical Moses narrative are particularly prevalent in the Dura Europos synagogue of the third century C.E. Scenes depicting Moses appear in five panels that range from Pharaoh’s daughter finding the baby Moses in a basket floating in the Nile river (Exod. 2:5–10),<sup>16</sup> to Moses fleeing to Midian after having killed an Egyptian and scolded a fellow-Israelite (Exod. 2:15),<sup>17</sup> Moses at the burning bush, where God reveals himself to him and promises to lead the Israelites out of Egypt (Exod. 3:2–19),<sup>18</sup> Moses splitting the Red Sea to let the Israelites move into safety (Exod. 14:16),<sup>19</sup> and Moses at Miriam’s well, an image that lacks a direct basis in the Hebrew Bible and is

14 Ghaffar, “Einordnung in die koranische Prophetologie,” 182f.

15 Ibid., 208.

16 See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dura\\_Europos\\_fresco\\_Moses\\_from\\_river.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dura_Europos_fresco_Moses_from_river.jpg) (accessed 7 July 2021).

17 See <https://cja.huji.ac.il/browser.php?mode=alone&id=6886> (accessed 7 July 2021).

18 See [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Moses\\_Dura\\_Europos.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Moses_Dura_Europos.jpg) (accessed 7 July 2021).

19 See <http://cojs.org/dura-moses/> (accessed 7 July 2021).

based on a later tradition developing from Moses striking the rock for water (Exod. 17:6). This painting also gives a central place to the *menorah* as the most important Jewish symbol, which appears in the background, flanked by the Israelites' temporary huts that are reminiscent of the *sukkah*.<sup>20</sup> Hagit Sivan has pointed to the central place which these Moses scenes occupy in the spatial and iconographic program of the Dura synagogue: "Moses practically dominates the Western Wall, with no less than five panels, two enormous at the top depicting the Exodus, one showing him in the centre with the burning bush, and the infancy scene. No other figure occupies so much space at Dura".<sup>21</sup>

Why did those responsible for the Dura Europos wall paintings give so much significance to the Moses narrative and why did they choose these specific scenes? Several explanations are possible. Like Moses and the Israelites in Egypt, the Jews of Dura Europos were migrants who lived outside of the Jewish homeland. Even if they were well integrated into their local surroundings, they may have felt threatened in maintaining their Jewish identity. The very phenomenon of the synagogue paintings already suggests that they were keen on expressing their own salvation history publicly, in formal analogy to but theological distinction from the iconographic program of the nearby church.<sup>22</sup> Peppard has emphasized that Dura Europos was a frontier town whose inhabitants came from a variety of ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. In the mid-third century "one could have visited buildings and shrines dedicated to the gods of Greece, Rome, Judea, Syria, and Persia", in addition to the Christian church.<sup>23</sup> In such a multi-cultural climate each community may have been eager to stress their own cultural traditions by, at the same time, adhering to a shared visual language.

Besides Moses, Abraham and David appear in the synagogue paintings as prominent figures from the Jewish past.<sup>24</sup> Rachel Hachlili has already stressed that the images are not directly based on and do not illustrate the written biblical texts. They are rather based on oral narratives that were transmitted

20 See <https://cja.huji.ac.il/browser.php?mode=alone&id=873> (accessed 7 July 2021).

21 Hagith Sivan, "Retelling the Story of Moses at Dura Europos Synagogue", <https://www.thetorah.com/article/retelling-the-story-of-moses-at-dura-europos-synagogue> (accessed 7 July 2021). Sivan considers the Dura Europos paintings of the Exodus as an "anti-Haggadah": "The dominance of Moses here is striking in view of his almost total absence from the Passover Haggadah, the central text of the Passover Seder", but the Passover Haggadah developed in the Middle Ages only, so that this iconographic programme cannot be considered a reaction to it.

22 On the church see Peppard, *The World's Oldest Church*.

23 Ibid., 6.

24 On the Binding of Isaac motif in the Dura Europos synagogue see Hezser, *Bild und Kontext*, 48ff.

within the community.<sup>25</sup> Scenes from the Exodus story would have symbolized the salvific history of the Jews who lived at Dura Europos: just as God saved Moses and the Israelites in the past, he would also save contemporary Jews. The iconographical depiction would also have evoked ritual associations with the Jewish holidays of Passover as a commemoration of the Exodus and Sukkot (notice the huts in the desert in one of the scenes).

Steven Fine has also pointed to another image that he associates with Moses, namely, the depiction of a man holding a scroll.<sup>26</sup> He argues that this man can be identified as “Moses, the archetypical sage in Second Temple and rabbinic times”.<sup>27</sup> According to rabbinic sources, Moses received the Torah at Sinai and passed it on to Joshua, the elders, and eventually rabbis. Whereas Ezra “the scribe” is presented as reading from “the scroll of the teaching of Moses” in Neh. 8:1–3, Josephus associates public Torah reading with Moses himself.<sup>28</sup> The scroll reader depicted in the wall painting wears the kind of clothes that third-century Jews would have worn. Fine, therefore, thinks that Torah readers within the community would have identified with Moses as the quintessential Torah reader here. The identification with Moses remains uncertain, however. The figure could also represent Ezra or was understood generically.

## 2. The Rabbinic Image of Moses as Lawgiver and Righteous Person

The image of the Torah reader, whose identification with Moses remains uncertain, is reminiscent of the rabbinic perception of Moses as the Jewish leader who received the Torah from God at Sinai. The chain of tradition that began with Moses is listed in Mishnah Avot 1:1: “Moses received the Torah from Sinai, and he transmitted it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets handed it down to the men of the great assembly ...”.<sup>29</sup> Late antique rabbis would have identified with Moses as the first sage who transmitted divine law to his fellow-Israelites, just as they instructed their Jewish contemporaries in halakhic matters.

In the Talmud Yerushalmi, rabbinic rules are often based on precedents attributed to Moses. For example, based on m. Pes. 7:4, y. Pes. 7:4, 34a discusses

<sup>25</sup> Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements*, 96.

<sup>26</sup> See <https://talivirtualmidrash.org.il/dura-europos-synagogue-moses-reading-the-torah/> (accessed 8 July 2021).

<sup>27</sup> Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World*, 179.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 179, n. 65.

<sup>29</sup> On this text see Stemberger, “Moses received Torah.”

the question whether the Passover offering, which is to be brought at a specific time, can be brought in an unclean state (that is, the priest, community members, or cultic objects might be unclean). Does the requirement of a specific time override the issue of uncleanness here, and if so, what could this rule be based on? Furthermore, can the regulations pertaining to Passover be expanded to other festivals as well? In a statement attributed to Rabbi (i.e., R. Yehudah ha-Nasi) the verse Lev. 23 is quoted ("So Moses declared to the Israelites the set times of the Lord") – do all sacrifices associated with festivals that are celebrated at "set times" override the Sabbath (but see Lev. 23:38) and can they all be offered in a state of uncleanness? This and many other rabbinic texts indicate that statements and rules associated with Moses constituted the basis of rabbinic halakhic discussions and rabbis' own legal creativity.<sup>30</sup>

Although rabbis wondered why Moses was not allowed to enter the promised land (Deut. 32:52, cf. Num. 20:12), in Midrash he is presented as a model of righteousness.<sup>31</sup> In *Sifre Deuteronomy* 26 Moses and David are presented as "two fine leaders [who] served Israel".<sup>32</sup> Moses, conscious of having committed a sin, is said to have asked God to "let the sin which I have committed be recorded after me [after my death] so that people should not say, 'It would appear that Moses falsified the words of the Torah or proclaimed a precept which had not been commanded'" (ibid.). Here the lesser sin (at the waters of Meribah, cf. Num. 27:14) is supposed to be made public to avert people from suspecting Moses of a much graver sin, namely the falsification of the Torah. The truthful transmission of the Torah and its commandments is presented as Moses' greatest legacy here. He is envisioned as an honest and truthful servant of God and leader of Israel, less concerned with his own reputation than with people's trust in the validity of God's precepts which he recorded. Although Moses' "good deeds" would have suspended the divine punishment of his sin, he asked for God's mercy. The midrash presents this behavior as exemplary. Fraade stresses the humility with which Moses is presented here.<sup>33</sup>

In his study of Moses in the rabbinic tradition Günter Stemberger has pointed out that the association of Moses with the Sinai revelation of the Torah

30 See also, e.g., y. Pes. 11, 27a, where Moses' rules for offering the first (on the fourteenth of Nissan, cf. Num. 9:4–5) and second Passover sacrifice (by those who were unclean then and had to offer it a month later) are mentioned (cf. Num. 9:9–11).

31 Fraade, "Sifre Deuteronomy 26 (Ad Deut. 3:23)," 258 n. 27 notes that "this question becomes the subject of intense discussion among rabbinic midrashists and mediaeval commentators", with references.

32 My translation follows Fraade *ibid.*, 264f.

33 See Fraade, "Sifre Deuteronomy 26 (Ad Deut. 3:23)," 270.

rarely appears in tannaitic texts.<sup>34</sup> The focus on Moses as a lawgiver and model ancestor of rabbis as legal interpreters and as a righteous person seems to have been emphasized especially in late antiquity, as the Talmud Yerushalmi and amoraic Midrahim suggest. Stemberger points to a “famous parlance of rabbinic theology” (my translation from the German) at the very end of Midrash Sifra on Lev. 27:34 (“These are the commandments which the Lord gave Moses for the Israelite people on Mount Sinai”): from that time onwards no prophet will add anything: “Erneuerung und Ausgestaltung der Halakhah ist nicht unter Berufung auf Offenbarung, sondern allein durch rabbinische Auslegung der Mose gegebenen rabbinischen Gebote möglich”.<sup>35</sup> Variants of this tradition appear in the Palestinian (y. Meg. 1:7, 70d) and Babylonian Talmuds (b. Meg. 2b and 3a; b. Yoma 80a; b. Temura 16a): “Es ist somit denkbar, dass der Satz als ganzer erst spät in Sifra eingetragen wurde”.<sup>36</sup> The emphasis on Moses as the last recipient of divine revelation and on rabbis as the only authorized interpreters of this revelation may have been directed against late antique and early Byzantine Christians who claimed the superiority of their “prophet” Jesus’s revealed teachings.

### 3. The Exodus in the Wadi Hamam and Huqoq Synagogue Mosaics: God’s Saving Power

Whereas scenes concerning Moses and the Exodus narrative are absent from synagogues with Zodiac panels (the Sepphoris synagogue shows Aaron’s consecration to the service of the Tabernacle, though), the two recently excavated synagogues at Wadi Hamam (4th c.) and Huqoq (5th c.) do depict particular scenes from the narrative – albeit not Moses himself.<sup>37</sup> Before we take a closer look at these scenes, it should be noted that other, no longer existing panels may well have featured other parts of the Exodus story and perhaps even Moses himself. With regard to the Wadi Hamam mosaic, Weiss has suggested that “its missing parts probably illustrated the Israelites being saved miraculously”,<sup>38</sup> and Talgam reckons with the possibility that Moses himself may have been

34 Stemberger, *Mose in der rabbinischen Tradition*, 105.

35 Ibid., 109.

36 Ibid.

37 On the scene with Aaron and the Tabernacle see Weiss, “Decorating the Sacred Realm.” At 123 fig. 1. Aaron’s consecration was linked to priestly functions and would have fitted other priestly associations in synagogue mosaic decorations.

38 Weiss, “Decorating the Sacred Realm,” 122.

depicted in a no longer preserved panel.<sup>39</sup> If that was the case – something we can no longer determine – the iconographic program of some late antique synagogues in the Land of Israel may have resembled that of the Dura Europos wall paintings with more biblical scenes than assumed in the past.

A fragmentary panel of the only partly preserved floor mosaic of the Wadi Hamam synagogue seems to depict the unsuccessful attempt of Pharaoh's army to follow the Israelites through the Red Sea. The image seems to allude to that part of the Exodus story which mentions God's protection of the Israelites while crossing the sea. In *Exod.* 14:16 God tells Moses to "lift up your rod and hold out your arm over the sea and split it so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground". By contrast, Pharaoh's army is destined to drown. In the next sentence, their destiny is predicted: "And I shall stiffen the hearts of the Egyptians so that they go in [to the water] after them; and I will gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen. Let the Egyptians know that I am Lord, when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen" (14:17–18). The fate of Pharaoh's army is related in *Exod.* 14:23–28: when the Egyptians pursued the Israelites, God "locked the wheels of their chariots, so that they moved forward with difficulty (14:25). He then instructed Moses to use his rod again: "that the waters may come back upon the Egyptians and upon their chariots and upon their horsemen" (*ibid.* v. 26). The very moment when the Egyptians experience this difficulty seems to be depicted in the mosaic panel, which shows the upturned wheels and horses of a chariot, a large fish, and part of a soldier lying on the ground with an outstretched sword.<sup>40</sup>

The synagogue visitors would have been familiar with the narrative, e.g., through synagogue Torah readings and sermons. While the preserved part of the panel shows the outcome of God's (and Moses') actions only, obviously God's protection of the Israelites and his punishment of their enemies is alluded to here. Miller and Leibner point to "the centrality of the story of the exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea in Jewish tradition".<sup>41</sup> In the Hebrew Bible the Exodus and crossing of the sea constitute the beginning of the Israelites' movement toward the promised land and God's revelation of the Torah at Sinai. "Rabbinic sources go even further, viewing the exodus not only as a miraculous intervention by God on behalf of the Israelites, but as an archetype for future redemptions".<sup>42</sup> In the early Byzantine context, God's actions against Pharaoh and his army, that is, his eradication of Israel's enemies may

39 Talgam, "From Wall Paintings to Floor Mosaics," esp. 104.

40 See fig. 4.32 in Leibner and Miller, "The Synagogue Mosaic," 165.

41 *Ibid.*, 167.

42 *Ibid.*

have received a particularly poignant meaning. Pharaoh and the Egyptian army may have stood in for Byzantine Christian authorities imposing discriminatory laws on Jews and invading and appropriating their territory. Whereas the motif is rare in synagogue art – it also appears in Dura Europos and Huqoq – it often appears on Christian sarcophagi, on the wall of a Christian catacomb in Rome, and in early Byzantine churches (see section 4 below). The Wadi Hamam version seems to stress God's own salvific power rather than pointing to Moses as a human endowed with supernatural powers.

Whereas the Wadi Hamam sea-crossing scene focuses on the drowning of Pharaoh's army, at Dura Europos the focus is on Moses' miracle working. The wall painting shows three Jewish men in striped tunics in the foreground and two depictions of groups of people in a smaller size format. The group on the left-hand side seems to depict Israelites able to walk on dry ground, whereas the right-hand scene shows people in the water who are drowning and splashing about. The central figure is Moses, whose miracle splits the sea, as explicated by an Aramaic inscription ("Moses when he went up from Egypt and split the sea"). In fact, all three men seem to represent Moses at different times, a composition that resembles modern graphic novels and is to be read from left to right (despite the Aramaic script's reading from right to left): Moses with the rod in his hand before using it, turned toward the Israelites; Moses lifting his arm and using the rod; and Moses lifting the rod above his head after having accomplished his task.<sup>43</sup> Moses' action is linked to God's saving power through the two hands from heaven above the two central figures' heads. The divine hands suggest that Moses' miraculous power is authorized by God, that the crossing of the sea exemplifies God's protection of the Israelites through the intermediacy of their leader.<sup>44</sup> Did the commissioners of the fourth-century Wadi Hamam mosaic fear that such emphasis on Moses could be misread and associated with Jesus' miracle working and Christian beliefs in his divine powers?

An even later fifth-century Jewish rendition of the scene appears on the Huqoq synagogue mosaic floor. As in the Wadi Hamam mosaic, Moses is absent from the scene and the focus is on the drowning of the Egyptian soldiers. A soldier with a helmet and spear is half-swallowed up by a large fish, while other fish with open mouth threaten horses and soldiers who are overturned and floating in the water. Perhaps even more than the Wadi Hamam rendition, this

43 For the identification of the three figures with Moses see also Jaś, "Pharaoh's Army Got Drowned," 31 who compares the Dura Europos image with those on Christian sarcophagi.

44 Schenk, "The Exodus Narrative and the Divine Warfare," 30, argues that the Dura Europos synagogue represents the Exodus as a "battle scene" with "divine participation".



version presents the sea and its creatures as naturally dangerous to humans. By implication, and perhaps considered evident without explicit reference, the saving of the Israelites would seem even more extraordinary. Karen Britt and Ra'anan Boustan have already emphasized that "[t]he focus on the drowning of the Egyptian army in the panels at Huqoq and Wadi Hamam stands in sharp contrast to most other Jewish and Christian depictions of this episode, which highlight the role of Moses and the experience of the Israelites".<sup>45</sup>

Another Huqoq mosaic panel related to the Exodus narrative shows two men carrying a pole laden with grapes, reminiscent of the spies or scouts sent by Moses to Canaan after the Exodus from Egypt. Poles are mentioned in Num. 13:23. "The spies returned with tales of an abundant land of milk and honey – with bunches of grapes so large they required two men to carry. Most of the scouts, however, were uncertain that they could conquer Canaan and wandered in the wilderness for 40 years as a result".<sup>46</sup> There is a Hebrew inscription on the panel that reads: "a pole between two". The depiction of such a specific scene suggests that the synagogue visitors, or at least those who commissioned the mosaic floor panels, were very familiar with the various aspects of the Exodus narrative, perhaps on the basis of storytelling (e.g., on Passover) and Torah reading practices. The grapes symbolize the fecundity of the Land of Israel, the land that the synagogue community lives in but also experienced to be appropriated by Byzantine Christians. In this context, the Exodus mosaic panels might serve to stress the Jewish claim to the land, both with regard to the Exodus narrative and Jewish labor and craftsmanship (elsewhere in the mosaic workers are depicted).<sup>47</sup>

#### 4. The Transformation of Moses in Early Byzantine Christian Art

As we have seen above, late antique rabbinic Judaism saw Moses as a lawgiver and Jewish leadership figure, while synagogues of the fourth to sixth centuries emphasized God's salvific power, skipping over the intermediary role of Moses. It was early Byzantine Christian art that presented Moses as a prophetic

45 Britt and Boustan, "Artistic Influences in Synagogue Mosaics," 40.

46 Romey, "Biblical 'Spies' Revealed in 1,500-Year-Old Mosaic," available at <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/news-huqoq-mosaic-synagogue-ancient-israel-archaeology> (accessed 12 July 2021).

47 On the Huqoq mosaic discoveries see Magness et al., "Huqoq (Lower Galilee) and its Synagogue Mosaics" 327–55; Magness et al., "The Huqoq Excavation Project," 61–131; Ovadia, "The Mosaic Panel with the Warlike Scenes and Figurative Arcade in the Ancient Synagogue at Huqoq," 1–14.

forerunner of Jesus, appropriating and transforming his biblical image to make it subservient to the Christian message. Part of this appropriation was the claim of Christ's superiority to Moses. Moses' centrality in Judaism was downgraded to a mere supporting role to claim that ultimate divine revelation happened through Jesus Christ only.

In Acts 3:22 a verse from the book of Deuteronomy (Deut. 18: 15) is quoted: "For Moses said: A prophet like me shall the Lord your God raise up unto you from among your brothers; to him shall you listen in everything that he tells you" (repeated *ibid.* 7:37). In the context of Deut. 18:9–22, the statement serves to alert Israelites to the lures of false prophecy once they have entered the promised land without Moses. Various types of false prophecy are mentioned as examples: divination, soothsayers, enchanters, sorcerers, charmers, necromancers (18:10–11), practices which are called "abominations of those nations" (18:9). From the perspective of Deuteronomistic history, the prophet like Moses, recommended in the statement, would have been one of the succeeding leaders of Israelites, such as Joshua and the later Israelite kings. Obviously, rabbis of the third and fourth centuries C.E. would have considered themselves the legitimate heirs of Moses, although they stressed that "prophecy" had ended a long time ago. Deut. 18:21–22 points to prophecies' actual fulfillment as a means to identify true prophecy.

Notably, according to Sifra 13:8 on Lev. 27:34, God revealed his commandments to Moses at Sinai exclusively. After Moses, no prophet is supposed to change or innovate anything. Stemberger writes: "Diese Auslegung, ein berühmter Spitzensatz rabbinischer Theologie, schließt andere Gebote, die ein Prophet einführen möchte, völlig aus".<sup>48</sup> On that basis, any claim of "prophecy" in the sense of divine revelation after Moses is illegitimate. In a monographic study L. Steven Cook has analysed all ancient Jewish references to the "cessation of prophecy".<sup>49</sup> He points to the difficulty involved in defining prophecy: the term seems to have been used in various ways in the ancient texts.<sup>50</sup> The above-mentioned Sifra text associates "prophecy" with the revelation of the Torah to Moses at Sinai only, not with the prophets and prophetic texts that are part of the biblical canon. Accordingly, Jewish views on the "end of prophecy" are diverse. The "end of prophecy" is usually associated with the end of the biblical period, i.e., Persian times. The revelation to Moses maintained a central significance for Philo and later rabbis.<sup>51</sup>

48 Stemberger, *Mose in der rabbinischen Tradition*, 109.

49 Cook, *On the Question of the "Cessation of Prophecy" in Ancient Judaism*.

50 *Ibid.*, *if.*

51 See *ibid.* 174 with reference to Deut. 34:10 and Philo.

For the perception of Moses vis-à-vis Jesus in late antique Christian theology the *traditio legis* tradition and the notion of transfiguration are important. These theological developments had an impact on the ways in which Moses is depicted in early Byzantine art. The *traditio legis* seems to have been represented in church apsis mosaics since the late fourth century C.E. Deines writes: “Typically, Jesus depicted in majestic, cosmocratic posture, hands over the new law in the form of a scroll to Peter in the presence of Paul (although Christians used the codex) ... The scenery is a sophisticated blend of paradise and Mt. Sinai: Jesus is standing on a kind of mountain top evoking the moment the Torah was given to Moses. But this mountain is placed within paradise ... in other contexts, not only Jesus, but also Peter and Paul are regularly depicted with scrolls, that is, in the traditional role of Moses and the prophets”.<sup>52</sup> As examples, Deines points to the apsis mosaics of the early sixth-century basilica of saints Cosmas and Damian and to the fourth-century church of Santa Costanza (the tomb of Constantine’s daughter) in Rome.<sup>53</sup> In this iconographic tradition, Moses has been replaced by Jesus, who takes center-stage. The Torah given to Moses at Sinai is replaced by a “new law”, the gospel of Jesus. A substitution of both the messenger and the message is evident here.

In his study of the *traditio legis* motif in early Christian art and literature, Reidar Hvalvik has pointed out that the motif is most prevalent in ecclesiastical and funerary contexts in late fourth- and early fifth-century Rome.<sup>54</sup> He rejects earlier understandings of the motif, according to which Jesus handed over a scroll of the law to Peter: Christian depictions of the law given to Moses at Sinai differ from the *traditio legis*-motif. “It should, however, be noted that some occurrences of Moses receiving the law are found exactly on monuments where the *traditio legis*-scene is the central motif”.<sup>55</sup> In such cases, the depiction of Moses has been delegated to the side aisle panels. Hvalvik reckons with a direct connection between the two motifs: “While the former depicts Moses receiving the law, the latter depicts Christ giving the law – figuratively speaking”.<sup>56</sup> According to Hvalvik, the motif would suggest that Jesus merely continued Moses’ task by spreading the law amongst the nations through his apostles Peter and Paul. It is this “figuratively speaking” which makes a real difference, however. It was not the Torah given to Moses at Sinai that the

52 Deines, “God’s Revelation Through Torah, Creation, and History,” 181f.

53 See Spier, and Kimbell Art Museum, *Picturing the Bible*, fig. 68. The image is also available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Santa\\_Costanza\\_Mosaic\\_del\\_S.\\_VII\\_%E2%80%99CTraditio\\_Legis%E2%80%99D\\_adjusted.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Santa_Costanza_Mosaic_del_S._VII_%E2%80%99CTraditio_Legis%E2%80%99D_adjusted.JPG) (accessed 14 July 2021).

54 Hvalvik, “Christ Proclaiming His Law To The Apostles,” 406.

55 Ibid. 415.

56 Ibid.

mis-named *traditio legis* is referring to but “the gospel/the message of Christ as a (new) law” and “new covenant”.<sup>57</sup> Therefore I agree with Deines, who points to the obvious disagreement between the *traditio legis* and Jewish emphasis on the one and only revelation of the Torah given by God to Moses at Sinai.<sup>58</sup>

Where does this replacement leave Moses, then? In churches of the late fourth to sixth centuries biblical scenes from the Exodus story featuring Moses are delegated to the side aisles that guide the viewer’s gaze to the Christian message displayed centrally in the apse. This is the case, for example, with the scenes from Moses’ life in the nave of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, dated to the first half of 5th c. C.E. Amongst the 43 mosaics on the right wall of the nave twelve depict episodes from the biblical Exodus story: Moses receives the commandments (now lost), the young Moses, Moses in Midian, Moses confronts Pharaoh (now lost), Moses tells the Israelites of God’s plan (now lost), Moses explains the laws of Passover (now lost), the crossing of the Red Sea, the manna and quails, the waters of Marah and attack of the Amalekites, Moses is rebuked by the people, Moses’ death and burial.<sup>59</sup> Besides Jacob, Moses is therefore the most displayed biblical character in the basilica’s mosaic program. This indicates the importance of the Exodus narrative amongst those responsible for the iconographic choices.

Perhaps less than in the triple representation of Moses in the Crossing of the Red Sea at Dura Europos but in contrast to Wadi Hamam and Huqoq, Moses is part of the scene: his miraculous parting of the sea with his rod, with Aaron at his side, is foregrounded here. Also similar to the Dura image is the presence of both the Israelites walking on dry land on the left-hand side and the Egyptian army marching towards and drowning in the sea in the center and right-hand side. The old man with a beard and raised arm, already half-way underwater, may be Pharaoh himself. Despite such similarities between the Jewish and Christian depictions, Robert L. Wilken points to the different theological frameworks that determined the interpretation and spatial arrangement of the images: “what is pictured in the mosaics in the nave [of Santa Maria Maggiore] finds fulfillment in the panels flanking the apse”, with Jesus, Mary, and Joseph in the triumphal arch.<sup>60</sup> The narrative-based biblical scenes are juxtaposed and culminate in dogmatically inspired representations of Jesus. Robin Jensen, who has traced the transformation of Christian iconography

57 Ibid. 419.

58 Deines, “God’s Revelation Through Torah, Creation, and History,” 182.

59 See the list at <https://www.christianiconography.info/staMariaMaggiore/naveMosaics.html> (accessed 14 July 2021). The site provides links to the images.

60 Wilken, “The Novelty and Inescapability of the Bible in Late Antiquity,” 5.

in the post-Constantinian era, notes that earlier “themes are not entirely displaced, but rather placed in relationship to powerful artistic representations of the risen and triumphant Christ ...”.<sup>61</sup>

The favourite Moses motifs in late antique Christian art were Moses at the burning bush (cf. Exod. 3:2–4) and Moses striking the rock in the desert to draw water (Exod. 17:6). These motifs have a particular significance in the Exodus narrative. They refer to miracles and to God revealing himself to Moses. In the burning bush episode, Moses perceives God (or his angel) in a burning bush that was not consumed by fire. God introduces himself to Moses and reveals his plan to save the Israelites from Egyptian oppression through Moses as their leader. An iconographic depiction of this episode also appears in the Dura Europos synagogue, where Moses stands barefooted next to his shoes (cf. Exod. 3:5: “And He said: ‘Do not come close; take off your shoes from your feet, for the place whereon you stand is holy ground’”) and to the burning bush to which his right hand points.<sup>62</sup> This is the only evidence we have for the iconographic use of this motif in ancient Jewish contexts. Stemberger has pointed out that the scene is also rarely discussed in rabbinic texts.<sup>63</sup>

The burning bush motif had a special significance in early Byzantine Christian art of the fourth to sixth centuries, when it seems to have been understood on the basis of transfiguration theology. It appears, for example, in the wall mosaic of the basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna (ca 525 C.E.).<sup>64</sup> The central part of the image shows Moses, identified by an inscription, in the process of removing his shoes. He is surrounded by flames emerging from the greenery around him. There is a halo around his head. He looks towards the hand of God, which appears in the upper left-hand corner.

The scene also appears in the sixth-century mosaic of the basilica of St. Catherine’s Monastery in the Sinai Desert.<sup>65</sup> The apse mosaic is meant to show the Transfiguration of Christ: “At the top of the wall above the apse are two scenes from the Old Testament which occurred at Mount Sinai itself: Moses loosening his sandals before the Burning Bush and Moses receiving the tablets

61 Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 92.

62 See [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Moses\\_Dura\\_Europos.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Moses_Dura_Europos.jpg) (accessed 15 July 2021).

63 Stemberger, *Mose in der rabbinischen Tradition*, 72. He presents the few rabbinic texts that deal with this episode; Stemberger, *Mose in der rabbinischen Tradition*, 73–77.

64 See <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=55945> (accessed 15 July 2021).

65 See <https://ccaroma.org/project/monastery-of-st-catherine/> (accessed 16 July 2021). On this monastery see especially Gerstel and Nelson, *Approaching the Holy Mountain*.

of the Law from the hand of God”.<sup>66</sup> Mango notes that the Moses scenes are placed very high on the wall above the apse, that is, they were considered to be of only subordinate importance to the main message.<sup>67</sup> The apse mosaic shows “Christ in a mandorla revealed to the prophets Elijah and Moses and to three apostles”.<sup>68</sup> Moses is clearly seen as a prophet here, who allegedly foresaw the coming of Christ. Mango understands the images in the context of Byzantine theology as, e.g., expressed by the seventh-century father Anastasius Sinaites: “The Transfiguration in the New Testament was the fulfillment of Moses’ incomplete vision in the Old. On Sinai Moses did not see God face to face; on Tabor he, Elijah and the three chosen apostles were able to see Christ in His divine glory”.<sup>69</sup> The biblical figure of Moses is appropriated and transformed into a prophet of Christ here. The young Moses at the burning bush and the middle-aged Moses with the law tablets belong to an earlier stage of revelation history. Only the aged Moses in the Transfiguration mosaic is “being deemed worthy of the divine vision” of Christ.<sup>70</sup>

Andreas Andreopoulos has argued that the images of Moses at the burning bush and Moses receiving the law symbolize the heavenly ascent of Moses. This interpretation is based on the early Byzantine theological context: “The Sinai synthesis, apparently closer to the mystical than the literal content of the Transfiguration, reflects the patristic strand of the theology of darkness, as is seen in the writings of Philo, Gregory of Nyssa, and pseudo-Dionysius. These authors used Moses – the customary model of spirituality for many early Fathers, including Basil of Caesarea and Gregory Nazianzinos – as a model of ascetic ascent in a way that expressed a particular strand of mystical theology. The connection between the iconography of the Transfiguration and the ascent of the soul as it was understood through the metaphor of the ascent of Moses on Sinai is evident.... Still, there is no written evidence from that time pointing out that this connection was widespread”.<sup>71</sup>

He also notes that the narrative of Moses at Sinai and the burning bush episode, together with the reference to “thick darkness where God was” (Exod. 20:18–20) were important for apophatic theology, that is, the knowledge of God obtained outside of intellectual and sensory perception. In his *Life of*

66 Mango, “The Mosaic of the Transfiguration”: <https://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/2014/07/mango-sinai-mosaic/> (accessed 16 July 2021).

67 See *ibid.*: “They are distant both spatially and temporally, the double meaning of the Greek word *anóthen*, both ‘from above’ and ‘from the past’.”

68 *Ibid.*

69 *Ibid.*

70 *Ibid.*

71 Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis*, 91.

*Moses*, Gregory of Nyssa describes the ascent of the soul “using the analogy of the ascent of Moses on Sinai. This tradition of Sinai as a model of ascent became most influential with pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite and his *Mystical Theology* ...”.<sup>72</sup> Both church fathers “interpreted the several experiences of Moses’ ascent on Mount Sinai as stages of revelation: Moses passed everything that could be perceived ... and entered a divine darkness in which he was united with God in a way beyond knowledge and reason”.<sup>73</sup>

The Christian use of the motif of Moses drawing water from the rock (cf. Exod. 17:6), which appears repeatedly in third- and fourth-century Christian catacombs and as a sarcophagus decoration in Rome, indicates another type of appropriation. The miracle of striking the rock was used to express the continuity of divinely legitimized authority from Moses to Peter. In the Christian context, Moses can be replaced by Peter and the identity of the miracle worker – Moses or the Christian apostle – often remains uncertain. The water also symbolized the Christian baptism ritual.

Only a few examples can be presented here. In the so-called Cubiculum of the Sheep in the Calixtus Catacomb in Rome, a wall painting shows Moses unlacing his sandals and Moses or Peter striking a rock to get water.<sup>74</sup> The fact that the two larger figures look differently may suggest that Peter rather than Moses is represented on the right-hand-side. The smaller figure moving toward the water may represent an Israelite in the process of gathering water in his hands or a Christian community member about to receive baptism. A fresco depicting a man striking a rock appears in the Peter and Marcellinus Catacomb of the fourth century C.E.<sup>75</sup> The catacomb walls show scenes from both the “Old” and “New” Testaments, besides pagan motifs. In the Christian context, the identification of the figure with Moses or Peter seems irrelevant, since the understanding was Christian in any case. Concerning both catacomb depictions Robin Jensen writes: “... most of the early catacomb frescoes (especially those in the Catacombs of Calixtus and Peter and Marcellinus) that portray Moses striking the rock can be interpreted as a recurrent typological reference to baptism. During the fourth century, this popular image was significantly transformed in frescoes and sarcophagus reliefs to show Peter instead of Moses and Roman soldiers (...) instead of Israelites reaching for the water gushing

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> See [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Moses\\_striking\\_the\\_rock\\_in\\_the\\_desert.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Moses_striking_the_rock_in_the_desert.jpg) (accessed 18 July 2021).

<sup>75</sup> See <https://www.akg-images.com/archive/Moses-draws-water-from-the-rock-2UMDHU1GDKTN.html> (accesses 18 July 2021).

forth from the rock”.<sup>76</sup> The association of the rock miracle with Peter lacked a biblical basis. Jensen points to a narrative insertion into the apocryphal Acts of Peter, according to which Peter baptized the Roman soldiers who arrested him, with water he produced from a rock.<sup>77</sup> Whatever the explanation, the Christians who commissioned these images superimposed Peter on the biblical Moses, supplanting the latter and completely changing the meaning of the water episode.<sup>78</sup>

On third- and fourth-century Christian sarcophagi stemming not only from Rome but also from Arles, the scene of Moses/Peter striking the rock for water is usually combined with other scenes from the biblical past (especially the Binding of Isaac and Daniel in the Lion's Den) and from the Christian tradition the deceased's relatives would have identified with.<sup>79</sup> In its description of the Sarcophagus of Marcus Claudianus, with images of Peter Striking the Rock and Peter's Arrest, the Vanderbilt University library digital archive states that the motif “presents the theme of the continuity of authority. This authority was first manifest in Moses' act of striking the rock to bring forth water (Exod. 17:1–7.) The rod that Moses used was a strong symbol of his authority to both lead the Israelites and to perform miracles. Here we see Peter performing the same activity, thereby strengthening his own authority, granted by Jesus,

<sup>76</sup> Jensen, *Living Water*, 76.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 77.

<sup>78</sup> The scene of Moses/Peter drawing water from a rock also appears in the Catacomb of the Via Anapo (Catacomba di Via Anapo) in Rome; dated to the mid-3rd c., see the film at <https://www.giornatadellecatacombe.it/en/third-catacombs-day/1145-unplished-images-the-catacomb-of-via-anapo/> and the image at <https://www.akg-images.com/archive/Moses-draws-water-from-the-rock-2UMDHURR5OX9.html> (accessed 18 July 2021).

<sup>79</sup> See, for example: sarcophagus with three panels: Binding of Isaac, Moses, Christ Performing Miracle; 3rd-4th centuries; Vatican City: <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/diglib-fulldisplay.pl?SID=20210702764790402&code=act&RC=46371&Row=2>; the Two Brothers Sarcophagus: Christ healing the crippled woman who was bent over; the cock of St. Peter is depicted below Christ's feet; both Christ and Moses are clean-shaven; Vatican City, 4th c.: <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=51253>; Daniel in the Lions' Den; Moses/Peter Striking the Rock (Exod. 17:1–7); 3–4th c., Vatican City: <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=51622>; similar: <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=51623>; <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=55203>; Sarcophagus of Marcia Romania Celsa, Arles, 330 C.E.: Found in Trinquetaille in 1974. Lid: three Youths in Fiery Furnace, central medallion with putti, adoration of the Magi. Base: (front frieze) Moses/Peter Striking the Rock, arrest of Peter, multiplication of the loaves, healing of the blind man, raising of Lazarus: <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=42654>; Sarcophagus of the Anastasis – Moses Striking the Rock; Arles, 375 C.E.: <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=42649> (all accessed 18 July 2021).



to lead the Christian Church. To the right of the scene of Peter's arrest, Christ is performing two miracles, the Wedding at Cana and a healing miracle. Christ holds a rod, symbolizing his own authority as the Son of God and as a miracle-worker".<sup>80</sup> Here all of the scenes are Christian and the rod which the Hebrew Bible attributes to Moses has been Christianized entirely. Not only Peter but also Jesus is shown in possession of the rod as a divinely given instrument. Ancient viewers were led to believe that the miracle-working rod had been passed on to Jesus and Peter while Moses has become a distant memory.

## 5. Moses/Musa as a Prophetic Predecessor of Jesus and Muhammad in Early Islam

The typological association of Moses with later recipients of divine authority and religious leadership continues in Islam. Since the early Islamic tradition lacks figural representations of biblical characters, the argumentation is based on literary sources here. Hartmut Bobzin writes: "Just as Jewish Christianity regarded Jesus as a prophet who confirmed and completed Moses' prophecy, the Qur'an views Muhammad as having completed Moses' work".<sup>81</sup> Zishan Ghaffar has traced the representation of prophetic figures in the Qur'an from early to middle and late Meccan suras and emphasized the "exposed position of Moses" in the middle Meccan texts.<sup>82</sup> He points to the "typological permeability" of the Exodus and other Moses-related traditions which are now loaded with new meaning for Muslim communities and Islamic identity. As already mentioned above, Muhammad is presented as a "Moses redivivus" who liberated Muslims as "servants of God" and gave them divine instructions (*huda*) to follow.<sup>83</sup> Griffith has pointed to a recurrent pattern in the sequence of seven biblical and non-biblical "prophets" in sura 26, which includes a long passage on Moses (26:10–68) and ends with Muhammad: they serve as "warners" amongst their people, are "discredited" by their audiences but "vindicated" by God.<sup>84</sup> Like the other figures preceding Muhammad, the biblical Moses is integrated into the Qur'an's "distinctive prophetology", which presumes its

80 See <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=54026>. For the image see <https://www.nasscal.com/materiae-apocryphorum/sarcophagus-of-marcus-claudianus/> (both accessed 19 July 2021).

81 Bobzin, "The 'Seal' of the Prophets," 581.

82 Ghaffar, "Einordnung in die koranische Prophetologie," 198. My translation from German.

83 Ibid. 206f.

84 Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, 70.

audiences' knowledge of the biblical narratives by "recalling" and transforming them.<sup>85</sup>

In the Qur'an, Moses is repeatedly presented as a prophet, sometimes together with Jesus. Thus, sura 19:51 states: "Mention Moses in the Scripture. He was devoted [to God] and a messenger and a prophet".<sup>86</sup> The covenant that God made with the prophets Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus was taken up by Muhammad and his followers (33:7). Various figures preceding Muhammad, who are associated with divine revelations, are homogenized under the rubric "prophets" here. This process is explicated in the following statement: "We believe in God and in what was revealed to us and in what was revealed to Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob and the tribes, and in what was given to Moses and Jesus and in what was given to the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them. We surrender to Him" (2:136). All earlier revelations are considered equally valid as forerunners of the revelation to Muhammad. Muhammad's special role in Islam is reflected in another verse which presents him as "the messenger of God and the seal of the prophets" (33:40). According to Rubin, this verse "is designed to demonstrate that Muhammad brings the successive chain of prophetic revelations to its final manifestation"; the seal metaphor "denotes confirmation as well as finality of prophesy".<sup>87</sup> Elsewhere, too, continuity with his prophetic predecessors is claimed: "Muhammad is only a messenger. [There have been] messengers who have passed away before him" (3:144).

In his study on Moses in the Qur'an, Brannon M. Wheeler has argued that Muhammad is seen as "a prophet unlike Moses".<sup>88</sup> According to him, the Byzantine Christian appropriation of Moses and his typological replacement with Christ had an analogy in early Islam, which carried it one step further: "Christians relied upon the Torah to make the argument that it had been abrogated. This same observation holds *mutatis mutandis* for an examination of Muslim exegetical efforts to demonstrate the abrogation of the Torah and the supersession of Israel in the place of Israel".<sup>89</sup> Whether the term "abrogation" correctly describes the Qur'anic representation of the Hebrew Bible is questionable, however. Ghaffar points to the "typological deep structure of Qur'anic

85 Ibid. 71.

86 In this chapter all English translations of the Qur'an follow Alan Jones' translation.

87 Rubin, "The Seal of the Prophets." Rubin argues that the verse continues the previous ones (33:38–39) which "endeavor to exonerate Muhammad from any fault". He discusses previous scholarship on the interpretation of the verse. I thank Zishan Ghaffar for this reference.

88 Wheeler, *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis*, 123.

89 Ibid.

teaching”: while the earlier prophetic figures still maintain their value as divine intermediaries, Muhammad’s profile as God’s messenger takes center stage.<sup>90</sup> The middle Meccan prophetological discourse supports the development of a distinct Muslim communal identity.

Neuwirth has pointed out that the Qur’an’s presentation of “Moses as a typological precursor of the proclaimer” enables the positioning of Muhammad in continuation with biblical tradition by, at the same time, representing a new revelation.<sup>91</sup> The Middle Meccan tradition seems to focus on analogies between the two prophets.<sup>92</sup> The focus of the Moses story in the Qur’an is the conversion of Pharaoh, however, rather than the Exodus tradition (connected with Passover) that is central in the Torah and later Judaism. Neuwirth argues that the Exodus serves as a model for the “personal experience of liberation of the proclaimer” instead.<sup>93</sup> Similarly neglected is the biblical account of the Sinai revelation that serves as the basis of the Jewish belief in the divine inspiration of the Torah. In the Qur’an “the reception of revelation, shared by all prophets, is conceived as oral”, an idea that is irreconcilable with the notion of a written Torah given or dictated to Moses.<sup>94</sup> As to the covenant, a later Medinan text (2:92–93) connects it with the Golden Calf episode as a reason why God allegedly “took the covenant from you” (2:93). Neuwirth views this text in the context of controversies between the Muslim community and Medinan Jews.<sup>95</sup> Obviously, the idea of a divine covenant with Israelites only “did not fit well conceptually into the Qur’an”.<sup>96</sup>

In the Qur’an the Israelites’ alleged disobedience to God is connected with the destruction of the First and Second Temples (Q 17:4–7). Ghaffar has suggested to understand this text in the context of religious and political developments after the Sasanian conquest of Jerusalem in 614 C.E.<sup>97</sup> No specific reasons for the Israelites’ disobedience are mentioned in the text. Ghaffar translates *ifsād* (17:4) with “Unheil anrichten” or “to create havoc” in English, in contrast to *iṣlāḥ*, moral action based on Islamic faith.<sup>98</sup> Whereas the proclaimer’s

90 Ibid. 210.

91 Neuwirth, *The Qur’an and Late Antiquity*, 406.

92 See *ibid.* 406 f. with references.

93 Ibid. 409.

94 Ibid. 411.

95 Ibid. 412.

96 Ibid. 414.

97 Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, 15–26.

98 Ibid. 17–8. Ghaffar emphasizes that the Qur’an does not present specific examples of *ifsād* here and does not refer to Jewish or Christian discussions about the possible reasons for the destruction of the Second Temple.

contemporary Meccan Jews may have hoped for a rebuilding of the Temple, the Qur'an rejects that possibility.<sup>99</sup> Rather, a universal Islamic community, including Jews, is associated with eschatological times (cf. Q 4:104).<sup>100</sup>

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99 While tannaitic rabbis remained silent on this issue, the later amoraim used the discussion of Temple-related matters to build up their own authority. See Cohen, "The Destruction," 22–43; Cohn, *The Memory of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbis*.

100 Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, 20f.



## **PART II**

### ***Qur'anic Concepts of Prophetology***



# The Qur'anic Reception of Balaam and the Conditions of Prophethood in Late Antique Literature

Fatima Tofighi

## 1. Introduction

To understand the nature of prophetology in the Qur'an, and more particularly the distinction between true and false prophets, the foils of a true prophet have to be taken into account. One of these foils is Balaam. Balaam is never mentioned by name in the Qur'an. However, many exegetes have assumed that verses Q 7:175–176 refer to him.<sup>1</sup> The verses read as follows:

Recite to them the story of the one to whom we gave out signs [=āyāt], and he distanced himself from them, and Satan followed him, and he was one of the deluded. Had we wanted, we would have raised him by them [i.e., the signs]. But he stayed on earth and followed his desires. His parable is the parable of the dog who if attacked, will stick out its tongue, and if left alone, will still stick out its tongue. This is the parable of the people who denied our signs [=āyāt]. Tell the story, so that they may think.

It is true that the Muslim reception of particular passages is not always to be trusted with full force for understanding the historical meaning of the Qur'an. Still, I start by assuming that the text might refer to Balaam, and then look at the meaning of the character of Balaam in late antique Jewish and Christian literature. As I will show below, the story of Balaam was an occasion for late antique Christian authors to talk about the conditions of prophethood, as well as the border between false and true prophecy. While the text literally refers

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1 Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'aẓīm wa-al-sab' al-mathānī*, 5:104; Ibn 'Ashūr, *Tafsīr al-tahrīr wa'l-tanwīr*, 21:149; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-tahrīr wa-l-tanwīr*, 2:275–77; al-Qurtubī, *Al-Jāmi' li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, 7:319–20; Rashīd Ridhā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, 9:347. Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 13:252–56; Ṭabātabāī, *Al-Mizān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 8:338; Tūsī, *At-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 5:31. For a commentary on the Qur'anic reception of Balaam, see: Leemhuis, “Bal'am in Early Koranic Commentaries.” Some exegetes, such as Aṭ-Ṭabarī and his followers, presumed that the verses could refer to the renowned poet Umayyah b. Abī as-Ṣalt.



neither to Balaam nor to prophethood, the text would be best understood if it is contextualized in the symbolism around his character. In this sense, the Muslim exegetes were not wrong in assuming that this text was referring to Balaam. A literary analysis of the entire Surah 7 will confirm this historical conclusion.

## 2. Balaam, According to the Hebrew Bible

Let us start off by briefly introducing the character of Balaam. The ambivalent attitude of Jewish and Christian literature toward Balaam is mostly due to his strange position on the border between the satanic and the divine. According to Num. 22–24, he is a diviner who is summoned by Balak the Moabite – the enemy of Israel – to curse them. He does not have any problems with doing that, except that God orders him not to go with the Moabites to curse Israel. He accepts the invitation, only after God allows him under the condition that he says whatever is to be dictated by God. In the next episode, Balaam arises to go to the Moabites. But his donkey, upon seeing an angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword, turned off. The angel obstructs the donkey's way in the right and left, and then Balaam falls off and starts striking the donkey, whereupon the donkey starts to speak. Balaam is also able to see the angel, who condemns him, and allows him to go to his fellow Moabites only on the condition that he says what he is told to say. That is why Balaam continues on his way towards Balak the Moabite.

Balaam's first oracle, after he offered a sacrifice, involves a blessing rather than a curse: "How can I curse whom God has not cursed?" (Num. 23:6). And Balak recognizes this, to which Balaam responds: "Must I not take care not say what the Lord puts in my mouth?" (Num. 23:12). Balaam's second oracle also involves a blessing: "There is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel" (Num. 23:23a). The third oracle is similarly a blessing. Finally, here is the famous fourth oracle: "I see him [=the Almighty], but not now; I behold him, but not near – a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the borderlands of Moab, and the territory of all Shethites/ Edom will become a possession, Seir a possession of its enemies, while Israel does valiantly. One out of Jacob shall rule and destroy the survivors of Ir" (Num. 24:15–19). After this, Balak is disappointed of gaining any benefit from Balaam's divinatory powers. This brief synopsis shows why Balaam is seen as standing somewhere between the enemy and the friend, the satanic and the divine, the prophetic and the magical, etc.

### 3. The Reception of Balaam in Late Antiquity

As seen in the above narrative, Balaam can be both positive and negative. He is not an Israelite and does not personally have any qualms with cursing Israel. He does have divine powers and can hear oracles from God; but he could just as well have access to Satanic powers. In the end, he does bless Israel, and does not succumb to the wishes of the enemies of Israel. That is why he walks on the thin line between the divine and the satanic, the prophetic and the magical, etc., although he tends to fall on the more negative side of the spectrum. In late antique Jewish and Christian literature – both before and after the emergence of Islam – in the Fertile Crescent (or let us say Palestinian and Babylonian Judaism, and Chalcedonian as well as anti-Chalcedonian Christianity), Balaam is associated with sorcery, where sorcery is also reminiscent of Magians and Zoroastrians, even to the point that Zoroaster is identified with Balaam. Balaam also reminds scholars of the conditions for prophethood, such as the character of the prophets, their belonging to the Gentiles, as well as what counts as true prophethood. Contested between different groups across the confessional and political spectrum, prophethood (and its difference with magic) should be read in a variegated context.

From very early on in the New Testament, Balaam is mentioned as an exemplar of false prophecy. In an extensive condemnation of “false prophets,” Balaam’s name comes along: “They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! They have left the straight road and have gone astray, following the road of Balaam son of Bosor, who loved the wages of doing wrong, but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet’s madness” (2 Pet. 2:14–16). This passage harks back to a similar passage in the Letter of Jude (v. 11), in which Balaam’s name is mentioned as an example of false prophets.<sup>2</sup> The reference to Balaam in Rev. 2:14 is probably the result of an ambiguity.<sup>3</sup>

The Babylonian Talmud mentions Balaam as one of the four commoners who do not have a share in the world to come (Sanhedrin 90a). This passage (and the famous discussion of the resurrection that is occasioned by it) comes up in the context of a rather extensive discussion of the punishment of false prophets, who they are, and how they are recognized. According to the Mishnah, “The false prophet mentioned in the Torah includes one who

<sup>2</sup> Fornberg, “Balaam and 2 Pet. 2:15.”

<sup>3</sup> Henten, “Balaam in Revelation 2:14.”

prophecies that which he did not hear from God and one who prophesies that which was not said to him, even if it was said to another prophet. In those cases, his execution is at the hand of man, through strangulation imposed by the court" (Sanhedrin 89a).

The Gemara explains this based on the content of a certain prophetic message, rather than something in their character. But what is subsequently said about Balaam (e.g., his bestiality with his donkey) reflects a correspondence between the prophet's character and the content of his message. In other words, more than belonging to Israel, the character of the prophets as well as what they say determines whether they are true prophets. In the Babylonian Talmud, Balaam becomes some sort of "mock Jesus," a false prophet to convince its audience of its anti-Christian sentiments.<sup>4</sup> Yet, according to Ronit Nikolsky, in the Talmud "the figure of Balaam should not be understood as a hard symbol, but a flexible one, allowing different interpretations according to need. Therefore, an interpretation of him as Jesus, while possible, is not exclusive. Balaam could be any 'Other' of the rabbinic culture."<sup>5</sup>

This "othered" prophet did function as the bearer of the good news of Jesus, and even a testimony to his truth. But references to the question of prophetic character also abound. In a homily of Jacob of Serugh (d. 521) on Balaam, the main point is the coming of Jesus; but the possibility of the existence of a gentile prophet, the revocation of prophethood, and character are also discussed. According to Jacob, the story of Balaam shows the possibility of a gentile prophet:

[The Lord] called the Nations by his prophet who was from the Nations, for they did not listen then to the Israelite prophets. Because he, an interpreter, prophesied that the star would shine, and the Nations heeded him and trusted his word without a doubt. Balaam was more credible to the Nations than Moses, and on account of this the Lord made him a prophet to the Nations [*de-'amīma nebia*].<sup>6</sup>

Jacob did not have any problem with granting that Balaam was given "the spirit of prophecy that reveals the mysteries".<sup>7</sup> The word for mysteries (*raze*, meaning sacraments, symbols, signs) has almost the same semantic field as Qur'anic word *āyāt*, something that according to Qur'an 7:175 was given to the person

4 Urbach, "The Rabbinic Sermons about the Gentile Prophets and the Story of Balaam"; Baskin, *Pharaoh's Counselors*; quoted in Fornberg and Nikolsky, "Interpret Him as Much as You Want," 213, 224.

5 Fornberg and Nikolsky, "Interpret Him as Much as You Want," 224.

6 Jacob of Serugh, "The Mimro on Balaam and Balak," 45–86, lines 345–350.

7 Ibid., line 315.

who refused to take it (perhaps Balaam). If asked how prophecy can be given to a pagan, Jacob suggested, we should respond that it was like a speech given to the donkey: "The Lord, who allowed that donkey to speak, allowed the evil man to prophecy. That speech did not persist with the donkey, but it ended, [the donkey] became dumb and silent as is natural. Nor with Balaam did the matter of prophecy persist, just as he was before, the pagan remained as a diviner."<sup>8</sup> The gifts that were given to both Balaam and his donkey were "borrowed gifts," not "original" or "natural" ones; hence, they could be revoked.<sup>9</sup>

It should be remembered, nevertheless, that these gifts were unnatural not because Balaam did not belong to Israel, rather because he preferred worldly pleasures. For example, when after God commands Balaam to go with Balak's messengers and only say what God tells him, the story is suddenly interrupted by God's anger at Balaam for going (Num. 22:22). Jacob justifies this shift by saying that God's anger was caused by "the stirring of the lust of money and deception" in Balaam's soul.<sup>10</sup> This passage is reminiscent of the Qur'anic description of the person who "followed his own desires" (7:175). Balaam's exposure to "wonders" and his turning away from them due to "greed" had also been mentioned by Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373): "When that donkey unexpectedly spoke, Balaam saw the miracle, but completely failed to marvel. Yet, as the donkey's mouth was rational, forgot about himself and was persuaded by his donkey."<sup>11</sup> Ephrem goes on to say, "Let the ass put the serpent to shame with its brief words: it spoke the truth, while from the serpent issued falsehood; it turned aside to turn away greedy Balaam who had gone awry."<sup>12</sup> The human-animal binary is significantly present in many commentaries on Balaam.

Jacob's contemporary, Severus of Antioch (d. 538), also explored the possibility of prophecy for those who fail in character. According to Severus, "The prophesying and workings of miracles are not under all circumstances performed by men who are worthy, but perhaps by men who are unworthy also for their own profit, because they are barbarians, and cannot be brought to religion by teaching or by any other similar method. This same thing our Lord and God Jesus Christ also said in the gospel: «Many shall say in that day, 'Our Lord,] our Lord, did we not in [thy] name prophecy, and in [thy] name cast out demons, and in thy name do many mighty works?' and then will I profess unto them,' I never knew you, depart ye from me, workers of iniquity'» [Matt.

8 Ibid., lines 409–414.

9 Ibid., lines 421–424.

10 Ibid., lines 149–150.

11 Wickes, *Ephrem the Syrian*, 41:7.

12 St. Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise*, 15:16.

7:22–23].<sup>13</sup> Balaam is not the only example of an “unworthy” prophet, according to Severus. Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Belteshazzar also had visions of future events. Therefore, knowing the future does not make a person virtuous; rather, others may become virtuous through these wonders.<sup>14</sup>

Balaam symbolism carries certain sociopolitical undertones. He was known as the forefather of the Magi, those who followed the star to find the infant Jesus. In his commentary on the Balaam story, 'Išo'dad de Merv (Bishop of Hdatta in Mesopotamia in the middle of the ninth century) made a few references to Gabriel of Qatar and Michael Badoqa, both of whom died in early seventh century. These references might reflect the “Eastern” perception of Balaam immediately prior to the rise of Islam. The dualistic interpretations, reflecting possible Persian influences, cannot be easily missed. 'Išo'dad did not perceive Balaam in a positive light, and interpreted most of his actions and motivations to have come from a demon rather than from God. According to him, Balaam was a native of Haran of Mesopotamia, who dwelt in the country of the Ammonites. 'Išo'dad also claims that Balaam's references to 'Lord' (Numbers 22:8,13,18; 23:3,8,12,21,26; 24:6,11,13) really means the demon he was serving as a sorcerer. Michael Badoqa held that God comes and chases away the demons, and then appears to Balaam in the same guise as the demon. Gabriel of Qatar also believed that God forced this demon to say what God would want to be said, just as he forced the Magi to visit Christ the child with presents. While in the expression “the spirit of God came upon [Balaam]” (Num. 24:2), the Spirit is usually identified as the Holy Spirit, Gabriel held that it actually referred to the “evil spirit”, just as Scripture, according to 'Išo'dad, also called ‘the spirit of God’ the evil spirit that tormented Saul (1 Sam. 16:14–23). Another reason, for 'Išo'dad, to claim that Balaam received the evil spirit is the phrase in Num. 24:4 (“the oracle of him who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down, but having his eyes uncovered”).

Balaam was known as the forerunner of the Magi. Not only is he, like the Magi, associated with divination and sorcery, but also his reference in the fourth oracle to a star that shall come out of Jacob allegedly led the Magi to Jesus. We should remember that the Magi were not positive figures in Greco-Roman literature prior to Matthew, nor did classical and late antique Christians see them as positive. Even though they followed the signs of the birth of Jesus, they were the negative bearers of good news, those from outside who testify to the true event, despite themselves. According to H. J. W. Drijvers,

13 Brooks, *A Collection of Letters of Severus of Antioch*, 234f.

14 Ibid., 239ff.

from the fifth century AD on, traditions based on Zarathustra and the Magians play a certain role in the exegetical literature and in particular of the Nestorian church, where the first chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew is explained. It is in the hostile relations between Christianity and the Mazdaean State Church in the Sassanian Empire that the background and origins of this special traditions and the Magians should be sought. These traditions offer a strong anti-Iranian trend and try, on the other hand, to prove that Zarathustra already knew about the coming of the Savior.<sup>15</sup>

The Church of East associated Balaam with the Magi, claiming that they read his oracle about the rise of the Star of Jacob. Contemporary Zoroastrian priests represented the Magi to them.<sup>16</sup> One of these traditions of the Church of East is the gnostic text, "Prophecy of Zardusht," surviving in both the eighth century *Scholion* by Theodore bar Konai and the ninth century commentary on Matthew by Isho'dad de Marv. The testimony of the powerful enemy, i.e., the prophecy of Zoroaster concerning Jesus, is very meaningful in the Sassanian context. From the very beginning of the text, there is a reference to the birth of an infant from a virgin, whose crucifixion and ascension are articulated in gnostic terms of light and darkness, which also resonate with the Iranian context. In this text, Zoroaster prophesies the coming of Jesus: "When that star which I told you about rises, you shall dispatch messengers bearing gifts, and they shall offer worship to him and present the gifts to him. Do not be neglectful, so that you not perish by the sword, for he is the king of kings, and all (kings) receive their crowns from him. I and he are one." Here Zoroaster is called the "second Balaam": "As is customary, (either) God forced him to expound them; or he derived from a people who were conversant with the symbolic prophecies about Christ, (and) he predicted them." This entire prophecy is strange because on the one hand Zoroaster is identified with Balaam – an identification that was, according to John Reeves, customary both in the West and East —<sup>17</sup> and, on the other hand, Zoroaster is associated with Christ. Given the political dynamic in the Church of East, it should not surprise us that Zoroaster

15 Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, 39.

16 Iso'dad de Merv Eynde and Ceslas van den, eds., *Commentaire d'Iso'dad de Merv Sur l'Ancient Testament, II Exode – Deutronome*, Num. 22–23, 142–152 (french), 105–112 (Syriac); quoted in Robert Kitchen, Introduction in Jacob of Serugh, "The Mimro on Balaam and Balak," 57.

17 John Reeves, "Reconsidering the 'Prophecy of Zardusht,'" <[https://www.academia.edu/4620462/Reconsidering\\_the\\_Prophecy\\_of\\_Zardusht](https://www.academia.edu/4620462/Reconsidering_the_Prophecy_of_Zardusht)>. Accessed 28 Feb 2022. A translation of the gnostic text can be found both in this essay, and in the translator's personal webpage: <<https://pages.charlotte.edu/john-reeves/research-projects/trajectories-in-near-eastern-apocalyptic/prophesy-of-zardusht/>>.

is both denigrated and taken as a strong testimony of Christ. Again, Zoroaster stands on the border between true and false prophecy, being like a sorcerer, but also giving true prophecy.

Prophethood as a point of contestation between Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians (as well as Manichaeans) can also be witnessed in the Babylonian Talmud:

Rabbi Abdimi from Haifa said: Since the day when the Temple was destroyed, prophecy has been taken from the prophets and given to the wise. Is then a wise man not also a prophet? – What he meant was this: Although it has been taken from the prophets, it has not been taken from the wise. Amemar said: A wise man is even superior to a prophet, as it says, ‘And a prophet has a heart of wisdom’ [Psalms 90] (Bava Batra 12a).<sup>18</sup>

According to Yaakov Elman, an analysis of other statements by Amemar indicates that he was responding to an Iranian context, where Zoroaster and more than him, Mani were proclaimed as prophets, and where the existence of a written scripture was used as a proof for the authenticity of a divine mission. When it came to having scriptures, Jews seemed to have the upper hand. Mani seemed to be the prophet par excellence, and here the Jews also could boast of their own prophets, and then wise men.<sup>19</sup> To follow up on this argument, we can see how in the above passage, rabbis are represented as replacing the prophets. Therefore, while the Jews seem no longer to have prophets, they do have a stronger gift, that of the wisdom of the rabbis. According to Charlotte Fonrobert in Chapter 1 of this volume, this passage also signifies a transition from the Holy Spirit to knowledge as the source of maintaining a connection with the divine. So far, we have seen that Balaam was an occasion to speak of the prophetic. In the interreligious setting of the question of prophethood, prophethood marks a privilege. Yet, both the rabbis and the Syriac fathers show a desire to beyond the age of the prophets, through rabbinic or typological knowledge respectively. More particularly in the work of Jacob of Serugh and Ephrem the Syrian, Balam would have been a true prophet, had he not failed in character by following ‘worldly pleasure’. This is very close to the Qur’anic account of the anonymous man who preferred his lusts rather to divine signs (7:175–176), a literary analysis of which will follow.

18 *New Edition of the Babylonian Talmud*, trans. Rodkinson and Wise.

19 Elman, “Middle Persian Culture and Babylonian Sages,” 165–97.

#### 4. The Historical Symbolism of Balaam and the Question of Prophethood in the Qur'an

One of the preoccupations of the Qur'an is to prove that Muhammad is a true prophet bringing divine message, not a poet (21:5; 36:69; 37:8; 52:31; 69:41), a demon-stricken man (7:184; 15:6; 23:70; 34:8, 46; 37:8; 44:14; 51:52; 52:29; 68:2, 51; 81:22), a magician (43:30), or a priest (41:42). Muhammad's words come from God, and not those of another teacher's (16:103) or from his desires (53:2). Muhammad is a prophet although he is not angelic (25:7) and does not belong to the wealthy elite (11:12; 25:8; 43:31) or Israel. In this sense, Muhammad both resembles diviners – poets, priests, magicians, etc. – and does not meet the alleged requirements of a diviner – wealth or angelic behavior. The Qur'an should show that Muhammad meets the many requirements that make him a true prophet. One way for the Qur'an to do so is to refer to different "prophetic" figures, showing their similarities with the Prophet Muhammad. Surah 7 can be read as providing an occasion for Muhammad's story to become the story of every prophet. As this Surah is especially centered on the conflict between the elite and the poorer sections of the society, in verses 175–176 there is a reference to the parable of the one who followed his desires. But more than this, the parable can make better sense if read in light of Balaam symbolism and prophetology in late antiquity.

What makes a prophet? Is it a matter of character and virtue? Or is it just by divine (random) choice? Does the prophet have any choice at all? It is commonly known that Biblical idea of prophethood does not rest on personal choice or the development of character. Rather, it is God who decides to whom a message should be given, and that person does not have the option of not declaring the message. (The story of Jonah represents a character who decides not to give the message, and then must go through the consequences of that decision.)<sup>20</sup> That is why late antique discussions around Balaam's character are in some sense radical. Besides, as observed above, according to Jewish and Christian authors of late antiquity, some sort of relationship with the supernatural does not necessarily imply that one is a true prophet. It might just as well be the work of satanic powers, or magic. Even belonging to Israel does not guarantee true prophethood. People outside Israel might have access to prophecy. However, what marks a true prophet from a false one is good character. In this sense, the symbolic Balaam of the late antiquity is the character who does

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20 Berlin and Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 457f.



have access to the supernatural, but is not a true prophet, because he failed in his character. The Qur'anic parable of the man who refuses divine signs to follow worldly pleasures fits well with this image. As I will show further below, there is evidence in the text that makes a prophetological reading of this narrative possible.

In the late antique Fertile Crescent, prophethood also had to compete with rabbinic wisdom. The Qur'an seems to take a stance on this, glorifying prophethood. It testifies to the importance of both prophets and scriptures for a particular community: "Every one of them wants to be given unfolded scrolls" (Q 74:52); "Had we sent down to you a book in paper and they touched it, the unbelievers would have said this is but an obvious magic" (Q 6:7), and the accusation against the Jews that they attributed to God what they themselves have written down (Q 2:79; 3:78). In the Qur'an, God is frequently introduced as the one who has sent down the "book" to the prophet (Q 3:3; 7:169; 25:1; 40:2; etc.). That is, the existence of the book signifies prophethood, and prophethood is itself a sign of true religion. As shown above, in the variegated community of the Qur'an, prophethood was about marking one's differences with the other. While according to the Babylonian Talmud, the wisdom of a sage might be superior to the message of a prophet, the Qur'an reflects this kind of debate over superiority, as well: "Woe unto those who write the book with their own hands, and then say it is from God ..." (Q 2:79), "There is a group from among them who twist their tongues in the book, so that you count it from the book, while it is not from the book; and they say it is from God, while it is not from God" (Q 3:78). Thus, it seems that we are facing an audience that used prophecy both to establish itself and to disparage others, and here the question of the conditions of prophethood is related to the question of identity and border marking.

According to this brief study of the reception of Balaam, he both represented many binaries and signified their blurry boundaries. The divine-satanic, the human-animal, the gentile-prophetic, Christian-Zoroastrian, prophethood-wisdom are important binaries associated with Balaam in the historical milieu of the Qur'an. In the following, I investigate whether Balaam symbolism helps better understand the Qur'anic prophetology, especially in Surah 7.

The entire Surah seems to revolve around the question of status, which is, not the least, marked by clothing. Social status is also seen as part of the question of prophethood. The Surah starts with discussions of proper ornaments and coverings in places of worship (vv. 26, 31), including a reference to the story of Adam's nakedness (vv. 11–25). In this context, it is stated that God does not prohibit the use of worldly ornaments and pleasures (v. 32). While in the story, Iblis falls down from heaven due to arrogance, the Qur'an declares that

the denying and arrogant people are described as not being able to enter the heaven “until the camel goes through the needle eye” (v. 40), a passage that replicates a Jesus quote in the New Testament (Matt. 19:23–26; Mark 10:24–27; Luke 18:24–27), which is also in the context of the relation between social status and spiritual powers. Up to this part, it seems that for the Qur'an the prelapsarian world was without any class distinction. It is only with the fall that humans realize their nakedness (v. 27, where ironically the stripping of clothing brings out distinctions), and only when they return to heaven, they put aside their animosity (v. 43). In the other world, there is only one distinction, i.e., that between the inhabitants of “gardens” and inhabitants of fire (vv. 44–50), reminding the reader of the creature who was “created from fire” (v. 12). The inhabitants of fire are proud of their worldly pleasures, forgetting God, and failing to realize the fulfillment of divine words (vv. 51–53).

Then, the stories of different prophets are told – Noah, Hud, Salih, Lot, Shu'ayb, and most extensively Moses (vv. 59–155). The main theme that connects the stories of these prophets is the conflict between the social and/or political leaders (*mala'*) and the respective prophets of their communities, who are described as “from them” or “their brother”. Now, the Qur'an deals with the question whether righteousness is a matter of choice or divine decision? Is it inborn, like one's tribal religion? Or is it acquired? What about prophethood more particularly? The Qur'an seems rather ambivalent with regards to this question. On the one hand, it calls its audience to faith, guidance, and righteousness (vv. 42, 87, 96, 153, 156–158); on the other hand, it emphasizes random divine intervention in bringing people to guidance (vv. 30, 43, 155, 178). It seems that divine guidance depends on certain capabilities similar to basic senses (vv. 179, 195, 198), which mark humans from animals (v. 179). Thus, faith is an indication of having the necessary senses to accept, and these senses have certainly been given by God. Even if one is to follow one's inherited beliefs, the primordial divine covenant is the key (v. 172). This is to counteract the argument that (a) one's tribal faith should determine one's stance toward guidance (vv. 28, 70, 173); and (b) that it is impossible to have a gentile Prophet (157, 158). Even the Mosaic episodes contribute to the Qur'anic counterarguments. For example, while the Egyptian sorcerers believe (vv. 120–126), Moses' brother did not (albeit justifiably) take the necessary steps to prevent the people from unbelief (v. 150). The Surah shows that the people around Moses were also variegated – some believed (v. 159), while others did not (vv. 163–164). Thus, the prophetology of Surah 7 revolves around having the capacity to diverge from one's own community to believe. Based on this interpretation and the reception of Balaam in late antiquity, it can be argued that verses 175–176 also speak to Balaam symbolism in a prophetological sense.

Here we come across the parable of the person who decides to follow worldly pleasures instead of receiving divine signs. Ironically, the signs would have helped him rise, but he stayed on earth to achieve greatness by his own means. The word “signs” is a keyword in this Surah. It refers to those who have rejected divine signs (vv. 9, 36, 37, 40, 51, 64, 72, 103, 136, 146, 147, 177, 182), and those who have believed in them (vv. 126, 156). God explains his signs (vv. 32, 174), and even sends messengers to tell people about his signs (v. 35), Moses being one of them (v. 103). Heavenly gates will not open to those who are arrogant and deny divine signs, nor can they enter heaven until a camel goes through the needle’s eye (v. 40). In this sense, the protagonist of the parable in verses 175–176 chooses to belong to the class of the arrogant, rather than a divine messenger like Moses. He chooses to stay on earth (v. 175), rather than benefit from the open doors of heaven (v. 40). Faced with the choice between the two paths, he goes astray. The question of choice (rather than inborn qualities) is shared between this parable and Balaam symbolism in late antiquity. The latter was also guided but chose not to follow the right path. As seen above, Jacob of Serugh more particularly uses the terminology of following “worldly pleasures,” which is also the point of focus in the Qur’an. Similarly, both Jacob of Serugh and the Qur’an mention the protagonist’s rejection of “signs”. Interestingly, in both accounts, animals have a special role in showing the truth. Not only is the Qur’anic parable accompanied by another example of a dog who would anyway stick out its tongue, in verse 179 the deniers are despised as being even “more lost than animals”: “Certainly we made many of the jinn and humans for hell. They have hearts with which they do not understand, and they have eyes with which they do not see, and they have ears with which they do not listen. They are like animals, and even more lost. They are ignorant.” The occurrence of the image of the dog, the man who stays on earth, and the animals, where Balaam symbolism is reminiscent of a character who failed to see what his donkey had seen, gives even more depth to the message that the Surah tries to convey. At the same time, these verses hark back to the elite-mass binary that had already been developed in the text, where the binary is recreated not only in terms of faith or character, but also in terms of basic human understanding (heart, eye, and ear).

When faith does not belong to a particular tribe or blood or inheritance, prophethood does not belong to one community either. In the people of Moses, there was diversity of belief. Interestingly, the Qur’an plays with the word “*ummah*” (i.e., nation; pl. *umam*) and its derivative “*ummī*” (scriptureless).<sup>21</sup>

21 For this translation, see Sinai, *Key Terms of the Qur’an*, 94–99.

While it serves as an idiomatic attribute for the Prophet in verses 157–158 (meaning “scriptureless”), in verses 38, 159, 160, 163, 164 it is employed in the literal sense of “community” or “group” (even within Moses’ people). And here we are with a “scriptureless Prophet,” with a virtuous character and leadership qualities: “Those who follow the scriptureless [*ummī*] messenger, prophet, written for them in Torah and Gospel, who enjoins them to the right, and forbids them the wrong, allows them to enjoy the good, and prohibits them from using the dirty, freeing them from the chains and burdens that were on them. Those who believed in him, and supported, and helped him, and followed the light that was sent down with him, they are saved. Say, O people [*nās*]! I am God’s messenger to you all [*jamīā*]. The God who owns the property of heavens and earth. There is no god, but him. He brings to life and brings to death. So, believe in God and his scriptureless [*ummī*] messenger prophet, who believes in God, and in his words. Follow him, so that you are guided” (vv. 157–158). The addressees of verse 158 might just have been the entire community around Muhammad; but with all the discussion on lineage and tribal beliefs, they could be interpreted as a universal audience. Whatever the case, the point is that divine guidance does not belong to a particular people – whether Israelites who have the prophets or the non-Israelites who inherit polytheism from their fathers – or a particular class – the elite rejected divine signs. Receiving guidance and signs belong only to matters of basic human understanding.

As mentioned earlier, Balaam was the occasion for late antique Jewish and Christian authors to talk about the “other” prophet, who remains a magician because of his character. In a prophetology that is centered on class and tribal binaries, a reference to Balaam symbolism seems quite apt. But why does the Qur’an refer to Balaam by name? Now that we do not have the name of Balaam, could we not say more confidently that these verses refer to any character who would not receive divine gifts only because they like to follow their desires? The references to the non-Israelite prophet (Muhammad), the entire prophetological episodes, the parable’s insertion in between Mosaic episodes, the animals functioning as foils to the character, all support that the Qur’an is referring to an all but named Balaam. But Balaam (even though symbolically neutralizing the argument for the necessity of Israelite ethnicity for a prophet) was charged with a lot of ethnic and religious connotations, which the Qur’an might not want to subscribe to. In this sense, Balaam becomes some sort of Everyman who does not become a prophet, not because he is not Israelite, but because he refuses divine signs and follows his lust; an Everyman that does not need be Persian, Zoroastrian, magician, etc.

## 5. Conclusion

This essay was an exploration of Balaam symbolism in late antiquity as a background to understanding the border between false and true prophets in the Qur'an. I started by assuming that Qur'an 7:175–176 referred to Balaam symbolism. Studying the reception of his character in Jewish and Christian literature just before the emergence of Islam shows that the Balaam, who in the Bible is only prevented from cursing Israel by all sorts of supernatural events, becomes a character who chooses not to curse Israel. Indeed, in late antiquity he is a pretext to discuss important questions about the possibility of a gentile prophet, or the necessity of character for election to prophethood. According to this historical analysis, the Qur'an responds by showing that although prophethood is given at will, it may or may not be fulfilled due to flaws in character. Without necessarily focusing on giving information about a Biblical figure, the Qur'an is responding to the debates around prophetology, which, among other places, recur around Balaam symbolism. This is parallel to the prophetology that is developed in Surah 7, which revolves around the importance of status and worldly pleasures for determining where one stands in relation to prophets and prophethood. Both the protagonist of the parable and the late antique "Balaam" choose to belong to the earthly classes rather than the heavenly community. The prophetology of Surah 7 also deals with the question of genealogy and prophecy, rejecting any link between the two, thus referring to Balaam symbolism. In this sense, Muslim exegetes were not wrong in assuming that the protagonist of the parable referred to Balaam, the non-Israelite who did not become a prophet only because he failed in his character.

# “Educating Adam Through Prophecy”

## *The Surplus Value of Taking the Qur’anic Prophecy Seriously*

Angelika Neuwirth, Dirk Hartwig

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Qur’anic Studies today are dominated by scholarly work from outside the field. This development, the Qur’an’s “migration” from Islamic Studies into neighboring disciplines, may be due to the attraction exerted by the current focus of Late Antiquity scholarship at large which lies on the imperial eschatological and apocalyptic ideologies of the 6th and 7th centuries, movements that figure prominently particularly in Syriac writings of the time. The Qur’an by several scholars is classified as such an apocalyptic text as well.<sup>2</sup> Others – though targeting the Qur’an – focus Qur’anic echoes of doctrinal positions held in the Syriac ecclesiastical milieu.<sup>3</sup> Works on the Qur’an today, thus, predominantly originate in the circles of historians, comparatists, Syriacists and historians of Christian theology, in short: scholars with ecclesiastical rather than Arabist philological backgrounds. Despite the invaluable increase in profundity and historical consciousness that has arisen from this track of approach its hermeneutical deficit is hard to miss: The Qur’an’s rank as a major, indeed revolutionary, player in Late Antique religious culture is widely faded out. Literary and hermeneutical studies in the Arabic text – outside, “beyond”, reception history – have become rare,<sup>4</sup> or at least prove insufficient to crystallize into a consistent image that does justice to the aesthetic, rhetoric, let alone the historical significance of the Qur’an. The present perusal of the Qur’an as just

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1 Substantial parts of this article are based on an earlier joint publication, see Neuwirth and Hartwig, “Beyond Reception History.”

2 See Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*; Shoemaker, *The Apocalypse of Empire*. Other representatives are Bladel, “The Alexander Legend in the Qur’an 18:83–102,” 175–203, critically discussed by Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, 154f., and Tesei, “Heraclius’ War Propaganda and the Qur’ān’s Promise of Reward for Dying in Battle,” 219–47; Tesei, “The Romans Will Win!,” 1–29, discussed by Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, 167–79.

3 See e.g. Muna Tatari and Klaus von Stosch, *Prophetin – Jungfrau – Mutter* [English Version: Muna Tatari and Klaus von Stosch, *Mary in the Qur’an*] and Ghaffar, “Kontrafaktische Intertextualität im Koran und die exegetische Tradition des syrischen Christentums.”

4 See e.g. Stewart, “Saj’ in the Qur’an.” For the work of Nora K. Schmid see e.g. Schmid, “Oaths in the Qur’an,” and see Klar, “A Preliminary Catalogue of Qur’anic Saj’ Techniques.”

another testimony for Late Antique ecclesiastic or imperial discourses should not distract from the still looming task already raised by Kenneth Cragg<sup>5</sup> and Mohamed Arkoun,<sup>6</sup> i.e. to explore the “Qur’anic event”, *l’événement coranique*, the appearing of the Qur’an as an active player on the stage of Late Antiquity, that epoch which is agreed upon to have substantially shaped Near Eastern as well as European civilization. The Qur’an indeed can be regarded as a most relevant link between Roman/Byzantine and Islamic culture. Insofar as it mirrors this transition it can justly be labeled not only as an Islamic but equally as a “European text”.<sup>7</sup> A critical and hermeneutically sensitive reading of the Qur’an is therefore highly relevant not only for the Muslim community and Muslim theologians but equally for Christian thinkers and – insofar as such inquiries promise new theoretical discoveries – for cultural or literary scholars in general as well.

In the following we will dwell on one exemplary point of entry into a sort of Qur’anic Studies that can alert us to the discipline’s “surplus value”. We are thinking of its significance for current processes of innovation, such as the questioning of accepted theological positions on the one hand<sup>8</sup> and the broadening of the scope of transmission history on the other to include hitherto disregarded venues such as aural and visual experiences.<sup>9</sup>

The prophecy of the Qur’an, its prophetic communication process extending over 23 years, addressed to an emerging new “people of God” can be viewed as an educational process that changed a conventicle of pious into a community. What is primarily demanded for a more adequate understanding of the Qur’anic event is the awareness of the Qur’an’s *peculiar new* telling of Biblical stories. The divergences are not – as has been hitherto usually assumed<sup>10</sup> – fully explainable by recourse to previous exegesis. The stories need equally to be related to particular exigencies of the community’s social situations. It is the *Sitz im Leben* then, that deserves new consideration. In view of the almost

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5 Cragg, *The Event of the Qur’an*.

6 Arkoun, *La pensée arabe*.

7 See Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike* [=KTS] [published in English as *The Qur’an and Late Antiquity* [=QLA]].

8 An example would be the “origin of evil”, see Haag, *Abschied vom Teufel* and its discussion below. – For a theological reaction by Ratzinger, “Abschied vom Teufel?”

9 Such disregarded venues have been explored in Syriac Studies more recently: Durmaz, “Hearing Sanctity,” 56–88 and Ruani, “Objects as Narrative Devices in Syriac Hagiography.”

10 Heinrich Speyer’s seminal work, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* has been used as the most important source for such readings of the Qur’an. More recently numerous other ancient, particularly Christian apocryphal texts have been involved, see e.g. Minov, “Satan’s Refusal to Worship Adam.”

tabooed status of the *sīra* in Qur’anic scholarship<sup>11</sup> this inquiry should dispense as far as possible with *sīra* information and rather rely on the Qur’an itself. It would of course be pretentious to claim that the Qur’an can be studied without any pre-knowledge of the time and space of its genesis. Yet the bare “skeleton” of indispensable – *sīra* related – local and temporal data has to be enwrapped in a new narrative deriving the successive stages of the communication process from the Qur’anic speech itself. Incidents and discussions concerning the life of the community that are reported in the context of a particular narrative will serve as its “real”, social frame for the storytelling.

Reality-related statements will also provide a key for one of the most frequently told stories in the Qur’an which – although part of the universal heritage of Late antiquity – has acquired the status of a particularly “Islamic narrative”, the story of Iblīs’ rebellion.

### The Sample: Adam, Satan/Diabolos/Iblīs, and the Origin of Evil

In our view then, stories in the Qur’an founded on the Bible are not simply reproductions of canonical narratives, nor exegetical interpretations, but in many cases are introduced to cope with urgent aporias incumbent on the community. A recent investigation into the Qur’anic creation story<sup>12</sup> has shown that the story of Iblīs, the Islamic Diabolos,<sup>13</sup> responds to a societal crisis in the middle Meccan community. Iblīs’ rebellion which is narrated not less than seven times<sup>14</sup> eclipses the canonical creation story, presenting a new etiology

11 The *sīra* has been called the “Muhammadan Evangelium” which provides the live background for the essential message, see Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*.

12 See Neuwirth and Hartwig, “Beyond Reception History.”

13 See for the derivation of Iblīs from Greek Diabolos Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 87.

14 We take the Qur’anic text as point of departure, placing the passages under discussion into chronological order: Q 15:26–48, Q 20:115–127, Q 38:71–85, Q 17:61–65, Q 18:50–53, Q 7:10–30, Q 2:30–39. These Iblīs pericopes mirror an ever-changing valorization. See for Q 15, Q 20, and Q 38 the commentary in Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, Bd. 2/1: Frühmittelmeckkanische Suren. Das neue Gottesvolk. Die ›Bliblisierung‹ des altarabischen Weltbildes, Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2017 [=HK 2/1] [published in English as *The Qur’an. Text and Commentary*, vol. 2/1: Early Middle Meccan Suras. The New Elect, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024], for Q 17 and Q 18, see Angelika Neuwirth and Dirk Hartwig, *Der Koran*, Bd. 2/2: Spätmittelmeckkanische Suren. Von Mekka nach Jerusalem. Der spirituelle Weg der Gemeinde heraus aus säkularer Indifferenz und apokalyptischem Pessimismus, Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2021. This also distinguishes our approach from Zellentin’s (Zellentin, *Triological Anthropology*), who does not always view the Qur’anic passages in chronological order. In fact, by focusing excessively on the presumed



of evil. This surprising discovery provokes the question of “why so?” – While the conventional approach would have been to look for a model in earlier tradition<sup>15</sup> – such as might be identified in some early apocrypha – we prefer to start with a close look at the suras in which the Iblis story appears. What is the *Sitz im Leben* of this new focus on evil?

### Rebellions vs Transgressions

A look at the first mention of the story in *Sūrat al-Ḥijr*, Q 15 reveals that in real life, evil is manifest in a social malaise: During the middle Meccan ministry of Muhammad the community faces the opposition of non-believers, indeed ridiculers of the truth, “deniers” of Muhammad’s true prophethood; Q 15:6–11:

*wa-qālū yā ayyuhā lladhī nuzzila ‘alayhi l-dhikru*  
*innaka la-majnūn/*  
*law mā ṭa’tinā bi-l-malā’ikati*  
*in kunta mina l-ṣādiqīn/*  
*mā nunazzilu l-malā’ikata illā bi-l-ḥaqqi*  
*wa-mā kānū idhan munẓarīn/*  
*inna naḥnu nazzalnā l-dhikra*  
*wa-innā lahu la-ḥāfiẓūn/*  
*wa-la-qad arsalnā min qablīka fī shi’ya’i l-awwalīn/*  
*wa-mā ya’tihim min rasūlīn*  
*illā kānū bihi yastahzībūn/*

They say, ‘Receiver of this Reminder!  
 You are definitely mad./  
 Why do you not bring us the angels,  
 if you are telling the truth?’/  
 But we send down the angels only to bring justice  
 and then these people will not be reprieved./  
 We have sent down the Reminder ourselves,  
 and we ourself will guard it./  
 Even before you, we sent messengers among the various communities of old,  
 but no messenger ever came to them  
 without being mocked./<sup>16</sup>

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intertexts (The Bible, The Cave of Treasures, Clementine Homilies, and Genesis Rabba), ‘privileging’ them over the Qur’anic text itself, he comes to different conclusions. In our view, it is worth studying the Qur’anic text not only in terms of ‘reception history’, but as a genuine new response to the burning theological questions that were *en vogue* in the epistemic space of Late Antiquity.

15 Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, see also Minov, “Satan’s Refusal to Worship Adam.”

16 English translation: Abdel Haleem, ed., *The Qur’an*, slightly modified.

Sectarian strife is imminent. There are not only deniers, but the adherents of the Prophet themselves are for the first time conceived as a party, a community of *‘ibād*, “servants of God”, Q 15:24.42.49, and thus as antagonists of the “deniers”.<sup>17</sup> What is the origin of their “evil” rejection of truth? In Christian theology with its peculiar reading of Gen. 1–3, on the creation of man and his first transgression, Adam’s first sin is the source of evil as such. – Not without consequences: This act that in the “antique” Biblical text had resulted in his expulsion from paradise, had in late antique Christianity received a sustained salvation historical interpretation: Adam’s fault had triggered redemption, and his persona had mutated into a world historically significant agent whose “alter ego”, the Second Adam, the messianic redeemer, in Christian understanding was virtually inseparable from him.<sup>18</sup>

Not so in Jewish understanding. The Christian “enlargement” of Adam, of man created in God’s image, into the double figure of a culprit and his redeemer-alter-ego, was felt suspiciously close to the much-maligned imagination of a “second power in heaven”<sup>19</sup>. The Rabbis, writing at a time when Christianity already prevailed, were aware of the outcome of the installment of a second ruler figure in heaven; they made a number of attempts to restrict Adam’s authority, indeed to ridicule Adam, be it as a newly created figure<sup>20</sup> – be it as an already acclaimed co-ruler with God.<sup>21</sup> This is also the stance of the Qur’anic message in *Sūrat Ṭāhā*, Q 20:115–123 which follows Q 15. Here the primordial Adam is degraded to a weak person, oblivious of his paradisiac covenant. Settled in the garden he is immediately warned of the rebel Iblīs, Q 20:115–7:

*wa-la-qad ‘ahidnā ilā Ādama min qablu*  
*fa-nasiya*  
*wa-lam najid lahu ‘azmā/*  
*wa-idh qulnā li-l-malā’ikati*  
*sjudū li-Ādama fa-sajadū*  
*illā Iblīsā abā/*  
*fa-qulnā yā Ādamu*  
*inna hādihā ‘aduwwun laka wa-li-zawjika*  
*fa-lā yukhrijannakumā mina l-jannati fa-tashqā/*

17 See Neuwirth, HK 2/1, 236f.

18 See e.g. St. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods, here: Book XIV:1.

19 See Schäfer, *Zwei Götter Im Himmel*; Schäfer, *Two Gods in Heaven*.

20 bSanhedrin 38b, BT Ḥagiga 12a, Genesis Rabba 12:5, 19:16, 21:2, 24:2, Leviticus Rabba 12:2, see Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, 47.

21 Genesis Rabba 8:10. See Peter Schäfer, *Rivalität zwischen Engeln und Menschen*, 82f.

We commanded Adam before you,  
 but he forgot  
 and we found him lacking in constancy./  
 When we said to the angels,  
 'Bow down before Adam', they did.  
 But Iblīs refused.  
 so we said, 'Adam  
 this is your enemy, yours and your wife's:  
 do not let him drive you out of the garden and make you miserable./

But since he seems even unable to discern the momentousness of his picking the forbidden fruit, which he mistakes for the satisfaction of a physical need, God must remind him (Q 20:118–119):<sup>22</sup>

*inna laka allā tajū'a fihā  
 wa-lā ta'rā/  
 wa-annaka lā taẓma'ū fihā  
 wa-lā taḍhā/*

In the garden you will never go hungry,  
 feel naked,/   
 nor be thirsty,  
 or suffer the heat of the sun'./

The pericope goes on with the Biblical seduction story, where a biblically coded *alter ego* of Iblīs, *al-Shayṭān*, – a demon who does not argue but whispers – has taken over the role of the snake, Q 20:120–123:

*fa-waswasa ilayhi l-shayṭānu  
 qāla yā Ādamu hal adulluka 'alā shajaratī l-khuldi  
 wa-mulkin lā yablā/  
 fa-akalā minhā fa-badat lahumā saw'ātuhumā  
 wa-ṭafiqā yakhṣifāni 'alayhimā min waraqi l-jannati  
 wa-'aṣā Ādamu rabbahu fa-ghawā/  
 thumma jtabāhu rabbuhu  
 fa-tāba 'alayhi wa-hadā/  
 qāla hbiṭā minhā jamī'an  
 ba'ḍukum li-ba'ḍin 'aduwwun  
 fa-immā ya'tiyannakum minnī hudan  
 fa-mani ttaba'a hudāyā  
 fa-lā yaḍillu wa-lā yashqā/*

<sup>22</sup> Cf. HK 2/1, 352–356.

But Satan whispered to Adam,  
 saying, ‘Adam, shall I show you the tree of immortality  
 and power that never decays?’/  
 And both ate from it. They became conscious of their nakedness  
 and began to cover themselves with leaves from the garden.  
 Adam disobeyed his Lord and was led astray -/  
 later his Lord brought him close,  
 returned to him (*tāba ‘alayhi*), and guided him -/  
 He said, ‘Get out of the garden  
 as each other’s enemy’.  
 Whoever follows my guidance,  
 when it comes to you will not go astray  
 nor fall into misery.

Adam – though re-accepted without efforts of his own – thus is a very faint person, his image is even trivialized. – Needless to say, that the Qur’an ignores the Second Adam altogether. Yet, at a later stage, the Qur’an refers to the Adam-Christ typology by reducing Adam and his *alter ego* Jesus (Christ) to merely genealogically unique mortal figures, Q 3:59:

*inna mathala ‘Īsā ‘inda llāhi ka-mathali Ādama khalaqahu min turābin  
 thumma qāla lahu kun fa-yakūn*  
 In God’s eyes Jesus is just like Adam: He created him from dust,  
 Said to him, ‘Be’, and he was.

What remains central, however, is rebellion. The Qur’an replaces the disobedient passive Adam by the active, rebellious Iblis. This replacement makes sense in light of the community’s new perception of evil. “Evil” – is no longer identical with the troubles caused for humanity by the Biblical Adam’s fault, such as physical constraints and the suffering of injustice, nor with man’s liability to commit evil deeds (cf. Gen. 3:14–19). It is rather an epistemic malaise that is perceived by the just: the rejection, even ridicule of prophetic truth by the “deniers”. The *Sitz im Leben* of the new dealing with “epistemic evil” is the community’s aporetic situation vis-à-vis the imminent social split. In the middle-Meccan *Sūrat al-Ḥijr*, Q 15:26–44, for the first time, the agency behind the opponents’ provocations is associated with a persona called Iblis. Iblis is an angelic figure, only later classified as essentially belonging to the jinn, the demons, a somewhat indefinite category of beings created from fire.<sup>23</sup> Demons, labeled *shayṭān/shayāṭīn* are remembered as rebellious, as

23 Q 55:15 – *wa-khalaqa l-jānna min mārijin min nār*, “And he created the jinn from a flame of fire”, for a detailed interpretation see also Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, Bd. 1: Frühmekkanische Suren. Poetische Prophetie, Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen,

illegitimate eavesdroppers,<sup>24</sup> and desirous of illicit knowledge, in the same sura, Q 15:16–18.<sup>25</sup>

*wa-la-qad ja'alnā fī l-samā'i burūjan*  
*wa-zayyannāhā li-l-nāzirīn/*  
*wa-hafiznāhā min kulli shayṭānin rajīm/*  
*illā mani staraqa l-sam'a fa-atba'ahu shihābun mubīn/*

We have set constellations up in the sky  
 and made it beautiful for all to see,  
 and guarded it from every cursed demon (*shayṭān*):/  
 any eavesdropper will be pursued by a clearly visible flame./

The community's awareness of the presence of demons in the world is another prerequisite of the Iblīs-story's "real", social background.

### Iblīs

Iblīs stands out among the angels as well as the "community of the jinn". Although it is most challenging to contextualize the Qur'anic figure with earlier and later representations of the "intermediate worlds"<sup>26</sup> we will confine ourselves to the Qur'anic figure's development so as to filter out the hitherto ignored Qur'anic Adam/Iblīs theology<sup>27</sup> which from our perspective is worth comparing with other Late Antique Adam resp. Satan theologies. What is the embedding of the Qur'anic discourse? Iblīs' story is no less than an alternative creation report, which conveys to the earliest act of disobedience a new dimension: Q 15:26–44:<sup>28</sup>

*la-qad khalqnā l-insāna min ṣalṣālīn*  
*min ḥama'in masnūn/*  
*wa-l-jānna khalaqnāhu min qablu*  
*min nāri l-samūm/*

2011 [=HK 1] [published in English as *The Qur'an. Text and Commentary*, vol. 1: Early Meccan Suras. Poetic Prophecy, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022], 598.

24 On the motive see Wild and Hawting, "Eavesdropping on the Heavenly Assembly and the Protection of the Revelation from Demonic Corruption."

25 See HK 2/1, 238f.

26 See the seminal study by Sara Kuehn, who also discusses the later Islamic developments, textual and iconic alike: Kuehn, "The Primordial Cycle Revisited," 173–200.

27 The Iblīs accounts have been discussed narratologically in Neuwirth, "The Qur'anic Path towards Canonization as Reflected in the Anthropogonic Accounts," 113–52, where however no particular theology had been sounded out. See also Bodman, *The Poetics of Iblīs*.

28 See *ibid.*, 240–245.

*wa-idh qāla rabbuka li-l-malā'ikati*  
*innī khāliqun basharan*  
*min ṣalṣālīn min ḥama'in masnūn/*  
*fa-idhā sawwaytuhu wa-nafakhtu fīhi min rūḥī*  
*fa-qa'ū lahu sājidīn/*  
*fa-sajada l-malā'ikatu kulluhum ajma'in/*  
*illā Iblīsā*  
*abā an yakūna ma'a l-sājidīn/*  
*qāla yā Iblīsu mā laka*  
*allā takūna ma'a l-sājidīn/*  
*qāla lam akun li-asjuda li-basharin*  
*khalaqtahu min ṣalṣālīn*  
*min ḥama'in masnūn/*  
*qāla fa-khruj minhā fa-innaka rajīm/*  
*wa-inna 'alayka l-la'nata*  
*ilā yawmi l-dīn/*  
*qāla rabbi fa-anẓirnī ilā yawmi yub'athūn/*  
*qāla fa-innaka mina l-munẓarīn/*  
*ilā yawmi l-waqtī l-ma'lūm/*  
*qāla rabbi bi-mā aghwaytanī*  
*la-uzayyinanna lahum fī l-arḍi*  
*wa-la-ughwīyannahum ajma'in/*  
*illā 'ibādaka minhumu l-mukhlāṣīn/*  
*qāla hādhā ṣirāṭun 'alayya mustaqīm/*  
*inna 'ibādī laysa laka 'alayhim sultānun*  
*illā mani ttaba'aka mina l-ghāwīn/*  
*wa-inna jahannama la-maw'iduhum ajma'in/*

We created man out of dried clay  
 formed from dark mud –/  
 The demons we created before,  
 from the fire scorching wind./  
 When Your Lord said to the angels,  
 'I will create a mortal  
 out of dried clay, formed from dark mud./  
 When I have fashioned him and breathed my spirit into him,  
 bow down before him',/  
 and the angels all did so./  
 But not Iblīs:  
 He refused to bow down like the others./  
 God said, 'Iblīs,  
 Why did you not bow down like the others?'/  
 He said, 'I will not bow to a mortal  
 You created from dried clay,  
 formed from dark mud'./  
 He said, 'Get out of here!', he said. 'You are an outcast,  
 you are rejected  
 until the Day of Judgement-'/

He said, 'My Lord, give me respite until the Day when they are raised from the dead'./  
 He said, 'You have respite,/ until the Day of the Appointed Time'./  
 He said, 'Because You have put me in the wrong,  
     I will lure mankind on earth  
     And put them altogether in the wrong,/ except Your devoted servants (*'ibāduka*):./  
 He said, 'That is a straight path to me:/  
 you will have no power over my servants (*'ibādī*),  
     only over the ones who go astray and follow you. /  
 Hell is the promised place for all these./

After creating Adam God calls the personnel of his heavenly court, the angels, to prostrate themselves before him; they all abide, except Iblīs who refuses, only to be expelled from God's vicinity. This at first sight resembles the Biblical Adam's fate. But Iblīs is shrewd: he does not surrender but negotiates with God for a compensation, and through clever reasoning turns the divine verdict of expulsion into an empowerment of his person: He succeeds to be assigned the tempter of humans on earth, thus accounting – together with his demonic followers, the *shayāṭīn* – for human error (including those of the deniers). The community's social crisis has thus been furnished with a scriptural explanation.

Iblīs' case, however, is an ambivalent case. To receive a recompensation for his loss he "justly" argues that he has been overreached ("put into the wrong"), unfairly stripped of his high status in favor of a less worthy rival. An even more stringent argument that he does not proffer has in later Sufi tradition earned him the title of "the true monotheist",<sup>29</sup> "the first martyr":<sup>30</sup> he suffers for the truth, since he has privileged the eternal divine will, God's prohibition to venerate any being but him, over the divine command to prostrate himself before Adam.

The plot is no Qur'anic invention, the alternative creation story was current in apocryphal literature<sup>31</sup> where Diabolos is however a *larmoyant* figure who

29 The famous mystic al-Hallāj (858–922) was the first to identify Iblīs with a "true monotheist", even stricter than God himself, see Ritter, *Das Meer der Seele*, 538 quoted by Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 194.

30 See Awn, *Satan's Tragedy and Redemption*.

31 The most prominent works are: Johnson, "Life of Adam and Eve," 249–95; Dochhorn, *Die Apokalypse des Mose*; Toepel, "The Cave of Treasures," 531–84. The latter occupies a special position in some recent studies, cf. Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext*, 39–53. It is however no more than a blatantly christological reworking of the earlier apocrypha of the Life of Adam and Eve cycle.

after being ultimately defeated with Adam's rehabilitation retells the story of his "fall", deploring his misfortune.<sup>32</sup> The Qur'anic Iblīs is depicted much more persevering and sophisticated, being convinced of his just position. In his heroic self-representation, he reminds of the ancient Arab hero who defies fate as such.<sup>33</sup> Yet he is essentially none other than the refiguration of an equally persevering Biblical figure, the Satan, "*ha-saṭan*", of the Book of Job, who functions as a divinely assigned prosecutor.<sup>34</sup> His role is to question the validity of the divine order based on the balance between doing and faring, thus enacting a sublime rebellion against the unquestioned divine will. In rabbinic exegesis he is explicitly identified as such a juridic figure: *ha-satan meqatreg* or simply *ha-meqatreg*,<sup>35</sup> a derivative from Greek *kategoros*. As such he functions again under the name Diabolos in the temptation story of Jesus,<sup>36</sup> challenging Jesus, "the Second Adam" against his divinely imposed mission.

<sup>1</sup>Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Diabolos. <sup>2</sup>And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungered. <sup>3</sup>And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. <sup>4</sup>But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. <sup>5</sup>Then Diabolos taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup>And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. (Ps. 91:11–12) <sup>7</sup>Jesus said unto him: It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. (Deut. 6:16). <sup>8</sup>Again, Diabolos taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; <sup>9</sup>And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. <sup>10</sup>Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. (Deut. 5:9; 6:13) <sup>11</sup>Then Diabolos leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.<sup>37</sup>

32 Johnson, "Life of Adam and Eve".

33 See Jacobi, "Allgemeine Charakteristik der arabischen Dichtung"; Wagner, *Grundzüge der klassischen arabischen Dichtung*.

34 See Stokes, "Satan, Yhwh's Executioner."

35 E.g. Genesis Rabba 38:7; 84:3; 91:9, and Leviticus Rabba 21:4.

36 Matt. 4:1–11; Mark 1:2–13; and Luke 4:1–13. It sees as if the text is an adaption of the King James Bible, but this is not stated. It is to the point to use the word 'Diabolos' in the English text, but it does seem strange with the rest of the archaic traditional English.

37 The original KJV translation uses the word "devil". We have replaced this with the original Greek word "Diabolos."



In the Gospels Diabolos figures on eye level with Jesus, both are portrayed as involved in a kind of courtroom debate. Both use equal rhetorical devices, both adduce scriptural verses to support their cause. Ephrem of Nisibis<sup>38</sup> surreptitiously applauds the Gospel Diabolos for his rhetorical skills.

Observe how there too  
the evil one (*bīshā*) revealed the truth:  
He recited Scripture there.  
He exacted truth there;  
he clothed himself with a Psalm (Ps. 90:11)  
hoping to win by reciting it.  
But our Lord would not listen  
to him – Not because it what he said  
was untrue but because the evil one  
had armed himself with deception.

The Qur'anic Iblīs is thus eventually an outcome of Biblical thinking. He equally debates with God whom he rhetorically maneuvers into a decision that brings about his own empowerment: his assignment to become the seducer of men on earth. His mode of argument – using conditional phrases and employing scriptural i.e., Qur'an quotations, follows Diabolos' mode. It is rhetorical skill, juridic argument that characterizes Iblīs as it had been characteristic of Job's "*saṭan*" and of the Gospel's Diabolos. This figuration has little in common with the Christian image of the Devil. No surprise that it has earned Iblīs the honorific of the inventor of syllogistic speech, *awwal man qās*,<sup>39</sup> only matched by the Rabbinic classification of Satan as the prosecutor, *ha-meqaṭreg* or *kategor*.

Iblīs is an ambiguous figure then: He is the initiator of juridic reasoning that will become a standard figure of Qur'anic arguing, and which has not remained unnoticed by theologians like al-Ghazali.<sup>40</sup> Simultaneously, he has rendered benefit to the community who has become aware of the ultimate origin of their aporia, their opponents' unbelief, which goes back to Iblīs' and his adherents', the demons', workings on earth. Evil is not the ontological reality of Christian theology, but rather an *epistemic challenge* that needs to be countered dialectically.

38 St. Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise*, 164f.

39 *Awwal man qās* – cf. Muḥammad Amīn al-Amīnī, *Al-Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq: ramz al-ḥaḍārah al-islāmīyyah*, 91; cf. Stewart, "An Eleventh-Century Justification of the Authority of Twelver Shiite Jurists," here: 482.

40 Thus al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) devoted an entire treatise, *Al-Qisṭās al-mustaqīm*, to the demonstration of syllogistic structures in the Qur'an, cf. Kleinknecht [Neuwirth], *Al-Qisṭās al-mustaqīm*, 159–188.

Fighting the assaults of invisible seductive agents is a demand which is not incumbent on the community alone. Their situation strongly reminds of another Late Antique case: the scenario depicted by the desert father Evagrius (345–399) who in his *Antirrhētikos* designed responses apt to be cast against demons who would attack the pious trying to seduce them.<sup>41</sup> Evil which is of epistemic nature is to be fought by references to epistemic truth, in Evagrius’ case: verses from scripture.

The Qur’anic Iblis story as far as it is told in Meccan suras (six of seven instances) is a success story, Iblis last but not least is an “educator”, who exemplarily employs juridical devices, to set dialectical processes in motion and thus evinces epistemic gain. Adam’s randomly committed “transgression” is eclipsed by Iblis’ consciously enacted rebellion. Iblis acting against God’s command – viewed historically – marks a new stage in the development of wisdom thinking. Aware of the problems inherent in a particular divine command, he questions the validity of the rule for pragmatic behavior based on the doing-faring balance altogether. Not unlike his Biblical predecessor he risks causing rupture within the divinely imposed order of the world.

### The Multifaceted Adam

Iblis’ antagonist, Adam, in the Qur’anic discourse hermeneutically remains present as well. In the Biblical story he had been destined to become the just ruler over creation. This plan, according to Christian thinking had due to Adam’s primordial failure not been implemented but was postponed to be realized by the “Second Adam”. In Judaism it is not a primordial but a historical national trauma that equally led to the perception of the need of a redeemer, a charismatic figure to restore Jewish nationhood. The Qur’anic community did not absorb such salvation historical memories, but at the very time of its emergence found itself confronted with the ideological consequences that had resulted from those salvation historical speculations.

Propelled probably by the political circumstances where two powerful rulers – Heraclius versus the Sassanian Khosrow II – were rivalling over the supremacy in the Eastern Mediterranean the community early in middle Mecca started to reflect on the preconditions of just rulership.<sup>42</sup> Elsewhere

41 Evagrius of Pontus and Brakke, *Talking Back*.

42 See for the work of the Corpus Coranicum on the middle Meccan suras: Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*; Neuwirth and Hartwig, HK 2/2.

messianic movements had – in Judaism – produced the ideal of the revived kingdom of David, and – in Christianity – the return of the redeemer-figure Jesus Christ. The quest for a *vicarius dei*, a *khalīfa fi l-arḍ*, had generally become a major urgency.<sup>43</sup> The community however discarded both the candidates proposed for that rank in their milieu: first David,<sup>44</sup> proffered by messianic Jewish groups of the time, who was briefly considered a proper *khalīfa fi l-arḍ* in the middle Meccan *Sūrat Ṣād*, Q 38.<sup>45</sup> The community's quest had equally bypassed the ruler image upheld by the Christians who had established a *khalīfa* in the person of the *pantocrator*, the “ruler over all” Jesus Christ, who was ubiquitously present in liturgies and in expressive icons. The community was to choose another figuration excluding the soteriological options.

### Medina and the New Placement of Man

Already in Late Mecca, when a more inclusive form of addressing both believers and pagans was needed, recourse was made to the basic common denominator of mankind, the descend from the protoplast, Adam. *Yā banī Ādam*, “children of Adam!” in Q 7:31–2 is used to appeal to pagan worshippers whose dispense with decent clothing for their Ka'ba worship is classified abominable – their nakedness being comparable to the first couple's being stripped of their (spiritual) cloth due to their transgression, Q 7:11–27. Adam's ill fate, his shameful nakedness, suffered though the machinations of *al-shayṭān* should serve as an abhorrent example. Although the Iblīs episode is re-narrated, Q 7:11–17, it is Adam's faring, that is of relevance for all his progeny, believers, and pagans alike. The focus has shifted from the rebellion of Diabolos/Iblīs to the primordial tragedy of man.

In Medina, at a time when the community had proven its valor with major political achievements – think of the “constitution”,<sup>46</sup> of the change of the

43 This is expressively expounded in Q 27, see the commentary in HK 2/2, 507–599, and Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, 75–110.

44 Q 38:26: ‘David! We have made you a *khalīfa fi l-arḍ*. (Abdhalim: “given you the mastery over the land”). Judge fairly between people. Do not follow your desires, lest they divert you from God's path: those who wander from his path will have a painful torment because they ignore the Day of Reckoning’. See for the implicit messianic reference the commentary in HK 2/1, 551 ff. See also Neuwirth, “David Im Islam.”

45 See HK 2/2, 38 ff., and Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, 57–74.

46 For the constitution of Medina see Lecker, *The “Constitution of Medina.”*

qibla<sup>47</sup> etc. – the Qur'anic creation of man scenario was critically revisited. In the Jewish neighborhood of educated co-dwellers in Medina the community's scope was widened to encompass Jewish knowledge and experience. The middle Meccan focus on the epistemic malaise created by the antagonism between deniers of the truth and believers and the community's uneasy position in between two messianically charged religious communities had given way to a more settled and confident self-view: Here the "antique" Adam, once rejected by Iblīs, reappears with new dignity. When God proclaims to install Adam as *khalīfa fi l-ard*, the angels – erstwhile so prone to venerate him beside God – try to dissuade God predicting that moral evil, violence, will result from his empowerment. But their argument is discarded – by a superimposed divine verdict: God himself vouches for Adam. This divine "nevertheless!" is part of Late Antique thinking, it is eloquently expressed in a famous rabbinic tradition:<sup>48</sup>

Rav Yehuda says that Rav says: At the time that the Holy One, Blessed be He, sought to create man/Adam, He created one group of ministering angels. He said to them: If you agree, let us fashion a man in our image. They said before him: Master of the Universe, what are the actions of this one You suggest to create? God said to them: His actions are such and such. [...] They said before him: Master of the Universe: "What is man that You are mindful of him? And the son of man that You think of him?" (Ps. 8:5). God outstretched His small finger among them and burned them. And the same with a second group. The third group that He asked said before Him: Master of the Universe, the first two groups who spoke their mind before You, what did they accomplish? The entire world is Yours; whatever You wish to do in Your world, do. When arrived the time of the people of the generation of the flood and the people of the generation of the dispersion, whose actions were ruinous, they said before God: Master of the Universe, didn't the first speak appropriately before You? God said to them: "*Even to your old age I am the same; and even to hoar hairs will I suffer you*" (Isa. 46:4).

This conciliatory divine turn to Adam is not random. It is hard to flash out the "real" background of the Talmudic angels' pessimism: Man in his – by then established – Christian ambivalent configuration as created in the image of God and yet practicing violence, presents an oxymoron. It can be dissolved only through an almost paradoxical divine act of solidarity, through God's persistent "surplus" confidence in man, his "vouching" for Adam.

47 See Neuwirth, "The Qibla of Muhammad's Community Reconsidered."

48 bSanhedrin 38b; see Schäfer, *Rivalität zwischen Engeln und Menschen*, 92, 97, 220ff.

This idea is likewise expressed in the last Iblīs pericope in Q 2:30–38, where the angels who witness Adam’s creation and are informed about his elevation, are equally biased against him, but again are outvoted. Adam’s installment is carefully prepared for. God provides Adam with exceptional knowledge to qualify him for his ruler role. Iblīs’ rebellion is briefly remembered – it is by now without avail, there follows no dispatchment of Iblīs to play a significant role on earth. Instead, the act of seduction is practiced by his alter ego, *al-shayṭān*, like in Q 20:115–123 and Q 7:10–18 before, “Bible knowledge”, the couple’s first transgression, moves into the foreground. But, again, it does not substantially affect their status – there is no “original sin” in Qur’anic thinking. God’s forgiveness in this last Iblīs narrative has however gained momentum. He, who had already taught Adam all the names, provides Adam with “words”, calls him to his new mission, Q 2:30–38:

*wa-idh qāla rabbuka li-l-malā’ikati  
innī jā’ilun fi l-arḍi khalifatan  
qālū a-ta’j’alu fihā man yuḥsidu fihā wa-yasfiku l-dimā’a  
wa-naḥnu nusabbiḥu bi-ḥamdika wa-nuqaddisu laka  
qāla innī a’lamu mā lā ta’lamūn/  
wa-‘allama Ādama l-asmā’a kullahā  
thumma ‘araḍahum ‘alā l-malā’ikati  
fa-qāla anbi’ūnī bi-asmā’i ḥā’ulā’i in kuntum ṣādiqīn/  
qālū subḥānaka  
lā ‘ilma lanā illā mā ‘allamtanā  
innaka anta l-‘alīmu l-ḥakīm/  
qāla yā Ādamu anbi’hum bi-asmā’ihim  
fa-lammā anba’ahum bi-asmā’ihim qāla  
a-lam aqul lakum innī a’lamu ghayba l-samāwāti wa-l-arḍi  
wa-a’lamu mā tubdūna wa-mā kuntum taktumūn/*

*wa-idh qulnā li-l-malā’ikati sjudū li-Ādama  
fa-sajadū illā Iblīsa  
abā wa-stakbara  
wa-kāna mina l-kāfirīn/  
wa-qulnā yā Ādamu  
skun anta wa-zawjuka l-jannata  
wa-kulā minḥā ragḥadan ḥaythu shi’tumā  
wa-lā taqrabā ḥādhihi l-shajarata  
fa-takūnā mina l-ẓālimīn/  
fa-azallahuma l-shayṭānu ‘anhā  
fa-akhrajahumā mimma kānā fihī  
wa-qulnā hbiṭū ba’ḍukum li-ba’ḍin ‘aduwwun  
wa-lakum fi l-arḍi mustaqarrun wa-matā’un ilā ḥīn/  
fa-talaqqā Ādamu min rabbihī kalimātīn  
fa-tāba ‘alayhi  
innahu huwa l-tawwābu l-raḥīm/*

*qulnā hbiṭū minhā jamīʿan*  
*fa-immā yaʿtiyannakum minnī hudan*  
*fa-man tabīʿa hudāya*  
*fa-lā khawfun ʿalayhim*  
*wa-lā hum yaḥzanūn/*

When your Lord told the angels,  
 ‘I am putting a viceroy on earth’,  
 they said, ‘How can You put someone there who will cause damage and  
 bloodshed,  
 while we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your holiness?’,  
 he said, ‘I know things you do not’./  
 He taught Adam all the names,  
 then he showed them to the angels  
 and he said, ‘Tell me the names of these if you truly [think you can]’./  
 They said, ‘May You be glorified!  
 We have knowledge only of what. You have taught us.  
 You are the All Knowing and All Wise’./  
 He said, ‘Adam, tell them the names of these’.  
 When he told them their names, he said,  
 ‘Did I not tell you that I know what is hidden in the heavens and the earth,  
 and that I know what you reveal and what you conceal?’/

When we told the angels, ‘Bow down before Adam’,  
 They all bowed. But not Iblis,  
 Who refused and was arrogant:  
 He was one of the disobedient./  
 We said, ‘Adam!  
 Live with your wife in this garden.  
 Both of you eat freely there as you will,  
 but do not go near this tree,  
 or you will both become wrongdoers’./  
 But Satan (*al-shayṭān*) made them slip,  
 and removed them from the state they were in.  
 We said, ‘Get out, all of you! You are each other’s enemy.  
 On earth you will have a place to stay and livelihood for a time’./  
*Then Adam received words from his Lord*  
*and he (God) turned back to him.*  
 He is the Ever Relenting, the Most Merciful./  
 We said, ‘Get out, all of you!  
 But when guidance comes from me  
 there will be no fear  
 for those who follow my guidance  
 nor will they grieve.’<sup>49</sup>

49 See for a more exhaustive interpretation Neuwirth and Hartwig, “Beyond Reception History.”

Not unlike in the case of the Talmud, it is God's persistent attachment to man that induces him to turn again (*tāba*) to Adam. But contrary to the Talmudic case, where Adam's elevation is God's lonely taken decision, in Q 2, it is a surplus privilege of Adam, divinely bestowed exceptional knowledge, that ostentatiously qualifies him for the position so much disapproved of by the angels. Not moral excellence nor salvation historical momentum, but knowledge, qualifies Adam for his role as a *khalīfa fī l-arḍ*. The finally identified ruler then, is not a figure towering over mankind, but rather the primordial man in the state he was created by God and successively endowed with knowledge. He equals mankind itself – or, viewed microstructurally: he is represented by the new community, finally excelling in religious knowledge.

Instead of the need to wait for a redeemer figure to come there is the challenge to take over the leadership oneself.<sup>50</sup> A newly acquired self-confidence, epistemic and political, has – after six preceding acts of Iblis' rebellion as a key to understanding the human condition, finally allowed to restore the pivotal position to man himself. Adam – an Adam who is however completely stripped of his salvation historical clothing – is established as a *khalīfa fī l-arḍ*.

### 'The Surplus value' of Considering the Qur'anic Prophecy

*Christian theology* has long ignored the Qur'an as a theologically relevant part of post-Biblical literature. The recent rediscovery of apocryphal literature may build a new bridge to the Qur'an as well. In the case of the Iblis stories, one Jewish/Christian apocryphon even acquires a sort of "canonicity" through its appearance in the "canonical" text of the Qur'an. – To what benefit? Such an inclusive gaze can throw new light on theological positions that have become controversial today: The Qur'anic version of Diabolos' rebellion reveals a more differentiated image of evil than does the story of the much-maligned

<sup>50</sup> In contrast to our interpretation of verse 37 (*fa-talaqqā Ādamu min rabbihi kalimātin fa-tāba 'alayhi ...*), underlining an optimistic attitude towards men, i.e. securing his status as a God-pleasing political agent, Zellentin, "Triological Anthropology: The Qur'an on Adam and Iblis in View of Rabbinic and Christian Discourse," 120f. cautiously suggests "to understand the expression of God's 'word' given to Adam in Q 2:37 as evoking a similar epithet of God's 'word' applied to Jesus in Q 3:39 and 45 and Q 4:171, where the same Arabic term *kalimah* is equally used (see also Q 19:34) ... by giving God's word to Adam in a form that may well evoke the epithet used for its Messiah, the Medinan Qur'an may well corroborate its teaching in Q 3:59 that highlights the affinity of Jesus to Adam ...". A different meaning of the Qur'anic pericope has been offered by Neuwirth and Hartwig, "Beyond Reception History," 27f.

Christian Devil. It excels for its artful depiction of Diabolos as a juridical actor, as an epistemic challenger, who does not primarily cause evil but rather stirs critical reflection. The diversification of the Diabolos image could serve as an impulse to rethink different dimensions of evil which in its Late Antique perception is not only a morally, but moreover an epistemically vexing malaise.

*Historians* will make the startling observation that the Qur'an though continuing Biblical traditions at times tells a completely new story – in response to "topical", social, and political problems that occupy the community. It is at once a heritage text and a mirror of the collective perceptions hedged in an emergent religious group of the 7th century. – *Literary students and cultural students* will realize the paramount importance of language and rhetoric in the Qur'an, which in Late Antiquity is virulent across confessional borders – expressed by Ephrem no less emphatically than by the Qur'an – a proficiency which even tends to challenge moral judgements.

The assets of critical, i.e., diachronic, and hermeneutically sensitive Qur'anic Studies for *Islamic theology* are numerous. One of the most significant though hitherto little noticed Qur'anic achievements is the evidence of a particular – confident – image of man, which is reached in the course of a long development. Judging man not primarily by moral, but by epistemic standards the Qur'anic message arrives at a remarkably new perception of humanity where Adam, cleansed from the stigma of his "original sin" can finally be installed as the viceroy of God. The – implicit – construction of Adam as the community's self-image, furthermore, gives expression to a strikingly optimistic view on human history – unknown of in the neighboring cultures.





# Divine Kingship

*David, Solomon, and Job in Sūrat Ṣād (Q 38)*

*Saqib Hussain*

## 1. Introduction

The central section in Q 38 (Sūrat Ṣād) tells the story of three Biblical prophets: David, Solomon, and Job, and concludes with an exhortation to remember the patriarchs and a few other Biblical prophets (for ease of reference, this final subsection will simply be referred to as the ‘patriarchs pericope’). There is a brief interlude of a few verses between the David and Solomon pericopes that reflect on the purpose of creation, the fate of the righteous and the unrighteous, and the status of the scripture. The central section of the sura in its entirety is given below, divided into thematic subsections:<sup>1</sup>

### David pericope (vv. 17–26)

<sup>17</sup> Bear patiently [singular] with what they say, and remember Our servant David, the man of might. He was a penitent.

<sup>18</sup> We subdued the mountains to give glory with him at evening and sunrise;

<sup>19</sup> And (We subdued) the birds gathered up, all turning to him.

<sup>20</sup> We strengthened his dominion, and We gave him wisdom and decisive speech.

<sup>21</sup> Have you heard of the tidings of the disputants when they scaled into the chamber,

<sup>22</sup> When they went in to see David, and he took fright at them? They said, ‘Do not be afraid. [We are] two disputants, one of whom has wronged the other. So judge between us with truth, and do not transgress, and guide us to the level path.’

<sup>23</sup> ‘This is my brother. He has ninety-nine ewes and I have one ewe, and he says, “Entrust it to me”, and he has overpowered me in speech.’

<sup>24</sup> He said, ‘He has wronged you in asking you to add your ewe to his. Many partners wrong each other, except those who believe and do good works, and how few they are!’ David realized that We had tested him, and he sought forgiveness from his Lord, and he fell in prostration and repented.

<sup>25</sup> So we forgave Him that. He had nearness to Us and a fair resort.

<sup>26</sup> ‘O David, We have made you a vicegerent in the land. Judge between the people in truth. Do not follow caprice, lest it make you stray from the way of God. Those who stray from the way of God will have a severe punishment for having forgotten about the Day of Reckoning.’

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1 Qur’an citations for this chapter are from the Jones, *The Qur’ān*, occasionally adapted to give a more literal rendering of the text where appropriate. Biblical citations are from the NRSV.

**Interlude (vv. 27–29)**

- <sup>27</sup> We did not create in vain the heavens and the earth and what is between them. That is the conjecture of those who are ungrateful. Woe to the ungrateful because of the Fire!
- <sup>28</sup> Shall We treat those who believe and do righteous deeds like those who do mischief in the land? Shall We make those who protect themselves like the profligates?
- <sup>29</sup> A scripture which We have sent down to you, blessed, for them to ponder its signs and for those of understanding to reflect.

**Solomon pericope (vv. 30–40)**

- <sup>30</sup> We gave Solomon to David. How excellent a servant! He was penitent.
- <sup>31</sup> (Recall) when he was shown the standing steeds in the evening,
- <sup>32</sup> And he said, 'I have loved the love of good things on the basis of the remembrance of my Lord,' until it/they disappeared behind the veil.
- <sup>33</sup> 'Bring it/them back to me.' And he began to stroke their legs and necks.
- <sup>34</sup> We tried Solomon and set on his throne a body. Then he repented.
- <sup>35</sup> He said, 'My Lord, forgive me and give me a dominion that will not be appropriate for anyone after me. Surely, You are the giver!'
- <sup>36</sup> So We made the wind subject to him, running at his command, gently, wherever he decided,
- <sup>37</sup> Likewise the devils, every builder and diver,
- <sup>38</sup> And others linked together in fetters:
- <sup>39</sup> 'This is Our gift. Bestow or withhold without reckoning.'
- <sup>40</sup> He had nearness to Us and a fair resort.

**Job pericope (vv. 41–44)**

- <sup>41</sup> Mention Our servant Job, when he called out to his Lord, saying, 'Satan has touched me with fatigue and torment.'
- <sup>42</sup> 'Stamp with your foot. This is a cool washing-place and a drink.'
- <sup>43</sup> We gave to him his family and the like of them with them, as a mercy from Us and as a reminder for those of understanding:
- <sup>44</sup> 'Take in your hand a bundle of herbs, and strike with it, and do not break your oath.' We found him patient. How excellent a servant! He was penitent.

**Patriarchs pericope (vv. 45–48)**

- <sup>45</sup> Mention Our servants Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, those of might and vision.
- <sup>46</sup> We distinguished them with a pure quality, remembrance of the Abode.
- <sup>47</sup> With Us they are of the chosen, the good.
- <sup>48</sup> Mention Ismā'il (=Samuel?) and Elisha and Dhū l-Kifl (=Elijah?). Each [of them] is one of the chosen.

There are several puzzling features in each pericope: What are the mistakes from which David and Solomon felt the need to repent, and for which they were forgiven (vv. 24–25, 34–35)? What is the significance of the strange manner by which the disputants enter upon David (v. 21–22)? What is it that 'disappeared behind the veil' (v. 32)? What did Solomon desire to be returned to him (v. 33)? (Note that for vv. 32–33 the referent of the feminine singular

verb and pronoun could be a feminine singular noun, such as *shams*, ‘sun,’ or a non-human plural, such as ‘horses.’) What is the mysterious body cast upon Solomon’s throne? Why is Job asked to take a bundle of grass, and who is he striking with it (v. 44)? How do the three primary prophetic pericopes hang together, and how do they relate to the interlude and the concluding patriarchs pericope, and indeed the rest of the sura? In what follows, I will first consider the most prominent interpretations of key aspects of these passages, before suggesting a new reading.

## 2. Previous Readings of the Prophetic Stories in Q 38

### *David*

For a systematic analysis of how the Q 38 David pericope was interpreted in *tafsīr* literature, see Khaleel Mohammed, *David in the Muslim Tradition*.<sup>2</sup> On the whole, the exegetes attempted to solve some of the above-mentioned problems through recourse to the Biblical tradition with which they were familiar, the so-called *isrā’īliyyāt*.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Ibn ‘Aṭīyya (d. 541/1146) is explicit that the Qur’anic account of David here cannot be understood without making use of extra-Qur’anic stories that explicate it.<sup>4</sup> Western scholars, from Abraham Geiger onwards, have similarly attempted to trace these pericopes to their Biblical and para-Biblical origins to fill in the gaps in the Qur’anic accounts.<sup>5</sup> Gabriel Reynolds is forthright on the matter: ‘This passage is hardly comprehensible unless account is taken of its Biblical subtext, namely the parable told to David by the prophet Nathan after the king’s fornication with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah.’<sup>6</sup>

2 Mohammed, *David in the Muslim Tradition*, 41, 65f., 117. For *mufasssīrūn* who attempted a close reading of the pericope without recourse to the Biblical tradition, see *ibid.*, 68 (al-Māturīdī), 75–78 (ar-Rāzī). For a treatment of this incident in the *qīṣas al-anbiyā’* (‘stories of the prophets’) genre, see Lindsay, “Alī Ibn ‘Asākir as a Preserver of “Qīṣas al-Anbiyā”, 75–80. See also Poorthuis, “Jewish Influences upon Islamic Storytelling,” 135–150.

3 On this label and its problematics, see Pregill, “Isrā’īliyyāt.”

4 Ibn ‘Aṭīyya, *al-Muḥarrar al-wajīz fī tafsīr al-kitāb al-‘azīz*, 4:498.

5 Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, 378f [actually published Breslau between 1937 and 1939], Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur’an and Muslim Literature*, 36f.; Mohammed, *David in the Muslim Tradition*, 3.

6 *El3*, s.v. David. See also Riddell, “Islamic Variations on a Biblical Theme as Seen in the David and Bathsheba Saga,” who adds that despite filling in gaps from the Bathsheba incident, the Qur’anic story remains incomplete and incomprehensible without the aid of the exegetical tradition. See also Stetkevych, “Solomon and Mythic Kingship in the Arab-Islamic Tradition.”

The relevant passage from 2 Sam. is as follows:

It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, 'This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.' So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, 'I am pregnant.' (2 Sam. 11:2–5)

After David learns of Bathsheba's pregnancy, he hurriedly recalls her husband, Uriah the Hittite, from the war effort, and tries to persuade him to go home to Bathsheba. Uriah, however, refuses to allow himself such a luxury, while 'the ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab [the general of David's army] and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field,' (v. 11). When no amount of inducement can sway Uriah, David eventually sends him back to the battlefield, instructing Joab to 'set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die' (v. 15). He subsequently takes Bathsheba as his wife. The story continues:

... and the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, 'There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meagre fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveller to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.' Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, 'As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.' Nathan said to David, 'You are the man! ...' (2 Sam. 12:1–7)

David is moved to remorse and repentance and is forgiven by God (v. 13). There are obvious differences with the Qur'anic account, the most prominent being that the parable told by Nathan in the Biblical story is transformed to an actual dispute that takes place before David.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, the Biblical narrative clearly provides relevant background to the Qur'anic passage (although see

<sup>7</sup> This portrayal of Biblical parables as veridical episodes is attested elsewhere in the Qur'an too. See Reynolds, *El3*, s.v. David; Reynolds, *The Qur'an and the Bible*, 691.

below). Speyer also cites Matt. 18:12 as a possible influence for the ninety-nine vs one sheep motif and Josh. 2:11–15 for the two men scaling into the king's chamber. Neither passage is at all related to the Biblical David, so Speyer suggests that the Qur'anic story is an amalgamation of these disparate elements.<sup>8</sup> Gobillot, accepting Speyer's suggestion that the number of sheep is taken from Matt. 18:12 (with parallels in Luke 15:4 and Ezek. 34:1–4), which is about concern for every single sheep in one's flock, attempts to fuse the message from that passage with the David story:

The lesson that thus emerges from Q 38 verses 23 and 24 is that the union of David and Bathsheba was among the events willed by God, insofar as the future mother of Solomon is identified with the one-hundredth sheep of the Gospel and is thereby considered as already belonging, despite appearances, to the shepherd David.<sup>9</sup>

This seems to be a stretch. Far more plausible is Neuwirth's suggestion that the introduction of the number of sheep is simply a rhetorical means of inducing greater sympathy for the owner of the single sheep.<sup>10</sup> Further, rather than scouring the Bible for parables involving the same number of sheep as in the Qur'anic pericope, the contrast between the two brothers might be a Qur'anic development of rabbinic reports of how David would adjudicate with justice and mercy between a rich man and a poor man, giving to each his due (b. Sanh. 6b).

### *Solomon*

Filling in narrative gaps with details from Biblical and para-Biblical intertexts has proven to be more challenging for the Q 38 Solomon pericope, as the parallels between the former and the Qur'an are not as evident. Speyer suggests that the pericope is connected to Deut. 17:16, which prohibits the king from acquiring a great number of horses, and 1 Kings 4:26 and 2 Chron. 9:25, which explicitly ascribe to Solomon a large number of horse stables. He also cites 2 Kings 23:11, in which Josiah removes from the Temple the horses dedicated to the sun. As for the body that was set upon Solomon's throne (v. 34), Speyer connects it with the Talmudic story of the demon Ashmedai, who for a while takes over Solomon's throne.<sup>11</sup>

8 Various other points of overlap between the Q 38 David pericope and the rabbinic tradition are given by Tait, "Managing a Royal Sex Abuse Scandal."

9 Gobillot, "David and Solomon," 216–31.

10 Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 2/1*, 548f.

11 Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, 398–401.

The exegetes offered various explanations for the enigmatic expressions in the passage. The phrase ‘until it/they disappeared (*tawārat*) behind the veil’ (v. 32) was generally understood by the mediaeval exegetes as referring to the sun setting before Solomon had performed his afternoon prayer.<sup>12</sup> His command to ‘bring it/them back (*ruddūhā*)’ (v. 33) was accordingly taken by the exegetes to mean that he commanded the sun to reverse its course so that he could pray on time. Then, as the love of horses had distracted him from his worship, he ordered that they be slaughtered: ‘And he began to stroke their legs and necks’ (v. 33; see below for this interpretation of the verse). Despite the modern scholarly insistence on separating the Qur’an from its exegesis, the mediaeval gloss regarding the sun changing its course and turning back is still widely accepted as the correct reading for this verse.<sup>13</sup>

### *Job*

The narrative outline of the Job pericope is clearly the same as that presented in the Biblical Book of Job: Job is a devout servant of God being tested by Satan (v. 41 – cf. Job 1–2), who after suffering terrible hardship is finally healed with his family restored to him (v. 43 – cf. Job 42). Despite the relatively clear Biblical parallel, the Job pericope also poses several interpretive difficulties, such as the manner in which Job is healed.<sup>14</sup> It is to such difficulties in all of the stories that we will turn below.

These various attempts, whether mediaeval or modern, to understand the Q 38 prophetic stories in light of their Biblical antecedents leave several of the questions posed at the start of the present essay unaddressed. I propose that this is because here, as so frequently elsewhere in the Qur’an, the scripture is using themes and *topoi* associated with the prophetic figures in question in a highly innovative way, to further its own theological message. A close reading of the text on its own terms is thus a necessary condition for deciphering the meaning of these stories.

12 The motif of Solomon sleeping through his prescribed prayer time seems to have been adopted into *tafsīr* from rabbinic stories. See Lev. Rab. 12:5, in which Solomon sleeps through the time of the morning burnt offering.

13 Klar, “And We Cast upon His Throne a Mere Body”; Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, 64; Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 2/1*, 530; Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, 399.

14 I have elsewhere dealt with the various (generally unconvincing) Biblical antecedents offered for the Qur’an’s presentation of how Job was healed, as presented in vv. 42 and 44. See Hussain, “Jonah, Job, Elijah, and Ezra.”

### 3. Sura Unity

The sura deploys several lexical repetitions that both span across the prophetic stories and occur outside of them, linking the stories to each other and to the rest of the sura, and strongly suggesting that the stories complement each other and are to be understood in light of the sura as a whole. Table 7.1 lists those lexical features of Q 38 that clearly serve to unify the whole sura.<sup>15</sup> The items listed are those that do not occur at all outside Q 38, or else do so only rarely, and thus may legitimately be considered as sura-binding features in Q 38. Various other lexical and structural overlaps between the prophetic pericopes that are not unique to Q 38 will be presented as we progress.

Table 7.1 Repeated lexical items in Q 38 that are unique or nearly unique to the sura

Lexical item	Q 38 verse and pericope in which the lexical item occurs, and comments on its unique relationship to Q 38
<i>awwāb</i> , 'penitent'	vv. 17, 19 (David) v. 30 (Solomon) v. 44 (Job) Only occurs twice outside Q 38 (in Q 17:25, 50:32)
' <i>abdanā</i> /' <i>ibādanā</i> , 'My/Our servant'	v. 17 (David: <i>wa-dhkur 'abdanā</i> , 'and remember Our servant') v. 41 (Job: <i>wa-dhkur 'abdanā</i> , 'and remember Our servant') v. 45 (patriarchs: <i>wa-dhkur 'ibādanā</i> , 'and remember Our servants') The phrase ' <i>abdanā</i> /' <i>ibādanā</i> followed by a prophet's name is unique to Q 38
<i>nī'ma l-'abd</i> , 'How excellent a servant'	v. 30 (Solomon: <i>nī'ma l-'abd</i> , 'How excellent a servant') v. 44 (Job: <i>nī'ma l-'abd</i> , 'How excellent a servant') This phrase occurs only in Q 38

<sup>15</sup> See also Stetkevych, "Solomon and Mythic Kingship in the Arab-Islamic Tradition," 21.



Table 7.1 Repeated lexical items in Q 38 that are unique or nearly unique to the sura (*cont.*)

Lexical item	Q 38 verse and pericope in which the lexical item occurs, and comments on its unique relationship to Q 38
<i>w-h-b</i> , 'giving'	v. 9 ( <i>wahhāb</i> , 'giver') (before prophetic pericopes) vv. 30, 35 (twice in the latter, once as <i>wahhāb</i> , 'giver') (Solomon) v. 43 (Job) The divine name <i>wahhāb</i> occurs only once outside of Q 38 (in Q 3:8)
<i>yawm al-hisāb</i> , 'the Day of Reckoning'	v. 16 (before prophetic pericopes) v. 38 (David) v. 53 (after prophetic pericopes) This phrase occurs only once outside Q 38 (in Q 40:27)
<i>husna/sharra ma'āb</i> , 'a fair/evil resort'	v. 25 (David) v. 40 (Solomon) vv. 49, 55 (after prophetic pericopes) Only occurs twice outside Q 38 (in Q 3:14, 13:29)
<i>zulfā</i> , 'nearness'	v. 25 (David) v. 40 (Solomon) Only occurs twice outside Q 38 (in Q 34:37, 38:40)

The multiple lexical overlaps presented in table 7.1, as well as those to be discussed below, suggest the broad literary coherence of the sura. As we proceed, due consideration must therefore be given to the relationship of each part to the whole.

#### 4. David

We are told two things about David at the start of his pericope (v. 17): he is possessed of might (*dhā l-ayd*) and is penitent (*awwāb*). This duality is developed in the next few verses. He has been given a sublime form of worship, such that

the mountains and the birds 'give glory with him at evening and sunrise' (vv. 18–19). Alongside this, he has also been given a great dominion, and the ability to rule as a wise king (v. 20). All of this points to David's combination of earthly kingship and pietistic devotion at the head of God's created order, which I shall frequently refer to respectively as worldly and religious 'authority'. This is a picture of David familiar from his Biblical and late antique presentation. Alongside being a king, 'David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals' (2 Sam. 6:5). David is also, of course, both in the Qur'an and in Christian and Jewish tradition, the proclaimer of the Psalms, which are replete with the language of nature singing God's praise (e.g., Ps. 148:7–10).<sup>16</sup> This image of David was developed among both Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity, both of whom fused it with the image of Orpheus, the Greek poet of legend who could charm animals with his lyre. Late antique synagogal and funerary depictions of David likewise have him playing his harp to animals, including, in the early fourth century Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus in Rome, being surrounded by birds.<sup>17</sup> This duality, David as king and David as harper, was noted explicitly by Clement of Alexandria.<sup>18</sup>

The significance to sura-specific concerns of David's being doubly blessed in this manner is clear when we consider the sura's opening section, before the prophetic pericopes, which introduces the themes of worldly and religious authority. In v. 2, we are told that 'those who have rejected are in pride (*'izza*) and schism (*shiqāq*). The first of these two characteristics, *'izza*, indicates worldly conceit (cf. Q 2:206, 4:39, 11:91.92, 18:34, 27:34, and 63:8 for similar uses of the root 'z-z); *shiqāq* on the other hand refers to religious deviation (see Q 2:137.176 and 41:52 for other clear uses of *shiqāq* with this sense).<sup>19</sup>

Over the next few verses, the themes of worldly and religious authority are alluded to several times:

16 Reynolds, *The Qur'an and the Bible*, 515.

17 The connection between the Qur'anic David and Orpheus was proposed by Marc Philonenko and has found more recent support in Geneviève Gobillot. See Gobillot, "David and Solomon," 220f. However, the connection they propose to Orpheus is via the Qumranic Psalm 151. This seems tenuous. Far more plausible as a background to the Qur'anic presentation is the evidence for the fusion of David and Orpheus in Late Antiquity. See Hezser, "The Contested Image of King David in Rabbinic and Patristic Literature and Art of Late Antiquity," 278–82.

18 Hezser, "The Contested Image of King David in Rabbinic and Patristic Literature and Art of Late Antiquity," 278–82.

19 Neuwirth also identifies pride and dissention as the two recurring features of the sura; *Der Koran. Band 2/1*, 538f.

<sup>6</sup> The notables (*al-mala'*) among them go off, saying, 'Go and be steadfast to your gods. That is a thing to be desired.

<sup>7</sup> We have not heard of this in (our) present religion.<sup>20</sup> This is something that has been invented.

<sup>8</sup> Has the reminder been sent down to him from among us [all]? No! They are in doubt about My reminder. No! They have not yet tasted My punishment.

Verses 6 refers to the notables (*mala'*) among the pagan rejectors of Muhammad's message,<sup>21</sup> a term used throughout the Qur'an to refer to the social elite in a society.<sup>22</sup> This *mala'* evidently also sees itself in a position of religious authority vis-à-vis their social inferiors, to whom they impart religious instructions (vv. 6–7). In v. 8, the notables take umbrage at the idea that they should have been overlooked as recipients of divine revelation.

We see this pairing of worldly power and religious authority in the opening section most clearly in vv. 9 and 10, which form a structural doublet:

<sup>9</sup> Or (*am*) have they the treasures of the mercy of your Lord, the mighty and the munificent?

<sup>10</sup> Or (*am*) have they the dominion (*mulk*) of the heavens and the earth and what is between them? Let them ascend the means (to reach Him)!

The 'treasures of the mercy of your Lord' in v. 9 refers to God's choice to send down His revelation to whomever He wishes, as is clear from their question in the preceding verse: 'Has the reminder (*dhikr*) been sent down to him from among us' (v. 8). Verse 9 thus asks rhetorically whether they have any right to determine who the recipients of scripture ought to be – i.e., who may be given religious authority –, and v. 10 dismisses any pretensions of worldly power they think they have as insignificant in contrast to God's complete dominion. As we will see, several key words here recur in the prophetic pericopes.

The common themes between the sura opening and the David pericope indicates that the latter in some way responds to the Meccan pagans' dual claim of worldly and religious superiority. That this is the case is also evident from the way the David pericope opens: 'Bear patiently [singular] with what they say, and remember Our servant David ...' (v. 17), which leads us to expect a response to the issues introduced in the sura opening.

20 For this translation of *al-millah al-ākhirah*, see Sinai, *Key Terms of the Qur'an*, s.v. *millah*.

21 For a justification of translating *kāfirūn* and *alladhīna kafarū* as pagans and/or rejectors, see Reynolds, Klar, Sidky and Sirry, *The Yale Dictionary of the Qur'an*, s.v. Unbelievers (by Saqib Hussain).

22 See Sinai, *Key Terms of the Qur'an* s.v. *mala'*.

We again see the pairing of religious and worldly authority in the patriarchs pericope, which concludes the prophetic pericopes: 'Mention Our servants Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, men of might (*ulī l-aydī*) and vision (*al-abṣār*)' (v. 45). The phrase *ulī l-aydī* echoes the near identical *dhā l-ayd* (man of might) in v. 17 in reference to David, *ulū* being the plural of *dhū*. Once again, this reference to the patriarchs' worldly power is conjoined with their religious insight, or 'vision.' Note that the three prophets mentioned next, Ismā'īl, al-Yasa', and Dhū l-Kifl, have recently been argued to refer to Samuel (rather than Ishmael), Elisha, and Elijah respectively,<sup>23</sup> all of whom were Biblical prophets who both commanded significant religious authority, and were also known for their relationship to Israelite rulers: Samuel with Saul and David, Elijah with Ahab, and Elisha with Jehu.

Returning to David, the connection between how he is introduced and the sura opening suggests that his double gift of religious and worldly authority is presented in contrast to the pagans, who certainly do not have the former, and are only deluded in thinking they have the latter. Several lexical links reinforce this distinction. Verse 10 had asked rhetorically whether the pagans, have dominion (*mulk*) over the heavens and the earth, while v. 20 affirms that God Himself strengthened David's dominion (*mulk*). Verse 2 had presented the pagans as having pride (*'izza*) over their higher worldly status, which was causing them to reject the Qur'an, while, as we will see, David's judgement in the matter of the two disputants corrects the overbearing behavior of the richer, who has 'overpowered' (*a'azza*) the poorer one in speech. In both instances, the root 'z-z implies an abuse and delusion of power that results in wrongful behavior, which, in the case of the richer brother, David – whose dominion God has strengthened – is able to correct.

After David is thus introduced, two disputants who need him to adjudicate in their case scale a wall to reach him in his *miḥrāb* (v. 21). Although this word is used consistently in the Qur'an for the Jerusalem Temple (Q 3:37.39, 19:11),<sup>24</sup> it seems likely here that its primary signification is a palace, or perhaps royal chamber (but see below).<sup>25</sup> David's fright is taken by some readers as an indication of his engrossment in devotional acts.<sup>26</sup> Neuwirth's explanation is more convincing: this episode is strongly reminiscent of the angelic visitation to Abraham in Q 51:24–34. In both episodes, the visitors reassure the prophet,

23 Abdel Raziq, "Ismā'īl, Dhū l-Kifl, and Idrīs."

24 Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 2/1*, 547.

25 *El2*, s.v. *miḥrāb*.

26 This point is also noted by Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'aẓīm*, 7:60; Tait, "Managing a Royal Sex Abuse Scandal," 190.

'Do not be afraid (*lā takhaf*)' (Q 51:28 and 38:22), continuing the Biblical theme of a sense of awe and fear at the presence of angels (e.g., Dan. 10:10–12; Matt. 28:2–5; Luke 1:11–13, 2:9–10).

Having heard the case, David rules in favour of the poorer brother, recognising how common it is for business partners to wrong one another, except for a small minority who believe and do good works (v. 24). This ruling triggers a realization in David that he is being tested, and so he repents, and is duly forgiven (vv. 24–25). As mentioned above, the connection between this pericope and the Bathsheba episode was readily made by both the earlier *mufasssīrūn* and Western scholars, and it can hardly be disputed that that is indeed in the background here. Even the disputants' entering the king's chamber forcefully and uninvited may be an allusion to Bathsheba's experience.<sup>27</sup> Yet, the very allusiveness of the reference places the focus squarely on David's repentance and God's forgiveness. In this regard, the Qur'an's telling of the incident stands in line with both Christian and rabbinic accounts that used the story as an illustration of the necessity of repentance and a demonstration of God's forgiveness (though we should also note a second trend in the Bavli, which sought to downplay David's sin, and even to suggest that he had not sinned at all).<sup>28</sup> Consider for instance 1 Clem., who also introduces David's story in an allusive way, omitting the details of the events in favour of focussing on repentance and mercy:

<sup>1</sup> And what shall we say about David, who had such a good reputation? God said concerning him [*Or: to him*], 'I have found a man after my own heart, David the son of Jesse. I have anointed him with a mercy that will last forever.'

<sup>2</sup> But he himself said to God, 'Have mercy on me, O God, according to your great mercy, and according to the abundance of your compassion wipe away my unlawful behavior.'

<sup>3</sup> Even more, wash my lawlessness away from me and cleanse me from my sin; for I know my lawlessness and my sin is always before my eyes.

<sup>4</sup> Against you alone have I sinned and done what is evil before your eyes, so that you are shown to be right in your words and victorious when you are brought to court. (1 Clem. 18:1–4)<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> I am grateful to Zishan Ghaffar for this insight.

<sup>28</sup> Hezser, "The Contested Image of King David in Rabbinic and Patristic Literature and Art of Late Antiquity," 282f; Karras, *Thou Art the Man*, 104–107, see also 115f. for how this image continued in the mediaeval reading of the David story; Shimoff, "David and Bathsheba," 248ff.; Kalmin, "Portrayals of Kings in Rabbinic Literature of Late Antiquity," 329–40; Kalmin, *The Sage in Jewish Society of Late Antiquity*, 84–88.

<sup>29</sup> Translation taken from Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 1.

As an aside, it may be noted that the allusiveness of the reference to the incident in the Qur'an leaves open the possibility that the audience to whom this sura was first proclaimed had an assumed understanding of the story that was partially informed by rabbinic readings of the Biblical text that are sympathetic to David, which, although acknowledging that David committed a mistake, insisted that he had not committed adultery. Alternatively, the Qur'an may be deliberately non-committal on this point, focusing instead not on the precise sin, but rather David's piety in seeking forgiveness. As ar-Rāzī notes, interpreting the incident of the disputants as a reference to the Uriah and Bathsheba affair seems to be at odds with the sura's introducing David as 'Our servant,' who would 'give glory at evening and sunrise.'<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, it is precisely David's humility in accepting that he had sinned that in Christian readings of the story made him so pleasing to God, and so suitable as a divinely appointed king.<sup>31</sup>

As we have seen, up until the introduction of the two disputants, the sura had consistently conjoined worldly and religious authority: the pagans, despite their pretensions to the contrary, have neither, while David has both, and is thus presented as a counter against whom the Meccans' claims are unfavourably measured. Immediately after being forgiven, God reminds David that 'We have made you a vicegerent (*khalīfa*) in the land. Judge between the people in truth' (v. 26). This essentially recalls David's worldly power and responsibility to which we were introduced at the start of the pericope (vv. 17–20). Key lexical items used to introduce David's authority at the beginning of this passage, namely wisdom (*ḥikma*) and decisive speech (*khiṭāb*) (v. 20), are repeated in telling ways from when the disputants appear in the story to the end of the passage, as shown below:

<sup>20</sup> We strengthened his dominion, and We gave him wisdom (*ḥikma*) and decisive speech (*khiṭāb*).

<sup>23</sup> 'This is my brother ... he has overpowered me in speech (*khiṭāb*).'

<sup>26</sup> 'O David, We have made you a vicegerent in the land. Judge (*uḥkum*) between the people in truth ...'

<sup>30</sup> Ar-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 26:378.

<sup>31</sup> Hezser, "The Contested Image of King David in Rabbinic and Patristic Literature and Art of Late Antiquity," 286f.

Such repetition serves to highlight David's role as a divinely guided king: his decisively just *khitāb* had to correct the rich brother's domineering one, and as he had been endowed with wisdom (*ḥikma*), so now he must judge (*uḥkum*) between people in truth.

Consider also the plea of the weaker brother, that David 'guide us (*ihdinā*) to the level path (*ṣirāt*)' (v. 22). Although he is asking for a just ruling, his vocabulary is strongly reminiscent of the invocation in Sūrat al-Fātiḥa, repeated multiple times in every prayer cycle, 'Guide us (*ihdinā*) on the straight path (*ṣirāt*)' (Q 1:6). By couching the language of his appeal for justice in the language of prayer, we see a fusion of David's role as worshipper and king; he is reminded that his duties towards his subjects are an extension of his duties to God. This message is foreshadowed earlier in the pericope, where David is described as *awwāb*, or 'penitent,' to God (v. 17), and creation is described using the same term *awwāb*, now meaning 'turning,' to David (v. 19), just as the disputants turned to him. The lexical overlaps with Sūrat al-Fātiḥa continue to the end of the David pericope, where he is warned to not to be unjust in his rule, lest that 'make you astray (*yudillaka*, root *ḍ-l-l*) from the way of God' (v. 26), recalling Q 1:7, where the supplicant prays to be shown the path of 'those who have not gone astray (*dāllīn*, root *ḍ-l-l*).'

In summary, the David pericope presents him as possessing both religious and worldly authority, in contrast with the pagans in the opening section, who have neither. David is then reminded of a past personal transgression by the injustice that is brought to his attention in the case of the two brothers. He is thus taught that he cannot separate between piety towards God and his actions as a ruler – not judging 'between the people in truth' would make him 'stray from the way of God' (v. 26). He readily accepts the admonition and seeks God's forgiveness.

## 5. Solomon

Like David, Solomon is described at the start of his pericope as 'penitent' (*awwāb*) (v. 30). Although the opening verse does not explicitly mention his worldly power, our attention is drawn to his being David's royal successor by the phrase: 'We gave Solomon to David.' In a parallel verse, his inheritance is made explicit: 'Solomon inherited David' (Q 27:16). The use of 'We gave' (*wahabnā*) in Q 38 rather than 'Solomon inherited' allows for the inclusion of one of the sura's key words (see table 7.1). The next verse proclaims Solomon's kingly power even more explicitly: '(Recall) when he was shown the standing steeds in the evening.' These are probably meant to be war horses, as is consistent with Solomon's preparations for war elsewhere in the Qur'an (Q 27:17–44,

which tells of the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba). As we will see, there are numerous points of overlap or contrast between the Solomon and David pericopes, which serve to underline the complementarity of two passages.<sup>32</sup>

There are two phrases in v. 32 that have proven difficult to interpret in the Solomon pericope. The first one is at the opening of the verse:

*I have loved the love (ḥubb) of good things (al-khayr) rather than / on the basis of ('an) the remembrance of my Lord' (v. 32)*

The beginning of Solomon's speech, 'I have loved the love of good things,' may be understood in several ways, and there are similarly multiple possible renderings for the immediately preceding preposition *'an*, as shown in the translation above. The *mufasssīrūn* suggest two possibilities for understanding the verse:<sup>33</sup> (1) the verb 'loved' here means 'preferred,' which renders the verse: 'I have preferred the love of good things in place of the remembrance of my Lord' (the other possible translation for *'an*, 'on the basis of,' does not fit with this reading); (2) the noun 'love' is a cognate accusative verbal noun (*maf'ūl mutlaq*), used merely to emphasize its antecedent verb, in a construct structure (*idāfa*) with the noun *khayr*, which latter is the true object. This renders the verse: 'I have truly loved good things ...' The first possibility should be dismissed, as it expresses a recognition on Solomon's part that he has allowed himself to become distracted from God's remembrance too early in the pericope – as with the parallel David pericope, it will take a crisis to bring about this realisation.

This analysis also helps us determine the correct meaning of *'an*. We must agree with ar-Rāzī that it means 'on the basis of,' and not 'rather than,' as the latter, once again, places Solomon's insight into his mistake, whatever it might have been, too early in the narrative. Indeed, it is difficult to understand why he continues to tend to his horses (vv. 32–33) rather than address his neglect of remembering God if he has become aware of it. We shall return to the significance of this *'an* phrase below, in particular why Solomon provides a reason for his love of horses here. Note that, as ar-Rāzī argues, there is no justification for interpreting v. 33, as some of the *mufasssīrūn* do, to mean meaning that Solomon began to slaughter his horses.<sup>34</sup>

Verse 32 closes with the phrase:

*... until it/they disappeared behind the veil.*

32 Parallels between David and Solomon throughout the Qur'an have also been noted by Gobillot, "David and Solomon".

33 See for example, al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, 15:194.

34 Ar-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 26:390–91; see also Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 2/1*, 555.



What was it that disappeared behind the veil? The general interpretation, as mentioned above, has been that this refers to the sun, which, although it has not been explicitly mentioned, was perhaps alluded to in v. 31 when the time of Solomon's inspection was given as the evening.<sup>35</sup> This reading seems implausible. Ar-Rāzī's suggestion that the referent is not the sun, but the horses which have just been mentioned, seems far more likely to be correct.<sup>36</sup> The horses Solomon was presented with in v. 31 were described as *jiyād* (translated above as 'steeds'), which the lexicographers describe as a horse that is excellent in running.<sup>37</sup> The phrase 'until they disappeared behind the veil (*hijāb*)' would appear to refer to the horses disappearing out of sight, having raced away beyond Solomon's vision, as suggested by Solomon's next statement, 'Bring them back to me' (v. 33). The seemingly unusual use of *hijāb*, as well as the sensuous, even sensual language that follows ('And he began to stroke their legs and necks') in fact creates another literary connection with the David pericope, if we bear in mind the Biblical – or more accurately, rabbinic – intertext that lies behind the latter, in which David sees Bathsheba only after the screen (*hlt'*) behind which she was bathing is inadvertently removed (b. Sanh. 107a), following which he has her brought to his palace.<sup>38</sup>

Verse 34 then introduces a test (using the same root *f-t-n* as was used for David's test in v. 24) that will bring about Solomon's repentance (*anāb*, again the same word used in the David pericope in v. 24). Let us first consider why Solomon was tested, and what the relationship is between the test and his tending to horses. The rabbis frequently found fault in Solomon for breaking the three rules for future Israelite kings in Deuteronomy 17:<sup>39</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Even so, he must not acquire many horses for himself or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since the Lord has said to you, 'You must never return that way again.'

<sup>17</sup> And he must not acquire many wives for himself or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself.

The three commandments here, viz. that the king not take many horses, wives, or gold and silver, were all contravened by Solomon. The Bavli explains why Solomon broke the commandments:

35 Az-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf 'an ḥaqā'iq ghawāmiḍ at-tanzīl*, 925.

36 Ar-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 26:390.

37 Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, 2:482, s.v. j-w-d.

38 I am grateful to Ali Aghaei for alerting me to the sensual aspects of the language in v. 33.

39 For rabbinic narratives that find fault with Solomon in this regard, see Leiter, *Perils of Wisdom*, 206, 213, 217; Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, 399; Weitzman, *Solomon*, 162ff.

R. Isaac also said: Why were the reasons of [some] Biblical laws not revealed? – Because in two verses reasons were revealed, and they caused the greatest in the world [Solomon] to stumble. Thus it is written: And he must not acquire many wives for himself (Deut. 17:17), whereon Solomon said, ‘I will acquire wives yet not let my heart be perverted.’ Yet we read, When Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart (1 Kings 11:4). Again it is written: he must not acquire many horses for himself (Deut. 17:16); concerning which Solomon said, ‘I will acquire them, but will not cause [Israel] to return [to Egypt].’ Yet we read: And a chariot came up and went out of Egypt for six [hundred shekels of silver] (1 Kings 10:29), (b. Sanh. 21b).

According to the rabbis, Solomon felt justified in contravening the restrictions placed on kings as he knew the *ratio legis* for the commandments in the Torah: acquiring many wives will make the king’s heart turn away from God, and acquiring many horses will require a return to Egypt, even if just for the purchase of the steeds. Solomon believed that as long as his wives and horses did not cause him to turn away from God or establish trade with Egypt, he was not properly in violation of the law. Yet, in the end, his contravention of the letter of the law did in fact lead to his violating the spirit of the law.

As seen above, Solomon in the Qur’an also gives a reason for his acquiring horses. Why he should do so is somewhat inexplicable unless read against this rabbinic background. In the Qur’an, his insistence that his love for acquiring horses is grounded in his remembrance of God indicates an apologetic defence of his actions, and thus a recognition on his part that he may be perceived as going against the law in some respect. (Note also the word for ‘remembrance,’ *dhikr*, is elsewhere used in the Meccan Qur’an for the Torah – see Q 16:43; 21:7.105 –, and for revelation more broadly, including in v. 8 of the present sura.)<sup>40</sup> This also explains the sequence of events in the narrative: Solomon attempts to cement his worldly authority by going outside the law (vv. 31–33), which only leads to his throne being taken away to teach him a lesson (v. 34, see below), and finally to a recognition that true power is from God (vv. 35–39).

What then was the body, or *jasad*, set upon Solomon’s throne in v. 34? *Jasad* is used elsewhere in the Qur’an to describe Israel’s Golden Calf, which was ‘a body (*jasad*) that lows’ (Q 7:148, 20:88), or else to deny that any prophet prior to Muhammad was a mere *jasad* who neither ate nor drank (Q 21:8), in response to pagan opposition to a human messenger. In other words, a *jasad* has the appearance of a body, but is either not alive, or not fully human. The text is once again allusive, but it seems the identification of the *jasad* with the demon

40 See Sinai, *Key Terms of the Qur’an* s.v. dhakkara; Goudarzi, “The Second Coming of the Book,” 293ff.

Ashmedai mentioned above is the best candidate.<sup>41</sup> In the Talmudic accounts, Ashmedai (ʾšmdʿy) takes Solomon's kingdom by imitating his form (b. Git. 68a-b). The Talmudic account gives Solomon's desire to build his Temple as the motivation for his subjugation of demons, including Ashmedai, following which Ashmedai is able to capture his throne. In the Qur'an however the incident of the *jasad* precedes Solomon's repentance and subsequent power over the demons who are expert builders (*bannā'*) and divers (*ghawwāṣ*), presumable for pearls (vv. 34–38). In other words, the order of events is reversed. Thus, where the rabbis were unsure whether Solomon ever regained his kingdom following Ashmedai's usurping it (b. Git. 68b), by reversing the order of events, the Qur'an creates a narrative that parallels the earlier David pericope much more closely, where each of the two Israelite kings' repentance is followed by a confirmation, indeed (in the case of Solomon) an expansion of their worldly authority.

On this reading, we have several more parallels with David's story: just as the angels forcefully entered his royal chamber, so now the demon forcefully takes Solomon's throne.<sup>42</sup> Like David, Solomon repents (v. 35), and we are left to understand that he is forgiven. The pericope concludes in v. 40 with: 'He had nearness to Us and a fair resort,' a verbatim repetition of the second clause in v. 25 for David. Thus, in both the David and Solomon story, we encounter a prophet who is devoted to God and divinely appointed as a king. In both stories, the authority of the king is called into question, and it is only through repentance that the crisis is resolved. Further, the Solomon and David stories provide us with a fascinating contrast. David used his wisdom to judge between the brothers in a morally praiseworthy way, whereas Solomon used his legal reasoning to illegitimately undermine a scriptural prohibition. Together, the two stories seem to insist on the indispensability of both moral reasoning and scriptural law. Read thus, the narratives seem to be a critique of the legitimacy of the Meccan pagan rejectors' status as rulers of Mecca: they have no divine right to that role, and neither the scriptural law nor the moral wisdom by which to conduct their responsibilities.

But what are we to make of Solomon's prayer for a 'dominion (*mulk* – cf. v. 20 in the David pericope) that will not be appropriate for anyone after me,' after which God subjugates (*sakhkhara*) the winds and demons to his command (vv. 36–38)? (Note that the same verb, *sakhkhara*, was used in the David pericope for God subjugating the mountains and birds to hymn His praises with David,

41 Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, 400.

42 For an overview of how the text was understood in the *tafsīr* and *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* genres, see Klar, "And We Cast upon His Throne a Mere Body," 116f.

once more connecting the two stories in a complementary way – God subjugates nature to David for the purpose of assisting his worship, and to Solomon for the purpose of assisting his rule.) Zishan Ghaffar in his recent monograph, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, reads the Q 38 David and Solomon stories as part of a wider Qur’anic strategy of repudiating the Davidic covenant and therefore the promise of a Messianic ruler, expectations for whom were particularly high at the turn of the seventh century.<sup>43</sup> The basis of Jewish Messianic expectations was God’s promise to David in 2 Samuel.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>12</sup> When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.<sup>13</sup> He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.<sup>14</sup> I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings.<sup>15</sup> But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you.<sup>16</sup> Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever. (2 Sam. 7:12–16)

It is through Solomon, who builds the Jerusalem Temple, that this prophecy to David begins to be fulfilled. Note that the Qur’an seems once again to link the David and Solomon story in its use of *mīhrāb* for David’s royal chamber, a word reserved elsewhere in the Qur’an for the Jerusalem Temple (see above). The Bible similarly indirectly associates David with the Temple by having him prepare the way for the building of the latter by bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:1–5) and by dedicating to the Lord the gold, silver, and copper from the peoples whom he defeats (2 Sam. 8:7–11).

Following the destruction of the First and then Second Temple, and the abolishment of the Davidic line with the Babylonian exile, Jewish exegesis developed the idea of a Messianic figure through whom God’s promise to David of an eternal kingdom for his son Solomon would be fulfilled.<sup>45</sup> In contrast, Christian readings of God’s covenant with David emphasized Jesus’s role (rather than Solomon’s) as the son of David through whom the prophecy was fulfilled, and will reach complete fulfillment with Jesus’s second coming. Indeed, Eusebius explicitly denied that Solomon was worthy of being the son

43 Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, 68–74.

44 See Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 24.

45 See the collection of articles in Talmon, “The Concepts of Māšīah and Messianism in Early Judaism.”

of David referenced in the prophecy.<sup>46</sup> Through the parallel presentation of Solomon and David, and then through Solomon's prayer, the Qur'an rejects both the Jewish and Christian accounts: Solomon fulfilled David's legacy – a point repeatedly driven home by the numerous parallels between the two passages –, but his power shall not be reacquired; Solomon inherits from David, but no-one shall inherit from Solomon.

Ghaffar's reading is compelling. It is also comprehensible why a sura that provides a commentary on worldly and religious authority and responsibility would include a rejection of a messianism, there being a clear thematic connection between the two subject-matters. Going further, in the context of the sura's polemics against the pagans in Mecca, the passage possibly means to deny that after Solomon there are *any* kings who had the divine right to rule,<sup>47</sup> a rebuttal of the Meccan elites' belief in their own status. For more on this, let us turn to the final story in the section.

## 6. Job

With the last of the three main prophetic pericopes in Q 38, we are presented with yet another contrast. Unlike the mighty Israelite kings David and Solomon, Job is completely powerless, crying out, 'Satan has touched me with fatigue and torment' (v. 41). God responds to his complaint by telling him what he needs to do in order to heal in vv. 42 and 44.<sup>48</sup> The two verses are interjected by a description of how God restored to Job his health and his family twice over (v. 43). It seems plausible that Job is here a cipher for the persecuted believing community in Mecca, who are also facing torment (*'adhāb*) inspired by Satan (see below), in this case at the hands of the pagans.

We can now begin to see the connection between the three prophetic stories. The David pericope commenced with an imperative to be patient (*iṣbir*),

46 Hezser, "The Contested Image of King David in Rabbinic and Patristic Literature and Art of Late Antiquity," 287–91, (see 290 for Eusebius).

47 This is not to deny that God in the Qur'an approves of and assists various rulers apart from David and Solomon, such as Dhu l-Qarnayn (Q 18:83–98), and even promises future worldly power to the believers if they remain committed to faith and righteous action (e.g., Q 24:55). David and Solomon are unique only insofar as there was a messianic expectation associated with them in Late Antiquity, based on a belief that God had undertaken to revive their kingdom. I thank Zishan Ghaffar for pointing out the relevance of Dhu l-Qarnayn in understanding what might be particular to David and Solomon.

48 For more on Job's role in the Qur'an, see Hussain, "Jonah, Job, Elijah, and Ezra".

a root form that reoccurs now in the concluding Job pericope: 'We found him patient (*ṣābir*),' suggesting that the same transformation from powerlessness to a situation of relief awaits the believing community if they too remain steadfast. We had learned in Solomon's story that he wielded power over the devils (*shayāṭīn*, v. 37), who were 'linked together in fetters' (v. 38). Similarly, just as Job is able to overcome the ill effects of Satan, so too can the believers overcome him and the persecution he occasions. Later in the sura, this motif of Satan's powerlessness against the righteous is repeated: Iblīs acknowledges that he has no power over God's 'devoted (*mukhlashīn*) servants' (v. 83). The same *kh-l-ṣ* root is here used for 'devoted' as was used to describe the patriarchs in v. 46, 'We distinguished (*akhlaṣnā*) them with a pure quality (*khālīṣa*).'

What is conspicuously missing from the Job pericope is any mention of worldly authority. Perhaps this provides an illustration of sorts of Solomon's prayer: there is no divine right to rule after Solomon.<sup>49</sup> There is, however, relief from hardship and from worldly torment for believers who remain steadfast. The three prophetic stories thus serve to simultaneously critique the pretensions to authority of the Meccan elite and provide comfort and hope to the believers.

## 7. The Interlude

While this is not a complete study of Q 38, one question that does not directly relate to the prophetic pericopes should nonetheless be addressed: What is the function of the interlude pericope between the David and Solomon stories? I will offer tentative observations here. We should note first of all that David, Solomon, and Job have a unifying characteristic: they are all prophets associated with the Biblical wisdom tradition.<sup>50</sup> Within that tradition, the genre of 'skeptical wisdom' is particularly associated with Solomon in Ecclesiastes (of which he was assumed to be the author in the rabbinic and Christian traditions) and Job. The sceptical wisdom tradition questions the assumptions of more traditional Israelite wisdom literature, such as Proverbs and Sirach, that people get what they deserve. To quote Proverbs:

49 One could argue that the Solomon pericope does not so much deny the existence of future divine kings, rather just that such divinely appointed kings would not wield the sort of authority that Solomon had. It is only in light of the pervasive messianic expectations that Ghaffar highlights that the reading suggested here becomes more plausible.

50 I am grateful to Angelika Neuwirth for alerting me to this point.

The perverse get what their ways deserve,  
 and the good, what their deeds deserve. (Prov. 14:14)  
 In all toil there is profit,  
 but mere talk leads only to poverty. (Prov. 14:23)

The sceptical tradition points out that this is empirically false, most famously in Eccles. 1:

<sup>2</sup> Vanity of vanities (Hebrew: *hăbēl hăbālīm*; Syriac: *hbl hblyn*), says the Teacher,  
 vanity of vanities! All is vanity.  
<sup>3</sup> What do people gain from all the toil  
 at which they toil under the sun?

Note that Eccles. 1:3, cited above, is also cited in b. Git. 68b as a quotation from Solomon after Ashmedai takes his throne.

Not even the pursuit of wisdom, so celebrated in wisdom literature, offers any hope. Thus in Eccles. 2:

<sup>13</sup> 'Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. <sup>14</sup> The wise have eyes in their head, but fools walk in darkness. Yet I perceived that the same fate befalls all of them. <sup>15</sup> Then I said to myself, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also; why then have I been so very wise?" And I said to myself that this also is vanity. <sup>16</sup> For there is no enduring remembrance of the wise or of fools, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How can the wise die just like fools? <sup>17</sup> So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind.'

Similarly, Job bemoans how God has treated him despite his righteousness (see especially Job 29–31). The interlude pericope in Q 37, placed before the Solomon and Job pericopes, seems to be a direct refutation of this sceptical wisdom associated with their names: 'We did not create in vain (*bāṭilan*)<sup>51</sup> the heavens and the earth and what is between them. ... Shall We treat those who believe and do righteous deeds like those who do mischief in the land? Shall We make those who protect themselves like the profligates?' (vv. 27–28). The sura seems to be insisting that whatever the appearances to contrary may be, ultimate victory, in this life or the next, will be for the believers.

<sup>51</sup> Note that the lexical roots used to express "vanity" here in the Qur'an (*b-ṭ-l*) and earlier in Eccles. 1 (*h-b-l*) are not cognates.

## 8. Conclusion

A discourse on worldly and religious authority and prestige, who has it and who deserves it, is central to Sūrat Ṣād. The motif is introduced at the start of the sura and illustrated through the prophetic stories. David and Solomon are both divinely appointed kings, whom the Qur'an praises for their piety. The numerous points of parallelism between the two stories serve to illustrate how Solomon fully inherited David's authority. Further, through their recourse to legal reasoning, the Qur'an emphasizes the necessity of both human wisdom and scriptural law to divine kingship. Solomon's prayer that none be given the dominion that he wishes to be granted perhaps indicates that this inheritance of a divine right to rule is to be discontinued. Thus, the Meccan pagans are not only unfit to rule on account of their impiety, but also because they lack scriptural and worldly wisdom, and their assumption of a divine right to rule is false. In contrast to this critique against the Meccans' belief in their right to rule, Job's story illustrates how the powerless can continue to hold out hope for rescue from Satanic persecution in this world.





# Muhammad as a Prophet of Late Antiquity

## *The Anti-Apocalyptic Nature of Muhammad's Prophetic Wisdom*

Zishan Ghaffar

### The Prophetological Epistemology of the Qur'an

In his entry about 'Knowledge and Learning' in the *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, Paul Walker explains as follows:

In the Qur'an the fact that God is all-knowing (*'alīm*), knows what humans do not, and knows the unseen (*'ālim al-ghayb*) is stressed constantly. The term all-knowing (*'alīm*) appears literally again and again, often in combination with all-wise (*ḥakīm*) but also with all-hearing (*samī'*). One phrase states clearly that "over and above every person who has knowledge is the all-knowing" (Q 12:76). In fact, every *Qur'anic* instance (thirteen in all) of the term "knower" (*'ālim*), which is the same word as that used later for the learned scholar, is followed by "unseen" (*ghayb*) and therefore refers unambiguously to God. It is true that there are references (five) to "those with knowledge" in the plural (*'ālimūn*, *'ulamā'*) and several expressions for humans "who know, understand, are aware". Nevertheless, God's preponderance and omniscience is overwhelming, so much so as to bring into question what it means to assert that humans, even the prophets, know.<sup>1</sup>

One can only affirm that Walker's description of the dominance of God's wisdom in the Qur'an matches the evidence of Qur'anic proclamation. Consequently, he asks about the epistemological implications of God's knowledge for the anthropology and prophetology of the Qur'an: What are humans generally able to know and what can prophets specifically know? Walker does not give an answer to both questions, because his entry is not dedicated to the anthropology and prophetology of the Qur'an. The current study focuses on the epistemology of Qur'anic prophetology, especially on the question: What are the limits of prophetic knowledge in the Qur'an?

### The Controversial Nature of *'ilm al-ghaib*

On several occasions, the Qur'an reacts to expectations about the knowledge of a prophet and his abilities. In verse 50 of sura *al-an'ām*, the prophet Muhammad says:

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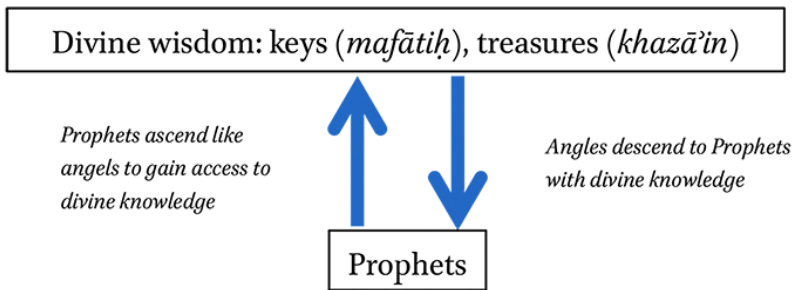
<sup>1</sup> Walker, "Knowledge and Learning," 102.

Say, 'I do not say to you,  
 "I possess the treasures of God" (*khazā'inu llāhi*),  
 nor do I know the Invisible (*wa-lā 'a'lamu l-ghaiba*).  
 Nor do I say to you, "I am an angel".  
 I only follow what is revealed to me.' (Q 6:50)<sup>2</sup>

The prophet is denying that he possesses knowledge of the unseen, holds an angelic status and has gained access to the treasures of God. After a few verses, Muhammad further reacts to the demand of knowledge of future events and says:

With Him are the keys of the Invisible (*wa-'indahū mafātiḥu l-ghaibi*).  
 Only He knows them. [...] (Q 6:59)

Therefore, the prophet Muhammad is confessing that only God is omniscient and the true bearer of knowledge. This Qur'anic discourse about the epistemology of prophetic knowledge can be summarised and conceptualised using the following model:



God's divine wisdom includes knowledge of the unseen and the Qur'an is using metaphors, such as keys and treasures, to describe this form of divine knowledge. The audience of the Qur'anic proclamation is expecting angels to come down or prophets to become similar to angels to deliver this divine knowledge as intermediaries. Thus, as typically stated in the Qur'an, the adversaries of Muhammad would demand him to ascend to heaven similar to an angel or to show them that an angel has descended with him. For example, this expectation is verbally quoted in verse 12 of sura *Hūd*:

[...] because they say,  
 'Why has a treasure not been sent down to him (*lau-lā 'unzila 'alaihi kanzun*)  
 or an angel come with him?"

<sup>2</sup> Translations of the Qur'an are adapted from *The Qur'an*, transl. Alan Jones.

You are only a warner (*nadhūrun*).  
 God is trustee of everything. (Q 11:12)

However, messengers and prophets before Muhammad previously needed to address the same kind of expectations; for example, Noah confesses the same kind of ignorance to his contemporaries as Muhammad:

I do not say to you  
 that the treasures of God are with me (*wa-lā 'aqūlu lakum 'indī khazā'īnu llāhī*)  
 nor that I have knowledge of the Invisible (*wa-lā 'a'lamu l-ghaiba*);  
 nor do I say that I am an angel (Q 11:31)

Now, the question that could be asked is: What type of milieu is the Qur'anic proclamation intending to address in this epistemological discourse of prophetic knowledge? Were there, in fact, Arab pagans prior to Islam who were expecting prophets to become angels and to gain access to the divine treasures of knowledge? If this was the case, then where did these concepts of prophetic knowledge originate, and how did these concepts reach the Hijāz at the beginning of the seventh century?<sup>3</sup>

### The Syriac Background of the Qur'anic Nomenclature

Recently, Andrew Hayes proposed to answer these questions.<sup>4</sup> He refers to the Syriac theological literature to give context to the Qur'anic discourse. He summarises his main thesis in the following manner:

For the Syriac Christological tradition as expressed in the writings of Philoxenus of Mabbugh, and Jacob of Serugh, with deep roots in the writings of Ephrem the Syrian, one of the foremost arguments for Jesus' full divinity was distinctly cognitive – that is, it is based on Jesus' knowledge. These authors argue that we know Jesus is divine because he alone is fully and intimately knowing of what is in his Father, whereas God's messengers do not have natural access to that knowledge, and can only receive it, in limited form, from Christ.<sup>5</sup>

Hayes describes how this epistemology of prophetic knowledge in the Syriac tradition proclaims Jesus as the treasury of prophetic knowledge. The

3 Hawting firstly attempted to answer these questions in "Has God Sent a Mortal as a Messenger?" (Q 17:95)." Hawting argued that the Qur'anic conceptions potentially refer to Gnostic and Jewish-Christian views.

4 Hayes, "The Treasury of Prophecy."

5 Ibid., 228.

exegetical root for this thought was two references in the Gospel of Matthew. In Matt. 11:27, Jesus says:

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matt. 11:27)<sup>6</sup>

In Matt. 16:13–18, an example is given of how divine knowledge is revealed to others:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.’ (Matt. 16:13–18)

This study does not intend to examine the details of Hayes’ exploration of the exegetical analysis of these verses in the Syriac tradition as a whole. Instead, I only want to summarise his findings.<sup>7</sup> Hayes refers to the striking similarities between the imageries for prophetic knowledge in the Qur’an and in Syriac theological literature. In both cases, divine wisdom is metaphorically described as *treasures* and *keys*, which are gained through *ascension to heaven*. Although the prophetic epistemology in Syriac tradition is *Christological*, the Qur’an is denying any human or prophetic access to this divine knowledge. Ultimately, Hayes argues that the discourse of prophetic knowledge in Syriac Christianity reached the Hijāz through Christian missionaries and contacts in trade. Accordingly, the audience of the Qur’anic proclamation expected a prophet at the beginning of the seventh century to gain direct or indirect access to divine wisdom. The Qur’an seemingly denies these expectations.

Hayes’ analysis is brilliant and very profound regarding the prophetic epistemology in the Syriac tradition. However, his proposal for an anti-discourse in the Qur’an to the Christological epistemology of prophetic knowledge in that tradition does not suffice every aspect of this theme in the Qur’an. In other words, prophets are not *explicitly* called and expected to be angels in the Syriac theological tradition. Furthermore, the Qur’anic limitation of prophetic knowledge is especially concerned with *eschatological* or *apocalyptic*

<sup>6</sup> Translations of the Bible are from the English Standard Version, Crossway Bibles 2001.

<sup>7</sup> See Hayes, “The Treasury of Prophecy,” 242–245.

knowledge, which would be only one aspect of divine wisdom in the Syriac discourse of prophetic knowledge. In addition, other concepts might be the basis for the Qur'anic rejection of prophets having access to divine knowledge rather than being exclusively directed against a Christological model of prophetic knowledge.

### The Apocalyptic Background

Prior to Hayes, Patricia Crone has analysed Qur'anic statements about the adversaries of the prophet Muhammad and their expectations of him.<sup>8</sup> The author draws the following conclusion:

[...] what was the polytheist conception of a messenger (*rasūl*)? The answer seems to be that a messenger to them was an angel sent down by God with revealed knowledge, including warning of an imminent disaster such as the flood or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. It was probably as an angel bringing such warning that they envisaged a *nadhīr*. By contrast, a prophet (*nabī*) was a human being who ascended to heaven in order to receive revelation, as Moses and many other heroes of the apocalyptic literature had done. The polytheists convey a strong sense of being fascinated by the idea of heavenly journeys. Whether an angel came down or a human succeeded in traversing the heavens, the connection with the divine world was expected to show itself in miracles. Moses is the prophet that both the polytheists and the Qur'anic Messenger consistently invoke in their disagreement over the nature of a messenger and the mechanics involved in the revelation of books.<sup>9</sup>

Crone points to the direct resemblance of the expectations by the adversaries of the prophet Muhammad of a prophet and the heroes of apocalyptic literature, such as Moses and Abraham.<sup>10</sup> In this literature, Moses and Abraham ascend to heaven with the help of angels and, in certain cases, even achieve angelic status themselves. They are told the secrets of future events and what will happen at the end of time. Crone admits that she cannot answer how the audience of the Qur'an gained access to this type of apocalyptic concepts and whether the opponents of the prophet were Arab pagans, Christians or Jews.

8 Crone, "Angels versus Humans as Messengers of God," 102–24.

9 Ibid., 123f.

10 See Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*.

### Imperial Eschatology as a Wider Horizon

In the main part of the paper, I intend to further develop the ideas of Crone and to give a potential scenario, examine why apocalyptic ideas were prevalent at the beginning of the seventh century in the Hijāz and determine their influence on the formation of the Qur'anic discourse about the limits of prophetic knowledge.

In this regard, I want to emphasise three major propositions or theses<sup>11</sup>:

1. Firstly, the Qur'anic proclamation is deeply related to the Roman-Persian war at the beginning of the seventh century.
2. Secondly, the Qur'an provides a theological response to the political events of the Roman-Persian war.
3. Thirdly, the genesis of the Qur'an and its eschatology and prophetology is connected to the Byzantine war propaganda and related religious and apocalyptical discourses.

Before presenting the Qur'anic view, I summarise the major outlines of the Roman-Persian war and its religious and political implications.<sup>12</sup> In the year 591, the Byzantine Emperor Maurice helped Khosro II to end a civil war in the Sasanian Empire and to secure his throne. On the basis of this cooperation, both empires committed to a new peace treaty. In the year 602, the rebel Phocas deposed and murdered Maurice. This development marked the beginning of the Roman-Persian war at the beginning of the seventh century. Khosro was enraged at the death of his patron and invaded the Roman Empire. Meanwhile, Phocas was assassinated in 610 and Heraclius was proclaimed as the new emperor. The Sasanian invasion culminated in the conquest of Jerusalem in 614. This event was described as a traumatic one for the Christian population and the Sasanians not only gained access to the Holy Places of Christianity but also took the True Cross of Jesus Christ's crucifixion with them. Heraclius intensified his counter-offensive in the second decade of the seventh century and ultimately manages to overcome Khosro and the Persian Empire in 628. He also brought back the stolen True Cross of Jesus Christ.

The Roman-Persian war posed far-reaching religious and political implications.<sup>13</sup> Especially from the Roman Christian perspective, the Conquest of Jerusalem in 614 was a traumatic event.<sup>14</sup> Several indications existed that the

11 For these propositions, see Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*.

12 Ibid., 5–13.

13 Ibid.

14 Not so for the East-Syriac Christians, see Payne, *A State of Mixture*, 179f.

Jewish population gained access to the Temple Mount and Jewish expectations emerged regarding the restitution of the Jewish Temple and the Coming of the Messiah. For Christian eschatology, the loss of Jerusalem needed to be contextualised within the traditional apocalyptic world view. In addition, the defeats of the Byzantine Empire challenged the self-understanding of Byzantium as the last empire on earth before the endtime. In response to these challenges, Heraclius seemingly made messianic and eschatological claims of power. In the Byzantine war propaganda, the Roman-Persian war was described as an endtime holy war, in which Khosro and the Sasanian Empire belonged to the powers of evil.

How can this context of war illuminate the Qur'anic discourse about the limits of prophetic knowledge? My thesis is that the Qur'an is denying that a prophet at the beginning of the seventh century could tell, which the last true empire at the endtime was, how long the events of war would proceed, when exactly the evil powers would be defeated and when exactly the resurrection and day of God's judgement would begin. This type of knowledge belongs to the apocalyptic literature and the prophet Muhammad denied that God would disclose such apocalyptic knowledge to him or to any prophet.

### An Arab Prophet in Late Antiquity: Anti-Apocalyptic Oaths in the Qur'an

A distinct *Arabic* characteristic of the Qur'anic proclamations in early Meccan suras are oaths, which are seemingly a genuine form of speech used by pre-Islamic poets and Arabian diviners. Recently, Nora Schmid analysed the oaths in the Qur'an as structural markers by comparing them with their pre-Islamic usage and within their Late Antique background.<sup>15</sup> Schmid summarised the 'general characteristic of pre-Islamic Arabian oath-taking' as follows:

- (1) Oaths are uttered by an authoritative figure with a pre-eminent position *entitled to speak* for his access to a hidden truth (the diviner, the poet).
- (2) Oaths are sworn by (the *muqṣam bihi*) celestial, cosmic, or meteorological phenomena, by wildlife, and by the Ka'bah.
- (3) Oaths introduce (the *muqṣam 'alayhi*) a statement of social consequence; they have an *inner-worldly* dimension exclusively.
- (4) Oaths introduce a statement that is propositionally true – Zuhayr is explicit in his understanding that oath-taking is one of three modes of establishing truth.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Schmid, "Oaths in the Qur'an."

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 151.



Schmid then compared the Qur'anic oaths in early Meccan suras with the abovementioned characteristics and drew the following conclusion:

To sum up, oath series in the early Meccan surahs obviously have a strong eschatological dimension, or at least they point unremittingly toward eschatology by means of the in-built liminality of the *muqṣam bihi*, in combination with the *muqṣam 'alayhi*. It can only be concluded that oaths in the earliest strata of the Qur'an simultaneously appealed to and subverted the poets' and the diviners authoritative rhetorical paradigm. They were a new and innovative response to existing pre-Islamic practices of oath-taking. Articulated at the opening of the surah, oaths do not have a merely ornamental function, they do not just 'provide a lively introduction,' but they are part of a complex network of functions. Most notably, they assert the truth of the statement that follows, they provide a foil against which statements on Judgment Day are contoured in the course of the proclamation, and they separate prophetic speech from any other kind of everyday discourse, all the while appealing to and emphasizing their own distinctness from oracular and poetic modes of speech. While the structuring force of oaths was inherited from pre-Islamic mantic and poetic discourse, the intent behind the statements themselves had shifted in the early Meccan surahs of the Qur'an. The structural feature oath still had the potential to distinguish and affirm subsequent knowledgeable discourse; however, this knowledge was attributed to a different, namely, divine omnipotent source.<sup>17</sup>

This study intends to consider another possible aspect of the introduced content (*muqṣam 'alaihi*) of oaths in pre-Islamic times to further enhance the function of oaths in early Meccan suras and their relationship to the discourse of prophetic epistemology in the Qur'an. Schmid provides ample evidence that pre-Islamic oaths would introduce 'a statement of social consequence'. However, *oracular prophecies* about *future events* and *developments* may have been a further content of pre-Islamic oaths. An example is the story about two soothsayers, namely, Shiqq and Saṭīḥ, who are summoned by the Yemenite King Rabī'a b. Naṣr who had a terrifying vision (*ru'yā*) that needed interpretation (*ta'wīl*). This story is preserved in Ibn Hishām's version of Ibn Ishāq's *sīra*-traditions.<sup>18</sup> After having 'summoned every soothsayer [*kāhin*], sorcerer [*sāḥir*], omenmonger [*āif*] and astrologer [*munajjim*]', the Yemenite king asks them about the interpretation of his dream. However, they all fail to describe the content of the dream in advance. Therefore, they recommend the soothsayers Saṭīḥ and Shiqq for this task. Saṭīḥ arrives first and is able to summarise the content of the king's dream:

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>18</sup> See Ibn-Ishāq and Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 4ff; Abd el-Malik Ibn Hishām, *Das Leben Muhammed's nach Muhammed Ibn Ishāk*, Part 1, 9–12.

A fire you did see  
Come forth from the sea.  
It fell on the low country  
And devoured all that be.<sup>19</sup>

The king confirms the content of the dream then asks for the meaning (*ta'wīl*), which is presented readily by Saṭīḥ:

By the serpent of the lava plains I swear  
[*aḥlifū bi-mā baina l-ḥarrataini min ḥanash*]  
The Ethiopians on your land shall bear [*la-tahbiṭanna arḍakum al-ḥabash*]  
Ruling from Abyan to Jurash everywhere.  
[*fa-la-tamlikanna mā baina abyana ilā jurash*]<sup>20</sup>

Saṭīḥ swears his oath by 'the serpent of the lava plains' then introduces a prophecy for future events (*muqṣam 'alaihi*): the Ethiopians will conquer Yemen and will rule it. The soothsayer derives this prophecy as a result of his interpretation of the king's dream.

The king then asks Saṭīḥ when these events will happen and the soothsayer adds to his prophecy, that is, these events will occur after 60–70 years. However, the Ethiopic dominion will not last forever. Saṭīḥ also refers to the coming of a 'true prophet' (*nabīy zakkīy*) and that ultimately time will end with the eschatological day of judgement. With a final oath, the soothsayer confirms the truth of his interpretations:

Yes, by the dark and the twilight  
And the dawn that follows the night  
Verily what I have told you is right.<sup>21</sup>

The same course of interaction is repeated, when the second soothsayer named Shiqq arrives to the king. He also anticipates the content of the king's dream and gives the same interpretation, which only slightly differs in wording.<sup>22</sup>

Discussing the historical authenticity of this story about both soothsayers in Ibn Ishāq's *sīra*-material is irrelevant for this paper. However, considering two interrelated points, which are corroborated by these reports, is important. Firstly, soothsayers were expected to possess a certain degree of access to hidden knowledge. Secondly, they could use this access to prophesy future events.

19 Ibn-Ishāq and Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 5.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 5 f.

Consequently, one could argue that soothsayers during pre-Islamic times could have also used oaths to introduce prophecies about the future course of (worldly) events.

Now, the early Meccan suras claim to be divinely inspired prophetic speech and are full of oaths *and* descriptions about future eschatological events. Is it then possible to link the use of oaths in early Meccan suras with the potential function of introducing prophecies? Moreover, is it reasonable to assume that an Arab prophet in the Hijāz at the beginning of the seventh century would have used oaths as a first and native instrument to give *apocalyptic prophecies*? If Imperial eschatology was very predominant throughout the Near East in Late Antiquity,<sup>23</sup> then expecting a prophet in Late Antiquity – even an ‘Arab’ and in the Hijāz – to make *apocalyptic prophecies* would have made sense.

Before checking the oaths of early Meccan suras and their possible function of introducing apocalyptic prophecies, analysing contemporary Late Antique texts for a framework of apocalyptic prophecies is helpful.

I firstly consider a scene of the Syriac Alexander Legend, the *neṣḥānā d-aleksandrōs* (‘victory of Alexander’),<sup>24</sup> which is now typically dated to the first half of the seventh century<sup>25</sup> and contextualised with other apocalyptic texts, which may have been written in the wake of the Roman-Persian war.<sup>26</sup>

After building a gigantic gate at the ends of the world, Alexander inscribes his apocalyptic prophecy about the eschatological events of war and political dominion till the end on the gate.<sup>27</sup>

Interestingly, the Persian king Tubarlaq makes a second prophecy after his defeat against Alexander:

And Tubarlaq the king of Persia brought sorcerers [*ḥarāšē*] and enchanters [*āšopē*], and the signs of the zodiac [*malwāšē*], and fire and water, and all his gods, and made divination by them [*wa-qṣam b-hon*]; and they told him that at the final consummation of the world the kingdom of the Romans would go forth and subdue all the kings of the earth; and that whatever king was found in Persia would be slain, and that Babylon and Assyria would be laid waste by the command of God. Thus did king Tubarlaq make divination [*hākanna qṣam tubarlaq malkā*], and he gave [it] in his own handwriting to king Alexander. And he put down in writing with Alexander what should befall Persia, that the king

23 See Shoemaker, *The Apocalypse of Empire*; but this view has also been questioned by Cameron, “Late Antique Apocalyptic,” 1–19.

24 Budge, *The History of Alexander the Great*, 144–158 (Translation) and 253–275 (Text).

25 For an earlier dating, see Tesei, *The Syriac Legend of Alexander's Gate*.

26 For an overview regarding the dating, see Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und welt-geschichtlichen Kontext*, 156–66.

27 Budge, *The History of Alexander the Great*, 154ff.

and his nobles prophesied [*etnabbī*] that Persia should be laid waste by the hand of the Romans, and all the kingdoms be laid waste, but that power should stand and rule to the end of time, and should deliver the kingdom of the earth to the Messiah who is to come.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, Tubarlaq summons sorcerers (*ḥarāšē*) and enchanters (*āšopē*) and takes the signs of the zodiac (*malwāšē*) and water and fire. He calls his gods to make a divination by them all (*qšam b-hon*). The actual process of this divination is not explicitly described: Did he ask the sorcerers and enchanters for their prophecies? Did he invoke his gods? Did he or his enchanters invoke the signs of the Zodiac or fire and water? Did they even swear by them? Regardless of the actual process, the result is an apocalyptic prophecy: the Roman empire will prevail till the end and ultimately give all the power to the Messiah. Tubarlaq writes down the prophecy with his hands and gives it to Alexander. The content of the prophecy is described as something that Tubarlaq and his nobles have prophesied (*etnabbī*).

Another contemporary source reports about a Persian king giving an apocalyptic prophecy about the course of events during war. In his *History*, the Byzantine Historian Theophylact Simocatta describes how the Persian king Khosro II, at the end of the Roman-Persian war from 572 to 591, makes a prophecy about the events of the following Roman-Persian war at the beginning of the seventh century. He is considered to have made this prophecy with the help of his knowledge about the Chaldeans to interpret stars:

But I will not overlook what Chosroes, who was well versed in the burdensome folly of the Chaldaeans concerning the stars, is said to have prophesied at the height of the war. [...] 'Be assured that troubles will flow back in turn against you Romans. The Babylonian race will hold the Roman state in its power for a threefold cyclic hebdomad of years. Thereafter you Romans will enslave Persians for a fifth hebdomad of years. When these very things have been accomplished, the day without evening will dwell among mortals and the expected fate will achieve power, when the forces of destruction will be handed over to dissolution and those of the better life hold sway.'<sup>29</sup>

Khosro II prophesies how the peace treaty between the Roman and Persians will be suspended by the Persians after the murder of Maurice by the rebel Phocas in 602 ('Be assured that troubles will flow back in turn against you Romans'), how the Persians will successfully invade Byzantine territories ('The Babylonian race will hold the Roman state in its power for a threefold

28 Ibid., 158.

29 Whitby and Whitby, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta*, V.15.3–7.

cyclic hebdomad of years') and how Heraclius will ultimately win against the Persians ('Thereafter you Romans will enslave Persians for a fifth hebdomad of years'). Afterwards, eschatological events will begin.

This prophecy of Khosro II is apocalyptic in nature, because it prophesies and calculates the course of events with regard to imperial battles and how these events will culminate till the end of this world. The nature and general tendency of this apocalyptic prophecy by Khosro II resemble the prophecy of Alexander, which he inscribes on the gate in the Syriac Alexander Legend.<sup>30</sup>

As a third example of an apocalyptic prophecy, I want to add the conceptualisation of a prophecy, which Alexander makes after receiving a revelation from an angel. The content of the third prophecy is much more pessimistic about the fate of the Romans in the end of time. However, I only want to consider the description of the *nature* of this prophecy by Alexander. It is contained in several recensions of a *mēm̄rā* (wrongfully) attributed to Jacob of Serugh.<sup>31</sup> This text may have also originated at the beginning of the seventh century.<sup>32</sup>

After building the gate at the ends of the world, an angel appears in a great vision (*hez̄wā rabbā*) after Alexander falls asleep. The angel tells Alexander about the secrets (*kesyātā*),<sup>33</sup> who then writes down the prophecies:

And after these (things) had been said from the angel, to the knowledgeable king Alexander, the son of Philip, the king said to him with the spirit of prophetic revelation (*b-rūh̄ gelyānā da-nbyutā*), that he wanted to write these (things) down, so that the world would learn, that these (things) would happen. And when all these (things) had been spoken by the angel, the spirit of the Lord dwelled on the king (*rūheh d-māryā šrāt 'al malkā*), as on Jeremiah. He wrote down the secrets (*kesyātā*) like Daniel and Isiah. [...] And he set down and showed/revealed all future things (*w-iteb ḥawwi koll da-'tidān*) like Daniel.<sup>34</sup>

Accordingly, Alexander is compared to the prophet Daniel as a receiver of revelation (Dan. 7:1). Similar to Daniel, he receives secret knowledge regarding future events and consequently writes down his apocalyptic prophecies.

The nature of the three abovementioned examples of apocalyptic prophecies *at the beginning of the seventh century* can be summarised in the following characteristics:

30 See Budge, *The History of Alexander the Great*, 154ff.

31 Reinink, *Das Syrische Alexanderlied*.

32 For an overview regarding the dating see Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, 156–66.

33 See Reinink, *Das Syrische Alexanderlied*, II.521–522.

34 Ibid., I.536–547.

- The receiver of apocalyptic knowledge gains access to hidden truths about the worldly course of events till the end of time and can concretely describe them.
- Apocalyptic prophecies can present calculations about the beginning and ending of certain events.
- Apocalyptic prophecies exhibit an imperial dimension: they identify empires that will or will not prevail till the end time.
- In the cases of Alexander and the prophet Daniel, the source of apocalyptic knowledge is an angel seen in a vision. However, pagan individuals, such as the Persian king Khosro II, are also described as gaining apocalyptic knowledge by interpreting stars or using the help of magicians and enchanters and invoking their gods. The Persian king Tubarlaq makes a divination (*qṣam*) for this knowledge by referring to stars (signs of the zodiac) and to terrestrial phenomena (fire and water).

By observing the application of oaths in early Meccan suras and their relationship with a prophetic discourse about knowledge and revelation, this study argues that the application of oaths aims to *deconstruct* apocalyptic prophecies. This claim extends beyond the thesis of Tor Andrae, who correctly observed that Qur'anic eschatology is *not apocalyptic*.<sup>35</sup> I believe that the eschatology of the Qur'an is even programmatically *anti-apocalyptic* and the practice of oath-taking in early Meccan suras serves to tackle an *apocalyptic worldview*.

Schmid convincingly summarized the characteristic of oaths in the early Meccan suras by explaining that 'oath series in the early Meccan surahs obviously have a strong eschatological dimension or at least they point unremittingly towards eschatology by means of the in-built liminality of the *muqṣam bihi*, in combination with the *muqṣam 'alayhi*'.<sup>36</sup> To further develop the argument by Schmid, three aspects of oath-taking and related discourse about revelation need to be considered.

1. Early Meccan suras use stars, terrestrial phenomena and eschatological sceneries as objects of oaths (*muqṣam bihi*).
2. Eschatological phenomena (e.g. resurrection, paradise and hell) are introduced by oaths (*muqṣam 'alayhi*) or are connected to oaths later within the sura.
3. The early Meccan suras describe the prophet Muhammad as the receiver of revelation by visions mediated by an angel or a messenger.

By comparing these three aspects with the context of the apocalyptic prophecies by Persian kings and Alexander, the Qur'an is evidently evoking the

35 See Andrae, *Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum*, 61ff.

36 Schmid, "Oaths in the Qur'an," 156.

expectation that the prophet Muhammad will give apocalyptic prophecies. However, the Qur'an then deconstructs this expectation by denying apocalyptic prophecies and introducing a discourse about prophetic knowledge, which is anti-apocalyptic. I want to exemplify this strategy by analysing a few of the early Meccan suras.

Sura 100 (*al-ʿādīyāt*) is a good example of how the use of oaths evokes certain apocalyptic expectations then denies it:

<sup>1</sup> By the runners that snort,

<sup>2</sup> By the strikers of fire,

<sup>3</sup> By the raiders at dawn,

<sup>4</sup> When they leave a track of dust,

<sup>5</sup> When they engage a host,

<sup>6</sup> Man is ungrateful to his Lord,

<sup>7</sup> And he is a witness to that,

<sup>8</sup> And he is violent in his love of good things.

<sup>9</sup> Does he not know?

When what is in the graves is poured out

<sup>10</sup> And when what is in [men's] breasts is made apparent -

<sup>11</sup> On that day their Lord will be fully informed about them. (Q 100:1–11)

The sura is introduced by oaths sworn by (*muqṣam bihi*) galloping horses, who can be interpreted to signify a raid or even apocalyptic horsemen, which is similar to the angels in the Apocalypse of John (Rev. 9,17–19).<sup>37</sup> Now, one could argue, that if the oaths are intended to give an apocalyptic/eschatological imagery, then, finally, the oaths will introduce an apocalyptic prophecy. Instead, the oaths culminate in a statement about the ungratefulness of human beings to their Lord. In addition, at the end of the sura, this is connected to a missing consciousness of humans regarding the eschatological judgement that awaits them.

Several oath series in Early Meccan suras culminate in anthropological statements about humans with regard to their relationship with God such as 'We created Man in the fairest stature' (Q 95:4) and 'We created Man in hardship' (Q 90:4). Although these statements are connected within the suras to the reality of the resurrection and the final judgement of humans, they deny any form of apocalyptic prophecy. As such, they do not contain calculations about the beginning and ending of certain events, explanations of how history will concretely evolve till the end time, identification of empires and their fates and the coming of the Messiah, among others.

<sup>37</sup> See Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 1*, 168f.

Even in the cases in which an oath series culminates in the introduction of an eschatological scene, it is not apocalyptic (Q 79):

- <sup>1</sup> By those that pull to destruction,
- <sup>2</sup> By those that rove,
- <sup>3</sup> By those that swim,
- <sup>4</sup> And by those that outstrip,
- <sup>5</sup> And by those that manage an affair,
- <sup>6</sup> On the day when the shuddering shudders,
- <sup>7</sup> Followed by the one that rides behind,
- <sup>8</sup> There are hearts on that day that will beat painfully,
- <sup>9</sup> Their looks downcast,
- <sup>10</sup> They will say, 'Are we being restored to our original state
- <sup>11</sup> – when we have become decayed bones?'
- <sup>12</sup> They will say, 'That will then be a losing turn.'
- <sup>13</sup> There will only be a single driving,
- <sup>14</sup> And see, they will be awake. (Q 79:1–14)

Sura 79 (*an-nāzi'āt*) begins with an enigmatic series of phenomena, which, in their threatening and ominous character, is seemingly evoking eschatological images.<sup>38</sup> The oaths then *explicitly* culminate into eschatological scenes such as a cosmic catastrophe, terrified humans, sceptical speech of those who denied the resurrection and the suddenness of resurrection.

Although the oaths introduce eschatological phenomena, they fail to culminate in an apocalyptic prophecy. Additionally, I want to argue that this failure is an intended strategy by the Qur'an to deconstruct apocalyptic prophecies. This is also the reason for the existence of a second category of Qur'anic oaths, which Schmid apostrophised as 'discourse on prophetic discourse'.<sup>39</sup> In these cases, the oaths introduce an explicit discourse about the truthfulness of Qur'anic revelation and how it differs from other forms of divination. An oath series in sura *al-ḥāqqah* is a good example of this discourse:

- <sup>38</sup> No. I swear by what you see
- <sup>39</sup> And what you do not see,
- <sup>40</sup> It is the speech of a noble messenger [*qawlu rasūlin karīmīn*].
- <sup>41</sup> It is not the speech of a poet [*qawli shā'irīn*]  
– little you believe –
- <sup>42</sup> Nor is it the speech of a soothsayer [*qawli kāhinīn*]  
– little you are reminded –
- <sup>43</sup> [It is] a revelation from the Lord of all beings [*tanzīlun min rabbi l-'ālamīna*].  
(Q 69:38–43)

38 Ibid., 400f.

39 Schmid, "Oaths in the Qur'an," 160.



After an oath series by objects, which can and cannot be seen, the divine proclamation of the Qur'an is characterised as the speech of a messenger and distinguished from other forms of divine utterances by soothsayers or poets. The insistence of the Qur'an, that is, it is different from the speech of Arab diviners, is connected to the failed expectation of the audience of the Qur'an. If the Qur'an is using oaths to introduce divine utterances similar to other Arab diviners and claiming to be the revelation from an angelic messenger, then, for the audience at the beginning of the seventh century, the Qur'an is failing to deliver its expectation of apocalyptic prophecies.

A similar discourse about the origin and insistence of the truthfulness of the Qur'anic proclamation is introduced by an oath series in sura 81 (*at-takwīr*):

- <sup>15</sup> No! I swear by the [stars] that retreat,
- <sup>16</sup> Moving and setting,
- <sup>17</sup> By the night when it closes,
- <sup>18</sup> By the morning when it breathes,
- <sup>19</sup> It is indeed the speech a noble messenger,
- <sup>20</sup> Powerful, secure with the Occupant of the Throne,
- <sup>21</sup> Obeyed and to be trusted,
- <sup>22</sup> Your companion is not possessed.
- <sup>23</sup> He did indeed see Him on the clear horizon.
- <sup>24</sup> He is not niggardly about the Invisible.
- <sup>25</sup> This is not the word of a devil that should be stoned.
- <sup>26</sup> So where are you going?
- <sup>27</sup> It is nothing less than a reminder to all beings
- <sup>28</sup> – for whoever of you wishes to follow the straight path. (Q 81:15–28)

The oath series is sworn by astronomical phenomena and introduces a 'discourse about prophetic discourse'. Once again, the Qur'an is insistent on the fact that it is a speech delivered by a messenger and that the prophet has truly seen this messenger in a vision. In verse 24, although the Qur'an is stating that God 'is not niggardly about the Invisible (*al-ghaibi*)', it is the failure of the Qur'anic proclamation to meet the expectation of the audience that is at stake here: a *true* and *authentic* revelation from an angelic vision, which is introduced by eschatological oaths, would give apocalyptic prophecies about the unseen.

Furthermore, in sura 53 (*an-najm*), a similar 'discourse about prophetic discourse,' as in sura 81, can be observed:

- <sup>1</sup> By the star when it sets,
- <sup>2</sup> Your comrade has not gone astray,
- nor has he erred,
- <sup>3</sup> Nor does he speak out of caprice.

- <sup>4</sup> This is simply a revelation that is being revealed,  
<sup>5</sup> Taught to him by one great in power,  
<sup>6</sup> Possessed of strength.  
 He stood straight  
<sup>7</sup> On the highest horizon;  
<sup>8</sup> Then he drew near and came down,  
<sup>9</sup> [Till] he was two bows' length away or even nearer;  
<sup>10</sup> Then he inspired his servant with his inspiration.  
<sup>11</sup> His heart has not lied [about] what he saw.  
<sup>12</sup> Will you dispute with him about what he sees?  
<sup>13</sup> Indeed, he saw him on another descent  
<sup>14</sup> By the *sidr*-tree of the boundary,  
<sup>15</sup> Near to which is the garden of refuge,  
<sup>16</sup> When the *sidr*-tree was covered by its covering.  
<sup>17</sup> His eye did not swerve nor turn astray.  
<sup>18</sup> Indeed, he saw [one] of the greatest signs of his Lord. (Q 81:1–18)

Recently, Saqib Hussain proposes a new interpretation of the first part of the sura.<sup>40</sup> He argues that the beginning of the sura, that is, an oath by a star, refers to the Pleiades and that their rising and setting anticipates the manner in which two visions of the prophet are described in the sura. Saqib further explains that the prophet did not see God in these visions, but an angelic messenger, who *descended* to the prophet in both cases. I want to stress two further points by comparing two aspects of this sura with specific elements of the apocalyptic prophecies, which were discussed earlier.

In the Syriac Alexander Legend, the Persian king Tubarlaq is described to have made divination (*qṣam b-*) by the signs of the Zodiac (*malwāšē*) and terrestrial elements such as water and fire. Through this, he achieved his apocalyptic prophecy. Similar to the beginning of sura 53, Qur'anic oaths are also sworn by (*muqṣam bihi*) stars (Q 56:75). In other cases, terrestrial elements (e.g. ocean and mountains) are also the object of oaths (Q 52:1,6; Q 95:2).

Although how Tubarlaq creates divination by the signs of the Zodiac or by terrestrial elements (e.g. invocation and oaths) is not explicitly described, the aspect that a distinct Qur'anic means of introducing oaths is using the IV stem of the root *q-s-m* and the preposition *bi-* is worthy of consideration. Schmid even observes that the more prevalent form of oath-taking in pre-Islamic time (*aḥlifu bi-, ḥalaftu bi-*) is not attested in the Qur'an.<sup>41</sup> The Syriac cognate for the

<sup>40</sup> Hussain, "The Prophet's Visions in Sūrat al-Najm."

<sup>41</sup> Schmid, "Oaths in the Qur'an," 152. Ahmad Al-Jallad has demonstrated that the root *q-s-m* is attested in a Safaitic inscription for an oath (see Al-Jallad, *The Religion and Rituals of the Nomads of Pre-Islamic Arabia*, 48,53.). In Sabaic Inscriptions, although different verbs are used to ask or apply to oracles (see Multhoff and Stein, "Sabäische Texte," 394f.), the

Qur'anic root *q-s-m* is *q-ṣ-m*.<sup>42</sup> The Persian king Tubarlag is now applying this verb in combination with the preposition *bi-* to make divination with objects similar to the *muqṣam bihi* in the Qur'an. For this reason, a possibility exists that the oaths in the Qur'an introduced by the form *aqsama bi-* also exhibited the strong connotation of *making divination*. I would even argue that the audience of the Qur'an was expecting the prophet to make an apocalyptic prophecy, when he used oaths in the described manner and was connecting them with an eschatological inventory. However, the prophetic speech of the Qur'an then deconstructs this expectation by insisting that the Qur'an represents authentic revelation by a true source. This scenario is perfectly exemplified in sura *an-najm*. The prophet takes an oath by the Pleiades, while the Qur'an insists that it is a true revelation by a descended messenger, although its contents are not apocalyptic prophecies about hidden truths.

The second point I want to emphasise is the nature of angelic visions. In the abovementioned *mēmra* about Alexander, his revelations are compared with those of Daniel. In a dream, Alexander sees an angel in a great vision (*ḥezwā rabbā*), can receive the spirit of prophetic revelation (*b-rūḥ gelyānā da-nbyutā*) and write down all hidden mysteries. Using the Arabic cognate *ru'yā* for the Syriac term for vision (*ḥezwā*), the Qur'an is emphasising that the prophet Muhammad is also having true visions (Q 48:27; 37:105). The Qur'an is also reflecting that visions for prophets can be a trial to people (Q 17:60). This aspect of angelic visions is also the theme of sura 53. In verse 13, it insists that the prophet saw the messenger (*ra'āhu*); in verses 17 and 18, this is again emphasised: '17. His eye did not swerve nor turn astray. 18. Indeed, he saw [one] of the greatest signs of his Lord. [*la-qad ra'ā min āyāti rabbihi l-kubrā*]'.

As Alexander had a *great vision* (*ḥezwā rabbā*) of the angel, the Qur'an claims the same type of vision for the prophet Muhammad: 'he saw [one] of the greatest signs' (*ra'ā min āyāti rabbihi l-kubrā*). However, an issue with Qur'anic divinations is that they do not match the expected type of apocalyptic prophecies. Hence, the Qur'an insists on the true and authentic nature of Muhammad's revelations and visions, although they fail to fulfil the expectations.

Regarding the Qur'anic denial of apocalyptic prophecies, an important aspect to point out is that the Qur'an is not arguing against the possibility of

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root *q-s-m* is attested in one Sabaic inscription (al-'Uḥdūd 2/8.-11.) for asking/appealing to an oracle (see <http://sabaweb.uni-jena.de/SabaWeb/Suche/Suche/SearchResultDetail?idxLemma=9516&showAll=0>).

42 See Zammit, *A Comparative Lexical Study of Qur'anic Arabic*, 339.

prophecies *per se*. God can give his servants and prophets knowledge about the unseen and future worldly events. For example, Joseph can interpret (*ta'wīl*) dreams (*ru'yā/pl. ru'an*) and foretell the future (Q 12:40 f., 46–49, 100). However, the Qur'an denies the *apocalyptic nature* of prophecies: a prophet will not calculate the exact time of the resurrection and will not tell which empire will last till the end, among others. These apocalyptic expectations are explicitly described in early Meccan suras:

<sup>6</sup> He asks, 'When will the Day of Resurrection be?' [*yas'alu 'ayyāna yaumu l-qiyāmati*] (Q 75:6)

<sup>1</sup> A questioner has asked questions concerning a punishment about to fall [*sa'ala sālilun bi-'adhābin wāqī'in*] (Q 70:1)

<sup>1</sup> About what are they questioning one another? [*'amma yatasālūna*] <sup>2</sup> – About the awesome tidings, [*'ani n-naba'i l-'aẓīmi*] <sup>3</sup> Concerning which they differ. [*alladhī hum fihī mukhtalifūna*] (Q 78:1–3)

In addition, the Qur'an curses those who are constantly asking and speculating about the exact date of the Judgement:

<sup>6</sup> The judgement will indeed happen.

<sup>7</sup> By the heaven with its tracks,

<sup>8</sup> You speak at variance; [*'innakum la-fi qaulin mukhtalifin*]

<sup>9</sup> Some are involved in lies about it.

<sup>10</sup> Perish the conjecturers,

<sup>11</sup> Heedless in overwhelming ignorance.

<sup>12</sup> They ask, 'When is the Day of Judgement?' [*yas'alūna 'ayyāna yaumu d-dīni*] (Q 51:6–12)

On another instance, the Qur'an asks the adversaries of the prophet Muhammad whether or not they would have access to divine treasures and whether or not they would be able to write the hidden truths down in a book:

<sup>37</sup> Or do they have the treasure of your Lord? [*'am 'indahum khazā'inu rabbika 'am humu l-muṣaiṭirūna*] Or do they have charge?

<sup>38</sup> Or do they have a ladder on which they can listen? Let their listener bring clear authority. [...]

<sup>41</sup> Or have they [knowledge of] the Invisible and so can write it down? [*'am 'indahumu l-ghaibu fa-hum yaktubūna*] (Q 52:37–41)

Evidently, rhetorical questions exist, because the Qur'an does not expect humans – not even prophets – to have the ability to gain apocalyptic knowledge.

### Muhammad's Anti-Apocalyptic Prophecy Regarding the Roman-Persian War

Although the Qur'an is addressing an apocalyptic worldview<sup>43</sup> and denying that Muhammad could make apocalyptic prophecies, a relatively astonishing aspect is that the Qur'an ultimately gave a prophecy about the events of the Roman-Persian war (Q 30:2–6). In the context of this war, people would demand from a prophet that he could prophecy the future course of events and would contextualise them within God's greater plan in salvation history. At least, this is seemingly the case if sources from the beginning of the seventh century that contain apocalyptic prophecies are considered.

For example, this scenario was described in a passage of the History of Maurice, which was composed by Theophylact Simocatta during the reign of Heraclius (r. 610–641 CE). As previously mentioned, Theophylact reports an apocalyptic prophecy attributed to the Sasanian sovereign Khosro II.<sup>44</sup> The events foretold by Khosro in this passage refer to the conflict between the Byzantines and Persians, which would occur immediately after the prophecy had been uttered. In fact, few doubts exist that the description of the initial fortune of the *Babylonian race*, which was later overturned by the Roman power, refers to the evolution of the Byzantine-Sasanian war.

The prophet Muhammad is now also given a prophecy about the Roman-Persian war in the Qur'an and the adaptation of this prophecy to the Qur'anic concept of prophetic knowledge and its limitations is very interesting. This prophecy is contained at the beginning of sura 30 (*ar-rūm*):

<sup>2</sup> The Byzantines have been defeated [*ghulibat ar-rūm*]

<sup>3</sup> In the nearest part of the land;

but after their being vanquished [*ghalabihim*] they will be victorious [*sa-yaghlibūna*],

<sup>4</sup> In a few years;

the matter belongs to God before and after

- and on that day the believers will rejoice [*wa-yauma'idhin yafraḥu l-mu'minūna*]

<sup>5</sup> In God's help [*bi-naṣri llāhi*].

He helps those whom He wishes.

He is the Mighty and the Merciful.

<sup>6</sup> The promise of God

- God does not break His promise, but most men do not know. (Q 30:2–6)

43 See Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*.

44 See Whitby and Whitby, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta*, V.15.3–7.

A consensus exists in traditional Muslim exegesis and in western scholarship that this Qur'anic prophecy generally refers to the Roman-Persian war.<sup>45</sup> According to a canonical reading, it describes the defeat of the Byzantines and that they will be victorious in the future. Although this prophecy poses many relevant aspects that need an appropriate explanation,<sup>46</sup> I will only focus my attention to the direct comparison of this prophecy with the previously quoted apocalyptic prophecies from the environment of the Qur'an. Although the prophet Muhammad is predicting the future victory of the Byzantine army and basically invoking the help of God for them, his prophecy is remarkably different from the apocalyptic prophecies.

Firstly, no apocalyptic context exists in the Qur'anic prophecy. The events of the Roman-Persian war are not placed in God's greater plan of salvation history. In fact, the Qur'anic prophecy more resembles a report of a historian than that of an apocalyptic prophecy. The Qur'an is invoking God's future help for the Romans and is claiming that they will ultimately win. However, these events of war pose no eschatological or apocalyptic implications.

Secondly, the Qur'anic prophecy about the future win of the Byzantines does not provide an exact time or duration or how long it would take the Roman army to be victorious again ('In a few years', *fī biḍ'i sinīna*). This characteristic of the Qur'anic prophecy matches the overall Qur'anic discourse on prophetic knowledge. Prophets do not know when exactly certain events will occur and how they fit in God's overall plan for salvation history. For the opponents of the prophet Muhammad, his prophecy of the future win of the Byzantines would have not matched their expectations of what a prophet would do and know. A true prophet would ascend to heaven similar to an angel and would gain direct access to God's treasures of divine knowledge. He would be able to say the specific manner and time of the occurrence of certain events in history.

### The Anti-Apocalyptic Nature of Prophetic Knowledge

The Qur'an also enhances its understanding of prophetic knowledge by adapting and presenting certain narratives such as the story of the Seven sleepers in the Qur'an (Q 18:9–26). A long reception history of this narrative exists, including several variants of this story, which the Qur'an is seemingly aware.<sup>47</sup>

45 Compare Cheikh, "Sūrat Al-Rūm"; and Tesei, "The Romans Will Win!"

46 See Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, 167–79.

47 For a complete commentary of the sura see Koloska, *Offenbarung, Ästhetik und Koranexegese*; the most recent study of the narratives in the sura is by Griffith, "The

However, the basic narrative is as follows. In the third century during the reign of the Roman emperor Decius, seven young men are being persecuted due to their Christian faith. They remain firm and refuse to become Roman idolaters. They escape to a mountain cave, where they fall asleep while praying. The mountain of the cave becomes sealed with the seven men. Time passes and Christianity ultimately becomes the state religion of the Roman Empire. In the fifth century, a landowner opens the sealed mountain cave by accident and finds the seven sleepers inside. The seven men wake up and do not realise that they have slept for centuries. They are astonished by the changed Christian imprint of the city of Ephesus when they go out to buy food. As soon as they pay using their old coins, they were identified as being from another century. Thus, they are interviewed by clerics and their miracle story serves as proof in debates about bodily resurrection in the end time and about the life after death.

In the Qur'an, the story of the seven sleepers, which has established a doctrinal background regarding the eschatological question of bodily resurrection, is transformed into an *epistemic parable* to enhance the Qur'anic view on prophetic knowledge about the end time.<sup>48</sup> Remarkably, the Qur'an is not telling the story of the seven sleepers as a narrative about the persecution of the true believers and how God helped them in history. Instead, it describes the narrative as a test of the calculation of eschatological time. Accordingly, verses 11–12 of sura 18 (*al-kahf*) state the following:

<sup>11</sup> Then We sealed up their ears in the cave for a number of years.

<sup>12</sup> Then We woke them that We might know (*li-na'lama*) which of the two parties would calculate (*aḥṣā*) better the period they had tarried. (Q 18:11–12)

Later, a few verses cite:

<sup>19</sup> Thus We raised them that they might ask questions among themselves. One of them said, 'How long have you tarried?' They said, 'We have tarried a day or part of a day.' They said, 'Your Lord is well aware of how long you have tarried.' [...]

<sup>21</sup> Likewise We caused [people] to stumble on them that they might know (*li-ya'lamū*) that the promise of God is true and that there is no doubt about the *Hour*." (Q 18:19–21)

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Narratives of 'the Companions of the Cave,' Moses and His Servant, and Dhū 'l-Qarnayn in Sūrat al-Kahf."

48 Compare Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*, 132–45.

Thus, the Qur'an is giving an apocalyptic context for the duration of their sleep. The story of the seven sleepers is proof of the resurrection of all humans; however, the sleepers fail to calculate the time of their resurrection. The Qur'an is seemingly emphasising that humans cannot access apocalyptic knowledge about the end time: No human or prophet could tell the exact time of the occurrence of the resurrection. The manner in which the Qur'an describes the speculation about the numbers of the sleepers and the duration of their sleep further confirms this view.

Being aware of the variants of the narrative regarding the quantity of the sleepers, the Qur'an describes speculations about them as follows:

22 They will say, 'Three, and their dog was the fourth of them.'  
 They will say, 'Five, and their dog the sixth of them,'  
 guessing at the Invisible (*rajman bi-l-ghaibi*).  
 They will say, 'Seven, and their dog the eighth of them.'  
 Say, 'My Lord is well aware of their number.  
 Only a few know them.'  
 So dispute concerning them only on a clear issue; [...]. (Q 18:22)

The speculation about the numbers of the sleepers is described as a speculation about the unseen (*ghaib*). In the Qur'anic discourse about prophetic knowledge, the opponents of the prophet are demanding knowledge of the unseen (*'ilm al-ghaib*) to which he confesses to being unaware. A demand seemingly exists for apocalyptic knowledge; in the context of the Roman-Persian war at the beginning of the seventh century, a prophet would be expected to give an apocalyptic interpretation of events. An example of this notion would be the prophecy in the apocalyptic book of Daniel about four monstrous beasts, which represent different empires and their fate contains the secret knowledge about the course of salvation history till the end (Dan. 7). Such an apocalyptic thought was, once again, predominant in the context of the Roman-Persian war and was related to questions, such as 'Is the Byzantine Empire really the last Empire on earth?', among others. The Qur'an seemingly mocks this form of apocalyptic speculation in its characterisation of the speculation about the numbers of the sleepers (e.g. Were there three sleepers and the fourth was the dog?). This question is similar to a mockery of someone who speculates about the four beasts in the apocalyptic book of Daniel and which empires they represent.

Another form of apocalyptic knowledge is the exact calculation of time till the end of the world. Once again, the Qur'an denies this kind of knowledge with reference to the seven sleepers. Therefore, verses 25–26 of sura *al-kahf* state the following:



<sup>25</sup> And they tarried in the Cave three hundred years and nine more.

<sup>26</sup> Say, 'God knows best how long they tarried (*'a'lamu bi-mā labitū*).  
To Him belongs the Invisible (*lahū ghaibu*) in the heavens and the earth.  
How well He sees and hears. (Q 18:25–26)

The Qur'an is not giving the exact and true chronological details of the narrative but is using the story of the seven sleepers as a parable to emphasise that only God has knowledge of the unseen.

### Summary

This paper began with Qur'anic statements about the limits of prophetic knowledge. The Qur'an frequently denies that the prophet Muhammad can be an angel or has access to the divine treasures (*khazā'in*) and keys (*mafātih*) of God's knowledge about hidden truths (*'ilm al-ghaib*). The study then argued that the nature of this knowledge should be qualified as apocalyptic knowledge and should be contextualised within the apocalyptic and eschatological discourses catalysed by the Roman-Persian war at the beginning of the seventh century. The early Meccan suras previously criticise an apocalyptic sentiment, which asks for the beginning of the end time and the coming of the *eschaton*. The inherent stylistic feature of oaths in these suras seemingly evoke that the prophet Muhammad could make an apocalyptic prophecy. However, these oaths ultimately culminate in Qur'anic statements against any form of apocalyptic prophecy. This tendency remains active, when the prophet Muhammad is given a prophecy about the win of Byzantine. As the study argues, this prophecy is resistant to any kind of apocalyptic discourse.

Finally, the study demonstrates that certain elements of the story of the seven sleepers in the Qur'an contain an epistemic discourse against any type of apocalyptic knowledge about the last empire on earth and about the beginning of the end time.

# Q 7:189–190: A Sound Child Born to Adam and Eve?

## *Haggadic Nature of Muslim Exegetical Narratives*

Ali Aghaei

### Introduction

From earliest times, Muslims have made immense efforts to understand and interpret the Qur'an. The first objective of these interpretative attempts, commonly referred to as *tafsīr*, was to clarify the plain meaning of the Qur'anic text. The genre of *tafsīr* developed quickly, so that by the end of the third/ninth century, voluminous commentaries had appeared, devoted to various aspects of the text of the Qur'an, including its lexicography, grammar, variant readings, jurisprudence, and theology.<sup>1</sup> In one of the earliest types of *tafsīr*, called 'narrative exegesis' or 'haggadic exegesis' (to use Wansbrough's terminology),<sup>2</sup> a large amount of biblical and post-biblical narrative material is enlisted in order to unfold and contextualize the often allusive Qur'anic versions of biblical stories. The central concerns of this genre were the identification of figures and events appearing in biblical stories that are alluded to by the Qur'anic text. In order to embellish the Qur'anic narratives, Muslim exegetes (*mufasssīrūn*) incorporated a vast amount of (extra-Qur'anic) biblical and para-biblical lore. In later times, these narrative materials were conventionally designated by the term *isrā'īliyyāt*.<sup>3</sup> This term must be taken as a cover term and not necessarily as a description of their content, which, at first glance, seems to be narratives derived merely from Jewish (and Christian) traditions but, as already

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1 For a critical overview on the history and literature of this genre, cf. Shah, "Introduction."

2 See Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 122–48.

3 For a comprehensive survey of the term *isrā'īliyyāt* and its appearance in Muslim literature, see Tottoli, "Origin and Use of the Term *Isrā'īliyyāt*"; Tottoli, "New Material".

known, also covers stories of a much broader domain of Near Eastern folklore traditions.<sup>4</sup>

The *isrāʾīliyyāt* have usually been presumed to go back either to early converts, who supposedly transmitted these materials from their own pre-Islamic traditions,<sup>5</sup> or to figures from among the nascent (Muslim) community who were familiar with biblical and post-biblical materials,<sup>6</sup> as their names are featured repeatedly in the *isnāds* of these traditions. However, recent studies have drawn attention to the suspicious character of these attributions, encouraging a re-evaluation of the function of both alleged 'sources', suggested that their value is somewhat more symbolic than historical.<sup>7</sup> Schwarzbaum has pointed out that these personalities may not necessarily have transmitted the material attributed to them but often served as 'personality pegs' on which many Jewish and Christian legends were 'hung' in Islamic sources.<sup>8</sup> Many of the individuals involved in the transmission of these exegetical traditions were *mawālī* (sg. *mawlā*, 'freedman client'),<sup>9</sup> whose family background and place of origin could have given them special knowledge of Jewish, Christian, or Zoroastrian sources.<sup>10</sup>

In the early Muslim period, the attitude of Muslim scholars towards the collection and use of so-called *isrāʾīliyyāt* was one of positive acceptance, as reflected in an early tradition attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad: "Narrate from the children of Israel; there is nothing wrong with it."<sup>11</sup> Such an affirmative conception of the material led to the understanding that using *isrāʾīliyyāt* for elucidating certain aspects of the Qur'an, clarifying areas of vagueness, or supplying spiritual and moral guidance was regarded as legitimate. *Isrāʾīliyyāt* were thus treated as valid exegetical material leading to their wide presence in early Muslim literature, particularly in the genre of Qur'an exegesis. This is also

4 See Rippin, "Tafsīr," 13:8952; Newby, "Tafsīr *Isrāʾīliyyāt*," 686.

5 A key figure to whom the transmission of *isrāʾīliyyāt* is ascribed is the Yemenite Jew Ka'b al-Aḥbār (d. ca. 32/652), who converted under the Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. See Schmitz, "Ka'b al-Aḥbār."

6 The most famous figure among them is 'Abdallāh Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/688), the cousin of the Prophet, whose knowledge of biblical traditions was said to be so extensive that he was called *ḥabr al-umma*, meaning "the rabbi of the community." See Gilliot, "Abdallāh b. 'Abbās."

7 Pregill, "*Isrāʾīliyyāt*, Myth, and Pseudepigraphy," 231.

8 Schwarzbaum, *Biblical and Extra-Biblical Legends in Islamic Folk Literature*, 55.

9 In the patronage system of early Islamic times, non-Arab freedmen linked by clintage (*walā'*) to their Arab patrons were called *mawālī*. See Nawas, "Client"; Wensinck and Crone, "Mawlā."

10 See Newby, "Tafsīr *Isrāʾīliyyāt*," 688–93; Newby, "The Drowned Son," 21.

11 For a thorough examination of divergent opinions of Muslim scholars about this statement, see Kister, "*Haddithū 'an banī isrāʾīla wa-lā ḥaraja*."

suggested by the fact that the term *isrāʿīlīyyāt* itself appeared very late. While this term occurred in different genres of Muslim literature since the fourth/tenth century,<sup>12</sup> its first recorded occurrence in *tafsīr* literature dates to an even later time, namely the sixth/twelfth century.<sup>13</sup> The term *isrāʿīlīyyāt* in a fixed pejorative sense entered the exegetical terminology only with Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328)<sup>14</sup> and particularly with his student Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), who was the first to make systematic use of the term *isrāʿīlīyyāt* in his works, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm* and *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*. Thereafter, labelling certain traditions as *isrāʿīlīyyāt* became a way of discrediting them: They were to be rejected because of their apparent Jewish or Christian origins, and they were regarded as untrustworthy, on account of their objectionable contents, which allegedly contradicted a by then established Islamic value or norm or were considered too fanciful and extravagant.

Nevertheless, the term was not used in a very coherent way: One and the same scholar might use the label *isrāʿīlīyyāt* in order to express disapproval of exegetical material on one occasion but transmitted biblical traditions and used them for theological argument on another occasion.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps, on account of this ambiguous approach, no later scholar followed Ibn Kathīr's example. The systematic usage of the term *isrāʿīlīyyāt* did not receive general acceptance, and the rejection of these traditions did not become a major concern of Qurʾan exegetes until the reformist movement in the modern period. Although the term *isrāʿīlīyyāt* eventually came to carry a pejorative sense and was often the basis for rejecting biblical and para-biblical traditions, many of these traditions continued to survive in Islamic literature. The negative attitude

12 The first evidence of the term *isrāʿīlīyyāt* in Muslim literature – as already noted by Goldziher, “Mélanges Judéo-Arabes,” 65 – is found in al-Masʿūdī's (d. 956), *Murūj adh-dhahab*, 370ff. According to al-Masʿūdī, scholars at his time held differing opinions concerning the validity of this kind of traditions; he himself stated that all these traditions should be treated with caution, since they are supposedly of uncertain credibility. See also Tottoli, “Origin and Use of the Term,” 194; Tottoli, “New Material,” 2.

13 See Tottoli, “Origin and Use of the Term *Isrāʿīlīyyāt*,” 197; Tottoli, “New Material,” 4.

14 Ibn Taymiyya used *isrāʿīlīyyāt* as a technical term for what he considered unreliable traditions of Jewish and Christian origin, that were quoted in early Muslim exegesis. According to him, these traditions had to be rejected unless they conformed to sound Muslim traditions. Even in the latter case, Ibn Taymiyya claimed that “*Isrāʿīlīyyāt* should only be mentioned for purposes of attestation (*li-l-istishhād*), not as a basis for belief (*li-l-iʿtiqād*)”; Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Muqaddima fī uṣūl at-tafsīr*, 100. There are some scepticism regarding the authorship of the last two chapters of *al-Muqaddima* and its attribution to Ibn Taymiyya. For details, see Mirza, “A Precious Treatise,” 84, and note 32.

15 See for example, Mirza, “Ishmael as Abraham's Sacrifice,” where he shows that Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Kathīr both engage biblical lore and the biblical text directly to argue that Ishmael was Abraham's intended sacrifice. Tottoli, “Origin and Use of the Term *Isrāʿīlīyyāt*”; McAuliffe, “Ibn Taymiyya.”

toward the *isrāʾīliyyāt* did not prevent such material from being transmitted in *tafsīr* works or the collections of universal history along with other genres devoted to religious concerns (*zuhd*, *faḍāʾil*, *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, etc.).<sup>16</sup> Not only had they become well integrated into Islamic lore and were therefore included in the most respected works and cited freely in the authoritative exegesis of the Qurʾan, but also they had been proved to be 'effective' exegetical tools, and therefore helpful and necessary to Muslim exegetes.

### *Haggada versus Isrāʾīliyyāt*

In order to understand better the dynamics whereby biblical material was incorporated into Islamic exegetical works, we need to set out the historical context of the early Muslim community and their interactions with pre-Islamic traditions. It is known from historical sources that the first community around the Prophet and the first Muslim exegetes in urban centres of the Islamic world from the East to the West, including Hijaz, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Syria, Egypt, North Africa, and Andalusia, have lived in environments in which Late Antique traditions were known and well assimilated into their every-day life. Those diverse religious communities naturally interacted with one another, and such interactions, particularly in oral cultures, often involved story swapping, resulting in a shared pool of religious traditions and legends over time. The Qurʾan's ability to refer allusively to a wide variety of biblical themes and stories with little or sometimes no explanation reveals the existence and extent of this pool of traditions and the diverse stock of knowledge that its first addressees had already shared.<sup>17</sup> In his broad study on the Arabic Bible in the pre-Islamic period, Sidney Griffith states that, while a proper Arabic translation of the Bible had not yet been produced, it was still known in many parts of Arabia, not in the sense of a written Arabic translation, but as an oral 'interpreted Bible', which was debated, expanded, and discussed. According to Griffith, the Qurʾan is closely connected to that floating, oral 'interpreted Bible', though it does not reflect an adaptation but rather a thorough reworking and reshaping of earlier traditions.<sup>18</sup> Assuming the existence of a floating, oral tradition of biblical lore that existed before the Qurʾan's emergence and continued to exist after it, one can well contextualize the *isrāʾīliyyāt* as its continuing reception in Muslim tradition.

The corpus of texts which can be regarded as a good representative of this oral, floating tradition may be collectively designated as *aggada*, or its

<sup>16</sup> Tottoli, "The Corpora of *Isrāʾīliyyāt*," 684.

<sup>17</sup> Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike*, 44.

<sup>18</sup> Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, 91f.

equivalent term used by Palestinian sources, *haggada*.<sup>19</sup> *Haggada* is the multifaceted material found in the Jewish-rabbinic literature that does not fall into the category of law, namely *halakha*, “the legal material.” In terms of content, *haggada* consists of different types of material, including stories and anecdotes, which add to or elaborate the biblical texts. These *haggadic* narratives do not simply function as entertainment tools and fantasy devices; they are exegetical and/or homiletical in nature, produced and employed in various literary genres not only to explain philological and conceptual difficulties of the biblical text but also to expand and elaborate on theological issues and religious ideas. In his lengthy review of L. Ginzberg’s *Legends of the Jews* (1909–1928), Bernhard Heller remarkably related *haggada* to the Ancient Orient (Egypt, Babylon, Persian, and India), Classic Antiquity, Hellenism, the Church, Islam and popular legends. In the course of centuries of contact among these various cultures, customs, and folkloric traditions, extensive mutual interference occurred.<sup>20</sup> While Heller maintained that Islamic narratives borrow abundantly from Judea-Christian *haggada*, at the same time, he emphasized that they were also incorporated into the motifs of the *haggada*, expanding, extending, and sometimes even deepening it.<sup>21</sup>

From this angle, *isrāʾīlīyyāt* can very well be seen as the Islamic counterpart of *haggada* in Muslim literature. While the Islamic tradition adopted elements from *haggadic* material, it also consciously remoulded and refashioned these cultural artefacts according to its own norms and values. The style and content of Islamic versions of *haggada* display a distinct quality that sets them apart from Jewish and Christian legends. Muslim exegetes were not necessarily interested in setting the original story straight; they instead attempted to identify specific themes or motifs relevant to the Qurʾanic message. Therefore, the Islamic narratives are not a confusion of the earlier sources but constitute the exegetes’ purposeful interpretation and appropriation of certain motifs relevant to the context of the nascent (Islamic) community and in accordance with their own values. In other words, Muslim scholars’ appropriation of Jewish or Christian *haggada* occurred hand in hand with corrective reproductions and creative innovations, providing their addressees with appropriate material for their religious self-perception and for their own identity formation.

One can recognize various types of *haggadic* traditions in early Muslim scholarship. Some traditions elaborate the biblical stories of the Qurʾan and add details and precisions to them, that have close parallels in pre-Islamic Jewish and Christian sources. While several studies have examined these parallels

19 See Wald, “Aggadah or Haggadah,” 454.

20 Heller, “Ginzberg’s Legends of the Jews.”

21 Heller, “The Relation of The Aggadah To Islamic Legends,” 281f.

and their common motifs and commonalities while accentuating the originality and creativity of Muslim versions in the re-elaboration of pre-Islamic traditions,<sup>22</sup> many cases still await thorough examination. This does not mean that all aspects of biblical narratives in early Muslim sources must have some basis in the pre-Islamic traditions. In particular are those Islamic traditions for which one might find no fitting parallel in pre-Islamic traditions, though they resemble pre-Islamic *haggada* in their form and content.<sup>23</sup> In the following, I will discuss one such case for which I could identify a relevant parallel neither in pre-Islamic traditions nor in later mediaeval Jewish and Christian literature. Regardless of the possible origins of such a tradition, the focus of this investigation is on the process of Midrash-making, borrowing a term from rabbinic studies.

### Adam and Eve Story as Narrated in Q 7:189–190

The Qur'an, in the closing sections of Q 7, *sūrat al-a'rāf*, while speaking about humans' origin, reads:

<sup>189</sup> He is the one who created you from a single soul (*nafs wāḥida*), and from it made his mate (*zawjahā*)<sup>24</sup> so that he might rest in her (*li-yaskuna ilayhā*). Then, when he covered her (*taghashshāhā*), she bore a light burden and passed by with it. However, when she became greatly burdened, they invoked God their Lord, saying: "If You give us a good [child] (*ṣālihan*),<sup>25</sup> then we will surely be among the thankful (*ash-shākīrīn*)."

22 Tottoli, "The Corpora of *Isrā'īlīyyāt*," 688. These studies usually emphasize 'the mutual interdependence' of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions in creating their versions, indicating that the Jewish and Christian parallels are not always at the origin of the Islamic narratives but rather reflect Islamic influences. To name just a few, Firestone, "Abraham's Journey to Mecca"; Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*; Wheeler, "Moses or Alexander?"; Alexander, "Jewish Traditions in Early Islam"; Halperin, "Can Muslim Narrative be Used as Commentary on Jewish Tradition?"; Wheeler, "The Jewish Origins of Qur'an 18:65–82?"; Lowin, *The Making of a Forefather*; Bernstein, *Stories of Joseph*.

23 Schwarzbaum in his *Biblical and Extra-Biblical Legends* promoted the idea that these Islamic reports supply evidence of now lost pre-Islamic (mostly 'Jewish') traditions. Certain scholars, therefore, proposed a methodology to reconstruct lost *midrashim* through Islamic sources. See for instance, Newby, "The Drowned Son"; Halperin and Newby, "Two Castrated Bulls"; and for a recent one, Silverstein, *Veiling Esther, Unveiling Her Story*.

24 The grammatical problematic here is that the feminine *nafs* (soul) is the reference of the pronoun suffix in *zawjahā*, literally meaning "from her made her mate." To keep its original ambiguity, some English translations render this expression as "made from it its mate"; see Qarā'ī, *The Qur'an with a Phrase-by-Phrase English Translation*; Nasr, *The Study Quran*.

25 The term *ṣāliḥ* in the Qur'an usually occurs in plural, meaning 'the righteous'. See Badawī and Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage*, 532. Some English

190a Yet, when He gave them a good [child], they assigned Him partners (*shurakāʾ*)<sup>26</sup> concerning what He gave them.

190b Exalted is God above what they associate (*yushrikūn*).

The first part of this Qurʾanic passage presents a general description of God's creation of male and female humans and their primordial relationship. The account of the creation of humankind 'from a single soul', out of which created its mate, occurs twice more in the Qurʾan: Q 4:1 and Q 39:6. In all of these verses, the creation of humankind is generic, and no name is ever mentioned. Therefore, these verses may be understood as a reference to the generation of human beings in general, male and female spouses who marry to get comfort with each other (see also Q 30:21). In light of the other verses in the Qurʾan (Q 2:35; 7:19; 20:117), however, one can readily assume that the single soul here is Adam and that his spouse is Eve (Ḥawwāʾ in the Islamic tradition).<sup>27</sup>

Yet, Q 7:189–190 deserve special consideration since these verses provide some additional information that is unique in the Qurʾan, namely the first sexual experience of the primal couple that resulted in conception and childbearing. Moreover, after receiving a child from God, the first parents did not keep what they had already promised God, to show their gratitude for His grace, and instead they ascribed partners to God concerning the child He gave them. Thus, they fell into what the Qurʾan calls associating partners with God (*shirk*, often translated as 'polytheism' or 'idolatry').<sup>28</sup> However, the Qurʾanic verse does not reveal whom they associated with God and what they did that indicated such an association.

By looking at other Qurʾanic passages regarding the story of the primordial couple, Adam and Eve, in which the Devil is an antagonist, one finds some possible answers to these questions. Q7:11–18, as well as other passages in the Qurʾan (Q 15:30–40; 17:61–65; 38:73–83), explain that after his refusal of God's command to prostrate before Adam and his expulsion from Paradise, Iblis (most probably from Greek *diabolos*)<sup>29</sup> asked for reprieve from punishment until Judgment Day, which was granted by God, in order to lead Adam and

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translations of the Qurʾan adopted the exegetical tradition and translated *ṣāliḥ* in this context as 'a healthy child'. See e.g., Qarāʾī, *The Qurʾān*; Nasr et al, *The Study Qurʾan*. To keep the ambiguity of the verse, I choose 'good' which can cover both meanings.

26 An alternative reading attributed to Nāfiʾ and Shuʿba from ʿĀṣim is *shirkan* (association), meaning "They assigned Him a share concerning what He gave them." See Ibn Mujāhid, *Kitāb as-sabʾa fī al-qirāʾāt*, 299.

27 Her name never appears in the Qurʾan in which she is referred to only as Adam's *zawj*; Spellberg, "Writing the Unwritten Life," 306; Schöck, "Adam and Eve"; Aghaei, "Ḥawwāʾ"; Tottoli, "Eve."

28 Fletcher, "Shirk."

29 See Jeffrey, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾān*, 57f.



his progeny astray from the straight path (*aṣ-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) and to destroy their relationship with God:

<sup>16</sup> He (Iblis) said, 'As You have caused me to err, I will lie in waiting for them (Adam and his progeny) on Your straight path.

<sup>17</sup> Then I will come at them from their front and from their rear, and from their right and from their left, and You will not find most of them to be thankful (*ash-shākīrīn*).'

As his first demonic act, Iblis, who was referred to in this context as *ash-shayṭān*,<sup>30</sup> tempted Adam and Eve to eat of the tree of immortality, which was a bold transgression of God's prohibition, causing them to be expelled from Paradise (Q 7:19–25; see also 2:35–36; 20:120–123). In Q 17:64, God allows the Devil to incite with all his means and power whomever he is able: The Devil will become their partner in wealth and children, and he will promise them what is nothing but delusion. In several verses of the Qur'an, wealth and children signify the good things and enjoyment of this world (*matā'zīnat al-ḥayāt ad-dunyā*, Q 3:14; 18:46; 57:20) which as such can be a source of temptation (*fitna*, Q 8:28; 64:15) and a distraction and diversion from God (Q 63:9; 71:21). Wealth and children can readily function as means of incitement and recognition by the Devil to lead human beings astray, including the primordial couple, to show disobedience and ingratitude towards God's grace by "assigning partners to God concerning what He gave them" (Q 7:190). This is indeed a failure in total submission to God, which is regarded in the Qur'anic passage in question as *shirk*, 'associating partners with God'.

Post-Qur'anic literature in various genres, including Qur'anic exegesis, hadith, and histories/chronicles, provide several exegetical narratives in several variants which purport to supply a historical occasion (*sabab*) for Q 7:189–190 to contextualize the Qur'anic passage and to remove its ambiguity. As discussed earlier, the Devil (Iblis/*ash-shayṭān*) is given a chance to participate in the narrative as an essential character who no longer sounds like a new, non-Qur'anic interloper. This conveys the point that God gave the pair a good/healthy child but that they were again duped by the Devil. Focusing on the negotiations between the Devil and the first couple over naming their imminent child after him, the narrative explains that they treated the Devil as a partner (*sharik*) in what God gave them.

<sup>30</sup> In the Qur'an, the Devil is referred to as Iblis where he refused to acknowledge the superiority of Adam, while in the story of Adam and Eve's temptation in Paradise and when he appears as tempter of humans on earth, he is designated as *ash-shayṭān*, the demon or Satan. See Wensinck and Gardet, "Iblis"; Lange, "Devil (Satan)."

In the following, I will analyze different versions of this exegetical narrative supplied in the select representative works of the formative period of Islamic tradition.<sup>31</sup> From Muslim exegetical works, I confine myself to the earliest layer of the *tafsīr* genre, drawing on the works of Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 104/722),<sup>32</sup> Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), Muḥammad b. as-Sā'ib al-Kalbī (d. 146/763), and 'Abd ar-Razzāq aṣ-Ṣan'ānī (d. 211/826). The commentary of aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), though it belongs to the classical period,<sup>33</sup> is a significant source because it includes much exegetical material that originated in the formative period. As several studies have shown, aṭ-Ṭabarī had several older commentaries at his disposal and was able to preserve what is apparently some of the oldest material. He very often quotes his sources verbatim and traces his quotations through his own chains of transmissions (*isnāds*) to the original sources.<sup>34</sup> Variants of the exegetical narrative are also found in historical works such as the biographical dictionary (*Ṭabaqāt*) of Muḥammad Ibn Sa'd al-Baghdādī (d. 230/845) and the history (*Tārīkh*) of aṭ-Ṭabarī as well as certain hadith compilations, namely the *Musnad* of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) and *al-Jāmi' al-kabīr* of at-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892). I present the relevant narratives from these sources, and divide them into three categories based on form and content. I then attempt to identify the essential features in each category, as well as their common and different elements that may correspond to gradual developments and refinements of the narrative over time.

### Group I: No Child Born to Adam, and Eve Survived

Mujāhid b. Jabr's version<sup>35</sup> reads as follows:

No child of Adam and Eve would live. So, the Devil (*ash-shayṭān*) said to them: If a child is born to you, name him 'Abd al-Ḥārith. They did [as the Devil

31 In secondary literature, a selection of these Islamic narratives have already been discussed from a gender-oriented perspective. See Spellberg, "Writing the Unwritten Life," 314–18; Hadromi-Allouche, "Name Him 'Abd al-Ḥārith," 185–188.

32 Mujāhid b. Jabr Abū al-Ḥajjāj al-Makkī al-Aswad (d. ca. 104 or 107/722 or 725) is a distinguished Successor (*ṭābiʿ*) who was a prolific transmitter in exegesis and hadith. Mujāhid was *mawlā* of as-Sā'ib a Companion from Banū Makhzūm. See Rippin, "Mudjāhid b. Djabr al-Makkī."

33 See Gilliot, "Kontinuität und Wandel in der 'klassischen' islamischen Koranauslegung (II./VII.-XII./XIX. Jh.)," 42ff.

34 For a comprehensive study of the sources of the commentary of aṭ-Ṭabarī, see Horst, "Zur Überlieferung im Korankommentar aṭ-Ṭabarī"; Lucas, "Translator's Introduction"; Savant and Seydi, "Dispatches from al-Tabari."

35 Mujāhid b. Jabr, *Tafsīr*, 348; cf. aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 13:312, no. 15522.

commanded them to do] and obeyed (*aṭāʾ*) him. This is [the meaning behind] God's word, *They assigned Him partners concerning what He gave them*.

Mujāhid's version of this narrative is most probably the earliest one. According to this version, all the children of Adam and Eve died in their infancy. Therefore, the Devil proposed to them to name their next child 'Abd al-Ḥārith. Adam and Eve followed what the Devil ordered them to do. According to Mujāhid's version, the pair's obedience (*tāʿa*) to the Devil occasioned Q. 7:190, that is, it was considered an instance of associating partners with God, for which they are reproached. Here, both Adam and Eve share the responsibility of obeying the Devil, and therefore both equally deserve blame.

Mujāhid assumes detailed knowledge on the part of the reader, since his statement does not explain why the name 'Abd al-Ḥārith is pertinent here. This question, of course, is answered by other versions presented below. Nevertheless, the version that al-Wāḥidī quoted in his *Asbāb nuzūl al-Qurʾān*<sup>36</sup> on the authority of Mujāhid has an additional statement explaining that al-Ḥārith was the Devil's name before he was demoted from Paradise.<sup>37</sup> Al-Ḥārith, as explained here, was the original name of Iblīs.<sup>38</sup>

Mujāhid simply states that Satan said, "When a child is born to you, name him 'Abd al-Ḥārith," but he does not explain why the Devil demanded that Adam and Eve name their child after him. An answer to this question is given in another version of the narrative transmitted by 'Abd ar-Razzāq aṣ-Ṣanʿānī<sup>39</sup> from his teacher Maʿmar b. Rāshid (d. 153/770), on the authority of Qatāda b. Dīʿāma as-Sadūsī (d. 118/735–736),<sup>40</sup> which reads as follows:

36 Al-Wāḥidī, *Asbāb nuzūl al-Qurʾān*, 225.

37 See also aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 455, no. 606 (at Q 2:30), 502, no. 685 and 509, no. 704 (at Q 2:34); idem, *Tārīkh ar-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, 1:81.

38 For the etymological speculations regarding the meaning of al-Ḥārith, see Hadromi-Allouche, "Name Him 'Abd al-Ḥārith," 183 f.

39 Abd ar-Razzāq, *Tafsīr 'Abd ar-Razzāq*, 2:103; cf. aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 13:312, no. 15520. In the *isnād* of 'Abd ar-Razzāq, the name of al-Kalbī also appears as the authority from whom Maʿmar transmitted, but this version, as we will see below, seems not to be compatible with al-Kalbī's. See note 56; also ath-Thaʿlabī, *Tafsīr*, 4:315.

40 Abū al-Khaṭṭāb Qatāda b. Dīʿāma as-Sadūsī (born in 60/680, and died of plague at Wāsiṭ in 117/735) was a Successor (*tābiʿī*) who became prominent for his knowledge about genealogies, lexicography, historical traditions, Qurʾanic exegesis and readings, and hadith. See Pellat, "Qatāda b. Dīʿāma."

No child was born to Adam but that it [soon] died. So, the Devil approached Adam and said: If you wish<sup>41</sup> this child of yours to live, name him 'Abd al-Ḥārith. Hence, Adam did [it].<sup>42</sup>

Here, Eve is not mentioned at all. The Devil approaches Adam and demands that he names his child 'Abd al-Ḥārith so that he might survive, and Adam complies. Thus, this version adds the missing elements that Iblis's naming suggestion is part of a life-giving bargain. He obeyed the Devil's command because he supposed that the Devil had either caused the death of his previous children or could bring about the newborn child's survival. The named child's fate is not detailed further, however.

A similar version is found in the hadith compilations of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal<sup>43</sup> and at-Tirmidhī,<sup>44</sup> both citing, through the same *isnād* on the authority of the Companion Samura b. Jundab (d. 58 or 59/677–679), a hadith attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad.<sup>45</sup> This narrative presents the story the other way round so that Eve is featured prominently, and there is no mention of Adam:

41 The text of 'Abd ar-Razzāq reads: *inna sharta an ya'isha waladuka hādhā*, meaning "the condition that the child lives," which I considered a scribal error and amended with that of at-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, Vol. 13: 312, no. 15520, which reads instead: *in surraka an ya'isha waladuka hādhā* "If you wish that this child of yours lives."

42 The imperative verb (*sammihī*, f. sg.) in 'Abd ar-Razzāq's version addresses a woman while the Devil talks with Adam. This is most probably a scribal error, if not that of the editor. Cf. another edition of 'Abd ar-Razzāq's *Tafsīr* edited by Muṣṭafā Muslim Muḥammad and published earlier under the title *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 1:245, and the version presented in at-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 13:312, no. 15520: *sammihī* (m. sg.). In a similar version of Qatāda's tradition though transmitted through a different *isnād*, the Devil approached both Adam and Eve and addressed both: *sammiyāhu* (in dual form); see at-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 13:312, no. 15521.

43 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 33:305, no. 20117.

44 At-Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmi' al-kabīr*, 5:160, *abwāb tafsīr al-Qur'ān 'an rasūl Allāh: bāb wa-min sūrat al-a'rāf*, no. 3077. At-Tirmidhī situated this hadith in the section on Qur'anic commentary that concerns Q 7, though he did not specify which verses it describes. See also Ibn Abī Ḥātim ar-Rāzi, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 5:163.

45 The *isnād* of this hadith consists of 'Abd aṣ-Ṣamad b. 'Abd al-Wārith – 'Umar b. Ibrāhīm – Qatāda b. Dī'āma as-Sadūsī – al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī. According to at-Tirmidhī's evaluation, this hadith is *gharīb* (lit. 'strange') because it is only known through 'Umar b. Ibrāhīm from Qatāda and there are other variants of this hadith which are not attributed to the Prophet, indicating that a Companion's opinion/saying was projected back to the Prophet. In other words, a *mawqūf* hadith that its *isnād* ends at a Companion of the Prophet is elevated to a *marfū'*, i.e., attributed to the Prophet. For a detailed discussion of at-Tirmidhī's hadith terminology and its implication for 'back-projection of tradition' (*raf' al-ḥadīth*), see Aghaei, "Common Link."

When Eve became pregnant, the Devil (Iblīs) wandered around her while no child of hers would live. He thus said: Name him ‘Abd al-Ḥārith, then he will live. Thus, she named him (*sammathu*)<sup>46</sup> ‘Abd al-Ḥārith, and he lived. This was of the Devil’s inspiration (*waḥy*) and of his command (*amr*).

Here it was Eve who wanted to save her child. She therefore followed the Devil’s inspiration, as the version concludes, and this solution indeed worked. Samura’s hadith clearly states that the child eventually lived when he was named after the Devil. Aṭ-Ṭabarī cited another version of the same hadith, in which the Devil did not visit Eve and therefore did not request that she name the child ‘Abd al-Ḥārith, but it was Eve’s wish after none of her children would survive. She vowed that if a child of hers lived, she would name him ‘Abd al-Ḥārith. Since the child lived, she did name him ‘Abd al-Ḥārith. This act was, of course, of the Devil’s inspiration, as this version concludes.<sup>47</sup> According to this hadith, Eve was the one who named the child at the Devil’s request or inspiration. Therefore, it is Eve alone who must be blamed for her action, though in Q 7:190, both Adam and Eve are equally reproached.<sup>48</sup>

The last, and the most elaborate, version that belongs to this group is that cited by aṭ-Ṭabarī, in both his *Tafsīr* and his *Tārīkh*.<sup>49</sup> He received it via his own *isnād* from Muḥammad Ibn Ishāq (d. ca. 151/768), the famous author of the life of Muḥammad (*sīra*),<sup>50</sup> who in turn transmitted from Dāwūd b. al-Ḥuṣayn (d. 135/752–3) from ‘Ikrima, the freedman (*mawlā*) of Ibn ‘Abbās, from his master (*mawlā*),<sup>51</sup> which reads as follows:

46 In Ibn Ḥanbal’s version, the verb is *sammawhu* in plural form, thus meaning “they named him.” Although it is not in dual form (*sammayāhu*) to better fit the context, apparently it was meant that both Adam and Eve participated in naming the child.

47 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 13:309, no. 15513; idem, *Tārīkh*, 1:149. See also Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh al-Ḥākim an-Nishāpūrī, *al-Mustadrak ‘alā aṣ-Ṣaḥīḥayn*, 5:10, no. 4051, where he evaluates the *isnād* of this hadith as *ṣaḥīḥ* (sound) although the two Shaykhs, i.e., Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) and Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj an-Nishāpūrī (d. 261/875) did not transmit it.

48 This discrepancy did not escape aṭ-Ṭabarī, for, right after Samura’s hadith, he cited another tradition from Samura (albeit with another *isnād*), in which he underlined the point that Adam named his son ‘Abd al-Ḥārith, too. See aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 13:310, nos. 15514–15.

49 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 13:310, no. 15516; idem, *Tārīkh*, 1:149. The translation, with minor modifications, is taken from idem, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, 1:320f.

50 Aṭ-Ṭabarī quotes here from Ibn Ishāq’s work through his teacher in Rayy Abu ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad b. Humayd ar-Razī (d. 248/862) from Abū ‘Abdallāh Salama b. al-Faḍl al-Azraq (d. after 190/805–6), judge of Rayy, who was the direct student of Ibn Ishāq. See also Rosenthal, 17f.

51 About ‘Ikrima and his master Ibn ‘Abbās, see Schacht, “Ikrima.”

Eve would give birth to Adam's children and make them slaves (*tu'abbiduhum*) of God, by naming them 'Abdallāh, 'Ubaydallāh, and the like. Nevertheless, they would die. Therefore, the Devil (Iblis) came to Eve and Adam and said: "Were you to give them other names, they would live." So, when she gave birth to a child for Adam, they named him 'Abd al-Ḥārith. In this regard, God revealed: *He is the one who created you from a single soul, to His word: the couple assigned Him partners concerning what He gave them*, until the end of the verse (Q 7:189–190).

This version tries to clarify the association between naming the child and ascribing a partner to God. While in Mujāhid's version, the pair's obedience (*ṭā'a*) to the Devil is considered as associating partners with God, here the stress is on the naming itself. By naming her children "the servant of God," Eve wanted to subjugate them to God. However, the problem was that they would not survive until Adam and Eve decided to follow the Devil's suggestion and give the child a different name. As in Mujāhid's version, the narrator of this version evidently assumes pre-existing knowledge on the part of the audience that al-Ḥārith was the Devil's name. This reveals why at the end of the narrative, they were exposed to the accusation of having introduced idolatry. By giving the newborn child the name 'Abd al-Ḥārith, namely "the servant of al-Ḥārith," instead of 'Abdallāh (lit. "God's servant"), they indeed decided to subjugate their child to the Devil.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, this name is regarded as an association with God in terms of servitude.<sup>53</sup> Interestingly enough, Eve is considered thoughtful for bringing her children under God's domination and control, and the later idolatrous act is attributed to the couple, and not merely to Eve.

In this version, there is a crucial point regarding the Devil's influence over the lives of Eve and Adam's offspring. All previous children died, even though they had been named after God. But the child who got the name 'Abd al-Ḥārith, and was thus subjugated to the Devil, survived. This paradoxical situation does not correspond very well to the Qur'anic passage, which emphasizes the ingratitude and disobedience of the parents towards God. When their babies kept dying even though they showed their whole devotion to God, they were not any more in a position to *be among the thankful* (Q 7:189). This fact has been considered in a later version of the narrative provided by al-Kisā'ī (d. ca. 4th–5th/10th–11th century). By introducing a new character into the narrative and making some minor changes in the order of the events, al-Kisā'ī resolves the theological paradox. His version tells the story as follows:<sup>54</sup>

52 See also al-Farrā', *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, 1:400.

53 This can explain why, in Sunni tradition, it is not permissible to name a child a "servant" ('*abd*') of anyone but "God." See Ibn Ḥazm, *Marātib al-ijmā'*, 249.

54 Al-Kisā'ī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 1:67f.

Eve's first two pregnancies ended in miscarriage, making Adam and Eve very sad. When Eve became pregnant for the third time, they prayed to God that this pregnancy would end sound. It was at this juncture that the Devil (Iblis) offered the name 'Abd al-Ḥārith. After she delivered safely, Eve followed the Devil's suggestion. Then, God sent an angel to the pair, asking them the reason for this. Eve's excuse was to save the child. The angel asked if they had ever tried 'Abdallāh, 'Abd ar-Raḥmān, or 'Abd ar-Rahīm. At this moment, the couple felt intense regret for their error and abandoned the child. So, God caused the child to die. After that, Eve conceived and gave birth to twenty sets of male and female twins, and they named all their children after God.

Contrary to all previous narratives, in this version, God appears as an active character who mitigates the extent of Adam and Eve's ingratitude towards God's grace and leaves the door open to them for repentance and compensation. It is also clarified that the Devil's suggestion was nothing more than an illusion wrongly perceived as truth.

## Group II: Eve Was Ignorant of the Process of Human Reproduction

The best representative of this group is the version of the narrative provided by Muqātil b. Sulaymān<sup>55</sup> and Muḥammad b. as-Sā'ib al-Kalbī (d. 146/763).<sup>56</sup> Both Muqātil and al-Kalbī narrate a very different and more detailed version.<sup>57</sup> They recount that the Devil approached Eve in her early pregnancy and alluded to the idea that she may be carrying some sort of beast in her womb. When she was about to give birth, the Devil revisited her, stipulating that in exchange for naming the child after him, he would pray to God, beseeching Him that the child take a human form. After this conversation with the Devil, Eve confessed her worry to Adam, so both became troubled. They prayed to God till she gave birth to a sound child. The Devil returned to Eve, asking her to fulfil her promise. She named then the child 'Abd al-Ḥārith. The story ends with the child's immediate death.

55 Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, 2:79f.

56 The original *Tafsīr* of al-Kalbī is lost, though his narratives are transmitted in later Qur'an commentaries. Here I rely on Hūd b. Muḥakkam al-Hawwārī (died in the last decades of the 3rd/9th century), *Tafsīr*, 2:65f., which itself is based on the commentary by Yahyā b. Sallām al-Baṣrī (d. 200/815). For a variant of al-Kalbī's narrative, cf. also ath-Tha'labī, *Tafsīr*, 4:315.

57 For abridged versions of the same narrative, see also al-Farrā', *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, 1:400; Ibn Qutayba, *Ta'wīl mushkil al-Qur'ān*, 258f., where he cites the narrative from "the commentators" (*qāla al-mufasssīrūn*) without mentioning any specific name.

Ibn Sa’d’s biographical dictionary includes an identical variant of the narrative mentioned above from al-Kalbī and Muqātil,<sup>58</sup> though a significant difference deserves attention. This variation can help us reconstruct the original narrative regarding how the Devil introduces himself to Eve. All three versions agree that the Devil approached Eve in disguise, trying to hide his real identity in order not to be identified by her. Muqātil emphasizes this by repeating that Eve listened to the Devil while she did not know him. In the beginning, Muqātil also reveals to the reader that the Devil’s name was al-Ḥārith,<sup>59</sup> as in the first group of narratives. However, this contradicts what is spelt out at the end of the narrative, where Muqātil notes that the Devil “lied” to Eve, supposedly regarding his real name. This inconsistency can be simply resolved in light of the parallel version provided by Ibn Sa’d. According to his version, the Devil’s name was ‘Azāzīl,<sup>60</sup> but he feared that Eve would recognize who he was.<sup>61</sup> To dupe her, therefore, the Devil disguised himself as al-Ḥārith. Yet another difference from the first group of narratives becomes evident: al-Ḥārith in the narratives of group II is not the Devil’s real name but his alias.

Table 9.1      Parallel versions of the narrative by Muqātil, al-Kalbī, and Ibn Sa’d

Muqātil	al-Kalbī	Ibn Sa’d
<i>When he covered her</i> , i.e., Adam had intercourse with her, <i>she bore a light burden</i> , i.e., the conception was easy to her, <i>and she passed by with it</i> , i.e., she got along with it, with the child, that is, she stood and sat and amused and did not concern.	<i>She bore a light burden</i> , i.e., Eve, <i>and she passed by with it</i> , i.e., she stood and sat.	Then Adam <i>covered her</i> , thus <i>she bore a light burden</i> , <i>and she passed by with it</i> , i.e., she stood and sat.

58 Ibn Sa’d, *aṭ-Ṭabaqāt*, 1:37f., where he inserted this version in a whole narrative section of several pages about Adam and Eve after their fall from Paradise, combined of various stories and supposedly taken from different sources, though he provided no sources for any part of this long narrative. See Ibn Sa’d, *aṭ-Ṭabaqāt*, 1:34–39.

59 Also see below, Sa’d b. Jubayr’s version.

60 See also aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 1:502f., nos. 686–687 (at Q 2:34); idem, *Tārīkh*, 1:83. The name ‘Azāzēl as a title for the leader of rebellious angels is found in the pre-Islamic Jewish *Book of Enoch*; see Ahituv, “Azazel”; Kohler, “Azazel.”

61 See also ath-Tha’labī, *Tafsīr*, 4:315, where it says, “If he introduced himself with his real name, Eve would recognize him.”



Table 9.1 (cont.)

Muqātil	al-Kalbī	Ibn Sa'd
Then the Devil (Iblīs) came to her in disguise ( <i>wa-ghayyara ṣūratahū</i> ) <sup>62</sup> – <b>and his name was al-Ḥārith</b> and said: O Eve! Perhaps the one in your belly ( <i>fī baṭniki</i> ) is a beast ( <i>bahīma</i> )? She said: I do not know. He left her.	Then the Devil ( <i>ash-shayṭān</i> ) came to her in disguise ( <i>fī ghayr ṣūratihī</i> ) and said: O Eve! What is in your belly ( <i>fī baṭniki</i> )? She said: I do not know. He said: Perhaps it is a beast ( <i>bahīma</i> ) among beasts? She said: I do not know, and he left her.	Then the Devil ( <i>ash-shayṭān</i> ) came to her in disguise ( <i>fī ghayr ṣūratihī</i> ) and said to her: O Eve! What is in your belly ( <i>fī baṭniki</i> )? She said: I do not know. He said: Perhaps it is a beast ( <i>bahīma</i> ) among beasts? She said: I do not know, and he left her.
<i>When she became greatly burdened</i> , meaning when the child became heavy in her womb, the Devil returned and said: O Eve! How do you feel?	<i>When she became greatly burdened</i> , the Devil came to her, and said: O Eve! How do you find yourself?	Until <i>when she became greatly burdened</i> , he came to her, and said: O Eve! How do you find yourself?
She said – <b>while she did not know him</b> : I am afraid that it may be inside of me ( <i>fī jawfī</i> ) the one of which you have frightened me. I cannot stand again when I sit.	She said: I am afraid that it may be inside of me ( <i>fī baṭnī</i> ) the one of which you have frightened me. I cannot stand again when I sit.	She said: I am afraid that it may be inside of me ( <i>fī baṭnī</i> ) the one of which you have frightened me. I cannot stand again when I stood ( <i>sic!</i> ). <sup>63</sup>
<b>He said: Do you see if I pray to God to form him a human being like you and Adam, would you name him after me?</b> She said: Yes, and he left her.	<b>He said: Do you see if I pray to God to form him a human being like you and Adam, would you name him after me?</b> She said: Yes, and he left her.	<b>He said: Do you see if I pray to God to form him a human being like you and like Adam, would you name him after me?</b> She said: Yes, and he left her.

62 Comparing this phrase with the two other parallels (*fī ghayr ṣūratihī*) reveals that this could be a misspelling of *fī* that changed to *wāw*.

63 Here “I stood” does not make sense and most probably is due to a scribal error. Other parallels suggest replacing it with “I sat.”

Table 9.1 (cont.)

Muqātil	al-Kalbī	Ibn Sa'd
So she told Adam: Someone came to me and believed that in my belly is a beast. I also feel its burden and fear it may be like he said.	So she told Adam: In my belly is a beast among beasts. I also feel its burden and fear it may be like he said.	So she told Adam: Someone came to me and informed me that in my belly is a beast. I also feel its burden and fear it may be like he said.
Adam and Eve had no concern but the one was in her belly. Thus, they started praying to God. <i>They invoked God their Lord, saying: 'If You give us a good [child]',</i> they said: If You gave us this child in sound ( <i>sawīyy</i> ) and perfect nature ( <i>ṣāliḥ al-khalq</i> ) <i>then we will surely be among the thankful</i> for this grace.	Adam and Eve had no concern but this until she delivered. This is [meant by] God's word: <i>They invoked God their Lord, saying: 'If You give us a good [child]',</i> i.e., a human being, <i>then we will surely be among the thankful.</i> This was their praying before she delivered.	Adam and Eve had no concern but this until she delivered. That is why He says: <i>They invoked God their Lord, saying: 'If You give us a good [child]', then we will surely be among the thankful.</i> This was their praying before she delivered.
When she delivered a sound and perfect [child], the Devil came to her – <b>while she did not know him</b> , and said: Why do you not name him after me as you have promised me?	When she delivered, the Devil came to her and said: Do you not name him after me as you have promised me?	When she delivered a sound child ( <i>ghulām sawīyy</i> ), the Devil came to her and said to her: Why do you not name him as you have promised me?
She said: <sup>64</sup>	She said: What is your name?	She said: What is your name? <b>His name was 'Azāzīl and if he introduced himself with it, she would recognize him.</b>
'Abd al-Ḥārith <sup>65</sup> – while he lied to her.	He said: My name is 'Abd al-Ḥārith. <sup>66</sup>	He said: <b>My name is al-Ḥārith.</b>

64 It seems that something here is missing that could be emended by other parallels from al-Kalbī and Ibn Sa'd.

65 See note 66.

66 'Abd al-Ḥārith as the Devil's name sounds weird and most probably is due to a scribal error. This also contradicts the name that appears in the beginning of Muqātil's narrative, where the Devil is introduced under his name al-Ḥārith.

Table 9.1 (cont.)

Muqātil	al-Kalbī	Ibn Sa'd
Thereupon, she named him 'Abd al-Ḥārith and Adam was pleased with that. <sup>67</sup>	Thereupon, she named him 'Abd al-Ḥārith.	Thereupon, she named him 'Abd al-Ḥārith.
Then the child died.	Then [the child] died.	Then [the child] died.
This is [meant by] God's word, <i>When He gave them a good [child]</i> , meaning He gave them the child in sound and perfect nature, <i>they assigned Him partners</i> , meaning Iblis as a partner in the name, as she named him 'Abd al-Ḥārith.	God says, <i>When He gave them a good [child], they assigned Him partners.</i>	God says, <i>When He gave them a good [child], they assigned Him partners.</i>

Another version, which resembles the narrative of group II though it consists of some additional elements to the already mentioned narratives, is the one cited by aṭ-Ṭabarī, in both *Tafsīr* and *Tārīkh*, via his *isnād*<sup>68</sup> from the famous Kūfan Successor (*tābiʿī*) Saʿīd b. Jubayr (d. 94/714).<sup>69</sup> This narrative reads:

When Eve became heavy with her first pregnancy, the Devil (Iblis) came to her before she gave birth, and said: "O Eve, what is that in your belly?" She said: "I

67 Adam's contentment is missing in other versions.

68 Sufyān b. Wakīʿ (d. 247/861) – Muḥammad b. Fuḍayl b. Ghazwān (d. 194–95/809–11) – Sālim b. Abī Ḥafṣa (d. ca. 140/757–8).

69 See aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 13:313, no. 15523; idem, *Tārīkh*, 1:150; Translation, with minor modifications, is taken from aṭ-Ṭabarī, *History*, 1:321. Through a different *isnād*, namely al-Qāsim b. al-Ḥasan b. Yazīd al-Hamadhānī (d. 272/885) – al-Ḥusayn b. Dāwūd (d. 226/840–1) – al-Ḥajjāj b. Muḥammad (d. 206/821–2) – 'Abd al-Malik b. 'Abd al-'Azīz Ibn Jurayj (d. between 149 and 151/766–68), aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 13:307, no. 15511, cites another version of Saʿīd b. Jubayr's tradition that contains a peculiar element: The Devil threatens Eve that he will kill the child if she does not follow his command, though Eve takes Adam's warning seriously and does not follow the Devil's command, so that the child's death appears to be the Devil's evil act, as he himself reveals. It seems that this element has been adopted from another narrative—I shall discuss below (Group III), and inserted into Saʿīd b. Jubayr's version, most probably by its transmitter Ibn Jurayj. This supposition is supported by a quite similar tradition preserved in aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 13:311, no. 15518, with the same *isnād*, though this time oddly attributed to Ibn 'Abbās rather than Saʿīd b. Jubayr (also see note 77).

do not know." He asked: "Where will it come out, from your nose, eye, or ear?" She again replied: "I do not know." He said: "Do you see if it comes out healthy (*salim*), would you obey me in whatever I command you?" She said: "Yes." He said: "Name him 'Abd al-Ḥārith!" The Devil was called al-Ḥārith. She said: "Yes." Afterwards, she said to Adam: "Someone came to me in my sleep and told me such-and-such." Adam said: "That is the Devil (*ash-shayṭān*). Beware of him, for he is our enemy who drove us out of Paradise." Then the Devil (Iblīs) came to her again and repeated [what he had said before], and she said: "Yes." When she gave birth to the child, God brought him out healthy. Yet, she named him 'Abd al-Ḥārith. This is [the meaning behind] God's word: *They assigned Him partners concerning what He gave them; but God is exalted above what they associate.*

As one rapidly notices, this version exaggerates Eve's ignorance of childbirth to the extent that she did not even know from where the child would come out! The fear resulting from such naïveté can readily explain her willingness to accept the deal with the Devil that would keep both her child and her healthy. Another distinct element in Sa'īd b. Jubayr's tradition is how Eve confronted the Devil: When she was sleeping, namely in a dream. In bold contrast to the narratives told by Muqātil, al-Kalbī, and Ibn Sa'īd, Adam could recognize the Devil and warned her by reminding her that he was their enemy who, had caused their expulsion from Paradise. She nevertheless ignored her husband's warnings not to listen to the Devil and named her child after him when the child was safely delivered.

At three points the narratives of group II clearly diverge those of group I. First, the main aim proposed in the first group that caused Adam and Eve to name their child after the Devil was to save the child's life. In contrast, in the second group, the Devil got the opportunity to deceive primal couple because, during her first pregnancy, Eve was totally ignorant of the process of human reproduction and feared that she might produce a nonhuman animal or that childbirth might hurt her. All these narratives emphasize that the child was born without any defect merely on account of God's grace, while the Devil claimed credit for himself out of Eve's ignorance. In other words, these narratives indicate that Eve's fear was baseless and ridiculous because the process of human production is so well-known and commonplace, because only God can secure the wellbeing of mother and child, and because the Devil has no hand to intervene in it. Following the Devil's demand or obeying his command was therefore unnecessary.

Second, another difference has to do with Adam and Eve's invocation of God, which was out of the concern raised by the Devil. The couple prayed to God and promised to be grateful if they were given a sound child. God granted them their wish, but they failed to keep their promise, for Eve had already promised the Devil that she would name her child after him in return for his

intercession. The pair's failure is thus not the fact that they obeyed the Devil's order or followed his suggestion or inspiration as portrayed in the narratives of group I, but rather their recourse to the Devil's intercession seems to be considered as associating partners with God here. This explains why, at the end of the narrative of Sa'īd b. Jubayr, they were exposed to the accusation of having introduced idolatry: Naming her baby after the Devil, as she had promised him, proves that she believed in the Devil's intercession.

Third, the narratives of group I indicate that the child named at the Devil's suggestion lived, whereas the narratives of group II end the opposite way: Eve named her child 'Abd al-Ḥārith, and he immediately<sup>70</sup> died. This sharp contrast manifests the moral purpose behind this narrative: Here is a clear condemnation of Eve's act<sup>71</sup> of naming the child after the Devil, which puts the child's death as its direct punishment. Unlike the first group of narratives, here it is God alone who retains the power of life and death over the child of Adam and Eve. Thus, the child's death suits the narration context as a moral outcome. It explains the ingratitude of Eve and Adam and can function quite well as a background for the Qur'anic passage. However, one quickly notices that in this narrative, the bulk of the blame is placed on Eve, which is in bold contrast to Q 7:190.<sup>72</sup>

### Group III: The Reconciled Version

Considering the contrast mentioned above between the narratives of groups I and II, one could hardly expect a kind of compromise between them. Surprisingly, such a compromise is offered by a tradition narrated on the authority of the late Successor Ismā'īl b. 'Abd ar-Raḥmān as-Suddī (d. 127/745).<sup>73</sup> This narrative combines features of the two first groups. Aṭ-Ṭabarī split as-Suddī's narrative, like many other narratives, into three parts and put each in the

70 Or after a short time, according to Ibn Qutayba, *Ta'wīl mushkil al-Qur'ān*, 259.

71 Although in Muqātil's version, it was accomplished with Adam's contentment.

72 See Aghaei, "Ḥawwā."

73 He was a freedman (*mawlā*) of a female Companion Zaynab b. Qays from Quraysh, of Kufa, was a popular exegete who got his name presumably from his wont to sit at the threshold (*sudd*) of the mosque and explain the Qur'an. Although his reputation as a narrator is quite mixed, and he is accused of *rāfiḍī* tendencies, his opinions are extensively reported in the exegetical literature, including aṭ-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr*. See Juynboll, "al-Suddī."

relevant position of his *Tafsīr* and only one part in his *Tārikh*.<sup>74</sup> I combined them here and discuss them in detail:

*She bore a light burden*, i.e., the sperm and His word *passed by with it*, i.e., she got along with it. *When she became greatly burdened*, i.e., the child became heavy in her belly, the Devil (Iblīs) came to Eve, frightened her, and said to her: Do you know what is in your belly? Perhaps a dog or a pig or a donkey! Do you know where will this come out? From your anus, which will kill you, or from your vagina? Or perhaps your belly will split and so kill you? This is [meant] where [God says:] *The couple invoked God their Lord, saying: 'If You give us a good [child], i.e., like us, then we will surely be of the thankful.'* So she – i.e., Eve – gave birth to a boy (*ghulam*). The Devil came to them and said: Name (pl.) him my servant ('*abdī*'); otherwise, I will kill him. Adam said to him: I have once before obeyed you, and you caused me to be driven out of Paradise. So, he refused to obey him, and they named him 'Abd ar-Raḥmān. Then, God gave a free hand to the Devil over the child (*fa-sallaṭa Allāhu 'alayhi Iblīsa*),<sup>75</sup> and he killed him. Eve bore another [child], and when she delivered him, the Devil said to her: Name (sg.) him my servant; otherwise, I will kill him. Adam said to him: I have once before obeyed you, and you caused me to be driven out of Paradise. So he refused, and they named him Šālīḥ. Then the Devil killed him. The third time around, the Devil said to them: If you (pl.) [want to] overcome me, name (pl.) him 'Abd al-Ḥārith! – the Devil's name was al-Ḥārith; he was called Iblīs when he bedevilled/despaired (*ablasa*)<sup>76</sup> – So they succumbed ('*anawā*'). This is [meant] when God says: *They assigned Him partners concerning what He gave them*, i.e., in the naming [of the child].

According to this narrative, the Devil approached Eve without hiding his identity and frightened her that what she was carrying in her womb would be a beast and that the position of her body from which it should come out would kill her. Notably, the Devil's demand in this version is combined with a

74 See aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 13:305, nos. 15503, 15505, 307 f., no. 15512, 313 f., no. 15525, where all three parts are transmitted through one and the same *isnād*: Musā b. Hārūn al-Hamdānī – 'Amr b. Hammād – Asbāṭ b. Naṣr; cf. also idem, *Tārikh*, 1:151; the translation with minor modifications is taken from aṭ-Ṭabarī, *History*, 1:322.

75 See aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 13:314. The variant in aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tārikh*, 1:151, reads: *fa-sulliṭa Iblīsu 'alayhi la'anahu Allāhu*, "the Devil—May God curse him!—was granted power over the child."

76 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 1:509 (at Q 2:34), cites a few traditions that combine Iblīs with the verb *ablasa*, the meaning of which is indicated to be "to make someone despair, to eliminate one's hope" as it can be inferred from the occurrence of its cognates in the Qur'an: Q 6:44, 23:77, 30:12, 49, 43:75. This root meaning may be genuine, but it could have originated from etymological speculation on the name Iblīs, as Rosenthal suggested "bedevil" in his English translation. See aṭ-Ṭabarī, *History*, 1:322; cf. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, sv. b-l-s.

threat.<sup>77</sup> Eve gave birth to a boy, and the Devil threatened to kill him if the child was not named “my servant” (*‘abdī*), supposedly meaning ‘Abd al-Ḥārith (lit. “al-Ḥārith’s servant”), as introduced at the end of the narrative. This narrative explicitly indicates submission of the child to serve the Devil, as it uses literary parallelism such that the word *‘abd* (slave/servant) appears in both names: ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān versus ‘Abd al-Ḥārith. Adam recalled what happened last time when he followed what the Devil recommended. On account of this, he refused the Devil’s demand and named the child ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān, opposite to what the Devil desired. The Devil then carried out his threat and caused the child to die. The inappropriate consequence of such a statement is not dismissed, as one notices in the variant of the narrative, in which the whole act was out of God’s permission, which means that no independent power on the part of the Devil over the lives of the children was taken for granted. The cycle repeated itself when Adam named the second child Ṣāliḥ. A clever choice, evidently adapted from Q 7:190 so that the adjective *ṣāliḥan* is taken up as child’s name,<sup>78</sup> is made by the narrator, who could have thought of finding a name that could reduce the contrast between the Devil’s desire who wanted the child named as his servant (‘Abd al-Ḥārith) and Adam’s wish not to follow the Devil. This choice, however, failed as well. When the third child was born, the Devil again insisted that they had no choice other than to name the child ‘Abd al-Ḥārith. The story concludes with them complying out of despair inferred from the reference to Q 7:190. However, about the child’s fate, the reader does not learn anymore.

### Theological Challenge: Did Adam Commit *Shirk*?

Apparently out of theological concerns, Muslim exegetes attempted, in different ways, to interpret the Qur’anic passage to protect Adam (and Eve) from committing any sin. The concern was evidently caused by the idea of ‘the infallibility of the prophets’ (*‘iṣmat al-anbiyā’*), in the sense that the prophets were immune against any sin (*dhanb*) or error (*khaṭa’*). This doctrine appeared from the mid-second/eighth century onwards, originating from among the Shi’a, but it was quickly embraced, in one way or another, by almost all Muslim sects and

77 Compare to Ibn Jurayj’s tradition attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās; see aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 13:311, no. 15518.

78 Also see Rosenthal’s note, aṭ-Ṭabarī, *History*, 1:322, note 924.

all theological and legal schools.<sup>79</sup> Since Adam is considered the first prophet,<sup>80</sup> Muslim exegetes were forced to claim boldly that he did not commit any sin, let alone the cardinal sin of *shirk* or idolatry.<sup>81</sup> In this regard, aṭ-Ṭabarī cites the following tradition,

Saʿīd b. Jubayr was asked, “Did Adam associate others with God (*ashraka Ādamu*)?” to which he replied: “I seek refuge in God to think that Adam committed *shirk* ... Adam’s associating (others with God) was only in the name.”<sup>82</sup>

The addendum to some versions of the narrative is supposed to clarify the issue raised when the verse is understood as a story of the child born to Adam and Eve in which they are reproached for ascribing partners to God. The complimentary comments maintain that Adam and Eve obeyed the Devil only in naming the child but, thus the association to God was only by name, not in worship (*fī al-ism lā fī al-ʿibāda*).<sup>83</sup> This additional explanation tries to mitigate their transgression; however, it does not entirely solve the problem, especially when one considers the broader context of the Qurʾanic passage. How shall one make sense of Q 7:190b, which reads: *Exalted is God above what they associate (yushrikūn)*? Is this also an objection to take partners with God just in name, or does it indeed refer to those who worship other gods? One also reads the next verse, Q 7:191: *Do they associate others that create nothing and have been created themselves?* which clearly indicates that the objection is directed to ‘worshipping’ God’s creatures than God Himself. This is indeed a common Qurʾanic argument demonstrating the foolishness of worshipping anything other than God: Since all objects of worship other than God are themselves created beings, they are ultimately incapable of creating others (cf. Q 16:20, 25:3), and in our case, bringing a sound child into the world. Therefore, they never deserve to be worshipped. Considering all this, one sees that the charge of *shirk* is still directed at Adam and Eve. In a tradition attributed to as-Suddī, a rhetorical solution is suggested: to disconnect parts *a* and *b* of Q 7:190 so that they can be interpreted as referring to different matters. While Q 7:189 and the

79 For a general overview of this doctrine, see Madelung and Tyan, “Iṣma.”

80 As regards his prophecy, which is not explicitly attested to in the Qurʾan, early traditions display various attitudes, but it is mainly in *awāʾil* literature that Adam emerges as the “first of the prophets.” See Tottoli, “Adam.”

81 The Qurʾan (Q 4:48 and 116) explicitly states that God can pardon all sins except one, the sin of *shirk*.

82 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 13:313, no. 15524.

83 There are various formulations though with quite similar meaning: “It was associating others in obedience not in worship”; “They associated others in naming not in worshipping.” See aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 13:311 no. 15518, 312, nos. 15520, 15521, 313 f., no. 15525.



first part of verse 190 relate the story of Adam and Eve, the last part of verse 190 addresses Arab polytheists worshipping their idols.<sup>84</sup> Muqātil and al-Kalbī pronounced a similar opinion,<sup>85</sup> and aṭ-Ṭabarī also approved of it.<sup>86</sup>

In contrast to this odd solution that splits a Qur'anic verse into two separate, independent parts, in another version of the narrative, the story of Adam and Eve not only covers the whole passage (Q 7:189–190) but also extends to the next verse Q :191. This narrative is transmitted on the authority of 'Abd ar-Raḥmān ibn Zayd b. Aslam (d. 182/798)<sup>87</sup> as follows:

A child was born to Adam and Eve. They named him 'Abdallāh. The Devil (Iblis) came to them and said: what did you name your son, O Adam and O Eve? – because before this one, another child had been born to them, and they had named him 'Abdallāh, but he had died. Then the Devil said: Do you think God will leave his servant ('*abdahū*) with you? No, by God, He will take him as He did with the other! But I will tell you a name so that [your child] will stay with you as long as you stay. Thus, they named him 'Abd Shams.<sup>88</sup> This is [meant by] God's word: *Do they associate others who create nothing and have been created themselves?* Does the sun create anything to have a servant? It is itself a creature! The Messenger of God, may God's salutation and peace be upon him, said: He [the Devil] deceived them twice. He deceived them once in Paradise, and he deceived them again on earth.

This narrative adds three new elements to the story, developing the idea of naming the child. First, the Devil explains why the first child named 'Abdallāh died: This name literally means 'the servant of God', and God does not leave His servant with others. In other words, the literal meaning of the name is emphasized here. Second, in order to keep the child alive, the Devil suggests to Adam and Eve that they choose another name for him that does not imply serving God, namely 'Abd Shams (lit. Sun's servant). Third, naming the child a servant of other than God is rebuked, because none of them has a role in creation so that they deserve servitude. So the connection between naming the child with associating partners with God becomes clear: It is no longer a mere name but

84 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 13:315, no. 15529, though through a different *isnād*: Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn b. Musā al-Kūfi – Aḥmad b. al-Mufaḍḍal al-Qurashī – Asbāṭ b. Naṣr, and 317, no. 15531, through al-Ḥasan b. Yahyā – 'Abd ar-Razzāq aṣ-Ṣan'ānī – Sufyān ibn 'Uyayna – Ṣadaqa b. Yasār. See also Ibn Abī Ḥātim ar-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 5:1634f.

85 See al-Hawwārī, *Tafsīr*, 2:66.

86 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 13:315.

87 Ibid., 318, through Yūnus b. 'Abd al-A'lā (d. 264/877) – 'Abdallāh Ibn Wahb (d. 197/813). See also Ibn Abī Ḥātim ar-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 5:1635.

88 In another version, the Devil promised that the child would live so long as the sun continued to rise and set.

a confession of servitude to something other than God, which has no meaning but *shirk*. The narrative concludes with a prophetic hadith stating that the Devil once more deceived Adam and Eve: The first time, they were expelled from Paradise for disobeying God's command, and the second time, they were again accused of committing idolatry out of their ingratitude.

### *Isrā'iliyyāt: An Easy Label to Eliminate the Problematics*

In their various amplifications and elaborations, the Adam and Eve narratives presented and discussed above represent the dominant understanding of the Qur'anic passage in the formative period of Muslim exegetical tradition. While these narratives provide a clear context in which the Qur'anic passage could be easily understood, they cause complex exegetical challenges regarding theological doctrine, namely the doctrine of the prophets' infallibility. This background can quite well explain why it was proposed to understand Q 7:189–190 in reference to people other than Adam and Eve. For instance, aṭ-Ṭabarī recorded from al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728)<sup>89</sup> three different explanations for Q 7:190:<sup>90</sup>

- (1) "The verse refers to some offspring of Adam who fell into idolatry after him";
- (2) "This is about followers of some religions, not about Adam";
- (3) "They were Jews and Christians, whom God gave children, but they turned them into Jews and Christians."

Apart from the apparent discrepancies between these three interpretations, none of them is considered acceptable by aṭ-Ṭabarī himself, for he takes it for granted that Adam and Eve are those who are referred to in the Qur'anic verses, since there is the consensus among the exegetes about that. Therefore, he prefers to understand the Qur'anic passage as his predecessors despite all mentioned difficulties.<sup>91</sup>

The attitude toward the exegetical narratives gradually changed. Muslim commentators of the classical period and later, generation after generation, gravitated toward explanations of the kind attributed to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī as

89 Abū Sa'īd al-Ḥasan b. Yasār al-Baṣrī (21–110/642–728) was a Successor, who was born to a Persian slave and later rose to pre-eminence in Islamic scholarship as a prominent exegete and reader (*qārī*) of the Qur'an as well as a distinguished theologian. See Mourad, "al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī."

90 See aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 13:314 f., nos. 15526, 15527, 15528.

91 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 13:314; idem, *Tārikh*, 1:151.

their preferred interpretation of this Qur'anic passage.<sup>92</sup> There is no surprise to see that Muslim scholars and exegetes with rationalist tendencies, including Mu'tazilites and Shi'ites, preferred to understand this Qur'anic passage as a parable relating to married couples in general. Thus it demonstrates the human tendency to beseech God when one feels hopeless and afraid but to attribute good fortune to other natural and supernatural causes after receiving God's help and grace.<sup>93</sup>

Along with this change of attitude, later commentators begin to criticize Adam and Eve's narrative. Nevertheless, this narrative continues to evoke the attention of, or even the admiration of, the exegetes while interpreting these verses, even those who evidently took a negative stance towards these narratives in general. The best example of this paradoxical position is *Tafsīr* of Fakhr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), who first presents a long list of shortcomings and discrepancies in the interpretation based on the narratives of Adam and Eve but later attempts to provide compelling arguments to justify the understanding of earlier commentators who accept the narrative as background information for the Qur'anic passage.<sup>94</sup>

The first Qur'an commentator who used the label *isrā'īliyyāt* in his *tafsīr* on this passage in a pejorative sense, indicating that the narrative was unreliable, was the Andalusian jurist and exegete Abū Bakr Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 543/1148), as far as I could determine. After citing al-Kalbī's version of the narrative, he evaluates it negatively by stating:<sup>95</sup>

This [narrative] and the like are mentioned in the weak hadith in [the collections of] at-Tirmidhī and others. In the *isrā'īliyyāt*, there are many [such narratives] which have no certainty (*laysa lahā thabāt*), and one who has a mind (*man lahū qalb*) does not rely on them. For Adam and Eve, although the deceiver deceived them concerning God (*gharrahumā bi-llāhi al-gharūr*), the believer would not be bitten from the same hole twice – after that, they would not accept from him any advice nor hear him any say.

No pre-Islamic, Jewish or Christian, tradition is identified that shows common elements with the Islamic narrative. Ibn al-'Arabī himself does not provide any evidence or argument for labelling this narrative as *isrā'īliyyāt*. However, the

92 See e.g. az-Zajjāj, *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān wa-ī'rābuhū*, 2:395f; al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt ahl as-sunna*, 5:11–15; al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, 4:212.

93 This view is cited from Abū Muslim Muḥammad b. Baḥr al-Iṣfahānī (d. 934), the famous Mu'tazilī theologian and exegete; see ash-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, *Tanzīh al-anbiyā'*, 34 f; aṭ-Ṭūsī, *at-Tibyan*, 5:54.

94 See Fakhr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 15:90f.

95 Ibn al-'Arabī, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, 2:355. Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, 9:410, repeated Ibn al-'Arabī's statement word for word without mentioning his reference.

mediaeval scholar, Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), takes a step forward. After criticizing Samura's version for being considered as a prophetic hadith,<sup>96</sup> he speculates that the Companion Samura could have received the narrative from some converts among the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*), such as Ka'b al-Aḥbār, Wahb b. Munabbih, or others.<sup>97</sup> He then cites other versions of the narrative transmitted on the authority of another Companion, Ibn 'Abbās, which were further transmitted and distributed by a group of Ibn 'Abbās's students (*jamā'a min aṣḥābiḥi*), including Mujāhid b. Jabr, Sa'īd b. Jubayr, and 'Ikrima, as well as by transmitters and exegetes from the next generation (*aṭ-ṭabaqa ath-thāniya*) such as Qatāda b. Dī'āma, as-Suddī, and others, and later commentators. Then he repeats his speculation, stating, "It seems – and God knows best – that it [=this narrative] is originally taken from the People of the Book," and as a support for his claim, he refers to a version of the narrative that Ibn Abī Ḥātim ar-Rāzī cited in his *Tafsīr* from Ibn 'Abbās on the authority of Ubayy b. Ka'b.<sup>98</sup> Regardless of the evident problem in the *isnād* of this version,<sup>99</sup> it does not supply the necessary evidence for his claim – none of the people in the *isnād*, including Ibn 'Abbās and Ubayy b. Ka'b, belonged to the People of the Book and later converted. Or perhaps he means that these famous Companions simply reported traditions from the People of the Book without mentioning their sources. The answer is clearly expressed in the introduction of his *Tafsīr*, where he explains his principles for the Qur'an exegesis. While emphasizing the significant role of the Prophet's Companions, whose exegetical traditions are the keys to the meaning of the Qur'an, Ibn Kathīr speaks of the traditions that they received from the People of the Book,

Sometimes sayings are transmitted on the Companions' authority that they used to recount from the People of the Book, [the practice of] which the Messenger of God – God bless him and give him peace – approved when he said, "Convey on my authority even a single verse and narrate [traditions] from the Children of Israel for there is nothing wrong with that. However, whoever tells lies against me intentionally, let him take his seat in the Fire."<sup>100</sup>

96 Cf. note 45. For a similar *isnād* criticism, see ash-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, *Tanzīh al-anbiyā'*, 36f.

97 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-aẓīm*, 3:527; Ibn Kathīr, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 1:73f.

98 See Ibn Abī Ḥātim ar-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 5:1633.

99 Ibn Abī Ḥātim ar-Rāzī transmitted this tradition through a very odd chain of transmitters: his father Abū Ḥātim ar-Rāzī – a certain Abū al-Jamāhīr – Sa'īd b. Bashīr – 'Uqba – Qatāda – Mujāhid – Ibn 'Abbās – Ubayy b. Ka'b. This *isnād* appears only once in his *Tafsīr*, and no occurrence of that is found in other early sources so far I surveyed.

100 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-aẓīm*, 1:8f., which is in fact a verbatim copy of a passage in Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Muqaddima fī uṣūl at-tafsīr*, 98. See also note 14. The translation with minor modifications is taken from McAuliffe, "Ibn Taymiyya: Treatise on the Principles of Tafsīr," 38.

Surveying the wide usage of the term *isrāʿīliyyāt* in Ibn Kathīr's works shows that he only used the term when he was faced with narratives to which he objected. His objections were theological and directed against a kind of tradition that in his opinion previous scholars had uncritically introduced into Islamic literature. There is no necessary co-ordination between the use of the term *isrāʿīliyyāt* and having recourse to biblical material; Ibn Kathīr himself is also one of the most assiduous readers of the biblical traditions, whose contents he transmitted when he approved of them.<sup>101</sup>

According to Ibn Kathīr, all versions of the narrative about Adam and Eve's child were rooted in the *isrāʿīliyyāt* material, and he confidently repeats his claim: "And these traditions (*al-āthār*, i.e., traditions transmitted from the Companions and the Successors) seem – and God knows best – to have been taken from the traditions of the People of the Book." Therefore, he reminds his readers of his opinion on *isrāʿīliyyāt*, the collective tradition passed down from *ahl al-kitāb*, as follows: "These reports [form the People of the Book] fall into three categories: (1) What we consider 'true' considering the evidence we have from the Qur'an or the Prophet's *sunna*; (2) What we consider 'false' because it contradicts the Qur'an and the *sunna*; and (3) What [our sources are] silent about (*maskūt 'anhu*), ... which is neither confirmed nor denied."<sup>102</sup> Whether this narrative belongs to the second category or the third, Ibn Kathīr admits, is of dispute, though his preference for al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī's opinion indicates that he assumes that the narrative is false.<sup>103</sup> The use of the label *isrāʿīliyyāt* by Ibn Kathīr and others for this narrative is, therefore, introduced to condemn traditions of a suspect nature that lack the authority of an authentic prophetic tradition.

### Concluding Remarks

What can one conclude from this collection of narratives? One cannot label these traditions as *isrāʿīliyyāt*, in the sense of deriving from Jewish and Christian lore, without having any objectively discernible connection to non-Muslim sources. Those mediaeval Muslim scholars who used the label *isrāʿīliyyāt* in order to discredit these traditions never supplied any evidence supporting their claim. By proposing "an intertextual reading of this narrative in a broader context of ancient and mediaeval Near East religious milieu,"

101 See also Calder, "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr," 137, note 38.

102 See also Ibn Kathīr's introduction to his, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*, 1:9.

103 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*, 3:528.

Hadromi-Allouche attempted to identify parallels from Jewish, Christian and Greek texts. However, in her summary of the article, she admits that none of the proposed cases could be regarded as a relevant parallel to the Islamic narrative in terms of content and context.<sup>104</sup> The present study, however, shows that the narrative of ‘the child born to Adam and Eve’ is deeply rooted in the Muslim exegetical tradition and belongs to a well-attested process of Midrash-making in order to explain the Qur’an *in narratio* by filling out its biblical narratives, supplying details, identifying persons, clarifying conditions, and resolving contradictions. All this is applied to produce a coherent narrative out of the elliptical references to the biblical figures – in this case, the primal couple. Although it cannot be determined where the actual provenance of the story lays and whether it emerged independently from the Qur’anic text, one cannot entirely agree Hadromi-Allouche’s conclusion when she maintains that the narrative “does not fulfill its exegetical role very well.” The Qur’anic passage speaks of the first couple’s ingratitude and disobedience to God, and the narrative attempts to contextualize the Qur’anic message by focusing on the concerns of the primal couple regarding the process of procreation.

The oldest version of this narrative dates to the end of the first century, when the generation of Successors was active in producing and transmitting traditions on the exegesis of the Qur’an. Later, several versions, with a variety of elaborations and embellishments, were developed by later generations of transmitters that reflect different narratological as well as theological concerns. It is not surprising that variants of this narrative were projected back to earlier authorities. It is a well-known phenomenon in both hadith and exegetical traditions that in order to acquire higher authority, statements of later generations, such as Successors, were attributed to earlier authorities, including Companions and the Prophet himself. This fact did not escape the notice of later hadith critics, in our case as well, as already shown.<sup>105</sup> This study also shows how effectively the narrative served to shape the conception of the Qur’anic passage, Q 7:189–190. It became the dominant and commonly accepted interpretation in the formative period of Muslim exegesis. Even the alternative interpretations attributed to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī were evidently dependent on the framework of the narrative. This proves that the narrative was commonplace among early Muslim exegetes. In other words, later exegetes and, following them, mediaeval and modern commentators approached the Qur’anic passage in the light of the strong tradition already produced

104 See Hadromi-Allouche, “Name Him ‘Abd al-Ḥārith,” 188–96.

105 For references and detailed discussion, see Aghaei, “Raf’-i Ḥadīth.”

and widespread by early Muslim exegetes, although the later commentators expressed their own preferences and proposed alternative interpretations.

Following the developments of this narrative allows one to see how sensitive the early generation of exegetes was towards the portrayal of the biblical figures in the Qur'an. The Qur'an does not contain an explicit indication of the idea that Adam was a prophet: He is not directly referred to as a prophet (*nabī*; pl. *anbiyā'*) or a messenger (*rasūl*; pl. *rusul*), nor does his name appear in the list of prophets (cf. e.g. Q 2:136, 3:84). However, Q 3:33 seems to allude to the prophetic mission of Adam by stating that "God chose Adam and Noah, and the House of Abraham and the House of 'Imrān above all the worlds." Several versions of the narrative reveal that the theological doctrine of the infallibility of prophets, which developed over the eighth and ninth centuries in Muslim theology, raised new concerns among Muslim exegetes. In the beginning, the reaction was adding a small clarification that softened the severe transgression of idolatry and obedience to other than God. Later commentators, however, preferred the alternative interpretation, in order to remove any accusation against Adam. Mediaeval scholars' decision to label the narrative as *isrā'iliyyāt* shows that for them, the charge of idolatry would be too stark an accusation, something that could not be conceived as having originated from within Islamic tradition. It should be, therefore, merely regarded as an outsider influence, opposed to the truth as known from the Qur'an and prophetic hadith, and harmful to Islam.

# Body and Wisdom

## *The Prophecy of Joseph in the Qur'an*

Nora Schmidt

In European intellectual history, since the age of the enlightenment, Prophecy and knowledge have been merely antagonists. In this paper, I will argue that the Qur'anic prophets do figure as bearers of knowledge. I will concentrate on one prophet of the Qur'an who is not yet comprehensively studied, the prophet Joseph, a representative of a prophetic persona who is connected in Qur'anic discourse with a particular epistemic notion that may be described as a revelation of God *from below*, instead of the otherwise prominent and often underlined concept of a descent of His word *from up high*. I will argue that the special role Joseph plays among the other prophets in the Qur'an is connected with his relation to late antique wisdom traditions.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Scholarly-historical Preliminary Remarks

When looking at Theodor Nöldeke's *History of the Qur'ān*, we immediately find a straightforward explanation of what a prophet is: "The essence of a prophet", writes Nöldeke, "is that his mind becomes so filled and taken by a religious idea that he ultimately feels compelled, as though driven by a divine force, to announce that idea to his peers as a God-given truth."<sup>2</sup> And he proceeds:

That Muḥammad was a true prophet must be conceded if one (...) properly interprets the notion of prophethood. One could perhaps object that the main tenets of his teaching are not the product of his own mind but rather originate from Jews and Christians. While the best parts of Islam certainly do have this origin, the way Muḥammad utilized these precures, how he considered them a

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1 I want to thank Dr. (des) Charbel Rizk for his thoughtful response to my paper as it was presented during the conference "Theology of Prophetology in Dialogue" in Paderborn in August 2021 and for letting me read his inspiring dissertation, to which I will refer later in this article, on Joseph in the Qur'an and Syriac Tradition. Dr. Rizk's criticism and input have helped me rethink and reformulate my own ideas and readings of the Qur'anic Joseph and deepened my understanding of the crucial importance of liturgical contexts of the Qur'anic Joseph story vis-à-vis Syriac literature. Here I depend on translations and interpretations from colleagues specialized in Syriac literature, like Charbel Rizk.

2 Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 1.



revelation descended from God, destined to be preached to all mankind, shows him to be a true prophet.<sup>3</sup>

In a brief glance at the opening chapter of Nöldeke's book further terminology springs to the eye: fanaticism, extasy, an inner voice that leaves the prophet no rest.

Nöldeke's view of the prophet of the Qur'an was certainly inspired not only by the Islamic hagiographical literature – as was often said<sup>4</sup> –, but also by the contemporary scholarship of the prophets of the Old Testament. Scholars like Herman Gunkel had pictured the prophets of Israel, according to an ideal of German romanticism, as culturally productive geniuses, who, in the words of Northrup Frye, had "a comprehensive view of the human situation".<sup>5</sup> The prophets in 19th century Qur'anic and Biblical scholarship were simultaneously what Abraham Heschel ironically called "some of the most disturbing people who ever lived",<sup>6</sup> and the noble geniuses of their time, passive media of divine inspiration, comparable to a modern-day artist or musician, who experiences the artistic process of composing a song as the product of someone else's creativity. Islamic and particularly Qur'anic Studies are equally rooted in the 19th century's enthusiasm with prophecy. Scholars like Nöldeke departed naturally from what they had learned about prophecy in the Ancient Near East.

After the sympathy and admiration with which 19th and early 20th century scholars had interested themselves in prophets, Biblical scholarship during the second half of the 20th century shifted away from the poetic (or political) genius perspective and concentrated instead on the *texts* of prophets, behind which the prophetic proclaimers, the poets, the warners, the human beings, who had once uttered these texts, became nearly invisible.<sup>7</sup> The insight in the sometimes centuries long redaction processes of the Biblical prophetic books (like Isaiah and Jeremiah) became a strong reason to no longer attempt to understand the true Amos or true Isaiah, but to read the books of the prophets as the products of multiple authors, who were imagined more and more like scholars and editors. The destiny of the prophet Muḥammad in Qur'anic Studies after World War 2 is indeed comparable to that of his Biblical predecessors in the respective field. The neglect of prophetic charisma or physical,

3 Ibid.

4 For Nöldeke's image of the prophet see for example Sinai, "Orientalism, Authorship, and the Onset of Revelation," 145–54.

5 Cited in Cooper, "Imagining Prophecy," 27.

6 Ibid.

7 See for example Schmid, "How the Prophets Became Biblical Authors and How the Biblical Authors Became Prophets."

communicative, and emotional aspects of the proclamation, and treatment of the Qur'an as a text and text alone had even more dramatic consequences than the redaction-history perspective on Isaiah had, because the "textual turn" of Qur'anic scholarship partly attempted to eliminate the person of the prophet from the history of the Qur'an altogether.<sup>8</sup>

It is not my intention to reconsider the "crisis" of Qur'anic Studies in its "revisionist" turns,<sup>9</sup> but merely to raise the issue of prophetic knowledge from the opposite perspective: Is not the Qur'an quite different from the Biblical prophetic books, precisely because it had a rather minimal redaction history? The original proclamations of the Qur'an seem to be altered so little in its transmission process, that even lexical "mistakes" were not corrected by the first scribal transmitters, like the famous *bakka* for the city *makka* in Sūrat Al-Imran (Q3), Verse 96, to name one example.<sup>10</sup> In other words, is not the Qur'an, not only due to the Islamic doctrine that Islamic scripture is God's revelation, but even more so because of its rhetorical and poetic qualities a perfect starting point for an inquiry of prophecy in late antiquity?

## 2. Different Senses of Prophecy in the Qur'an

In the Qur'an, prophecy is not only the modus of the communicational situation (Muḥammad and his audiences), but the Qur'an interprets protagonists from Israelite history as prophets, who were not prophets in the Bible. In the Qur'anic transformation of the Biblical figures of Abraham, Moses or David and others into prophets, some scholars even saw the backbone of a Qur'anic historiography and salvation history<sup>11</sup> and deduced from it that God's repeated communication with pious individuals throughout human history formed a prophetic genealogy that Muḥammad himself superseded.<sup>12</sup> Human knowledge of God and man's hopes for wellbeing and salvation are formulated on the

8 Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*; Crone and Cook, *Hagarism* and others.

9 This was done thoroughly by Angelika Neuwirth in several publications. See for example Neuwirth, "Vom Rezitationstext über die Liturgie zum Kanon."

10 Discussed in Sinai, *Der Koran*, 24; (with further examples). See also the similar argument by Zishan Ghaffar in context of the development of Qur'anic notions of prophecy in Ghaffar, "Einordnung in die koranische Prophetologie," 190.

11 See Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, 62ff; Stroumsa, *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity*, 59–87.

12 Bobzin, "The 'Seal' of the Prophets"; Stroumsa, *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity*, 87ff.

basis of the experience of a repeated descent of God's word, that each prophet in his time communicated to his, usually unbelieving, contemporaries.

It is not my intention to discuss here, whether or not Muḥammad's relation to the preceding prophets may be understood in terms of supersessionism, but, on the contrary, I want to argue that the prophets of the Qur'an cannot be adequately described with one single theology of prophetology, but instead, on a closer look, the different prophetic agents of Qur'anic memory reflect different concepts attributed to holy men, messengers, lawgivers, pious statesmen or sages in late antique religious landscapes. This diversity in the Qur'anic prophetology has, I believe, to do with the long legacy of the introduced prophetic figures. They each bring with them not only Biblical discourse and memory, but also the diversity of late antique interpretations, contemplations and artistic recreations of scripture. I will approach one of the Qur'anic prophets with a Biblical and late antique heritage, the prophet Joseph, who is, in my impression, the most obvious exponent of a different sense of prophecy than the one Nöldeke and others described. Joseph seems to be a paradigmatic example of an understanding of prophetic knowledge that cannot be fully explained in terms of transmitting a divine message, or a religious-political function of proclaiming the truth of monotheism, but Joseph introduces another epistemic category into the Qur'anic discourse, that I will heuristically call 'wisdom'.

### 3. Joseph in the Qur'an

It was often argued that Joseph had a particularly close connection to Muḥammad.<sup>13</sup> The late Meccan Sūrah dedicated to Joseph (Q 12), tells the story of an enduring believer, who preaches monotheism in the hour of his greatest despair, in the Egyptian prison. Although here we may see a parallel to Muḥammad's critical task in Mecca,<sup>14</sup> it is actually not Joseph, but Moses, who exemplifies the prophet with a political responsibility comparable to that of Muḥammad's before the Hijra.<sup>15</sup> It is merely in later Islamic tradition that the parallel between Muḥammad and Joseph becomes apparent and important. And here it is neither political endurance nor ecstatic experience of the divine, but an overwhelming and nearly metaphysical beauty of Joseph's body.

13 See among others Prémare, *Joseph et Muhammad*.

14 As is convincingly argued in Saleh, "End of Hope"; Qureshi, "Ring Composition in Sūrat Yūsuf"; Spitaler, Diem, and Wild, "Zur Struktur der Yūsuf-Sure," 123–52.

15 See for example Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike*, 653–70. And her interpretations on Moses in many other publications.

Joseph's body seems to be the medium of his authentic truth claim and proof of his prophethood, as early as in the *Sīra*, where Muḥammad encounters Joseph on his ascension (*Mi'rāj*), and recognizes him by the overwhelming beauty of his face compared to the moon.<sup>16</sup>

*Sūrat Yūsuf* already anticipates this connection of Joseph with physical beauty in two narrative details: The women in the house of "Potiphar" spontaneously cut themselves in the hands at the appearance of Joseph and utter the telling phrase: "This is not a man, but a glorious angel." (Q 12,31) The second instance concerns the relationship between Joseph and Jacob, which involves a – Qur'anically atypical – healing story with a piece of clothing (Q 12, 84 and goff). In both narrative details, the effect of the prophet's physical appearance (and fragrance) on other protagonists is a positive attribute of his persona that seems to render Joseph "more than a man".<sup>17</sup>

After a word on Joseph's connection with wisdom in Biblical and post-Biblical traditions, I will concentrate on these physical aspects of Joseph's prophecy and some literary specificities in *Sūrah* 12 and then give a very brief outlook on this parallel of Muḥammad's and Joseph's beauty in Islamic literature.

#### 4. Joseph's Connection with Wisdom

The Biblical Joseph story (Gen. 37–50) is, in parts, probably older than the book of Genesis, for it integrates storylines from Ancient Eastern Literatures like the Egyptian *Tale of the Two Brothers*, *Sinuhe*, and, possibly, even *Gilgamesh*.<sup>18</sup> The story about Jacob's second-youngest son, who is sold to Egypt by his brothers out of envy, where he manages to rise in the household of the noble man Potiphar, ends up in prison because of his master's wife's accusation and then rises to second man of the state via his ability to interpret dreams, continues to be read and retold, rewritten and interpreted throughout the different religious communities of late antiquity. The Joseph story inspired literary innovations like the "first novel of antiquity", the Hellenistic romance Joseph and

16 Ibn-Ishāq, *Das Leben des Propheten*, 87.

17 For an inspiring analysis and comparison with Jewish arguments about Joseph's masculinity see: Lefkowitz, "Not a Man," 155–80.

18 See Goldman, *The Wiles of Women, the Wiles of Men*, 44, 57–78. On the parallel between Joseph and Sinuhe: Meinhold, "Die Geschichte des Sinuhe und die alttestamentliche Diasporanovelle." On the question of Egyptian influence on Genesis 37–50 see Schipper, "The Egyptian Background of the Joseph Story," 6–23.

Asenath.<sup>19</sup> Joseph is remembered in poems and hymns, fantasized about in narratives, and pictured in religious art, for example in the Dura Europos synagogue.<sup>20</sup> While the New Testament pays peculiarly little attention to Joseph,<sup>21</sup> he again figures prominently in rabbinic and Islamic literature, not only in the Qur'an, but later in Persian mystic novels, like Jami's *Yūsuf and Zulaikha*, in various historical and exegetical traditions that creatively combine aspects of the Qur'anic and the Biblical Joseph.<sup>22</sup>

Gerhard von Rad formulated the influential thesis that the Genesis Joseph story was a "wisdom novella" that had its *Sitz im Leben* in Solomon's court, where Joseph served as a model for the moral education of young administrators.<sup>23</sup> The Ancient Near Eastern concept of wisdom is elaborated in the Bible in the book of Proverbs (Hebr. *Meshalīm*) in teachings transmitted from father to son/teacher to student. James Kugel describes the epistemic concept of Biblical wisdom followingly:

We tend to think of knowledge as an ever-growing body of information: each day, scientists discover new things about the universe and about ourselves. But to a denizen of the ancient world, knowledge was a fixed, utterly static set of facts, the unchanging rules that underlie all of reality as we know it. Those rules had been established since the world had been created; indeed, when the Bible asserts that God had created the world 'with wisdom' (Prov. 3:19; Ps. 92:6–7; 104:24), what it means is that He had established it according to certain immutable patterns. Possessing wisdom thus meant knowing those rules, not only the rules that governed the natural world (...) but the rules that governed the way people, both the righteous and the wicked, behaved and the way God treated them in consequence. God had created these rules and immutable patterns, but He did not publicize them; on the contrary, they often lay hidden beneath the surface of things. It was the job of sages to try to discover them and to pass their findings on to later generations.<sup>24</sup>

Scholarship, however, today disagrees on the question, whether the Genesis Joseph story has an original connection with Biblical wisdom. Von Rad saw

19 For a new translation of the text see *Josef und Asenath, Ein Roman über richtiges und falsches Handeln*, trans. Holder.

20 See the chapter by Catherine Hezser in this volume, who discusses the paintings in this synagogue more extensively.

21 Joseph is mentioned in John 4:5, Acts 7: 9–16 and Heb. 11, 21–22.

22 For an overview (although without Christian contexts) see next to the aforementioned literature, Bernstein, *Stories of Joseph*.

23 Rad, "Die Josephsgeschichte und ältere Chokma," 120–27, for alternative dating see the more recent scholarship of Michael V. Fox (cited further down).

24 Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 506.

in Joseph a representative of the young sage, because he interprets dreams, becomes the adviser of a king and – most importantly – wisely accepts his tough destiny, by turning anger and envy to forgiveness and peace. The strongest case for this view lies in the final chapters of Genesis, where Joseph comforts his grieving and anxious brothers with the words: “Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for it was God who sent me here ahead of you in order to keep (people) alive ... You planned to do me harm, but God had planned it for the good.” (Gen. 44:5; 50:20) This summary in the end of the Biblical story seems to reflect an awareness of the curious fact that stunned also scholars in modern times:<sup>25</sup> The absence of God as the protagonist in Gen. 37–50 that also von Rad underlined and interpreted as a specifically *modern* theology in the Joseph story.<sup>26</sup> Unlike his brothers, who struggle with their guilt, the wise Joseph realizes the indirect ways of God’s revelation in human history and understands that his expulsion to Egypt really was not cruelty and abandonment, but a divine “” for the assurance of survival of the family and people. Von Rad’s thesis was, however, contested by younger scholars, like Michael Fox.

Joseph, von Rad argues, displays the virtues taught in Proverbs: He avoids the strange woman (cf. Prov. 7 and elsewhere); he is ‘cool of spirit’ and slow to anger (cf. Prov. 14:29); he restrains his lips (cf. Prov. 17:28); he keeps silence and conceals his knowledge (cf. Prov. 10:19; 12:23); he controls his spirit (cf. Prov. 14:30); he refuses to seek revenge (cf. Prov. 24:29); he is humble (cf. Prov. 15:33; 18:12; 22:4); and, above all, he fears God (cf. Prov. 1:7; 9:10). This is a good description of the ideal man projected by Proverbs. It largely fits Joseph – as it would any wise person – though we must note that Joseph’s upbringing was terrible and he was neither ‘well-bred’ nor ‘finely educated’.<sup>27</sup>

After all, Joseph, lacking any positive teacher-student relationship, could not represent the Biblical sage. According to Fox, the discrepancies between Joseph and the wisdom student, the addressee of Proverbs, are too evident to

25 Esp. *ibid.*

26 Already church fathers and rabbis felt this “indirect report of God”, when they speculated about God’s presence in the nameless man (*’ish*) that Joseph finds on his way to his brothers in the fields of Sichem. For examples see Levenson, *Joseph*, 12ff. Already church fathers and rabbis felt this “indirect report of God”, when they speculated about God’s presence in the nameless man (*’ish*) that Joseph finds on his way to his brothers in the fields of Sichem. For examples see Levenson, *Joseph*, 12ff. For further analysis of the theology of the Joseph story see the standard German commentary of Ebach, *Gen 37–50*, 40, 116–172, 660–63 and the article by Christina Nießen, “Der Verborgene Handlungsträger,” 32–358.

27 Fox, “Joseph and Wisdom,” 231–61, here 256.

claim Gen. 37–50 a sapiential genre. Dream interpretation is not even a positive quality in Biblical wisdom, but instead, several Biblical texts even see it negatively. Joseph in Genesis is, if anything, “wise in Egyptian terms”.<sup>28</sup> The most important difference between Joseph and the sage of Proverbs is, however, literary: Joseph at no point utters *meshalīm*, apophthegmata, or gnomic verses, that are characteristic for the Biblical wisdom genre.

While the connection between Joseph and wisdom stays unresolved in Genesis, it becomes apparent with other Biblical accounts and in late antique retellings of the story. See for example Ps. 105, 16–22:

When he summoned a famine on the land and broke all supply of bread, he had sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave. His feet were hurt with fetters; his neck was put in a collar of iron; until what he had said came to pass, the word of the Lord tested him. The king sent and released him; the ruler of the peoples set him free; he made him lord of his house and ruler of all his possessions, to bind his princes at his pleasure and to teach his elders wisdom.

The psalm overdramatizes Joseph’s physical sufferings, mentions details like the collar of iron that do not appear in Genesis. And here, the sapiential thrust of the retelling is outspoken: Joseph not only anticipates God’s plan behind his personal history to be a test, but he becomes a teacher of wisdom to the (Egyptian) elders. In another apocryphal text, the Wisdom of Solomon (Sapientia Salomonis), Joseph is one of the men, who were guided by the personified agent of wisdom, a feminine figure that, again, Proverbs had introduced.<sup>29</sup>

When the righteous was sold, she forsook him not, but delivered him from sin: she went down with him into the pit,  
And left him not in bonds, till she brought him the scepter of the kingdom, and power against those that oppressed him: as for them that had accused him, she shewed them to be liars, and gave him perpetual glory. (SapSal 10, 13–14)

Joseph, here, does not figure as a wise student, son, or teacher, but his life appears under the guidance of lady wisdom. He is not mentioned by name but is already characterized with the title “the righteous” (*ha-zadik*) that will become the honorary title for Joseph in later Jewish tradition.

Obviously, the arguments for Joseph’s connection with wisdom changed throughout the Biblical or inter-Biblical – does the author mean the scholarly term ‘intertestamental’? because this is a legitimate term, while “innerbiblical”

<sup>28</sup> Fox, “Joseph and Wisdom,” 247.

<sup>29</sup> See Prov. 1–9, esp. Prov. 8, 22–36. For an interpretation on the basis of gender see Yoder, “Personified Wisdom and Feminist Theologies.”

is not. rewritings of his story. Rabbinic authors, later, were also convinced that wisdom was a driving force and active power in the life of Joseph, but they argued differently. It was Joseph being Jacob's *ben zekunim*, "son of old age" (Gen. 37:3) that associated Joseph with wisdom in *Midrash*.<sup>30</sup>

Christian readers of Genesis, who mainly interpreted Joseph as a *typos* of Christ, again highlighted Joseph's (voluntary) endurance of betrayal and pain,<sup>31</sup> his forgiving behavior with his brothers, the transformations of his body, represented in the triple change of clothing, and the ascent from prisoner to ruler. A sapiential element is highlighted primarily with regard to Joseph's resistance to the seductions of Potiphar's wife. In the *Testament of Joseph*, the woman is pictured as an evil force with even satanic connotations. Joseph here is capable of resisting her offers and pressures because he is obedient to the law.<sup>32</sup> Already the book of Jubilees adds the information that Joseph remembered the law of Abraham, from which his father Jacob had regularly read aloud, and therefore knew the divine prohibition of adultery (Jub 39,5–8).<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Joseph is pictured as the example of a pious man, who dedicates his life to Tora scholarship in the Yoma tractate of the Babylonian Talmud that – maybe ironically – contrasts the life dedicated to scripture with the temptation caused by Joseph's physical beauty. Joseph here resists the woman's offenses with praying psalms, which again manifests a (yet different) connection of Joseph with sapiential virtues.<sup>34</sup>

30 Levenson, *Joseph*, 7.

31 See Acts 7, 10.

32 Testament of Joseph, 3:1–3; 9:1–2,5: "How often did the Egyptian woman threaten me with death! How often did she give me over to punishment, and then call me back and threaten me, and when I was unwilling to lie with her, she said to me: You will be my master, and (master) of everything that is in my house, if you will give yourself to me." (Translation in Kugel, In Potiphar's House, 53).

33 "Joseph aber war schön von Angesicht; gar hübsch war sein Antlitz, und so hob das Weib seines Herrn ihre Augen auf, sah Joseph und gewann ihn lieb; dann bat sie ihn, dass er ihr beiwohnen möge. Er aber gab sich nicht hin, sondern dachte an den Herrn und an die Worte, die sein Vater Jakob aus den Geschichten Abrahams zu lesen pflegte, dass kein Mensch mit einem verheirateten Weib Unzucht treiben dürfe und dass für einen solchen die Todesstrafe im Himmel vor dem höchsten Gott festgesetzt und dass die Sünde zu seinen Ungunsten in den ewigen Büchern vor dem Herrn stets aufgezeichnet werde." (Translation: Paul Rießler, Altjüdisches Schrifttum außerhalb der Bibel, Augsburg 1926, 643). It is good to refer to a German work of scholarship in a footnote and quote it, but I see no reason for presenting such a long text in an English publication when the Book of Jubilees itself is available in English in all good libraries, and some versions are even free online.

34 Yoma 35b: "Man erzählt vom frommen Joseph, daß die Frau Potiphars tagtäglich ihn durch Worte zu verführen suchte; Gewänder, die sie seinetwegen morgens anlegte, legte sie abends nicht an, Gewänder, die sie seinetwegen abends anlegte, legte sie morgens nicht an. Sie sprach zu ihm: 'Sei mir zuwillen.' Er erwiderte ihr: 'Nein.' Sie sprach zu ihm:



To sum up: The Biblical Joseph story has similarities and discrepancies with the virtues attributed to the sage in Proverbs and significantly lacks the literary form of *mashal*. The different rewritings of the Joseph story in late antiquity highlight his connection with wisdom, using different arguments and picking up different “sapiential” elements of the original narrative. What the late antique sapiential rewritings of Joseph eliminate is the geopolitical importance of Joseph as the father of the tribes Ephraim and Manasse that figures in other Biblical texts,<sup>35</sup> but loses significance throughout reception history. It is this conjunction of Joseph with wisdom, achieved through the inner- and especially the post-Biblical rewritings of the biblical Joseph story, the “collapse”<sup>36</sup> of the formerly religious-political figure of Joseph into the paradigm of a sage, which fixes the biblically still disputable connection of Joseph with wisdom and earns him the honorary title *Joseph ha-zadek* and *Joseph ha-khakhom*.

Such *sapientialization* of Biblical protagonists that were achieved also for other personas, for example in Philo of Alexandria’s description of Abraham in his *De Abrahamo*,<sup>37</sup> may be counted as one of the “mutations of late antiquity”<sup>38</sup> that Guy Stroumsa famously described and to which the various religious communities, Jews, Christians and finally also Muslims contributed together.

#### 4.1 *Sapiential Elements in the Qur’anic Joseph Story*

In the Qur’an, Biblical wisdom does not figure prominently. The idea of sapiential teachings, transmitted from father to son, occurs only seldom in the figure of Luqmān in the equally late-Meccan Sūrah 31. But in Q 12 one finds multiple indications of its participation in what Kugel described as the epistemic concept of ancient wisdom: The attempt to understand the rules God has inscribed in his creation and pass this understanding on to the next generation.<sup>39</sup> The most obvious reflection of such a “wisdom worldview” in Q 12 is

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‘Ich sperre dich ins Gefängnis.’ Er erwiderte ihr: ‘Der Herr befreit die Gefangenen.’ (Sie:) ‘Ich beuge deine Statur.’ (Er:) ‘Der Herr richtet die Gebeugten auf.’ ‘Ich blende dir die Augen.’ ‘Der Herr macht die Blinden sehend.’ Alsdann gab sie ihm tausend Silbertalente, damit er ihr zuwillen sei, mit ihr zu schlafen, mit ihr zusammen zu sein; er aber wollte ihr nicht zuwillen sein. Mit ihr zu schlafen, dieser Welt; mit ihr zusammen zu sein, in jener Welt.” (Translation: Lazarus Goldschmidt, *Der babylonische Talmud*, Berlin 1930, vol. 3, 93 f.)

35 Texts mentioning the “house of Joseph” and the tribe Joseph see Lux, *Josefsgeschichte*, if.

36 Kugel, *In Potiphar’s House*, 26.

37 On the strategy of a “sapientialization” of Abraham in Philo’s work and other early Jewish and Christian texts see Becker, “Bios und Sophia.”

38 Stroumsa, *Das Ende des Opferkults*.

39 Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 506.

the repetition of Joseph's capacity of "*ta'wīl al-aḥādīth*" (verses 6, 21, 101), the "understanding of events"<sup>40</sup> that may qualify him as "wise" the way he figured in the end of Genesis: Joseph, from the beginning, understands that his destiny unfolds according to a divine plan. Unlike in Genesis, God himself in the Qur'anic Joseph story does not stay silent, but reveals to His prophet Joseph, that he will later triumph over his assailants, already when he sits in the empty pit: "And We inspired him, 'You will inform them of this deed of theirs when they are unaware.'" (Q 12,15)

Throughout the Sūra, the plot is interwoven with "sapiential" comments from the perspective of the divine storyteller that are directed at the listener of the Sūra, for example in verse 7 "In Joseph and his brothers are signs for those who ask." (*la-qad kāna fī yūsufā wa-'ikhwatihī 'āyātun li-s-sā'ilīn*), 4: "Satan really is an evident enemy of man" (*'inna sh-shaitāna li-l-'insāni 'aduwwun mubīnun*), 6: "Your Lord is knowing and wise" (*'inna rabbaka 'alīmun ḥakīm*), 19: "God knows, what they do" (*wa-llāhu 'alīmun bi-mā ya'malūn*), 21: "God has the supremacy in his matter, but the majority of people don't know" (*wa-llāhu ghālibun 'alā 'amrihī wa-lākinna 'aktara n-nāsi lā ya'lamūn*), 24: "He (Joseph) is one of our chosen servants" (*innahū min 'ibādina l-mukhlashīna*)<sup>41</sup> 35: "He (God) is the hearing, the knowing." (*huwa s-samī'u l-'alīm*) etc. etc.

Angelika Neuwirth has systematized the different categories of such clauses in the verse endings throughout Q 12.<sup>42</sup> They not only structure the Qur'an's longest coherent narrative formally and acoustically, but cross-connect the performer/storyteller with the listener, and the Joseph story itself with other narratives of the Qur'an, by interweaving lexical and syntactic patterns.

Alle paar Verse (...) tauchen aus dem Redefluß die den Horizont des jeweiligen Themas übersteigenden Schwarz-Weiß-Klauseln auf, und noch wichtiger: die hymnisch gefärbten Gottesprädikationen. Man könnte auch sagen, daß die Sure (im Gegensatz zu vielen anderen) keinen eigenen Hymnenpassus enthält (...), dafür aber die Elemente eines Hymnus als Verschuß-Kora (Klauseln) über den ganzen Erzählteil wie Perlen ausgestreut sind. Einem kontemplativen Hörer mögen diese Gottesprädikationen sogar als das eigentliche Rückgrad der Erzählung erscheinen. So gesehen wird nicht die Erzählung mit Gottes-Epitheta

40 For alternative translations of the term see Tropper, "Josephs Gabe der Rätseldeutung (Ta'wīlu l-'Aḥādīṭi) im Koran."

41 See also the Qur'anic verses 15,39f; 38,82; 37,40.74.128.160; 37,169; 19,51; 38,45–47, where the same wording is used to describe other prophets and thereby acoustically (and semantically) connect the Joseph story with other proclamations. On the development of the notion *ibād* see also Ghaffar, "Einordnung in die koranische Prophetologie," 190f.

42 Spitaler, Diem, and Wild, "Zur Struktur der Yūsuf-Sure."

dorchflochten und geschmückt, sondern die verschiedenen preisenswerten Eigenschaften Gottes werden anhand einer Erzählung entfaltet.<sup>43</sup>

These phrases that are most apparent in the rhyming verse endings occur also in direct speeches of dialogues and interpositions of the divine narrator of the story, these are formally associated with the wisdom phrases of Proverbs, and with the *mashal* genre. The gnomic genre that was so characteristic of Biblical wisdom but absent in the Genesis Joseph story, here seems to have found its way into the Joseph narrative. The Qur'an hereby renders Joseph "sapiential" in a way he had not been in Genesis. He is not only capable of "understanding the events" of his life but exemplifies the patient, God-fearing young sage, who speaks in meaningful verses. Read together with the "wise" anticipation of the end of the story in its beginning, we may argue: Joseph's wisdom is a direct result of his relationship with God. He is patient, enduring, God-fearing, and wise because God taught him wisdom. The educational relationship between father and son/teacher and student of Biblical wisdom literature is transferred into the relationship between God and prophet.

## 5. The Prophetic Body as Sapiential Medium

Joseph's prophecy, in two plot lines of Q 12, manifests itself in the effect of his physical appearance on other protagonists of the story. The women in Egypt, when confronted with Joseph as the object of female desire, spontaneously call out: "This is not a man, this is a glorious angel!" (verse 31) and thereby identify an aesthetic (and erotic) aspect of the prophet Joseph connected with his body.<sup>44</sup> Many of the contemporary Jewish texts that add similar narrative expansions about the events in the Egyptian house, where Joseph is a servant, concentrate on the question why and how Joseph could resist the seductions of the "strange woman" of whom the Book of Proverbs so vehemently warns

43 Ibid, 151.

44 For an interpretation of the episode on the basis of gender see Lefkovitz, "Not a Man." The identification of Joseph as an "angel" also has a connection in the polemic against Muhammad to be an angel. This polemic, however, has the primary aim to discredit the authority of the prophet by questioning the source of his inspiration. Since the issue in Q 12 is not Joseph's prophetic message, but a reaction to his physical appearance, I do not stress this parallel further in my argument.

the student of wisdom (see esp. Prov 7).<sup>45</sup> In many late antique texts, the episode about the seduction and resistance merely serves as an intermediary step in the personal development of Joseph as a representative of the young man to become a sage. The Qur'an, however, does not concentrate exclusively on *his* development, but on the contrary, adds the perspective of the women. On the narrative level, the cutting of the hands serves as proof that the Egyptian mistress cannot be blamed for desiring her servant and does not deserve the mockery of society. The fellow women indirectly pardon her, by collectively imitating her "burning" or "violent" desire for Joseph and their act of self-injuring painfully adds significance to their own physicality. Thus, the women of Egypt in Sūrah 12 figure as the *opposite* of the female persona of lady wisdom, who supports and guides Joseph according to Sapientia Salomonis.

They represent the human response to the nearly superhuman, angelic, male prophet. However, they are not portrayed as evil seductresses, like in the *Testament of Joseph*.<sup>46</sup> The women's desire for Joseph is not sanctioned in the Qur'an, but, on the opposite, is credited with legitimacy, which is further underlined, when taking the several Jewish traditions into account that tell similar variants of an "assembly of ladies" in the house of Potiphar. Here, the women are also neither sanctioned, nor punished, but instead, form an identity as a female collective on the other side of their (male) object of desire.<sup>47</sup> The cutting of the women in their hands at the gaze of Joseph indicates a moment of violence that adds significance also to the body of Joseph.<sup>48</sup> Female desire, even if unfulfilled, is a means to acknowledge the overwhelming effect a prophet may have in his physical appearance.

This angelic appearance of Joseph's body resonates with another detail in the Qur'anic story: Near the end of the Sūra, when Joseph's brothers have returned from Egypt twice and this time without the youngest brother, the Biblical Benjamin, Jacob is so pained by his grief for Joseph that he loses his

45 For examples see Bar-Ilan, "Sūrat Yūsuf (XII) and Some of Its Possible Jewish Sources," 189–210; Bernstein, *Stories of Joseph*; Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*.

46 For the text see FN 31 above.

47 Particularly *Midrash ha-Gadol*, where Lady Potiphar asks all the other women to claim that Joseph had touched them in order to strengthen her cause against her husband, who would, otherwise, not believe her.

48 On speculations over the erotic overpowering of the women with intertexts in Midrash see Bar-Ilan, "Sūrat Yūsuf (XII) and Some of Its Possible Jewish Sources." On further intertextual relations of the episode see also Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, and Bernstein, *Stories of Joseph*. See also the interpretation of Mustansir Mir of the cutting of the hands as an indication of irony: Mir, "Irony in the Qur'an," 173–87, here: 179.

eyesight: "He turned his back and said: 'O my grief over Joseph!' And his eyes became white/blurry over his sorrow, for he was full of grief." (84)

It is not until Jacob first smells Joseph and finally touches a garment that Joseph sends to his father that Jacob is cured from this eye-sickness. The sickness and healing of the father in the *Sūrah* is the eminent motive around which the recognition, reunion and reconciliation between Joseph and his family develops. In Genesis, this reunion is very lengthily reported in four full chapters (Gen. 42–46). The brothers here are sent back and forth, oscillating between Egypt and Canaan on several restless journeys, during which they recapitulate their original guilt and lose their identity as a male collective.<sup>49</sup> *Sūrah* 12 does not pick up the dramatic development of the Biblical narrative with the climax of Joseph's tearful self-revelation to his brothers (Gen. 45:3: "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?"), but instead gives a short summary, again spiked with sapiential, gnomic commentary:

They said, 'Are you indeed Joseph?' He said 'I am Joseph, and this is my brother. God has certainly favored us. Indeed, he who fears God and is patient, then indeed, God does not allow to be lost the reward of those who do good. Take this, my shirt, and cast it over the face of my father; he will become seeing. And bring me your family, all together.'

And when the caravan departed, their father said, 'Indeed, I find the smell of Joseph, if you did not think me weakened in mind.'

They said, 'By God, indeed you are in your [same] old error.'

And when the bearer of good tidings arrived, he cast it over his face, and he returned [once again] seeing. He said, 'Did I not tell you that I know from God that which you do not know?'

They said, 'O our father, ask for us forgiveness of our sins; indeed, we have been sinners.' (12,90–97)

Israel Shapiro suggested a midrashic context to the episode of Jacob's blindness, pointing at a midrash that claims that the "holy spirit" left Jacob, after Joseph was sold to Egypt.<sup>50</sup> Others instead associated the blurring of Jacob's eye with the slightly later event in Genesis 48 during his adoption of Ephraim and Manasse.<sup>51</sup> One may also draw the connection to Isaac's blurry eyes that led him to confuse his younger son for the elder in Gen. 25. There is, of course, evidence for Jacob expressing a straightforward death wish in Gen. 37:34 after the brothers show him Joseph's torn garment. In Genesis, Jacob's spirit (*ruach*) is revived only after he sees the wagons with silver, grain, and festive garments

49 For a longer interpretation see Schmidt, *Josef*, 93–105.

50 Schapiro, *Die Haggadischen Elemente im erzählenden Teil des Korans*, 72–75.

51 Abraham Geiger quoted in Witztum, "Joseph among the Ishmaelites," 435.

that Joseph sends (Gen. 45:27).<sup>52</sup> Thus Genesis itself clearly emphasizes the deep, even existential impact of Joseph's destiny on his father Jacob. But neither Genesis, nor any Midrash mention this relation to eyesight.

Instead, it is the church father Origen, who mentions Jacob's blindness in his interpretation of Joseph being a *typos* of Christ. Origen argues that Jacob lost his eyesight, when his sons showed him the blood-drenched garment as a proof that Joseph was killed by a wild beast and regained sight when Joseph lay his hands on the eyes of his father in Egypt. Here Origen draws a parallel to Jesus' healing of the blind born youth in the Gospel in John 9, 1–12.<sup>53</sup> Very similar to Origen's interpretation are the Syriac texts Joseph Witztum collects that also relate Jacob's grief over the loss of Joseph at the beginning of the story with an effect on the father's eyes. Pseudo-Basilus, Witztum shows, reports that "the light of his eyes dimmed",<sup>54</sup> when Jacob faced the bloody garment. Since Benjamin and Joseph are frequently called the "light of their father's eyes" in other Syriac Texts<sup>55</sup> the comparison between blindness and the loss of the beloved sons here is clearly metaphorical. Highlighting this "figurative" significance of Jacob's blindness and the healing accomplished by Joseph's touch (or garment), Charbel Rizk in a dissertation on Joseph in the Qur'an and Syriac tradition argues that the Qur'anic story is reminiscent of contemporary Syriac liturgies of the Eucharist.<sup>56</sup> Channeled through the strong typological connection of Joseph and Jesus in many Syriac homilies, the healing story at the end of Sūrah 12 may also open a typological reading of the Qur'anic Joseph. Rizk argues that already in its earlier occurrence, the shirt (*qamīṣ*) of Joseph is indirectly linked with Jesus. The shirt proves Joseph's innocence against the Egyptian woman and therefore vindicates the oppressed, like Jesus does, not only in the synoptic Gospels, but also in the Qur'an, where he vindicates "his mother Mary against [the] accusation of sexual immorality"<sup>57</sup> in Q 19. Similarly, Joseph's shirt at the end of Sūrah 12 not only heals a physical eye sickness, but also, and maybe primarily, gives Jacob reassurance in his faith in God, which is, on the narrative level, connected with his faith in Joseph's survival.

52 The verse specifically says that Jacob's heart stayed cold, because he did not believe the news reported by his sons that Joseph was alive. Only the arrival of the wagons revives his spirit. On a comparison between the *qamīṣ* in Q 12 and the garments in Gen. 45 see Witztum, "Joseph among the Ishmaelites," 434f.

53 Referred to in Lux, "Josef / Josefsgeschichte."

54 See Witztum, "Joseph among the Ishmaelites," 436.

55 Witztum refers to Balai, Ephraem Graecus and Romanos. See *ibid*.

56 Rizk, *Prophetology, Typology, and Christology*.

57 *Ibid*.

Rizk relates the report of this physical and spiritual recovery in the Joseph story of the Qur'an to the Syriac liturgies of the Eucharist on the basis of two arguments: As already attested in the story of the disciples in Emmaus (Luke 24), the community shared in the Eucharist may have an "eye-opening" effect that is performatively reflected also in certain Eucharist liturgy practices, when believers first place the Eucharistic bread on their eyes before eating it.<sup>58</sup> The second argument concerns the fragrance of Joseph (*rīḥ*) that Jacob "magically" senses from afar (Q 12, 94). Here, Rizk points to practices connected with the use of incense in the Eucharistic liturgy that also symbolically link the presence of Christ with fragrance (Syriac *rīḥa*).

Syriac traditions are a more plausible transmission link to the Qur'anic proclamation in Mecca than the western church father Origen is, although direct contact with communities of the Syriac Churches during the Meccan proclamations is also disputable. But, as Zishan Ghaffar, who highlights the hermeneutical importance of typology for Qur'anic prophetology, argues: "Even without a closer contact to Christian communities it can be presumed that such typological interpretations had been circulating in the Late Antique period, so that it was only logical for the proclaimer of the Qur'an to make use of this technique and to reformat it."<sup>59</sup> Typology certainly is a key hermeneutical strategy to the different late antique communities, especially, but not exclusively to Christians. Rizk shows how in the Qur'anic Joseph story is in conversation with theologies and literary motives in the Syriac traditions, especially with typological readings. In so far as both Jesus and Joseph share in the Qur'an certain characteristics, primarily the capacity to heal the blind (Q 3, 49 and 5, 110), vindicate the oppressed and reassure faith, one has reason to argue that the Qur'an reflects the analogy of Joseph and Jesus in the typological readings of neighboring traditions, without suggesting a Christological "supersessionist" or exclusivist significance of Joseph. Rather such typological readings of Joseph as *typos* of Christ add to the theological uniqueness of the prophet Joseph in the Qur'an.

### Other Liturgical Contexts

As already mentioned with Rizk's interpretation of the healing story in the Qur'anic Joseph story in light of Syriac Eucharist liturgies, Sura 12, like the middle and late-Meccan Suras in general, has a strong liturgical component.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ghaffar, "Einordnung in die koranische Prophetologie," 196.

The liturgical *Sitz im Leben* of the Sura and its structural, lexical, and performative similarities with Syriac homilies is one of Rizk's strongest arguments for a connection between the religious and hermeneutical practices of the Syriac Churches and those of the prophetic community in Mecca. But the Syriac Eucharist Liturgy is not the only possible religious *praxis* to be taken into consideration for an understanding of Joseph's prophecy in the Qur'an. Let us again look at the verses that narrate the reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers. First of all, by directing his brothers back home with his shirt, Joseph proves capable of prophetic knowledge in the simplest understanding of the term. He anticipates Jacob's loss of eyesight in "Canaan".<sup>60</sup> This may be a neglectable detail, would not the entire narrative episode circle around the proof of earlier uttered predictions. Joseph's utterance: "He who fears God and is patient, then indeed, God does not allow to be lost the reward of those who do good" (Q 12, 91) sounds like an almost direct quotation from the Biblical *Meshalim*. Fear of God and patience are the cardinal virtues of the sage that both the Qur'anic Joseph and Jacob prove capable of.<sup>61</sup> Although the brothers already know better, they repeat their accusation to Jacob to be "in his same old error", maintaining the belief that Joseph is alive. This stubbornness of the brothers despite better knowledge causes a moment of retardation in the storytelling: The brothers repeat their rejection of truth, Jacob finds confirmation for his original belief that Joseph is still alive via the fragrance of the garment. Jacob then insists on possessing knowledge from God that the brothers don't and finally the brothers admit their sin and plea for forgiveness. This development of the plot suggests a liturgical motive. The antagonism between sinners and sage, who is himself redeemed by the final evidence of his original belief and thereby converts the collective of sinners (the brothers) to repentants might reflect the liturgical *Sitz im Leben* the Joseph story had in ancient Judaism. According to the Book of Jubilees, this place was in the ceremonies of Yom Kippur that are not exclusively reserved for remembering the Israelite's sin at Sinai, but also for the atonement of Joseph's brothers.<sup>62</sup>

Once we are pointed to the context of Proverbs, we easily find many wisdom utterances that relate to eyesight, for example: "The hearing ear and the seeing

60 The geographical places in the Joseph story of the Qur'an stay unnamed, like all protagonists of the story except Joseph and Jacob. The story thereby neglects (or avoids) the political meaning the Joseph story has in the end of the book of Genesis and before the Exodus. See also the similar argument of Ghaffar, "Einordnung in die koranische Prophetologie," 213.

61 Comp. for example Prov. 1,29; 2,5; 3,7; 8,13; 10,27; 14,2.26.27; 15,16.33; 16,6; 19,23; 22,4; 23,17; 24,21; 28,14; 29,25; 31,30.

62 Jub 37, referred to in Lux, *Josef*, 271.



eye, the LORD has made them both.” (Prov. 20, 12) One utterance is particularly close to the Josephstory, Prov. 23:26–29:

Give me your heart, my son, and let your eyes delight in my ways.  
 For a harlot is a deep pit, and an adulterous woman is a narrow well.  
 Surely she lurks as a robber, and increases the faithless among men.  
 Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has contentions? Who has complaining?  
 Who has wounds without cause? Who has dullness of eyes?

Unlike the majority of *meshalīm*, this one stresses the crucial importance of the son for the spiritual wellbeing of the father, not the other way around. Not only does the deep pit, the narrow well and the adulterous woman anticipate motives from the Joseph story, but the final lamentation: “Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has wounds without cause? Who has dull eyes?” may well be read as a summary of Jacob’s mental state as head of the most “dysfunctional family” of scriptural tradition, including his inability to see clearly. Reading the *Sūrah* also through the heuristic of wisdom literature further stresses another component:

The motive of blurred and eased eyesight primarily concerns the relationship between father and son, which is further highlighted in other verses of the *Sura*, like in the divine announcement to Joseph: “God will complete his favor on you *like he did on Abraham and Isaac*” (Q 12, 6). Joseph himself asserts this connection in his prison sermon: “I have followed the belief of *my fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*.” (Q 12, 38) Although the apparent argument here is monotheism and the prohibition of idol-worship, the *Sūrah* also associates the ‘Aqīda, which brings into play yet another example of a reciprocal redemption of father and son, a consolidation of the great father Abraham with God via the pious and courageous admission to self-sacrifice by the son.

Taking these father-son relationships throughout the *Sura* into consideration, it is worth pointing out that the healing of Joseph’s father’s blindness, different from the Syriac reports on the matter, is accomplished not by the touch of Joseph’s hands or body, but the touch of his garment. This is a significant difference to Jesus’ healing of the blind in John 9 that Origen and the Syriac Church fathers allude to. Several scholars emphasized the symmetrical structure of the Joseph *Sūra*, highlighted it as ring-composition or chiasmic structure, for which the occurrence of the *qamīṣ* of Joseph is an example.<sup>63</sup> The *qamīṣ*, the shirt of Joseph that effects Jacob’s eyes, evokes the *qamīṣ* that was shown to Jacob at the beginning of the story, after the brother’s original crime.<sup>64</sup>

63 See Cuypers, “Structures Rhétoriques Dans Le Coran”, and now, Qureshi, “Ring Composition.”

64 See also Witztum, “Joseph among the Ishmaelites,” 437.

What is missing in the Qur'an (and many Syriac texts with similar symmetrical structures) is the *origin* of Joseph's shirt that, in Genesis, is so clearly connected with Jacob favoring Joseph over his other children. "Israel loved Joseph most and he made for him an ornamented tunic" (Gen. 37:3) is the starting point for the Joseph story in Genesis that already associates tragedy. The Qur'an skips this part and introduces the "shirt" (*qamīṣ*) only when it comes to the brother's attempt to trick Jacob of Joseph's death. (Q 12,18) Since Witztum, the Syriac tradition specialist, himself concludes that the similarities between the Syriac texts and the Qur'anic story are best explained by their shared departure from the Biblical version,<sup>65</sup> we have no reason not to emphasize the "missing" parts of Genesis in Sūrah 12. By omitting Jacob's contribution to the escalation of envy among the brothers (by making only for Joseph a multicolored garment and loving him more), Sūrah 12 renders the clothing of the prophet a purely positive artifact. It serves as a proof of his innocence (33) and an artifact of faith that mediates between Egypt and Canaan, Joseph and Jacob, climaxing in the healing of Jacob's blindness. The shirt that heals Jacob's blindness is not a magic tool, but a vehicle of faith.

Thus, in its unique retelling and structure of the Joseph story, Sūrah 12 brings several scriptural elements and interpretive traditions, several typological cross-references together: the repentance of the sinners, the fulfillment of the divine plan, the inversion of the ordinary sapiential relationship by a teaching of the *son* to his *father*, the relief from blurred sight via touch with the prophetic clothing. These different references certainly do not culminate in a Christological argument, but the Sūrah rather opens a multiple typological connection of Joseph, Jacob, and the brothers to other protagonists of history.

The question we should raise is not only how far the prophet of the Qur'an and his community might have been aware of the homiletic texts and practices from the neighboring Christian communities but merely, which purposes the intertextual and performative contexts of the Eucharist and other liturgical traditions serve for the Qur'anic community and text. It seems to me that the physical aspects of the prophet Joseph, the detail of the healing qualities of his fragrance and garment highlight the interdependency of spiritual and physical wellbeing. Joseph, seen in the light of the referred traditions, seems to introduce the experience that divine knowledge is not perceived on a linguistic level alone, but it has a sensual, aesthetic, haptic, and emotional component that goes beyond the cognitive understanding and verbally claimed truth of monotheism.

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65 Ibid.

## Conclusion

Many late antique traditions, including the Qur'anic narrative, that elaborate on Joseph's physical beauty are still surpassed by the later Islamic descriptions. And precisely in these descriptions of Joseph's beauty Islamic interpreters and storytellers draw the connection between Joseph and Muḥammad. Al-Tha'labī describes Joseph's physical appearance on the authority of Ka'b al-Akhbār in the following words:

Josef was light skinned. He had a beautiful face, curly hair and large eyes. He was a medium build, his arms and legs were muscular, his stomach 'hungry' or flat. He had a hooked nose, and a small navel. The black mole on his right cheek was an ornament to his face, and between his eyes there was a spot white as the full moon. His eyelashes were like the feathers of an eagle, and when he smiled the light flashed from his teeth. When Josef spoke rays of light beamed from between his lips. No one can fully describe Joseph.<sup>66</sup>

Al-Tha'labī's description of Joseph is only one in many that compare Joseph's face to light, and, sometimes more precisely, to the moon, to which Muḥammad himself is often compared as early as in the 9th century *Shamā'il Muḥammadiya* by the mystic al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī and many times in the later philosophical and literary traditions.

I give one example of a description of Muḥammad's beauty that is especially similar to the one we heard from al-Tha'labī. Abū Huraira when asked about the qualities of the prophet, said:

He had the best of qualities. He was medium in size, broad-shouldered. He had a high forehead and thick black hair, black eyes, long eyelashes, he treaded with his entire foot that had no curvature and when he spread his mantle around his shoulders it was as a bullion of silver. And when he laughed, light shone from the walls.<sup>67</sup>

The comparison of the prophet to the moon was so powerful that it inspired an artistic genre, the *hiliyāt* that were brought to perfection in the 17th century by Hafiz Osman. Here, the outer and inner qualities of the prophet are entered into the perfect oval of the moon. The linguistic description of the prophet's body and character replaces the prophetic physical portrait. The *hilya*, like the shirt of Joseph, and like the sandal and footprints of the prophet that are

66 Goldman, *The Wiles of Women, the Wiles of Men*, 83.

67 Ammann, *Vorbild und Vernunft*, 58.

venerated throughout the Islamic world as sources of prophetic blessings,<sup>68</sup> is a representation of the prophetic body that reveals itself only in its withdrawal, that is effective only in its trace.

I want to conclude with a hermeneutical reflection on this aspect of prophet Joseph in connection with wisdom: If we understand the allegory of lady wisdom as divine actress in the life of Joseph (as introduced in Prov. 1–9 and specifically connected with Joseph in SapSal 10) literally, we may describe the transmission process of stories itself as her accomplishment. The different Joseph traditions are a rewriting accomplished *with wisdom*. They are at the same time a new mediation and actualization of the efficacy of wisdom as the earthly agent of God. In her oscillation between the indispensability of revelatory knowledge and the corporate, playful, and even erotic efficacy, lady wisdom highlights the dialectic between the deprivation of divine knowledge and the joy of fabulating that shapes the transformations of the Joseph story through the centuries. As a patron of the (always imperfect) transmission processes and never completed interpretation, lady wisdom is both subject and object of her transcription. A by-effect of her agency is that she disguises the religious affiliation of the texts to either or another community of belief.

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68 On such “relics” see Beihieri, “Hilya,” 258–63.



# The Arabian Context of Muḥammad's Prophethood

## *The Testimony of Two Inscriptions*

*Suleyman Dost*

### Introduction: What is "Arabian" about the Arabian Context of Early Islam?

There has lately been a growing interest in the study of the "Arabian context" of Islam's origins.<sup>1</sup> This trend is due partly to the frustration caused by the limitations of the revisionist endeavor, which failed to unroot the event of the Qur'an from its traditionally accepted provenance in north-western Arabia. Despite its shortcomings, however, revisionist scholarship has gifted the field with the enduring idea that material evidence from pre-Islamic and early Islamic times, be it archaeological, architectural, epigraphic, numismatic and so on, is crucial to corroborate or counter the Muslim narrative. The return to the Arabian context of Islamic origins has benefited from this renewed emphasis on documentary evidence as we see the scholars of early Islam increasingly turning to epigraphic sources that have hitherto largely been in the exclusive use of comparative Semiticists and archaeologists of Arabia.<sup>2</sup>

But the following question is rarely asked: what do we mean by "Arabian" here? It must certainly mean something other than "Arab" or "Arabic". By using the word "Arabian" we thereby purposefully leave out categories of language and ethnicity, however they are construed, from its main signifier. To wit, the languages of Ancient South Arabia must have been unintelligible to Arabic speakers around Muḥammad and vice versa but scholars gladly take their testimony as part of the Arabian context of early Islam. Similarly, most speakers of these languages could have hardly identified as Arabs, whatever this might have meant at the time, because that seems to be a designation that they

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1 See among others Blois, "Islam in Its Arabian Context"; Saleh, "The Arabian Context of Muḥammad's Life"; Munt, "The Arabian Context of the Qur'an."

2 The utility of Arabian epigraphic sources for early Islamicists had long been argued by the likes of Margoliouth or Grimme but only recently do we see a burgeoning of studies in that direction. See Grimme, "Über einige Klassen südarabischer Lehnwörter im Koran." Margoliouth and British Academy, *The Relations Between Arabs and Israelites Prior to the Rise of Islam*. For more recent examples, see Blois, "Islam in Its Arabian Context"; idem, "Qur'an 9:37 and CIH 547"; Miller, "Yemeni Inscriptions, Iraqi Chronicles, Hijazi Poetry."

ascribed to others in late Sabaic inscriptions.<sup>3</sup> There is certainly some merit to understanding the scholarly use of “Arabian” as a geographical designation but this, too, has its ambiguities and needs to be probed further for precision and clarification.

What is “Arabian”, one could argue, is defined in our usage by the approximate borders of the Arabian Peninsula but, besides the problem of setting the latter’s fluid edges in the north, those of us who speak of the Qur’an’s or early Islam’s “Arabian context” rarely deem the entirety of the Arabian Peninsula relevant for such contextualisation. The area around the Arabian Gulf, in particular, is often neglected despite its connections with the larger Indian Ocean world and its, albeit limited, epigraphic heritage. “Arabian” in this case is not bound by the peninsula and denotes specifically that which is western Arabian in the north-south axis. If it has anything to do with geography it must be the sum of what Greek and Roman geographers called *Arabia Deserta* and *Arabia Felix*, the distinct appellations of which reflected two different sets of topographical, linguistic and political realities.<sup>4</sup> Islam was born in an area that was bookended by these two regions which were better known to classical authors than central-western Arabia and had a richer epigraphic record. In its positive connotations, then, the “Arabian context” of Islamic origins engages sources, old and new, that connect the world of Muhammad with the relatively better documented worlds of northwestern and southwestern Arabia. As Michael Macdonald astutely observed, the real linguistic divide in the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula was between the east and west, as the latter developed several writing systems, native as well as adopted, and the inscriptions in these scripts, Ancient North Arabian, Old South Arabian, Nabataean and Greek, have recently been brought to bear on a better contextualization of Islam’s beginnings.<sup>5</sup>

I would argue that there is another sense of “Arabian” in the scholarly usage that dates back to the beginnings of critical western scholarship, and in this usage Arabian is defined not by what it is but what it is not. For scholars who raced to find parallels to early Islamic religious discourse in Jewish and Christian sources, there remained a portion of materials that were impenetrable through the latter. Even though it was agreed that the core of the Qur’an’s message owed greatly to biblical and parabiblical texts, there were still

3 For a discussion of Late Sabaic sources and their use of ‘rb see Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 32–36.

4 For an overview of how these different appellations of Arabia appear in Ptolemy, see Bowersock, “The Three Arabias in Ptolemy’s Geography.”

5 For Macdonald’s ground-breaking study see Macdonald, “Reflections on the Linguistic Map of Pre-Islamic Arabia.”

"Arabian" elements such as the idiosyncrasies of a seemingly active polytheism in the Ḥijāz or statements about other religions that looked out of place. Richard Bell, a proponent of Christianity's dominant influence on the Qur'an, assessed this as follows: "He claimed to be an Arab prophet and he was. We shall see him consciously borrowing – he is quite frank about it. But to begin with, the materials which he uses, though they may remind us ever and again of Jewish and Christian phrases and ideas, are in reality Arab materials."<sup>6</sup> On the opposite camp, Charles C. Torrey, who wrote the "Jewish Foundation of Islam" had a strikingly similar view: "Around all these Qur'anic narratives there is, and was from the first, the atmosphere of an Arabian revelation, and they form a very characteristic and important part of the prophet's great achievement."<sup>7</sup>

This Arabian component that accounted for what Jewish and Christian sources could not explain had been habitually explored with the help of Muslim sources. The case in point is the description of idolatry during the period of *jāhiliyya* that early Muslim scholars presented in vivid details. The same spirit of revisionism, however, cast doubts on the reconstruction of pre-Islamic paganism through the lens of Muslim sources, and I would say, often rightfully so. Once again, Arabian epigraphy provides a unique chance of corroborating or problematizing the picture of pre-Islamic Arabia portrayed in Muslim sources.

My understanding of studying the "Arabian" context of Muḥammad and the Qur'an, as a heuristic model, is conditioned by the two elements mentioned above where "Arabian" represents aspects of early Islam that Jewish and Christian sources cannot account for while epigraphic sources can provide a certain degree of explanation and corroboration. A typical and well-executed example of such an inquiry is François de Blois's work on intercalation in the Qur'an as he reads Q 9:37 in the light of a Sabaic inscription (CIH 547). In this case, Arabian epigraphy not only provides a rare lexical parallel to the Qur'anic terminology but it also expands our knowledge of pre-Islamic religious and cultural milieu. As I focus in this piece on the Arabian context of Muhammad's prophethood, I will follow a similar methodology.

### Muhammad as an Arabian Prophet: A Prophet for the Pagans or Misguided Monotheists?

Within the methodological parameters that I discussed above, I explore in this article two inscriptions that could potentially illuminate two seemingly

6 Bell, *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment*, 69.

7 Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam*, 126.



irreconcilable faces of Muḥammad's interlocutors and thereby his role as a messenger. On the one hand, the Qur'an refers to deities and rituals that were deeply rooted in the long-forgotten polytheistic cults of Arabia as though they were still part of the religious sphere that Muḥammad and his addressees inhabited. At the same time, the language of the Qur'an shows distinct familiarities with the idiom of Jewish and Christian inscriptions from southern Arabia dated to the 5th and 6th centuries CE. One gets the impression while reading the Qur'an that Muḥammad encountered and responded to a wide variety of beliefs and practices that could only be accounted for if centuries of religious transformations in Arabia, as can be traced in epigraphy, all unfolded during his tenure as a prophet. To be sure, his traditional biography reflects a shift in the religious demographics of his audience when he left Mecca for Yathrib but the main focus of his activity remained to be his Meccan townsfolk and alleged pagans of other Arabian tribes.

I do not propose here a way out of the conundrum of whether Muḥammad's primary addressees were pagans, as the Muslim tradition suggests, or monotheists, as the epigraphic sources imply. Rather, I'd like to make the point that Arabian epigraphic corpus has the potential to explain both the pagan *and* the monotheistic legacy of Arabia that the Qur'an reminisces in its own laconic way. To this end, I'll juxtapose and discuss one inscription from the polytheistic period of southern Arabia (RES 4176, see below) and another one left by Abraha (CIH 541, see below). Despite being centuries apart and coming from two different religious worlds, both of these inscriptions find echoes in the Qur'an.

### RES 4176: Pilgrimage, Sacrifice, and Animals Reserved to Gods

The late Patricia Crone had been working later in her career on the question of *mushrikūn* and their portrayal in the Qur'an, and she argued convincingly that the Qur'an is surprisingly silent on the details of polytheistic beliefs and practices that Muhammad's interlocutors adopted.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the references to idol worship in the Qur'an are either from the stories of former biblical and Arabian communities or restricted to rules related to agricultural surplus, cattle and livestock. The Qur'an is particularly concerned with setting certain animals and plants aside for pagan ritual purposes as Q 6:136–138 states:

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8 Crone, "The Religion of the Qur'anic Pagans."

They appoint to God, of the tillage and cattle that He multiplied, a portion, saying, "This is for God" – so they assert – "and this is for our associates."... They say, "These are cattle and tillage sacrosanct (*hijrun*); none shall eat them, but whom we will" – so they assert – "and cattle whose backs have been forbidden, and cattle over which they mention not the Name of God." All that they say, forging against God; He will assuredly recompense them for what they were forging. And they say, "What is within the bellies of these cattle is reserved for our males and forbidden to our spouses; but if it be dead, then they all shall be partners in it ..." (tr. A. J. Arberry)

The practice that the Qur'an refers to here is not necessarily unique to pre-Islamic Arabia as similar practices of consecrating sacrificial animals and plants existed in other pagan contexts. What is significant here is the language that the Qur'an uses which echoes the terminology of religious practice as it is found in Old South Arabian inscriptions. An inscription from the modern-day Jabal Riyām region around sixty miles north of Sana'a, named RES 4176 provides a striking snapshot of pre-Islamic practices around consecrated lands and animals as well as pilgrimage rites that show parallels with the way these practices are mentioned in the Qur'an.

The inscription has been studied quite a few times, not least because it is fairly well-preserved and its content is interesting for several reasons. It also contains difficult or hitherto poorly-attested vocabulary leading to different interpretations by scholars of Old South Arabian. After Rhodokanakis<sup>9</sup> and Beeston,<sup>10</sup> Mahmoud Ghul turned to the inscription for its value for contextualizing the Muslim pilgrimage.<sup>11</sup> His interpretation was further revised by Beeston in a 1984 publication once better images of the inscription were made available by Christian Robin and the edited article was reprinted again in 2005.<sup>12</sup> More recently, Walter Müller made corrections to Ghul/Beeston's interpretation,<sup>13</sup> and some of the morphological oddities of the text have been discussed by Peter Stein.<sup>14</sup> The translation provided on the website of the Corpus of South Arabian Inscriptions, to which I will refer below, incorporated these recent reappraisals.

As Beeston mentioned in his revision of M. Ghul's translation, the reason the latter was interested in the inscription was its references to a ritual of pilgrimage that appeared to have echoes of the same to Ka'ba. What eluded attention

9 Rhodokanakis, "Altsabäische Texte II."

10 Beeston, "Two South Arabian Inscriptions. Some Suggestions."

11 Ghul and Beeston, "The Pilgrimage at Itwat," 1984.

12 Ghul and Beeston, "The Pilgrimage at Itwat," 2005, 147–54.

13 Müller, "Das Statut Des Gottes Ta'lab von Riyām Für Seinen Stamm Sum'ay," 89–110.

14 Stein, *Untersuchungen zur Phonologie und Morphologie des Sabäischen*, 95.

in the inscription, however, is the practice of consecrating animals and land for ritual purposes, a practice that the Qur'an laconically mentions in the verse quoted above. I would like here to highlight those sections in conjunction with other inscriptions that refer to the same practice. The following transliteration and translation are from the website of CSAI with some of my emendations.<sup>15</sup> The parts that are underlined will be discussed with special attention:

Text:

- 1 *b-ḥg dn mḥrn ḥḥr T'lb Rym Yrḥm s<sup>2</sup>b-hw S'm'y b-kn s'tyf<sup>c</sup> b-ḥrf 'ws'l bn Yhs<sup>3</sup>ḥm l-k-d 'ly'tnn S'm' b-d-'bhy bn ḥḥdrn 'lmq—*
- 2 *h 'dy Mrb w-l-k-d ḥḥr T'lb qs'dm bn ḍbh b-bd<sup>c</sup>-hw w-l-k-d ḥḥr T'lb Rhbtm bn ḥlf qnwym ywym Tr't w-Zbyn w-s'rn ns'r-n Nws<sup>2</sup>m((Nws<sup>2</sup>m)) b-'md |*
- 3 *'dy Rhb w-ṭmt ywm Tr't w-Zbyn w-hwst T'lb ywm ḥgr s'rn l-ḡrd b-hw w-yḡrdw S'm' b-s'rn b-ḥg mwst T'lb s'lb' m't qnym b-'hd |*
- 4 *ywmm w-l-k-d l-yqny T'lb b'l Tr't 's<sup>2</sup>r Ḡlḥ w-Nḍḥt w-Brrn w-Mnḥdm d-Mnyd<sup>c</sup> w-'s<sup>2</sup>r Dr'm w-'s<sup>2</sup>r m[ḥ]mytn d-rt<sup>c</sup> mšyḥm((Mšyḥm)) 'dy l-yrt<sup>c</sup> s<sup>3</sup>dn Hgr w-mdy-*
- 5 *h w-qwlhnh d-Yhybb w-d Mḍnhn w-mnsftn l-ykwnw b-'ly mb'l T'lb w-d yḡln bn mb'l T'lb l-yt'lmn T'lb brt-hw w-l-k-d ḥḥr T'lb s<sup>1</sup>—*
- 6 *r 'rwybn bn ns<sup>3</sup>g bn mšrn k-s'tnhšn b-ns'lm w-ḥḥr T'lb ḥlfn d-Mḥrmn w-Rydn w-Mnttm bn ḥwḍn 's<sup>3</sup>rm d-ys't<sup>c</sup>ḍbn k-ḥrmw w-'l s<sup>3</sup>n S'm'y h—*
- 7 *ḥbn ṣd T'lb w-ḥḥr 'lb bn ḥtl 'ntt b-ywm s'lb' d-Šrr l-tfr qs'd T'lb 'dy Tmt w-'dy tmn w-ḥṣr b-ḥrmt 'tmn w-ns<sup>2</sup> d-Mḍnhn qs'dn w-l-k-*
- 8 *d l-yf'l T'lb b-'s<sup>2</sup>r 'lm w-bn Hmdn 'lmn b-ḥrf w-d-Yhybb-w-d-Mḍnhn tny-b-ḥrf w-kwn-mrt<sup>c</sup> 'lmn ḥms't b-'ḥd-ḥrfym Tr't w-l-k-d l-y—*
- 9 *t'lmn 'ttr w-'lt b-Yhrq d-ydktn thrm k-ḥrm w-l-k-d s<sup>2</sup>m T'lb Yhybb 'ḥd-fqḥm w-Mḍnhn w-Yrs'm 'ḥd l-ṭbb mst 'lmqh*
- 10 *w-T'lb w-l-k-d ḥḥr T'lb Rhbtm bn kl-t'by ym Tr't w-ḥḥrn-h nfs'm w-l-k-d l-y't 's<sup>2</sup>r 'bs'm' w-fql Ḥrmt w-S<sup>2</sup>db w-'bln w-Mhns<sup>2</sup>y-w-S'mrt*
- 11 *w-Dmḥt w-Mdmnm w-Qhrt w-'twt l-y't 'dy 'twt w-Rymt w-'s<sup>2</sup>r Dr' w-Mḥmtn w-S'rn w-Mnḥd w-fql Ghfl l-y't 'dy Zbyn w-ḥg qny—*
- 12 *n ḍbh((d-bḥ))-hw tny 's<sup>1</sup>n w-t'l((T'l<b>)) w-l-yhrd' mr' 'rbbw S'm'y w-m'tn d't w-mḥr 'rs'wt Tr't w-Zbyn 's<sup>2</sup>rt ḥrfn w-'qb w-s'ḥmm l-yrt<sup>c</sup> d-'ḥdq—*
- 13 *{ḥ}n l-Rhbt w-ḥtq b-hwfyb b-ḥg-dn-mḥrn ym Tr't ḥrf w-dt<sup>c</sup> w-'s'rr w-'tṁr b-'s<sup>2</sup>r d-'gby 'ln-ḥgr T'lb 's<sup>3</sup>wr-hw w-mrd tlt l-q<sup>3</sup>m*
- 14 *'qwl w-ms<sup>3</sup>wd w-qs'd s<sup>2</sup>bn S'm'y ḥgddw w-h'zz mḥr ḥḥr l-hmw s<sup>2</sup>ym-hmw T—*
- 15 *'lb b'l Tr't 'dy dn ḥrn |*

15 The link for the epigraph together with the text and translation is <[http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=dasi\\_prj\\_epi&prjId=1&navId=211279720&recId=7497](http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=dasi_prj_epi&prjId=1&navId=211279720&recId=7497)>.

Translation (parts to be discussed are highlighted):

1 In accordance with this decree, T'lb Rym Yrhm has ordained to His tribe S'm'y when He declared His will in the year of 'ws'l, of the family Yhs<sup>3</sup>hm: that S'm'y should not neglect in the month of 'bhy to make a pilgrimage to 'lmqh

2 in Mrb, and that T'lb has forbidden the pilgrims to make trouble in His territory and that T'lb has forbidden (the territory of) Rḥbtm to be grazed by livestock on the two days of Tr't and Zbyn as well as the valley from (or: on the authority of) Nws<sup>2</sup>m, directly

3 towards Rḥb and 'tmt, on the day of Tr't and Zbyn. And T'lb has decreed, when the valley was reserved, to slaughter there – and S'm' will slaughter in the valley – according to the decree of T'lb, seven hundred small animals in one

4 day; and that T'lb, Lord of Tr't, will receive the tithes of Ġlz, Nḏht, Brn and Mnḥdm d-Mnyd', and the tithes of Ḍr'm, and the tithes of the irrigated field which runs alongside the canalization (or: Mšyhm) until the latter reaches the barrage Hgr and its

5 two overflow channels. And the two qwl of Yhybb and Mḏnḥn and the (temple) officials shall control the property of T'lb, and anyone who fraudulently appropriates (something) from the property of T'lb, shall be denounced to T'lb forthwith; and that T'lb has forbidden

6 capturing the remnants of the female ibexes by the mšr, when they are pregnant with offspring. And T'lb has forbidden the inhabitants of d-Mḥmmm, Rymn and Mnttm to lead herds, that can cause damage, since (these territories) are in the sacral state. And S'm'y are not allowed

7 to neglect the hunt of T'lb. And that He has forbidden that (those of) 'lb have sexual intercourse with women on the seventh day of (the month) d-Šrr, while the pilgrims of T'lb make a visit at Tmt and at 'tmn and stay in the sanctuary of 'tmn until he (the qyl) of Mḏnḥn dismisses the pilgrims. And that

8 T'lb will provide with the tithes – from Ḥmdn the single banquet in a year and from (each of) Yhybb and of Mḏnḥn two (banquets) in a year; so that the total of the banquets is five in one year, (to be held) in the day of Tr't. And that 'ttr and the gods in Yhrq shall

9 be notified of anyone who violates the ritual prohibition while in the sacral state. And that T'lb has appointed for Yhybb one arbitrator, and for Mḏnḥn and Yrs'm one, for proclaiming the decree of 'lmqh

10 and T'lb. And that T'lb has prohibited Rḥbtm from any fighting among themselves on the day of Tr't and has prohibited disputes there. And that the tithes of 'bs'm' and the firstfruits of Ḥrmt, S<sup>2</sup>db, 'bln, Mhns<sup>2</sup>y, S'mrt,

11 Dmḥt, Mdmmn, Qḥrt and 'twt shall be brought into 'twt and Rymt; and the tithes of Ḍr', Mḥmtn, S'm and Mnḥd, and the firstfruits of Ġḥfl shall be brought into Zbyn and in regarding the cattle,

12 two men should free them; and furthermore the master of dependents of S'm'y and of the places shall enforce the proclamation and the decree of the priests of Tr't and Zbyn for ten years (or: and T'lb should aid ...). And subsequent dispute is to be adjusted by him of Hdqn

13 for Rhbt; and the execution of this edict according to this is guaranteed on the day of Tr't, autumn and spring. And the valley (agricultural produce) and crops, which are with the tithes in the third decade (of the month) on the basis of the reserve, which T'lb separated for His part and one third is granted for the share

14 of the 'qwl, of the tribal council and of the pilgrims of the tribe of S'm'y. They have validated and put into effect the edict promulgated for them by their Patron T'lb,

15 Lord of Tr't, on this rock.

The inscription begins essentially as an ordinance (*hg*) from the deity T'lb to its people concerning a pilgrimage to the sanctuary of the higher deity 'lmqh in Marib in a designated month. Then, T'lb lays down further rules related to the use of grazing land, animal slaughter, tithes, ritual hunts and banquets, ending with more prohibitions on two sacred days. It is not fully clear whether the rest of the regulations has to do with the pilgrimage to Marib mentioned at the top or with the local cult of T'lb but the text is clearly religio-legal in content touching on some of the basic features of pre-Islamic Arabian cultic practice.

The first point of interest in the inscription is its larger frame regulating the rites of pilgrimage. The deity T'lb stipulates that the pilgrims are expected to sustain an elevated status of ritual purity signaled by the semantic range of the word *h̄rm*. In this level of sacrality during designated days certain, otherwise permissible, actions are strictly prohibited. Some of these prohibitions are easier to infer from the text than others. For instance, the people of T'lb are clearly warned against disputes (*nfs*<sup>1</sup>, ln. 10) during the sacred day of Tr't and it is possible that there is another reference to disputes or "bad behavior" in line 2.<sup>16</sup> Another clear prohibition is on sexual intercourse (*h̄tl*) on the day of pilgrimage, a prohibition that appears in penitential texts from the Haram region as well.<sup>17</sup>

The text also seems to refer to restrictions related to the use of land and animals during sacred days but at this point scholars disagree over the reading

16 M. A. Ghul certainly thinks so but Beeston doubted this reading, see Ghul and Beeston, "The Pilgrimage at Itwat," 2005, 149.

17 See CIH 533/Haram 34: *b-hn qrb-h mr'<m> ywm tlt hgtm*: "[she made penance] because a man approached her sexually in the third day of the pilgrimage".

of certain passages in the text. Line 2 contains a reference to the prohibition of animal grazing on the two sacred days, which could be interpreted that the land itself and its plants gained a status of sacrality on the days of pilgrimage. Even more ambiguous is the reference in Line 6 to leading herds during pilgrimage. Ghul and Beeston translated this section as follows: "and T'lb has forbidden the (sacrificial) she-camels of d-Mḥrmm and Raydan and Mnttm to be driven at a (pace) which causes distress, when they are in the sacral state" (*w-ḥẓr T'lb ḥlfn d-Mḥrmm w-Rydn w-Mnttm bn hwḏ'n ʿsʿrm d-ys't'dbn k-ḥrmw*).<sup>18</sup> In this interpretation, the camels led for sacrifice are supposed to be in a sacral state (*ḥrm*) and they need to be driven with care. Müller, on the other hand, argued that it is the land, not the animals, that is inviolable: *und T'lb hat den Anwohnern von (Wild)reservaten, der Weidegründe (des Wildes) und von Jagdgebieten verboten, eine Herde hinauszuführen, die Schaden anrichten würden, da (jene Plätze) unverletzlich sind* ("and T'lb has forbidden the dwellers of (game) reservations, grazing grounds (of game) and hunting grounds to lead out a flock that would do harm, since (those places) are inviolable", *my translation*). The divergence in the two translations is wide and the text is not easy to interpret but the common point in these interpretations is that it is not only humans that can have the status of *ḥrm* in sacred times and spaces but animals or land, too, gain such status.

That land and animals are accorded special cultic status in pre-Islamic Arabian religious practice is further attested in the inscriptions with the key-word *ḥjr*, the same word that the Qur'an uses for the concept. In RES 4176 the word appears twice, in Lines 3 and 13, the second one conforming more to the polemical usage in the Qur'an. In the first instance, the valley is "reserved" (*ḥgr s'rn*) for the slaughter of sacrificial animals, which curiously is supposed to take place in large numbers on a single day. The second attestation of the word *ḥgr* points to the practice of setting aside the crops of an area for the deity, in this case T'lb, mirroring the practice that the Qur'an accuses the *mushrikūn* of performing. The same deity T'lb is mentioned in another inscription from the region of Nihm, to the northeast of Sana'a, not too far from the provenance of RES 4176. In that inscription, T'lb has a land dedicated to it (*mḥgr*), which is forbidden to others for grazing.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, an inscription from Arḥab, north of Sana'a, records the dedication (*yḥgrmn*) of a water reservoir for the sole use of the deity Nws<sup>2</sup>m. The dedication requires that any animal that peruses the

18 Ghul and Beeston, "The Pilgrimage at Itwat," 2005, 148.

19 MAFRAY-al-'Adan 10+11+12.

cistern be sacrificed, males to T'lb and females to Nws<sup>2m</sup>, unless their owner pays a fine to redeem them.<sup>20</sup>

This single legal inscription (RES 4176), then, preserves a dense repository of pre-Islamic religious practices in southern Arabia concerning pilgrimage, animal sacrifice and the cultic use of land and produce. The language of this inscription and its content clearly echo the way the Qur'an speaks of similar practices, some of which it approves and some others it decries. Chapter 5 of the Qur'an contains three references to *ḥurum*,<sup>21</sup> the elevated status of ritual sanctity for the performers of pilgrimage, and curiously, all these three references have to do with hunting (*ṣayd*) and its prohibition when someone is in the state of *ḥurum*. The Qur'an makes the curious distinction that during *ḥurum*, the hunt of land animals (*ṣayd al-barr*) is forbidden whereas one can still eat seafood (*ṣayd al-baḥr*). RES 4176 also contains references to limiting activities of hunting during pilgrimage. In other words, both the Qur'an and RES 4176 stipulate that the land within the perimeters of *ḥarām* and the animals therein gain special status for the pilgrim. The Qur'an denounces, however, the practice of consecrating such lands, its produce and its animals to a deity or restricting their use to specific groups.<sup>22</sup> That certain animals are treated specially by not being driven or hauled with burden according to Q 6:38 might find its parallel in the enigmatic statement in Line 6 of RES 4176, which, for Ghul and Beeston, prohibits the driving of sacrificial camels at a pace that causes distress.

The similarities are more striking when it comes to restrictions imposed on the pilgrims in the state of elevated ritual purity. The most extensive information about pilgrimage in the Qur'an comes from Q 2:196–198, where it is stated that the pilgrimage is confined to designated days, as in RES 4176. The pilgrims cannot engage in sexual activity nor cause trouble or fight (*wa-lā rafatha wa-lā fusūqa wa-lā jidāla fī l-ḥajj*) while they perform the pilgrimage.<sup>23</sup> That the pilgrimage is associated with animal sacrifice is evident in RES 4176 and the Qur'an also prescribes for pilgrims to sacrifice an animal as a conclusion to the rites of the pilgrimage.<sup>24</sup>

20 Robin/al-Mašamayn 1.

21 See Q 5:1, 95, 96.

22 See Q 6:139 for instance: "And they say, 'What is within the bellies of these cattle is reserved for our males and forbidden to our spouses; but if it be dead, then they all shall be partners in it.'"

23 See Q 2:197.

24 Q 2:196: *wa-ʾatimmū l-ḥajja wa-l-ʾumrata li-llāhi fa-ʾin ʾuḥṣirtum fa-mā staysara minā l-hadyi*: "Complete the ḥajj and the ʾumrah for Allah's sake, and if you are prevented, then [make] such [sacrificial] offering as is feasible."

Still, the picture that emerges from the comparison of a single Ancient South Arabian inscription and the Qur'an on the questions of pre-Islamic religious practice is a complicated one. There are practices that are simply criticized and abandoned in the Qur'an, such as consecration of animals and land to gods, whereas some others, such as forbidden months or certain rites of pilgrimage, are transformed and adapted to the Qur'an's religious agenda. More significantly, this comparison demonstrates the Qur'an's conscious engagement with the non-monotheistic/pagan/polytheistic legacy of its provenance that the Jewish and Christian sources can hardly account for. Even though the polytheism of southern Arabia gave way to Judaism and Christianity two centuries before the rise of Islam, inscriptions that document the polytheistic phase of the region still provide the closest parallels to the idiom of the Qur'an when it comes to its criticism and adaptation of earlier Arabian traditions. Yet, I would argue that the utility of Arabian epigraphy for the contextualization of Muhammad's prophethood and the Qur'an is not limited to its portrayal of Arabian polytheism. Admittedly, the monotheistic period of southern Arabia yielded a much smaller number of inscriptions than the polytheistic phase, given that the former lasted much longer, but the Christian and Jewish religious formulae that these inscriptions contain have already expanded our horizon on the study of these two religions in Arabia. In the next section I would like, as an example, to focus on a well-known inscription commissioned by Abraha, the Abyssinian ruler of South Arabia, and two words in it that parallel their usage in the Qur'an.

#### CIH 541: Rasūl and Khalifa

Abraha's reign in Ḥimyar was marked by his struggle to gain recognition for himself as a leader that came to power by force and his efforts to maintain the Marib dam, which have long provided an invaluable source of irrigation but was in poor condition at the time. CIH 541, a large stele-inscription erected at the site of Marib Dam by Abraha, reflects both of these aspects of Abraha's reign. Beginning with a Christian formula invoking the Holy Trinity,<sup>25</sup> the hundred-odd-lines inscription touches on several topics: the rebellion of a governor appointed by Abraha (Lines 9–13) and how he suppressed the revolt (Lines 13–41), multiple repairs on the dam conducted by Abraha (Lines 55–63, 68–73, 97–114), a plague that led to the dismissal of his armies (Lines 72–75)

25 *b-ḥyl w-[r]d' w-rḥmt Rḥmnn w-Ms'lḥ-hw w-Rḥ [q]ds'.* "With the power, the help and mercy of Rḥmnn and his Messiah and the Holy Spirit".



and a diplomatic summit that brought representatives from Constantinople, Aksum, Persia and several Arabian tribal confederations (Lines 87–92). The inscription received due attention for its varied content<sup>26</sup> but my focus here will be on two terms that appear in the text: *rsʿl* and *hlft*.

The Qurʾan principally uses two words for messengers and prophets sent by God to a community to warn them: *nabī* and *rasūl*. The former is a common word in other Semitic languages with the sense of “prophet”, corresponding squarely in meaning to the Greek word that became the basis of the English word as well. The word *rasūl*, however, does not have a cognate, nor does it seem to correspond to any specific concept in Jewish and Christian prophethood.<sup>27</sup> It is also unclear whether there is any difference between these two words,<sup>28</sup> even though Muslim scholars did come up with distinctions for who the Qurʾan calls a *rasūl* and who a *nabī*.<sup>29</sup> There is no doubt that the meaning of the word in Arabic is “someone sent with a message, a messenger” but for a word that has a precise religious connotation referring often to biblical prophetic figures it seems to have little history before the Qurʾan.

The only time a cognate word shows up in the Arabian epigraphic texts, as far as the current record is concerned, is in CIH 541. The lines 87–92 of the inscription mention a diplomatic convention as follows:

87 ... Following this  
 88 the ambassador of Negus  
 89 and the ambassador of Rome arrived at his court, as well as the diplomatic  
 mission  
 90 of the king of Persia, the envoy of Mḍrn, the envoy

26 The long inscription was studied for its narration of the events during the reign of Abraha as well as its linguistic peculiarities, see Smith, “Events in Arabia in the 6th Century AD”; Gajda, “Himyar Gagné Par Le Monothéisme (IVe-VIe Siècle de l'ère Chrétienne)”; Müller, “Die Stele Des 'Abraha, Des Äthiopischen Königs Im Jemen,” 266ff; Sima, “Epigraphische Notizen Zu Abraha's Damminschrift (CIH 541).”

27 In the sense of “messenger”, *rasūl* must certainly have links to similar concepts of prophethood in late antiquity but the fact that no direct cognates exist might indicate that it is a conscious translation of a concept like Greek *apostolos*, as argued by long ago by Horowitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 44–46. I would argue that the Qurʾanic word *mursal*, and particularly its use in Sūrah 36 in a seemingly Christian context, corresponds better to the word *apostolos*. It should also be remembered that the word of Jesus's apostles in the Qurʾan is *ḥawārīyyūn*, an Ethiopic loanword, see Jeffrey, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾan*, 115f; Nöldeke, *Neue Beiträge Zur Semitischen Sprachwissenschaft*, 48.

28 The distinction becomes all the more problematic as the Qurʾan calls Ishmael, Moses and Muḥammad both a *rasūl* and a *nabī*, see Q 19:51, 19:54 and 71:57.

29 For a discussion of these two terms in their Qurʾanic usage, see Rubin, “Prophets and Prophethood,” 289–307.

91 of Ḥṛṭm son of Gblt and the envoy of 'bkrb  
 92 son of Gblt.<sup>30</sup>

The text appears to have three categories for diplomatic representatives: *mḥs<sup>2</sup>kt* for the Byzantine and Ethiopian ones, *tnblt* for the Persian delegate and *rs'l* for the representatives of Ghassanids (Ḥārith b. Jabala and his brother Abū Karib) and Lakhmids (Mundhir b. al-Nu'mān). The first two words, or at least words from these roots, are attested elsewhere in Old South Arabian texts, suggesting that they are originally from the languages of South Arabia. *Rs'l*, on the other hand, is not found in any other inscription. Given that it is used for the envoys of Arab states, in this case Ghassanids and Lakhmids, it is very likely that the word in Old South Arabian is an Arabic loanword. Yet, what this solitary attestation tells us is that the word *rasūl*, or a similar form of it, was in circulation before Muḥammad as a word denoting a political office: diplomatic representative or messenger. With the Qur'an, it gained a religious sense not too far from its "secular" usage before.

A similar transformation can be observed in the word *khalīfa*, which is a fairly well-attested word in the Qur'an, both in singular and plural, meaning "one that succeeds, a group that replaces or comes after another one".<sup>31</sup> Two instances where the word is found in the singular form, Q 2:30 and 38:26, however, seem to stand out with more theologically-laden meaning. In these cases, Adam and David are described as "made (*ja'ala*) a *khalīfa* on earth (*fī l-arḍ*)", while in the case of David, his role as a *khalīfa* qualified further as "judging between people with justice". It is clear that the Qur'an is using the word in the sense of an office, perhaps best understood in a political sense for comparison, and it is no wonder that translating it as "viceroys" or "vicegerents" became very common.<sup>32</sup>

A close parallel to the Qur'anic usage of the word *khalīfa* appears in CIH 541. The inscription mentions Abraha's military expedition against Yazīd b. Kabsha,

30 Once again, the translation is from the CSAI website. The text in Sabaic is as follows: ...

*w-k-wṣḥ- <h> m—*

88 *w mḥs<sup>2</sup>kt ngs<sup>2</sup>yn w-wṣḥ-hmw*

89 *mḥs<sup>2</sup>kt mlk Rmn w-tnblt*

90 *mlk Frs<sup>1</sup> w-rs'l Mḍrn w-rs'l—*

91 *l Ḥṛṭm bn Gblt w-rs'l 'bkrb*

92 *bn Gblt ...*

31 See Q 6:165, 7:69, 7:74, 10:14, 10:73, 27:62, 35:39.

32 For a recent discussion on the Qur'anic usage of the term *khalīfa*, see Sinai, *The Qur'an*, 149f. For the semantic development of the term in early Muslim sources, see Al-Qadi, "The Term 'Khalifa' in Early Exegetical Literature."

whom Abraha had appointed (*s'thlfw*) as a *hlft* for Kinda. The best rendering of the term in this case would be “governor” or ruler in an inferior status to Abraha himself. Once again, the word is not common in Old South Arabian and the only other text in which it appeared (in the verbal form *s'thlf* in Ry 506) is from another Abraha inscription, in that instance referring to the appointment of 'Amr b. Mundhir as the governor of Ma'add. In both cases, Abraha appoints rulers to well-known Arab tribal confederations and calls such rulers as *hlft*. As in the case of *rasūl*, it is likely that the word is Arabic and refers to an office to which Arabic-speakers are appointed. Similarly, *khalīfa* as a word of political import in Old South Arabian texts is transformed in the Qur'an to a religious concept that signifies God's appointment of humans as vicegerents on earth.

### Conclusion

It is tempting to reduce the Arabian element in early Islam or Muhammad's mission to ethnic, linguistic or geographical categories but I contended here that the legacy of revisionist historiography opened up new venues to explain the “Arabian context” of Islam through new or overlooked sources that come out of the Arabian peninsula. Inscriptions in particular, and those with religious content, can be extremely useful in contextualizing both the Qur'an's engagement with pre-Islamic Arabian polytheism and its unique take on Judaism and Christianity, both of which survived and thrived in South Arabia for at least two centuries before the rise of Islam. What is “Arabian” about early Islam, in my understanding as I argued in this paper, is what truly Arabian sources, such as epigraphic material in Old South Arabian, Ancient North Arabian or Hījāzi Nabataean, can illuminate when other sources, including early Muslim historiography in Arabic, fail to explain.

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**PART III**

*Challenges for Prophetology within the Framework  
of Comparative Theology*



# Sūrah Yūsuf as an Examination of Christological Motifs?

## *A Systematic Search for Traces Following Recent Exegetical Findings*

*Klaus von Stosch*

In recent years, certain developments have occurred in scholarship regarding the question of the specific relationship of the Qur'an to high Christology.<sup>1</sup> However, when examining explicit Qur'anic statements about Jesus, the Son of Mary, one must remember that speaking of the Old Testament prophets as *typoi* (i.e. as it were pre-drawings) of Jesus Christ and, in this manner, developing prophetology as implicit Christology were natural for the majority of church fathers of late antiquity.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, Sidney Griffith assumes that Qur'anic prophetology must be deciphered as a counter-discourse against implicit Christology.<sup>3</sup> In examining this thesis, the figure of Joseph is of particular interest, because he represented a particularly powerful site for the typological development of Christology among church fathers.<sup>4</sup> As such, is it possible to understand Sūrah Yūsuf as a confrontation with an implicit Christology? Moreover, can the Qur'anic critique of this Christology be more closely defined in terms of its motives? Is it a fundamental critique of any high Christology or are there comprehensible reasons that underlie the Qur'anic reshaping and reconfiguring of the given motifs and narrative materials?

Such questions emerge from presuppositions of recent historical-critical Qur'anic research, which should be first viewed as explorations in a new field of research. The awareness of the Qur'anic community about corresponding typological interpretations of the Christian church fathers is unclear. Moreover, whether or not the Qur'anic community theologically engaged with the church fathers is less clear. Nevertheless, reports of recent studies make it extremely likely, especially for Sūrah Yūsuf that they addressed the intertexts of Syriac church fathers and, thereby, had typological interpretations in

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1 For a discussion, see Khorchide and Stosch, *The Other Prophet*; as a summary of my position today, cf. Stosch, "Kirche und Fremdprophetie," 247–70.

2 Cf. Heither, *Mose*; Heither, *David*.

3 Cf. Griffith, "Late Antique Christology in Qur'anic Perspective" here 44.

4 See, for example, Dulaey and Joseph le patriarche, "Figure Du Christ," 83–105; Heal, "Joseph as a Type of Christ in Syriac Literature," 29–49.



mind in the sense of implicit Christology.<sup>5</sup> In his dissertation, Charbel Rizk convincingly demonstrated that the Qur'an, in its construction of the Joseph story, reacts in various ways to the Christological-typological interpretation of the Joseph figure in the Syriac tradition. In the first step, Rizk's dissertation illustrates the motifs, plotlines and lines of thought from the Syriac tradition, which are of crucial importance to the typological interpretation of Joseph towards Christ that do not appear in the Qur'an.<sup>6</sup> In total, Rizk lists 19 Syriac typological-Christological interpretations of the Biblical tradition whose narrative clues remain unmentioned by the Qur'an. This finding suggests that the Qur'an considers the church fathers' extensive typological interpretations of Joseph towards Christ problematic and does not wish to adopt them. In the following, the study intends to explore the question of what theological motifs may underlie the Qur'anic omissions.

Evidently, one must be extremely careful with such a question, because the Qur'an is not only in discussion with the Syriac church fathers and not every omission of narrative details needs to pursue a counter-Christological intention.<sup>7</sup> Thus, in my opinion, a few of the omissions listed by Rizk are seemingly readily explicable without reference to Christology. In my search for traces, I concentrate on the passages in which I consider the explanatory approach of the Qur'anic omission as an implicit statement vis-à-vis the Syriac tradition to be plausible. The fact that the Syriac tradition is seemingly such an intensive interlocutor for Sūrah Yūsuf may be due to the particular geographical, cultural and linguistic proximity of Syriac Christians to the genesis of the Qur'an, which is a proximity that renders Syriac literature of late antiquity the site par excellence for Qur'anic intertexts.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, this chapter does not endeavour to demonstrate once again that the Qur'anic modifications of the Biblical textual record are best understood as a reaction to the Christological interpretations

5 Based on the Qur'anic text alone, a striking aspect is that according to Q 12:22, Joseph is given wisdom and knowledge by God, which are both qualities that the Qur'an prominently associates with Jesus (cf. Q 3:48). For the initial research, I believe this aspect, in fact, makes it very likely that Q 12 indeed engages with texts from the Syriac church fathers, see Rizk, *Prophetology, Typology, and Christology*; Witztum, "The Syriac Milieu of the Quran".

6 Cf. Rizk, *Prophetology, Typology, and Christology*, 41–99.

7 In this book Schmidt's chapter can be understood as a reading of the Qur'anic Joseph story that is aware of the exegetical findings that I use for my interpretation without giving them much weight as this chapter. As one of the editors of this book, I am particularly happy with these oppositions, because they demonstrate the ambiguity of Qur'anic dealings with Christological traditions in a very impressive manner.

8 This can be demonstrated by a look at the proportion of Syriac intertexts in the *environmental texts* compiled by the Corpus Coranicum project (<https://corpuscoranicum.de/> call 10.03.22).

of the church fathers. I am fully aware that the last word in research remains unspoken. Instead, with heuristic intent, this study seeks to elucidate the implications of the Qur'anic perspective on Jesus, the Son of Mary, if circumstantial evidence from Sūrah Yūsuf may indeed be interpreted as addressing an implicit Christology. Therefore, I would like to invite readers to a so-called thought experiment, for which a number of strong clues can be found in recent research, at the same time, however, it is unusual and presupposition-rich, such that it can only be understood as an experimental search for clues for the time being.

### 1. Counter-Christological Omissions of Biblical Motifs in Sūrah Yūsuf?

In examining the Qur'anic motifs that underlie the omissions of Biblical narrative materials in Sūrah Yūsuf due to their critical implications for Christology, three circles of motifs emerge that seem to be of concern to the proclaimer of the Qur'an and the Qur'anic community.

#### a) *Rejection of Anti-Jewish supersessionism*

In my view, the rejection of any form of Christological supersessionism is particularly evident and recurring. I will illustrate this using three examples. First, the church fathers transfer the special relationship of Joseph to his father and his superiority over his brothers to Jesus and his special relationship to God the Father and his superiority over all prophets.<sup>9</sup> The Qur'an does not seem to want to follow this hierarchisation, which could also be and was turned anti-Jewish. Thus, it omits the narrative details used by the church fathers to illustrate Joseph's superiority, such as the Bible's transmission through him of the evil deeds of his brothers to his father (Gen. 37:2) or the emphasis on the greater love of Jacob for Joseph (Gen. 37:3f). The Qur'an certainly considers the special significance of Joseph's clothes not only as evidence of his apparent death or infidelity (Q 12:17f; 12:25–28) but also as a means of healing (Q 12:96). However, it does not mention that the clothes were specially made for Joseph

<sup>9</sup> When I speak here of the Church Fathers in general, I do not mean to claim that all Church Fathers are to be regarded as supersessionist, but only to address a widespread tendency in patristics, which I concretize only with regard to certain Syriac Church Fathers, because they are particularly obvious as intertexts of the Qur'an. On the inaccuracy of the accusation of supersessionism, cf. with regard to Origen, for example, Azar, "Origen, Scripture, and the Imprecision of 'supersessionism'"; Kofsky and Ruzer, "Theodore of Mopsuestia on Jews and Judaism."

by his father, which elevated him above his siblings (Gen. 37:4). In summary, this move avoids any idea that would imply unjustified favouritism towards Joseph by his father. On the contrary, the Qur'an programmatically emphasises at the very beginning that God fulfils God's grace on Joseph and the house of Jacob (Q 12:6) without privileging Joseph at this point. If one considers the typological identification of Joseph with Christ in the patristic tradition, then one can see a promise not only to Christianity but also to Judaism in this programmatic statement.

Second, the Biblical version of the Joseph narrative assumes that Joseph is sent by God and his father to his brothers in Shechem, who are feeding the sheep and goats there (Gen. 37:12–14). In the Qur'anic version, however, the brothers take him away and, thus, lure him into a trap (Q 12:11f). In this context, Joseph appears still as a child and the brothers promise to watch over him while he plays. In the interpretation of Aphrahat and Jacob of Sarug, Joseph being sent by his father is linked to the vineyard parable, in which the landowner sends his son to the vinedressers to collect the fruit (Matt. 21:33–46par). However, the vinedressers kill the son, as did the servants before him. The Syriac church fathers now typologically interpret the brothers of Joseph as the Jews who killed the son and heir of God.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that Joseph in the Qur'an becomes the victim of his brothers' intrigue while still a child emphasises his innocence. His provocative dreams, which remain hidden, are not the cause of the intrigue but the feeling of jealousy against the one who is supposedly more beloved.<sup>11</sup> In the Qur'anic version, given that Jesus is able to speak prophetically as a child (Q 19:30), the emphasis on the childhood of Joseph cannot be brought against the typological identification of Joseph with Jesus. The Qur'an simply seems to oppose the idea of the mission to the sacrifice on the cross and its supersessionist implications.

Third, in the Biblical story, Joseph's brothers sell him upon Judah's initiative (Gen. 37:26f); in the Qur'anic version, the merchants discover him by chance when they went to fetch water from the well (Q 12:19). The background of this omission could be the fact that Syriac church fathers, such as Aphrahat and Jacob of Sarug, observed the behaviour of Judas Iscariot prefigured in this

10 Cf. Aphraates and Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage*, 405; Akhrass and Sryany, 160 *Unpublished Homilies of Jacob of Serugh*, 1:505.

11 As previously mentioned, the Qur'an omits the Biblical detail of Jacob's preference for Joseph. However, the motive of jealousy due to this preference (from the Qur'anic point of view, only alleged) is assumed to be known in the Qur'an. The Qur'an does not want to undo the effects and plausibility of the Biblical story but only to question its legitimacy.

initiative by Judah.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Judah becomes Judas and the life-saving intervention of Judah in the Biblical context is turned into its opposite. Once again, then, the Qur'anic omission can be understood as an endeavour to deconstruct supersessionist Christian theologies.

The three aforementioned omissions could also be generally opposed to any form of high Christology. In addition and certainly, the majority of Muslim interpretations would simply see such anti-Christological motifs at work in the interpretation of Sūrah Yūsuf, if they are willing to seriously consider the typological search for the proposed traces. In pointing out that the three omissions can be interpreted as criticisms of the anti-Jewish supersessionism of the Christology of the church fathers, I want to acknowledge an interpretive possibility of the Qur'anic reservations about Christological motifs, which were developed and substantiated at length elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> From the modern theological perspective, the Qur'an would be stronger and more convincing in such an anti-supersessionist reading and more challenging for non-Muslim listeners. In addition, the hermeneutical principle of charity within comparative theology demands to adopt the strongest interpretation available for the text of another religion. Thus, I suggest reflecting on this possibility.

**b) *Rejection of an imperial claim to the figure of Joseph***

A second motif seemingly exerts a critical effect on Christology in the Qur'an and arouses scepticism about a typological claim to Joseph from the Christological perspective. Although rabbinic sources and in the church fathers refer to Joseph as a shepherd, even the Lord of Shepherds, this detail does not appear in the Qur'anic text. A possibility exists that the Qur'an takes offence at the hierarchisation made by Aphrahat and Jacob in particular, when Joseph thus appears as lord over all other shepherds and, therefore, as the better shepherd.<sup>14</sup> For this reason, an anti-supersessionist motivation could be hidden here as well. Especially in view of the link of the shepherd function with that of the statesman given, for example, in Philo and numerous Greek thinkers,<sup>15</sup> this superlative is politically charged and can be used to legitimise imperial theology and Christology, which the Qur'an seems to view critically.<sup>16</sup>

12 Cf. Aphraates and Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage*, 406; Akhrass and Syryany, 160 *Unpublished Homilies of Jacob of Serugh*, 1:513.

13 Cf. Stosch, "Kirche und Fremdprophetie"; Khorchide and Stosch, *The Other Prophet*.

14 Cf. Aphraates and Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage*, 405; For more detailed evidence, see Rizk, *Prophetology, Typology, and Christology*, 41–42.

15 Cf. Colson, *Philo*, 141; Blondell, "From Fleece to Fabric," here: 23–32.

16 Cf. Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*.

Two further details support this notion. In the Biblical text, Joseph's investiture of power by the Pharaoh is linked to a bestowal of insignia of power upon him, such as the signet ring, the byssus robes and the golden chain around his neck (Gen. 41:42). In the Qur'an, Joseph is also placed at the head of storehouses and is considered highly respected (Q 12:54–56); however, it avoids anything that may imply an end in itself of power. His installation is intended to secure Joseph a place in the land and is done due to his trustworthiness and pragmatic skill. Based on this discussion, a power-political staging of his peculiarity is avoided. Observing an anti-Christological intensification would only be permissible if one wanted to develop Christology with such imperial insignia of power. A possibility exists that the proclaimer of the Qur'an has indeed such Christologies in mind. However, whether or not a discourse exists with the Christian-typological interpretation is unclear in view of the installation of Joseph.

This uncertainty may change in light of another detail. Joseph's brothers also prostrate themselves before him (Gen. 42:6), which is a detail that is important for the Biblical narrative, because it partially proves the two dreams from the beginning of the Joseph novella. The prostration of the parents (Gen. 37:9f), which is to be expected from the second dream, is not found in the Biblical Joseph novella—at least not in the Hebrew version of the text. It may be relatively different in the Greek and Syriac translations of the Bible. When Gen. 47:31 says that Jacob bends over the head of his deathbed in response to Joseph's oath, the Septuagint and Peshitta find the idea that Jacob bends 'over the head of his staff', because the underlying Hebrew word for bed can also mean staff when vocalised differently. Many church fathers wanted to see bowing at this point and, thus, viewed the second dream as fulfilled.<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, the Qur'an precisely takes up this second dream, such that one expects a corresponding prostration (Q 12:4). However, it is missing at the expected place of the brothers' encounter with Joseph (Q 12:58). Once again, one can see the scepticism of the Qur'an against any religious charging of imperial insignia in the background or suspect anti-Christological motives. In any case, a striking aspect is that in the typological interpretation of a number of Syriac church fathers, this prostration of the brethren is understood as a surrender to Jesus as the Son of God.<sup>18</sup> This notion suggests a counter-Christological implication of the Qur'anic omission. Whether or not it is directed against high Christology as such or against its imperial claim remains unclear for the time

17 Cf. for example Johannes Chrysostomos, *Genesishomilien*, 54, sp. 567f; Ephraem the Syrian, "Genesiskommentar XLI," 198.

18 See, for example, Ps.-Narsai, "Über Josef," 561.

being. However, in the further course of Sūrah Yūsuf, a prostration occurs before Joseph (Q 12:100), which does not fit a general critique of high Christology. This prostration does not explicitly mention the brothers, although one can assume that they are among those present who prostrate themselves before Joseph. This is also the suggestion of the standard interpretation in Muslim tradition. Much textual evidence implies that the parents of Joseph joined in the gesture of humility. However, this happens after Joseph has raised his parents to the throne. If they now throw themselves at Joseph's feet on the throne, then misunderstanding this gesture as a recognition of his imperial or political power is impossible. At the same time, this gesture is extraordinary in the ancient Near Eastern as well as in the late antique contexts, especially in light of it being anchored in the Biblical tradition, which can only be comprehended nearly by force. Does this mean that a Christological interpretation of this scene, purified of political implications, may therefore be likely?

The act of prostration/Proskynesis before a person is found in two main groups of images in late antique art: in depictions of defeated enemy rulers or generals (e.g. prostrating themselves before the Roman Emperor) and of donors or of the Emperor, prostrating in front of Jesus Christ.<sup>19</sup> This latter pictorial motif, together with the fact that prostrations before the Emperor were forbidden on Sundays,<sup>20</sup> may suggest that a certain tension was perceived between these two major forms of a Proskynesis.

However, a relatively clear idea to Christians of the late antique Near East was that prostration/Proskynesis was not something that could be offered to God alone: Already 'Origenes (adnot. In Ex. 20, Patrologia Graeca 17, col. 16) unterscheidet insofern zwischen λατρεία und προσκύνησις, als erstere letztere mit einschließt, aber nicht zwingend umgekehrt, denn προσκύνησις kann *eine oberflächliche, den sozialen Normen entsprechende Ehrerbietung sein*, muss aber nicht unbedingt λατρεία meinen'.<sup>21</sup> This prostration/Proskynesis before a fellow human who is only socially superior has been attested in the Gospel of Matthew. In the parable of the merciless debtor, we read that the debtor/servant 'fell down and prostrated (προσεκύνει) himself before' (Matt. 18,26) his master (to ask for more time to pay off his debt). In summary, prostration to humans was neither unknown nor particularly unusual in early Christianity and in the world of Late Antiquity. Ray Lozano demonstrated that, 'many in

19 See Stefanos Alexopoulos, "Proskynesis," col. 368.

20 See *ibid.*, col. 370–371.

21 *Ibid.*, col. 367.

antiquity would acknowledge their superiors with προσκύνησις, especially those who rule over them as their kings and lords'.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, in the majority of cases, one can infer that Proskynein in the New Testament is enacted before God and Jesus Christ as God or as divine.<sup>23</sup> For example, theologically meaningful forms of prostration/proskynesis occur before Jesus (e.g. Heb. 1:6 or Phil. 2:10), which would have led Syriac fathers, such as Jakob, to understand the prostration in front of Josef christologically. Evidently, another very prominent Qur'anic scene exists in which prostration to humans occurs such as the scene in which the angels are ordered to prostrate themselves before Adam. Holger Zellentin compares the different versions of this Qur'anic scene with the same passages in the *Cave of Treasures* and with *Bereshit Rabba* and demonstrates that the different Meccan episodes on the creation of Adam (Q 18:50–53; 17:61–65, 15:26–48, 38:71–85, 7:10–28 and 20:116–23) are in close dialogue with the Syriac tradition. Moreover, they adopt an increasing number of elements of the *Cave of Treasures*, including the prostration before Adam and the refusal of a few angels to perform this prostration.<sup>24</sup> Zellentin identifies the danger of the association of the angels with God as the major reason for this prostration in the Qur'an. He suggests that the prostration of the angels becomes a weapon in arguments against pagans in Mecca.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, the Qur'an remains silent about certain Christological motives and does not understand the prostration – pace the *Cave of Treasures* – as a form of worship.<sup>26</sup> Similar to the rabbis, the Qur'an seemingly rejects the kingship and holiness of Adam,<sup>27</sup> which was developed in the Christian-typological reading of the role of Adam.

The only Medinan retelling of the story in Q 2:29–37 seems to be a response not only to the Christian but also to the rabbinic tradition, which becomes increasingly precise in its theological articulation. Zellentin demonstrates how glory and holiness are transferred from Adam/Christ to God,<sup>28</sup> and no divine

22 Lozano, *The Proskynesis of Jesus in the New Testament*, 175; See, *ibid.*, 13–34.

23 Alexopoulos, "Proskynesis," col. 366f.; see Lozano, *The Proskynesis of Jesus in the New Testament*, esp. 169ff., coming to different results than the earlier study by Horst, *Proskynein*.

24 See Zellentin, "Trialogical Anthropology," 61–129, here 98. For the inner-Qur'anic developments between these passages see the chapter of Neuwirth/ Hartwig in this book.

25 Zellentin, "Trialogical Anthropology," 97.

26 Compare *ibid.*, 79.

27 Compare *ibid.*, 86–87.

28 See *ibid.*, 122.

knowledge can be attributed to Adam,<sup>29</sup> which seemingly also challenges the idea of the rabbis who stress that Adam's wisdom is superior to that of angels.<sup>30</sup>

On the one hand, we present evident and close parallels between the Syriac literature and the Qur'anic prostration before Adam,<sup>31</sup> which may be related to the order given to the angels to prostrate themselves before Jesus, the second Adam, in Heb. 1:6. This verse was interpreted – similar to Phil. 2:10 – by most Exegetes of Late Antiquity as a manifestation that Jesus Christ is God.<sup>32</sup> This aspect may have led to the idea that the prostration of the parents before Joseph can also be interpreted christologically. On the other hand, Zellentin poses many arguments for a non-Christological reading of the Qur'anic versions of the prostration of the angels before Adam. However, applying his arguments to the case of Joseph is difficult. Thus, inferring that pagan people in Mecca associated angels with God and arguing that the Qur'an wants to oppose these pagans by positively referring to the prostration of the angels before Adam make sense. However, evidence is lacking for people who associate their parents with God. For this reason, the reference to the association of parents lacks a good Qur'anic motive, such that its narration in the Qur'an is striking. Nevertheless, the door remains open to the possibility for Christians for Christological readings at a very decisive moment of the story of Joseph.

In summary, an interesting notion is that the Qur'an does not omit such possibilities for Christological associations. Thus, the major concern is not to avoid prostrations before humans but, potentially, to avoid a misunderstanding of these prostrations as a form of the sacralisation of political power in the sense in which Heraclius understood his reign. When the parents perform the prostration on the throne, the scene illustrates that imperial power needs to be balanced and contextualised. In other words, the scene is seemingly more about Joseph and his relationship with his parents and less about his imperial power.

### c) *Counter-Eucharistic Implications of the Omission of Joseph's First Dream?*

The first dream, in which the sheaves of Joseph's brothers bow down before his sheaf, is fiercely rejected by his brothers in the Biblical figure of Joseph's novella, because they noted the presumption that Joseph wants to be their king and lord (Gen. 37:6–8). In contrast, the second dream evokes the protest of his father, who does not want to accept that they must prostrate themselves

29 See *ibid.*, 124.

30 See *ibid.*, 93.

31 See Minov, "Satan's Refusal to Worship Adam," 230–71.

32 See Heen, Krey, and Oden, *Hebrews*, 22ff.



before Joseph (Gen. 37:9–11). In the Qur'anic version, as previously mentioned, only the second dream is preserved, such that one could ask whether it is only narrative parsimony that leads the proclaimer of the Qur'an to omit the first dream or whether theological motives could also exist. Is it, perhaps again, Joseph's imperial presumption as suspected by the brothers that leads the Qur'an to omit the first dream? Alternatively, does the proclaimer of the Qur'an take offence at the Eucharistic interpretation of the first dream by Jacob of Sarug, for example?<sup>33</sup>

Examining the relationship of the father with Joseph, another detail may elucidate the answers to these questions. In the Qur'an, the father does not reject Joseph's presumption that the parents and his brothers should prostrate before him. Instead, the father asks Joseph not to use this fact as an argument against his brothers (Q 12:5). Thus, Jacob confirms his son's election and ranks it with the election of his fathers (Q 12:6). In contrast, the growth of Joseph's sheaf and its venerability to Jacob of Sarug functions to illustrate that the fullness of bread is only in Jesus and that only with him is life-giving power.<sup>34</sup> It is precisely this latent supersessionist charge of the dream that its omission takes away. Therefore, the typological allusion to the Eucharist does not seem to be the decisive problem; instead, it is the intensification of this interpretation to a supersessionist Christology. In fact, another unlikely scenario is that the Qur'an pursues counter-Eucharist motifs in its omission of the first dream, because, elsewhere, it seemingly accepts in principle that the bread of heaven connects Christians with Jesus and is able to give the disciples certainty in their hearts.<sup>35</sup> However (this is how one could interpret the omission of the dream), the proclaimer of the Qur'an resists the assumption of a superiority of the Eucharist over other forms of closeness to God. Nevertheless, whether or not the proclaimer of the Qur'an holds a special sensitivity for the particularity of the Eucharistic event and, perhaps, even wants to invite a Eucharistic interpretation of Christology, we will still consider in the further course of our reflections.

Thus far, we have identified only two motifs of the counter-Christological omissions in *Sūrah Yūsuf*. The Qur'an seemingly opposes the typological claims to Joseph in the Christology of the church fathers when these can be used in a supersessionist and imperial manner. Whether or not he also wants

33 Cf. Akhrass and Syryany, 160 *Unpublished Homilies of Jacob of Serugh*, 1:498 f.

34 See again *ibid*.

35 See also Q 5:112–114. On the interpretation of the passage, cf. Khorchide and von Stosch, *The Other Prophet*, 159–62.

to intervene generally against a high Christology must remain open. The textual findings do not suggest but evidently do not exclude this interpretation.

Apparently, one could object to all possibilities of interpretation turned to criticism of Christology that the omissions in each case are simply due to the narrative economy of the Qur'an and only happen to be concerned with christologically central points. Indeed, drawing conclusions from an *argumentum e silentio* is always decidedly tricky. In addition, the cumulative force from the multitude of case studies is only of limited conviction. Rizk is, evidently, aware of this objection; for this reason, he is particularly emphatic about the three cases, each of which exhibits not only an omission but also a counterfactual intertextuality between the Qur'anic formulation and the Syriac *memre* tradition. With this formulation of counterfactual intertextuality, which was borrowed from Zishan Ghaffar,<sup>36</sup> Rizk intends to elucidate that the Qur'an and the Syriac tradition directly contradict each other on crucial facts. Once again, this direct contradiction decisively exceeds the diagnosis of an omission and increases the likelihood that even the mere omissions are made with critical intent. They are particularly striking and could also help in answering the question of how to evaluate the Qur'anic approach to the Biblical tradition in light of its Christological implications. Towards this end, I present three examples.

## 2. Three Examples of Counterfactual Intertextuality in Sūrah Yūsuf

### a) *Potifar's accusation*

The first example explained by Charbel Rizk is related to Potifar's wife, who in the Biblical and the Qur'anic versions, tries without success to seduce Joseph (Gen. 39:12; Q 12:23f). In contrast to the Bible (Gen. 39:19f), however, Potifar in the Qur'anic version does not believe his wife (Q 12:28) and is not responsible for the imprisonment of Joseph (12:33–35). In other words, not only is a detail of the Biblical narrative omitted, but the facts also are inverted. Such inversions are found in view of the first detail mentioned in certain rabbinic and Syriac sources. Thus, in Genesis Rabbah, Pseudo-Basilus, Pseudo-Narsai and Narsai, they also assume that Potifar does not believe his wife.<sup>37</sup> However, in all these sources, Potifar is the one who remains responsible for Joseph's imprisonment. In contrast, in the Qur'an, Potifar does not condemn Joseph. In the further course, instead, Joseph himself desires the prison sentence to escape

36 Cf. Ghaffar, "Kontrafaktische Intertextualität im Koran und die exegetische Tradition des syrischen Christentums."

37 See the evidence in Rizk, *Prophetology, Typology, and Christology*, 70.

the persecutions of women (Q 12:33), such that the incarceration brought about by the women's intrigues nearly appears as a fulfilment of his wish. Who is responsible for this incarceration on the human side remains open; it is simply stated laconically that incarcerating him seemed good to *them* (Q 12:35). Who 'they' are remains open.

To make the inversion of the Biblical story understandable at this point, Rizk offers an explanation from the Syriac tradition, which he particularly develops by recourse to Jacob of Sarug. Similar to Jesus, Joseph was considered guilty by his people, although he was not guilty of anything as Jacob of Sarug explains.<sup>38</sup> He explicitly identifies the Egyptian woman in her agitation against Joseph with the *synagogue*, which, according to his interpretation, turns against Jesus. At the typological level, Judaism is, thus, explicitly accused of having learned the denial of the Savior from the Egyptian woman. Typologically, Potifar plays the role of Pilate, who condemns the innocent victim to death, because he is manipulated by the women or the Jews against Joseph or Jesus.

Although Potifar is tricked in Jacob's sermon and allows himself to be manipulated – similar to Pilate – the Qur'anic version of the story presents the case that Potifar recognises the deception and, therefore, defends Joseph against the accusations of his wife. In addition, in the Qur'an, the women in the city see through the scheme of Potifar's wife and publicly oppose her (Q 12:30). If we typologically understand this woman as part of Israel, because Potifar's wife is identified with Israel by the church fathers and the other women belong to the same people as she, then Israel as a whole would no longer turn against Jesus in the Qur'anic version, but only part of its ruling elite.

However, whether or not the women in the Qur'anic version of the story are to be interpreted in this manner remains relatively vague, because they follow the invitation of Potifar's wife to a banquet and perform a strange ritual by cutting their hands. This ritual has previously aroused associations with the Eucharist through the talk of a banquet and the great importance of the blood. However, blood is not symbolically represented, which stems from an injury that the women want only inflicted on themselves. Moreover, no ritual consumption of the blood occurs. Despite these obvious differences, if the Eucharist is in view here, then the Qur'an perhaps intends to warn against a potential misunderstanding of the Eucharist. After all, the women get into ecstasy by the beauty of Joseph and they increase into it by their peculiar ritual actions. Relatively different from Q 5:112–114, their actions do not appear as a response to God's action, but as something of their own making. As such, it is

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38 See Akhrass and Syryany, 160 *Unpublished Homilies of Jacob of Serugh*, 1:529.

not for the purpose of gaining assurance of heart but for ecstasy. Thus, their feast could be interpreted as a pagan instead of a Christian ritual; accordingly, it culminates in the confession of Joseph/Jesus as an angel (Q 12:31) that is, the basic pagan misunderstanding of the prophets in Qur'anic theology.

This pagan interpretation of the women's ritual also fits the fact that a cross-cultural idea of slitting one's wrists for love nearly exists in secular love literature. Against this background, the ritual of the women may be evaluated as a pagan ritual of veneration of Joseph or Jesus, respectively, which is supposed to demonstrate how much Joseph have inspired the women. The women could then stand for a grouping that was very present in Mecca and wanted to include Jesus in their pantheon of gods, thus, understanding Jesus as a finite quantity that competes with other heavenly figures (see Q 43:58).<sup>39</sup>

In this aspect, Potifar's wife gets carried away by Joseph and commits the sin of companionship in this manner (Q 12:30). In doing so, she harms Joseph/Jesus the most and destroys the relationship with him. Furthermore, the other women fail to achieve a helpful relationship with Joseph/Jesus. Apparently, dangers lurk for the Qur'anic perception in the Christ-relationship, which gets the upper hand when rituals display ecstatic-orgiastic features and when the beauty of Jesus Christ becomes the all-dominating category. Unfortunately, less is known about the addressees of this warning such that it can be explained more precisely. If Christians are addressed, then it may be concerned with an inherent danger of Christ worship, which could consist in making Jesus an idol and wanting to come close to him through ecstatic rituals.

On the one hand, it denotes the defence against the paganisation of the worship of Christ. In addition, the opposition between Christ and Israel, as introduced by Jacob of Sarug, is broken up and given new possibilities of interpretation through the category of ambiguity.<sup>40</sup> The anti-Jewish clichés of the church fathers are rendered impossible and the arbitrator role of Rome is destroyed, because Joseph/Jesus determines his fate in the end. Therefore, it is neither the Jews who bring Jesus to the cross nor Pilate's miscarriage of justice but the will of Jesus, who submits entirely to the will of God. In this manner, Q 4:157 can then say that God alone is the acting agent in the execution of

39 See Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 2/1*, 620; Stosch, "Kirche und Fremdprophetie," 250–56.

40 The category of ambiguity is introduced by the Qur'an itself in the context of Christology (cf. Q 3:7 in the interpretation of Khorchide and von Stosch, *The Other Prophet*, 130.). Through the narrative development of the seductive power of the beauty of the figure of Jesus with simultaneous appreciation of his healing power, which will be discussed in more detail in a moment, an ambiguous mixed situation arises in the typological interpretation of Sūrah Yūsuf with regard to Jesus. Cf. Stosch, "Kirche und Fremdprophetie."

Jesus.<sup>41</sup> The reason is that Jesus takes himself completely back in the Qur'anic interpretation and repeatedly elucidates God as the reason for his work and his miracles. The group that, in fact, conducts the execution in the end is no longer important at this point, because the historical event can no longer be separated from the will of God.

**b)      *The Three Journeys of Joseph's Brothers to Egypt***

For the second example, Joseph's brothers make three trips to Egypt in the Biblical version. Although they returned empty-handed after the first time due to Joseph's insistence that they must bring their youngest brother Benjamin with them, Benjamin is then arrested by Joseph the second time, before Joseph reveals himself to them (Gen. 45:3–5). Finally, the third visit serves to move the whole clan to Egypt (Gen 46). In the Qur'anic version, Joseph's revelation on the second journey occurs only to Benjamin, who remains nameless (Q 12:69), while he does not reveal himself to the other brothers until the third journey (Q 12:90). In this context, not only is something omitted (the revelation to the brothers on the second journey) but the situation of revelation is inverted with regard to the brothers who have become guilty of Joseph.

To explain the reasons why this event happens, Rizk again recommends an examination of the Syriac church fathers. Thus, Jacob of Sarug compares the revelation of Joseph to his brothers with the *Parousia* of Christ and his meeting with the nations. When all the nations are gathered only then will the Risen Christ come again and reveal himself in his glory.<sup>42</sup> Those who crucified him will also recognise him. A special treatment of the Jews is, thus, excluded and their special relationship to Christ is left unmentioned. Yes, typologically, they will have to be ashamed in the encounter with the *Parousia* Christ as the brothers of Joseph when they see him again.

If one wants to understand the special treatment of the Qur'an with regard to Benjamin, then one needs to consider whether or not Benjamin's role should also be understood typologically. In the Jewish tradition, at any rate, Benjamin seems to have been frequently understood as a typos for King Saul, who came from the tribe of Benjamin.<sup>43</sup> After all, Benjamin is the only son of Jacob born in Israel. On the other hand, part of the patristic exegesis typologically links Benjamin with Paul.<sup>44</sup> Evidently, this interpretation fits well with the special

41 For a detailed explanation of this interpretation of the crucifixion verse, see Stosch, "Approaching the Death on the Cross."

42 Cf. Akhrass and Syryany, 160 *Unpublished Homilies of Jacob of Serugh*, 1:567.

43 Cf. Krause, *Saul, Benjamin and the Emergence of Monarchy in Israel*, 1–6.

44 Cf. Hannah, "The Ravenous Wolf".

relationship of Jesus to the Benjaminite Paul. However, making it plausible as a theological intervention of the Qur'an is difficult, because Paul seemingly does not play a role in the Qur'an.

Therefore, considering the typological interpretation of Saul seems more insightful. The relationship of Saul to David, who would then be typologically identified with that between Benjamin and Joseph, is anything but free of tension biblically. Nevertheless, if the special closeness of Joseph to Benjamin is considered here and Benjamin stands for the pre-Davidic or the so-called extra-Messianic, state-constituted Israel, then a special love relationship of Jesus Christ to precisely this Israel is warranted. In view of the massive hopes of the Jews in late Meccan times to become native again in Jerusalem through the interim victory of the Persians over Byzantium, such a statement would also be a very powerful political message.<sup>45</sup>

In any case, I find that the Qur'anic Joseph asks Benjamin to stop being sad about what his brothers once did is very interesting (Q 12:69). Typologically, this act is the betrayal of Christ, for which Benjamin/Saul is not responsible. The representative of the present political Israel and its hopes would then be acquitted of the charge of betrayal and in intimate relationship with Christ. As previously discussed, especially as Q 4:156f clarifies, the proclaimer of the Qur'an does not want to take sides in the question of the guilt for the death of Jesus.<sup>46</sup> Although he dismisses the dumping of the blame on Rome, it does not mean that he accepts the thesis of Jewish responsibility for the death. He only elucidates that reconciliation can occur for Joseph's brothers even if they bear the guilt of betrayal. In other words, even if one shares the thesis of the guilt of certain Jews in the death of Jesus (which the Qur'an explicitly does not), one must not infer their rejection based on this guilt. Typologically speaking, Christ holds out new possibilities of relationship despite the guilt that has emerged.

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45 In view of the late Meccan major conflict of the Byzantine Empire with the Persians, it could also be interesting that Mordecai and his niece Esther were both from the tribe of Benjamin. Both submit to the king of Persia and, thus, save the lives of the entire Jewish people (Esther 2:5–6). Could there be a cautious allusion here to the Jewish hope after the reconquest of Jerusalem by the Persians? This hope would remain christologically tied back through Benjamin's special relationship to Joseph, such that the Jewish-Christian antagonism that normally accompanies it cannot emerge in the first place. The Jewish longing for their land, thus, no longer becomes visible as in the *Sefer Serubbabel* as a messianic hope for overcoming adversaries but as a justified hope for a homeland, which can certainly be conveyed christologically and prophetologically. However, this must remain a speculation.

46 For the interpretation of Q 4:156f, see again Stosch, "Approaching the Death on the Cross," 150–64.

Moreover, the hoped-for state figure of Israel is unrelated to the rejection of the messianic claim of Jesus.

c) *The Revelation on the Second Journey*

The third example given by Rizk deepens our observation from above by examining the considerations of Jacob of Sarug regarding the reason why Jesus reveals to the brothers on his second journey of all times. Although Jacob interpreted the encounter on the first journey as an encounter with the earthly Jesus, which has just not yet led to the faith of the Jews, the second journey stands for the *Parousia* of Christ, such that the conversion of Joseph's brothers is understood as the conversion of Israel through the *Parousia*.<sup>47</sup> In contrast, the Qur'an – when viewed from this scheme – postpones the conversion of the brothers to the time after the *Parousia*. In doing so, it fundamentally changes the character of the return of Jesus Christ. It no longer serves to point all peoples towards Christ and, thus, to convert an unbelieving Israel to Christ. Instead, it provides a platform for an intimate encounter between Joseph and Benjamin or Jesus and Israel.

From the Qur'anic point of view, however, the story is far from over with the reconciliation of the church with Israel. Only in the third journey did reconciliation with the brothers occur. If the brothers represent the totality of the tribes of Israel, then this journey could still be related to the complexity of the reconciliation process of Israel and the church, which is made possible not only by Joseph but also by Benjamin. Possibly, however, the brothers also typologically stand for Gentile nations, which then do not fall solely within the Christian sphere of responsibility. Similarly, they require the cooperation of Joseph and Benjamin that is, of Christ and Israel. The considerations here remain tentative and point to different directions. However, it is not likely to interpret the Qur'anic inversions simply as a criticism of high Christology.

### 3. Counterfactual Intertextuality and Qur'anic Appropriations of Patristic Interpretive Traditions

In the abovementioned dissertation (see footnote 5), Rizk addresses Qur'anic passages that add extra-Biblical details to the story of Joseph in his second working step and demonstrates that these can be explained nearly exclusively by the texts of the Syriac church fathers. Once again, this point decisively

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47 Cf. Akhrass and Syryany, 160 *Unpublished Homilies of Jacob of Serugh*, 1:567.

strengthens his basic argument. Evidently, the proclaimer of the Qur'an always receives Syriac additions and theological deepening of the Biblical text, even when they are interpreted christologically. Only when these Christological interpretations acquire supersessionist features and establish a hierarchical relationship via typology that the Qur'an does not seem to adopt them.

Specifically, Rizk presents 13 extra-Biblical details.<sup>48</sup> In the case of the second dream of Joseph at the beginning of the story, for example, the Qur'an adopts Jacob's belief in the dream and his warning against the ill will of the brothers. It also pertains to the idea of Satan as the enemy of humans from the patristic tradition. In particular, the latter two details are found in this form in Jacob of Sarug. Theologically, Rizk explains these adoptions using the fact that the Qur'anic community can readily interpret these details in terms of the fate of Muhammad, which a rationale that applies to many of the elaborated adoptions. Thus, the proclaimer of the Qur'an seemingly adopts the typological strategy of the patristic texts and to see the fate of Muhammad as prefigured in the fate of Joseph. However, it does not argue in a supersessionist way and – in contrast to the Christian tradition with regard to Jesus does not claim that Muhammad exacerbates and surpasses the fate of Joseph. The typological interpretation towards Muhammad should also not be understood exclusively and, as will be discussed later – does not necessarily omit the Christological connection.

#### a) *Potifar's Accusation Revisited*

I also cannot trace in detail all the points that have been discussed in the exegetical studies of Rizk. For pragmatic reasons, I will limit this paper to the two scenes discussed in the last chapter. In the Biblical narrative, Potifar's wife does not appear after her accusation of Joseph but does so in the Qur'anic narrative, when she appears with the women who cut their hands (Q 12:31) and admits her guilt for Joseph's arrest (Q 12:32).

Interestingly, the admission of guilt as such by Potifar's wife can be found in the Syrian church fathers (e.g. in Ephraem).<sup>49</sup> At the same time, she attempts to take away her husband's bad conscience due to the condemnation pronounced by him by understanding the condemnation as God's plan and by pointing out that Joseph could only find his destiny and glory through his imprisonment. In the letter of Pseudo-Basilius, she asks forgiveness for her meanness and lie and wants to participate in his elevation to rule over Egypt, which is an offer of

48 Cf. Rizk, *Prophetology, Typology, and Christology*, 100–174.

49 See the evidence in Witztum, "The Syriac Milieu of the Quran," 238–54.



reconciliation that Joseph gladly accepts.<sup>50</sup> Repeatedly, then, the repentance of Potiphar's wife enables her to share in Joseph's salvation. Typologically, the option of redemption is, thus, opened to Israel when it recognises its guilt and turns to Christ anew.

Interestingly, the Qur'an considers this idea positively and modifies it decisively at the same time. By including the other women, Potiphar's wife no longer stands alone for Israel, but the voices of this people are diversified. We found that in the case of the other women, whether or not they are typologically still to be identified with Israel remains unclear. Hence, the clearcut supersessionist Christian reading becomes ambiguous in the Qur'anic version and different interpretations become possible. The Qur'an may want to suggest the following here: In their confession of guilt so demanded by the church, if Jews seek a new relationship with Christ and find a ritual fellowship with people who are enthusiastic about Christ in the process, then new trouble threatens. The reason is that the innocent women unite through the conversion-mad wife of Potiphar into an enthusiasm for Joseph/Jesus accompanied by bloody rituals, which should be rejected from the Qur'anic perspective. The reason for this rejection is that their ritual is an encroaching intrigue; on the narrative level, it forces Joseph/Jesus to flee into the dungeon. Apparently, he feels challenged by the encroaching enthusiasm of the women and no longer knows how to resist them. Joseph/Jesus is afraid to fall for them (Q 12:33). In this respect, the Jewish *No* to Jesus can also be understood as a protection for the church to prevent it from becoming encroaching and wanting to unite everything with Christ in a carnal manner. Alternatively, the conversion of all Jews could call into question the integrity of Jesus, who can only remain truly human if the orgiastically united community of women turns away from him (Q 12:31) or is kept away from him through intervention by God (Q 12:34).

#### b) *The Meeting of Joseph With Jacob Revisited*

Let us now consider the second context that was previously examined and pose a new detail: in the Qur'anic version, when the brothers return to Jacob after their second journey, he loses his sight in the face of the loss of his two favourite children (i.e. Joseph and Benjamin). He is literally no longer able to see anything that makes life worth living. When they then return to Joseph and complete their third journey to Egypt, not only are their debts forgiven, but Joseph also gives them his shirt to take with them, such that they may use it to heal Jacob's blindness (Q 12:93). Thus, Joseph's brother mediated this healing

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<sup>50</sup> Heal, "Joseph as a Type of Christ in Syriac Literature," here: 106f.

as they were tasked to bring Joseph's shirt to Jacob, which assumes a liturgical function. The relationship with Joseph/Jesus, thus, becomes possible through the liturgical action of his brothers, who can stand as much for the church as for Israel. On the one hand, therefore, healing is Christocentric (precisely through his garment); alternatiely, it needs the cooperation of the brothers regardless of which faith community they belong.

Rizk implies that such a function of Joseph's clothing and the idea of Jacob's blindness do not occur in Jewish tradition. In the Syriac tradition, as well, although the healing role of Joseph comes into play, it is not associated with his clothes.<sup>51</sup> On the contrary, in the Syriac church fathers, Jacob loses his sight in view of the perception of the bloody clothes of Joseph, not simply as in the Qur'an, due to his recollection of Joseph's fate (Q 12:84) in view of the presumed loss of Benjamin (Q 12:83). Thus, if Benjamin should stand for pre-Messianic, state-constituted Israel, as previously conjectured, then Israel would be visible in terms of its relationship with Christ. If one continues to follow the typological interpretation that was previously pursued, then one may consider whether or not perhaps the loss of a successful relationship of this Israel to Christ constitutes the occasion of the need for redemption by Jacob/Israel.<sup>52</sup> This notion could potentially further imply that the salvific significance of Jesus becomes relevant only to the descendants of Jacob who lost their connection to Benjamin and, thus, to state-based Judaism. Moreover, it is the case that, according to the Qur'an, the touch by the garment replaces the living encounter, which becomes the occasion of healing for the Syriac church fathers. Given the great importance of relics in the late antique Christian tradition and the extensive debate about the significance of the garments of Jesus and Mary in the Qur'an,<sup>53</sup> this change can be viewed as a benevolently presented concretisation of the so-called Christ encounter in Late Antiquity. The same shirt (which in the Qur'anic version of the story of Joseph proves Joseph's innocence in the accusations of Potifar's wife) is the one that refers to Joseph/Jesus and, thus, conveys healing and brings the good news (Q 12:96).

However, Rizk draws attention to another potential explanation. According to ancient church understanding, the Eucharist opens the eyes of people

51 Cf. the evidence in Rizk, *Prophetology, Typology, and Christology*, 153.

52 For the capture of Benjamin as representative of this integrity by Joseph would now be the reason for Jacob's blindness, which makes it impossible for him to see the continued work of God's promise in his children. Thus he lacks the healing nearness of God, which is then granted to him a little later by the garment of Joseph/Jesus and which enables him again the possibility of the perception of the faithfulness of God (literally he can see his child again, in whose existence, however, exactly this faithfulness is shown).

53 Cf. on the interpretation of Q 5:75 Tartari and Stosch, *Mary in the Qur'an*, 210–17.

and overcomes their inner blindness, as in the Emmaus story. This symbolic meaning was literally demonstrated in the Syriac liturgy in Late Antiquity by faithfully placing the body of Christ on their eyes before communicating.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, in the liturgical context, this Eucharistic event is prepared by the use of incense. It is also used for the Eucharistic gifts; the priest in the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom says that they are received from God 'as a fragrance of a spiritual odor'.<sup>55</sup> The sense of smell, as it were, opens to the encounter with Christ; indeed, it virtually mediates this encounter. From this point of view, Rizk is absolutely right when he considers remarkable the fact that Jacob is first touched by the smell of Joseph (Q 12:94).

If we relate the healing meaning of the instance in which Jacob once again smells Joseph's clothes, then, notably, the relics in the (late antique as well as today's) eastern piety are also typically very often fragrant.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, Jacob can believe again the good news that Joseph/Jesus is alive even before he sees Joseph in the flesh through the touch of his eyes on the shirt/Eucharistic body and its holy fragrance.

Thus, one could also ask whether or not the second journey in the Qur'anic version can really mean the *Parousia*. For Joseph can heal Jacob through signs which is from a Christian-typological point of view the hallmark of the church in the time of waiting for the return of Christ. The described reconciliation of Israel and church would then not be an event that can wait until the *Parousia* of Christ but is now the task of all children of Israel. Only the third journey would then stand for the *Parousia* and provoke the prostration of all before Joseph.

#### 4. Conclusion

We collected several indications, which suggest that the Qur'an rejects high Christology when it is turned supersessionistically against Israel and when it is used to legitimise imperial theology. Finally, the Qur'an is critical of Christians whose relationship with Christ is indistinguishable from their relationship with an idol. In contrast, the proclaimer of the Qur'an seems decidedly open to a Eucharistic embedding of Christology, even if he can see the dangers of misunderstood Christian rituals. In addition, he interprets the Eucharist in

54 Cf. Rizk, *Prophetology, Typology, and Christology*, 161.

55 [https://www.goarch.org/-/the-divine-liturgy-of-saint-john-chrysostom?\\_101\\_INSTANCE\\_ulcNzWPdScz6\\_languageId=el\\_GR](https://www.goarch.org/-/the-divine-liturgy-of-saint-john-chrysostom?_101_INSTANCE_ulcNzWPdScz6_languageId=el_GR) Call on 10.03.22.

56 Cf. Harvey, *Scenting Salvation*, esp. 203, 223, 272.

contrast to many church fathers not through the tradition of love mysticism<sup>57</sup> but from its sensual processes. Only when we open ourselves to Christ with all our senses, such as in the smell of the incense as well as in the touch of his body, can the healing experience of the closeness of Jesus be possible. Thus, Joseph/Jesus becomes newly accessible as a brother, rather than as a super shepherd or head guru, who can approach us in a reconciling manner through his relational power. His specialness consists precisely in the fact that he does not want to be special (Q 12:101). His venerability is only given when he is not isolated from his Jewish origin; for this reason, he is venerated together with his parents or asks the parents to come to the throne in their veneration (see above 1.b). In contrast, the attempt to place Joseph above his brothers and, thus, to separate the church from Israel proves to be the work of Satan (Q 12:100), which the Qur'an contrasts with the reconciling power of God in its guidance and mercy (Q 12:111). Only when such reconciliation is achieved can the true beauty of the story of Joseph be allowed to shine (Q 12:3) and a superficial enthusiasm for the beauty of Joseph be overcome. Embedded in the beauty of the recitation and narrative context, however, Joseph can then also become a sign of God with his brothers (Q 12:7), which is a distinction that has previously existed for Jesus (Q 19:21). According to the Qur'an, therefore, it could be reason to pursue the signs of God from the Christological perspective as well.

The present search for traces intends to put forward the first heuristic hypotheses, which enables the Qur'anic Joseph story to appear in a new light through its connection with Syriac intertexts. My impression is that this aspect makes the story more comprehensible in terms of originality and penetrating power. However, many observations can be interpreted very differently. Only when we succeed in placing Sūrah Yūsuf more precisely in the Qur'anic prophethood will it become clear whether or not the reading attempted in this article can really stand up to close criticism.

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57 Cf. only the numerous echoes of the marriage mysticism between Christ and the Church in Ephraim and Jacob. Evidence can be found, for example, in Ephraem, Gwynn, and Böer, *Hymns and Homilies of St. Ephraim the Syrian*; Jacob of Sarug, "Über die Taufe unseres Erlösers im Jordan," 6f and 52ff. The Eucharistic union was not only understood by them very strongly also in an erotic sense, for example, by Gregory of Nyssa. The first wedding night corresponded in this thinking to the Eucharist. One can easily imagine that such images could cause irritations in the Qur'anic community, which were in the background of the criticism of the feast of the women around Potifar's wife described above.



# The Letter of Jude as a Testimony of Early Christian Prophecy of Divine Judgment and the Question of Prophetic Power in a Theology of Prophecy in Dialogue

Christian Blumenthal

Prophets exercise immense power as they claim to speak on behalf of God. At times they even go so far as to announce a judgment in the name of God. A largely neglected literary testimony of the early Christian Prophecy of Judgment is the Letter of Jude.<sup>1</sup> In Jude 11, for example, the author expresses a woe oracle against his opponents: οὐαὶ αὐτοῖς, ὅτι τῇ ὁδῷ τοῦ Κάϊν ἐπορεύθησαν καὶ τῇ πλάνῃ τοῦ Βαλαάμ μισθοῦ ἐξεχύθησαν καὶ τῇ ἀντιλογίᾳ τοῦ Κόρε ἀπώλοντο<sup>2</sup>. This verse stands in the tradition of prophetic pronouncements of judgment and woe oracles in the Old Testament. In such oracles as in Isa. 1:4<sup>3</sup>; 10:1 or Jer. 22:13, the interjection woe functions as an announcement of doom, because

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1 Luz, "Stages of Early Christian Prophetism," 161, regards early Christian Prophecy as "a complex phenomenon far from all uniformity" (more detailed *ibid.*, 161–178); as additional exemplary contributions concerning research of early Christian prophecy, see only Dautzenberg, *Urchristliche Prophetie*, especially for 1 Cor. 12–14; Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*; Gillespie, *The First Theologians* (with a focus on Paul) as well as the collective volume: Joseph Verheyden, Korinna Zamfir, and Tobias Nicklas, eds., *Prophets and Prophecy in Jewish and Early Christian Literature*.

I developed the following considerations together with a previously published study on the subject of Jude's opponents: Blumenthal, "Ein prophetisches Gerichtswort." The observations in sections 1 and 2 above are essentially based on this work and my book Blumenthal, *Prophezie und Gericht*, without me identifying them always in detail. Since both the form-critical considerations and the reflections on the prophetic claim build the basis for my development of a dialogue option in this essay, I present these observations here in the required compression and do not point only to my previous works. Furthermore, it is the first time that I present them in English: I would like to thank Britta Fernandes and Lucie Schüssler (Bonn) very much for the translation of my article.

2 Bauckham, *Jude*, 77, as follows: "Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain, they plunged into Balaam's error for profit, and through the controversy of Korah they perished."

3 See also the references in Beuken, *Jesaja*, 1, 71–72. With woe oracles such as in Isa. 1:4 it can be spoken of prophetic form of speech "die das kommende Gericht mit einer Sphäre des Todes als unvermeidlicher Konsequenz unmoralischen Verhaltens umgibt" (*ibid.*, 71).

its uttering means as much as fear of death, like the proclamation of the judgment of JHWH.<sup>4</sup>

On this background, the woe oracle that Jude calls upon his opponents implies their condemnation in the Final Judgment. In the author's eyes they have definitely failed; they will perish (φθειρόνται) and meet their death (ἀπώλοντο). Thus, Jude announces to them nothing less than their exclusion from eschatological salvation. According to Jude 13, their fate is not salvation but eternal darkness (ὁ ζόφος τοῦ σκότους εἰς αἰῶνα τετήρηται).

Those first form-critical based impressions give the impetus to pose the question of the prophetic dimension of Jude's letter in a systematic way. It becomes clear that form-critical observations alone are not sufficient for a comprehensive answer to this question.<sup>5</sup> They rather provide a first important track which is to be followed in section 1. However, a complete answer to the question about the prophetic dimension of the Letter of Jude can only be achieved by broadening the perspective. This broadening is carried out in section 2 and leads beyond the Letter of Jude. In this section, I include the Pauline task outline of early Christian prophecy in 1 Cor. 14:24–25 in my considerations from a heuristic perspective. By this inclusion, it can be sounded out for the Letter of Jude to what extent Jude only receives specific prophetic form elements (e.g., woe oracle) *or* really makes a prophetic claim by adopting such form elements. Section 3 prepares the observations made on the Letter of Jude for a Theology of Prophecy in Dialogue in general and explores a starting point for a Christian-Islamic dialogue on prophetic announcements of punishment in particular. Section 4 finally addresses the overarching question of the immense and ambivalent power that is inextricably linked to the claim to anticipate divine judgments. I profile the open question of the exercise of prophetic power in the Bible and the Qur'an as a central common question of a Theology of Prophecy in Dialogue in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

## 1 Thesis to the Letter of Jude and the Form-Critical Approach

My thesis on the Letter of Jude is: *through the appearance of his opponents in the fellowship meals, Jude sees the salvific integrity of his addressees as highly*

4 Cf. Zobel, s.v. "hōj," 387.

5 On this level, however, remains Frey, *The Letter of Jude and the Second Letter of Peter*, 104. He infers the prophetic claim directly from the use of the prophetic form of speech in v.11: "Judas' announces the judgment of the opponents in a prophetic style and with a prophetic claim."

endangered. This assessment of the situation causes him to settle the score so sharply with his opponents. His 'reckoning', however, is not exhausted in a massive polemic but culminates in the prophetic announcement of the exclusion of his opponents from the eschatological salvation. Jude wants this prophetic announcement to be understood as legitimate anticipation of the divine judgment. Jude sees himself legitimized, to uncover the inner self of his opponents from a divine perspective. If we follow this track, Jude fulfils with his letter the specific task which Paul sets out in 1 Cor. 14:24–25 as a task of early Christian prophecy.<sup>6</sup>

I begin the elaboration of this thesis with form-critical considerations: for Frank-Lothar Hossfeld there are, regardless of the individual character of each Old Testament prophet, some persistent core areas of prophetic proclamation. Among these, he counts, for example, the proclamation of judgment and the announcement of salvation.<sup>7</sup> The 'bipartite word of judgment' (*zweiteiliges Gerichtswort*) could be regarded as the prophetic main form of speech, in which the analysis of the present is connected with the announcement of the future reaction of God.<sup>8</sup> These two parts are internally connected by the fact that the analysis of the present (= accusation) substantiates the statement of the future (= pronouncement of judgment) and makes it comprehensible.<sup>9</sup>

The bipartite nature of the prophetic word of judgment with the assignment of *future proclamation* and *analysis of the present* also determines the structure of a group of prophetic woe oracles.<sup>10</sup> Woe oracles are documented from early pre-exilic prophecy to the Jewish apocalyptic. Such oracles are often built with the interjections אִי ('ôj) and הִי (hôj)<sup>11</sup> (in the LXX: οὐαί). These two

6 Cf. already my considerations: Blumenthal, *Prophetie und Gericht*; in more detail Blumenthal, "Ein prophetisches Gerichtswort" (with special attention to the question of Jude's opponents).

7 Cf. Hossfeld, "Propheten, Prophetie," 630.

8 Cf. *ibid.*, 630; Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, 92. ("The most common type of prophetic oracle in the OT is the announcement of judgment") or Schmidt, *Einführung in das Alte Testament*, 191. For Schmidt, the actual prophetic speech form can be found "in der Zukunftsankündigung, sei es Drohung oder Verheißung, einschließlich deren Begründung".

9 See for the last aspect just Schmidt, *Einführung in das Alte Testament*, 191. Just because of the explanation 'the hearer can recognise damnation as a punishment for their guilt'.

10 While Westermann, *Grundformen prophetischer Rede*, 136–37, calls the woe oracle a "Variante" of the prophetic word of judgment, Sato, *Q und Prophetie*, 186, or Janzen, *Mourning Cry and Woe Oracle*, 48f., remain more sceptical: "[I]t retains at the same time a considerable formal independence from the prophetic Gerichtswort" (*ibid.*, 49); see recently (according to his own statement as a continuation of Westermann's analyses) from a linguistic perspective: Hoyt, "Discourse Analysis of Prophetic Oracles," 158–61.

11 Conversely, however, אִי ('ôj) and הִי (hôj) are not consistently translated with οὐαί (see only Ezek. 24:6 with וָאִי for אִי).



interjections are to be differentiated in their meaning. *אוי* ('ôj) often introduces a threatening or reproaching word (*Droh- oder Scheltwort*) which expresses the guilt of individuals or a community, e.g. the guilt of Jerusalem in Ezekiel:

Ezek. 16:23: After all your evil – woe, woe to you! Declares Lord YHWH – (Translation: M. Greenberg)

Ezek. 24:6: Now then, thus said Lord YHWH: Woe to the bloody city, Pot whose filth is in her, Whose filth will not be gone from her. Take her cuts out one by one; No lot has fallen on her. (Translation: M. Greenberg)

Although such threatening or reproaching words (*Droh- oder Scheltworte*) may still be specifically attached to an announcement of ill and doom (*Unheilsankündigung*), the interjection *אוי* ('ôj) already implies the idea of ill and doom:<sup>12</sup>

Jer. 48:46: Woe to you (*אוי לך*), O Moab! Doomed are you, the people of Chemosh; for (*כי*) your sons are taken into exile, and your daughters into captivity.

Elsewhere, “Woe” (*אוי*) can also be an expression of fear, whereas the transition between an expression of fear and of the woe oracle (*Klageruf*) can be fluent:

1 Sam. 4:8: Woe to us (*אוי לנו*)! Who can deliver us from the power of this mighty god?

Lam. 5:16: The crown has fallen from our head; woe to us (*אוי־נא לנו*), for we have sinned (*כי חטאנו*)!

The woe oracles formed with *אוי* ('ôj) must be distinguished contentwise and functionally from the oracles which are formed with *הוי* (hôj). Initially, *הוי* (hôj) is an exclamation of the lamentation for the dead (1 Kings 13:30<sup>13</sup>) and introduces a woe oracle in the prophecy (e.g. Amos 5:16). Syntactically, the *הוי* (hôj) is repeatedly accompanied by a participle, which is used to describe negative humane behavior:<sup>14</sup>

12 The often-added justifying sentence signals: The one to whom the *אוי* ('ôj) applies is facing ‘quite generally the downfall, death, ruin’ (cf. Zobel, s.v. “hôj,” 384).

13 Verbatim: He (the old prophet) buried him (that prophet who transgressed God’s command) in his own grave, and it was mourned for him: Alas, my brother (*הוי אחי*)!

14 In the woe oracles constructed with *הוי* (hôj) the announcement of doom contained in the “woe” is usually substantiated by an added participle, noun or adjective. While the added participle paraphrases a negative humane behavior (see above), the assigned noun defines a group of people, whose negative behavior is at issue; see for the latter

Hab. 2:12: Woe (הוי) to him who builds (בנה) a town with blood, and founds a city on iniquity!

Because of its roots in the lamentation of the dead, the utterance of this prophetic woe (hôj) in such a syntactic construction (hôj + participle) is associated with the idea that ‘the germ of death is already inherent in a certain humane behavior’.<sup>15</sup>

Over time, the differences between אוי (’ôj) und הוי (hôj) have become partially blurred, so that אוי (’ôj) can also be found in prophetic threatening or reproaching words<sup>16</sup> and some of the hôj-words are understood as a threat.<sup>17</sup> Finally, the differences are completely leveled out in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Biblical text, since in the LXX both אוי (’ôj) and הוי (hôj) were translated in most cases with the same Greek interjection οὐαί.

Considering the functional diversity of the Old Testament woe oracles, the group of prophetic woe oracles mentioned at the beginning can be described more precisely. The members of this group correspond in their structure to the bipartite prophetic word of judgment: these woe oracles are composed of an interjection אוי (’ôj) or הוי (hôj) in the first member and a proof of guilt in the second member. Thereby the utterance of the woe receives ‘an announcement of calamity *in nuce*’<sup>18</sup> and implies the idea of divine judgment.

In the light of these observations, the bipartite structure of the woe oracle in Jude 11<sup>19</sup> becomes apparent. The οὐαί in Jude 11a is followed in Jude 11b by a sentence introduced with ὅτι (“because” / “for”). In this ὅτι-sentence Jude describes the behavior of his opponents using three Old Testament examples (Cain, Balaam, Korah).<sup>20</sup> This series of examples shows a climactic structure and runs towards the annihilation announcement ἀπώλοντο (“they have been

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only Nah 3:1: Woe (הוי) to the bloody city (עיר), all full of lies and booty – no end to the plunder!

15 Cf. Wanke, “’ôj und Hôj,” 218.

16 Cf. Zobel, “s.v. “hôj,” 386.

17 Cf. Zobel, “s.v. “hôj,” 386.

18 Westermann, *Grundformen prophetischer Rede*, 137; Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, 97 speaks of the interjection woe as “an indefinite announcement of accusation that prefaces an accusation.”

19 If one wants to trace the arc from the Old Testament woe oracles to the woe oracle in Jude 11 more precisely, the woe oracles in early Jewish and early Christian literature require attention. In this regard I refer to my observations on οὐαί in the pseudepigraph scriptures in the Old Testament and the New Testament: Blumenthal, *Prophezie und Gericht*, 286–92.

20 Bauckham, *Jude*, 79–84, for example, comments in detail on the imagery in Jude 11b.

destroyed / they perished”) at the end of the verse.<sup>21</sup> Despite this final chord, the ὅτι-sentence as a whole does not serve as an announcement of the future, but is primarily a description of behavior and proof of guilt. This proof of guilt substantiates (ὅτι) the woe pronounced immediately before, which represents a definite announcement of doom. Because of a behavior which, for Jude, corresponds to the way of Cain, the error of Balaam,<sup>22</sup> and the rebellion of Korah, the opponents have been guilty before God. For them, the announcement of the οὐαί means an irrevocable announcement of doom, which, with the inclusion of the central prophecy of the Final Judgment in Jude 14–15, can be understood as an announcement of the condemnation in the Final Judgment.

If we extend the perspective of the prophetic woe oracle in Jude 11 to the entire main part of the letter in Jude 4–19,<sup>23</sup> we get the following impression: the interplay of present analysis and future announcement, which is characteristic of prophetic words of judgment and woe oracles, does not only determine the woe oracle in Jude 11, but the layout of Jude 4–19 as a whole. In these verses, the analysis of the present continuously alternates with a proof of guilt and an announcement of the future. This alternation determines essentially the content of the corpus of the letter. The woe oracle in Jude 11 contains *in nuce* what the surrounding verses further unfold and specify: the opponents have made themselves guilty by their denial of the divine ruling power in the sense of the accusation in the Final Judgment (cf. Jude 4b; 8–10; 11bc; 12–13; 16; 19) so that Jude can announce to them the final condemnation and eternal disaster (cf. Jude 4a;<sup>24</sup> 5–7; 11a; 11d; 13; 14–15; 17–18).<sup>25</sup>

21 For Schreiner, *Jude*, 462. ἀπώλοντο functions “as a prophetic aorist, communicating the certainty of the future destruction of the opponents.”

22 Cf. for Balaam in Jude 11 and especially in the Qur’an Tofigi, “The Qur’anic Reception of Balaam” (in this volume). Her observation that Balaam “becomes a character who chooses to be what he is” is in line with the Letter to Jude: Jude portrays Balaam acting on his own responsibility.

23 In these verses, the author repeatedly refers to his adversary. That is why this part of the letter is specifically mentioned here.

24 Verbatim: οἱ πάλαι προγεγραμμένοι εἰς τοῦτο τὸ κρίμα (Bauckham, *Jude*, 28 translates: “who were long ago designated for this condemnation”; Schreiner, *Jude*, 433, reads: “whose condemnation was written about long ago”).

25 In detail: Blumenthal, *Prophetie und Gericht*, 134–45, 297–99.

## 2 The Letter of Jude as a Prophetic Anticipation of the Final Judgment on the Godless

An answer to the question of whether Jude merely adopted *prophetic forms of speech* in his letter or claimed to act as a prophet himself can be gained by considering early Christian prophecy. This broadening of perspective beyond the Letter of Jude to early Christian prophecy in general leads to 1 Cor. 12–14, more precisely to the Pauline determination of the relationship between prophecy and glossolalia in 1 Cor. 14:23–25.<sup>26</sup> In the following section, I include 1 Cor. from a heuristic perspective and not under the idea of any kind of literary dependence between 1Cor and the Letter of Jude.<sup>27</sup>

In 1 Cor. 14:23–25 Paul seeks to prove the superiority of prophecy over glossolalia with two fictional examples, this time mainly because of the impression on externals:<sup>28</sup>

### Example 1 in 14:23

If then the whole church meets in one place and everyone speaks in tongues (πάντες λαλώσιν γλώσσαις) and outsiders or unbelievers (ιδιώται ἢ ἄπιστοι) come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind (ὅτι μαίνεσθε)? (Translation: J.A. Fitzmyer)

### Example 2 in 14:24–25

<sup>24</sup> But if everyone prophesies (προφητεύωσιν) and some unbeliever or outsider (ἄπιστος ἢ ιδιώτης) comes in, he will be convinced by all and called to account by all (ἐλέγχεται ὑπὸ πάντων, ἀνακρίνεται ὑπὸ πάντων):<sup>25</sup> the secrets of his heart will be laid bare (τὰ κρυπτὰ τῆς καρδίας αὐτοῦ φανερά γίνεται), and so, falling down, he will worship God (προσκυνήσει τῷ θεῷ) and declare, God is truly in your midst (ὄντως ὁ θεὸς ἐν ὑμῖν ἐστίν). (Translation: J.A. Fitzmyer)

According to the first example, the glossolalia provokes a negative reaction in an uninformed or unbelieving person (ιδιώται ἢ ἄπιστοι) who joins the

<sup>26</sup> See also the note in Luz, “Die korinthische Gemeindepredigt im Kontext urchristlicher Prophetie,” 187: “Paulus unterscheidet zwar Prophetie von Zungenrede, und vor allem: er bewertet beides sehr verschieden. Trotzdem denke ich, dass *Prophetie und Zungenrede bei Paulus nicht toto coelo verschiedene Dinge* sind” (italics in original); see further as an overview of glossolalia in early Christianity: Zeller, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, 433–37.

<sup>27</sup> According to Frey, *The Letter of Jude and the Second Letter of Peter*, 15, a “use of Pauline texts or other NT writings cannot be demonstrated” for Jude, “which of course does not rule out the possibility that the author or his addressees knew these texts”; cf. besides the question of literary dependence, the reflections on possible influences of Pauline theology on Jude *ibid.*, 44.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Zeller, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, 424.

meeting of the Christian communities. The one who joins expresses his negative attitude by asking about the sanity of those speaking in tongues (will they not say that you are out of your mind). The situation is quite different when externals (ἄπιστος ἢ ἰδιώτης) join such a meeting of the Christian communities in which the participants speak prophetically (πάντες προφητεύωσιν). For Paul, the prophetic speech of the community has a salutary effect<sup>29</sup> on the externals, resulting in them acclaiming God and acknowledging his presence in the assembly (ὅτι ὄντως ὁ θεὸς ἐν ὑμῖν ἐστίν). Paul differentiates the process of prophetic speaking as ἐλέγχεται and ἀνακρίνεται. In research, it is disputed how offensive one should imagine these processes to be in concrete terms.<sup>30</sup> Despite different assessments on this question, the opinions mostly meet two very central basic assumptions: (a) The two process descriptions ἐλέγχεται and ἀνακρίνεται have juridical connotations.<sup>31</sup> They denote convicting<sup>32</sup> and judging. (b) In this prophetic process of conviction – Dieter Zeller speaks of a miraculous process<sup>33</sup> – the judgment of the *Kyrios* takes place.<sup>34</sup> This attribution of function is remarkable insofar as Paul in 1 Cor. 4:5 explicitly emphasizes the divine reservation of judgment: it is the task of the *Kyrios* at his *Parousia* to illuminate what is hidden in darkness and to manifest the resolutions of hearts (ὁς καὶ φωτίσει τὰ κρυπτὰ τοῦ σκούτους καὶ φανερώσει τὰς βουλὰς τῶν καρδιῶν).<sup>35</sup> From this the admonition goes out to the Corinthians: do not judge anything before the time before the Lord comes (ὥστε μὴ πρὸ καιροῦ τι κρίνετε ἕως ἂν ἔλθῃ ὁ κύριος).

When the two statements in 1 Cor. 4:5 and 14:24–25 are considered together, the limited validity of 4:5 becomes clear. The call there not to judge does not

29 Cf. *ibid.*, 432.

30 For example: Wolff, *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther*, 336f., thinks in the direction of a direct confrontation between the approaching and the prophetic speakers. The prophecy “hält ihm in Form einer Gerichtsrede seine Sünden vor und fordert ihn zur Umkehr auf” (*ibid.*, 336); similarly e.g. also Sandnes, *Paul, One of the Prophets?*, 95, (“probably”); critical of the assumption of a direct confrontation are, for example, Merklein and Gielen, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, 3, 193: “Doch wird man sich kaum vorstellen können, dass es sich um ein aktives, den Ungläubigen direkt ansprechendes Verfahrens seitens der Gemeinde gehandelt habe.”

31 See for many only: Dautzenberg, *Urchristliche Prophetie*, 248; Sandnes, *Paul, One of the Prophets?*, 95, with note 515; Wolff, *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther*, 336, with note 515; Merklein and Gielen, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, 3, 193; Li, *Paul's Teaching on the Pneumatika in 1 Corinthians 12–14*, 469.

32 Cf. for many now only Gardner, *1 Corinthians*: “‘to convict’ sees the best translation” von ἐλέγχω.

33 Cf. Zeller, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, 432.

34 So e.g. also Dautzenberg, *Urchristliche Prophetie*, 249; or Gillespie, *The First Theologians*, 156.

35 On the theocentric foundation Zeller, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, 176.

apply when such judging is carried out by a prophet. The prerequisite for a legitimate anticipation of divine judgment by prophets is the conviction that prophets participate in the divine knowledge of the heart. Because of this participation, they are able – from the overarching perspective of the *Kyrios* – to reveal the hidden things in the hearts of the externals in a real and legally effective way.<sup>36</sup>

Turning to the Letter of Jude in the horizon of these reflections on prophetic judicial action, I propose the following thesis: the task of Early Christian prophecy outlined in 1 Cor. 14:24–25, namely the prophetic anticipation of divine judgment, is carried out by Jude in his letter. Here are six observations:

1. In 1 Cor. 14:25 the juridically connoted verb ἐλέγχω denotes an activity of the early Christian prophets: the Spirit-inspired prophets<sup>37</sup> can convict an unbeliever and reveal the hidden things of his heart.
2. In the Letter of Jude this verb ἐλέγχω, connected in 1 Cor. with the prophets as subject, occurs in the midst of the central judgment statement in Jude 14–15.<sup>38</sup>
3. The final judicial ἐλέγχω by the *Kyrios* aims at convicting the ungodly men (ἄσεβεις) and pronouncing a fair judgment. Since the *Kyrios* himself pronounces the judgment, it is objective, just, and binding. Paul expresses a comparable expectation in 1 Cor. 4:5.
4. In the horizon of the expectation of the Final Judgment, Jude makes every effort to identify and convict his opponents as ungodly men (ἄσεβεις), for example in Jude 10.12.16.<sup>39</sup> Via this path, from Jude's perspective, he legally anticipates the final judicial ἐλέγχω and considers himself in a position to anticipate the divine judgment.
5. The aim of the prophetic process of convicting (= ἐλέγχω) differs quite seriously depending on the circle of persons to be convicted: if the ἐλέγχω in 1 Cor. aims at the conversion of the unbelievers or externals and their acclamation of God, in the Letter of Jude a conversion of the convicted is no longer at issue, but the identification of the opponents as ungodly men (ἄσεβεις).<sup>40</sup>

36 See on the topic of the κρυπτὰ τῆς καρδίας (the hidden things of the heart) Blumenthal, *Prophetie und Gericht*, 307–11.

37 Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 522, for instance, speaks of the “Spirit inspired preaching” of the early Christian prophets in 1 Cor. 14:24–25.

38 In comparison with 1 Cor. 14, however, a change of subject has taken place, since in the Letter of Jude the *Kyrios* himself has taken the place of the prophets in 1 Cor. 14.

39 In detail on the functional variety of nominal sentences of the form: “οὗτός ἐστιν ...” in the New Testament: Blumenthal, *Prophetie und Gericht*, 325–33, especially 332.

40 Reflections on the prophetic dimension of the exhortations in Jude 22–23 have been presented, for example, by Lockett, “Objects of Mercy in Jude.”

6. The prophetic judicial convicting action has an exhortatory function in 1 Cor. as well as in Jude (1 Cor. 14:31; Jude 3–4. 22–23).<sup>41</sup>

### 3 Processing the Exegetical Observations on the Letter of Jude for a Theology of Prophecy in Dialogue

Now I process my exegetical insight in the prophetic dimension of the Letter of Jude into the discussion on a *Theology of Prophecy in Dialogue*. For this purpose, I first look at the sub-area of Jewish-Christian dialogue, more precisely: at the early Jewish-Christian relationship (early Judaism – early Christianity). This focus refers back to my remarks in section 1 where I could demonstrate how seamlessly the Letter of Jude follows (early) Jewish prophecy of judgment and also formally feeds on this tradition. The linguistic form of the bipartite word of judgment with its elements of reproof and announcement of the future, so typical for Jewish Biblical prophecy, determines the content of the Letter of Jude over long stretches. Thus, in Jude 4–19, statements about the behavior of the opponents and announcements of divine judgment consistently alternate. In the (also structural) center of this section of the letter in verse 11, Jude pronounces the woe oracle against his opponents that is firmly anchored in Jewish prophecy, thus announcing their condemnation in the Final Judgment and their exclusion from salvation. He refers to the biblical figures Cain, Balaam, and Korah for the direct justification of this woe oracle.

If we now look at the sub-area of Christian-Islamic dialogue, the observations made above still require a final reappraisal in order to make them compatible with this dialogue. In this reappraisal, it would be too short-sighted to focus on the history of the reception of the Letter of Jude. Rather, it is necessary to go much further and to think from the literarily tangible form of early Christian prophecy of judgment in the sense of a prophecy of conviction (ἐλέγχω) and revelation of the hiddenness of the human heart (κρυπτὰ τῆς καρδίας). The Letter of Jude, so polemical and cryptic, but at the same time artful,<sup>42</sup> is the practical realization of a specific task of early Christian prophecy which

41 To further secure the assumption that Jude acts as an Early Christian prophet, the perspective must be extended beyond Jude and 1 Cor. to the field of Early Christian prophecy as a whole: See Blumenthal, "Ein prophetisches Gerichtswort," 87–92; Blumenthal, *Prophetie und Gericht*, 302–70.

42 The preceding characterization of the Letter of Jude follows in parts Grünstäudl, "Jesus in Sodom," here 237.

Paul looks at theoretically in 1 Cor. 14:24–25: the decisive characteristic of this variant of early Christian prophecy consists in the claim to be able to uncover the hiddenness of the human heart and to convict people accordingly.<sup>43</sup> The condition of the possibility for this prophetic action is the selective participation of the prophets in the divine knowledge of the heart.

While conviction and disclosure can be identified equally in Paul (theoretically) and Jude (practically) as the heart of this variant of prophetic speech, the two theologians associate different objectives with this speech. For Paul, the prophetic disclosure of what is hidden in the human heart aims at praising God on the part of the convicted (1 Cor. 14:25); Jude is quite different: he identifies his opponents as ἄσεβεις and announces to them definite and irrevocable final condemnation. In his eyes, their condemnation has long been written down for condemnation and is rightfully made public through him. As a prophet, Jude knows himself legitimized to anticipate the judgment actually reserved for the *Kyrios* in his *Parousia*.

In light of this biblical background, the following questions arise for a Christian-Islamic dialogue in a Theology of Prophecy:

1. To what extent do Qur'an and Islam know variants of prophetic speech which claim a participation in the divine knowledge of the heart?
2. To what extent do Qur'anic and Islamic prophecy share the idea that a prophet can reveal what is hidden in the human heart and is capable of (judicial) conviction?
3. And, if applicable, to what extent does such prophetic conviction form the basis for the pronouncement of a divine judgment against a certain group of opponents?

Methodologically, when dealing with these questions, it is advisable to think essentially from the point of view of the matter, content, and conceptual field and less from a specific terminology. The key point is a judicially connoted, i.e., criterion-guided, righteous examination, uncovering, and conviction.<sup>44</sup>

43 For Zeller, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, 452, prophecy has the task "Verborgenes aufzudecken, ob es in der Vergangenheit, Gegenwart oder Zukunft liegt" ("to uncover what is hidden, whether it is in the past, present, or future"). In this way, it seems possible for him to reconcile two seemingly different functions of early Christian prophecy: "Ansage des Bevorstehenden und Enthüllung begangener Sünden (14,24)" ('announcement of the forthcoming and revelation of sins committed').

44 The connotation of the just and righteous stems from the fact that this convicting is based on a punctual participation in the divine heart knowledge. From this, this convicting can claim to be appropriate, just and fair.



While the term ἐλέγχω in the Greek biblical text of Paul and Jude equally serves to bring up such a conviction, a random check in two early Arabic Bible translations already leads to the realization that comparably consistent terminology is found neither in Mount Sinai Arabic 151<sup>45</sup> nor in Vatican Arabic 13, for example.<sup>46</sup> This finding is hardly surprising since the Syriac tradition already follows different paths. A look at 1 Cor. 14:24 is sufficient to illustrate this ‘inconsistency’, or, to put it positively: the different translation possibilities:

ἐλέγχεται ὑπὸ πάντων, ἀνακρίνεται ὑπὸ πάντων

He will be convicted and called to account by all.

Peshitta

ܠܚܝܬܝ ܕܥܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܠܡܝܢ

He will be examined by all of you and he will be rebuked by all of you.

Harclean

ܠܚܝܬܝܢ ܕܥܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܠܡܝܢ ܕܥܠܡܝܢ

He will be reproved by all of them and he will be judged by all of them.

Sinai Arabic 151

فانه يفتش منكم اجمعين ويوبخ من جميعكم

He will be examined by all of you and he will be censured / rebuked by all of you.

Vatican Arabic 13

فيبكت من كلكم ويفحص من كلكم

He will be rebuked by all of you and he will be searched / explored / examined by all of you.

45 Mount Sinai Arabic 151 contains, among other things, the Arabic translation and interpretation of the Pauline Epistles. According to a colophon (ibid. f.186<sup>v</sup>–187<sup>r</sup>), the author of this translation and interpretation is the Syriac-speaking theologian Bišr ibn al-Sirri. There Bišr states that he completed this work in Damascus in Ramadan of the year 253 A.H. (= 867 A.D.); in detail on the extremely complex history of this ancient Arabic manuscript: Zaki, “A Dynamic History.”

46 According to the colophon at the end of the codex, Vatican Arabic 13 originally contained an Arabic translation of the Psalms, the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the Catholic Epistles, and the Pauline Epistles (a transcription of this colophon in Schulthess, *Les Manuscrits*, 188. Of these texts, only parts of the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles are preserved today. Taking into account palaeographical aspects, this manuscript with its “caractère unique” (ibid., 166) can be dated to the turn of the ninth century AD (according to Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, 114f. and 118. A detailed overview of the working time windows and activities of the various scribes of Vatican Arabic 13 is given by Schulthess, *Les Manuscrits*, 180–196, a summary at 195f.

After determining the methodological starting point from which the questions raised above can be answered, I would like to conclude by identifying an entry point for answering these questions. If we search in the Qur'an for traces of whether the Prophet Mohammad claims to be able to selectively anticipate the divine Final Judgment,<sup>47</sup> we may find them in Q 111<sup>48</sup> and Q 85:4–6. In Q 111, the prophet announces eschatological doom in fire<sup>49</sup> to Abū Lahab and to his wife a rope around her neck.<sup>50</sup> Who this Abū Lahab is, however, is highly disputed. In Islamic exegesis, this man is repeatedly identified as Muḥammad's uncle 'Abd al-'Uzzā; for Nicolai Sinai, however, it is "by no means to be ruled out" that "the sura was not originally directed against a specific individual, but merely describes the afterlife of a prototypical damned person, a 'man of flames'".<sup>51</sup>

An announcement of ill and doom is also encountered in Q 85:4–6: "Curse the people of the ditch (قتل أصحاب الأخدود), the fiercely burning fire (النار ذات الوقود), then when they squat on it (إذ هم عليها قعود)". The reference point of this announcement is determined differently. While Islamic exegetes such as Ibn Ishāq interpret this call in a historicizing way and think of the Christian martyrs of Nadjrān in the early sixth century A.D. when speaking of those sitting in the trenches of fire, Angelika Neuwirth represents an

47 According to Ghaffar, "Muhammad as a Prophet of Late Antiquity" (in this volume), the Qur'an denies "apocalyptic prophecies", but not "the possibility of prophecies *per se*." In my view, Jude does not claim apocalyptic knowledge about times, periods and deadlines, but knowledge about the character of his opponents. According to the New Testament in general, the knowledge of the coming key moment of "salvation history", namely the timing of the *Parousia*, is restricted (solely) to God (cf. the synoptic tradition in Mark 13:32 *parr*).

48 I am grateful to Zishan Ghaffar for pointing out this sura to me at our conference in Paderborn; I also thank him for his comments on the characteristics of the Qur'an's eschatological judgment sermon in the early Meccan suras (just below in the main text).

49 For Sinai it is "wenig überzeugend, Q 111 nicht als genuine Jenseitsbeschreibung gelten zu lassen, auch wenn der Text Motive der altarabischen Schmähdichtung aufgreift" (Chronological and Literary Critical Commentary on the Koran, part 1, The Early Meccan Suras, "Sura 111: The Palm Fibers [al-Masad]," translated and analyzed by Nicolai Sinai, in cooperation with Nora K. Schmid, using preparatory work by Angelika Neuwirth, accessed March 10, 2021, <https://corpuscoranicum.de/kommentar/index/sure/111/>).

50 At the beginning of the sura, ill and doom is pointedly announced: "Perdition shall be at the hands of Abū Lahab" (تبت يدا أبي لهب وتب). The announcement of ill and doom specifically about the hands (*yadā*) implies for Neuwirth, *Der Koran*. 1, 142. the idea of 'sozialer Entrechtung'; see further on the social implications of the depiction of the woman in Q 111:4–5: Neuwirth, *Der Koran*. 1, 143f.

51 According to Sinai, "Sura 111"; the expression Abū Lahab in the sense of father of flames is for Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 88, "kein eigentlicher Name", but an "uneigentliche Kunja" which "marks the one designated by it as doomed to hell" (cf. 78).

eschatological understanding. The curse call refers 'to contemporaries who are presented in advance as punished'.<sup>52</sup> If we follow this eschatological interpretation and understand the words about the fiercely burning fire in Q 85:5 (النار ذات الوقود) as a statement about an eschatological fire punishment, the prophet announces with this curse final destruction to a part of his contemporaries described as people of the ditch (أصحاب الأخدود).<sup>53</sup>

Taken together, the brief look at two early Meccan suras and their interpretation has given the following basic impression: in Qur'anic exegesis, both Q 111 and Q 85:4–6 are intensely debated as to what extent these two passages constitute an anticipatory judgment sermon. At the same time, it is highly controversial to what extent the announcement of ill and doom in Q 111 and Q 85:4–6 is to be referred to concrete persons or groups at all, since the eschatological judgment sermon of the Qur'an in the early Meccan suras proves to be transcendent and individualistic in sum.<sup>54</sup> The eschatological knowledge of the soul (علمت نفس) is revealed only after death. Consequently, it must be reckoned that the respective addressees of the announcement of ill and doom function admonitively as a prototypical group.<sup>55</sup>

#### 4 Prophecy of Divine Judgment and the Question of the Exercise of Prophetic Power as a Leading Question in a Theology of Prophecy in Dialogue

Having identified a possible starting point for a Christian-Islamic exchange on the prophecy of judgment, I conclude by addressing an overarching question

52 Cf. Neuwirth, *Der Koran*. 1, 334. (verbatim: "auf Zeitgenossen, die in Vorausblende als Bestrafte präsentiert werden"). The above sketch for discussion according to *ibid.* (there also more detailed information and evidence).

53 For the "conspicuous" expression: "Leute des Grabens" ("people of the trench") see only *ibid.*, 335.

54 Cf. in detail on early Qur'anic eschatology and its tradition-historical background Sinai, "The Eschatological Kerygma," 236–42.

55 Detailed on the paraenetic character of the thematization of judgment in early Qur'anic eschatology: *ibid.*, 226–32. According to him, the following applies: "[T]he foremost objective of the early Qur'an's announcements and descriptions of the Judgment and the hereafter is quite obviously not to inform but to inspire terror"; and on the linkage of a social, eschatological, and paraenetic dimension *ibid.* 228f.: "The intertwining of religious and social vices observed above is therefore ultimately due to the fact that, from the Qur'anic perspective, it is only the existential dread to which anticipation of the Judgment gives rise that enables man to overcome his innate love of possessions and fulfil the requirements of social solidarity."

that has accompanied my investigation between the lines all along. This question is equally relevant to prophecy, especially prophecy of divine judgment, in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It arises immediately when the observations on the (presumed) usage of prophetic announcements of punishment in the Bible and Qur'an are reflected in the light of the guiding idea of the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies:<sup>56</sup> It is the question of the exercise of power and authority by the prophets and thereby the establishment of strong asymmetrical dependency. Prophets like Jude claim nothing less than the competence to act on behalf of God or Christ and to announce doom to (specific) people from a divine perspective.<sup>57</sup> With other words: the Prophets present themselves to be legitimized by God to proclaim divine judgement in their texts, but at the same time it is they who control which of God's utterances are to be transmitted and used in their literary works, and in which ways.<sup>58</sup>

The question of strong asymmetric dependency can be differentiated and made even more pressing: what are the prophetic announcements aimed at? Who are the intended addressees? What functions do these announcements fulfil with regard to the intended addressees (in the literal context)? How do the condemned come into view?

It is absolutely virulent to deal with such questions, as the prophecy of judgment is extremely susceptible to abuse due to its extensive claim to judge other people from a divine perspective: doesn't this claim always involve the danger of making the unavailable God available for one's own purposes?

A decisive key for dealing adequately with questions around power and dependency could be a communication-theoretical approach, which works with the following assumption: with their announcements of punishment, the prophets enter into a negotiation process with their recipients about claimed competence and conceded interpretative sovereignty. As immense as their claim to power is, the prophets are at the same time highly reliant

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56 For orientation see, for example, Winnebeck et al., "The Analytical Concept of Asymmetrical Dependency."

57 Early Christian prophets claim to be able to adequately anticipate divine conviction because of their partial participation in the divine knowledge of the heart (cf. 1 Cor. 4:5 and 14:24–25); Jude regards himself as Spirit-inspired: Jude and his addressees see to live in the certainty of having received the Holy Spirit. This is supported, for example, by the fact that the letter writer denies his opponents any possession of the Spirit (Jude 19) and calls on his addressees to pray in the Holy Spirit (Jude 20); furthermore, the end-time consciousness that shines through behind the letter points in this direction (in detail: Blumenthal, *Prophetie und Gericht*, 346–57).

58 Partly verbatim from Blumenthal, "The Power of Biblical Authors," 8.

on the recipients accepting this claim and regarding their announcements as binding.<sup>59</sup>

The probability that the two parties in the communication process (prophet – recipients) approach a balance of power increases with the degree of independence of the recipients. The more independent and autonomous the recipients perceive themselves and the more this autonomy is experienced by the prophet, the greater is the power of the recipients to exercise a controlling function.<sup>60</sup> Although the real influence of the recipients can only be roughly calculated, nonetheless it has a power-limiting function that should not be underestimated. With this structural controlling, the recipients contribute to preserving the unavailability of God.

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59 More details: Blumenthal, "The Power of Biblical Authors," 9–12.

60 See for the last two sentences *ibid*, 10.

# Conclusion

The present volume gathers a wealth of insights that should be considered in the construction of a prophetology regardless of whether it is developed from an Islamic or Christian perspective. Without the claim of being exhaustive, the authors intend to highlight four such insights to suggest how interreligious learning in the sense of comparative theology can be successful.

## On the Character Integrity and Epistemic Limitations of the Prophets

First, the competitive relationship between prophecy and scholarly knowledge in Rabbinic Judaism, as referenced by Charlotte Fonrobert, highlights the reasons why the Qur'an is under pressure to legitimise itself when it grants prophets such a prominent role in the religious practice that it inspires. Rabbinic Judaism has long since developed methods for addressing the prophetic that absorbed this impulse into its discourses, which effectively blunts its revolutionary edge. Similarly, Late Antiquity Christianity no longer relied on the authoritative role of prophets as a source of disruption for the hierarchically developing Church. Prophetic inspirations were required to submit to episcopal authority, that is, prophets were subordinate to the apostles.

Thus, prophecy does not vanish but continues to live on in Rabbinic knowledge and the apostolic tradition of the Church. As noted by Fonrobert, this relationship exemplifies the scepticism of rabbis towards all charismatic claims and movements of their time. The sages play the role of the prophets. Inspired leadership exists even in Rabbinic times, which was passed down across generations – from Hillel to Samuel the Small (Fonrobert 9–11), who even delivers a prophetic speech to foretell the catastrophic developments following Bar Kochba (Fonrobert 11). However, prophets and certainly claims to divine authority by prophets against Rabbinic or ecclesiastical authorities no longer exist.

In contrast, when Qur'anic discourse grants prophets apostolic dignity<sup>1</sup> and understands Muhammad as a messenger/an apostle and a prophet and aims to revive the prophetic element, it faces the pressure to legitimise itself. It is not immediately clear that these prophets are more trustworthy than the

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1 Sinai, "Muḥammad as an Episcopal Figure."

established legitimising authorities of the apostolic tradition or scholarly knowledge. Consequently, the notion that true prophecy must be accompanied by character integrity from the Qur'anic perspective is understandable. For this reason, for example, Balaam cannot be considered a prophet, as we observe in the contribution of Fatima Tofighi, while Muhammad is established as a gentile prophet partially due to his moral excellence. Islamic tradition continually elaborates this excellence, but its roots can be witnessed in the precarious status of prophetic speech in Late Antiquity.

The discussion of Christian Late Antiquity about Balaam, which uses his example to debate what true prophets are (Tofighi 103), is particularly insightful in this context. At the same time, he appears in this context as an example of idolatry and magic and despite his prophetic role; thus, he is also mentioned in the Epistle of Jude as an example of false prophecy (Tofighi 105). In Rabbinic tradition as well, he is an ambiguous figure and is occasionally associated with Jesus (Tofighi 106). Thus, Balaam is a character of dubious integrity across traditions. When Jacob of Serugh honours Balaam as a gentile prophet, this move simultaneously demonstrates that a prophet can possess a poor character (Tofighi 106–107), which challenges the legitimacy of the Qur'anic conception. From the perspective of Jacob, being shown the future by God without being a good person is possible; Severus holds a similar view (Tofighi 107–108). Indeed, Christian tradition, up to and including Thomas Aquinas, repeatedly develops the idea that God can bestow prophetic gifts upon people without making them role models.<sup>2</sup>

Such a perspective is particularly risky for the Qur'anic conception, because Muhammad not only claims prophetic gifts but also serves as a role model for Muslim life. When Muhammad is defined in the Qur'an as a prophet and a messenger, doing so is not about correctly predicting the future or accessing hidden information from God; instead, it is providing comprehensive guidance for one's life. The Qur'an is not satisfied if its proclaimer is reduced to merely receiving God-inspired prophecies, while one's cognition and life remain unaffected by his proclamation. It aims to challenge people and focuses on the rehabilitation of the appropriate Biblical understanding of prophecy, which was redefined through the concept of the messenger or apostle. At the same time, the Qur'an rehabilitates individual Biblical prophets to defend its prophetological concept against the challenges of Judaism and Christianity. Interestingly, this aspect leads to an engagement with Jewish polemics against Jesus, which aim to refute the legitimacy of his legal condemnation (Zellentin 39).

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2 Cf. Moreland, *Muhammad Reconsidered*.

Especially given the multitude of apocalyptic discourses in Late Antiquity, the contribution of Zishan Ghaffar emphasizes that, from the Qur'anic perspective, prophets do not possess apocalyptic knowledge. He does not dispute that prophets can proclaim insights about the future, as any other concept would, indeed, be in tension with the Biblical genre of prophetic speech, as demonstrated by Blumenthal (277–282). Furthermore, Ghaffar does not deny that prophets can ‘uncover the hiddenness of the human heart’ (Blumenthal 287). However, according to the Qur'anic view, prophets neither know the unseen nor “gained access to the treasures of God ... only God is omniscient and the true bearer of knowledge’ (Ghaffar 161–163). In summary, Ghaffar argues that Qur'anic references to the future do not exhibit an apocalyptic character. Consequently, visions of the future do not serve as the ultimate legitimizing authority for prophetic claims. Accordingly, prophets do not need to be necessarily granted a privileged epistemological position that involves infallible knowledge mediated by God. This concept has led modern theology into numerous aporias, especially regarding the difficulty in addressing the problem of evil if prophets are believed to possess infallible knowledge from God.

Despite the epistemic humility of Qur'anic prophetology,<sup>3</sup> it insists on all the vigour of the Biblical prophetic tradition. As Fonrobert vividly demonstrates, rabbis no longer directly anticipate the inspiring power of the Holy Spirit or the voice of God; instead, they await an echo of it, namely a heavenly voice (*bat kol*). This voice does not authoritatively lead them out of Rabbinic debates, but into them. This voice appears to be a less intense, authoritative form of divine presence. Although the voice is capable of connecting people with the divine and times of intensified encounters with God, individual sages, such as Rabbi Hillel, who are conceived as persons worthy of the Holy Spirit and considered on par with prophets, are distinguished from prophets. The issue is not their lack of moral integrity but the corruption of their time, which makes wielding the same authority as the prophets impossible for them.

When the Qur'an regards Muhammad as a prophet in the Biblical sense, it defends not only his personal piety but also the integrity of his community. The Prophet cannot be conceived without his community. While Christianity occasionally tends to portray human society as deeply entangled in sin, such that Jesus can shine bright as the Saviour, the Qur'an emphasizes the prophetic distinction of an Arabian prophet and his followers. Therefore, Angelika

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3 The result of the abandonment of epistemic humility and the assertion of a general infallibility of prophets can be well understood through Aghaei's contribution, which impressively illustrates how the dogma of the infallibility of prophets changes the manner of addressing Hadiths regarding Adam and Eve.



Neuwirth rightly stresses that the Prophet should be honoured not apart from his community. Muhammad is not only a prophet to the gentiles in general; he is specifically sent to the Arabs in particular, who with him receive a new role in salvation history. This case is evident, for example, in the Qur'an's endowment of non-Biblical Arabian figures with prophetic authority and their stories intertwined with Biblical narratives.

### **On the Lasting Political Impact of Prophecy**

The contribution of Ghaffar has only been partially understood if one perceives only an epistemic humility within the framework of prophetology in his reflections. Ultimately, he is also at the least tracing an anti-imperial aspect of Qur'anic theology. In contrast to the pre-Islamic seers and the apocalyptic-imperial theology of Byzantium, the Prophet does not know details about the end of the world from the Qur'anic perspective. In contrast, typical apocalyptic texts of his time possess an imperial dimension: 'They identify empires, who will prevail or not prevail till the end time' (Ghaffar 173). Alternatively, the Qur'anic position is programmatically anti-apocalyptic, as demonstrated by the treatment of apocalyptic thought in the early Meccan suras. The Qur'an does not deny the possibility of God knowing the future and communicating it to prophets (for example, consider Joseph's interpretations of dreams or the prediction of Byzantium's victory over the Persians). It merely opposes the apocalyptic intensification of such knowledge (Ghaffar 179). Thus, our initial point needs refinement. The Qur'anic concern is not about an abstract epistemic humility but about a political challenge to imperial claims and the conception of an anti-imperial model of prophetology.

The contributions of Saqib Hussein to this volume also point in this direction, which focus on the prophetic kings David and Solomon. Specifically, David is portrayed as a prophetic ruler through his piety and willingness to repent. By being a devout worshipper and seeker of forgiveness, he fulfils his role as a prophetic king (Hussein 144–145). The prophetic and royal authority of David and Solomon can only be restored through their plea for repentance (Hussein 150–151). While the Meccan elites or other imperial powers base their rule on their strength and invulnerability, David and Solomon demonstrate a model of rulership that admits personal weaknesses and shortcomings. The divine support for their reign is not a legitimization for later imperial elites but a limitation and theological critique of imperial claims to power (Hussein 155–156). After Solomon, a divine imperial authority no longer existed; in other words, the ruling claims of the Meccan elites must be subject to the

same theological critique as those of the Christian emperors in Byzantium or the Sassanids. The adoption of Biblical salvation history thinking serves to critique voices in Late Antiquity that view continuity with Biblical figures as a legitimization of their claim to power. In contrast, the Qur'an emphasizes that the Biblical salvation history continues through the Qur'anic community and their Prophet through their hope in a forgiving and merciful God, who has now also included the people of the Arabs in His covenant.

The clearly emerging anti-imperial impact of prophetic thinking not only poses a challenge for the political elites of Christian empires but also extends to religious elites. Their authority should not be exercised by God-like lords (Q 9:30–31) but should consist of viewing religious authorities, such as John the Baptist, Jesus (Q 19:30), and the early Islamic community, as servants of God. This aspect leads the discussion to the potential of the prophetological insights in this book for Christological debates.

### Prophetology Beyond Supersessionism

A central Christian theological concern in this volume and the associated research project lies in the search for impulses for a non-supersessionist Christology. The objective is to explore how Christology can remain the guiding reference point for prophetology without entirely absorbing it. In other words, this objective is related to the revelation of prophetologically relevant insights that lack consideration within Christology. This approach intends to preserve the unique contributions and perspectives of prophetology, which enable an integrated and dialogical relationship between Christology and prophetology. By doing so, the project aims to enrich Christian theological discourse and offer new avenues for understanding the role of prophets within the Christian framework without undermining the distinctiveness of prophetic figures in other religious traditions, particularly within Islam.

At this point, three major observations in the present volume offer significant pointers. First, the authors wish to mention the counter-prophetology that Klapheck identified in the Book of Esther and the Jewish prophetesses. Within Judaism, this aspect is challenging, because it presents a positive attitude towards the Persian exile and, thus, a positive view of the diaspora (Klapheck 60–61). The position of Klapheck becomes a Christological challenge, because she views the seven prophetesses as an alternative to the Davidic messianic hope (Klapheck 70). Understood as an example of an integrated Jewess in exile with a dual identity, that is, Persian and Jewish, Esther creates an alternative to the messianic expectation. In other words, redemption is

already given here and now. Esther did not need a state and a temple, which represents a secular emancipation that has only partially realized the messianic promise but enables an affirmation of the present life. Instead of returning to Jerusalem, she focuses on the concrete improvement of the current political situation (Klapheck 75). This point conceptualizes an alternative form of salvation to the conception of the Torah by the Rabbis. Furthermore, tracing Queen Esther back to King Saul illustrates that this alternative conception can integrate the fallen of history and, thus, free people from black-and-white thinking. This manoeuvre can also break open the black-and-white thinking of the traditional promise-fulfillment schema for Christianity. It creates space for the recognition of experiences of atonement and emancipation that have occurred beyond the boundaries of the Church. Especially in times of emphasis on the masculinity of Jesus Christ, it demonstrates how the feminine dimensions of prophetology can broaden the perspective on the Christ event in a healing manner. Meanwhile, in her contribution, Hezser proposes that only the Exodus can be considered an archetype of future redemptions (Hezser 87), which highlights the well-trodden paths of surpassing Moses by Jesus, which the Qur'an rightly exposes as supersessionist. Klapheck's model points out that unrealized potentials exist in the Jewish hopes of redemption that have not simply been usurped Christologically.

At the same time, Hezser's contribution is an indirect invitation for creativity in redefining the relationship between Moses and Jesus. Only in Byzantine art in Late Antiquity was Moses typologically interpreted as a precursor to Jesus and subordinate to him. In many depictions, Jesus replaces Moses or is even portrayed as the lawgiver who hands the new law to Peter and Paul, which replaces the old one. In other texts, Moses continues to appear but is surpassed by Jesus and points to him (Hezser 90). At the burning bush, Moses appears as a forerunner of Jesus at the Transfiguration (Hezser 92–93), which is understood as the fulfillment of the experience of Moses. A particularly intriguing fact is that the miraculous power of Moses, as described in the Bible when he causes water to flow from the rock, is interpreted as prefiguring baptism, which Peter initiates. This interpretation is based on an apocryphal text in which Peter baptizes a Roman soldier with water that Peter miraculously causes to spring from a rock (Hezser 95). Thus, the Christian art of Late Antiquity creatively engages with tradition and is relatively willing to invent new connections to legitimize its typological intent of supersession.

In contrast, the Qur'an's depiction of Muhammad as 'Moses redivivus' and as the Seal of the Prophets opens the possibility for a non-supersessionist interpretation of both religious founders. The seal can also mean confirmation,

which implies that emphasis is placed on the affirmation of what came before instead of surpassing it. Perhaps from this context, one could develop a model for understanding Jesus as the goal of the Torah (Romans 10:4), not ending or abolishing it but fulfilling and expanding it in his person. The creativity of Christian thinkers in Late Antiquity, as Hezser very clearly documents, can encourage people to seek new ways in broad connection to Christian traditions.

The degree to which one can differently perceive prophetic figures even with similar methodological assumptions is exemplified by the contributions of Nora Schmidt and Klaus von Stosch. While Schmidt acknowledges the Christological motifs in the Qur'anic depiction of Joseph but does not consider them central and interprets Joseph instead as a figure of wisdom, von Stosch observes numerous points of connection for engaging with Christology in the Joseph surah. Schmidt and von Stosch interpret the same detail of the healing of Jacob's father through Joseph's shirt in a nearly opposite manner, which is a clear example that the ambiguity of Qur'anic verses through their intertextual embedding may not diminish.

This volume does not aim to definitively answer which aspects are considered by the proclaimer of the Qur'an in terms of the typological interpretations of the prophets with regard to Jesus and how he specifically responds to such claims. However, this book demonstrates that the Qur'an engages in diverse dialogues with the typological and Christological interpretations of prophets and that the Qur'anic response do not always merely reject these connections. Although its primary concern is seemingly developing its prophetology, the Qur'an also presents a confident view of humanity (Neuwirth/Hartwig 135), which is ultimately grounded in God's vouching for Adam (Neuwirth/Hartwig 132). In this aspect as well, the Qur'anic worldview encourages a new perspective on Christian tradition.

This notion, similar to a comprehensive elaboration of an intertextually sensitive Qur'anic prophetology, cannot be achieved here. Our objective was to collect initial impulses and present various case studies. All of these methods assume that the intense dialogue among Islam, Judaism and Christianity from Late Antiquity can be fruitfully explored today. Methodologically, not only considering the dialogue among Abrahamic religions but also subjecting the pre-Islamic Arabian context to scrutiny is crucial. In this regard, Arabic inscriptions can provide important new insights, as particularly highlighted in the contribution of Dost—regardless of whether they are monotheistic or pagan inscriptions (Dost 240). Moreover, the examination of patristic and Rabbinic sources remains incomplete. Therefore, these conclusions are provisional and subject to further research and in-depth examination.

### Long-term Systematic Theological Significance of Prophecy

In general, the theological engagement with prophets and prophecy evidently does not necessarily and should not, occur due to purely historical interest. Among others, the contributions of Ghaffar and Hussein illustrate that the conceptualisation of prophecy in the Qur'an is closely linked to fundamental questions of epistemology, anthropology and salvation history. When the Qur'an emphasizes the limitation of prophetic knowledge and defends the moral integrity and vulnerability of prophets at the same time, it also addresses religious polemical discourses about God's election of specific individuals and peoples. The position and significance of individual figures as prophets or non-prophets in their respective historical perspectives also determine (from the theological standpoint) how one can appreciate the theological value of another religious tradition. A Christocentric perspective on salvation history can lead to typological appropriations of religious traditions and to hermeneutical violence. Similarly, one can ask how to prevent the Qur'anic understanding of Biblical and non-Biblical figures in a prophetological model from being interpreted in a manner that leads to an indifferent levelling of the individual significance of figures and their unique positions in their respective religious traditions. The nature of prophecy as uncomfortable, disruptive and challenging on the one hand and healing, corrective and meaningful, however, is seemingly inherent. Therefore, a comparative theological reflection on the phenomenon of prophecy is particularly suitable for initiating hermeneutical learning effects within one's and other theological traditions.

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This volume examines the Rabbinic, Qur'anic and Christian understandings of prophecy from a historical and comparative theological perspective. The Rabbinic perspectives on the phenomenon of prophecy are analyzed in their historical continuity and engagement with the theological traditions of Islam and Christianity. The examination of female prophecy also occupies a central place here. Similarly, several contributors describe the deep roots of Qur'anic prophetology in the Christian and Jewish traditions of Late Antiquity and the Arabic context. Finally, the anthology attempts to reflect on these different theological traditions of prophecy in the Christian, Jewish, and Qur'anic traditions from a comparative theological perspective and to discuss the possible theological significance of this phenomenon in the modern age.

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