Focus On Quran and the Syriac Bible

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The Qurʾan and the Syriac Bible

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How was the Qurʾan 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 (according to Islamic tradition, revealed between 610–32 CE) and the century CE, some insights on this question might be gained from a careful reading of the text. Qurʾan presents itself as an affirmation and renewal of the scripture 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 Qurʾan effectively appea
steeped in biblical literature, including stories of earlier prophets and nations.

The sorts of stories which the Qurʾan chooses to tell suggest the same thing. 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 religion. Moreover, the Qurʾan is more interested in the Bible than it is in paganism. The Qurʾan refers to times, to Abraham 69 times, and to Moses no fewer than 136 times.

Moreover, the Qurʾan frequently challenges Jewish and Christian texts on biblical characters. This concern is especially salient with Jesus. The Qurʾan challenges 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 Qurʾan 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).

The Qurʾan appears to be a scripture with a particular concern for Christology, the center of religious controversies in late antiquity. The Qurʾan's concern with Jesus has often led scholars to analyze it in light of the New Testament. Christians in the Qurʾan's environment would have heard the Bible not in the Syriac translation of the Bible known as the Peshitta. In fact, the names and proper names in the Arabic Qurʾan come not from Greek but from Syriac and Christian Palestinian Aramaic: e.g. ruh al-qudus ("holy spirit"); je ("priest"); salla ("he prayed"); sabbah ("he praised"); sulayman ("Solomon"); ishaq ("Isaac"); zakariyya ("Zachariah"). The Arabic language in which the Qurʾan was articulated evidently had absorbed various "Syriacisms." Moreover, the Qurʾan's Arabian audience was to some extent bilingual, like many peoples of late antiquity. Many would have possessed, in addition to Arabic, some command of an Aramaic dialect—especially Syriac—"which was widely spoken in the Near East at the time.

Syriac was also the language of religious exhortation among the Syriac-speaking (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 (memre). In this context the "Arabic recitation" (Qurʾan '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 Qurʾanic exhortation functions like that of Syriac religious exhortation.

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

Prophets and Messengers

A theme central to the Qurʾan is the recurrence of prophets (anbiyaʿ) and messengers (rasūl).
by God to warn people to believe in him lest they be punished for their disbelief. The Qurʾan relates stories of Biblical and Arabian prophets (e.g. Q 7, 11, 26), specifies that these prophets are sent to their own peoples: Noah is sent to his people; Hud, a prophet sent to a people named 'Ad, is described as "their brother"; a prophet sent to a people named Thamud, is similarly described as "their brother.

In the case of Noah, his people seem to find it unbelievable that a man should be a messenger of divine revelation. In the Qurʾan 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).

The Qurʾan presents Muhammad as part of this prophetic tradition. ??li? warned his people to believe, lest they be punished as the people they refused to listen to Hud ("And remember when He appointed you successors after 'Ad" Q 7:74). The Qurʾan 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 Qurʾan maintains that all of the prophets are sent with the same message, and indeed their own characters, are part of a grand meta-narrative. Thus Muhammad’s followers acknowledge the message of all of the prophets by saying:

Say: "We believe in God, and that which has been sent down on us, and sent down on Abraham and 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"muslimun. Muhammad’s followers would use this word, which is ang their own religious community.

The Islamic vision of an unchanging divine message seems to be unlike which God reveals messages intimately shaped by the particular historical circumstances of its protagonists. Yet the Qurʾanic vision of revelation seems to be close to that of Syriac Christian literature, which presents a typological reading of the Hebrew Bible narratives. Treasures (a Syriac Christian text dated from the 4th–6th centuries), for example, presents a typological reading of the Hebrew Bible narratives in which particular circumstances of the Hebrew Bible narratives fade away in which Eden becomes the Church; Noah carries "gold, myrrh, and frankincense" with him in the "treasures" from the Garden that will one day be offered to the infant son Isaac to sacrifice him on the very spot where Christ would be crucified. For the Qurʾan the most important case of typology involves Abraham: Qurʾan has Abraham and his son Ishmael raise the foundations of
understood an allusion the building of the Kaaba in Mecca. They stop send a new prophet to their descendants:

*And when Abraham, and Ishmael with him, raised up the foundations of the House: “Our Lord, hear all our prayers, and, our Lord, make us submissive to Thee, and, and of our seed a nation submissive to Thee; and make the Book and the Holy Law a light to our people; and, unless We turn towards us, surely Thou art the All-mighty, the All-wise” (Q 2:127–29).*

This passage is something more than a prediction. The Qurʾān here has Abraham yearn for the coming of Muhammad, the prophet whom God would send to Mecca. They understand the Qurʾān’s insistence elsewhere that Muhammad has a special relationship with Abraham: “The people standing closest to Abraham are those who followed him (Q 3:68). The theme of Muhammad’s intimate relationship with Abraham is 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 explain much like myself.”

The Qurʾān’s interest in developing a typological relationship between Abraham and Muhammad appears to be in part a response to Christian claims about Abraham. The Qurʾān refers to Genesis (15:6) to the faith of Abraham in order 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*).

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 community. Abraham was justified by faith in believing the message God had revealed to him. Now all those who believe in the new, Christian revelation will be justified by their faith. This idea becomes explicit among Christians throughout the whole world that the manner of religious practice is actually be found in practice” (*Eccl. Hist. 1:4*).

The Qurʾān 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 as a "pre-Islamic monotheist," it seems here to be related to Syriac *lhan* "pagan" and "pagan not in a religious sense, but in the sense of someone Christian communities. Here the Qurʾān skillfully responds to the Christian idea of Abraham. Long is Abraham a proto-Christian; he is now a proto-Muslim.
While the case of Abraham illustrates how the Qurʾan responds to a biblical idea, other cases illustrate the Qurʾan's development of biblical ideas. The teachings on charity and worship are in close dialogue with those of Jesus and his apostles in the fourth Sura, known as *al-Nisaʿ* ("The Women"); the Qurʾan gives good tidings to the righteous:

> Whosoever obeys God, and the Messengerâ"they are with those whom God has blessed, Prophets, just men, martyrs, the righteous (*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 "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 the Gospels and *Acts* 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 Qurʾan seems to employ vocabulary, syntax, and imagery which suggest a particular relationship with Syriac literature. *al-Aʿraf* ("The Heights"), the Qurʾan 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 7:40â"41).

The phrase, "the gates of heaven shall not be opened to them" is a rendering of Arabic *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," and its syntax of the two verses is consistent as well:

Verb to open (*etpta?u*) or not to open (la tufatta?) + preposition l 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 yaliq al-jamal fi l-me'al ba-hrura da-mhata aw 'atira d-ne'ul l-malkuta d-alaha* (= through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God). The Gospel reference to the "rich man" (*atir*) of Q 7:40 as "those that cry lies to Our signs and wax proud against them." The Arabic word used for Hell/Gehenna, *jahannam*, is the biblical *ge-hinnom*.

Tellingly, the linguistic relationships shared by the Arabic and Syriac parse of linear influence. These relationships reflect, rather, the dogmatic claim that the Qurʾan 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 Qurʾan is not new, nor is it foreign to Islamic tradition. Early Muslim exegetes such as Muqatil b. Jaʿfar al-Tabari (d. 310/923) regularly cite traditions on the biblical background to Qurʾanic passages or explain the meaning of the Qurʾan’s Arabic vocabulary in the light of other languages. Period scholars such as Ibrahim b. ʿUmar al-Biqaʿī (d. 808/1460) and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 911/1505) utilized these methods in their studies of the Qurʾan as well.

Today Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike are increasingly interested in reading the Qurʾan 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 Qurʾan is the historical structure of the academy, by which the field of biblical studies incorporates Jewish and Christian literature but not the Qurʾan, and by which the field of Qurʾanic studies begins with the Qurʾan and early Arabic literature, but leaves the Qurʾan to earlier literature in Greek, Aramaic, Ethiopic, and other languages. Directors of a consultation to found a new learned society, the International Qurʾanic 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 Qurʾan and biblical literature. Serious and fruitful research on the Qurʾan will not be limited to an analysis of individual Arabic words in the light of etymologies in Syriac (or any other language). 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 Qurʾanic Studies to a new spirit of collaboration.

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