



## The Bible and the “People of the Book”

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### I. The Bible text and the Muslims

The renowned French Islamicist, Louis Massignon (1883–1962) once wrote that the Qur’an may be considered “une édition arabe tronquée de la Bible” (a distorted Arabic edition of the Bible). “Le Qur’an,” he went on to say, “serait à la Bible ce qu’Ismael fut à Isaac.” (The Qur’an is to the Bible what Ismael is to Isaac.)<sup>1</sup> Massignon here puts his finger on the central fact about the Qur’an: on the one hand its text insistently recalls the earlier biblical narrative and even appeals to it; on the other hand it pursues a reading of its own, often notably distinct from and contrary to the understandings of Jews or Christians about the Bible’s message. The Qur’an, as its name implies is expressly a “reading” or “proclamation”<sup>2</sup> of a scripture which, through the agency of the angel Gabriel, as Islamic tradition teaches, God serially put onto Muhammad’s heart in the course of his prophetic career in Mecca and Medina from 610, the year of his first revelatory experience, to 632, the year of his death.<sup>3</sup> In contradistinction to earlier scriptures, such as those which the Qur’an itself calls Torah, Psalms and Gospel, the Qur’an insists that its distinguishing feature is that it is “an Arabic Qur’an” (Sura 20 *Ta Ha* 113), in “a clear Arabic tongue” (Sura 16 *an-Nahl* 103; Sura 26 *ash-Shu’ara’* 195).

Even a cursory glance at the text of the Qur’an is sufficient to remind the most casual reader that it presumes in its audience a ready familiarity with the stories of the principal narrative figures of the Old and New Testaments. In it there are frequent references to episodes in the stories of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Mary and Jesus, the son of Mary, to mention only the most prominent of biblical characters to be found mentioned in the Qur’an’s discourse (see hereto the article published in this issue). Yet not infrequently there are elements in the telling of the biblical stories that are not familiar to readers of either the Jewish or the Christian Bibles. Sometimes these seemingly dissonant elements can in fact also be found in

early Jewish or Christian, extra-canonical, apocryphal or exegetical lore; in other instances, the apparent novelities are unique to the Qur’an. This is the sort of narrative situation which in the broader areas of literary criticism has prompted scholars to propose a theory of “intertextuality”.<sup>4</sup> As applied to the accounts of the biblical characters, just for the sake of narrative analysis and independently of any canonical or theological considerations, the theory considers their stories to be narratively incomplete as they actually appear in any single telling, be it in the Bible, in the non-canonical literature, or in the Qur’an. Rather, each textual source is conceived as participating to a greater or lesser extent in telling the full story of any one of the biblical characters.<sup>5</sup>

The “intertextual” consideration of the Qur’an’s participation in telling the stories of many of the principal biblical characters highlights the fact that the Islamic scripture came to Muhammad already in dialogue with the biblical traditions of the Jews and the Christians. Indeed, the Qur’an itself says that God “has enacted for you as a religion that which He charged Noah with and that which We revealed to you, and what We charged Abraham, Moses and Jesus with.” (Sura 42 *ash-Shura* 13) And God said to the Muslims, “If you are in doubt about what We have sent down to you, ask those who were reading scripture before you” (Sura 10 *Yunus* 94). Inevitably then the Bible called for special attention in the encounter of the Jews, Christians and Muslims from the very beginning of Islamic history.

The Qur’an calls the Jews and Christians “People of the Book” or “Scripture People” (e.g., Sura 2 *al-Baqarah* 105), a phrase which occurs some fifty-four times in the text;<sup>6</sup> once the Islamic scripture refers to the Christians as “People of the Gospel,” saying, “Let the People of the Gospel judge in accordance with what God has revealed in it.” (Sura 5 *al-Ma’idah* 47). It is a settled Qur’anic doctrine that originally the Torah, the Gospel and the Qur’an were on a par, at least in the form in which the Qur’an teaches they were first delivered by their “messengers” (Moses, Jesus and Muhammad) to the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims respectively. But in the form in which the Jews and the Christians actually have their scriptures, the Qur’an itself is already aware of disparities in text and interpretation. For this reason, the Qur’an speaks of the corruption (*at-tahrif*) of the text of the Bible, the alteration of words, and the con-



cealment of meanings. (cf., e.g., Sura 3 *al 'Imran* 78). From the early Islamic period onward, in the arguments about religion that proliferated from the beginning until well into the Middle Ages, and indeed even into modern times, the charge and countercharge of corrupting the scriptures became a staple item in the apologetic and polemical texts composed by Jews, Christians, and Muslims.<sup>7</sup> Needless to say, in the Islamic milieu the Qur'an itself then became for Muslims the ultimate arbiter of the interpretation of the earlier scriptural accounts, in the narration of which its own text came to participate.<sup>8</sup>

The interest of Muslim religious writers in the text of the Bible underwent a certain evolution as time went on. In the early Islamic period, some Muslim writers actually showed a keen interest in the biblical text familiar to Jews and Christians. In this connection, one might mention quotations, albeit often "corrected", allusions and paraphrases to be found in the work of scholars such as Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. 732), in the *Sirah* of Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Ishaq (d. ca. 767), as transmitted by Abu Muhammad 'Abd al-Malik ibn Hisham (d. 834), and in the somewhat copious quotations in the works of Abu Muhammad 'Abd Allah ibn Muslim ibn Qutaybah (d. 889) and Ahmad ibn Abi Ya'qub ibn Ja'far ibn Wahb ibn Wadih al-Ya'qubi (d. 897), to name only the most prominent and well-studied authors.<sup>9</sup> By the tenth century, however, the interest of Muslim scholars seems to have shifted away from quotations as such from the earlier scriptures, however much they may have "corrected" their wording, and more toward what one may call the "Islamicization" of whole biblical narratives by retelling them freestyle, with concomitantly less interest paid to the wording of the texts familiar to Jews and Christians. This was very much the case in the popular "tales of the prophets" (*qisas al-anbiya'*) and in the so-called *Isra'iliyyat*, of which more below. But it was also the case *mutatis mutandis* in the exegetical literature and in the early Islamic historiography, in which Muslim writers put forward the biblically inspired, Islamic version of salvation history.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, Muslim scholars in the later ages who did pay attention to the biblical texts of the Jews and Christians in some detail did so with a deconstructive intent, designed to demonstrate their corruption, falsification and utter unworthiness.<sup>11</sup>

The shift in interest on the part of Muslim scholars around the eleventh century from the text of the pre-Islamic scriptures as the Jews and Christians actually have them, to their own narratives or stories of the biblical messengers may well have been due in some part to the pressure exerted by the arguments about religion between Muslims and Christians, which had come into full force in the ninth century.<sup>12</sup> It was common for controversialists on both sides to develop their arguments from both scripture and reason. But even in the early

period there is evidence that Muslims were distrustful of Christians quoting from the Bible. For example, in one text, now preserved only in Greek, Theodore Abu Qurrah (c.755–c.830), one of the earliest Christian writers in Arabic whose name we know,<sup>13</sup> recalled the challenge of his Muslim adversary as follows: "Persuade me not from your Isaiah or Matthew, for whom I have not the slightest regard, but from compelling, acknowledged, common notions."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, another Christian text in Arabic from the ninth century has the Muslim interlocutor make the following declaration when the Christian apologist proposes to substantiate his claims "from the scriptures of the prophets and messengers." The Muslim character in the dialogue is made to say, "We do not accept anything from the Old [Testament] nor from the New [Testament] because we do not recognize them."<sup>15</sup> And later in the same work, the Muslim character is made to give voice to the Islamic charge of the corruption of the Gospel text as the Christians actually have it. In regard to the Gospel according to John he says,

*What you have said you report only from your distorted Gospel and your distorted scriptures. But we have the original Gospel. We have gotten it from our prophet. John and his associates, having lost the Gospel after Christ's ascension into heaven, set down what they pleased. Our prophet Muhammad informed us of this.*<sup>16</sup>

As Christian writers in Syriac and Arabic thus strove to prove from the Bible that Christianity was the true religion, Muslim writers were in their own turn the more strongly motivated to authenticate the "signs of prophecy" (*dala'il an-nubuwwah*) which testified to Muhammad's status as a prophet and messenger from God, in fact as the "seal of the prophets" (Sura 33 *al-Ahzab* 40). This concern, along with the concomitant development of the doctrine of the "inimitability" (*al-i'jaz*) of the Qur'an, seems to have carried with it a renewed Muslim interest in the topic of the corruption of the previous scriptures at the hands of Jews and Christians.<sup>17</sup> By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, major writers, such as al-Ghazali (1058–1111)<sup>18</sup> and Ibn Hazm (994–1064),<sup>19</sup> again to mention only the most prominent names, were concerned to refute the arguments of Jews and Christians by demonstrating in great detail the unreliability of their scriptures. After their time, and certainly after the time of Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328),<sup>20</sup> and for the rest of the Middle Ages, Muslim authors seem to have lost interest in any possible authoritative or probative value to be found in the texts of the scriptures of the Jews or Christians, or in anything emanating from Jewish or Christian exegetical traditions. Aside from their arguments against the integrity of the received texts of the Bible, Muslim scholars did not themselves compose commentaries on any part of the Bible, nor did they systematically use the Torah or Gospel as authoritative sources of religious teaching. As one modern scholar has put it, in the world of Islam biblical exegesis "never became a literary genre on its own, nor did it ever



play an important role in Muslim medieval theology.”<sup>21</sup> Rather, the emphasis seems to have shifted in this period to demonstrating the untrustworthiness of the Bible. In modern times, in the wake of the great achievements of western biblical scholars, both Jews and Christians, whose scholarship has for the most part been based on the historical critical methodologies of modern scholarship, many Muslim writers, taking note of the deconstructive conclusions these scholars have reached, have themselves felt vindicated in reaffirming the claims of their community’s earlier scholarly traditions about the textual corruption of the Bibles of Jews and Christians.<sup>22</sup>

## II. The Torah, the Muslims and the “Religion of Abraham”

While Muslims thus gradually lost interest in the text of the Bible, in the textual form in which it actually circulates among Jews and Christians, following the lead of the Qur’an they certainly did not lose interest in pre-Qur’anic, divine revelation nor in the stories of the biblical prophets and messengers.<sup>23</sup> Rather, the evident intertextuality of many biblical and Jewish/Christian folkloric narratives in the Qur’an prompted Muslims from an early period to engage in a double appropriation of biblical revelation. On the one hand, early writers were concerned to claim the authority of the Bible to warrant the scriptural authenticity of Muhammad, the Qur’an, and Islamic teaching more generally; one may call it a process of “biblicizing” the Islamic prophetic claims. On the other hand, given the concomitant Islamic concern about the corruption of the text of the Bible, and observing the consequent, divergent cast of many of the early Islamic presentations of biblical narratives, one may also speak of a simultaneous process of “islamicizing” the biblical narratives.

In the first instance, that of “biblicizing” the Islamic prophetic claims, the effort was basically to claim a place for the Qur’an alongside the Torah and the Gospel as the locus of a continuing but final divine revelation in scripture. Concomitantly, the purpose was also to show that the earlier scriptures foretold the coming of Muhammad and his mission. In this context, Muslim controversialists often appealed to biblical texts to support their arguments, or to refute what they saw as wrong interpretations on the part of Christian apologists and polemicists.<sup>25</sup>

It is in the long process of “islamicizing” the biblical narratives in the burgeoning literature of Muslim piety, presenting the Bible stories in Islamic diction and in an Islamic interpretive framework, as was mentioned above, that one sees the enormous presence of Bible revelation in Islamic life. This development is particularly evident in the ever popular “tales of the prophets” (*qisas al-anbiya*)<sup>26</sup> and the associated material which is

collectively known among Muslims as “Israelite lore” (*Isra’iliyyat*).<sup>27</sup> Even more than the Qur’an itself, these narratives betray their oral origins, calling attention to the fact that they originally came into circulation in homilies and oral commentaries on the stories of the biblical characters whose careers exemplified the prophetology of the Qur’an. Their currency in turn calls attention to the fact that prior to the rise of Islam, and during the time of Muhammad’s proclamation of the Qur’an to its intended, Arabic-speaking audience, the Torah and the Gospel themselves, to which the Qur’an often refers, both directly and indirectly, were available to Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians themselves only in an oral form. As far as the available evidence indicates, there were no pre-Islamic translations of the Bible into Arabic which circulated as written texts.<sup>28</sup> Rather, every indication suggests that Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians *heard* the scriptural word of God proclaimed and discussed by Arabic-speaking rabbis, monks and priests who transmitted the narratives *viva voce* from Hebrew, Aramaic/Syriac and Greek texts and commented on them, probably in largely liturgical settings. Text and commentary drawing on apocryphal and folkloric material in the two communities would have intermingled in an enriched religious discourse which then formed the Jewish and Christian consciousness of the original Arabic-speaking audience of the Qur’an.

The Arabic Qur’an in its turn addressed its first audience with the presumption of their familiarity with the orally circulating, biblical narratives embedded in homiletic commentaries as just described. With its own rhetorical strategies, the Qur’an faced its audience with a critique of the beliefs and practices of the earlier “Scripture People”. In its own right, and within the nascent Islamic community, the Qur’an thus became what some recent scholars have described as “a canonical recital of God’s Holy Word that reconfigured aspects of both Hebrew Bible and New Testament discourse in a context of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim interaction.”<sup>29</sup>

The Qur’an did not become a canonical scripture in the Islamic community, that is to say an authoritative written text, until after the death of Muhammad. Neither the Hebrew Bible nor the Christian New Testament were translated into written Arabic texts until well after the written, Arabic Qur’an had established the parameters for literary Arabic and Arabic had itself become the public language of all the peoples who lived within the world of Islam, whether or not they were Muslims. The first translators of the Bible into written Arabic were not the Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians of pre-Islamic Arabia but Jews and Christians who lived in the conquered territories outside of Arabia, whose own languages had been eclipsed by Arabic.<sup>30</sup> This means that the original, Arabic-speaking arena in which Jewish, Christian and proto-Muslim scriptural narratives interacted with one another was an oral/aural, Arabic-speaking



space with a biblical dynamic all its own. It admitted a high quotient of homiletic discourse into the transmission of the scriptural narratives. It was this oral dynamic that prevailed in the later enterprise on the part of Muslims to “Islamicize” biblical history.

Once the Islamic doctrine of the Jewish and Christian corruption of the Bible had gained a general currency, and Muslim scholars lost respect for the texts of the Bible as Jews and Christians actually had them, Muslims seem nevertheless to have recovered a fuller appreciation of divine revelation according to the dynamic mode in which the biblical narratives had interacted in the oral, homiletic milieu of early Qur’anic times. And so it came about that the stories of the Bible’s principal characters, such as Abraham, Moses and Jesus, have inspired many subsequent generations of Muslims in a virtually “midrashic” literature which presents them as messengers of the Word of God, who seem to bear revelation in their very persons. Of no one of them has this been more evidently the case than in the narratives of the patriarch Abraham, whose story has in Islamic times become a paradigm for interfaith relations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Already in the Qur’an, in the context of encounters with the “People of the Book”, God gives this instruction to the believers, “They say, “If you become Jews or Christians, you shall be well-guided.” Say, “Rather, we follow the religion (*millah*) of Abraham, who was upright and not a polytheist.” (Sura 2 *al-Baqarah* 135) Even more to the point, in another place in the Qur’an, after posing the question, “O People of the Book, why do you dispute concerning Abraham?” God makes the following declaration, “Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a *hanif* and a *muslim*.<sup>31</sup> He was not one of the polytheists.” (Sura 3 *al ‘Imran* 65 & 67) And finally, the Qur’an says, “Who has a better religious judgment (*din*) than one who submits himself to God, does right and follows the true religion (*millah*) of Abraham the *hanif*? God has taken Abraham for a friend (*khalilan*).” (Sura 4 *an-Nisa* 125) The last phrase provides a moment of intertextuality, in that the epithet for Abraham, “God’s friend”, can be found both in the Hebrew Bible (Is 41:8) and in the New Testament (Jm 2:23). But surely the main point is the evocation of the concept of “following the religion of Abraham” as a proposed common point de repère for Jews, Muslims and Christians together.

The Qur’an’s concept of “following the religion of Abraham” (*ittiba’ millat Ibrahim*) may be taken as one of the principles which inspired the development of the distinctively Islamic prophetology which Muslim scholars elaborated in early Islamic times, and especially during the period between the eighth and tenth centuries, the period of the so-called “Sectarian Milieu” of competing religious communities, when, as Brian Hauglid has

pointed out, “a lively textual interchange existed between Jews, Christians and Muslims.”<sup>32</sup> The story of Abraham as it is presented in the Qur’an then became in that milieu one of the nuclei for both the evolving paradigm of “prophethood” in Islamic thinking and the impetus for the mushrooming, *midrashic* accounts of the deeds of Abraham and his sons, as we find them in the medieval Islamic works of exegesis, Bible history and the tales of the prophets.<sup>33</sup> In these compositions, biblical revelation took on a new life in an “Islamicizing” mode which could confidently leave behind the disputed biblical texts of the Jews and the Christians and yet still lay claim to the authoritative biblical persona, “God’s friend” Abraham. In this way the concept of the “religion of Abraham” emerged for Muslims as a *theologoumenon* which would prove to have a considerable potential for their conversations and controversies with Jews and Christians.



Prompted by the Qur’an, in their exegetical and historical narratives early Muslim scholars traced their own religious ancestry and the genealogy of the Arabs back to Abraham by way of the lineage of his eldest son Ishmael/ Isma’il, whose mother was Hagar.<sup>34</sup> For Muslims, Ishmael was the immediate patriarch of the North Arabians, from whom, they taught, Muhammad descended, just as Isaac, Abraham’s second son, whose mother was Sarah, was the immediate patriarch from whom the people of Israel descended. And while Christians claimed a spiritual relationship with Abraham through Isaac, the son of the free woman, as opposed to Ishmael, the son of the bondswoman, (Rm 4:9-12; Ga 3:6-18; 4:22-31) the fact remained that in the Torah, Ishmael too, and his descendants, were recipients of the divine blessing. (Gn 16:11-12; 21:13,17-21; 25:9,12-18)



In consequence of the perceived spiritual relationship between Jews, Christians and Muslims which can be traced back to Abraham in different ways in the several communities which reverence the biblical traditions, those engaged in interreligious dialogue in modern times have not been slow to speak of the “Abrahamic faiths” or the “Abrahamic traditions”, and to use such phrases as umbrella terms to designate the three monotheist world religions. One finds this recognition of Islam’s “religion of Abraham” *theologoumenon* even in the documents of Vatican II, when the texts speak of the Muslims. In *Lumen Gentium*, the council fathers spoke of “the Mohamedans, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind” (LG 16). Similarly in *Nostra Aetate*, the Conciliar Declaration on non-Christian religions says of the Muslims that they “take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even his [i.e., God’s] inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God” (NA 3). While these expressions of awareness of the Islamic *theologoumenon* on the council’s part do not amount to a theological endorsement of its veracity from the Church’s point of view, they do show that the continuing, revelational authority of the personae of the biblical Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac in the three scriptural traditions can nevertheless provide the occasion for Muslims and Christians to recognize a moment of common interest in the faith of Abraham, if not a common spiritual relationship, and on this basis to enter into a meaningful interreligious conversation with one another about all that the profession of this “religion of Abraham” entails.<sup>35</sup> In the past, Christian controversialists had used the names of these same biblical personae as polemical epithets, regularly calling the Muslims “Ishmaelites” or “Hagarenes”, with the understanding that they are among the children of bondage, who will have no part in the inheritance of freedom promised to the adopted children of Sarah’s son Isaac (cf. Ga 4:21-31). Now the names of these same biblical characters can be symbols of a biblical tradition which both communities cherish as foundational for their own religious identities.

### III. Jesus, the Gospel and the Muslims

In nine of the twelve instances in which the Qur’an mentions the Gospel, it includes also a mention of the Torah. According to the Qur’an, the Gospel, like the Torah, is a scripture which God taught to Jesus. (Sura 3 *al ‘Imran* 48; Sura 5 *al-Ma’idah* 110). One notices immediately the difference between this Islamic idea of the Gospel as a message which God communicated to Jesus, just as He communicated the Torah to Moses and the Qur’an to Muhammad, and the Christian idea.<sup>36</sup> For Christians, the Gospel is the “Good News” of the salvation which God has accomplished for humankind through Jesus, the Messiah. It is proclaimed both orally and in writing by

those whom God has inspired to proclaim it. This difference with the Islamic conception is exacerbated in the instance of the Gospel as scripture, which according to the Christians is recorded in the originally Greek texts of the four canonical evangelists, by the Islamic charge of *at-tahrif* (“corruption”) which, as we have seen, is often leveled by Muslim scholars against the texts of the Gospel as the Christians actually have them.<sup>37</sup> In this connection it is interesting to observe that in his apologetic work, written in Arabic in the Islamic milieu, Theodore Abu Qurrah (750–820) enunciated the following principle regarding the authority of the Gospel for Christians. He wrote,

*Christianity is simply faith in the Gospel and its appendices, and the Law of Moses and the books of the prophets in between.*<sup>38</sup> *Every intelligent person must believe in what these books we have mentioned say, and acknowledge its truth and act on it, whether his own understanding reaches it or not.*<sup>39</sup>



*Jesus depicted in an Ottoman miniature dated 1583*

It is relevant to the usages of the Islamic milieu in which he wrote that Abu Qurrah here presents the whole Bible succinctly by reference simply to the Gospel and its appendices, and the Torah, along with the prophets between it and the Gospel; the Qur’an normally refers to the full Bible simply as “the Torah and the Gospel” (Sura 3 *Al ‘Imran* 48; Sura 4 *al-Ma’idah* 110). What is more, as if in response to the Qur’an’s admonition to the “People of the Gospel” to make their religious judgments in accordance with what God sent down to them (Sura 5 *al-Ma’idah* 47), Abu Qurrah further says in another Arabic treatise, “Were it not for the Gospel, we would not acknowledge Moses to be from God. ... Likewise, we acknowledge the prophets to be from God because of the Gospel.”<sup>40</sup>

In spite of the differences between Muslims and Christians about the nature of the Gospel, there is nevertheless much Gospel material, both canonical and



apocryphal, in the Qur'an and in Islamic tradition, history and exegesis. For the most part, this Gospel material is concerned with Jesus, the Messiah, his sayings and his actions. In the early Islamic period there were some Muslim commentators who did consult the canonical Gospels in connection with their studies of this material,<sup>41</sup> but as early as the time of the historian and Qur'an commentator, Abu Ja'far Muhammad at-Tabari (839–923),<sup>42</sup> Muslim scholars were already turning away from the canonical Gospels and were developing a distinctively "Muslim Gospel," with its own "Muslim Jesus," as one modern Muslim scholar has described the tradition.<sup>43</sup> While this material has remained largely unfamiliar to Christians, it has enjoyed an enormous circulation in the Islamic world, where the veneration of Jesus as a messenger from God is second only to that accorded to Muhammad himself.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to the textual and narrative divergences between the Christian and the Islamic presentations of Jesus, there is also the obvious major confessional difference (expressed in the phrases, "son of God" vs. "son of Mary"), which persists in the face of the fact that the scriptures of the Christians and the Muslims in one important instance use the same titular epithet in reference to Jesus, the Messiah, albeit that they mean radically different things in the predication. Both the New Testament (Rev 19:13)<sup>45</sup> and the Qur'an (Sura 3 *al-Imran* 39; Sura 4 *an-Nisa'* 171), each for their own reasons, speak of Jesus as the "Word of God". This coincidence of titular terminology, while very different in meaning in the two faith traditions and indeed expressive of the major confessional difference between them, nevertheless provides a scriptural moment for mutual reflection.

For Muslims, the Qur'an's affirmation that Jesus, the Messiah, Mary's son, is the Word of God and a Spirit from Him (Sura 4 *an-Nisa'* 171),<sup>46</sup> is a testimony to the perceived, personal creatureliness of Jesus in Islamic thought, strongly affirmed in other passages of the Qur'an (e.g., in Sura 3 *al-Imran* 59; Sura 5 *al-Ma'idah* 75). Christians contrariwise, taking their cue from John 1:1 & 14, affirm that the identification of Jesus with God's Word is an affirmation of his divinity and of his divine sonship, while the Spirit of God, who, according to the scriptures, came upon Mary at the Annunciation (Lk 1:35), and whom Jesus promised to send upon his disciples after his ascension into heaven (Jn 15:26), is the one God in person come to guide God's people. The crucial point to observe in this fundamental, confessional contradiction between Christians and Muslims is the occurrence in the Gospel and the Qur'an of the same scriptural terms, "Word" and "Spirit" of God, carrying with them echoes of the language of the Torah and the Prophets, to ground the opposing Christian and Islamic affirmations about Jesus, the Messiah. This identity of terms, given their scriptural origins, while used to

express opposite creedal affirmations in the two communities of faith, nevertheless also offers the opportunity for a renewed inter-communal conversation about their significance, when they are read against the wider horizon of the shared sacred narratives to which both communities pay allegiance. While such conversations well may not lead to any significant interreligious rapprochement in doctrine, they can certainly help to clarify the mutual understanding of the crucial points of difference and highlight the central tenets of the Christian and Islamic calls to faith in the modern world.

#### IV. The Bible and Christian/Muslim dialogue

The persistent presence of the Bible to the Qur'an throughout Islamic history indicates that Islam has been in dialogue with Judaism and Christianity from its origins. One could say that the "Word of God" in its several senses could actually work as a powerful magnet to pull Jews, Christians and Muslims together. The Qur'an even now assumes that Jews, Christians and Muslims will be in dialogue with one another. The text instructs the Muslims, "Do not dispute with the People of the Book save in the fairest way; except for those of them who are evildoers. And say: "We believe in what has been sent down to us and what has been sent down to you. Our God and your God are one and to Him we are submissive." (Sura 29 *al-Ankabut* 46)<sup>47</sup> Similarly, the Qur'an presumes that the moment of dialogue will be a moment of truth determined by reference to the scriptural "word of God". So in connection with a point of disagreement, the text exhorts the Muslims to say, "Bring forth your proof (*burhan*) if you are telling the truth." (Sura 2 *al-Baqarah* 111) In the context it is clear that the "proof" in demand is a corroborating passage from the sacred scriptures.

Furthermore, in a particularly telling passage in the Qur'an it emerges that in the dialogue between Christians and Muslims, the Islamic scripture envisions the requisite proof of personal authenticity in faith statements to consist in putting one's very life on the line in attestation to the religious truth one professes; it is effectively a call for the willingness for martyrdom in the Christian/Muslim encounter. On the occasion of Muhammad's meeting with a delegation of visiting Christians from the south Arabian town of Najran,<sup>48</sup> as the later Islamic traditions recalled the moment of the revelation, the subject of the truth about Jesus, the Messiah, came up. The traditions record the memory that it was on this occasion, and in connection with the challenge to tell the truth about Jesus, that the following verse of the Qur'an came down to Muhammad, proposing that he and the Christian spokesmen put themselves to the test. The verse says, "To those who dispute with you about it after the knowledge which has come to you, say: 'Come now; let us call our sons and your sons, or wives and your wives, ourselves and yourselves. Then



let us pray to God and so call down God's curse upon those speaking falsely'." (Sura 3 *al 'Imran* 61)<sup>49</sup>

On the face of it, this Qur'anic charge can be taken to require that Christians and Muslims in dialogue with one another about the truth concerning Jesus Christ should leave the judgment of the veracity of their authentically professed witness to one another in the hands of God. It implies not only good faith on their part, in the moral sense of the expression, but also that the terms of their witness should be in accord with "the knowledge which has come to you." That is to say, according to this reading of the Qur'an's charge, Muslims and Christians must testify to the truth attested in the scriptures which God has sent down to each community. And this requirement brings the matter back full circle to the issue of the texts of the scriptures and the question of their integrity in the forms in which each community actually possesses them.



As we have seen, Muslim controversialists have customarily accused the "People of the Book" of having distorted or corrupted their scriptures. In the early Islamic period, Muslim scholars who in their apologetic and polemic works quoted verses from the Torah or the Gospel to verify their own claims sometimes ventured to "correct" the presumed "distorted" passages, especially those which speak of Jesus and the Father, or are supposed to foretell the coming of the prophet Muhammad.<sup>50</sup> Christians, for their part, viewed these Islamic "corrections" of the Jewish or Christian scriptures as in fact "distortions" of the received text. And in the early Islamic period, in texts written in Syriac and Arabic by Christians who lived in the Islamic milieu and who responded to the challenges posed by Muslim scholars one can actually trace changes in the traditional interpretation of certain scriptural passages to reflect the new religious challenges posed to them by the Muslim polemicists.<sup>51</sup>

So from the early Islamic period until modern times, dialogue between Christians and Muslims in regard to the biblical text has remained at something of a stalemate. But the matter is otherwise in regard to the large body of narrative traditions about biblical characters that are central figures in both the Bible and the Qur'an. These traditions in both communities have a "haggadic", even "midrashic" quality about them, which recalls the oral stage of the transmission of biblical narratives in Arabic, when the "Word of God" circulated from person to per-

son without the benefit of a fixed, canonical text easily available in the appropriate language. In the instance of stories about Jesus' sayings and doings in particular, Christians and Muslims are both familiar with a large body of canonical and non-canonical, apocryphal and pseudepigraphic material which circulates in the intertextual milieu of both communities in a way which constitutes almost an "oral Gospel" after the manner of the "oral Torah" in the Jewish community. There is ample room for dialogue between Christians and Muslims in connection with these narratives of biblical personae, especially in terms of the major lines of salvation history and the cultivation of a moral way of life in accord with biblical admonitions.<sup>52</sup>

Vatican II's document *Dei Verbum* does not mention the Qur'an, nor does it speak of dialogue with Muslims, albeit that it does mention some of the same, pivotal figures in salvation history, such as Abraham, Moses and Jesus, who also appear in the Islamic scripture and tradition. But toward the end of the document there is a passage which has considerable potential for encouraging dialogue between Christians and Muslims about the scriptures. In connection with the discussion of the necessity for providing up-to-date translations of the Bible for Christians of the modern era, the council fathers said, "Furthermore, editions of the Sacred Scriptures, provided with suitable footnotes, should be prepared also for the use of non-Christians and adapted to their situation." (*DV* 25) Given the wealth of biblical traditions which circulate among the Muslims, and the Qur'an's own formal endorsement of the Torah, the Psalms and the Gospel, the time seems to have come to take heed of *Dei Verbum's* suggestion and to propose the preparation of an edition of the Bible specifically for the Christian/Muslim dialogue, with suitable notes and adapted to the requirements of Muslim/Christian mutual understanding. It could become an important moment for the Christian and Muslim "Scripture People" of the twenty-first century to reaffirm their faith in the word of God as they find it in the Torah and the Gospel, scriptures which they both affirm in principle, while commending their differences to the mercy of God. ■

<sup>1</sup> Louis Massignon, *Les trois prières d'Abraham*, Paris 1997, p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> The Arabic term *qur'an* is cognate to the Syriac term *qeryana*, regularly used by Aramaic-speaking Christians to refer to a liturgical "lesson" or "reading" from the scriptures. See Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*, Baroda 1938, s.v. *qur'an*.

<sup>3</sup> On the Qur'an as "scripture" (*kitab*), see Daniel Madigan, *The Qur'an's Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture*, Princeton 2001.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Thais E. Morgan, *Is There an Intertext in This Text? Literary and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Intertextuality*, in: *American Journal of Semiotics* 3 (1985), p. 1-40.



- <sup>5</sup> Earlier scholars have studied the stories of biblical characters in the Qur'an in a similar manner. See, e.g., Marilyn R. Waldman, *New Approaches to "Biblical" Materials in the Qur'an*, in: *Muslim World 75* (1985), pp. 1-16; Mohammed Arkoun, *The Notion of Revelation: From ahl al-kitab to the Societies of the Book*, *Die Welt des Islams* 28 (1988), pp. 62-89.
- <sup>6</sup> On the dynamic sense of this expression, see Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur'an's Self-Image*, esp. the appendix, *The People of the Kitab*, pp. 193-213.
- <sup>7</sup> On this topic see especially Jean-Marie Gaudeul / Robert Caspar, *Textes de la tradition musulmane concernant le Tahrif (falsification) des Écritures*, *Islamochristiana* 6 (1980), pp. 61-104.
- <sup>8</sup> See Andrew Rippin, *Interpreting the Bible through the Qur'an*, in: Gerald R. Hawting / Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (eds.), *Approaches to the Qur'an*, New York 1993, pp. 249-259; Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *The Qur'anic Context of Muslim Biblical Scholarship*, in: *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 7 (1996), pp. 141-158.
- <sup>9</sup> For a discussion of this process in connection with the quotation of John 15:23-16:1 in Ibn Ishaq's *Sirah*, see Sidney H. Griffith, *The Gospel, the Qur'an, and the Presentation of Jesus in: al-Ya'qubi's Ta'rikh*, in: John C. Reeves, *Bible and Qur'an: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality (Symposium Series, 24)*. Atlanta, 2003, pp. 133-160; Id., *Arguing from Scripture: The Bible in the Christian/Muslim Encounter in the Middle Ages*, in: Thomas J. Heffernan / Thomas E. Burman, *Scripture and Pluralism: Reading the Bible in the Religiously Plural Worlds of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, Leiden 2005, pp. 29-58.
- <sup>10</sup> See John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History (London Oriental Series, 34)*, Oxford 1978.
- <sup>11</sup> See Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism*, Princeton 1992; Theodore Pulcini, *Exegesis As Polemical Discourse: Ibn Hazm on Jewish and Christian Scriptures*, Atlanta 1998.
- <sup>12</sup> For a good survey, see Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Encounters and Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History (2 vols)*, Rome 2001.
- <sup>13</sup> See John Lamoreaux (introduction & translation), *Theodore Abu Qurrah*, Provo, UT 2005.
- <sup>14</sup> Theodore Abu Qurrah, *Greek Opusculum 24*, PG, vol. 97, col. 1556B.
- <sup>15</sup> Giacinto Bulus Marcuzzo (edition & translation), *Le dialogue d'Abraham de Tibériade avec 'Abd al-Rahman al-Hashim i à Jérusalem vers 820 (Textes et Études sur l'Orient Chrétien, 3)*, Rome 1986, pp. 342-343.
- <sup>16</sup> Marcuzzo, *Le dialogue d'Abraham de Tibériade* (see note 15), pp. 394-395.
- <sup>17</sup> See Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm*, Leiden 1996.
- <sup>18</sup> A refutation of the Christian doctrine of the divinity of Christ based on the Gospels is attributed to al-Ghazali. See Robert Chidiac (edition & translation), *Al-Ghazzali, Refutation excellente de la divinité de Jésus-Christ d'après les Évangiles*, Paris 1939. The authenticity of the work is challenged in: Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies in al-Ghazzali*, Jerusalem 1975, appendix A, pp. 458-487.
- <sup>19</sup> See Pulcini, *Exegesis as Polemical Discourse* (see note 11).
- <sup>20</sup> See Thomas F. Michel, *A Muslim Theologian's Response to Christianity: Ibn Taymiyya's al-Jawab al-sahih Delmar*, New York 1984.
- <sup>21</sup> Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds* (see note 11), p. 110.
- <sup>22</sup> See Kate Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face*, Oxford 1997.
- <sup>23</sup> See Brannon M. Wheeler, *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis* Richmond 2000; Id., *Prophets in the Quran: An Introduction to the Quran and Muslim Exegesis*, London 2002.
- <sup>24</sup> It is important to emphasize that the processes of "Biblicization" and "Islamicization" are not mutually exclusive; they often operate simultaneously in a text, albeit that one or the other of them may be a more dominant concern for a given author.
- <sup>25</sup> See David Thomas, *The Bible in Early Muslim Anti-Christian Polemic*, in: *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 7 (1996), pp. 29-38.
- <sup>26</sup> See Tilman Nagel, *Die Qisas al-Anbiya': Ein Beitrag zur arabischen Literaturgeschichte*, Bonn 1967; Brian Hauglid, *Al-Tha'labi's Qisas al-Anbiya': Analysis of the Text, Jewish and Christian Elements, Islamization, and Prefiguration of the Prophethood of Muhammad*, (PhD diss.; The University of Utah, 1998 – Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Microform 9829755, 1998); Wheeler, *Prophets of the Quran* (see note 23); Roberto Tottoli, *I Profeti Biblici nella Tradizione Islamica*, Brescia 1999. One of the most popular texts in this genre has an English translation; see Wheeler M. Thackston Jr. (translation), *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisa'I*, Boston 1978.
- <sup>27</sup> See Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Assessing the Isra'iyyat: an Exegetical Conundrum*, in: Stefan Leder (ed.), *Story-telling in the Framework of Non-fictional Arabic Literature*, Wiesbaden 1998, pp. 345-369; Roberto Totolli, *Origin and Use of the Term Isra'iyyat in Muslim Literature*, in: *Arabica* 46 (1999), pp. 193-210.
- <sup>28</sup> So far no convincing evidence has appeared for a pre-Islamic Arabic translation of any substantial portion of the Bible. It is possible that a few literate individuals among Arabic-speaking Jews or Christians may have had notes or some other rudimentary texts for personal use. See Gregor Schoeler, *Écrire et transmettre dans les débuts de l'islam*, Paris 2002, esp. pp. 26-29. See also Sidney H. Griffith, *The Gospel in Arabic: An Inquiry into its Appearance in the First Abbasid Century*, in: *Oriens Christianus* 69 (1985), pp. 126-167.
- <sup>29</sup> Vernon K. Robbins / Gordon D. Newby, *A Prolegomenon to the Relation of the Qur'an and the Bible*, in: Reeves (ed.), *Bible and Qur'an* (see note 9), p. 23.
- <sup>30</sup> See Griffith, *The Gospel in Arabic* (see note 28); Sebastian P. Brock, *A Neglected Witness to the East Syriac New Testament Commentary Tradition: Sinai, Arabic MS 151*, in: Rifaat Y. Ebied / Herman G. Teule (eds.), *Studies on the Christian Arabic Heritage (Eastern Christian Studies, 5)* Leuven 2004, pp. 205-215.
- <sup>31</sup> On the sense of the term hanif as roughly equivalent to the sense of the term "gentile" in Judeo-Christian usage, see François De Blois, *Nasrani (Ναζωραῖος) and hanif (εθνικός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and Islam*, in: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65 (2002), pp. 1-30.
- <sup>32</sup> Brian Hauglid, *On the Early Life of Abraham: Biblical and Qur'anic Intertextuality and the Anticipation of Muhammad*, in: Reeves, *Bible and Qur'an* (see note 9), p. 105.
- <sup>33</sup> See Youakim Moubarac, *Abraham dans le Coran*, Paris 1958; Hauglid, *On the Early Life of Abraham* (see note 32); Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis*, Albany 1990.
- <sup>34</sup> See in this connection the critical observations of Yisrael Eph'al, "Ishmael" and the "Arabs": A Transformation of Ethnological Terms, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 35 (1976), pp. 225-235. A considerable controversy arose among European scholars over the issue of Ishmael considered as the ancestor of the Arabs. See Massignon, *Les trois prières* (see note 1), pp. 61-77; Michel Hayek, *Le mystère d'Ishmael*, Paris 1964; René Dagorn, *La geste d'Ismael d'après l'onomastique et la tradition arabes*, Geneva 1981.
- <sup>35</sup> See Lewis R. Scudder Jr., *Ishmael and Isaac and Muslim-Christian Dialogue*, in: *Dialog* 29 (1990), pp. 29-32; Sidney H. Griffith, *Sharing the Faith of Abraham: The "Credo" of Louis Massignon*, in: *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations* 8 (1997), pp. 193-210; Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Abraham: Sign of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims* (translation John Bowden), New York 1995.
- <sup>36</sup> See Sidney H. Griffith, *Gospel*, in: Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, Leiden 2001, vol. II, pp. 342-343.



- <sup>37</sup> The so-called "Gospel of Barnabas" is a special case in Christian/Muslim controversies. The text of this work was discovered in an Italian manuscript in Amsterdam in 1709. The modern scholarly consensus has it that the "Gospel of Barnabas" was composed in the western Mediterranean world (Spain) in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. See Jan Slomp, *The Gospel in Dispute*, in: *Islamochristiana* 4 (1977), pp. 67-112; Mikel De Epalza, *Le milieu hispano-moresque de l'Évangile islamisant de Barnabe*, in: *Islamochristiana* 8 (1982), pp. 159-183; R. Stichel, *Bemerkungen zum Barnabas-Evangelium*, in: *Byzantinoslavica* 43 (1982), pp. 189-201; David Sox, *The Gospel of Barnabas*, London 1984. Since being translated into Arabic early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the 'Gospel of Barnabas' has been widely acclaimed by some popular Muslim writers as a more authentic record of Jesus' life and sayings than is offered in the four canonical Gospels of the Christians. See Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face* (see note 22), esp. 45-46, 50-71.
- <sup>38</sup> By the Gospel's "appendices" (*tawabi'ih*) Abu Qurrah means the New Testament books, Acts to Revelation, which follow the Gospel according to the four evangelists in the canon. Similarly, the prophets who come "in between", as he says in the next phrase, refer to all the Septuagint books from Joshua to Malachi, which follow the Torah.
- <sup>39</sup> Constantin Bacha, *Les oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara, évêque d'Haran*, Beyrouth 1904, p. 27.
- <sup>40</sup> Louis Cheikho, *Mimar li Tadurus Abi Qurrah fi wujd al-khaliq wa d-din al-qawim*, al-Machriq 15 (1912), p. 837.
- <sup>41</sup> See in this connection, e.g., Sidney H. Griffith, *The Gospel, the Qur'an, and the Presentation of Jesus in al-Ya'qubi's Ta'rikh*, in: Reeves, *Bible and Qur'an* (see note 9), pp. 133-160.
- <sup>42</sup> See André Ferré, *La vie de Jésus d'après les Annales de Tabari*, in: *Islamochristiana* 5 (1979), pp. 1-29.
- <sup>43</sup> Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*, Cambridge, MA 2001, p. 3.
- <sup>44</sup> See Roger Arnaldez, *Jésus, fils de Marie, prophète de l'Islam*, Paris 1980; Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration*, London 1985; Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, Albany/NY 1991.
- <sup>45</sup> See also Jn 1:1;14, where nevertheless the full phrase, *ho logos tou theou* applied to Christ, does not appear as it does in Rev 19:13.
- <sup>46</sup> The Qur'an's statement that Jesus is a Spirit from God (Sura 4:171) should be read in connection with other passages, such as the one recalling the Annunciation to Mary, where the text says, "We sent to her Our spirit in the semblance of a full-grown man," who said to her, "I am but your Lord's emissary and have come to give you a holy son." (Sura 19 *Maryam* 17;19) In other places the Qur'an says that God strengthened Jesus with the Holy Spirit; see Sura 2 *al-Baqarah* 87;253; Sura 5 *al-Ma'idah* 110. In a particularly pertinent passage the Qur'an says of Mary, "She who guarded her chastity, We breathed into her of Our Spirit and made her and her son a sign unto the world." (Sura 21 *al-Anbiya'* 91)
- <sup>47</sup> See Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Debate with them in the better way: The Construction of a Qur'anic Commonplace*, in: Angelika Neuwirth et al. (eds.), *Myths, Historical Archetypes and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature: Towards a New Hermeneutic*, Beirut / Stuttgart 1999, pp. 163-188.
- <sup>48</sup> See Irfan Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najran: New Documents* (Subsidia Hagiographica, 49), Brussels 1971; René Tardy, *Najran: Chrétiens d'Arabie avant l'Islam*, Beirut 1999.
- <sup>49</sup> See Louis Massignon, *La Mubahala de Médine et l'hyperdulie de Fatima*, in: Louis Massignon, *Parole donnée*, Paris 1983, pp. 147-167.
- <sup>50</sup> See, e.g., the discussion of the presentation of Jn 15:23-16:1 in Ibn Ishaq's *Sirah*, as noted above, note 9.
- <sup>51</sup> See Martin Accad, *Did the Later Syriac Fathers Take into Consideration Their Islamic Context When Reinterpreting the New Testament?* in: *Parole de l'Orient* 23 (1998), pp. 13-32. See also Id., *The Gospels in the Muslim Discourse of the Ninth to the Fourteenth Centuries: An Exegetical Inventorial Table*, in: *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 14 (2003), pp. 67-91, 205-220, 337-352, 459-479.
- <sup>52</sup> See the recent effort of one scholar to take advantage of the common heritage in: John Kaltner, *Ishmael Instructs Isaac: An Introduction to the Qur'an for Bible Readers*, Collegeville/MN 1999.