

## CHAPTER 19

# Biblical Background

Gabriel Said Reynolds

Scholars of the Qurʾān have long been divided over its relationship to the Bible and biblical literature more generally. This division emerges in part from the nature of the biblical material in the Qurʾān. On the one hand the Qurʾān is a text marked substantially by biblical characters and narratives. On the other hand, the Qurʾān rarely cites biblical passages and frequently departs from the details of biblical narratives. Traditionally most academic scholars have sought to explain these departures as products of the particular context in which Muḥammad would have encountered biblical material, whether in written or oral form. These scholars often argue that Muḥammad was exposed to certain sorts of biblical material (canonical or otherwise) because of the particular sectarian background of the Jews or Christians whom he met. Other academic scholars, however, have sought to explain the nature of the biblical references in the text of the Islamic scripture as products of the Qurʾān's intentional reshaping of biblical material for the sake of its own religious message.

### The Biblical Material in the Qurʾān

The presentation of biblical characters in the Qurʾān is shaped by the Qurʾānic idea that God's principal method of communication with the world is through – in addition to angels – prophets (who might be named with the Arabic term *nabīy* or *rasūl*, or both). Most biblical figures who appear in the Qurʾān, whether or not they are named prophets in the Bible, do so as prophets. Therefore they generally share certain characteristics: they are chosen by God (and usually sent to their own people), they provoke divisions

*The Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Qurʾān*, Second Edition.

Edited by Andrew Rippin and Jawid Mojaddedi.

© 2017 John Wiley & Sons Ltd. Published 2017 by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

among their people between believers and unbelievers, they give warnings of divine punishment (and sometimes promises of divine blessing), and they insist on the worship of God alone. They are also concerned to prove their own claim to prophethood in the midst of skeptical opponents. The Qurʾān thus reduces the diversity of biblical narratives so that most of its protagonists have a similar profile.

Since it is impossible in a chapter of modest length to discuss all of the biblical material in the Qurʾān, I will discuss only the most prominent biblical characters and themes therein. Thereafter I address certain questions concerning the nature of the biblical material in the Qurʾān which have been at the center of academic debates.

## Adam and Eve

One biblical protagonist who never receives the title of prophet in the Qurʾān is Adam (although he is given this title by later Islamic tradition). In the Qurʾān God creates Adam as a *khalīfa*, or “vicegerent” on earth (Q 2:30) and teaches him the names of things (Q 2:31–3). In seven different *sūras* the Qurʾān refers to a story – prominent in Christian texts such as the Syriac *Cave of Treasures* – which has God command the angels to bow down before Adam (Q 2:34; 7:11; 15:28–31; 17:61; 18:50; 20:116; 38:71–4). All of the angels do so with the exception of the devil (Iblīs), who explains (as in the *Cave of Treasures*) that it would be inappropriate for him, who was created by fire, to bow down to Adam, who was created from dirt. For this offense the devil is expelled from heaven and declared to be *rajīm* (an “outcast” and not “stoned” as sometimes understood).

In the Garden the devil – now referred to as Satan (*al-Shayṭān*) – again meets Adam (now accompanied by his “wife”). Adam, prompted by Satan, eats from the forbidden tree (Q 2:35; 7:19–22; 20:120). This tree is not named “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” as in Genesis 2:17, but rather the “tree of eternity (*khuld*)” (Q 20:120). Both Adam and his “wife” (left unnamed by the Qurʾān) are expelled from the Garden, along with Satan (2:36, 7:24, 20:123).

Of these episodes only the story of Adam’s sin in (and expulsion from) the Garden is shared by Genesis. In its material on Adam the Qurʾān follows largely later writings. The presence of Satan in the Garden reflects the Christian interpretation of the serpent in the Genesis story as a manifestation of the devil (cf. Revelation 12:9). The angelic opposition to the creation of Adam in Q 2:30 is found in the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 38b).

## Cain and Abel

The Qurʾān refers to Cain and Abel not by name but as “Adam’s two sons” (Q 5:27–31). The Qurʾān’s references to them preserves the basic outline of the narrative of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 but shows the influence of Christian sources (in particular the Syriac *Life of Abel*) which make Abel an anticipation of Christ (note especially Q 5:28, in which Abel offers himself as a victim). Following the Mishna (Sanhedrin 4:5), the

Qur'ān connects the story of Cain's murder of Abel with a divine admonition given to the Israelites, that whoever murders another is guilty of the murder of all mankind, and whoever saves the life of another has the merit of saving all mankind (Q 5:32).

## Noah

The Qur'ān shows enormous interest in the story of Noah as an example of divine punishment meted out on unbelievers (this marks a change from the Bible, where the people are condemned for their wickedness, not faithlessness). This story, repeated at length in seven places (Q 7:59–64; 10:71–4; 11:25–49; 23:23–30; 26:105–22; 54:9–17; 71:1–28) and referred to in numerous other passages, illustrates the way in which the Qur'ān takes advantage of biblical material which can be shaped easily to match the preaching of its own prophet, namely that God will destroy – or punish with hellfire – those who do not listen to his word. In three *sūras* (7, 11, and 26) the account of Noah and the flood is the first of a series of punishment stories. On one occasion (Q 7:69) the prophet Hūd, who follows Noah, uses the story of Noah to warn his own people of divine punishment. One might think of the prophet Muḥammad doing the same: the story of the flood is recounted in order that his audience might take the threat that God will punish them seriously.

Of note in regard to Noah is the account of his unnamed son who is drowned in the flood, mentioned only in *sūra* 11 (vv. 42–7). This account, which has no precedent in the account of Genesis, seems to reflect a process of speculation on Ezekiel 14:13–20 (cf. Ezekiel 18:4), a text which insists that if Noah had an unrighteous son he would not be saved from punishment, even death, by the merits of his father. The Qur'ān is interested in this account in order to show that devotion to God is more important than devotion to anyone, even a family member.

## Abraham and Lot

The theme of faith over family is central also to the Qur'ānic material on Abraham. As the Qur'ān depicts a division between Noah and his son (and has God [11:46] command Noah not to consider his son part of his family), it also depicts a division between Abraham and his father (Q 6:74–83; 19:41–8; 21:51–67; 26:69–104, 116; 29:16–17, 24–5; 37:83–96; 43:26–7; 60:4). This confrontation, the origins of which are not in the canonical Bible but rather in Midrash and the pseudepigraphic *Apocalypse of Abraham* (first or second century CE), reflects a tradition by which Abraham, who lived in the midst of a pagan people, discovered the one true God in his childhood by observing the heavenly bodies (Q 6:74–83). This discovery leads him to confront his idolatrous father Terah – named Āzar by the Qur'ān (Q 6:74) – and to break his father's idols (Q 21:51–70; 37:88–96). Eventually Abraham's people throw him into a furnace for his insolence, but God preserves him (Q 21:68–70; 29:24–5; 37:97–8; as God preserves Shadrach, Meshack, and Abed-Nego in Daniel 3).

The Qurʾān refers to Abraham’s migration to a promised land (Genesis 12:1–9; Q 21:71; 29:26) and to his guests (Genesis 18:1–15; Q 11:69–73; 15:51–6; 51:24–34) – presented as angels in the Qurʾān (unlike the men of the Genesis account they do not eat the food presented to them) – who come to give him and his wife the good news of a son (Isaac), and who continue on to destroy Lot’s people (Genesis 19:1–16; 11:77–81; 15:61–6). The Qurʾān also alludes to Abraham’s dispute with God over the fate of Sodom (Genesis 18:23–33; Q 11:74–6; 29:32). While the Qurʾān discusses God’s commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son (Genesis 22:1–18; Q 37:100–10; cf. 2:124), it does not specify whether Isaac or Ishmael is the intended sacrifice (eventually Islamic tradition would decide upon Ishmael). The Qurʾān does specify that Abraham and Ishmael together built the foundations of the “house” (2:124–41; 14:25–41), an episode which may be related to Abraham’s building an altar on Mt. Moriah (understand by Jewish and Christian tradition to be the site of Jerusalem) in Genesis 22:9, but which is taken by Islamic tradition as a reference to the building of the Kaʿba.

The Qurʾān’s references to Lot follow much more closely the biblical story, principally that of Genesis 19. The Qurʾān has Lot protect the angels who visit him from his sexually deviant people; it also has Lot reprimand his people explicitly for this deviancy (Q 7:80–1; 11:78–80; 15:66–72; 21:74; 26:165–6; 27:54–5; 29:28–30; 54:37; 69:9), something which reflects the New Testament (2 Peter 2:8–9) more than the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.

## Joseph

The Qurʾān dedicates a *sūra* (12) almost entirely to an account of the story of Joseph, an account which is generally identified as the longest continual narrative in the Qurʾān (although even then it is marked more by references than detailed descriptions). As Joseph Witztum has shown, the Qurʾānic Joseph account departs from that of Genesis in ways that consistently reflect Syriac Christian homilies. The Qurʾān refers to only one prophetic dream of Joseph (there are two in Genesis). This dream (cf. Genesis 37:9–10) suggests that Joseph’s parents will bow down to Joseph, and they do so towards the end of the account (Q 12:99–101); in Genesis it is the brothers who do so (indeed his mother Rachel is already dead). Reflecting a development found already in the Syriac *Homilies on Joseph* of Pseudo-Narsai, the Qurʾān has Joseph’s father Jacob warn Joseph not to tell his brothers about this dream. Again in line with Syriac tradition, it has the brothers claim (12:13) that a wolf (not a “wild animal” as in Genesis) devoured Joseph. The Qurʾān also has Jacob recognize that the brothers’ claim is a lie, something also reported in Pseudo-Narsai.

To the Joseph story the Qurʾān adds an account (12:30–5), found in various post-Qurʾānic Midrashic sources (which may be based on pre-Qurʾānic traditions), by which the wife of Potiphar (or *al-ʿAzīz*, as he is called in the Qurʾān) gathers the women of Egypt to witness the beauty of Joseph. It also (12:50–3) has her confess her wrongdoing with Joseph, a detail found in Ephrem’s (d. 373) *Commentary on Genesis*. Various details of the interaction between the brothers and Joseph after his ascent to power are also

found in Syriac Christian tradition, including the declaration of the brothers (12:75) that the one in whose bag the goblet is found shall be enslaved. The Qur'ānic report that Jacob was blind, and recovered his sight through the touch of Joseph's garment (Q 12:93–6), reflects an exegetical development on Genesis 45:27, which speaks of Jacob's spirit "reviving" upon seeing the wagons which Joseph had sent from Egypt. The consistent departures from Genesis in the Joseph story illustrate that the Qur'ān is more in conversation with biblical tradition – and Syriac Christian tradition in particular – than it is with the Bible.

## Moses and Aaron

The name Moses appears more than any other in the Qur'ān (136 times). The Qur'ān's remarkable interest in the figure of Moses presumably reflects a sectarian milieu in which the figure of Moses was central (one might note to this effect Q 6:91, which reports that the prophet's opponents "displayed parchments of Moses' book").

The material on Moses in the Qur'ān might be divided generally between that which has him act as a messenger, or warner, to Pharaoh and thus is connected to the other "punishment stories" of the Qur'ān, and that which is concerned with the revelation of a covenant between God and the Israelites for which Moses acted as a mediator. As for Moses' mission to Pharaoh, the Qur'ān introduces the confrontation between the two figures by reflecting in several places (Q 20:37–40; 26:18–29; 28:7–28) on the childhood of Moses. It seems to have Pharaoh himself (described in 20:39 as an "enemy" of God), through the urging of his wife (Q 28:9), adopt Moses (unlike Exodus 2, which has Pharaoh's daughter do so). The Qur'ān depicts the adoption as part of God's foreordained plan to make Moses "an enemy and a cause of grief" (28:8) to Pharaoh. It also makes the subsequent confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh (Q 26:10–17) into another example of a prophet choosing faith over family (to make this happen the Qur'ān makes the Pharaoh of Moses' childhood the same Pharaoh of his adulthood, *pace* Exodus 4:19).

The Qur'ān reports Moses' killing of an Egyptian (20:40; 26:19–20; 28:15, 33), but it has Moses (28:15) blame this on Satan. The Qur'ān also reports Moses' sojourn in Midian (20:40; 28:22–35) where he encounters God in a burning bush (20:9–16; 27:7–12; 28:29–35) and is assigned Aaron as a helper (20:25–32; 25:35; 26:12–14; 28:34). However, whereas the account in Exodus is centered on Moses' mission to save the Israelites from their suffering in Egypt, the Qur'ān seems to have Moses sent to Egypt principally to reprimand Pharaoh and the Egyptians for their insolence or disobedience (Q 20:24; 27:12).

Accordingly the Qur'ān makes the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh less about the liberation of the Israelites (although this is mentioned, Q 20:40; 26:64; 28:21, 25; 37:115) and more about the punishment of Pharaoh, the enemy of God who claims to be divine (26:29; 28:38; 79:22–4). Indeed the Qur'ān seems to make Pharaoh the unbeliever *par excellence*, by having him witness divine signs (nine of them, according to Q 17:101; 27:12) – including the miracle of Moses' staff and the

transformation of his hand, and various plagues (Q 7:130–4) – and attribute them to magic, even though his own sorcerers come to recognize the divine origin of these signs (Q 7:120–6; 20:70–3; 26:46–51). The Qurʾān alludes in several places to the ultimate destruction of all of Pharaoh’s people (2:50; 25:35–8; 54:41–2), or perhaps only his soldiers (Q 10:90; 20:78; 28:40). In one place it reports that Pharaoh came to believe in God; his faith *in extremis* was of no use to him, but his body was saved as a sign (10:90–2).

The Qurʾān alludes to several biblical episodes of the wandering of the Israelites in the desert. It refers to God’s sending manna and quails to the Israelites in the wilderness (Q 2:57; 7:160; 20:80–1; Exodus 16; Numbers 11) and to Moses’ striking of a rock to make water spring forth (Q 2:60; 7:160; Exodus 17:5–6). The revelation to Moses on Mt. Sinai (referred to by name, in two different forms, in Q 23:20 and 95:2, and elsewhere simply as “the mountain” – *al-ṭūr*) is of great importance to the Qurʾān. On numerous occasions the Qurʾān alludes to God’s meeting with Moses there (Q 2:253; 4:164; 7:143–4; 19:52; 20:11–24, 83–4; 26:10–16; 27:8–11; 28:30–5, 46; 79:16–19), and to a general covenant there between God and Israel (Q 2:40, 47–8, 63, 80, 83–4, 93, 100, 122–3, *passim*). The Qurʾān has God condemn the Israelites for worshiping the Golden Calf in Moses’ absence (Q 2:51–4, 92–3; 4:153; 7:142, 148–52; 20:83–98; Exodus 32; Deuteronomy 9:16; Nehemiah 9:18); in one place (20:95–7) it blames a character named al-Sāmīrī for this sin and refers to the scattering of the ashes of the calf in water, which the Israelites drink (Exodus 32:20). The Israelites are repeatedly blamed in the Qurʾān for their breaking of this covenant (Q 2:27, 83, 93, 100; 7:102; 8:56; 13:2, 25; 16:91–5), one of several sins which has led God to curse them (Q 2:88; 4:46; 5:13, 60, 64; 17:60).

## Saul, David, and Solomon

The Qurʾān refers to Saul only in one place (2:246–50) and there as Ṭālūt, a name related to the Arabic root (*ṭ-w-l*) suggesting height (cf. 1 Samuel 9:2). In this passage the Qurʾān refers to God’s presence (*sakīna*, cf. Hebrew *shekinah*) residing in the ark (2:248) and to an episode from the story of Gideon and his army (Judges 7:1–7), but with Saul in the place of Gideon (2:249). The Qurʾān connects that episode with the conflict in 1 Samuel 17 between the Israelites and the Philistines, as it speaks there of Saul’s forces entering into battle against Goliath and refers to David’s killing of him (Q 2:251).

Elsewhere the Qurʾān, following Jewish and Christian tradition, associates David with the Psalms (*zabūr*; 4:163; 17:55) – presenting the Psalms, like the “Torah (*tawrāt*)” and “Gospel (*injīl*),” as a book given by God to a prophet. The traditional Jewish and Christian association of David with the Psalms also seems to be reflected in those passages which speak of David’s praising of God (21:79; 34:4, 10; 38:18). The Qurʾān also, along with Psalm 148 (see vv. 7–10), speaks of the mountains’ and the birds’ praising God with David (21:79; 34:10; 38:18–19). Otherwise the Qurʾān is interested in David asking. It refers to him (38:26) as *khalīfa* (“successor” or “vicegerent,” whence “caliph”).

David is the only figure in the Qur'ān other than Adam (Q 2:30) to receive this title. Also like Adam he is not named a prophet (*nabīy*) or a messenger (*rasūl*). It could be that the Qur'ān conceives of both Adam and David in a distinct way, as rulers of their people, or of creation, and not as messengers to them.

The Qur'ān also alludes to a sin of David, in a passage (Q 38:21–6) which seems to make the parable told by the prophet Nathan (2 Samuel 12) of two men, one with many sheep and one with only a single sheep (a parable which alludes to David's stealing of Bathsheba from Uriah), into a dispute between men who really had a dispute over sheep. At the same time the Qur'ān speaks of David's repentance (38:24) and God's forgiveness (38:25) – a passage which would have a great effect on Islamic spirituality – suggesting that its author knew of David's adultery with Bathsheba and his plotting against the life of Uriah.

On occasion the Qur'ān connects the life of David with that of his son Solomon. Together David and Solomon are said to have exhibited judgment (21:78) in a case involving sheep (again) in a field (perhaps related to Genesis 13:7–12) and to have received knowledge from God (27:15). Like David, Solomon is said to have repented (Q 38:34), although the Qur'ān does not name his sin. On the other hand Solomon is distinguished by possession of certain supernatural powers. He has power over the winds (21:81–2; 34:12–13; 38:36–9) and over the *jinn* (27:16–17; 34:12–13; 38:37). The Qur'ān describes Solomon's encounter with a troop of ants in an episode related to a report in the Babylonian Talmud (*Hullin* 57b) which explains Proverbs 6:6–8. It reports both the speech of the ants, who are afraid of being crushed by Solomon's armies, and Solomon's ability to understand them (Q 27:18–19).

In its description of Solomon's encounter with the Queen of Sheba (27:20–44; 34:15–19) the Qur'ān is in close conversation with a long passage in the *Targum Sheni* of Esther (a Jewish text the earliest form of which may date to the fourth century CE). Like the *Targum Sheni* the Qur'ān speaks of Solomon's power over animals and various spiritual beings. In 27:20 ff. the Qur'ān, following the *Targum Sheni*, refers to one bird, the hoopoe (*hudhud*), who comes to Solomon to give him a report of the Queen of Sheba's reign. Similarly it follows the *Targum Sheni* in its description of the encounter between the Queen of Sheba and Solomon, ending in the conversion of the queen (Q 27:44).

## Jonah

Of all of the Major and Minor prophets of the Bible the Qur'ān shows substantial interest only in the figure of Jonah. It alludes to the story of the repentance and salvation of Nineveh, and suggests that of all peoples threatened with divine punishment the people of this city alone turned to God and were saved: "Why has there not been any town except the people of Jonah that might believe, so that its belief might benefit it?" (10:98). In its allusions to Jonah (6:86; 10:98–9; 21:87–8; 37:139–48; 68:48–50) the Qur'ān seems to follow the biblical narrative closely, although the way it refers to

Jonah (“the man of the fish”) leaving somewhere in anger (21:87; an allusion to his leaving for Jaffa in Jonah 1:3) led most Muslim interpreters to imagine that he first preached in Nineveh and, after leaving the city in frustration because the people did not hear his message (or that God did not destroy them), was subsequently swallowed by the great fish (and then returned a second time to preach to Nineveh, this time successfully).

## John, Zechariah, and Mary

In *sūra* 3 the Qurʾān connects closely the story of John (John the Baptist of the New Testament) and the story of Mary. The Qurʾān first (3:35–6) describes (following the *Protoevangelium of James*, a second-century CE Greek text centered on the events before the birth of Christ) how the mother of Mary – Anne of Christian tradition and the “wife of ʿImrān” in the Qurʾān – dedicates her child to God. While the Qurʾān does not explain this, she does so because, as with the Old Testament figure of Hannah/Anne, she had previously been barren. The Qurʾān then describes how the child, Mary, is brought to the care of Zechariah in the temple (Ar. *miḥrāb*). As Mary is a child miraculously given to Anne, John is a child miraculously given to Zechariah. When Zechariah prays to God for a child (Q 3:38) he is promised John (Q 3:39) even though he is old and his wife is barren (Q 3:40). The Qurʾān also alludes to the report in Luke (1:20–2) that Zechariah was not able to speak (the Qurʾān, 19:10, specifies that he remained mute for three days).

In *sūra* 19, on the other hand, the Qurʾān connects the story of John more closely with Jesus. Here the Qurʾān describes the divine annunciation of John to Zechariah (19:7–10) in a manner close to its description of the angelic annunciation of Jesus to Mary (19:17–21). In the same way that it has God call down peace upon John (Q 19:15), it has Jesus – speaking miraculously as an infant – call down peace upon himself (Q 19:33). Otherwise the Qurʾān describes John (19:12–15) in terms similar to those of Jesus (19:30–2), alluding even to John’s spiritual authority, like Jesus, as a child (19:12), in a way which smacks of early Christian traditions on the childhoods of John and Jesus. However, the only allusion in the Qurʾān to John’s predictions of the coming of Jesus is in *sūra* 3 (3:39).

As for the Qurʾānic portrait of Mary, it seems to be shaped by a desire of the Qurʾān’s author to protect her reputation in the face of Jewish calumny (noted in Q 4:156). The manner in which Mary’s mother asks for God’s protection of Mary and Jesus from Satan (3:36) may even allude to the sinlessness of Mary and Jesus (a widespread report in later Islamic literature, doubtlessly inspired by this verse, describes how Satan has touched all children at their birth except for Mary and Jesus). The Qurʾān’s interest in the tradition found in the *Protoevangelium of James* regarding Mary’s upbringing in the temple, where even the food she receives comes directly from heaven (3:37; *Protoevangelium* 8.1), illustrates its desire to emphasize Mary’s purity (on this note 3:42: “Allāh has chosen you and purified you, and He has chosen you above the world’s women”).

## Jesus and the Holy Spirit

Qur'ān 23:50 refers to God's giving Mary and Jesus refuge on a height with "flowing water," perhaps a reference to their protection during the holy family's flight to Egypt (cf. the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* 20:1–2), if not a reference to the nativity of Jesus (cf. Q 19:22–5). This is not the only passage in which the Qur'ān seems to give a special status to Mary and Jesus. As mentioned above, the Qur'ān has Mary's mother commend Mary and her offspring (that is, from the Qur'ān's perspective, only Jesus) to the protection of God against Satan (Q 3:36). In a passage which alludes to the annunciation the Qur'ān reports that God has made Mary, and her son, signs for the world (21:91; cf. 23:50). In that verse the Qur'ān relates that Jesus was conceived when God breathed his Spirit into Mary. The importance of this seems to be confirmed by 4:171, where the Qur'ān calls Jesus both "God's word cast into Mary" (cf. Q 3:39, 45) and a "spirit from [God]." In addition Jesus is the only prophet associated with the Holy Spirit (or "spirit of holiness") in the Qur'ān. On three occasions (2:87, 253; 5:110) the Qur'ān reports that God "strengthened Jesus" with the Holy Spirit.

Scholars such as Wilhelm Rudolph have seen a particular reflection of Christian doctrine in the way the Qur'ān suggests that the Spirit comes down from God's "command" (*amr*, a word related to Aramaic, *mēmṛā*, used for the Word of God; see Q 17:85; cf. 16:2; 40:15; 42:52; 97:4). The Qur'ān also sees a role for the Spirit (16:102) in the transmission of revelation to Muḥammad.

Jesus (like John) is a prophet from his youth, apparently from the moment of his birth. The Qur'ān in fact insists that he could speak "in the cradle" (3:45; 19:29 ff.). Indeed some interpreters attribute the address beginning in 19:24 to Jesus when he was still in the womb. One might conclude that Jesus is more than a divine messenger; he does not simply receive the word of God, he is inspired in his very being, having been created by the spirit of God. Thus he is rightly called the word and spirit of God. At the same time, the Qur'ān, rejecting the idea of God as father, also denies the title "son of God" to Jesus (Q 9:30). Indeed the Qur'ān sharply critiques Christian doctrine on Christ, accusing the Christians of unbelief for considering God to be Jesus (Q 5:72; a locution which is probably an intentional caricature of Christian doctrine) and to be the "third of three" (Q 5:73). It also has Jesus distance himself from those who claim that both Jesus and Mary are "gods" (Q 5:116; presumably another caricature of Christian doctrine and not, as some Orientalists have argued, a reflection of a Mary-worshipping cult in Arabia).

The Qur'ān attributes a number of miracles to Jesus. Jesus brings a bird which he forms from clay to life (a miracle also associated with the childhood of Jesus in the second-century CE *Childhood of the Savior* or *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*), heals the blind and leper, raises the dead (all mentioned in Q 3:49 and Q 5:110), and knows things which are hidden (3:49). The Israelites, according to the Qur'ān, attributed Jesus' ability to work these miracles to magic (Q 5:110; 61:6), an accusation known from the Talmud (Sanhedrin 107b; Sotah 47a).

The Qur'ān also relates an account by which Jesus calls down a table (*mā'ida*) from heaven (5:112–15) upon a challenge from the disciples. This account is not a version of the "multiplication of fish and loaves" account of the Gospels, or the Last Supper

narrative (or the “sheet from heaven” in Acts 10:9–16), but rather a tradition which reflects Psalm 78 and the Bread of Life pericope in John 6, in which the crowds challenge Jesus to produce a sign like the manna Moses once brought down from heaven (John 6:30–1). The challenge of the disciples in Q 5:112 – “Can your Lord send down to us a table (*mā’ida*) from the sky?” – echoes Psalm 78:19 – “Can God spread a table (in Ethiopic: *mā’edd*) in the desert?”

The Qur’ān uses the term *ḥawāriyyūn* to refer to the disciples, a term (like *mā’ida*) which comes from Ethiopic (*ḥawāryā*: “walker” or “disciple”). Because this term seems to be related to the word “white” in Arabic, many Muslim interpreters imagine that all of Jesus’ disciples were bleachers of cloth, or that they all wore white (the translator Muhammad Asad wonders if they might have been part of the Essene community, which is sometimes thought to have worn white).

The standard position of Muslim interpreters, as well as academic scholars, is that the Qur’ān denies the crucifixion of Jesus in 4:157 where it declares: “[the Israelites] did not kill him nor did they crucify him, but so it was made to appear to them (*shubbiha la-hum*),” This verse, however, only denies that the Israelites killed Jesus. This denial seems to be consistent with other verses (esp. Q 3:55; 5:117) which suggest that it was God who took Jesus’ soul (“caused him to die,” Ar. *tawaffi*). Yet if the Qur’ān itself seems to accept the death of Jesus, it does not attribute any particular sacrificial or redemptive quality to that death. It does, on the other hand, seem to follow Christian doctrine on the return of Christ in the last days. It speaks of Christ as a sign of the Hour (Q 43:61) and makes him a witness against Jews and Christians on the Day of Resurrection (Q 4:159). These references (along with the doctrine that Jesus escaped death) led to the development of detailed narratives on the apocalyptic role of Jesus as an instrument of divine vengeance in later Islamic traditions.

## Other Biblical Material in the Qur’ān

While the Qur’ān rejects Christian doctrine on Jesus it embraces certain elements of anti-Jewish polemic which are prominent in early Christian (especially Syriac) literature. This is seen most prominently in the repeated accusation that the Jews are “killers of the prophets” (2:61, 87, 91; 3:21, 112, 181, 183; 4:155; 5:70). This accusation does not reflect the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, which includes only two brief reports of insignificant prophets being killed (2 Chronicles 24:20–1; Jeremiah 26:20–3; cf. 1 Kings 19:9–10). Instead it reflects the portrayal of the Israelites in the New Testament (esp. Matthew 23:34–48/Luke 13:34–5, but also Hebrews 11:32–40) and early Christian literature (esp. the *Lives of the Prophets* attributed to Epiphanius [d. 403], the Syriac version of which dates to the sixth century CE). The Qur’ān also speaks of God’s cursing of the Israelites, and insists in one place that David and Jesus also cursed them (5:78; cf. 2:88; 4:46, 5:13, 60, 64; 17:60).

Some of the Qur’ān’s eschatological imagery, especially its reference to a beast (27:82; Revelation 13:11) and a trumpet blast (6:73; 18:99; 20:102; 23:101; 27:87; 36:51; 39:68; 50:20; 69:13; 74:8; 78:18; Matthew 23:31; 1 Corinthians 15:52; 1

Thessalonians 4:16; Revelation 8:7–11:15), reflects New Testament imagery. The Qurʾān's portrayal of heaven and hell also seems to reflect a Christian perspective, especially that of the Syriac fathers. Like the *Hymns on Paradise* of Ephrem, the Qurʾān presents heaven as a garden, and indeed as the Garden of Eden (2:25; 9:72; 13:23; 16:31; 18:31; 19:61; 20:76; 35:33; 38:50; 40:8; 61:12; 98:8; cf. Revelation 2:7) which lies at the top of a cosmic mountain in the heavenly realm.

The Qurʾān follows the Bible in describing God's creation of the world in six days (7:54; 10:3; 11:7; 25:59; 41:9–12; 50:38; 57:4), although it seems to refute the tradition of God's resting on the seventh day (Genesis 2:2) by insisting that God does not tire from the act of creation (46:33, 50:38); other passages suggest that in place of resting on the seventh day God sat down on the divine throne (7:54; 10:3; 13:2; 20:5; 25:59; 32:4; 57:4). Reflecting the account of the creation of Adam in Genesis 2, the Qurʾān regularly speaks of the creation of man from clay, or dirt (3:59; 6:2; 7:12; 15:26–7; 23:12; 32:7; 37:11; 38:71, 76), although in some places it speaks of creation from water (21:30; 24:45; 25:54), something which may reflect ultimately 2 Peter 3:5.

The Qurʾān also speaks repeatedly of Allāh's ability to coin parables (2:26; 13:17; 14:24–5, 45; 16:74–6, *passim*), which may be seen as a response to the centrality of the parable in the preaching of Jesus in the Gospels.

## Biblical Material not Mentioned by the Qurʾān

In an attempt to understand the Qurʾān's relationship to the Bible it is also instructive to note the significant biblical elements which are left unmentioned by the Qurʾān. With the exception of the material on Saul, David, and Solomon (and brief mentions of Elijah - 6:85, 37:123–32 – and Elisha - 6:86, 38:48 – and a curious accusation that the Jews consider Ezra to be the son of God - 9:30), the Qurʾān shows little interest in the biblical narrative of the conquest of the promised land, the rise and fall of the Israelite monarchy, and the return of the Israelites from exile. The Qurʾān shows no significant interest in the major and minor prophets, excepting Jonah. It is also worth noting that the Qurʾān makes no explicit mention of the Mishna or Torah, although in one place (5:32) it introduces a quotation from the Mishna (Sanhedrin 4:5) with the words: "We decreed for the Children of Israel...."

The Qurʾānic references to the New Testament are exclusively to the Gospels, and even then are limited to only a few characters: Zechariah, John, Mary, and Jesus. The Qurʾān shows no particular knowledge (with the possible exception of eschatological imagery) of the Acts of the Apostles, the Pauline or catholic epistles, or the Book of Revelation (but on this book see Brady 1978). The way in which the Qurʾān passes over most of the New Testament is parallel to the way it passes over the Mishna and the Talmud: the Qurʾān is not interested in, or aware of, the idea of scripture among the Jews and Christians of its time. It is interested in certain biblical characters which it finds useful for the advancement of its own message centered on a God who sends prophets, often with signs, to remind humans to worship and obey Him alone. Thus one might say that the Qurʾān is not interested in the Bible *per se*, or in the biblical account of the history of salvation.

## Knowledge of the Canonical Bible

These observations leave one with the question of what the author(s) of the Qurʾān knew of the canonical Bible, and the larger question of how biblical traditions were received by the Qurʾān. It is true that the Qurʾān in places shows relatively detailed knowledge of certain biblical traditions, such as the story of Joseph, or the story of Moses and Pharaoh. Yet the Qurʾān's references to these stories seem to have come from the same sources as its references to non-biblical stories, such as the story of the Sleepers of Ephesus (*aṣḥāb al-kaḥf*; Q 18:9–26) or the story of Alexander the Great (*dhū l-qarnayn*; Q 18:83–98). In other words, the Qurʾān's author(s) seems to have been exposed to those Jewish and Christian Midrashic and homiletic traditions which circulated (orally, above all) in the late antique Near East, and not to the Bible itself. One sign that this was the case is the absence of any precise description of the contents of the Bible. The Qurʾān never refers to a biblical book by name, and it seems to have no knowledge of the principal division of the Jewish Bible (*tanakh*) or the Christian Bible (Old and New Testaments, four Gospels, etc.).

Another sign that the author of the Qurʾān did not have direct exposure to the Bible is the almost complete absence of direct biblical citations in the Qurʾān. The closest thing to a direct citation is likely 21:105: “Certainly We wrote in the Psalms, after the remembrance: ‘Indeed My righteous servants shall inherit the earth,’” a verse which may be a paraphrase of Psalm 37:9 (“For evil-doers will be annihilated, while those who hope in the Lord shall have the land for their own.” But cf. Psalm 37:11, 29); even this verse, however, does not definitively display knowledge of the Psalms. One might also point to the Qurʾān's use of the Gospel metaphor involving a camel and the eye of a needle (7:40; cf. Matthew 19:23–4; Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25). The Qurʾān, however, applies this metaphor not to a “rich man” as do the Gospels but instead to the man who fails to recognize God's signs. Indeed even these two cases seem to point to the oral transmission of biblical traditions, and not to the citation of a written text.

In other passages, moreover, the Qurʾān seems to attribute to the Bible things which are not in it. Qurʾān 7:157, for example, insists that the “unlettered” or the “gentile” prophet – apparently an allusion to Muḥammad himself – can be found in the “Torah” and the “Gospel” (later Islamic scholarship has accounted for the absence of references to Muḥammad in the Bible either by claiming that the Bible is a corrupt form of the original prophetic scriptures or by insisting that various passages, such as Deuteronomy 18:18 or John 14:16, allude to him). Similarly Qurʾān 9:111 reports that God's promise to give paradise as a reward to those who give their lives and their property to the cause of the holy war is recorded in the “Torah,” the “Gospel,” and the “Qurʾān.” However, paradise is not found (explicitly, at least) in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible and a command to fight holy wars is not found in the New Testament. Such verses give one the impression that the author of the Qurʾān assumed that earlier scriptures agreed with the things that he was saying, but that he did not in fact know those scriptures first-hand.

## Departures from the Bible

Another sign that the Qur'ānic author was familiar more with biblical traditions than with the Bible itself is the way in which material in the Qur'ān differs from or contradicts material in the Bible. One such case of a Qur'ānic "variant" has already been mentioned: the appearance (Q 2:249) of Saul in the place of Gideon in a version of the account of Judges 7:1–7 involving the thinning out of the Israelites' army. Another such case, also mentioned above, involves instead David. Whereas the Bible (2 Samuel 12) has the prophet Nathan tell a parable about men with sheep, the Qur'ān has David meet real men who have a real problem involving sheep (Q 38:21–6).

More famous still is the case of Mary the mother of Jesus, whom the Qur'ān identifies as the "daughter of 'Imrān" (Q 3:35) and the "sister of Aaron" (Q 19:28). These two identifications suggest that the Qur'ān has confused Mary the mother of Jesus with Miriam (the Hebrew form of Mary) daughter of Amram, the sister of Aaron (although scholars have argued that the Qur'ān means symbolically to associate Mary with the Aaronic priesthood). Similarly the Qur'ān makes Haman, who in the Bible is the vizier of Ahasuerus in Persia, the vizier of Pharaoh in Egypt (28:6, 8, 38; 29:39–40; 40:23–4, 36–7); this is perhaps, as Adam Silverstein (2008) has shown, because of the influence of the Assyrian legend of Ahiqar.

In other cases the Qur'ān seems to depart intentionally and thoughtfully from the details of the Bible. For example, the Qur'ān makes the Pharaoh whom Moses confronts in adulthood the same Pharaoh of his childhood (Q 26:18; cf. Exodus 4:19, which explains that the Pharaoh of Moses' childhood had died) in order to have a scene in which an adopted son confronts his father. Similarly the Qur'ān has Satan make the cupbearer forget to mention Joseph to Pharaoh (Q 12:42; in Genesis [40:23] he simply forgets) in order to emphasize the role of the devil as an enemy to man (2:168, 208; 5:91; 6:112, 142, *passim*), and in particular the danger that Satan might make man forget things (Q 6:68; 58:19; 18:63).

## The Qur'ān's Assessment of the Bible

The conclusion that the Qur'ān's author did not know the Bible itself has significant consequences for the way one reads those Qur'ānic passages which seem to challenge the reliability of the scriptures of the Jews and Christians (passages which have been taken by the greater part of Islamic tradition as indications that the Bible is corrupt). In numerous passages the Qur'ān accuses the Jews in particular of falsifying the meaning of words (*yuharrifūna al-kalima*; Q 2:75; 4:46; 5:13, 41). The Qur'ān also attacks those who have exchanged (*baddalū*) God's word for others (Q 2:59; 7:162), who write down passages which they pretend are from God (Q 2:79), who conceal passages from God or hide revelation behind their backs (2:42, 140, 146, 159, 174; 3:71, 187; 5:15), who twist their tongues, speaking evil (3:78; 4:46), or forget things revealed by God (5:13, 14; 7:53, 165). Collectively such passages suggest that Jews (especially) and Christians are not faithful guardians of the word of God.

It is not clear, however, if these passages amount to a clear rejection of the Bible's reliability (even if they have been taken as such by the majority of Islamic tradition). Indeed in other passages the Qur'ān suggests that the scripture of the Jews and Christians is still reliable. Qur'ān 5:47 relates: "Let the people of the Gospel judge by what God has sent down in it," suggesting that the author of the Qur'ān believed that the scripture of the Christians in his milieu was valid. Qur'ān 10:94, which reads as a command given by God to the Prophet, states: "So if you are in doubt about what We have sent down to you, ask those who read the Book [revealed] before you." Here the Qur'ān seems to affirm, in contrast to other passages (discussed above), that the Jews and Christians are reliable interpreters of God's word. Traditionally such contrasts are understood to be reflections of different stages of Muḥammad's interaction with the People of the Book (but Q 5 is by tradition a late Medinan *sūra*). It is also possible that these contrasting assessments of the Bible (and of the Jews and Christians who read it) reflect different sources or authors.

## Debates over the Nature of Biblical Material in the Qur'ān

From the beginnings of academic research on the Qur'ān scholars have offered various theories on the origin and nature of the Qur'ān's biblical material. The first major academic work on the Qur'ān, Abraham Geiger's *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen* (1833), is dedicated to the question of what narratives and religious ideas Muḥammad learned from Jews, and involves consideration of the manner in which such things could have been transmitted to what Geiger (and almost all Orientalists) assumed to have been Muḥammad's context. The approach of Geiger, and many scholars after him – including Hirschfeld, Horowitz, Nöldeke, Sidersky, Speyer, and Torrey (and, to a lesser extent, Bell) – tends to be shaped by the traditional Islamic reports that there were Jews (but not Christians) in Muḥammad's Medina and that these Jews were the most likely source of much of the biblical material in the Qur'ān. Of course, these scholars also recognized that there must have been some Christian influence on Muḥammad (whom they took as the author of the Qur'ān), since the Qur'ān refers to Christian characters (Jesus, Mary, John, Zechariah) and to Christian legends (the prostration of the angels to Adam, the Sleepers of Ephesus, Alexander legends). Accordingly, they were interested in the reports in the traditional Islamic biography of the Prophet which involve Christians (including those on Waraqa b. Nawfal, cousin of Muḥammad's first wife Khadija, or the Christian delegation from Najrān in South Arabia).

In a 1927 article Alphonse Mingana makes the case that the Qur'ān is the first book in Arabic and that it would accordingly have been influenced by the most important language of Christians in the late antique Near East: Syriac. He attempts to prove the point by offering Syriac etymologies of Qur'ānic vocabulary. Arthur Jeffery, in his *Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (1938), repeatedly observes that Qur'ānic vocabulary is closer to Christian languages (Syriac, Christian Palestinian Aramaic, Ethiopic) than to Jewish languages (Hebrew, Jewish Aramaic). For his part Tor Andrae shows that the Qur'ān – not only in its narrative sections but also in its description of the apocalypse,

and of heaven and hell – is in harmony with Syriac Christian traditions. Still Andrae remained attached to the traditional stories that place the origins of the Qurʾān in Muḥammad’s Mecca and Medina, and he felt obliged to imagine how Syriac -speaking Christians might have influenced Muḥammad there.

The middle of the twentieth century (with the notable exception of Paret’s Qurʾān commentary) would see a profound decline in work on the biblical background of the Qurʾān, and on Islamic origins generally. In some ways William Montgomery Watt’s biography of Muḥammad – which is shaped by a secular reading of the traditional Islamic sources – is symbolic of that period. This scholarly silence on the topic made the appearance of John Wansbrough’s *Qurʾānic Studies* (1977) all the more dramatic. Wansbrough, informed by German New Testament scholarship, rejected the almost universal notion that the Qurʾān should be read through the lens of the traditional biography; he proposed that much of that biography is exegetical, and that the Qurʾān might be a composite work, the product of multiple authors and different layers of redaction.

The freeing of the Qurʾān from the traditional biography of the Prophet brought about by his work has led many scholars in more recent times to think about the Qurʾān in the larger context of the late antique Near East. One such scholar was Christoph Luxenberg, whose much criticized work *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran* (2000) again brought attention to the Qurʾān’s relationship to Syriac. Whereas Luxenberg focuses his attention on finding Syriac etymologies for particular Qurʾānic terms or turns of phrase, other scholars – including Emran El-Badawi, Sidney Griffith, and Gabriel Said Reynolds – have looked more broadly at the special relationship of the Qurʾān with Syriac Christian literature. Unlike the early Orientalists, these scholars tend not to think of the Qurʾān as borrowing material from Syriac Christian sources (the Bible or otherwise). Instead they tend to attribute agency to the Qurʾān, arguing that the Qurʾān alludes to narratives or traditions still accessible to us in Syriac Christian texts (such as the *Cave of Treasures*, Jacob of Serugh’s *Homilies Against the Jews*, or Ephrem’s *Hymns on Paradise*) while it develops its original religious message. From the perspective of these scholars the Qurʾān actually provides a window into the way Jews and Christians were reading the Bible, and telling biblical stories, in the late antique Near East.

Still other scholars, following a long tradition of Western scholarship, have argued that the Qurʾān reflects the particular influence of certain “heterodox” movements, usually held to be some type of Jewish Christians. These scholars include Shlomo Pines, Yūsuf al-Ḥaddād, Joseph Azzi, and more recently François de Blois, Edouard Gallez, and Joachim Gnilka. Holger Zellentín argues that the Qurʾān has a particular relationship with the Syriac *Didascalia*, while Jan Van Reeth has asked if the “Gospel” of the Qurʾān is in fact the lost “Harmony of the Gospels” or the *Diatesseron*.

Other scholars have cautioned against this tendency to see the Qurʾān in close conversation with the Bible. In a 1986 article Marilyn Robinson Waldman, using the story of Joseph as an example, refutes the idea that Qurʾānic accounts should be seen as later or derivative versions of original biblical accounts. She contends that the theological message and literary qualities of the Qurʾān are so distinct that its “biblical” material cannot be properly described as “biblical.” Angelika Neuwirth argues stridently against

Wansbrough, insisting that the Qurʾān is not composite, that the chronology developed by Nöldeke is fundamentally reliable, and that the basic outline of the Prophet's life in the medieval biographical literature is accurate. Accordingly she shows a particular interest in the traditions which have Muḥammad (and the Islamic community) interacting with the Jewish community in Medina. She also frequently allows for the possibility that (so-called) "Meccan" *sūras* have been reworked or edited in the Medinan period.

Finally, it is important to add that certain scholars have raised the possibility that at the heart of the Qurʾān is a transferal of biblical traditions to an Arabian context. One such case would be the Abraham and Ishmael material in the Qurʾān. Whereas Genesis (21) has Hagar and Ishmael cast out into the desert of Beersheba, the Qurʾān (2:124–9) seems to have Abraham and Ishmael in Mecca, building the Kaʿba. Reuven Firestone studies this material in his 1990 work *Journeys in Holy Lands*. More recently this Arabization thesis has been supported by Joseph Witztum, Jacqueline Chabbi, Uri Rubin, and Aziz al-Azmeh, who has made a significant contribution to the position that the Qurʾān reflects an Arabian context in *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity* (2014a).

Thus in recent years more and more scholars have worked on the relationship between the Qurʾān and the Bible, although they explain this relationship with diverse, and often conflicting, theories. Nevertheless, through this work the academic community has generally come to appreciate that the story of the Qurʾān is part of a larger story of the history of biblical literature.

### Further reading

- Asad, Muḥammad (1984) *The Message of the Qurʾān*. Dar-al-Andalus, Gibraltar.
- Al-Azmeh, Aziz (2014a) *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and His People*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- El-Badawi, Emran (2013) *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions*. Routledge, New York and London.
- Brady, David (1978) The Book of Revelation and the Qurʾān: Is there a possible literary relationship? *Journal of Semitic Studies* 23, 216–25.
- Firestone, Reuven (1990) *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham–Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis*. State University of New York Press, Albany.
- Griffith, Sidney (2008). Christian lore and the Arabic Qurʾān: The "Companions of the Cave" in *Sūrat al-Kahf* and in Syriac Christian tradition. In: Reynolds, G. S. (ed.) *The Qurʾān in Its Historical Context*. Routledge, London, pp. 109–38.
- Luxenberg, Christoph (2007) *Die Syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran. Das Arabische Buch*, 3rd ed. Hans Schiler, Berlin (translated as *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran*. Hans Schiler, Berlin).
- Neuwirth, Angelika (2014) Glimpses of paradise in the world and lost aspects of the world in the hereafter: Two Qurʾānic re-readings of biblical Psalms. In: Neuwirth, Angelika, *Scripture, Poetry, and the Making of a Community: Reading the Qurʾān as a Literary Text*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 76–101.
- Neuwirth, Angelika, Sinai, Nicolai, and Marx, Michael (eds.) (2010) *The Qurʾān in Context: Historic and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾānic Milieu*. Brill, Leiden.

- 
- Reynolds, Gabriel Said (2010) *The Qur'an and its Biblical Subtext*. Routledge, London.
- Reynolds, Gabriel Said (2016) *The Qur'an in Conversation with the Bible*. Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Rubin, Uri (2014a) Moses and the Holy Valley ʿTuwan: On the biblical and Midrashic background of a Qur'anic scene. *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 73, 73–81.
- Schneemelcher, W. (1991) *New Testament Apocrypha*. Ed. and trans. R. Wilson. J. Clarke & Co., Cambridge, vol. I, pp. 462–5.
- Wansbrough, John (1977) *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*. Oxford University Press, Oxford (reprinted with annotations Prometheus Press, Amherst, NY, 2004).
- Witztum, Joseph (2009) The foundations of the house. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 72, 25–40.
- Witztum, Joseph (2011b) *The Syriac milieu of the Qur'an: The recasting of biblical narratives*. PhD diss., Princeton University.