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## The Qur'an and the Syriac Bible

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How was the [Qur'an](#) able to persuade the Arabs of late antiquity of its message and forever transform the map of the Near East? While scholars continue to debate the history of the Qur'an (according to Islamic tradition, revealed between 610–32 CE) and the [spread of Islam](#) in the seventh century CE, some insights on this question might be gained from a careful reading of the text. The Qur'an presents itself as an affirmation and renewal of the scriptures earlier revealed to [Jews](#) and [Christians](#). In the Quran's tenth Sura, or chapter, God declares to the Prophet Muhammad: "So, if thou art in doubt regarding what We have sent down to thee, *ask those who recite the Book before thee*. The truth has come to thee from thy Lord; so be not of the doubters" (Q [10:94](#), trans. A. Arberry). Passages like this suggest that the Qur'an effectively appealed to an audience which was steeped in biblical literature, including stories of earlier [prophets](#) and nations.

The sorts of stories which the Qur'an chooses to tell suggest the same thing. Islamic tradition paints a picture of Islam's origins in a pagan environment, and Western scholars have often assumed that [Mecca](#) in the time of [Muhammad](#) was an outpost of decadent, polytheistic idolaters. Yet for its part the Qur'an is more interested in the Bible than it is in paganism. The Qur'an refers to [Jesus](#) 25 times, to [Abraham](#) 69 times, and to [Moses](#) no fewer than 136 times.

Moreover, the Qur'an frequently challenges Jewish and Christian teachings concerning biblical characters. This concern is especially salient with Jesus. The Qur'an has Jesus himself reject the beliefs of the community which claims to be following him: "The Messiah said, 'Children of Israel, serve God, my Lord and your Lord. Verily whoso associates with God anything, God shall prohibit him entrance to Paradise, and his refuge shall be the Fire; and wrongdoers shall have no helpers'" (Q [5:72](#)). Several verses later the Qur'an adds: "The Messiah, son of Mary, was only a Messenger; Messengers before him passed away; his mother was a just woman; they both ate food. Behold, how We make clear the signs to them; then behold, how they perverted are!" (Q [5:75](#)). In such verses the Qur'an appears to be a scripture with a particular concern for Christology, a matter which was at the center of religious controversies in late antiquity.

The Qur'an's concern with Jesus has often led scholars to analyze it in light of the Greek New Testament. Christians in the Qur'an's environment would have heard the Bible not in Greek, but in

the Syriac translation of the Bible known as the *Peshitta*. In fact, the majority of religious terminology and proper names in the [Arabic](#) Qur'an come not from Greek but from Aramaic, above all Syriac and Christian Palestinian Aramaic: e.g. *ruh al-qudus* ("holy spirit"); *jannah* ("garden"); *qassis* ("priest"); *salla* ("he prayed"); *sabbah* ("he praised"); *sulayman* ("Solomon"); *fir'awn* ("Pharaoh"); *ishaq* ("Isaac"); *zakariyya* ("Zachariah"). The Arabic language in which the Qur'an was articulated evidently had absorbed various "Syriacisms." Moreover it seems likely that the Qur'an's Arabian audience was to some extent bilingual, like many people of late antiquity. Many would have possessed, in addition to Arabic, some command of an Aramaic dialect—Syriac especially—which was widely spoken in the Near East at the time.

Syriac was also the language of religious exhortation among the fragmented Eastern Churches (Jacobites, the Church of the East or "Nestorians," and Chalcedonian Christians or "Melkites"). Syriac religious piety was frequently articulated in rhymed homilies to be sung (*madrashe*) or recited (*memre*). In this context the "Arabic recitation" (*Qur'an 'arabi*; cf. Q [12:2](#)) of the prophet Muhammad (d. 632), while unique by virtue of its claims of direct divine revelation and its "clear Arabic language" (Q [26:195](#)), would have been understood as part of an established genre of religious exhortation., as the literary and rhetorical form of Qur'anic exhortation functions like that of Syriac religious exhortation.

Here we will examine two themes of religious exhortation which reflect the extraordinary dialogue between the Qur'an and the biblical literature of late antiquity.

### ***Prophets and Messengers***

A theme central to the Qur'an is the recurrence of prophets (*anbiya'*) and [messengers](#) (*rusul*) sent by God to warn people to believe in him lest they be punished for their disbelief. In several suras the Qur'an relates stories of Biblical and Arabian prophets (e.g. Q [7](#), [11](#), and [26](#)). The Qur'an often specifies that these prophets are sent to their own peoples: Noah is sent "to his people" (Q [7:59](#)); [Hud](#), a prophet sent to a people named 'Ad, is described as "*their brother*" (Q [7:65](#)); and Šalih, a prophet sent to a people named [Thamud](#), is similarly described as "*their brother*" (Q [7:73](#)).

In the case of [Noah](#), his people seem to find it unbelievable that a man whom they know should claim to be a messenger of divine revelation. In the Qur'an Noah declares to them, "What, do you wonder that a reminder from your Lord should come to you by the lips of a man from among you? That he may warn you, and you be God-fearing, haply to find mercy" (Q [7:63](#)). Such verses seem to manifest a *topos* (theme) seen also in the Gospel passages which have the people of Nazareth reject Jesus: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offense at him" (Mark 6:3 NRSV).

The Qur'an presents Muhammad as part of this prophetic tradition. The Qur'an remembers how Šalih warned his people to believe, lest they be punished as the people of 'Ad were punished when they refused to listen to Hud ("And remember when He appointed you successors after 'Ad" Q [7:74](#)). The Qur'an has Muhammad, in turn, warn his own people by reminding them of earlier peoples who refused to believe the messengers sent to them: "We destroyed the generations before you when they did evil, and their Messengers came to them with the clear signs, but they would not believe; so We recompense the people of the sinners." (Q [10:12](#)).

The Qur'an maintains that all of the prophets are sent with the same message: their stories, and indeed their own characters, are part of a grand meta-narrative. Thus the Qur'an demands Muhammad's followers acknowledge the message of all of the prophets:

*Say: "We believe in God, and that which has been sent down on us, and sent down on Abraham and Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob, and the Tribes, and in that which was given to Moses and Jesus, and the Prophets, of their Lord; we make no division between any of them, and to Him we surrender" (Q [3:84](#)).*

The Arabic word at the end of this verse—rendered here as "surrender"—is the active participle

*muslimun*. Muhammad's followers would use this word, which is anglicized as *Muslims*—to identify their own religious community.

The Islamic vision of an unchanging divine message seems to be unlike that of the Hebrew Bible, in which God reveals messages intimately shaped by the particular historical circumstances of its protagonists. Yet the Qur'anic vision of revelation seems to be close to that of Syriac Christian literature, which presents a typological reading of the Hebrew Bible narratives. In the *Cave of Treasures* (a Syriac Christian text dated from the 4th–6th centuries), for example, *all* of the particular circumstances of the Hebrew Bible narratives fade away in the light of Christ. The Garden of Eden becomes the Church; Noah carries "gold, myrrh, and frankincense" with him in the ark, "treasures" from the Garden that will one day be offered to the infant Jesus; Abraham "lifts up" his son [Isaac](#) to sacrifice him on the very spot where Christ would be crucified, and he has a vision of the Cross and Christ himself as he does so.

For the Qur'an the most important case of typology involves Abraham. In the second Sura the Qur'an has Abraham and his son [Ishmael](#) raise "the foundations of the house," traditionally understood an allusion the building of the [Kaaba](#) in Mecca. They stop and pray that God will one day send a new prophet to their descendants:

*And when Abraham, and Ishmael with him, raised up the foundations of the House: "Our Lord, receive this from us; Thou art the All-hearing, the All-knowing; and, our Lord, make us submissive to Thee, and of our seed a nation submissive to Thee; and show us our holy rites, and turn towards us; surely Thou turnest, and art All-compassionate; and, our Lord, do Thou send among them a Messenger, one of them, who shall recite to them Thy signs, and teach them the Book and the Wisdom, and purify them; Thou art the All-mighty, the All-wise" (Q 2:127–29).*

This passage is something more than a prediction. The Qur'an here has Abraham yearn for the coming of Muhammad, the prophet whom God would send to Mecca. In this light we might understand the Qur'an's insistence elsewhere that Muhammad has a special relationship with Abraham: "The people standing closest to Abraham are those who followed him, *and this Prophet*" (Q 3:68). The theme of Muhammad's intimate relationship with Abraham becomes an important element of Islamic tradition. In the traditional account of Muhammad's ascent to heaven from Jerusalem he describes to his companions how he met Abraham in the seventh heaven (whereas he found Jesus in the second heaven, and Moses in the sixth) and explains, "Never have I seen a man so much like myself."

The Qur'an's interest in developing a typological relationship between Abraham and Muhammad appears to be in part a response to Christian claims about Abraham. Romans 4 and Galatians 3 calls upon the reference in Genesis 15:6) to the faith of Abraham in order to make the case that all who have faith will be saved:

*And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith (Galatians 3:8–9).*

In this passage Paul uses Abraham as a figure who, having preceded Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes, and Moses, to whom the Jewish law was given, embraces both the Jews and the Gentiles. As Abraham was justified by faith in believing the message God had revealed to him so now all those who believe in the new, Christian revelation will be justified by their faith. Thus to Paul Abraham becomes something like a proto-Christian. This idea becomes explicit with Eusebius: "It is only among Christians throughout the whole world that the manner of religion which was Abraham's can actually be found in practice" (*Eccl. Hist.* 1:4).

The Qur'an responds to this Christian understanding of Abraham with its own vision:

*People of the Book! Why do you dispute concerning Abraham? The Torah was not sent down, neither the Gospel, but after him. What, have you no reason? Ha, you are the ones who dispute on what you know; why then dispute you touching a matter of which you know not anything? God*

*knows, and you know not. No; Abraham in truth was not a Jew, neither a Christian; but he was a Muslim and one pure of faith; certainly he was never of the idolaters (Q 3:65–67).*

The Arabic word rendered here as "pure of faith" is *hanif*. While later Muslim exegetes define *hanif* as a "pre-Islamic monotheist," it seems here to be related to Syriac *hanpa*, meaning "pagan"—pagan not in a religious sense, but in the sense of someone *outside* of the Jewish and Christian communities. Here the Qur'an skillfully responds to the Christian idea of Abraham. No longer is Abraham a proto-Christian; he is now a proto-Muslim.

### **Promises and Threats**

While the case of Abraham illustrates how the Qur'an responds to a biblical idea, other cases illustrate the Qur'an's development of biblical ideas. The teachings of the Qur'an on the matters of charity and worship are in close dialogue with those of Jesus and his apostles in the *Peshitta*. In its [fourth Sura](#), known as *al-Nisa'* ("The Women"), the Qur'an gives good tidings to the righteous:

*Whosoever obeys God, and the Messenger—they are with those whom God has blessed, Prophets, just men, martyrs, the righteous (al-nabiyyun w-al-siddiqun w-al-shuhada' w-al-salihun); good companions they (4:69)!*

The series of holy figures cited in this verse is neither gratuitous in form nor general in its reference. It reflects the titles of holy figures celebrated in the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles. These include the "prophets and sincere men" (*nabiye wa zdiqe*) of Matthew 13:17, the "prophets and righteous men" (*nabiye wa shlihe*) of Luke 11:49, and the "witnesses" (*sahde*) of Acts 22:20, passages which had a great impact on the writings on the saints and martyrs by Syriac authors including Aphrahat (d. 345 CE) and Ephrem (d. 373 CE).

In its warnings of the apocalypse as well the Qur'an seems to employ vocabulary, syntax, and imagery which suggest a particular relationship with Syriac literature. In the [seventh Sura](#), known as *al-A'raf* ("The Heights"), the Qur'an declares:

*Those that cry lies to Our signs and wax proud against them the gates of heaven shall not be opened to them, nor shall they enter Paradise until the camel passes through the eye of the needle. Even so We recompense the sinners; Gehenna shall be their cradle, above them coverings. Even so We recompense the evildoers (Q 7:40–41).*

The phrase, "the gates of heaven shall not be opened to them" is a rendering of Arabic *la tufattah lahum abwab al-sama'*, a wording that is reminiscent of the Syriac phrase used in the scene of Jesus' baptism: "suddenly the heavens were opened up for him," *etptahu leh shmaya* (Matthew 3:16). The syntax of the two verses is consistent as well:

Verb to open (*etptahu*) or not to open (*la tufattah*) +  
preposition I with pronominal suffix (*leh; lahum*) +  
the heavens (*shmaya*) or its doorways (*abwab al-sama'*).

Meanwhile, the phrase "nor shall they enter [Paradise](#) until the camel passes through the eye of the needle" (Arabic: *wa la yadkhulun al-jannah hatta yalij al-jamal fi samm al-khiyat*) is related to the well-known Gospel metaphor. What is particularly noteworthy, however, is the intimate relationship between the Qur'anic Arabic and the Syriac version of this metaphor: *dlil hu l-gamla l-me'al ba-hrura da-mhata aw 'atira d-ne'ul l-malkuta d-alaha* ("It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God"; Matthew 19:24; cf. Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25). The Gospel reference to the "rich man" (*atira*) is embodied in the opening of Q 7:40 as "those that cry lies to Our signs and wax proud against them." Finally the Arabic word used in this passage for Paradise, *jannah*, is linguistically related to Syriac *gannta* ("garden"), and the Arabic word used for Hell/Gehenna, *jahannam*, is the biblical *ge-hinnom* ("Valley of Hinnom").

Tellingly, the linguistic relationships shared by the Arabic and Syriac passages do not suggest any

sort of linear influence. These relationships reflect, rather, the dogmatic claim found in Q [25:33](#), namely that the Qur'an articulates (biblical) parables in a manner claimed to be more truthful and more accurate.

Looking to the biblical canon and Syriac language for wisdom on the Qur'an is not new, nor is it foreign to Islamic tradition. Early Muslim [exegetes](#) such as Muqatil b. Sulayman (d. 150/767) and [Abu Ja'far al-Tabari](#) (d. 310/923) regularly cite traditions on the biblical background to Qur'anic passages or explain the meaning of the Qur'an's Arabic vocabulary in the light of other languages. At a later period scholars such as Ibrahim b. 'Umar al-Biqā'i (d. 808/1460) and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 911/1505) utilized these methods in their studies of the Qur'an as well.

Today Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike are increasingly interested in reading the Qur'an in light of the larger context of the Near East in late antiquity, and in particular for its contribution to the reception history of biblical literature. Perhaps the greatest obstacle to research on the Qur'an and the Bible is the historical structure of the academy, by which the field of biblical studies incorporates Jewish and Christian literature but not the Qur'an, and by which the field of Qur'anic studies begins with the Qur'an and early [Arabic literature](#), but leaves out the relationship of the Qur'an to earlier literature in Greek, Aramaic, Ethiopic, and other languages. In our work as co-directors of a consultation to found a new learned society, the International Qur'anic Studies Association (<http://iqsaweb.wordpress.com/>), we hope to bring these fields into greater conversation in the future.

This modest study has shown something of the complications involved in the study of the Qur'an and biblical literature. Serious and fruitful research on the Qur'an will not be limited to an analysis of individual Arabic words in the light of etymologies in Syriac (or any other language). Instead such research will proceed in a sophisticated manner, with a due appreciation for linguistic, historical, and theological questions. This is the sort of task that exceeds the capacity of any individual scholar, a task that invites the field of Qur'anic Studies to a new spirit of collaboration.

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