

# Focus On Quran and the Syriac Bible.



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## Focus On Quran and the Syriac Bible

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## The Qurʾān and the Syriac Bible

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How was the [Qurʾān](#) able to persuade the [Arabs](#) of late antiquity of the transformation of the map of the Near East? While scholars continue to debate (according to Islamic tradition, revealed between 610 and 632 CE) and the 7th century CE, some insights on this question might be gained from a careful reading of the Qurʾān [presents itself as an affirmation and renewal](#) of the scripture [Christians](#). In the Quran's tenth Sura, or chapter, God declares to the prophet, "thou art in doubt regarding what We have sent down to thee, *ask thou of thy Lord*. The truth has come to thee from thy Lord; so be not of the doubters" (Arberry). Passages like this suggest that the Qurʾān effectively appeared

steeped in biblical literature, including stories of earlier prophets and

The sorts of stories which the Qurʾān chooses to tell suggest the same picture of Islam's origins in a pagan environment, and Western scholars believe that Mecca in the time of Muhammad was an outpost of decadent, polytheistic paganism. The Qurʾān is more interested in the Bible than it is in paganism. The Qurʾān mentions Abraham 69 times, and to Moses no fewer than 136 times.

Moreover, the Qurʾān frequently challenges Jewish and Christian teachings and characters. This concern is especially salient with Jesus. The Qurʾān challenges the beliefs of the community which claims to be following him: "The Messengers serve God, my Lord and your Lord. Verily whoso associates with God he will have his entrance to Paradise, and his refuge shall be the Fire; and wrongdoers will be therein (5:72). Several verses later the Qurʾān adds: "The Messiah, son of Mary, whom We made clear the signs to them; then behold, how they perverted and distorted the Qurʾān appears to be a scripture with a particular concern for Christ and the center of religious controversies in late antiquity.

The Qurʾān's concern with Jesus has often led scholars to analyze it in light of the Testament. Christians in the Qurʾān's environment would have heard the Syriac translation of the Bible known as the *Peshitta*. In fact, the names and proper names in the Arabic Qurʾān come not from Greek but from Hebrew and Christian Palestinian Aramaic: e.g. *ruh al-qudus* ("holy spirit"); *juh* ("priest"); *salla* ("he prayed"); *sabbah* ("he praised"); *sulayman* ("Solomon"); *ishaq* ("Isaac"); *zakariyya* ("Zachariah"). The Arabic language as it was articulated evidently had absorbed various "Syriacisms." Moreover, the Qurʾān's Arabian audience was to some extent bilingual, like many people in the region would have possessed, in addition to Arabic, some command of an Aramaic language, especially Aramaic, which was widely spoken in the Near East at the time.

Syriac was also the language of religious exhortation among the fragmentary Christian churches (Jacobites, the Church of the East or "Nestorians," and Chalcedonian Christians). In this context the "Arabic recitation" (*Qurʾān 'arabi*; cf. *Qurʾān*) of Muhammad (d. 632), while unique by virtue of its claims of direct divine revelation in the Arabic language" (Q 26:195), would have been understood as part of a tradition of religious exhortation, as the literary and rhetorical form of Qurʾānic exhortation, as religious exhortation.

Here we will examine two themes of religious exhortation which reflect the relationship between the Qurʾān and the biblical literature of late antiquity.

## Prophets and Messengers

A theme central to the Qurʾān is the recurrence of prophets (*anbiya*)

by God to warn people to believe in him lest they be punished for the Qurʾān relates stories of Biblical and Arabian prophets (e.g. Q 7, 11, 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* prophet sent to a people named Thamud, is similarly described as " *th*

In the case of Noah, his people seem to find it unbelievable that a man could be a messenger of divine revelation. In the Qurʾān Noah declares, "And We sent Noah to his people, that a reminder from your Lord should come to you by the lips of a man whom you may warn you, and you be God-fearing, haply to find mercy" (Q 7:63) a *topos* (theme) seen also in the Gospel passages which have the people of Nazareth not recognizing Jesus: "Not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joseph and not his sisters here with us? And they took offense at him" (Mark 6:3-4).

The Qurʾān presents Muhammad as part of this prophetic tradition. He warned his people to believe, lest they be punished as the people of Noah and Hud who refused to listen to him ("And remember when He appointed you as messengers, that We might warn the people who refused to believe the messengers sent to them: "We destroyed the people who did evil, and their Messengers came to them with the clear signs, and We recompense the people of the sinners." (Q 10:12).

The Qurʾān 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:

*Say: "We believe in God, and that which has been sent down on us, and sent down on Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and in that which was given to Moses and Jesus, and the Prophets, of their Lord; we surrender to Him we surrender" (Q 3:84).*

The Arabic word at the end of this verse is rendered here as "surrender" (*muslimun*). Muhammad's followers would use this word, which is anglicized as "Muslim", to describe their own religious community.

The Islamic vision of an unchanging divine message seems to be unlike the Jewish and Christian traditions in which God reveals messages intimately shaped by the particular historical circumstances of the protagonists. Yet the Qurʾānic vision of revelation seems to be close to the typological reading of the Hebrew Bible in the Treasures (a Syriac Christian text dated from the 4th to 6th centuries), in which the particular circumstances of the Hebrew Bible narratives fade away in the typology: "Eden becomes the Church; Noah carries "gold, myrrh, and frankincense" "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. Christ himself as he does so.

For the Qurʾān the most important case of typology involves Abraham and his son Ishmael raise "the foundations of the Kaaba" in Mecca.

understood an allusion to the building of the Kaaba in Mecca. They stop and send a new prophet to their descendants:

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

This passage is something more than a prediction. The Qur'ân here anticipates the coming of Muhammad, the prophet whom God would send to Mecca. We can understand the Qur'ân's insistence elsewhere that Muhammad has the same relationship to 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 a central element of Islamic tradition. In the traditional account of Muhammad's journey to Jerusalem he describes to his companions how he met Abraham in the seventh heaven, found Jesus in the second heaven, and Moses in the sixth) and explained his own mission much like myself."

The Qur'ân's interest in developing a typological relationship between Abraham and Muhammad appears to be in part a response to Christian claims about Abraham. It draws upon the reference in Genesis (15:6) to the faith of Abraham in order to argue that those who have faith will be saved:

*And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand, saying, "shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham*

In this passage Paul uses Abraham as a figure who, having preceded Jewish law, tribes, and Moses, to whom the Jewish law was given, embraces both the old and the new. Abraham was justified by faith in believing the message God had revealed. Those who believe in the new, Christian revelation will be justified by their faith. This idea becomes something like a proto-Christian. This idea becomes explicit among Christians throughout the whole world that the manner of religious practice actually be found in practice" (*Eccl. Hist.* 1:4).

The Qur'ân responds to this Christian understanding of Abraham with the following:

*People of the Book! Why do you dispute concerning Abraham? The Torah was not sent down until after he had died. How have you no reason? Ha, you are the ones who dispute on what you know; why then dispute about anything? God knows, and you know not. No; Abraham in truth was not a Jew, neither a Christian; he was pure of faith; certainly he was never of the idolaters (Q 3:65â "67).*

The Arabic word rendered here as "pure of faith" is *hanif*. While later understood as a "pre-Islamic monotheist," it seems here to be related to Syriac *hanan*, "pagan" â "pagan not in a religious sense, but in the sense of someone who is not a member of the Christian communities. Here the Qur'ân skillfully responds to the Christian claim that Abraham is no longer a proto-Christian; he is now a proto-Muslim.

## Promises and Threats

While the case of Abraham illustrates how the Qurʾān responds to a  
illustrate the Qurʾān's development of biblical ideas. The teachings of  
charity and worship are in close dialogue with those of Jesus and his  
fourth Sura, known as *al-Nisa* ("The Women"), the Qurʾān gives good

*Whosoever obeys God, and the Messengerâ they are with those whom God has blessed, Propriety  
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  
It reflects the titles of holy figures celebrated in the Gospels and Acts:  
the "prophets and sincere men" (*nabiye wa zdiqe*) of Matthew 13:17,  
men" (*nabiye wa shlihe*) of Luke 11:49, and the "witnesses" (*sahde*) of  
a great impact on the writings on the saints and martyrs by Syriac authors  
CE) and Ephrem (d. 373 CE).

In its warnings of the apocalypse as well the Qurʾān seems to employ  
imagery which suggest a particular relationship with Syriac literature.  
*al-Araf* ("The Heights"), the Qurʾān declares:

*Those that cry lies to Our signs and wax proud against them the gates of heaven shall not be  
Paradise until the camel passes through the eye of the needle. Even so We recompense the sinners  
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 rephrasing  
*lahum abwab al-sama'*, a wording that is reminiscent of the Syriac phrase  
baptism: "suddenly the heavens were opened up for him," *etptahu le*  
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  
needle" (Arabic: *wa la yadkhulun al-jannah hatta yalij al-jamal fi*  
the well-known Gospel metaphor. What is particularly noteworthy, however,  
relationship between the Qurʾānic Arabic and the Syriac version of the  
*l-me'al ba-hrura da-mhata aw 'atira d-ne'ul l-malkuta d-alaha* ("It is  
through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom  
Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25). The Gospel reference to the "rich man" (*atira*)  
of Q 7:40 as "those that cry lies to Our signs and wax proud against them"  
used in this passage for Paradise, *jannah*, is linguistically related to Syriac  
Arabic word used for Hell/Gehenna, *jahannam*, is the biblical *ge-hin*

Tellingly, the linguistic relationships shared by the Arabic and Syriac phrase  
of linear influence. These relationships reflect, rather, the dogmatic claim  
that the Qurʾān articulates (biblical) parables in a manner claimed to be  
accurate.

Looking to the biblical canon and Syriac language for wisdom on the foreign to Islamic tradition. Early Muslim exegetes such as Muqatil b. Ja'far al-Tabari (d. 310/923) regularly cite traditions on the biblical background or explain the meaning of the Qur'an's Arabic vocabulary in the light of period scholars such as Ibrahim b. 'Umar al-Biq'a'i (d. 808/1460) and J. (d. 911/1505) utilized these methods in their studies of the Qur'an as well as the Bible.

Today Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike are increasingly interested in the light of the larger context of the Near East in late antiquity, and in particular the reception history of biblical literature. Perhaps the greatest obstacle to the study of the Bible is the historical structure of the academy, by which the study of the Bible incorporates Jewish and Christian literature but not the Qur'an, and the study of the Qur'an begins with the Qur'an and early Arabic literature, but leaves the study of the Qur'an to earlier literature in Greek, Aramaic, Ethiopic, and other languages. In the directors of a consultation to found a new learned society, the International Association for the Study of the Qur'an (<http://iqsaweb.wordpress.com/>), we hope to bring these two conversations into 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 proceed in a sophisticated manner, with a due appreciation of the theological questions. This is the sort of task that exceeds the capacity of the current field of Qur'anic Studies to a new spirit of collaboration.

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