

A Possible Coptic Source for a Qur'ānic Text¹

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The Qur'ānic account of the fall of Satan includes certain details not found in the Biblical record such as Satan's refusal to worship Adam and the former's subsequent dismissal from heaven. Some extra-Biblical sources mention parallel details to the Islamic account. Chief of these are the Syriac book *Cave of the Treasures*, the pseudepigraphic book *Adam and Eve*, and the Coptic treatise known as *The Encomium of Theodosius on Saint Michael the Archangel*. After careful examination of these three sources, it becomes clear that the Coptic text of the fall of Satan contains more similarities to the Islamic account than either of the other two sources, making Coptic the most likely source of the Qur'ānic text.

The Qur'ān includes certain statements about the creation of Adam and the fall of Satan that are so different from the biblical record as to pose certain problems regarding their possible origins and relationships. These statements are recorded in several *Sūras*, of which *Sūras* VII.7-18 and XXXVIII.72-79 are the most prominent.¹ The following text in *Sūra* XXXVIII includes most of the details of this account:

- 71 When thy Lord said unto the angels: Lo! I am about to create a mortal out of mire,
72 And when I have fashioned him and breathed into him of My Spirit, then fall down before him prostrate,
73 The angels fell down prostrate, every one,
74 Saving Iblis; he was scornful and became one of the disbelievers.
75 He [God] said: O Iblis! What hindereth thee from falling prostrate before that which I have created with both My hands? Art thou too proud or art thou of the high exalted?
76 He [Iblīs] said: I am better than him. Thou createdst me of fire, whilst him Thou didst create of clay.
77 He [God] said: Go forth from hence, for lo! thou art outcast,
78 And lo! My curse is on thee till the Day of Judgment.
79 He [Iblīs] said: My Lord! Reprieve me till the day when they are raised.
80 He said: Lo! thou art of those reprieved
81 Until the day of the time appointed.
82 He [Iblīs] said: Then, by Thy might, I surely will beguile them every one,
83 Save Thy single-minded slaves among them.

Sūra VII.10 and 16 add to the above account the following statements:

- 10 And We have given you (mankind) power in the earth, ...
16 He [Iblīs] said: Now, because Thou hast sent me astray, verily I shall lurk in ambush for them on Thy Right Path.²

Referring to these passages in the Qur'ān, A. Guillaume stated that such a story about angels being ordered to worship man cannot be of Jewish origin, since man in Judaism is made a little lower than angels. Accordingly, another source, possibly Christian or gnostic Christian, is to be sought.³

In 1926 Rabbi Leo Jung published an excellent study dedicated wholly to *Fallen Angels in Jewish, Christian, and Mohammedan Literature*. He cites many accounts of the creation of man and the fall of Satan from Jewish, Christian, and Islamic sources; but he makes clear that the original source of these accounts must have developed from two separate stories—one involving Satan's objection to Adam's creation and the other dealing with Satan's refusal to worship Adam

¹ *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 91, No. 1 (Jan. - Mar., 1971), pp. 125-128.

after his creation.⁴ Jung stipulates that the origin of the first story of Satan's objection to man's creation was Jewish and cites some samples for it.⁵ However, he maintains that the origin of the other story of Satan's refusal to worship Adam was basically Christian and non-Jewish. He asserts that in Islam, Muhammad, and those whom he calls "the fathers of Moslem traditions" confused the two accounts, and put emphasis on the idea that revenge was the reason why the devil lurked for man and sought to beguile him.⁶ Jung also cites translations of pertinent portions in the Syriac book *The Cave of Treasures* and of the pseudepigraphic books of *Adam and Eve*.⁷

The Syriac book *The Cave of Treasures* was edited, translated into German, and published by Carl Bezold in 1883.⁸ In 1927 E. A. Wallis Budge published a translation of it in English with ample notes and comments.⁹ Wallis Budge wanted to consider as its author Ephraim, the Syrian, himself, who died in 373 C.E. However, he finally agreed with Bezold that it was perhaps first written in the sixth century by a Syriac scribe belonging to the Ephraim school of Syriac apocryphal authors, who, due to great demand by the Christian communities of the early Christian centuries, borrowed, wrote and circulated many nonbiblical stories about the patriarchs, the prophets, Christ, and the apostles.¹⁰

The particular book in the group of pseudepigraphic books entitled *Adam and Eve*, which records an account of the fall of Satan parallel to the Qur'dnic text, is the one entitled *Vita Adae et Evae*. It is well edited and translated in R. H. Charles's *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha*. In his introduction to these books, Charles asserts that the main bulk of the stories included are essentially Jewish, and some of them could be traced back to pre-Christian times.¹¹ However, Charles maintains that during the early Christian centuries, many Christians and gnostics did borrow these stories and embellish them with several other clearly Christian and gnostic ideas, which were later translated into Latin and Greek.¹² A clear sample of such embellishments can be detected in the portion in *Vita Adae et Evae*, which narrates the story of Satan's refusal to worship Adam and his subsequent fall from heaven. Both Charles and Jung tend to believe that the Syriac book of *The Cave of Treasures* was one of the background sources associated with such embellishments in the *Vita*.¹³

The third and most neglected account of the fall of Satan is included in the *Encomium of Theodosius, Archbishop of Alexandria, on Saint Michael, the Archangel*. E. A. Wallis Budge translated it among other miscellaneous texts in 1915 and used for his translation two Coptic manuscripts dated in 983 and 987 C.E.¹⁴ When I examined this document in Coptic and as Budge had translated it, I observed that the account of the fall of Satan in it was quite elaborate and by far the closest to the Qur'ānic account. There is no reason to reject the claims of the two Coptic manuscripts attributing the arrangement of the *Encomium* to Theodosius, Archbishop of Alexandria, who died in 567 C.E.¹⁵ This should not exclude the possibility that the ideas expressed in this *Encomium* were in circulation in Egypt before Theodosius's time. Since the account of Satan's refusal to worship Adam and his subsequent fall is recorded in some detail in the Coptic text, I shall quote from Budge's translation only the pertinent statements that reveal close similarities to the Qur'ānic text.

Adam saith,... He [God] breathed into my face a breath of life, He set me upon an exceedingly glorious throne, and He commanded all the hosts of heaven who were in truth under His power, saying, "Come ye, and worship the work of My Hands, My likeness and My image." And there was there [a hateful being], who was of the earlier creation, that is to say, Satanael, who is called the Devil, and he was an Archangel. Furthermore, when the command had issued from the mouth of God, Michael, the Archangel... and his host came and worshipped.... And afterwards, Gabriel the Archangel and his host came, and they bowed low in homage even as did Michael, and so likewise did all the hosts of angels, each rank in its proper order. Finally, the Master said unto that Mastema, the interpretation of which is "hater," Come thou also, and

worship the work of My hands...." And Satanael answered boldly and said, "... Far be it from Thee to make me worship this thing (of earth)! ..."

And the compassionate God said unto him, "Satanael, hearken unto me! ..." And the Mastema said, ". . . Far be it from us to worship that which is inferior to us! Moreover, we are beings of spirit, but this creature is of the earth, ..."

And straightway God was angry, and He commanded a mighty cherubim [sic], who smote him and reduced him to helplessness, . . . and he cast him and all those who were with him forth from heaven. And the Good God cried out unto Michael "... I know that the Mastema will fight against My created being, wishing to cast him away from Me even as I cast Mastema forth from My kingdom. But behold, I entrust My created beings unto thee. ..."16

It is very clear from this Coptic account that, with the exclusion of the references to Michael and Gabriel, it runs quite parallel to the Qur'ānic rendition. Content analysis of both the Coptic and the Qur'ānic texts reveals that the following eight points stand out clearly in common:

- (1). God created Adam and breathed in him the breath of life.
- (2). God exalted Adam with glory.
- (3). God ordered all angels to worship him.
- (4). All angels obeyed except Satan and his hosts.
- (5). God entered into a conversation or an argument with Satan about the latter's refusal to obey.
- (6). Satan's excuse was his being created of spirit or fire while Adam was created from earth.
- (7). Satan and his hosts were cast out of heaven.
- (8). Satan threatened to lurk for and tempt Adam in revenge.

The account in *The Cave of Treasures* is quoted here in its entirety as translated by Wallis Budge:

And when the prince of the lower order of angels saw what great majesty had been given unto Adam, he was jealous of him from that day, and he did not wish to worship him. And he said unto his hosts, "Ye shall not worship him, and ye shall not praise him with the angels. It is meet that ye should worship me, because I am fire and spirit; and not that I should worship a thing of dust, which has been fashioned of fine dust." And the Rebel meditating these things would not render obedience to God, and of his own free will he asserted his independence and separated himself from God. But he was swept away out of heaven and fell.¹⁷

It is obvious that in contrast to the contents of the Coptic and Qur'ānic texts, the account in *The Cave of Treasures* fails to record any direct conversation or argument between God and Satan, and instead records a conversation between Satan and his own angels in which Satan asked his angels to worship him. Moreover, it also fails to portray the revengeful attitude of Satan against Adam after Satan had been cast out.

The account of Satan's refusal to worship Adam in *Vita Adae et Evae* is also quoted here in its entirety as translated by R. H. Charles:

And Michael went out and called the angels saying:

"Worship the image of God as the Lord God hath commanded."

And Michael himself worshipped first; then he called me and said: "Worship the image of God the Lord." And I answered, "I have no [need] to worship Adam." And since Michael kept urging me to worship, I said to him, "Why dost thou urge me? I will not worship an inferior and younger being [than I]. I am his senior in the Creation, before he was made was I already made. It is his duty to worship me."

When the angels, who were under me, heard this, they refused to worship him. And Michael saith, "Worship the image of God, but if thou wilt not worship him, the Lord God will be wrath with thee." And I said, "If He be wrath with me, I will set my seat above the stars of heaven, and will be like the Highest."¹⁸

Although this account is more elaborate than the one in *The Cave of Treasures*, it does not record any conversation between God and Satan. On the contrary, it contains a dialogue between Satan and Adam, in which Satan was telling Adam the background of why he (Satan) had been tempting Eve. During this conversation, Satan quotes a dialogue between himself and Michael-not God-in which Michael was the one who asked Satan to worship Adam.

From the above comparisons, it becomes quite clear that the Qur'ānic text concerning the fall of Satan bears more resemblance to the Coptic account than either *The Cave of Treasures* or *Vita Adae et Evae*, giving rise to the assertion that the Coptic account constitutes a very likely source for the Qur'ānic text. This assertion is strengthened by the fact that the Copts of Egypt during the early Christian centuries were known for their massive production of Apocrypha and pseudepigrapha.¹⁹ This characteristic of the early Copts should not be surprising to us in the light of the evidence of gnostic influence on the early Coptic Christian thought. The gnostics were literate people and well acquainted with ancient religions and mythology. As Christianity was spreading in Egypt, a group of these gnostic Christians apparently made an effort to tie old Egyptian myths to Christian beliefs. In this respect C. J. Bleeker mentions the following:

It can be proved that a number of gnostic conceptions go back to ancient Egyptian religious thoughts. What is even more important, there is some evidence that to a certain extent there existed a typological affinity between the ancient religion of the valley of the Nile on the one hand and gnosticians at the other side.²⁰

A very plausible story of ancient Egypt that fitted very well into the biblical record of creation was the legend of the rebellion of Seth against Horus. Seth, a synonym of hatred and disobedience in Egyptian mythology, caused all sorts of troubles to befall man in revenge for his banishment by Horus and the rest of the Egyptian Ennead.²¹ In the minds of the early Egyptian Christians, Satan, as a parallel to Seth, became the rebel and the enemy of man, who began to lurk in ambush in order to drag him (man) into disobedience. As a matter of fact, Wallis Budge himself, commenting on the story of the fall of Satan in *The Cave of Treasures*, recognized its possible Coptic origin and remarked that the early Egyptian Christians were known for compiling various apocryphal stories, drawn mainly from ancient Egyptian legend. He even mentioned the story of the struggle of Seth against Horus as a possible source for the account of the fall of Satan in *The Cave of Treasures*.²²

Since the early Coptic Church (at least until the fifth century) was among the leading churches in early Christendom, it is not surprising to find that many of its apocryphal stories spread throughout the Christian Middle East. By way of Abyssinia, Coptic ideas could have spread into Arabia, at least during the Abyssinian occupation of Yemen between 525 and 571 C.E., if not before, due to trade and religious persecution. In pre-Islamic times, Arabia was a haven of refuge

to all dissatisfied and persecuted Christians, especially the Copts after the Council of Chalcedon had ruled against them in 451 C.E. Muhammad must have come in contact with many of these Copts and listened to their stories. Muhammad's friendship to Christians of Coptic faith is reflected in many aspects of his life. He is known to have had cordial relations with the Negus of Abyssinia, as indicated by the fact that he advised his followers at a time of persecution to flee there. He married a Coptic wife named Mariya, and he is reported to have advised his followers to be especially kind to the Copts of Egypt, considering them his in-laws.²³ Such friendly gestures to the Copts add more credence to the possibility that Coptic was the most likely source of the Qur'ānic account of the fall of Satan.²⁴

NOTES

1. Other accounts occur in *Sūras* XV.26, XVII.61, XVIII.51, and XX.116.
 2. Quoted from M. M. Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*.
 3. Alfred Guillaume, "The Influence of Judaism on Islam," in *The Legacy of Israel*, ed. E. R. Bevan and Charles Singer (Oxford, 1927), p. 139.
 4. Rabbi Leo Jung, *Fallen Angels in Jewish, Christian, and Mohammedan Literature* (Philadelphia, 1926), p. 53.
 5. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
 6. *Ibid.*, pp. 53-56.
 7. *Ibid.*, pp. 57-59.
 8. Carl Bezold, *Die Schatzhöhle I* (Leipzig, 1883).
 9. E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Cave of Treasures* (London, 1927).
 10. Bezold, *Die Schatzhöhle I*, p. 4, and Budge, *The Book of the Cave of Treasures*, pp. 6, 21, 22. Syriac and Arabic Texts.
 11. R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1963), vol. 2, pp. 123, 126.
 12. *Ibid.*, pp. 125, 126.
 13. *Ibid.*, pp. 128, 131. See also Jung, *Fallen Angels in Jewish, Christian, and Mohammedan Literature*, p. 53.
 14. E. A. Wallis Budge, *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts* (Oxford, 1915), pp. liii, lvi.
 15. E. L. Butcher, *The Story of the Church of Egypt* (London, 1897), pp. xiii, 330.
 16. Budge, *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts*, pp. 904-906.
 17. Budge, *The Book of the Cave of Treasures*, p. 55.
 18. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, p. 137.
 19. Compare W. H. P. Hatch, "Three Leaves from a MS. of the Acta Apostolorum," in *Coptic Studies in Honor of Walter Ewig* (Boston, 1950), p. 310.
 20. C. J. Bleeker, "The Egyptian Background of Gnosticism," in *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo* ed. Ugo Bianchi (Leiden, 1967), p. 231. The entire article as well as other related articles in the same work contain useful remarks and footnotes about the subject.
 21. The struggle between Seth and Horus is very well discussed in J. H. Breasted, *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt* (New York, 1912), pp. 31-65. See also H. Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusions* (Leiden, 1967).
 22. Budge, *The Book of the Cave of Treasures*, pp. 56-8. Surprisingly enough, Budge failed to associate the vividly related account about Satan in the *Encomium* with that in *The Cave of Treasures*. Apparently, the years that had lapsed between 1915 and 1927 caused him to neglect to connect the two accounts.
 23. See Wilson B. Bishai, *Islamic History of the Middle East* (Boston, 1968), p. 147.
 24. This conclusion adds more support to Ilse Lichtenstadter's contention that certain Qur'ānic interpretations and symbols can be better understood in the light of ancient Egyptian history. Needless to say, ancient Egyptian religious symbols could never have reached pre-Islamic Arabia without the Coptic intermediate stage.
- See use Lichtenstadter, "Origin and Interpretation of some Koranic Symbols," in *Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of Hamilton A. R. Gibb*, ed. George Makdisi (Leiden, 1965), pp. 426-36.