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QUR'ANIC STUDIES AND HISTORICAL-CRITICAL PHILOLOGY:  
THE QUR'AN'S STAGING, PENETRATING, AND ECLIPSING OF  
BIBLICAL TRADITION

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## Abstract

Qur'anic scholarship today tends to privilege historical queries, focusing on individual texts, their alleged subtexts, and the codex's earliest venues of transmissions. It usually abstains from attempts at making sense of the text as a literary artifact, let alone as an epistemic intervention into the reception of the Bible. Such concerns are left to philology which – if we follow Sheldon Pollock – is a tripartite venture: a query for “textual meaning,” an investigation into the text's traditional understanding, i.e. its “contextual meaning,” and finally a re-thinking of one's own scholarly preconceptions and responsibilities, the “philologist's meaning.” Few topics are better suited to demonstrate the urgency of complementing historical with philological research than the Qur'an's controversial relation to the Bible. A fresh approach which updates the time-honored historical-critical method is required: a diachronic, yet contextual and moreover holistic reading of the Qur'an. The paper will discuss texts featuring Muhammad and Moses that reveal two major shifts in the Qur'an's relationship to the Biblical tradition. The early short *surahs* that seem to have been inspired during vigils (cf. Q 73) still manifest a liturgical transfer of Biblical tradition by means of a “staging” of psalm-like texts in a monastic vein. Subsequently, the entrance of Moses into the narrative space marks the discovery of the textual world of scripture by a nascent community that penetrates the Bible's history and topography through a typological reading of its stories (Q 20). At a still later stage, in Medina, typology gives way to the community's search for a theological identity of its own. Revoking the typological bonds with Moses, the Prophet establishes himself as a spiritual and legal authority (additions to Q 20) and thus eclipses Moses' status. Muhammad thus resumes a position earlier held by Jesus (Matt 11:28–30). Historical research must not stand alone: philology's two assets, contextual reading and scholarly self-reflection, need to be admitted to the stage of Qur'anic studies. The Christian interpretation of the Bible, which for historical and political reasons has until now not taken the Qur'an into account, could benefit substantially from the Qur'an's Biblical criticism as well as from its challenge to rethink prevailing exclusivist positions.

I am aware that I am treading ground that has been smoothed by my eminent predecessor in the role of keynote speaker, the historian Aziz al-Azmeh. Allow me therefore to respond to some of his theses.

Qur'anic scholarship today tends to privilege historical inquiry, focusing on fragmented texts and their alleged subtexts, on biblical, post-biblical and ancient Arabian traditions, and on the codex's earliest venues of transmission. Historical scholars are less interested in making sense of the text as a literary artifact, let alone as an epistemic intervention into the reception of the Bible. Such concerns are left to philology, which indeed appears well equipped for the task. If we follow Sheldon Pollock, philology should be a tripartite venture: first, a quest for "textual meaning"; second, an investigation into the text's traditional understanding, that is, a quest for "contextual meaning": and third, a rethinking of one's scholarly preconceptions and social responsibilities, that is, the "philologist's meaning." Few topics are better suited to demonstrate the urgency of complementing historical research with philology than the Qur'an's controversial relationship to the Bible. A fresh approach – updating the time-honored but somewhat fusty historical-critical method – is required: a diachronic yet contextual and holistic reading of the Qur'an. My presentation will discuss texts featuring Muhammad and Moses that reveal two major shifts in the relationship between the Qur'an and the biblical tradition, which may be considered as stations in the community's itinerary towards a unique religious identity.

### The "Qur'anic Triangle"

The Qur'an is a literary artifact unlike any other. Indeed the word *qur'ān* is a homonym, designating a plurality of things. There are at least three basic peculiarities that set the Qur'an apart from other texts: (1) it is a proclamation (*balāgh*), a message to a community; (2) it is a revelation, a "sending down" (*tanzīl*); and (3) it is a guidance (*hudā*), a rectification of the profane and highly anthropocentric worldview of the Qur'an's Arabian milieu projected in poetry. Thus the Qur'an emerges from a triangular field of tension with the vertices of scripture, the rectification of the old, poetry-imprinted worldview, and the imperatives of establishing a community.

#### *Balāgh*

The first distinctive characteristic of the Qur'an is that it is not an authorial work compiled to edify random readers. It is in a unique way the property – or at least the "heritage" – of a community. Such a close relationship between the text and the community has been effective from the very beginning. It is reflected in the structure of how the Qur'an addresses its audience, and it mirrors the gradual establishment of a communal consensus about a number of essential religious positions. What is demanded therefore is a "contextual reading" of the Qur'an as the transcript of the emergence of a community that gradually develops a religious identity of its own. Indeed one might claim that the individual verse groups and *sūrahs* of the Qur'an are "stations" on the itinerary of the Prophet's listeners towards that eventual goal. This track is not followed in current Qur'anic scholarship, which tends to rigorously sever the text from its historical scenario, which is dismissed for not being reliably documented.

The fact that this verdict raised against the Islamic historical tradition is highly problematic was the focus of Aziz al-Azmeh's talk a year ago. The resulting separation of

the Qur'an from the community is no academic trifle from a philological perspective. To abandon the context of the Meccan and Medinan situations of crisis within which the Prophet Muhammad and the community were operating means to forfeit the most plausible clue to the synchronous growth of the text and the cult of the community, that is, the text's liturgical dimension. Rather than imagine the emergence of the Qur'an isolated from the establishment of the community, we have to imagine synchronicity, a sort of twin birth of scripture and liturgical community.

### *Tanzīl*

The second vertex of the qur'anic triangle is even more complex. It is the Qur'an's claim to be a word sent down from a transcendent sender, a *tanzīl*. It is true that scholars – in particular Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd – have insisted on the fact that this aspect of the Qur'an cannot be a field of scholarship. What scholarship can investigate is exclusively the horizontal dimension of the text, that is, the Prophet's proclamation of the message to his listeners. This is essentially true, yet we should not neglect the traces of that other, vertical communication, which is deeply inscribed in the text. Present on the scene are not only the Prophet, addressed in the Qur'an as "you," and the community, either addressed as "you" (pl.) or mentioned as "they," but also a speaker, absent from the scene, who speaks in the first person, as "I" or "We." The fact that this absentee speaks from the start and claims an elevated status encodes his language with a sacred dimension the linguistic manifestations of which cannot be effaced from scholarly analysis. We have learned from earlier studies such as that of Daniel Madigan that *qur'ān* was conceived early on as matching "the Word of God" in the sense of the late antique *Logos*, the mediating force operating between God and humanity imagined to have come down from heaven; in Christianity, this "Word of God" is incarnate in Jesus Christ, who also "came down from heaven." It is speech – and moreover language as a system of speech – that is hypostasized in the Qur'an, conceived as a divine tool that God applies in organizing the world and communicating its meaning to humanity. Accordingly the world is presented as a system of signs that the pious need to decode.

Thus scholars have to deal with the issue of sacredness reflected in the Qur'an. There have been attempts to capture this dimension in terms of "mantic speech" or "prophetic speech." The qur'anic claim of transcendence is bound to the biblical mode of divine communication that relies on prophecy. Sidney Griffith is right to identify the concept of prophecy as the key to the Qur'an's reading of the Bible. The adoption of the model of prophecy as the exclusive trajectory connecting the supernatural and real worlds went in tandem with the community's shift from a pagan local identity to a new identity forged by biblical tradition. This shift in the qur'anic text is reflected in the typically late antique practice of liturgy: the community's recitation of hymns, doxologies, and litanies, and particularly its adoption of a *qiblah*, an orientation in prayer towards Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish and Christian sacred topography. In its formative Meccan period, the Qur'an absorbs a wide range of biblical religious experiences, both in terms of narrative plots and in terms of self-expression. A number of essential biblical stories are retold and, what is more, their protagonists are reclaimed as the community's own spiritual ancestors. In view of the Qur'an's emergence in Late Antiquity, this particular reception of biblical antiquity takes on the shape of liturgical speech.

*Hudā*

What about the third vertex of our triangle, the negotiation of poetry? One has to keep in mind that the aforementioned self-biblicization of the community is not sustained throughout the Qur'an's development. It is highly problematic to single out the Bible as *the* subtext of the Qur'an. Considered more closely, the Qur'an not only "biblicizes" Arab culture, but – I would claim – equally "Arabizes" the biblical worldview. The Qur'an, being a highly poetical text, celebrates high language in an unprecedented way and thus raises the Arab heritage to a new level of dignity.

Further indices of an Arabization of biblical tradition should not go unmentioned. In its later stages of development, the qur'anic community comes to rethink its native origins. Entire biblical texts are rewritten and reconnected to inherited moral codes. It suffices here to refer to the Arabization of the Decalogue, which emerges as a genuinely new manifesto of morally approved behavior within Arab society. Perhaps most importantly, the Qur'an negotiates the ancient Arabic *aporia* of *ubi sunt*, the perennial question of the whereabouts of past generations. This question, which is ubiquitously mirrored in the initial section of the ancient Arabic long poem, starts with the motif of the so-called *at̤lāl*, the poet's lament over ruins, which is to be understood as a cipher for the tantalizing perception not only of an obviously lost collective past, but moreover of the transitoriness of human life altogether. The qur'anic response is a new reading, a reinterpretation of history that does not connect to the extant models of constructing meaning. It claims to rectify the Jewish option of remembering a remote national past where God used to privilege His elect people and thereby promised to continue to provide for them. In the Qur'an, history does not entail such a promise, but it is creation – celebrated as almost paradisiacal – that must be recognized as the divine warrant of His providence, which concerns humankind universally. Additionally, it is the promise of an eschatological re-creation that devaluates the verdict of transitoriness. This new worldview reconnects to the Arabian milieu. One might say, to quote Ghassan El Masri, that "the motif of the *at̤lāl*, of the ruins, which is presented by the poet as the ostensible trace of the ruinous will of time, is theologized and in its eschatological re-embodiment as paradise and hell is turned into a divine instrument of revival and merciful reward as well as an instrument of punishment and retribution."

The entire frame of reference of the Qur'an's embedment in Arab Late Antiquity is only recently being discovered, not least thanks to new studies in Arabic poetry and new epigraphic Arabic evidence. Learning more about the pre-Islamic period makes it possible to recognize the full dimension of the readmission of Arab legal and cultic lore into the new religious frame, and thus to assess the new community's distinctive character vis-à-vis other biblical communities. What is often ignored by scholars who focus on the biblical dimension of the Qur'an is the fact that the biblically privileged prophetic paradigm – the Prophet Muhammad's emulation of Moses – in the end gives way to another more complex paradigm, that of an Abrahamic faith that no longer excludes the local extra-biblical heritage, but integrates it. Nonetheless, what is upheld throughout the qur'anic development is the linguistic guise of liturgical speech. It is still a desideratum to systematically reconsider the Arab heritage, which is predominantly accessible to us in the linguistically condensed form of poetry, as an important second subtext of the Qur'an, if not the essential matrix on which biblical traditions have been inscribed.

### The “Shibboleth of Qur’anic Studies”: Diachronic vs. Synchronic Approaches

A new attempt to trace the development of the Qur’an is overdue. The still-powerful shibboleth lurking behind the present disarray of Qur’anic studies is chronology – and not simply in the sense of accepting or rejecting a particular sequence of “chapters” such as Theodor Nöldeke established in the beginning of critical scholarship. What is needed is a deeper understanding of chronology, that is, the pursuit of traces of epistemic developments that lead up to the ultimate achievement of a new communal religious identity. What is at stake is the acceptance of the Qur’an’s emergence from a real historical event, reading it as a sequence of messages addressed to real listeners who successively increase in number and in theological sophistication and whose changing expectations are mirrored in the text – an approach that corresponds roughly to that of Islamic tradition itself.

Yet what goes beyond the approach of Islamic tradition is our more strict adherence to diachronicity. Although there is an entire discipline within the traditional qur’anic sciences (*‘ulūm al-qur’ān*) dedicated to the so-called “occasions of revelation” (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), which establishes a rough sequence of text units, the results are neither complete nor independent of later social and religious contexts. Looking at the discursive contexts implied in the text rather than at extratextual social contexts that are hard to verify, we focus on the qur’anic communication as a “challenge-and-response process” that reflects the first listeners’ understanding of the text. Their changing attitudes towards core issues, such as the status of Moses and the Israelites, are closely related to the changing manifestations of the Bible in the milieu of the community. The following diachronic reading, which considers not only the final form of the Qur’an including its historical intertexts but also (and equally) the Qur’an’s “intratexts” – its intrinsic history as a chain of gradually conveyed and received messages – is meant to throw light on this development.

With the early *sūrah*s, one could say that an Arabic poetical manifestation of biblical tradition is “staged” in the shape of psalmodic recitations of qur’anic texts, a procedure which actively involved its listeners. With the community’s emerging self-awareness in the middle Meccan period, however, one can perceive a critical turn. Biblical tradition at large, including the orally transmitted “interpreted Bible,” appears as a counter-world to replace the one inhabited in reality. Its textual world is “penetrated” to accommodate within the Israelites’ salvation history the new covenantal group around the Prophet, a procedure once again actively involving the community. Still later in Medina, in the course of encountering the Hebrew Bible as manifest in Jewish liturgy and learned discussions, the exclusive authority of biblical prophecy, represented by Moses, is questioned and finally “eclipsed” by that of the Prophet Muhammad. Moses’ word to the Israelites fuses with that of Muhammad to the Medinan Jews, and the merger of biblical directives with qur’anic instructions in the text reflects the community’s consciousness of possessing a new manifestation of scripture and thus its attainment of a new identity vis-à-vis the earlier “People of the Scripture” (*ahl al-kitāb*). Let us now consider this development in further detail.



### Three Phases of Qur'anic Development

#### “Staging” Biblical Tradition

The early Qur'an attests to liturgical practices involving texts that should have borne a close resemblance to the canonical Psalms. Indeed, the recitation of these texts, performed in the particular framework of a vigil, is even claimed as the *Sitz im Leben* for the receipt of new revelations. One of the earliest uses of the word *qur'ān* (Q Muzzammil 73:1-10) points to an already existing practice of nightly recitals of liturgical texts:

O thou enwrapped in thy robes,  
Stand during the night (*qumi'l-layla*), except a little –  
A half of it, or diminish a little,  
Or add a little, and chant the *qur'ān* very distinctly.  
Behold, We shall cast upon thee a weighty word;  
Surely the first part of the night is heavier in tread, more upright in speech,  
Surely in the day thou hast long business.  
And remember the Name of thy Lord (*wa'dhkuri'sma rabbika*), and  
devote thyself unto him very devoutly.  
Lord of the East and West (*rabbu'l-mashriqi wa'l-maghribi*) – there is no  
god but He, so take him for a guardian.

The scenario of the *sūrah* is that of a vigil, the liturgical frame which elsewhere would involve the reading of the Psalms. What is being read, *al-qur'ān* mentioned in verse 4, is not explicitly determined. That it should be texts matching the Psalms is evident from the wording of the text: Q 73:2 (*qumi'l-layla*) corresponds to Psalms 119:62 (*hātsôt laylāh āqūm lē-hôdôt lākh*); Q 73:8 (*wa'dhkuri'sma rabbika*) is reminiscent of Psalms 113:1 (*halēlū et-shēm YHWH*); and Q 73:9 (*rabbu'l-mashriqi wa'l-maghribi*) refers to Psalms 50:1 (*mi-mizrah shemesh 'ād-mēbo'ō*). Thus, in these early Qur'anic texts, the term *qur'ān* would denote a biblically inspired genre of liturgical texts apt for recitation in the Arabic language – a sort of Arabic psalms.

It is true that the recitation of the *qur'ān* is imposed on the Prophet personally; however, we can deduce from other references (including the final verse of Sūrat al-Muzzammil, Q 73:20, which refers to the situation of the Medinan community) that vigils – at least at a later phase – should have been held as communal services. The Qur'an, from the beginning, is not only “text” but equally “context,” the spiritual possession of a proclaimer and subsequently a community that, through its collective recitation, constructs a biblically informed identity of its own.

#### “Penetrating” Biblical Tradition: A Conversation with the “Interpreted Bible”

The awareness of not only participating in a shared liturgical practice with earlier communities or pious individuals, but also of sharing their historically rooted covenantal status, does not emerge immediately. It comes about with the necessity of self-legitimation for the new community, which arose at a time when opponents prevailed and cast doubts upon the legitimacy of the proclaimer's status as the bearer of a supernatural

message. The *sūrah*s of the Middle Meccan period in particular attest to the community's attempt to dissociate itself from the Meccan cult center and to relocate itself in an imagined space, the Holy Land, the landscape of biblical salvation history dominated by the towering figure of Moses. This is achieved through diverse textual strategies, most strikingly the ubiquitous renarrating of biblical stories. The central parts of Middle Meccan *sūrah*s are occupied with narratives that recount episodes of biblical history. The formal centrality of such biblical narratives in these *sūrah*s is reminiscent of the position of the *lectio* or *qeri'at Torah* in Christian and Jewish services respectively. Moreover, in the beginnings and the ends of these *sūrah*s, scripture as such, *al-kitāb*, is referenced as the ultimate attestation to the truth of the proclaimer's message.

The role of scriptural remembrance in inducing an expansion of collective consciousness in the later Meccan period can hardly be overestimated. This expansion was both topographical and temporal. The topography of scriptural history expands beyond Mecca to include the homeland of earlier messengers, and the Holy Land, the site of the Israelites' history, emerges as a particularly blessed region. At some point during this period, the reorientation towards the "furthest sanctuary" in Jerusalem was implemented on the ritual level as well, with the community adopting Jerusalem as the *qiblah* and thus expanding its symbolic horizon into the world of the Banū Isrā'īl, the people of Moses. The temporal setting of the message likewise expands, as the community counts itself among the receivers of a scripture narrating a succession of spiritual forbears and ultimately adopts the cultural memory of the people of the Holy Land. Embracing core aspects of a different tradition, the community relinquished the identity it had garnered from the Meccan rites.

The shift of the religious center away from the Ka'ba and towards Jerusalem not only implies a change of orientation in the divine service, but also signals the evolution of a new form of the text. The considerably longer *sūrah*s of this period are no longer apt to serve as mere verbal complements to the prescribed gestures of ritual (as were the early Meccan *sūrah*s). They have outgrown their previous framework, on both liturgical and stylistic levels. Their new structure suggests that they were used in a longer liturgical services, reflecting that of the older monotheistic verbal services of the Jewish and Christian religions. There are multiple indications – for example, the introduction of the *basmalah* – that from this time onwards, new Qur'an compositions were codified straightaway. In fact, the more complex structure of the verses, whose endings can no longer be sufficiently marked by rhyme, seems to demand this step. This does not reflect the actual adoption of writing (the technique of writing itself being long known in the area), but rather the transition of the community from one based on ritual continuity to textual continuity. This is primarily manifested in the intense preoccupation with heavenly scripture, which is assigned the highest status of authority. It is writing that has now become a kind of external storage supporting memorization. Most importantly, the new attachment to the Bible as the document of a covenantal relationship between God and man manifests the penetration of biblical salvation history and the appropriation of the past of the Banū Isrā'īl as spiritual forbears.

But with what kind of Bible was the Meccan community engaged? The observations that the Qur'an does not exist in more than one version, that it has no apocrypha or pseudepigrapha attached to it, and that it has not been submitted to diverging authoritative translations or starkly contrasting readings that would have



crystallized into different religions, easily blind us to the fact that the Bible, the scripture that preceded the Qur'an, is essentially different in exactly these respects.

In Christian hands, biblical exegesis had become the vehicle of a strongly sectarian reading of the text. It subordinated the Hebrew Bible to the hermeneutic authority of the New Testament, which was considered to entail the key to the "true" understanding of the Bible as a whole. Although such hermetic closure cannot be upheld for the Eastern Mediterranean, where Aramaic-speaking Jews and Syriac-speaking Christians (Syriac being a dialect of Aramaic) entertained a lively exchange in theological issues, speaking of the Bible demands that one keep in mind the essential heterogeneity of its two modes of existence, Christian and Jewish.

Did the development that culminated in the widespread hegemony of the "Christian Bible" affect the Arabian milieu of the Qur'an's emergence as well? Scholars of Late Antiquity more recently have devoted particular attention to the manifestation and status of the Bible in the period after its codification, highlighting its diversity. James Kugel states:

Examined through the lens of wisdom writings, the original meaning and even the original genres of Israel's ancient texts were subtly modified, reconfigured by a whole new way of reading. It was this way of reading that Jews and Christians canonized as their Bible. (p. 671)

Kugel might have added that "this way of reading" biblical tradition was also what the nascent Islamic community adopted and developed. But it still needed the intervention of Sidney Griffith, the doyen of the study of the Christian Arabic Bible, to expand Kugel's observations. Griffith widens the horizons of the impact of the "transformed Bible" to include the Qur'an among the manifestations of what he calls the "interpreted Bible," a kind of vernacular, orally transmitted Bible on which the Qur'an draws – eventually developing into a new scripture of its own.

However, a distinction should be made between the reception of biblical tradition in Mecca and in Medina. Mecca and Medina are not only two different sites for the proclamation of the Qur'an with different audiences. They are also sites of different hermeneutical approaches to the Bible. How is this difference, which sometimes amounts to contradictions, reconciled? The decisive device is a hermeneutical tool that had already been successfully employed *mutatis mutandis* in Jewish practice: the use of *targumim*, amendments to the original texts to accommodate new understandings. While in Judaic tradition these took the shape of free translations, in the Qur'an they figure as later additions. Later additions to earlier *sūrah*s are indicative of a new interpretation of a previously communicated text. Previous texts, in view of their status as *tanzīl*, cannot be altered or eliminated, but they can be reinterpreted. Islamic tradition draws attention to this particular growth of the text in its discussion of the Meccan and Medinan origins of individual *sūrah*s. This practice of periodization seems to have been applied early in the Qur'an's development, as a number of very early Meccan *sūrah*s appear to have been transmitted *à jour* already in the Middle Meccan period. The theologically most significant additions, however, are due to the paradigm shift that occurred in Medinan times.

To contrast the Meccan and Medinan conversations with the Bible, the figure of Moses offers a particularly rewarding vantage point. In what follows, Moses will be

highlighted as the central figure in the process of the community's shift from a pious religious reform movement to a self-reliant religious community with a strong political identity of its own. The particular textual politics involved in bringing about this shift in the hermeneutical paradigm is a sort of typology that, while current in Judaism, enjoyed a particularly high status in the Christian reading of the Bible during Late Antiquity.

Let us take a closer look at the Qur'an's peculiar manifestation of this typology. It may be claimed that it is through the textual politics of a modified typology that the Prophet Muhammad gradually slips into the role of earlier prophets, Moses in particular. The messenger historically "relives" Moses' experiences. A number of examples can be found in Q 20, Sūrat Ṭaha.

The reading of the Moses story in Sūrat Ṭaha is, in many respects, typical of the Qur'anic revision of biblical narrative. In the story of Moses' call, which is the foundation narrative of the Israelites' emergent identity as the people of the covenant, the divine speaker is stripped of his particular covenantal dimension. In the Qur'anic version, he does not identify himself as the God of an elect group nor as the future savior who will lead his people out of Egypt, although the biblical narratives in which these divine self-identifications are embedded are reported elsewhere in the Qur'an. Thus in Sūrat Ṭaha the story of Moses' call from the burning bush reads like this:

Hast thou received the story of Moses?  
When he saw a fire and said to his family, "Tarry you here. I observe a  
fire. Perhaps I will bring you a brand from it or I shall find at the  
fire guidance."  
When he came to it a voice cried, "Moses,  
I am thy Lord (*rabbuka*). Put off thy shoes; thou art in the holy valley  
Ṭuwā.  
I myself have chosen thee; therefore give your ear to this revelation!  
Verily I am God. There is no god but I (*lā ilāha illā anā*)! Therefore serve  
me and perform the prayer (*ṣalāh*) of My remembrance!"  
The Hour is coming. I hardly conceal it that every soul may be  
recompensed for its labors...  
Go to Pharaoh; he has waxed insolent...

(Q 20:9-15, 25)

Here there is no mention of the "God of your fathers, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Ex 3:6). Instead, God identifies himself as "your Lord," *rabbuka*, the usual rendering of the Tetragrammaton known from the Septuagint (*kúrios*) that appears throughout the Meccan *sūrahs*. God further testifies to His own oneness with a version of the newly introduced *shahādah* formula, here phrased as *lā ilāha illā anā*. He justifies his dispatch of Moses with the imminence of the Last Judgment, which should inspire faith and liturgical piety.

Here, biblical concepts have been translated into late antique perceptions: God is portrayed not as the God of a particular people but as universal, and the world is portrayed not as a mundane stage for historical events, but as approaching its eschatological end. Although the story goes on with the divine voice preparing Moses for his mission at Pharaoh's court, this mission is not simply to persuade Pharaoh to let Moses' people go, but is rather psychagogic – to actually convert Pharaoh. In this way,

the proclaimer's situation is projected onto that of Moses in a kind of typological reading. The calls for attestation of God's unity (*tawhīd*) and prayer (*ṣalāh*) are two injunctions imposed on the contemporary Meccan community, and their connection with Moses substantially increases their authority. The long *qur'ān* about Moses, who is presented as a counterpart of Muhammad, serves to establish a new theological paradigm: prophethood has to be installed as the decisive and solely authoritative medium of relating to the supernatural, which devaluates the plural venues of opponents involving lesser deities and demons.

Moses' experience of being called in a place distinguished by a natural phenomenon that is mysteriously affected – a plant that is burning but not consumed by the fire (Ex 3:2) – seems to be sidelined in Q 20:9-15. Yet exactly this sort of mysterious phenomenon is reflected in an experience relating to Muhammad himself, who in Q Najm 53:13-18 sees a bush or tree that is mysteriously “covered”:

Indeed, he saw Him another time  
by the lote-tree of the boundary,  
nigh which is the garden of the refuge,  
When there covered the lote-tree that which covered;  
His eye swerved not, nor swept astray.  
Indeed, he saw one of the greatest signs of his lord.

The experience of Moses appears as a significant prefiguration of that of Muhammad. Is it justifiable to claim that Muhammad thus becomes the antitype of Moses? Obviously the paradigm of typology at work here is different from the Christian one. There is no teleological tension between the biblical and qur'anic events, and Muhammad does not come to fulfill a biblical promise; rather, here things work the other way around. The biblical events corroborate the truth and significance of the qur'anic events. We might therefore more precisely speak of *taṣdīq* (validation), insofar as the older tradition comes to confirm the new. Yet the construction of reciprocity, of empirical and psychological analogies, goes beyond a merely semantic, “textual” similarity between the plots of the prophetic stories. They touch on the “context,” attesting the emergence of a new prophetic identity. Taking the biblical intertexts and the qur'anic intratexts seriously, we discern a development both in terms of the psychological condition of the Prophet Muhammad and in terms of the translation of the biblical version into a late antique epistemic space.

#### *“Eclipsing” Biblical Tradition: A Conversation with the Jewish Bible*

Turning to the community's encounter with the original heirs of the Bible, the Medinan Jews, another manifestation of the Bible different from the universally known “interpreted Bible” enters the scene. Moses, who had been the prophet *par excellence* during the Meccan period, is overshadowed by the figure of the messenger whose rank as a mediator of divine speech and thus of divine norms gains new political momentum. The Jews of Medina, far from being immediate opponents of the Prophet, must be imagined as significant interlocutors of the community, introducing not only more precise biblical knowledge, but also new hermeneutical approaches to biblical texts.

In Mecca, the Bible that was manifest as the heavenly scripture and present in the oral tradition of the widely promulgated “interpreted Bible” had been a virtual, rather than material, corpus. In Medina, the Bible was present in a much more concrete form, as we must deduce from the qur’anic evidence that points to a background in Jewish liturgy. Medinan qur’anic Bible references relate to texts that figure prominently in Jewish liturgy.

The Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) liturgy is a case in point. Yom Kippur (Arabic: *‘Āshūrā*) is a biblically founded feast. Moses’ return with the new tablets on 10 Tishri (Dt 10:1-10) signaled God’s forgiveness for the people’s grave sin of idolizing the Golden Calf. Indeed, this act of idolatry provides the very etiology for the cultic practices carried out during the period of repentance that precedes the Day of Atonement. One has to keep in mind that the act of idolatry in Jewish tradition is deemed the most fateful event in all of biblical history, responsible for any later catastrophe that was to befall the Jews (cf. *bSanh.* 102a).

However, looking at the event of the Golden Calf as related in the Qur’an in the final part of the aforementioned Meccan *sūrah*, Q 20:83-99, we read an amazingly different story. It is an edifying narrative, where no blame, let alone any lasting guilt, is laid upon the Israelites, since it is not the people but a stranger, al-Sāmīrī, who is charged with initiating the act of idolatry. This makes an immediate and complete reconciliation between God and His people possible. Upon closer inspection, however, we discover a later Medinan insertion into the Meccan *sūrah* that adds theological points to the story that do not blend smoothly with the tone and tenet of the story itself. The insertion, Q 20:80-82, is easily identifiable as such by its address, “Children of Israel (*yā banī isrā’īl!*)” This is never used to address the biblical Israelites, but rather exclusively to address the Jews, be they the contemporaries of Jesus or, more often, Muhammad. In its original qur’anic setting, the narrative of the Golden Calf immediately followed the Exodus and Pharaoh’s punishment:

So Pharaoh had led his people astray, and did not guide them.  
Children of Israel (*yā banī isrā’īl!*)! We delivered you from your enemy  
and we made a covenant with you upon the right sight of the  
Mount and sent down on you manna and quails.  
Eat of the good things (*tayyibāt*) wherewith we have provided you, but  
exceed not therein, or my anger (*ghaḍab*) will alight on you; and  
on whomsoever my anger alights, that man is hurled to ruin.  
Yet I am all-forgiving to him who repents and believes and does  
righteousness and at last is guided.  
What has made you hasten from your people, Moses? [What follows is the  
story of the Golden Calf.]

(Q 20:79-83)

The inserted verse 80 supplements some facts that had been sidelined in the Meccan story, namely the miraculous salvation through the passage of the Red Sea and the conclusion of the covenant with God – both regarded in Jewish tradition as climactic events in the history of the elect people. Finally it mentions the miraculous nourishment of the people in the desert with manna and quails. It is this mention of food that leads to

the direct address of the contemporary Jews, who are admonished to eat from “the good things,” that is, from the pure food given to them by God, but not to “exceed therein.” This qur’anic warning should not be taken to target the biblical Hebrews’ handling of food, but rather to address a contemporary controversial point: that Jewish dietary laws should not be kept overanxiously. The “good things” (*tayyibāt*), though occasionally also referring to manna and quails, is equally a legal term denoting “ritually pure” food.

The identification of Q 20:80-82 as a later insertion is further corroborated by the verses’ new interest in God’s emotional self-manifestation. They twice mention divine anger (*ghaḍab*), a topic which had not been raised previously in any Meccan qur’anic text. While the idea of divine anger is directly connected to a reprehensibly overanxious observance of dietary laws, equally important is its leading into to the immediately following story of the Golden Calf. Through the topic of “divine anger,” the contemporary legal issue of the dietary laws and the momentous biblical story about the Israelites’ disobedience become entwined. This *unctim* lays the foundation for a new qur’anic *theologumenon*, namely the concept of punitive – and thus not universally binding – laws. This issue cannot be fully elaborated here; suffice it to refer to Holger Zellentin’s recent discussion in *The Qur’ān’s Legal Culture* (2013). For now, then, let us look at the peculiar reception of the Bible that is reflected here.

The contextualization of the *unctim* of Israelite guilt acquired through the sin of the Golden Calf and divine anger towards the later Jews that we encounter in the interpolated Meccan Sūrat Ṭaha can be understood as a late antique rereading of the biblical account in Exodus 33. This is no qur’anic innovation; rather, it reflects an already established association that figures prominently in the late antique Jewish liturgy of Yom Kippur, where it is embedded in a number of other scriptural texts. Among these, one particular passage, Exodus 34:6-7, stands out. When Moses, after witnessing the act of idolatry and destroying the first set of tablets, returns into God’s presence to receive the new tablets, the so-called thirteen attributes (*middôt*) of God are revealed:

And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed: The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth. Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.

This verse, recited more than ten times in the liturgy, is in tune with the prophetic reading, the *haftarah*, for Yom Kippur morning (Is 57:14-58), the main concern of which is to inculcate a transformation of religious consciousness and action. These ideas, and perhaps even these scriptural references, seem to be reflected in the qur’anic address to the Banū Isrā’īl in Q 20:81-82, which highlights the gravity of the guilt that would arise from further transgressions on the part of the contemporary Jews, but which equally opens the door for forgiveness. Thus the story told in Q 20:83-99, through the liturgy-inspired connection of lasting divine anger, retrospectively regains the theological momentum it had in Judaism – an observation that can hardly be explained without assuming the presence of Jewish interlocutors in the Prophet’s audience. A communal context again provides the key to a meaningful understanding of a qur’anic text.



### Conclusion: The “Philologist’s Meaning”

Our diachronic reading of the Qur’an allows us to differentiate between distinct stages in the Qur’an’s relationship to the Bible. After a period of “staging” the psalm-like liturgical texts of the early *sūrah*s, the community developed an awareness of walking in the footsteps of the Israelites, whose history therefore had to be retold. The qur’anic community looked upon the towering figure of their prophet-leader Moses as the model for its own prophet. During his Meccan ministry, through the double strategy of mutual reconfiguration, the Prophet Muhammad developed into a mirror image of Moses. This close relationship was questioned in Medina. The Qur’an’s most sophisticated Moses story, Sūrat Ṭaha, which contains both Meccan and Medinan verses, reflects this. The Meccan core text still presents Moses as role model, but in the Medinan insertion, his role as the ultimately authoritative legislator is challenged. It is Muhammad who steps into the older prophet’s role by addressing the people of Moses, the contemporary Jews, and admonishing them to modify their attitude towards the Mosaic law, which in part has become obsolete. Moses’ absolute authority is thus eclipsed, and Muhammad’s mission becomes substantially more significant. In addition to Muhammad’s being a messenger (*rasūl*), he becomes a leader empowered to endow his community with a new identity. Biblical prophecy, which in Mecca had been the sole authoritative form of mediation between the divine and human realms, becomes in Medina a contested authority.

This kind of reading of the Qur’an is based on the conviction that the narrative of qur’anic origins transmitted in Islamic tradition is – at least in its basic data – historically trustworthy. To dismiss it would require falsifying proofs. It would also be methodologically dubious to leave undecided the basic question about the historicity of the Prophet and his addressing a community, that is, the qur’anic event taking place in a fixed period of time. Qur’an scholars have to decide on the literary genre of the text under scrutiny. Is it a written *report* distributed over 114 chapters, or is it an orally staged *drama* progressing in successive scenes and acts? Either way, there is no text without context. The text and its embedment in a historical event need to be considered. What has happened to the Bible, which until modern times was completely detached from its Jewish reception and interpretation, should not *mutatis mutandis* repeat itself with the Qur’an. On the contrary, Christian as well as Jewish interpretation of the Bible, and indeed Western Biblical scholarship in general, will benefit substantially from observing the Qur’an’s biblical criticism, as well as the intrinsic challenge it poses to rethink prevailing exclusivist positions.



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