The Qur'an's Engagement with Christian and Jewish Literature

TAHA SOOMRO
SHARIF RANDHAWA

YAQEEN™
INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC RESEARCH

Author Biography

Taha Soomro completed his Bachelor's of Arts degree in 2020 from the University of Sydney, majoring in Biblical Studies and Classical Hebrew. His interests include Qur'anic intertextuality and the Syriac language, and he eventually intends to specialize in Syriac Literature for his postgraduate studies. He is currently an engineer by profession.

Sharif Randhawa completed his Bachelor's degree in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations from the University of Washington in 2018 and his Master's degree in Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Chicago in 2021. His interests include the literary composition of the Qur'an and the Qur'an's engagement with biblical and extra-biblical traditions.

Introduction

The Qur'an is God's final revelation and the ultimate source of spiritual guidance for humanity. One of the primary ways in which it imparts this guidance is through narrative, by frequently telling stories of the past in order to instruct both its historical audience and subsequent generations. Since the Qur'an is a confirmation and continuation of earlier revelations known to the Jewish and Christian communities (e.g., 2:97, 3:3, 20:133), its stories are seldom entirely unfamiliar, but instead find strong echoes in previous Jewish and Christian traditions. These traditions are contained not only in the Bible, but also in a rich corpus of extra-biblical traditions transmitted, elaborated on, and recorded by the Jewish and Christian communities over many centuries, frequently interpreting, expanding on, or adding to biblical narratives. The Qur'an often engages with these extra-biblical traditions just as it engages with the Bible itself.[1]

This feature, which is so prominent in the Qur'an, is known as "intertextuality"—that is, the engagement of one text with other texts and traditions. For example, Qur'an 10:98 alludes to the repentance of the "people of Jonah" (*qawm Yūnus*), a reference that is more fully understood when read against the background of the story found in the biblical Book of Jonah. Similarly, the account of the bowing of the angels to Adam after his creation in Sūrah al-Baqarah finds parallels in Christian and Jewish stories about Adam circulating several centuries before the revelation of the Qur'an.

Muslim scholarship has long sought to draw upon biblical tradition to understand the Qur'an, a trend that has also arisen in Western academia over recent decades. The works of hadith and *tafsīr* contain plentiful reports according to which early exegetes, most notably the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ cousin and disciple Ibn ʿAbbās, narrated traditions of Jewish and Christian provenance, known as *isrāʾīliyyāt*, when commenting on stories of the prophets. While hadith literature

[1] Angelika Neuwirth succinctly explains, "The Qur'ān is communicated to listeners whose education already comprises biblical and post-biblical lore, whose nascent scripture therefore should provide answers to the questions raised in biblical exegesis—a scripture providing commentary on a vast amount of earlier theological legacies." Angelika Neuwirth, "Two Faces of the Qur'ān: Qur'ān and Muṣḥaf," *Oral Tradition* 25, no. 1 (2010): 16.

contains some reports of the Prophet ﷺ or his companions criticizing the use of Jewish and Christian traditions, the general policy towards these traditions is embodied in the Prophet's ﷺ authentically transmitted statements "Narrate from the Children of Israel—there is no problem,"[2] and "Do not believe or disbelieve in the People of the Scripture."[3] That is, Jewish and Christian traditions can be referred to as sources of information, but they cannot be used as standards for the doctrines or practice of one's religion without further verification. Hence, the use of *isrāʾīliyyāt* was a common practice in early Muslim *tafsīr*.[4] To cite just one example, Qur'an 19:56-57 reads, "Mention in the scripture Idrīs. He was a man of truth, a prophet, and We raised him to a high station." Many early *tafsīr*s identified the figure of Idrīs with the biblical Enoch, concerning whom the Bible says, "Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him" (Genesis 5:24). In his explanation of the Qur'anic verses, al-Ṭabarī cites a variety of narrations according to which Idrīs was transported to heaven by an angel, an idea found in numerous pre-Islamic Jewish and Christian traditions about Enoch.[5]

While early Muslim exegetes drew on *isrāʾīliyyāt* to provide further background to Qur'anic allusions to stories of biblical figures, early Western scholarship on Qur'anic intertextuality sought to uncover the presumed "sources" of the Qur'an, viewing it as an essentially derivative work comprised of confused adaptations of biblical and extra-biblical lore. Such an attitude is reflected in the very title of Abraham Geiger's pioneering 1833 book, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judentume aufgenommen?* ("What did Muhammad borrow from Judaism?")[6]

Western Qur'anic studies has since seen a paradigm shift away from its polemical origins. Rather than attempting to reduce the Qur'an to alleged "sources," most

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[2] *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 3461.
[3] *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 4485.
[4] For a good overview of the various attitudes towards *isrāʾīliyyāt* in Qur'anic commentaries and early narrations, see Ismail Albayrak, "Qur'anic Narrative and Israiliyyat in Western Scholarship and in Classical Exegesis" (PhD diss., University of Leeds, 2000), 114–131. A useful list of the most authentic narrations on the topic that reflect this ambivalence is found in Wan Mohd Fazrul Azdi Wan Razali, Ahmad Yunus Mohd Noor, and Jaffary Awang, "The Fourth Source: Isrāʾīliyyāt and the Use of the Bible in Muslim Scholarship," in *Reading the Bible in Islamic Context*, ed. Daniel J. Crowther, Shirin Shafaie, Ida Glaser, and Shabbir Akhtar (London: Routledge, 2017), 110.
[5] A complete survey is provided in John Reeves and Annette Yoshiko Reed, *Enoch from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, Volume I: Sources From Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 219–53.
[6] Abraham Geiger, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judentume aufgenommen?* (Bonn: F. Baaden, 1833); the English translation is *Judaism and Islam: A Prize Essay*, trans. F. M. Young (Vepery: M.D.C.S.P.C.K. Press, 1896).

contemporary scholars in the field seek to understand how the Qur'an closely engages with and critiques the traditions that were current among its Jewish and Christian audiences from its own autonomous standpoint—presenting, in the words of one scholar, "corrective retellings" of these traditions.[7] In keeping with this newer approach, Sidney Griffith remarks that "[the Qur'an] cannot be reduced to any presumed sources. Earlier discourses appear in it not only in a new setting, but shaped, trimmed and re-formulated for an essentially new narrative."[8] This approach acknowledges the Qur'an as "a text of its own… possessed of its own peculiar theological agenda and literary logic," which cannot therefore simply be reduced to its presumed "sources."[9] Western scholarship has thus begun to appreciate the Qur'an's corrective role over previous traditions, a role which is described by the Revelation itself:

> We have revealed to you this Book with the truth, as a confirmation of previous Scriptures and a supreme authority on them (*muhaymin ʿalayh*). (5:48)

As the classical Qur'anic scholar al-Thaʿālibī (d. 875/1470) explains, the Qur'an's status as "*muhaymin*," or "authoritative over" previous revelations entails that it "confirms that which is true" in them, while also "reinstating the truth and counteracting [whatever] corruption [is found therein]."[10] The idea that the Qur'an both affirms and corrects previously corrupted scripture was articulated by Muslim scholarship even before modern notions of Qur'anic intertextuality. But how, specifically, does the Qur'an both affirm and correct previously circulating accounts?

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[7] Holger Zellentin, "Trialogical Anthropology: The Qur'an on Adam and Iblīs in View of Rabbinic and Christian Discourse," 100 passim, in *New Approaches to Human Dignity in the Context of Qur'anic Anthropology: The Quest for Humanity*, ed. Rüdiger Braun and Hüseyin I. Çeçek (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 61–131.

[8] Sidney Griffith, "Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'an: The 'Companions of the Cave' in Surat al-Kahf and in Syriac Christian Tradition," in *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 116.

[9] Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx, *The Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'anic Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 13.

[10] ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Thaʿālibī, *Jawāhir al-ḥisān fī tafsīr al-Qur'an* (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-ʿAṣrīyah, 1997), 5:48.

An example from the story of Adam (AS)

To provide a preliminary example of the Qur'an's engagement with previous literature, consider the story of the prostration of the angels to Adam (AS), an account that is told in many places in the Qur'an. A brief reference is found in verses 15:28-30:

> And [remember] when your Lord said to the angels, "I am creating a man, formed from black mud. So when I have formed him and breathed My spirit into him, then fall in prostration to him." So the angels prostrated to him, all together.

Although the episode of the angels' prostration to Adam is absent from the creation story found in the Bible, it is found in various post-biblical Jewish and Christian versions of the creation story. The *Cave of Treasures*, a Syriac Christian text typically dated earlier than or up to the sixth century,[11] contains a particularly Christian rendering of this episode. In this account, Adam is made in a "glorious appearance" in the image of God and is given the "dress of kingship" as well as a "crown of glory." Seeing this image of Adam, the angels marvel at him, and God commands them to prostrate to and worship Adam.[12] Since many Church Fathers saw Adam as a typological precursor to Jesus himself (cf. Romans 5:14), this "deification" of Adam served to underscore the deity of Jesus.

In response to this overtly Christian story, rabbinic Jews told this story in a way that sought to undermine this christological message. One such rendition is preserved in *Genesis Rabbah*, a rabbinic commentary on Genesis probably redacted by the fifth century.[13] The *Genesis Rabbah* countered the Christian account by stating that although the angels prostrated to Adam in worship, they did so not because God commanded them to, but because they mistook Adam, made in God's image, for God himself, just like royal subjects who intended to pay homage

[11] Sergey Minov, "Date and Provenance of the Syriac *Cave of Treasures*: A Reappraisal," ed. George Anton Kiraz, *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 20 (December 3, 2018): 129–230, https://doi.org/10.31826/9781463239978-004.
[12] For references and translations of all relevant passages, see Zellentin, "Trialogical Anthropology," 78–81.
[13] Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 279–80. While *Genesis Rabbah* predates the *Cave of Treasures*, there is still good reason to believe it is responding to the sources that lie behind the Adam-Jesus typology in the bowing of the angels narrative. See Zellentin, "Trialogical Anthropology," 84.

to their king but confused him with his governor. Consequently, God put Adam to sleep, showing the angels that the being they worshiped was a mere man. By retelling the episode of the angels' prostration in this way, the Rabbis implied that just as the worship of Adam by the angels was a mistake, so too was the worship of Jesus by their Christian contemporaries.

The Jewish and Christian texts discussed above form *intertexts* for the Qur'an—that is, they represent the stories with which the Qur'an engages when it tells its own authoritative account. In doing this, the Qur'an affirms and rejects elements from both the Christian and Jewish renditions in a manner that expresses its own distinctive theological outlook, correcting their excesses with "surgical precision."[14] For example, in agreement with the Christian narrative (and against the Jewish narrative), the Qur'an accepts that the angels prostrated to Adam at God's command. However, in agreement with the Jewish narrative (and against the Christian narrative), the Qur'an maintains that Adam merely had the role of a vicegerent or "governor" (*khalīfa*) appointed by God (2:30), and not that God's divinity dwelled in him. Accordingly, the Qur'an only describes the angels as prostrating to Adam (2:34), but not worshiping him.

Moreover, whereas the Christian account speaks of Adam's divine "glory" (*teshbūḥthā*) and states that the angels "sanctified" (*mqadshīn*) him, the Qur'an depicts the angels as declaring to God, "we glorify You (*nusabbiḥuka*) with praise and sanctify You (*nuqaddisu laka*)," using the Arabic cognates of the Syriac terms but applying them to God instead of Adam. The Qur'an therefore safeguards God's exclusive divinity against the Christian account, upholds Adam's exalted but non-divine status as a vicegerent of God, and absolves the angels of having wrongly worshiped Adam. Additionally, the Qur'an's affirmation of God's command to the angels to prostrate to Adam undercuts the Meccan pagans' justification of their angel-worship.[15] Accordingly, the Qur'an presents its own distinctive narrative of the story of Adam, which at the same time engages with

[14] Zellentin, "Trialogical Anthropology," 103.
[15] See Zellentin, "Trialogical Anthropology," 95–129.

and corrects both the Jewish and Christian versions of the story in a marvelously precise and sophisticated way.

The Qur'an's extra-biblical intertexts

The above example highlights how an intertextual approach can uncover sophisticated ways in which the Qur'an engages with previous traditions, even to the point of alluding to non-Arabic texts in their original languages. Nonetheless, examples of intertextuality such as the story of Adam also raise interesting historical questions for Muslims. As the Qur'an is a confirmation of previous scripture (e.g., 5:48, discussed before), its imparting of stories with parallels in the Bible is not only unsurprising, but even expected. And yet, this episode of the Adam story is not found in the Bible, but is instead present in extra-biblical Jewish and Christian sources such as *Genesis Rabbah* and the *Cave of Treasures*. Why would the Qur'an engage with certain extra-biblical tales or later expansions of biblical stories—such as those found in rabbinic midrash, apocryphal gospels, or Syriac Christian literature—rather than only speaking about stories that have parallels in the Bible?

To understand why the Qur'an engages with these stories, it is necessary to first appreciate that although such extra-biblical accounts are forgotten or overlooked as "secondary" by many Christians and Jews today, they in fact formed an integral part of Jewish and Christian tradition preceding and contemporary to the time of the Qur'an's revelation, and well afterwards too. Just as the Islamic tradition consists not only of the Qur'an, but also a vast body of hadith, exegetical traditions, biographies of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and history of the early Muslim community, and so on, both Jews and Christians had, by the time of the Prophet ﷺ, developed vast and rich bodies of traditions, transmitted both orally and textually, that complemented their canonical scriptures. As Annette Reed writes, concerning the widespread use of extra-biblical traditions by ancient Jews and Christians, "The fluid boundaries between biblical literature, biblical

pseudepigraphy,[16] and biblical interpretation in Second Temple Judaism[17] serves as a helpful reminder that… the biblical heritage bequeathed to Late Antique[18] Jews and Christians *went well beyond the texts of the books that became canonical*."[19] Skeptical criticism of the Qur'an on the basis of its engagement with extra-biblical tradition per se would thus be anachronistic.

So which extra-biblical texts and traditions were authoritative among the Jews and Christians of Late Antiquity? Rabbinic Jews cherished a large body of *midrash*, or exegetical traditions that were initially transmitted orally before eventually being collected and codified in various rabbinic texts. *Midrash* encompassed legal traditions (*halakhah*) and non-legal exegetical traditions (*aggadah*), the latter of which prominently included reworkings and expansions of biblical stories. Between 200 and 500 CE, many of these traditions were compiled in the Talmud, regarded by rabbinic Jews as divinely inspired "Oral Torah" essentially forming a second scripture alongside the Hebrew Bible.[20] A large body of legal traditions was also recorded outside the Talmud throughout the first millennium. Similarly, the various Christian groups of Late Antiquity read and transmitted extra-biblical texts such as apocryphal gospels (especially infancy gospels, which contained narratives of the birth and childhood of Jesus), the writings of the Church Fathers, homilies, legal codes, apocalypses, biblical commentaries, and other genres of religious writing.

Moreover, it should be remembered that the Bible itself—both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament—exhibits various degrees of extra-biblical

[16] Biblical pseudepigrapha refers to ancient Jewish writings that fall outside the traditional Jewish biblical canon.
[17] The "Second Temple" period traditionally refers to the time between the reconstruction of the Jewish temple in the 515 BCE and its eventual destruction in 70 CE. This period of time is often associated with the development of the biblical canon and the birth of Christianity.
[18] Late Antiquity typically refers to the time period 200–800 CE and is commonly known as the era during which Judaism and Christianity took on their recognizable forms and the era within which Islam was established as a world religion.
[19] In other words, Protestant notions of "*sola scriptura*" should not be applied to Second Temple or Late Antique Judaisms and Christianities. See Annette Yoshiko Reed, "*Pseudepigraphy, Authorship, and the Reception of 'the Bible' in Late Antiquity*," in *The Reception and Interpretation of the Bible in Late Antiquity: Proceedings of the Montréal Colloquium in Honour of Charles Kannengiesser*, ed. Lorenzo DiTommaso and Lucian Turcescu (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 467–90.
[20] For a discussion on the place of the oral Torah in rabbinic Judaism, see Martin Sicker, *An Introduction to Judaic Thought and Rabbinic Literature* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007).

intertextuality. Ever since the advent of Near Eastern archaeology, biblical scholars have studied parallels between traditions in the Hebrew Bible, such as the creation and Flood narratives, and traditions from ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Canaan.[21] Similarly, the New Testament reflects a variety of traditions that are absent from the Hebrew Bible but which have roots in the extra-biblical literature of the Second Temple period (c. 515 BCE–70 CE).[22] Insofar as one would expect a scripture to engage with the beliefs of the people it seeks to instruct, it is not difficult to see why Qur'anic intertextuality extends well past the boundaries of the Jewish and Christian scriptural canon. The Qur'an's repeated reminder that it is "a confirmation of what is with" the People of the Scripture (e.g., 2:41) can thus be understood to include elements of this broader body of extra-biblical literature.

A Muslim approach to Qur'anic intertextuality

Nonetheless, some parallels between the Qur'an and extra-biblical traditions still attract skeptical criticism. As the Qur'an in multiple places declares it narrates true accounts of the past (e.g., 3:44; 12:102; 28:44), parallels shared between some of its narratives and post-biblical traditions from the period of Late Antiquity (c. 200–800 CE), such as *Genesis Rabbah* and the Syriac *Cave of Treasures*, motivate the charge that the Qur'an has erroneously assumed the truth of noncanonical post-biblical stories, which skeptics allege have clearly human origins, contain legendary motifs, or simply date far too late from the events they purport to describe to be plausible recollections of the historical past. Such an allegation contradicts the mainstream Muslim belief that the Qur'an's stories are not merely "fables of the ancients" (Qur'an 8:31).

A proper counter to the aforementioned objections requires a Muslim approach to intertextuality in the Qur'an. This approach should reconcile mainstream Islamic belief with historical evidence uncovered by the study of Qur'anic intertextuality,

[21] Readers may consult John Walton's study on the topic for a careful overview. See John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context: A Survey of Parallels between Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

[22] For example, the author of the epistle of Jude directly quotes a prophecy found in the noncanonical book of Enoch (Jude 1:14). Cory Anderson convincingly argues that it is very likely that the author(s) of Jude and their audience believed that the noncanonical Book of Enoch was authoritative. See Cory D. Anderson, "Jude's Use of the Pseudepigraphal Book of 1 Enoch," in *A Journal of Mormon Thought* 36, no. 2 (2003): 19.

while respecting the principles of rational and historical inquiry. Putting forward such an approach is the primary objective of the present essay. Prior to pursuing this objective, it will be useful to clarify what it means for believers to affirm the Qur'an's recollection of the historical past. In several places, God stresses that the accounts He narrates are a part of the inaccessible realm of the "unseen":

> These are the accounts of the unseen (*al-ghayb*) which we have revealed to you—You did not know them, nor did your people before you, until this [revelation]. So have patience, the end is for the God-conscious. (Qur'an 11:49)

The primary basis for the believer's acceptance of the historical truth of the Qur'an's stories should therefore be God's own testimony, rather than any particular set of historical data. Muslims do not need to provide historical evidence for every individual Qur'anic story that has parallels in biblical or extra-biblical literature. Instead, a Muslim approach to Qur'anic intertextuality simply needs to show how the parallel Jewish and Christian traditions could derive from divinely authorized sources, or are otherwise presented in the Qur'an in a way that does not clearly contradict historical facts.

Such a resolution, of course, assumes a certain degree of certitude as to how historians have dated the Qur'an's intertexts. Ultimately, the vast majority of these intertexts simply lack irrefutable evidence for their existence prior to the revelation of the Qur'an itself. The earliest manuscripts of these texts typically post-date the Qur'an's first manuscript witnesses by many centuries or even millennia. Attempts to date the Qur'an's intertexts are usually speculative in nature, typically on the basis of literary or testimonial considerations. This is a far cry from the certitude that can be afforded to scientifically observable facts.[23] Furthermore, unlike scientific observations, historical events are not repeatable, and evidence that might shed more light on the past rarely survives to the present day for historians to study.

[23] For a useful discussion on the nature of historical evidence, see Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, ed., *Philosophy of History: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 44–65.

Arguments that impute charges of borrowing to the Qur'an thus never reach a high level of certitude simply due to the nature of the evidence involved. This is something that Muslims should remember when approaching any particular historical doubt, as God ultimately has knowledge of the past in ways that humans do not. Nevertheless, the methodology that we present generally accepts the validity of the historical method and how historians have dated many proposed intertexts of the Qur'an.[24] Our intention is to show that historical evidence need not be rejected out of hand.

If this can be accomplished, then intertextuality can even hint at the Qur'an's divine authorship. Considering that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was not known to have studied Christian and Jewish tradition, it is remarkable that the Qur'an shows such deep awareness of biblical and extra-biblical texts. This is an argument that the Qur'an itself puts forward:

> You [Prophet] had not read before [the Qur'an] any scripture, nor did you write one with your right hand. In that case, those who speak falsehood would have doubted (29:48).

This verse and other similar verses would have been publicly recited by the Prophet ﷺ in an environment hostile to his preaching. Considering that the Prophet's ﷺ opponents knew him a whole lifetime before the Qur'an was revealed (10:16), it would have been easy to discredit his message, were it known that he had studied Jewish and Christian lore.[25] When juxtaposed with the Prophet's ﷺ own lack of scriptural education, it is easy to see how sophisticated examples of Qur'anic intertextuality can provide evidence for the Qur'an's divine origins. Accordingly, we have included a brief section towards the end of the essay that details a number of such examples.

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[24] That is not to say that the proposed dating of ancient texts cannot be challenged vis-à-vis the historical method itself. As shall be shown later, some of the proposed intertexts for the Qur'an are in fact likely to be post-Qur'anic in origin and, therefore, derived from the Qur'an itself.

[25] This point was also made by some classical Muslim scholars. For example, Fakhr al-Dīn Al-Rāzī (d. 1209) writes, "It would not be possible to say that the Prophet forged [the Revelation], for he [was not known to] read scripture, nor did anyone teach him, nor did he mix with men of learning." See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Mafatīḥ al-ghayb* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), 12:111.

Presenting a more detailed argument for the Qur'an's truth claims on the basis of intertextual evidence shall be reserved for a future essay. For the present, our main intention is to provide a methodology through which historical objections on the basis of the Qur'an's intertextual engagement can be neutralized. We shall now present our methodology with this aim in mind.

Given that the Qur'an engages with a large number of traditions reflecting diverse genres and contents, it is not possible to provide a single explanation that accounts for all of its intertextual parallels. Instead, a true understanding of Qur'anic intertextuality must do justice to the diverse characteristics of these traditions and the sources in which they are found. Accordingly, the framework that we outline in this essay involves extrapolating several different categories of Qur'anic intertexts, and presenting methods for assessing them from a believer's perspective. These categories of intertextuality may be listed as follows:

Category 1: Parallels with early extra-biblical traditions;

Category 2: Conscious departure from biblical texts;

Category 3: Coincidental similarities between the Qur'an and pre-Islamic texts;

Category 4: Parallels with legal traditions;

Category 5: Parallels that counter stories found outside revealed sources;

Category 6: Parallels with texts redacted in the post-Qur'anic period;

Category 7: Parallels with texts that have unstable manuscript traditions.

In what follows, we will explain and illustrate each of these categories of Qur'anic intertextuality with examples intended to demonstrate how other cases belonging to each category could be understood by Muslims. This will provide readers with a framework for assessing further cases that they come across. For subsequent reference, we have provided a flowchart in the concluding section that sketches out a step-by-step process that the reader may use to categorize and assess intertextual parallels beyond the specific examples treated in this essay.

Readers are also welcome to recategorize specific examples that we discuss such that they are explained in some other way. It is entirely possible that there is more than one valid explanation for any specific example of Qur'anic intertextuality. At times we also note alternative explanations for some of the examples we discuss.

Before proceeding, a brief note on translations is in order. Translations of Qur'anic passages are generally our own; however, at times we rely on Mustafa Khattab's *The Clear Qur'an* to inform our translation. Other Arabic and Syriac texts are translated directly by the present authors from source editions, with references to the source editions of the Syriac texts provided in the footnotes. Translations of passages from the Bible are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). The references for other sources found in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, or other languages along with their translations are provided in the accompanying footnotes.

Finally, it should be stressed that this guide is an initial attempt at developing a Muslim approach to reading the Qur'an intertextually. Additional questions and possible avenues for further research may be raised in the course of this essay, and it is hoped that Muslim researchers may be able to expand on, refine, or revise the approach outlined here. With these preliminaries discussed, we may now explore our proposed categories for classifying and assessing the Qur'an's engagement with extra-biblical traditions.

Category 1: Parallels with early extra-biblical traditions

Our first category includes cases in which the Qur'an mirrors traditions that are attested in sources written in post-biblical times (i.e., after the 1st century AD), but which could plausibly be argued to contain material dating to the era of prophecy before the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. The chronological boundary of this period is defined in a hadith found in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, according to which the Prophet ﷺ said:

> I am the nearest of people to the son of Mary: the prophets are all brothers [in faith], and there is no prophet between him and I.[26]

This hadith indicates that the era of prophecy prior to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ ended with Jesus. Yet, another hadith indicates that the Children of Israel had continuous prophets up until the time of Jesus:

> The Children of Israel were led by their prophets. Every time a prophet left, another prophet would succeed him.[27]

Therefore, the Qur'an's agreement with traditions that date prior to the end of Jesus' earthly career would pose no inherent problem for Muslim theology, as these traditions could be the result of inspiration to an Israelite prophet prior or contemporary to Jesus, even if that tradition lies outside the canonical Jewish or Christian scriptures. Even texts that postdate Jesus' life by many centuries may preserve extremely early traditions originating from before Jesus' time, as scholarship has shown that a large number of Jewish and Christian texts written down in Late Antiquity (i.e, when the Qur'an was revealed) contain stories and traditions that were circulating in the Second Temple Period (c. 515 BCE-70 CE),[28] an era that mostly coincides with the time preceding and up to Jesus' death. Moreover, stories and traditions that could be early enough to originate from revealed sources may appear deceptively late simply because our knowledge of them is limited to texts that have actually survived long enough to reach us. Accordingly, as long as pre-Qur'anic traditions that overlap with the Qur'an do not feature any anachronisms, historical difficulties, or any overt signs of literary development over the course of their transmission, any similarities can simply be understood as due to a shared divine source from a Muslim point of view.

This explanation is strengthened if parallel traditions can be shown to trace back to early sources. To illustrate this, we return to the story of the angels' prostration to Adam. As noted previously, the angels' bowing to Adam at the command of God (15:28-30) does not have any parallels in the Bible, but rather is found in later

[26] *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 3442.
[27] *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 3445.
[28] See Menahem Kister et al., "Tradition, Transmission, and Transformation from Second Temple Literature through Judaism and Christianity in Late Antiquity," in *Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah* 113 (Brill, 2015), vii.

Syriac and Hebrew texts such as the *Cave of Treasures* (c. 6th century CE) and *Genesis Rabbah* (c. 5th century CE). The Qur'an's correction of these traditions aside, there is certainly significant overlap between the Qur'anic story and these other accounts.

This overlap is easily explained. While the Qur'an is most directly engaging with the story as it was preserved in contemporary Jewish and Christian traditions, the various elements that the Qur'an affirms in these traditions are likely to have originated during the era of prophecy terminating with Jesus. For example, although the shared motif of the angels' prostration to Adam is not found in the Bible, it is found in the *Life of Adam and Eve*, which was originally a Jewish text composed in the 1st century CE,[29] preserving yet older traditions. In this text, when God declares Adam's exalted status to the angels, the archangel Michael commands them to prostrate to Adam.[30] This tradition is also echoed in the "second book of Enoch" (2 Enoch), also dated as early as the first century.[31] Some scholars have argued that even the New Testament Book of Hebrews alludes to this narrative.[32] It is therefore most likely that these texts reflect a prior and more widely shared tradition that circulated during the time of Jesus or earlier. In fact, the Dead Sea Scrolls contain an extracanonical psalm, 4Q381, which speaks of the angels "serv[ing] Adam and minister[ing] to him," with the context indicating some sort of veneration.[33] As the manuscript of this psalm is dated to the 1st century BC,[34] portions of the narrative under discussion may concretely be placed well before Jesus' time. From a Muslim viewpoint, it is therefore probable that

[29] Andrei Orlov and Gabriele Boccaccini, eds., "'Better Watch Your Back, Adam': Another Adam and Eve Tradition in Second Temple Judaism," in *New Perspectives on 2 Enoch*, ed. Jason Zurawski (Brill, 2012), 273–82, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004230149_016.
[30] Sergey Minov, "Satan's Refusal to Worship Adam: A Jewish Motif and Its Reception in Syriac Christian Tradition," in *Tradition, Transmission, and Transformation from Second Temple Literature through Judaism and Christianity in Late Antiquity*, ed. Menahem Kister et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 233, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004299139_011.
[31] Andrei A. Orlov, "The Sacerdotal Traditions of 2 Enoch and the Date of the Text," in *New Perspectives on 2 Enoch* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 103–16.
[32] For this and further arguments for a pre-Christian origin of the veneration of Adam story, see Crispin Fletcher Louis, *Jesus Monotheism, Volume 1, Christological Origins: The Emerging Consensus and Beyond* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015), 263.
[33] Crispin Fletcher-Louis, "A Divine and Angelic Humanity in the DSS," in *All the Glory of Adam* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 88–135.
[34] Eileen M. Schuller, "4Q380 and 4Q381: Non-Canonical Psalms from Qumran," in *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).

earlier divine revelation provided indirect source material for later texts such as *Genesis Rabbah* and the *Cave of Treasures*, thus explaining their overlap with the Qur'an.

This examination of the motif of the angels' prostration to Adam underscores how pre-Qur'anic renditions of this story have their origins in earlier traditions which could trace back to a time when prophecy was still active. From a Muslim perspective, it historically stands to reason that it had its original source in divine revelation, even if the narrative is not explicitly told in the Old or New Testaments.

Certain other parallels between the *Cave of Treasures* and the Qur'an's story of Adam and Eve can be understood in the same way, such as Satan's refusal to obey God in bowing to Adam. While this motif is also found in the 1st century *Life of Adam and Eve*, Satan's reason for disobeying God—that he was made of fire while Adam was made of clay (Qur'an 7:12, cf. *Cave of Treasures* 3:1-7)—is first found in the *Questions of Bartholomew*, a 2nd/3rd century text.[35] Although this text is dated later than the time of Jesus, a believer has no obstacle to supposing that the overlapping motif of Satan's reasoning originated from a pre-Qur'anic revelation. Written texts often postdate the traditions they contain by many centuries, as demonstrated by the episode of the angels' bowing to Adam in the *Cave of Treasures*.

Category 2: Conscious departure from biblical texts

Besides the Qur'an's engagement with extra-biblical traditions, another criticism that has been leveled at the Qur'an is that when it presents stories in common with the Bible, it confuses them, since it often contradicts certain details that the Bible possesses when telling the same story.[36] Such objections are easily analyzed by Muslims through the lens of *taḥrīf*, a concept which refers to the corruption of previous scriptures.[37] Since Muslims are not required to accept the validity of the

[35] See Minov, "Satan's Refusal to Worship Adam," 247–48.
[36] This section is adapted from a paper delivered by Sharif Randhawa at the 2019 International Qur'anic Studies Association Annual Meeting: "'Immortality and Kingdom That Never Fades'?: Adam, Satan, and the Forbidden Tree in the Qur'an."
[37] The notion of *taḥrīf* is ultimately found in its simplest form in Qur'an 2:79, 5:13–14, and other related verses. In addition, the Qur'an's conscious departure from biblical stories is in itself evidence for the corruption of previous

Hebrew Bible and the New Testament in an absolute sense, such discrepancies can be understood as instances where the Qur'an is restoring the truth of earlier revelation that may have been obscured over time.

Differences between the Qur'an and Jewish or Christian scriptures should therefore be seen as a feature of its corrective approach to past traditions. When discrepancies between the Qur'an and the Bible are examined carefully, it can often be shown that the Qur'an has not confused anything at all, but has instead deliberately responded to the biblical narrative in profound ways in order to reveal divine truth that is distinct from the biblical narrative, rather than simply "garbling" details as some skeptics would insist.

To consider one example, skeptics have claimed that in its counterpart to the biblical creation story, the Qur'an confuses the tree of life with the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This was first suggested by Abraham Geiger, who wrote:

> In the details of this narrative some confusion is found between the tree of knowledge and the tree of life. The former only is mentioned in Scripture as prohibited by God, and to the eating of that alone the serpent incites Eve. After the transgression has taken place, we find the fear mentioned lest men should eat of the tree of life and live forever. Muhammad confuses the two. In one passage he puts into the devil's mouth the statement that men through eating of this tree would become "Angels," or "immortal," but in another passage he mentions only the tree of eternity.[38]

Geiger's argument is that in the Bible, it is the tree of knowledge of good and evil that God proscribes for Adam and Eve (Gen. 2:16-17) and which the serpent tempts them to eat from:

> And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." (Gen. 2:16-17)

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scripture for some Western scholars. See for example Geneviève Gobillot, "Qur'an and Torah: The Foundations of Intertextuality," in *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations* (Prineton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 611–27.

[38] Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 79.

> But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. (Gen. 3:4-7)

Only once God finds that Adam and Eve have eaten from this tree does He expel them from the Garden and appoint a cherub to guard the tree of life, lest they gain the quality of eternal life as well (Gen. 3:22-24). In contrast, in the Qur'an, Satan (in the place of the serpent) entices Adam and Eve by telling them that if they eat from the forbidden tree, they will become "immortal" (7:20; cf. 20:120) and "like angels" (7:20):

> Satan whispered to them so that their nakedness became exposed to them: he said, "Your Lord only forbade you this tree lest you become angels or you become immortals," and he swore to them, "I am giving you sincere advice"—and so he lured them with deception. (7:20-22)

Geiger concludes from this that the Qur'an mistakes the tree that Adam and Eve were tempted to eat from in the biblical account—the tree of knowledge of good and evil—with the tree of life.

However, a more careful consideration shows that this is not a case of confusion, but of the Qur'an's purposeful engagement with the biblical narrative in accordance with its own distinctive theological message. In the Qur'an, the tree does not function as a source of moral knowledge or of immortality, but simply as mankind's first test.[39] In fact, far from attempting to withhold moral knowledge from human beings, God creates them with it from the very beginning (76:3; 90:10; 91:8-10; cf. 2:30).[40] Accordingly, while one finds in the biblical account that

[39] The Qur'an does not describe the tree as either a "tree of knowledge of good and evil" or as a "tree of life," but simply as "this/that tree" (*hādhihi/tilka ʾsh-shajarah*) (2:35; 7:19, 20).

[40] In the Genesis account, God places additional measures around the tree of life after Adam eats from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This is purely to prevent Adam from becoming immortal, just like he had gained knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3:22–24), giving the impression that God in the Bible did not intend Adam to gain moral knowledge in the first place.

Adam and Eve are originally naked in the Garden and only feel shame of their nakedness after eating from the tree, in the Qur'anic account, they are originally clothed in heavenly garments, and innately feel shame once they are stripped of these garments upon disobeying the prohibition (20:117-122). Since the Qur'an portrays human beings as having moral discernment from the very beginning, an attempt by Satan to tempt Adam and Eve with moral knowledge would make little sense in the Qur'anic narrative.

Still, why does the Qur'an recall Satan tempting Adam and Eve by claiming that if they eat from it, they will gain immortality? This tactic by Satan makes sense in the context of the Qur'an's view of humanity. Consider Satan's claim as quoted in 20:120: "O Adam, shall I show you the tree of immortality and of a kingdom that never fades?" This occurs in a passage in which God warns the Prophet ﷺ to be patient and avoid haste:

> Do not hasten the recitation before its revelation to you is completed. But do say, "My Lord, increase me in knowledge." And We had taken a promise from Adam from before, but he forgot and We did not find him steadfast… (20:114-115)

Satan's claim that the forbidden tree would grant immortality to Adam and Eve is merely a ruse— taking advantage of the human proclivity for haste (cf. 21:37) and desire for immediate, short-term gains at the expense of that which requires patience but is more lasting (cf. e.g., 75:20-21; 87:16-17). It is not a true description of the tree, as Satan only seeks to delude the human being through false promises (4:120). Hence, the story of Adam's deception by Satan in this passage serves as a caution to the Prophet ﷺ to not act in haste, even in pursuit of that which is good, but to be steadfast.

Furthermore, while in the biblical account the serpent's claim that God prohibited the tree from them lest they attain the status of heavenly beings actually proves to be true (Gen. 3:22-24), in the Qur'an, Satan's claim that God only forbade them the tree "lest [they] become like angels or become immortals" (7:20) is an ironic inversion of the truth, for God had already honored Adam above the angels by ordering them to prostrate to him (7:11; 20:116), and Satan already knows that God

in fact intends to resurrect them to a life of immortality (7:14). While in the biblical story, the serpent is actually correct in stating that God wishes to prevent Adam and Eve from attaining the status of heavenly beings, in the Qur'anic story, Satan's claim is an ironic lie, since it is God's plan from the beginning to give humanity the opportunity to rise to a status higher than that of the angels and to be rewarded with a life of eternal bliss.

In summary, the differences between the Qur'an and the Bible concerning the nature of the forbidden tree do not represent a confusion or garbling of it, but rather an engagement with it to express the Qur'an's own distinctive teaching about God, and about man's purpose, salvation, and relationship with Him.[41] Understanding how and why the Qur'an corrects biblical stories can allow us to easily dispel the notion that any differences between the Qur'an and the Bible are rooted in a Qur'anic misunderstanding. Instead, locating these differences in the Qur'an's correction of the previous revelation, which may have been obscured and forgotten over time, allows for a more convincing explanation.

[41] An important supplement to Geiger's argument was put forward by Joseph Witztum, who proposes that the Qur'an's "garbling" of the Genesis account came about because, in his opinion, the Qur'an's alleged author had heard about the story of the fall of Adam from the Syriac *Cave of Treasures*, rather than from the book of Genesis. In this Syriac text, the identity of the tree that Eve took from is somewhat ambiguous. First, we read that God planted the tree of life (*ʾīlāna d-ḥaye*) in the middle of the Garden (*Cave of Treasures* 4:2), which is an allegory for Jesus' cross. Later we see that Eve hears about "the tree" (*ʾīlāna*) from Satan and eats from it (*Cave of Treasures* 4:14) and hence disobeys God. Since we are told nothing about the nature of this tree, Witztum concludes that "a reader without familiarity with Genesis could well assume that the forbidden tree is the Tree of Life." Aside from overlooking why the Qur'an would depart from the biblical story in such a manner, there are other issues with Witztum's posited garbling scenario. His identification of Qur'an's forbidden tree with the tree of life in the *Cave of Treasures* is ironically dependent on certain biblical details, such as the notion that the tree of life does in fact confer immortality or angelhood, rather than simply being an allegory for Jesus' cross. If, for argument's sake, the alleged human author of the Qur'an relied on the *Cave of Treasures* to produce the Qur'anic account, we would also have to assume that he had other sources informing him of these specific biblical details concerning the forbidden tree, yet these same sources did not inform him exactly which tree was forbidden. One is left with an almost comical situation where the Qur'an's author chances upon very specific, disconnected details about the story of Adam from canonical and apocryphal sources and somehow pieces them together to formulate a coherent narrative, which, by pure coincidence, functions as a specific corrective to the corresponding biblical account. For Witztum's argument, refer to Joseph Witztum, *The Syriac Milieu of the Qur'an: The Recasting of Biblical Narratives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2011), 81–82. The present references to the *Cave of Treasures*, including verse numbers, are based on the eastern recension of the text published by Su-Min Ri. See Su-Min Ri, *La Caverne Des Trésors: Les Deux Recensions Syriaques, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* (Leuven: Peeters, 1987).

Category 3: Coincidental similarities between the Qur'an and pre-Islamic texts

Not all points of agreement between the Qur'an and previous texts need to be explained by appealing to pre-Qur'anic revelation. In the following few sections, we shall see how extra-biblical parallels assumedly dating after the time of pre-Qur'anic prophecy could be understood from a Muslim perspective. For example, in a small number of instances, parallels between the Qur'an and Jewish or Christian literature may simply be reduced to coincidental similarities arising as a natural consequence of shared assumptions about God, His prophets, and sacred history generally.

To illustrate this point, recent scholarship has drawn attention to a number of unique parallels between the story of Joseph as it is told in the Qur'an and the *Homilies of Joseph*,[42] a fifth or sixth century Syriac text falsely attributed to the Syriac poet and theologian Narsai (d. 502), and hence known as Pseudo-Narsai for short. Pseudo-Narsai adds several elements to the story of Joseph that are not part of the biblical narrative.[43] For instance, the biblical account does not elaborate on what happened to Joseph when he was trapped in the well, but simply says:

> So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a well. The well was empty; there was no water in it. (Genesis 37:23-24)

[42] Witztum, "Syriac Milieu of the Qur'an," 188–239.

[43] Pseudo-Narsai belongs to the genre of ancient biblical commentary that exemplifies the phenomenon of narrative expansion, a "characteristic feature" of many premodern Jewish and Christian texts that predominantly discuss biblical stories and themes. This technique involves introducing details to biblical stories that are not explicitly found within the canonical texts themselves but, in the minds of later Jewish or Christian authors, may have been implied by the specific wording of biblical stories or are otherwise a natural addition to them. On the technique of biblical narrative expansion, see James L. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 4. Kugel introduces the scope of this phenomenon and provides many examples specific to rabbinic exegesis. Kugel's observations are further developed specifically in relation to Syriac Christian literature by Kristian Heal. See Kristian Heal, "Reworking the Biblical Text in the Dramatic Dialogue Poems on the Old Testament Patriarch Joseph," in *The Peshitta: Its Use in Literature and Liturgy* (Brill, 2007), 87–98.

However, in both Pseudo-Narsai and the Qur'an, God consoles Joseph while he is in the well and reassures him that he will be rescued:

> The Divine Will descended with Joseph into the well / Comforting and consoling him, saying / "Do not fear, Joseph, and do not despair / I am always with you, in all the days of your life / I will never again leave you / and nor will I turn away wherever you go / and I will be with you until you see old Jacob." (Pseudo-Narsai)[44]

> They went with him, and they cast him to the bottom of the well. And We revealed to Joseph, "You will surely inform them of this deed of theirs, while they are unaware." (Qur'an 12:15)

Even though in this instance the Qur'an echoes a motif that is found only in a text that dates to much later than the era of pre-Qur'anic revelation, upon reflection, this parallel is easily explained as a coincidental overlap between the Qur'an and Pseudo-Narsai resulting from shared views concerning God and prophecy. Given the biblical and Qur'anic notion that God communicates to His prophets and their followers, supporting them and reassuring them amid their adversities,[45] it is natural to assume that God must have offered Joseph a similar reassurance and

[44] Excerpt translated from the Syriac edition in Paul Bedjan, "Homiliae Mar-Narsetis in Joseph," in *Liber Superiorum Seu Historia Monastica* (Paris: Harrassowitz, 1901), 527.

[45] For example, in the Bible, God reassures Moses when he expresses self-doubt (Exodus 3:11–12) and similarly responds to King Hezekiah's call of distress in the face of an Assyrian invasion (2 Kings 19). In the Qur'an, God's responsiveness to and consolation of His servants is a central feature of His relationship with humanity. For instance, He comforts Mary through the words of Jesus in her womb (Qur'an 19:23–26) and also Moses' mother in her fear for Moses' life (Qur'an 28:7–13). For an excellent comparative study of how God reassures and responds to believers in the Qur'an, the Bible, and Jewish or Christian tradition, see Usman Sheikh, *God's Responsiveness in the Qur'ān: An Intra and Intertextual Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2021).

consolation.[46] This parallel between the Qur'an and Pseudo-Narsai is therefore not problematic as such.

On the other hand, were it the case that God's revelation to Joseph in the Qur'an followed Pseudo-Narsai more closely than this, such as featuring a specific promise to Joseph that he would see his father again, it would be unreasonable to suggest that the overlap between the two accounts is a mere coincidence. Taking recourse to coincidental agreement is only reasonable where it is very clear how the overlapping motifs between the Qur'an and other texts could have arisen independently. If this cannot be shown, alternative explanations should be explored, such as locating the points of overlap in an earlier revelation (see Category 1 previously).

Category 4: Parallels with legal traditions

Just as the Qur'an validates some elements of extra-biblical retellings of biblical stories while critiquing or rejecting others, it does the same with the legal traditions and interpretations of the Jewish and Christian communities of the late ancient Near East.[47] Oftentimes, the rulings found in these religious legal traditions are not explicitly stated in the Bible, but are instead derived through some measure of human interpretation of scripture or extra-biblical sources. The Qur'an's occasional

[46] This form of explanation is also applicable to the few other points of agreement between Pseudo-Narsai and the Qur'an in their respective versions of the Joseph story. For example, in the Bible, Jacob reacts to his son Joseph's dream with apparent incredulity (Genesis 37:10), but both Pseudo-Narsai and the Qur'an (12:6) portray Jacob as reacting positively to Joseph's dream. See Bedjan, "Homiliae Mar-Narsetis in Joseph," 522–523. Such a departure from the biblical narrative is not unusual, given that Jacob himself is a prophet and would have understood that his son's dream had some significance. However, as with the case of God's revelation to Joseph in the well, the Qur'an differs from Pseudo-Narsai when it comes to the specifics of this episode, implying that Jacob did not know the precise meaning of his son's dream until after it was fulfilled (Qur'an 12:100). This is in contrast to both Genesis and Pseudo-Narsai, where Jacob immediately interprets the dream, understanding it to mean that he and his sons would eventually bow to Joseph in the future (see Genesis 37:10 and Bedjan, "Homiliae Mar-Narsetis in Joseph," 523, respectively). Overall, it should be stressed that the Qur'an and the *Homilies of Joseph* often disagree on details, and commonalities between them are usually because the core story of Joseph's life is ultimately also found in the Bible, which may partly comprise previous revelation from a Muslim perspective.

[47] By the 7th century, Jews had long developed a vast tradition of rabbinic law deriving from the written Torah (i.e., the Pentateuch) as represented in the Talmud. Moreover, unlike Protestant Christians today, many Christian groups of Late Antiquity adhered to some form of legal or ritual practice as evidenced by certain documents that survive from that era. These include the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and the *Clementine Homilies*, whose laws sometimes bear similarities with the Qur'an's own injunctions. See Holger Michael Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum as a Point of Departure* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

validation of aspects of these "derived" legal traditions has attracted criticism by some skeptics who allege that the Qur'an mistakes these human legal interpretations for divine law. The most common example cited is Qur'an 5:32. After recounting the story of the murder of Abel by his brother Cain (5:27-31), the Qur'an declares:

> On account of this [story], We decreed for the Children of Israel that whosoever kills a soul, unless it be out of retaliation for murder or causing corruption in the land, it is as though he killed all of humanity, and if he saved [a soul] it is as though he saved humanity altogether. (Qur'an 5:32)

This "decree" appears to be an allusion to an exegetical tradition found in the Talmud which similarly comments on the story of Cain and Abel as found in the Hebrew Bible. In the biblical account, God reproaches Cain after he murders his brother, saying:

> What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood [literally, "bloods," *dĕmê*] is crying out to me from the ground! (Genesis 4:10)

The peculiar use of the Hebrew plural "bloods" (*dĕmê*) instead of the singular "blood" (*dām*) in this verse prompted some speculative explanations from the Rabbis. In the Talmud, the following lesson is derived:

> For so have we found it with Cain that slew his brother, for it is written, "the bloods of thy brother cry." It says not "The blood of thy brother," but "the bloods of thy brother"—his blood and the blood of his posterity… Therefore but a single man was created in the world, to teach that if any man has caused a single soul to perish [from Israel],[48] Scripture imputes it to him as though he had caused a whole world to perish; and if any man saves alive a single soul [from Israel], Scripture imputes it to him as though he had saved a whole world. (*Mishnah Sanhedrin* 4:5)[49]

This Talmudic passage explains the plural "bloods" to refer to the blood of Abel and all of the potential offspring who were deprived of the opportunity to live as a

[48] Some manuscripts omit "from Israel," and therefore do not restrict the maxim to the Israelites only, in agreement with the Qur'an. This omission seems truer to the evidence presented in the Mishnah, as Abel's offspring are not limited to the Israelites.

[49] Translation taken from H. Danby, "The Mishnah: Translated From The Hebrew With Introduction And Brief Explanatory Notes, 1933," *Sanhedrin* 4, no. 5 (n.d.): 388.

result of his murder. Accordingly, the life of one human being is said to have the value of "a whole world." The Qur'an echoes this conclusion, showing awareness not only of the rabbinic legal maxim but also of the scriptural context from which it is derived.

Notwithstanding, some critics allege that the Qur'an has committed an error by attributing this dictum not to the Rabbis, but to God Himself. This objection can be dispelled by referring to several authentic hadiths that shed light on the place of human effort in determining God's laws. In one well known hadith, the Prophet ﷺ himself differentiates between a correct and an incorrect legal deduction:

> ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ heard the Prophet ﷺ say, "When a judge is exercising judgment, and reaches [the correct judgment], he has double the reward, but if he errs, he has a singular reward."[50]

The above hadith indicates that some human attempts at determining legal rulings are correct, aligning with God's intentions, while others are incorrect. Accordingly, human interpretations of divine law were sometimes confirmed and accepted by the Prophet ﷺ himself, even if they were not present in scripture beforehand. One such example is that ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb's suggestions to the Prophet ﷺ on the direction of prayer and the veiling of the Prophet's ﷺ wives were explicitly accepted as God's own prescriptions in the Qur'an.[51] There are also several cases where the Prophet ﷺ determined legal judgments made by non-Muslims to be acceptable. For example, the Prophet ﷺ forbade swearing by the Kaʿbah when a Jewish man shared his opinion that this would constitute associating partners with God.[52] Another example is how the Jewish fast celebrating Moses' escape from Egypt led the Prophet ﷺ to institute a fast on the day of *ʿĀshūrāʾ*.[53] All these hadiths indicate that human judgment that falls within God's own intentions for divine law can themselves be considered as possessing divine authority.

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[50] *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 7352.
[51] *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 4483. ʿUmar's statement that God "agreed" with him is particularly interesting here.
[52] *Sunan al-Nasāʾī*, no. 3773. Al-Albānī and al-Wādiʿī both graded this hadith as authentic (*saḥīh*); however, Ibn Kathīr expressed that scholars disagreed over its *isnād*.
[53] *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 3397. This hadith is well attested and has many versions.

Accordingly, in the case of the above example of Cain and Abel, the Qur'an's attribution of the rabbinic dictum to God can simply be taken to mean that the dictum coincides with God's own judgment concerning the value of a single human life.[54] Moreover, the Qur'an's agreement with the Talmud's judgment on murder does not necessarily validate the obscure line of reasoning the Rabbis had employed in deriving it. In fact, it might be argued that the Qur'an implies a different logical connection between the story and the lesson adduced from it which differs from the grammatical argument found in the Talmud. Classical Qur'anic commentator Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) argues for a type of categorical imperative as the underlying reason for the dictum in verse 5:32—anyone who makes it lawful for himself to murder one innocent soul effectively makes it permissible for him to kill all humanity, since nothing differentiates one innocent human life from another. In other words, a murderer who deems one innocent human being to be violable would share this sentiment towards all human life by analogy.[55] The verse 5:30, which plainly states that Cain "allowed himself" (*fa-ṭawwaʿat lahu nafsuhu*) to murder his brother, could therefore be read in light of Ibn Kathīr's interpretation, thus anchoring the maxim in Cain's murder of Abel without taking recourse to the obscure grammatical argument in the Talmud.[56]

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[54] One may still argue that 5:32 is intended to be an explicit decree from the Torah, as opposed to alluding to a derived ruling, due to the similar usage of *katabnā* in 5:45, which contains a near-verbatim allusion to the Lex Talionis (the law of retribution) in Deut 19:21. However, although the law of retribution is explicitly stated to be 'in' (*fīhā)* the Torah, no such explicit statement is made in 5:32, nor does the preceding context seem to require it (unlike 5:45). Nonetheless, even if the analogy between 5:32 and 5:45 were valid, it is still possible that "decree" in both instances is meant to reflect correct interpretation of scripture rather than the mere literal meaning. If one considers the allusion to Deuteronomy in verse 5:45, it is apparent that the Qur'an's prescription intentionally reaches beyond the mere meaning of the text – for example, while this *ayah* prescribes forgiveness as the better option, Deut 19:21 forbids any leniency, at least at face value (*w-lō tākhōs*). Despite this, Rabbinic law encourages forgiveness even in some criminal cases due to scriptural reasons. Both 5:32 and 5:45 could thus be said to reflect rulings *derived by* scripture rather than verbatim references. See Solomon Schimmel, "Interpersonal Forgiveness and Repentance in Judaism," in *Forgiveness in Context: Theology and Psychology in Creative Dialogue* (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 16–18.

[55] See Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'an al- Aʿzīm* (Riyadh: Dār Ṭayba, 1999), v. 5:32.

[56] Alternatively, a second approach might be to accept the grammatical argument made in the Talmud as valid, in light of the Qur'anic statement that God has conferred on every community its own law and methodology (5:48). The Talmudic argument might therefore be considered a sound deduction within the framework of interpretive norms inherited by the Jews of Late Antiquity, even if it may seem arbitrary to those outside this tradition. For the rabbinic mode of scriptural exegesis, in which peculiar features of the biblical text are exploited to reveal a deeper message far surpassing its plain meaning, see Irving Jacobs, *The Midrashic Process: Tradition and Interpretation in Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1–21.

Category 5: Parallels that counter stories found outside revealed sources

Our last category of intertextual engagement consists of examples in which the Qur'an contains highly specific parallels with later, extra-biblical traditions which neither appear to draw on earlier prophetic sources nor represent plausible elaborations on such sources. Moreover, these traditions may even contain legendary accounts or mythical concepts that are falsified by modern knowledge of history or of the natural world. Yet, a careful examination of these examples shows that the Qur'an does not simply parrot these mythical concepts, but in fact deliberately counters them when telling its own separate historical account.

An example that illustrates this tendency is the story of the travel of Moses and his assistant in Qur'an 18:60-65, which serves as a prologue to the narrative of Moses' encounter with a mysterious sage, known in the Islamic tradition as al-Khiḍr. This prologue reads as follows:

> And remember when Moses said to his young assistant, "I will never give up until I reach the junction of the two seas, even if I travel for ages." But when they finally reached the point where the seas met, they forgot their fish, and it made its way into the sea, slipping away. When they had passed further, he said to his assistant, "Bring us our meal! We have certainly been exhausted by today's journey." He replied, "Do you remember when we rested by the rock? That is when I forgot the fish. None made me forget to mention this except Satan. And the fish made its way into the sea, strangely enough!" Moses responded, "That is what we were looking for." So they returned, retracing their footsteps. (18:60-65)

Finally, a third option would be to allow that the Talmudic passage preserves a genuine vestige of a pre-Qur'anic revelation, and that the grammatical argument from Genesis 4:10 is merely a post hoc effort to anchor the message of the revelation in the biblical text. In this case, we have an example of the Qur'an's agreement with texts containing pre-Qur'anic revelation as discussed in Category 1, rather than an example of the Qur'an's validation of legal verdicts brought about by an interpretive process. Interestingly, since rabbinic Jews of Late Antiquity viewed the Talmud as the outcome of the oral Torah that God revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai in addition to the written Torah, they too would have viewed the Talmudic dictum as part of God's revelation to Israel. For an excellent overview of Rabbinic models of Talmud as revelation, see Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, "The Orality of Rabbinic Writing," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 38–57.

This episode contains a parallel with an account found in some pre-Islamic editions of the Greek Alexander Romance, a legendary narrative of the life and exploits of Alexander the Great that was extremely popular in antiquity. While the Romance follows the historical biography of Alexander in its broad outlines, it embellishes this with many elements of myth, legend, fantasy, and folklore in order to produce an entertaining narrative.[57] The Qur'anic story is paralleled by an episode that is found in the beta (β) recension of the Alexander Romance, usually dated to the fifth century CE,[58] but which is absent in earlier versions of the Alexander Romance.[59] In this account, Alexander, writing to his mother about his travels through the lands of darkness, recalls an incident when his cook chanced upon a source of water with life-giving properties:

> And, having become hungry, I wanted to take some food; and, having called my cook, I said to him: "Prepare us something to eat." And he, having taken a dried fish, went to the shining water of the spring to wash the food. And the moment it was put in the water it came to life and it escaped out of the cook's hands. (Alexander Romance β 2:39)[60]

The cook drinks from this spring of life and acquires immortality, only later confessing what happened, while Alexander fails to drink from it himself, thereby missing out on his chance to obtain immortality.

The parallels between the two stories are readily apparent. In both accounts, the protagonist—Moses in the Qur'an and Alexander in the Romance—stops while on a journey and asks one of his traveling companions (Moses' assistant and Alexander's cook respectively) to prepare a meal. However, the companions confess that the fish they carried for lunch escaped into a body of water, leading

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[57] See Aleksandra Szalc, "In Search of Water of Life: The Alexander Romance and Indian Mythology," in *The Alexander Romance in Persia and the East*, ed. Richard Stoneman, Kyle Erickson, and Ian Netton (Groningen: Barkhuis, 2012), 327.

[58] The main evidence for this date is an Armenian translation belonging to the early sixth century that seems to show awareness of the β recension. Benjamin Garstad, "Dionysiac and Christian Elements in the Lysos Episode in the Greek Alexander Romance (β Rec.)," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 2022, 72. For further discussion on the dating of the Armenian translation, see Albert Mugrdich Wolohojian, *The Romance of Alexander the Great: By Pseudo-Callisthenes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 10.

[59] For an overview of the various recensions of the Romance, see Krzysztof Nawotka, *The Alexander Romance by Ps.-Callisthenes: A Historical Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 30–33.

[60] Translations from Greek to English for this episode are taken from Brad L. Cook, "A Watery Folktale in the Alexander Romance: Alexander's Byzantine Neraïda," *Syllecta Classica* 1, no. 20 (2009).

the protagonists to realize that the body of water was their intended destination. The two stories are similar enough that some later Muslim commentaries expanded on the Qur'anic story using details found in the Alexander Romance and related literature.[61]

However, the pre-Islamic account does not concern a monotheistic prophet like Moses, but Alexander the Great, who was historically a pagan king. Given that the account is only attested many centuries after the era of pre-Muhammadan prophecy, one might doubt the likelihood that the origin of this narrative element can be attributed to a revealed source in the era of pre-Qur'anic prophecy. At the same time, the similarity between the two stories appears too specific and peculiar to brush off as mere coincidence. How, then, can this parallel be understood from a Muslim perspective?

Before endeavoring to reconcile any correlation between the Qur'an and the Alexander Romance, we should recall our earlier point about the dating of apparently pre-Islamic texts. It is noteworthy that none of the pre-Qur'anic manuscripts of the Romance contain the episode about Alexander that corresponds with Qur'an 18:60-65. Moreover, the primary manuscript witness to β recension post-dates the Qur'an by over eight centuries.[62] Strictly speaking, the possibility

[61] Brannon M. Wheeler, "Moses or Alexander? Early Islamic Exegesis of Qur'an 18:60–65," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 57, no. 3 (July 1998): 191–215, https://doi.org/10.1086/468638. In a narration of a well-attested hadith that expands on Qur'an 18:60–65, the narrator Sufyān b. ʿUyayna mentions the claim that in the vicinity of the rock was a "spring of life" whose water would revive anything dead that it touched. However, this is merely an addition that Sufyān attributes to an undisclosed narrator (*fī ḥadīthin ghayri ʿAmr*) (*Sahīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 4727) or to anonymous "people" (*yazʿumu nāsun*) (*al-Tirmidhī*, no. 3149); it is not attributed to the Prophet ﷺ himself.

[62] The earliest identified manuscript containing the β tradition is Parisinus Supplementus 690, dated to the eleventh century on the basis of paleographic evidence. This manuscript only contains a small portion of the Alexander Romance that does not include the episode of Alexander and the water of life. The earliest manuscripts that do attest to this story date between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. The most authoritative of these is Parisinus Graecus 1685, dated to the fifteenth century. For a brief overview of the dating of the primary manuscripts of the β tradition, see Alexander Mikhaylov, "*Entgrenzung und Begrenzung Alexanders des Großen: äußere Grenzen im griechischen Alexanderroman, dem Schāhnāmeh und in der altrussischen Aleksandrija*" (Kiel: Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel, 2015), 11 and Cook, "A Watery Folktale," 109. Outside the Alexander Romance, the other relevant texts that contain variants of the episode, namely Tamid 32b and the *Syriac Song of Alexander*, similarly lack manuscripts that date prior to the Qur'an.

that the Qur'an influenced the corresponding account in the Alexander Romance cannot be ruled out.[63]

Nonetheless, let us presuppose that the episode found in the Alexander Romance is indeed pre-Qur'anic. While both the Qur'anic story and the Alexander Romance account contain surface level similarities, a closer reading of the two texts will reveal that the Qur'an, rather than slavishly copying an earlier myth, deliberately presents a plausibly historical counter-narrative to the Romance that Muslims should have no difficulty affirming.

So how does the Qur'an do that in this case? First, the "meeting of the two seas" in the Qur'anic account does not denote the location of a mythological life-giving spring, but simply a location where a stream of fresh water merges into the ocean: elsewhere in the Qur'an, the two seas are explained as the salt and fresh bodies of water from which human beings are able to obtain food and ornaments (35:12; 55:19-22).[64] Rather than simply repeating verifiably false Late Antique notions of cosmology, as some have argued,[65] Qur'anic references to the two seas instead merely signify ordinary geographical features.[66] Accordingly, in the context of this story, the Qur'an's reference to such a geographical location displaces the mythical "spring of life" found in the Alexander Romance. As for the "strange" escape of

[63] Some examples of Qur'anic influences on proposed intertexts are explored in further detail in the following sections (see Categories 6 and 7).

[64] There is some speculation in *tafsīr* as to where exactly this meeting of the two seas, *majmaʿ al-baḥrayn*, is located. Al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1143) lists most of the common opinions, citing the location of the junction being somewhere between the 'seas of Persia and Rome', or in Africa or Tangier, while Ibn ʿĀshūr (d. 1973) reasonably suggests the Jordan River. See al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf 'an Ḥaqā'iq Ghawāmiḍ al-Tanzīl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, n.d.), v. 18:60-65 and Ibn ʿĀshūr, *Tafsīr Al-Taḥrīr Wa-al-Tanwīr* (Tunis: al-Dār al-Tūnusiyah li-l-nashr, 1984), v. 18:60-65. The specific location of this junction is ultimately irrelevant, and the only important point here is that all hints in the Qur'an indicate that this junction clearly refers to a mundane geographical location, as opposed to a mythical spring of life. This is what prompted many *mufassirūn* to suggest familiar locations. It should be noted that although some *mufassirūn,* such as Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), do suggest the meeting of the two seas to be the place of the 'spring of life' (*ʿayn al-ḥayāh*), they do not equate the junction with the spring of life itself, and are furthermore informed by *isrāʾīliyyāt* that ultimately rely on Syriac sources. See Brannon M. Wheeler, "Moses or Alexander? Early Islamic Exegesis of Qurʾān 18:60-65," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 57, no. 3 (July 1998): 191–215, https://doi.org/10.1086/468638. In any case, there is no credible evidence that supports the presence of this spring in the Qur'anic story. See also footnote 67 below.

[65] Tomasso Tesei, "Some Cosmological Notions from Late Antiquity in Q 18:60–65: The Qur'an in Light of Its Cultural Context," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 135, no. 1 (2015): 23, https://doi.org/10.7817/jameroriesoci.135.1.19.

[66] See Mohammad Ali Tabataba'i and Saida Mirsadri, "The Qur'anic Cosmology, as an Identity in Itself," *Arabica*, 2016, 213.

the fish, this simply functions as the sign of the location where Moses and his assistant are supposed to find the sage they are looking for, not as a source of eternal life.[67] Consequently, the Qur'anic account does not depict the fish being miraculously revived, as with the Alexander Romance.[68]

Moreover, the Qur'an counters the Romance account by rejecting the role of Alexander as the protagonist, instead telling an episode about a prophet of God. This is despite the fact that in Late Antique Christian accounts, Alexander is depicted as a monotheistic and even proto-Christian hero, a far cry from the historical Alexander who was a pagan. Furthermore, as we have seen, the Romance episode has no relationship with the historical Alexander, given the mythical setting of the story and its late composition. The Qur'an thus avoids the historical problems with the Alexander story. Rather than being a case of misguided borrowing, the story of Moses in fact provides clues pointing to the divine authorship of the Qur'an: had the revelation been fabricated by the Prophet ﷺ or another human author, it would not be expected for him to demonstrate awareness of the Alexander story while at the same time presenting a counter narrative that avoids the Romance's historical and scientific inaccuracies.[69]

In light of all these differences, we can now present a plausible scenario that reconciles the Qur'anic story even if we assume that the Romance is pre-Qur'anic in origin. Some time during his life, Moses embarked on a journey to seek

[67] None of the characters in the Qur'anic story are said to obtain eternal life. The Qur'an itself asserts that God has not given any human being lasting or eternal life (21:34). While the Islamic tradition contains legends of the sage al-Khidr's immortality, their authenticity has been criticized by some Muslim scholars. See *al-Manār al-munīf fī al-ṣaḥīḥ wa-al-ḍaʿīf*, ed. Abd al-Fatāh Abū Ghuddah (N.d.: Maktab al-Matbūʿāt al-Islāmiyyah, 1970), 67.

[68] See Brannon M. Wheeler, *Moses in the Qur'an and Islamic Exegesis* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 13. It is true that Moses's assistant characterizes the escape of the fish as "strange" or "marvelous" (ʿ*ajaban*), just as the Qur'an suggests that its audience found the story of the Seven Sleepers to be "a marvel (ʿ*ajaban*) among God's signs" (18:9). However, although the Sleepers awaken from a miraculously long slumber, they serve only as a sign of resurrection, not as an example of literal resurrection itself. In a similar way, the escape of the fish could be an allusion to renewal of life in the face of a seemingly inevitable death without necessarily being an example of a miraculous resurrection. Moreover, the confession of Moses' assistant that at the location of the rock he forgot the fish and witnessed it take a marvelous path into the sea suggests not that the fish came to life, but that in a moment of inattention, the fish escaped from his supervision. This seems to be the most straightforward reading of the Qur'an.

[69] As we hope to demonstrate in future articles, this is representative of a more general pattern when it comes to the Qur'an's intertextual engagements with the cosmology and narratives found in Late Antique texts. Qur'an 18:63. See Mustansir Mir's interpretation of this Qur'anic passage in his article "Humor in the Qur'an," *The Muslim World* 81, no. 3– 4 (October 1991): 179–93.

knowledge as related in the Qur'an. Much later in time, a separate and legendary tradition developed about Alexander and his quest for immortality that coincidentally shared some overlap with the historical episode about Moses. This mythological account about Alexander eventually became popular among the Jewish and Christian audiences of the prophet, which in turn provided a good occasion for God to reveal the episode from Moses' life as a historical counter-narrative to the fantastical story in the Alexander Romance.[70] Nothing in the Qur'anic story is inherently difficult to accept, and in fact, clear signs of the Qur'an's rejection of the mythological features of the Alexander account ultimately point to a divine author countering foregoing myths with truthful accounts of history rather than borrowing from them. In conclusion, the historicity of the Qur'anic story of Moses and the fish is not difficult to accept from a Muslim perspective, even if one believes that the Alexander Romance was in circulation before the revelation of the Qur'an.

Furthermore, the Qur'an's engagement with the Alexander Romance invites deeper reflection in a way that may not have been possible if this intertextual engagement was absent. Syriac Christian retellings of the Alexander Romance adapt the episode into a narrative of Alexander's quest for the fountain of eternal life.[71] By

[70] Some may still argue that the overlap of certain motifs, such as the presence of a fish as a sign for the protagonist, is too striking to be coincidental. There are several ways to respond to this. First, it is entirely possible that an ancient historical or revealed tradition on Moses' life influenced the Alexander Romance. Interestingly, a variation of the Alexander story is also present in the mishnah tractate *Tamid*, which some scholars have dated to as early as the first century. See Ori Amitay, "Alexander in Bavli Tamid: In Search for a Meaning," *The Alexander Romance in Persia and East* (Groningen: Barkhuis Publishing, 2012), 349–65. For comments on dating, see Peter L. Trudinger, "The Tamid Service," in *The Psalms of the Tamid Service* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 12–51. Second, it is possible that pre-Rabbinic Jews had a memory of the original account involving Moses, which then evolved into a story about Alexander and subsequently spread to the Christian world. This example could therefore at least partially be reduced to a case of the Qur'an's agreement and correction of texts containing pre-Qur'anic revelation (see Category 1). Nonetheless, after considering how the Qur'an differs from the Romance account, we maintain that the few exact parallels between the two stories are not too striking to warrant further explanation. Stories that have developed independently across cultures sometimes feature similar motifs, even though the communities that they belong to are isolated by time and geographical boundaries. Third, it is entirely possible that God prescribed the mundane event of a fish's escape from being eaten as a sign for Moses, and that some centuries later, a fictitious story featuring a fish coming to life as an identifier for a miraculous life-giving spring independently developed. After all, scholars have noted that fish have often been associated with renewal of life or rebirth across many cultures. See Patricia A. Morley, "Fish Symbolism in Chapter Seven of Finnegans Wake: The Hidden Defence of Shem the Penman," *James Joyce Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (1969): 268–69. For a general resource on cross-cultural repetition of motifs in storytelling, see also L. L. Stookey, *Thematic Guide to World Mythology* (Connecticut.: Greenwood Press, 2004).

[71] This is how the episode is adapted in the Syriac *Song of Alexander*, ascribed to the Syriac poet-theologian Jacob of Serugh (d. 521 CE) but now dated to the early seventh century by an anonymous author (see Kevin Van Bladel,

contrast, Moses' quest in the Qur'anic narrative is to gain wisdom from the sage he encounters at the meeting of the two seas. An educated Christian listener familiar with the Alexander traditions would have perceived the Qur'an's interaction with a familiar story, observing how the Qur'anic story privileges the pursuit of knowledge of God over the quest for earthly reward.

Category 6: Parallels with texts redacted in the post-Qur'anic period

The previous example concludes our investigation of genuine Jewish or Christian intertexts of the Qur'an. In each of these cases, the evidence indeed suggests that these intertexts are pre-Qur'anic, a premise that is necessary for admitting any text as an intertext for the Qur'an to begin with. Although the Qur'an's engagement with these preceding texts and traditions has received increasing attention in contemporary academia, the possibility of Qur'anic influence on Jewish and Christian traditions has seen comparatively little attention.[72] In fact, many proposed intertexts for the Qur'an's stories and themes have a long redaction history continuing after the advent of Islam, and sometimes these sources even indicate awareness of Islamic traditions.[73] Even texts that contain a strata of pre-Islamic material often accrued newer material as time went on.

"The Alexander Legend in the Qur'an 18: 83–102," in *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 188. Though the work was most likely composed soon after the revelation of the Qur'anic story, it probably reflects earlier adaptations of the Alexander Romance among Syriac Christians.

[72] Given that Qur'anic revelation preceded the authorship of many of its alleged sources (see footnote 73 below), Ismail Albayrak writes that "there is a need for general common sense and objectivity amongst academics in order for the foundations of mutual interaction in verbal and textual literature to be established... many Jewish and Christian groups continued their lives under Muslim rule, and it is an undeniable fact that most of these groups had to change both their way of speaking and their religious language due to the influence of Islam." Ismail Albayrak, "Reading the Bible in the Light of Muslim Sources: From Isrāʾīliyyāt to Islāmiyyāt," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23, no. 2 (April 2012): 113–127, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2012.655062.

[73] Shari Lowin aptly notes that some scholars wrongly view even post-Islamic texts as potentially having influenced the Qur'an, simply assuming that the text contains pre-Islamic traditions. As Lowin and a number of other scholars have shown, in many cases, it was in fact Islamic tradition that influenced Jewish or Christian scholarship in the post-Qur'anic era. As one example, Joseph Witztum has argued that the incident of the raven teaching Cain how to bury his brother is an originally Qur'anic tradition that later influenced midrashic and Christian texts. See Witztum, "Syriac Milieu of the Qur'an," 115–122. For further examples of the symbiotic relationship between Islamic tradition and post-Qur'anic Judaism, see Shari L. Lowin, *The Making of a Forefather: Abraham in Islamic and Jewish Exegetical Narratives* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

Before assessing any instance of intertextuality, one should ascertain whether there are good reasons to regard the supposed intertext(s) of the Qur'an as being pre-Islamic to begin with. If not, then it may be in fact that the Qur'anic story is the genuine precursor, with the supposed intertext(s) having been formed under Islamic influence.

One possible example of this is the case of the story of Solomon in Qur'an 27:20-44 and the corresponding narrative found in the so-called "Second Targum of Esther" (Targum Sheni).[74] For brevity, we will only compare the initial scene in the two stories, in which Solomon learns about the kingdom of Sheba:

> Solomon sought the birds, and said "Why do I not see the hoopoe bird, could he be absent? I shall surely punish him intensely, or slaughter him, unless he brings me a compelling reason." [The bird] did not dwell long, and said, "I have gone where you have not, and I bring you sure news from Sheba. I saw a woman ruling them, and she was given everything, and she possesses a great throne. I saw her and her people prostrating to the sun instead of God, and Satan made their deeds seem good to them, obstructing them from the right path; and so they are not guided." (Qur'an 27:20-24)

This scene of a bird informing Solomon about the kingdom of Sheba has a counterpart in the corresponding story of Targum Sheni:

> [Solomon] commanded the wild beasts, the birds, the reptiles, the devils, demons, and spirits to be brought… At that time, the cock of the wood was missed among the fowls, and was not found. Then the king commanded in anger that he should appear before him, or else he would destroy him. Then the cock of the wood answered and said to King Solomon: "Lord of the earth, incline thine ears and hear my words… I saw a certain country, the name of whose fortified town is Kitor, whose dust is more precious than

[74] The Aramaic word *targum* (pl. *targumīm*) literally means "translation" or "interpretation"; however, the specific sense of the term refers to an ancient body of Aramaic commentaries written by Jewish authors that heavily expanded or explained the Hebrew Bible. See John Bowker, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature: An Introduction to Jewish Interpretations of Scripture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969). Targum Sheni is thus related to the biblical book of Esther in a manner consistent with its genre of literature and has been dated to anywhere between the fourth and eleventh centuries CE. For a summary of the various (admittedly somewhat obsolete) opinions on the dating of Targum Sheni, readers should consult Bernard Grossfeld, *The Two Targums of Esther: Translated, with Apparatus and Notes*, vol. 18, *The Aramaic Bible* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991). In consideration of the more recent evidence that shall be presented in this paper, we will tentatively suggest that this text was either entirely authored in the post-Qur'anic era, or still fluid during this time.

> gold, and where silver lies about like dung in the streets. Trees also are there standing from primeval times, and are watered from the garden of Eden. Great crowds of people are there from the garden of Eden, having crowns upon their heads, who know nothing of warfare, nor can they draw the bow. For, indeed, I have seen one woman who rules over them all, and her name is Queen of Sheba. (*Targum Sheni*)[75]

These excerpts form part of a broader narrative shared by the Qur'an and the Targum Sheni. Although the stories are not exactly alike, they are nonetheless quite similar, which has led some scholars to suggest that the Targum Sheni is the source for the Qur'anic story.[76] However, the plausibly post-Qur'anic dating of the targum casts doubt on this suggestion.[77] While there is no unanimous consensus, most scholars have assigned the Targum Sheni a post-Qur'anic date, which suggests that the direction of influence may instead be the reverse of what has been previously perceived.

This hypothesis receives support from recent work that has provided new evidence for a post-Islamic date of composition for the Targum Sheni. This evidence centers on the striking degree of agreement between passages of Targum Sheni related to Solomon's court and Byzantine sources that describe artistic features of the royalty and court of Constantinople in the ninth and tenth centuries. For example, the targum speaks of "two sirens that were on either side of King Solomon's ears," a peculiar description that is accounted for by the fact that Byzantine royalty began to wear pendant earrings featuring depictions of sirens after the mid-ninth century. [78] Dating the entirety of the Targum prior to the ninth century would thus be anachronistic.

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[75] Translation reproduced from Paulus Cassel, A*n Explanatory Commentary on Esther: With Four Appendices Consisting of the Second Targum Translated from the Aramaic with Notes: Mithra: The Winged Bulls of Persepolis: And Zoroaster* (T. and T. Clark, 1888), 275–76.

[76] See for example, Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an and the Bible: Text and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 586.

[77] This was first noted by M. S. M. Saifullah. et al., "On the Sources of the Story of Cain and Abel in the Qur'an," Islamic Awareness, 2006, https://www.islamic-awareness.org/Qur'an/sources/bbcanda.

[78] For this argument and further evidence of a post–ninth century dating, see Allegra Iafrate, *The Wandering Throne of Solomon: Objects and Tales of Kingship in the Medieval Mediterranean*, vol. 2, Mediterranean Art Histories (Brill, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004305267.

In view of the above considerations, there is good reason to believe that the targum incorporated traditions composed up to three centuries after the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ life. In the absence of any evidence to indicate that the targum's traditions predate the Qur'an's revelation, a common-sense approach to the question of influence then would be to prioritize the earlier of the two texts. Unfortunately, attempts to locate the Targum Sheni as the "source" of the Qur'an's story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba tend to overlook this simple fact. It strains credulity to believe that a text as influential and as well circulated as the Qur'an could not be the source of a story retold in a Jewish text containing traditions originating centuries later. At the very least, the ultimately post-Islamic redaction of Targum Sheni brings arguments for its influence on the Qur'an into serious doubt.

Category 7: Parallels with texts with unstable manuscript traditions

Another important consideration in assessing the possibility of Qur'anic influence on a Jewish or Christian text is its history of transmission. While internal clues within the text might suggest that it was originally composed before the revelation of the Qur'an, the manuscripts of the text themselves may actually postdate the Qur'an by centuries or even as much as a millennium. Furthermore, they may exhibit a high level of textual variation, suggesting that the text was fluid even into the later period of its transmission history. By contrast, the Qur'an exhibits a fairly complete and extremely early manuscript record.[79] This raises the possibility that the Qur'an is in fact the source of the proposed intertext, even if the intertext belongs to an originally pre-Islamic composition.

One example of this is the story of Moses and the sage (al-Khiḍr) in Qur'an 18:65-82 and its parallel in a Christian text titled the *Spiritual Meadow* (*Pratum Spirituale*), which is attributed to the Byzantine monk John Moschus (d. 619). In the Qur'anic story, Moses embarks on a quest for the sage so that he may

[79] For a useful list of early manuscripts, readers should refer to: "Concise List of Arabic Manuscripts of the Qur'an Attributable to the First Century Hijra," Islamic Awareness, 2019, https://www.islamic-awareness.org/Qur'an/text/mss/hijazi.html.

accompany and learn from him. The sage agrees, but to Moses' dismay, he perpetrates a number of disturbing and inexplicable acts in the course of their travel, first damaging a man's boat, then slaying a young boy, and finally repairing a wall without taking any compensation, despite the fact that the people of the city denied the two travelers any food. After Moses proves unable to maintain his silence for the third time, the sage reveals the hidden benevolent purposes for which he committed the actions. The story highlights that behind the seemingly inexplicable evils that we encounter in this life lies a fuller picture that can only be grasped with knowledge of the unseen, which is reserved by God.

Some manuscripts of the *Spiritual Meadow* contain a similar story, in which a pious monk accompanies an angel disguised as a man and witnesses him carry out similar actions, including slaying a child and repairing a decrepit wall, before the angel finally explains to him the benevolent purposes behind these acts. For illustration, one might compare the explanation given by the protagonist for the slaying of the child in both stories:

> [al-Khiḍr said:] And as for the boy—his parents were believing people, and we feared that he would oppress them with his wickedness and disbelief. We intended that God would substitute him with a better child, who is more pious and compassionate. (Qur'an 18:80-81)

> And the other man who made us his guests, he is virtuous. Had that small child lived, it would have grown up to be an instrument of Satan, so that the good works of his father would pass into oblivion. So I strangled him whilst he was tender to ensure the salvation of the father, and that his record remain unassailable before God. (*Spiritual Meadow*)[80]

The evident similarity between the two accounts has led some scholars to propose that the Qur'anic story is derived from the account contained in the *Spiritual Meadow*.[81] However, a consideration of the manuscript tradition of the *Spiritual Meadow* suggests that this parallel account is a post-Qur'anic addition. The main

[80] John Moschus, *The Spiritual Meadow*, trans. John Wortley (Pratum Spirituale) (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 221. Readers wishing to read the complete story as found in *The Spiritual Meadow* may consult this translation.

[81] Reynolds, *Qur'an and the Bible*, 465. See also, Roger Paret, "Un Parallèle Byzantin à Coran, XVIII, 59-81," *Revue Des Études Byzantines* 26, no. 1 (1968): 137–159.

sources for the text of the *Spiritual Meadow* are four manuscripts dating from the tenth through twelfth centuries.[82] Significantly, the story we are concerned with does not appear in the most authoritative manuscript, the twelfth-century *Florentine Codex*, or most of the other manuscript witnesses.[83] Instead, it is found in the tenth-century *Venice Codex* among a collection of stories that are considered secondary to the more authentic collection in the *Florentine Codex*. There is considerable doubt concerning the attribution of these supplementary stories to the original seventh-century author John Moschus; most of these stories appear to be "spurious," in the estimation of one scholar.[84] There is also a stylistic hint for this particular account being a later addition, since while the authentic tales in the work display a tendency to specify the narrators and settings of the stories "wherever possible,"[85] such details are completely absent from the story under consideration. The case of the *Venice Codex* is symptomatic of the state of affairs with the *Spiritual Meadow* at large: the amount of variation found between manuscripts is so great that each manuscript amounts to a "version" of its own, rather than simply a copy.[86] Consequently, it is evident that the existing manuscripts of this work do not wholly reflect the original form of the text written in the early 7th century.[87]

In contrast, manuscript evidence for the Qur'an demonstrates that the scripture—including the section of Sūrah 18 that contains the Qur'anic story of Moses and the sage—was already circulating within the first century of Islam.[88]

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[82] Following Elpidio Mioni's classifications, the primary manuscript witnesses include the twelfth-century Florentine codex (Laurentianus Plut. X.3), the Paris codex (Parisinus gr. 1596) from the eleventh century, the Venice codex (Marcianus gr. II.21) dated to the mid-tenth century, and, finally, the Turin codex (Taurinensis Graecus B-II-10), which is dated to the twelfth century, although it contains two folios from the tenth century.

[83] Philip Pattenden noted in 1975 that the Florentine manuscript "remains for the present the most authoritative." Philip Pattenden, "The Text of the Pratum Spirituale," *The Journal of Theological Studies* XXVI, no. 1 (April 1, 1975): 38– 54, https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/XXVI.1.38. It does not seem much has changed since Pattenden's remarks many decades ago, considering that no critical edition of the Spiritual Meadow has yet to surface. See Phil Booth, *Crisis of Empire: Doctrine and Dissent at the End of Late Antiquity*, vol. 52 (University of California Press, 2017), 91.

[84] Booth, *Crisis of Empire*. Other scholars also express uncertainty as to whether these stories really do go back to Moschus. See for example, Moschus, *Spiritual Meadow*, x.

[85] Pattenden, "Text of the Pratum Spirituale," 40–41.

[86] Moschus, *Spiritual Meadow*, xiii.

[87] As Brenda Ihssen notes, one can only conclude that the "text that remains is not as John composed it." See Brenda Llewellyn Ihssen, *John Moschos' Spiritual Meadow* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2014), 14.

[88] First-century *hijrī* codices that contain Q18:65–82 including M a VI 165 and Arabe 328f. See "Concise List of Arabic Manuscripts of the Qur'an Attributable to the First Century Hijra."

Given the much stronger evidence for the earlier attestation of the Qur'anic story, it is more reasonable to assume that it is the source of the *Spiritual Meadow* account, rather than the reverse. Accordingly, the burden of proof lies on the one who asserts that the tale found in the *Venice Codex* is the source of the Qur'anic story.

Intertextuality in Qur'anic rhetoric

Thus far, we have focused on presenting a methodology for addressing historical questions that the study of Qur'anic intertextuality raises for Muslims. Such a focus risks giving the impression that the primary relevance of this area of research for Muslims is addressing such questions. However, this is far from the case. As the reader has already seen from some of the above examples, the Qur'an's critical engagement with earlier scriptural and exegetical traditions represents an extremely profound and fascinating aspect of God's revelation, the study of which continues to shed light on the uniqueness of its message as well as the literary and rhetorical sophistication of its presentation of that message. In this section, we wish to underscore this point by considering examples in which the Qur'an engages with particular motifs and even specific linguistic features of Jewish and Christian texts in highly original and creative ways.

"Those who were charged with carrying the Torah…"

Sūrah 62, al-Jumuʿah, contains the following censure of some of the Jewish leaders who were antagonistic to the Prophet's ﷺ message:

> The example of those who were charged with carrying the Torah but then failed to carry it is like the example of a donkey carrying books. How evil is the example of those who reject God's signs! And God does not guide the wrongdoing people. (62:5)

On its own, the message of this passage is clear: just as a donkey that carries a load of books on its back does not internalize or derive any benefit from that knowledge, worse still is the example of religious scholars who possess a great deal of knowledge but fail to honor it in their character and actions. Yet, the

example in this passage of a donkey carrying books proves even more potent when one realizes that it is an inversion of a rabbinic parable. *Sifrei Debarim*, a compilation of rabbinic biblical interpretation that is thought to have reached its final form around the 5th century,[89] contains a parable extolling Israel for taking up the heavy commandments of the Torah when none of the Gentile nations were able to:

> A man sent his donkey and his dog to the granary, where fifteen *seʾah*[90] [of grain] were loaded atop the donkey and three *seʾah* on the dog. The donkey walked and the dog strained to breathe, his tongue lolling. He cast aside one *seʾah* and placed it atop the donkey and then did the same with the second and then the third. This is how Israel accepted the Torah, together with its commentaries and its minutiae. Even those seven commandments that the Noahides could not abide and cast aside,[91] Israel came and accepted. (*Sifrei Debarim*)[92]

Israel, likened to a donkey that is able to carry a large burden, is credited with bearing all of the commands of the Torah. In contrast, the Gentile nations, likened to a dog that proves unable to carry even a fraction of that load, are disparaged for being unable to fulfill even the most basic commandments.

The Qur'an adopts this metaphor but polemically inverts its meaning, transforming it from a praise of Israel into a sharp critique of its religious leadership, who burdened themselves with the study of volumes and volumes of religious law but failed to live up to the spirit of God's most basic commandments. The verse is well situated in Sūrah al-Jumuʿah, where only three verses earlier (62:2), God declares that He has sent His Prophet Muhammad ﷺ from among the unlettered or

[89] Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 273.
[90] A "*seʾah*" is a standard unit of measure used in rabbinic law. The earliest mention of this term is found in Genesis 18:6, where Abraham is said to have ordered his wife Sarah to take "three *seʾah* of flour" to prepare food for his visitors.
[91] According to the biblical narrative, human beings after the time of the Great Flood are exclusively descendents of Noah. The "Noahide Laws" in Jewish tradition refers to God's commands to the sons of Noah, and therefore all non-Jews by implication. These laws generally encompass basic prohibitions around disbelief in God, harming other humans (e.g., murder or robbery), sexual immorality, and eating from live animals. See David Novak and Matthew Lagrone, *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism: The Idea of Noahide Law*, 2nd ed, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization (Oxford ; Portland, OR: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011), 11–35.
[92] Translation from Haggai Mazuz, "Tracing Possible Jewish Influence on a Common Islamic Commentary on Deuteronomy 33:2," *The Journal of Jewish Studies* 67, no. 2 (2016): 291–304.

Gentile people (*al-ummiyyīn*) to teach them the scripture. This is the same group of people whom the rabbinic parable charges with failing to keep even the laws of Noah, the most basic commandments that God gave to humanity. There is even a hint of wordplay with Hebrew in 62:5. The word *asfār* ("books") only occurs here in the entire Qur'an (even counting its singular form, *sifr*), while in all other places, the Qur'an uses the word *kitāb* when speaking of books. This unique occurrence of *asfār* in 62:5 is a deliberate allusion to the word's Hebrew cognate, *sefer*, which is the standard term for a book in the Hebrew language understood by the Prophet's ﷺ Jewish audience.

"If the oceans were ink…"

Such inversions of motifs attested in Jewish or Christian literature are a frequent feature of Qur'anic rhetoric. Another example is found in a concluding verse of Sūrah al-Kahf, and in Sūrah Luqmān:

> Say, "If the ocean were ink for the words of my Lord, the ocean would be emptied before my Lord's words were exhausted—even if We were to add another like it." (Qur'an 18:109)

> If all the trees on earth were pens and the ocean were ink, refilled by seven other oceans, God's words would not be exhausted. Surely God is Almighty, All-Wise. (31:27)

These verses respond to a motif found in a fifth-century rabbinic work titled *Avōt d'Rabbi Natan*.[93] In this text, the first-century Rabbi Eliezar is found to use a similar example to describe the inexhaustibility of his own knowledge:

> [Rabbi Eliezer said] "For were all the oceans ink, all the reeds quills, all men scribes, they could not write down what I have learned in Scripture and repeated in Mishnah-traditions, and derived as lessons from my apprenticeship to sages in the session." (*Avōt d'Rabbi Natan*, 25:4.2)[94]

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[93] *Avōt d-Rabbi Natan*, or "the [chapter of the] Fathers according to rabbi Nathan," is an expansion of an earlier tractate of the Mishnah titled "*Pirkê 'Avōt*" ("the chapter of the Fathers").

[94] Jacob Neusner, "Rabbinic Narrative: A Documentary Perspective, Volume Three: Forms, Types and Distribution of Narratives in Song of Songs Rabbah and Lamentations Rabbah and a Reprise of Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan Text A," in *Rabbinic Narrative: A Documentary Perspective*, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 269.

While this example is designed to illustrate the inexhaustible knowledge of the scholar of Torah, the Qur'an polemically recasts it to emphasize that God alone possesses limitless knowledge.[95] That the Qur'an is responding to such a tradition is confirmed by a *ṣaḥīḥ* narration that situates this verse as a response to Jewish claims of knowledge:

> Ibn ʿAbbās narrated: "The Quraysh said to the Jews, 'Inform us of something that we can question this man about.' So they responded, 'Ask him about the spirit,' and so they went and asked [the Prophet ﷺ] about the spirit. God then revealed the verse, 'They ask you about the spirit. Say: The spirit is from the command of my Lord, and you are given but little knowledge regarding it.' [The Jews objected], saying, 'We have been given much knowledge [by way of] the Torah, and whoever is given the Torah is given much good.' So the following verse was revealed: 'Say: If the ocean were ink for the words of my Lord, the ocean would be emptied before my Lord's words were exhausted, even if We were to add another like it.'" (*Jāmiʿ al-Tirmidhī*)[96]

This is another example of the Qur'an's critical engagement with Jewish or Christian texts that comes to light only by engaging in the intertextual study of the Qur'an. Although traditional Qur'anic commentaries are aware of the context of the revelation—that it is a response to some of the Prophet's ﷺ Jewish audiences—only with knowledge of the specific tradition from rabbinic literature can we appreciate how powerfully and precisely God formulates this response in the Qur'an.

Inter-linguistic wordplay

Previously when looking at the story of Adam, we saw an example of the Qur'an employing Syriac-Arabic cognates to critically engage with traditions relating to the worship of human beings found in the *Syriac Cave of Treasures*. We also saw

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[95] This intertextual engagement was presented by Shari Lowin at the 2019 International Qur'anic Studies Association (IQSA) annual meeting. For the abstract of Lowin's presentation, see *International Qur'anic Studies Association*, "Annual Meeting Program Book and Annual Report," 2019, 32. While the motif of the seas as ink does occur elsewhere in rabbinic literature, it is only in the context of describing the rabbinic sages where one encounters it in connection with the theme of knowledge.

[96] *Jāmiʿ al-Tirmidhī*, no. 3140. Al-Albāni graded this narration *saḥīḥ*, as did al-Wādiʿī and Ibn Daqīq al-ʿĪd.

an example of Hebrew wordplay in Sūrah al-Jumuʿah above. This rhetorical use of words and phrases in the languages of the Prophet's ﷺ Jewish and Christian audiences can be seen elsewhere in the Qur'an, sometimes in an even more pronounced manner. We will close this section by noting several more examples of this intertextual feature.

The first example relates to the episode of the golden calf in Sūrah 2, al-Baqarah:

> And when We took a covenant with you, and We raised over you the Mountain, [saying] "Take what we have given you with determination and listen," they said, "We hear and we disobey" **(*samiʿnā waʿaṣaynā*)**, and through their disbelief they were made to absorb [the love of] the calf. Say, "Evil is what your faith commands you to do, if you are indeed faithful!" (Qur'an 2:93)

This verse recalls one of the most pivotal moments in the history of the Children of Israel, when God offered them the Covenant on Mount Sinai. In the biblical version of this episode, the Israelites respond to the offer of the Covenant positively, saying to Moses, "We have heard and we shall do" (Deuteronomy 5:27)—in Hebrew, "*we-shāmaʿnū we-ʿāsinū*." In the Qur'an's recollection of this event, however, the Israelites are quoted as saying, "*samiʿnā wa-ʿaṣaynā*," which phonetically sounds like their quotation in the Bible in Hebrew,[97] but which in Arabic has the *opposite* meaning: "we hear and we *disobey*." Through this interlinguistic wordplay, the Qur'an highlights that although they may have said "we hear and we obey" with their lips, their actions demonstrated the exact opposite. This is reinforced by the allusion to their worship of the Golden Calf immediately afterwards in the same verse, just one in a long series of errors of which they are reminded in Sūrah al-Baqarah (2:40-123).

A second example of inter-linguistic wordplay occurs in one of the descriptions of Abraham in the Qur'an:

[97] Note that the Hebrew "sh" consonant is often interchangeable with the Arabic *sīn*, thus *samiʿnā* becomes *(we)-shāmaʿnū* in Hebrew.

> Abraham was not a Jew or a Christian, but he was inclined to the truth (***ḥanīfan***) and submitting [to God]. And he was not from the idolaters. (Qur'an 3:67)

According to the Islamic tradition, the term "*ḥanīf*" designates someone who follows a primordial monotheism apart from Judaism and Christianity.[98] Curiously, the description of Abraham in the Qur'an as "*ḥanīf*" nearly always follows with the qualification that "he was not from the idolaters (*mushrikīn*)" (see also 2:135; 3:95; 6:79, 161; 16:120, 123; 22:31). Why is this the case? It is most likely that the Qur'an is engaging with Syriac Christian terminology. The Syriac cognate of *ḥanīf* is "*ḥanpā*," which may have originally been designated for a Gentile but came to have the meaning of "pagan" or "heretic" among Syriac Christians. The Qur'an's emphasis that Abraham was not a *mushrik* therefore precludes a Syriac Christian audience from understanding the verse in an objectionable way, since it forecloses any possibility of *ḥanīf* being misinterpreted as "pagan."[99]

The Qur'an also plays on the names of the characters in the stories it relates. One example occurs in the story of the nativity of John the Baptist in Sūrah 19, Maryam:

> "O Yaḥyā, keep to the scripture firmly!" And We gave him wisdom while he was a boy, tenderness (*ḥanān*) from Us, and purity, and he was God-conscious. (Qur'an 19:12-13)

The Qur'anic name for John is "*Yaḥyā*," which means "he lives," celebrating God's act of causing his barren mother to conceive him. However, in the New Testament, John the Baptist is called "*Iōannēs*," the Greek form of the Hebrew "*Yōḥanān*," meaning "tenderness (*ḥanān*) of God." Syriac Christians, speaking a language much closer to Hebrew, invariably used the similar "*Yuḥanān*." While using a

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[98] The Qur'an builds a fairly complex argument in many verses related to Abraham's religion and belief, distancing him from both Judaism and Christianity. It responds to Jewish insistence that the patriarchs kept the Mosaic law while simultaneously rebutting any Christian belief that Jesus was somehow recognized by Abraham prior to his earthly career. See Neal Robinson, "Sūrat Āl ʿImrān and Those with the Greatest Claim to Abraham," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 6, no. 2 (2004): 7–8. For further insights on how the Qur'an responds to Jewish claims that the patriarchs—including Abraham—kept the Torah before its revelation, see Zellentin, *Qur'ān's Legal Culture*, 168.

[99] The possibility of this interlinguistic engagement seems to have been first noted by Mun'im Sirry. Refer to Mun'im Sirry, *New Trends in Qur'anic Studies: Text, Context, and Interpretation* (Atlanta, Georgia: Lockwood Press, 2019), 353, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/j.ctvd1c8h4.

different name for John, the Qur'an also alludes to his name in its original Hebrew and cognate Syriac, since it characterizes him with the gift of "affection" (*ḥanān*) from God—a word which only occurs in the Qur'an in this verse, synonyms such as *raḥmah* ("mercy") being used elsewhere instead. This is not a unique example, as the Qur'an makes similar allusions to the meanings of many other biblical proper names in their original languages.[100]

In addition to some of our earlier case studies that demonstrated how the Qur'an consciously engages with previous biblical and extra-biblical stories, the examples shown in this section support the Muslim conviction that the Qur'an is not merely a pastiche of borrowings—or worse, confusions—of previous traditions. On the contrary, it can be demonstrated that the Qur'an's engagement with these previous traditions is marvelously precise, sophisticated, and cogent, consistent with its purported divine authorship. In concluding this article, we will summarize the approach to Qur'anic intertextuality that we have developed and discuss some implications of the evidence we have presented.

Conclusion

In this essay, we have considered examples of Qur'anic engagement with Late Antique Jewish and Christian traditions that may raise problems of historicity for modern Muslim audiences, and we have offered a list of categories by which one might classify and evaluate such examples. We reproduce these categories here for easy reference:

Category 1: Parallels with early extra-biblical traditions;

Category 2: Conscious departure from biblical texts;

Category 3: Coincidental similarities between the Qur'an and pre-Islamic texts;

[100] Many such examples are provided by Raʾūf Abū Saʿda, *Min iʿjāz al-Qur'an fī aʿjamī al-Qur'an* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1994); translated into English as Raouf Abou Seida, *The Onomastic Miracle in the Koran* (Riyadh: Al-Maiman Publishing House, 2011). Although not all of the examples documented by Abū Saʿda are particularly convincing, there are enough plausible examples provided to indicate that this is a frequent trend in the Qurʾan.

Category 4: Parallels with legal traditions;

Category 5: Parallels that counter stories found outside revealed sources;

Category 6: Parallels with texts redacted in the post-Qur’anic period;

Category 7: Parallels with texts that have unstable manuscript traditions.

There may even be some cases that fall outside the scope of the seven categories that we have offered here and which may require new categories or unique solutions. Because of the sheer quantity and diversity of the Qur’an’s interactions with these traditions, it is necessary to consider each instance of Qur’anic intertextuality on a case-by-case basis. Nonetheless, most examples of Qur’anic intertextuality with Late Antique Jewish and Christian traditions should easily fall within one or more of these categories. In the flowchart below, we outline the steps by which one can consider further cases of intertextuality in accordance with the methodology we have presented.

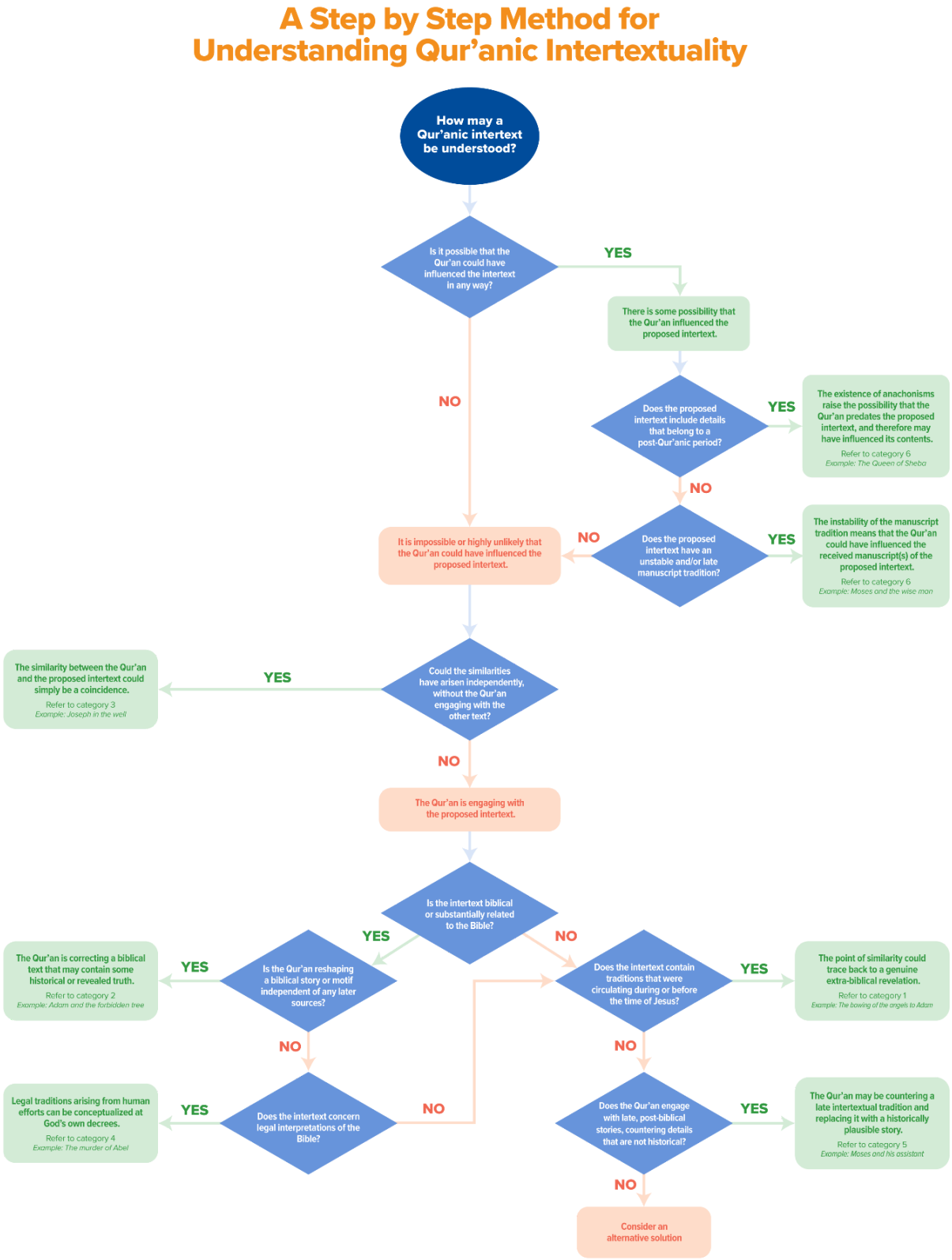

Figure 1: ***Methodology for Evaluating Proposed Qur'anic Intertexts***

Given that this essay focuses on examples of Qur'anic intertextuality that may seem historically problematic for modern audiences, one might develop the impression that Qur'anic intertextuality as a whole is a problematic notion for Muslim beliefs about the Qur'an. However, while questions of historicity may arise in some instances, the study of Qur'anic intertextuality is overall deeply rewarding and even potentially faith-enhancing, and sheds new light on the depth and sophistication of the literary and rhetorical aspects of the Qur'an.

Moreover, this mode of study also reveals that the Qur'an demonstrates an extremely profound, detailed, wide-ranging, and accurate knowledge of the Jewish and Christian scriptures and traditions across different languages, including Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, and even Greek. Yet, the Qur'an itself highlights the Prophet's ﷺ own lack of scriptural learning (29:48). Had he been known to have undertaken an education in the Jewish and Christian scriptural traditions—and the level of knowledge of these traditions evinced by the Qur'an would have required an extensive education under masters of these traditions, to say the least—it would not have been possible for the Qur'an to make this claim without being easily discredited. Yet, the Prophet's ﷺ opponents were hard pressed to explain how he acquired such knowledge, pointing, for example, to a foreigner who was scarcely able to communicate in Arabic (16:103; cf. 25:4-5).

For Muslims, however, the Qur'an's deep familiarity with previous traditions should be far from surprising; after all, one would expect no less from divine scripture revealed by God. The Qur'an's intertextuality therefore bolsters its claim to divine authority rather than undermining it,[101] as long as seemingly problematic instances of intertextuality can be reasonably explained. If this can be done, then the study of Qur'anic intertextuality can only be edifying to the student of the Qur'an.

[101] A positive case for the Qur'an's divine origins on the basis of its intertextuality shall be presented thoroughly in a future essay.