

CHAPTER 3

Biblical Turns of Phrase in the Quran*Gabriel Said Reynolds*

Academic scholars have long recognized that the Quran is a text closely related to the Bible and later biblical tradition.¹ Already in 1833 Abraham Geiger devoted a book, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* (What has Muḥammad taken from Judaism?) to the question of the relationship of the Quran to Jewish tradition. The standard study of the Quran's relationship to the Bible, Heinrich Speyer's *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Quran* (The biblical narratives of the Quran), published about a hundred years later, includes detailed discussions of the Quran's biblical material in relation to Jewish and Christian literature.

Scholars have also long recognized, however, that the Quran tends not to reproduce biblical passages closely. Indeed, by my reading, the Quran has not a single passage that we might properly consider a quotation of the canonical Bible.² The closest thing to a quotation in the Quran comes not from the Bible but from the Mishna.³

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- 1 In recent years scholars of the Quran have increasingly turned their attention to the relationship between the Quran and the Bible, and biblical literature more generally. To name only a few examples: Angelika Neuwirth incorporates an analysis of that relationship, in addition to structural and other questions, in her recent works. See most recently the first installment of a promised commentary on the entire Quranic text: Neuwirth *Der Koran*. Holger Zellentin has discussed the relationship of the Quran's legal material to biblical tradition broadly. See Zellentin, *Qur'an's legal culture*. Emran El-Badawi, in his work *The Qur'an and the Aramaic Gospel traditions*, looks at the relationship of the Arabic Quran and the Aramaic Gospels. In French language scholarship Guillaume Dye, Geneviève Gobillot, and Michel Cuyppers have studied in different ways the Quran's references to biblical narratives. Among other works, see Dye, *Lieux saints communs*; Gobillot, *Histoire et géographie sacrées*; and Cuyppers, *Festin*; English trans.: Kelly, *Banquet*. In Germany the team at *Corpus Coranicum* incorporates detailed material on the Quran's relationship to biblical traditions in their online database. I have addressed the relationship between the Quran and biblical literature in my work *Qur'an and its biblical subtext*.
 - 2 It is often argued that Q 21:105 ("Certainly We wrote in the Psalms, after the Torah: 'My righteous servants shall indeed inherit the earth'") is a biblical citation, but it merely resembles certain verses of Psalm 37 (see vv. 9 and 28–29). One might also compare this verse to Matthew 5:4: "Blessed are the gentle: they shall have the earth as inheritance." Cf. also 1 Enoch 5:7.
 - 3 Q 5:32 ("That is why We decreed for the Children of Israel that whoever kills a soul"), is a quotation of the Mishna (m. Sanhedrin 4:5).

In his *New researches into the composition and exegesis of the Qoran* (1902), Hartwig Hirschfeld attributes the absence of precise renderings of biblical passages in the Qoran to the absence of an Arabic translation of the Bible at the rise of Islam. He writes:

From several almost literal quotations from the O.T. in the *Qorân* the question arose, whether an Arabic translation of the former existed in Arabia Had such a version existed, Muhammed would have certainly succeeded in procuring one, and his renditions of Biblical passages would consequently have been more verbal, and less intermixed with *agâdic* ornamentation. Since this was not the case, we must assume that he gained the bulk of his Biblical knowledge from intercourse with the people.⁴

Hirschfeld mentions only the Old Testament here because of his interest in comparing biblical material in the Qoran with biographical reports of Muḥammad's experiences in the city of Medina, which, according to the traditional literature, was a city with a population of Jews but not of Christians. His focus on the Old Testament, in my opinion, is not justified on the basis of the Qoran itself, a text that includes material related not only to the Old Testament—or Hebrew Bible—but also to the New Testament. Indeed, even some of the Quranic Old Testament material apparently reached the Qoran from Christian sources; for example, the Qoran has Satan—and not a serpent—lurking in the Garden of Eden, which reflects not Genesis but a Christian reading of Genesis (see Rev 12:9: “The great dragon, the primeval serpent, known as the devil or Satan”).⁵

Meanwhile, there is a related point about the biblical material in the Qoran, which Hirschfeld does not mention at all. In addition to some *almost* literal quotations of biblical material, the Qoran also includes a wide range of smaller biblical “turns of phrase.” It is this phenomenon that I would like to address in the present paper. I will not offer an exhaustive catalogue of these turns of phrase, but rather a discussion of ten principal examples thereof (along with some references to a number of further examples toward the end of the paper).

4 Hirschfeld, *New researches* 104. Recent research has tended to confirm Hirschfeld's position that the Bible had not been translated into Arabic by the rise of Islam. On this see further below.

5 For many more examples of this type one might consult the excellent dissertation of Witztum, *Syriac milieu*.

As we will see, there are two interesting points about these biblical turns of phrase in the Quran. First, the Quran takes them and uses them differently. This transformation, I will argue, has implications not only for our knowledge of how biblical material reached the Quran—the question that interested Hirschfeld—but also for our appreciation of the rhetorical strategies of the Quran. Second, these turns of phrase (at least on the basis of this modest survey) tend to be disproportionately connected to the New Testament and not the Hebrew Bible.

I begin with a passage in Q 7:40, a verse found in the midst of a larger section on divine reward and punishment. Here, the Quran declares:

Indeed, those who deny Our signs and are disdainful of them—the gates of heaven will not be opened for them, nor shall they enter paradise until the camel passes through the needle's eye (*ḥattā yalija l-jamalu fī sammi l-khiyāt*), and thus do We requite the guilty.⁶

The reference to a camel passing through a needle's eye is recognizable as a turn of phrase from the synoptic Gospels.⁷ It is found, for example, in a passage of Matthew 19:

- 23 Then Jesus said to his disciples, “In truth I tell you, it is hard for someone rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven.
 24 Yes, I tell you again, it is easier for a camel (*kamēlos*) to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven.”
 25 When the disciples heard this they were astonished. “Who can be saved, then?” they said.
 26 Jesus gazed at them. “By human resources,” he told them, “this is impossible; for God everything is possible.”

Mat 19:23–26; cf. Mar 10:25; Luk 18:25⁸

6 Quran quotations are from Ali Quli Qara'i unless otherwise mentioned.

7 There is possibly another biblical turn of phrase with the reference to the “gates of heaven” in this verse. The Book of Revelation (21) presents heaven as a city with gates, and the expression is relatively common in later Christian literature. However, the Quran seems to use this expression (n.b. its appearance in 54:11; 78:19) in line with its cosmology of heaven as a place in the sky on the other side of the firmament. The gates, then, are the doors in the firmament which can be opened and allow passage to the realm above. One travels to these gates along the “cords” or “passageways” referred to as *asbāb*. See Q 2:166; 15:14–15; 18:84–85, 89, 92; 22:15; 38:10; 40:37; and van Bladel, Heavenly cords.

8 Biblical passages are cited from the NJB unless indicated otherwise.

Earlier scholarship on “the camel and the eye of a needle” centers around two discrete questions.⁹ The first is the relationship of this maxim as it appears in Q 7:40 to its appearance in the Synoptic Gospels. The second—and indeed the question that has received more attention—involves an opinion found both in Christian exegesis on the Bible and Islamic exegesis on the Quran, according to which the maxim actually involves not a camel but a “rope” (usually described as a sailor’s rope) and the eye of a needle. In other words, both Christians and Muslims have sought to do away with the camel.

As Samir Khalil Samir explains, the first Christian commentator to speak of a rope instead of a camel appears to be Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), who expresses this opinion in two different passages regarding the maxim as it appears in Matthew.¹⁰ In one passage Cyril writes: “By ‘camel’ (*kamēlos*) he means not the living thing, the beast of burden, but the thick rope (*kamilos*) to which sailors tie their anchors.”¹¹ The Greek *kamēlos*, incidentally, is derived from the semitic root *g/j-m-l*, probably from the Hebrew *gāmāl*, but in any case it is related to the cognate Arabic term *jamal*.¹² Opinions like that of Cyril are found among a number of later Christian interpreters, including a certain fifth-century figure named Agricola and Photius (d. 891), Bishop of Constantinople.¹³ This reading is also attested in an Armenian version of the New Testament.¹⁴

Remarkably, a similar opinion is found on the corresponding Quranic verse in Islamic tradition. According to a tradition attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68/

9 Perhaps the most important studies are a 1978 article of Samir Khalil Samir and a 1980 article of Andrew Rippin (both summarize, and cite, earlier studies). See Samir, *Note sur le fonds sémitique*; Rippin, *Qur’an 7.40*. For earlier studies see Samir, although we might note the following: Bishop, *Eye of the needle*; Tritton, *Camel and the needle’s eye*; Watt, *Camel and the needle’s eye*; Blachère, *Regards sur un passage parallèle*; Schub, *It is easier for a cable*.

10 See Samir, *Note sur le fonds sémitique* 90–91.

11 This is a quotation from the Greek Fragment 219 of Cyril, cited from Simonetti (ed.), *Ancient Christian commentary* 102. The second passage is from Cyril’s book 16 against Julian the Apostate, preserved in Syriac. See Neumann, *Juliani Imperatoris* 56, para. 21 (see the French translation in Samir, *Note sur le fonds sémitique* 90–91). There, too, the “rope” in question is specifically associated with seafaring.

12 See Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English lexicon* #2715. Geiger (*Judaism and Islam* 53) notes that in the Talmud, “elephant” is used instead of “camel”—which to him suggests that the expression in the Quran must refer to an animal (a camel), and not to a rope. See b. *Bava Metzi’a* 38b; *Berakhot* 55b. Samir comes to a similar conclusion.

13 See the references in Samir, *Note sur le fonds sémitique* 91.

14 See Samir, *Note sur le fonds sémitique* 92. The Armenian version reads *malh* “rope” for the citation in Matthew. Samir also refers to a Gregorian New Testament text which offers a similar reading for the citation in Mark.

687), Q 7:40 should be read not as *ḥattā yaliḡa l-jamalu* but instead as *ḥattā yaliḡa l-jummalu*. The Ibn ‘Abbās tradition defines *jummal* as a “thick rope” (*qals ḡhalīz*). As Andrew Rippin points out, this Ibn ‘Abbās tradition is found already in the commentary (of dubious authenticity) of Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778) and in that of al-Farrā’ (d. 207/822).¹⁵

As Rippin explains, later *mufasssīrūn* speculate more widely on this term.¹⁶ In his medieval commentary *Zād al-masīr fī ‘ilm al-tafsīr*, Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201)—who shows no awareness of the biblical roots of this turn of phrase—asks why God would speak of a camel in Q 7:40. He writes:

If someone says, “Why, of all animals, would a camel be specified, especially when there are animals which are larger than it?” There are two answers to this. The first of them is that expressing this parable with a camel gets the point across ... since a camel cannot pass through the eye of a needle The second is that the camel is the largest pack animal among the Arabs [hence, too, Q 88:17].¹⁷

After this reflection, however, Ibn al-Jawzī also raises the possibility that the Quran is not actually speaking of a camel after all. He notes how the grammarian Ibn al-Anbārī (d. 577/1181) reports the Ibn ‘Abbas tradition mentioned above that offers *jummal* as a variant reading, and he refers to a number of other possible variants.¹⁸

Arabic *jummal* (“thick rope”) is probably not derived directly from the poorly attested Greek *kamilos* (“thick rope”). Instead, it seems to have been formed from the verbal root *j-m-l* meaning “to gather together;” that is, it refers to a number of smaller strands or cables put together to form a larger rope.¹⁹ Some lexicographers wondered if *jummal* is a genuine Arabic word,²⁰ and indeed it is used principally in speculation around Q 7:40. It is possible that

¹⁵ al-Thawrī, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān* 70; al-Farrā’, *Ma’ānī al-Qur’ān* i, 379.

¹⁶ Rippin argues that the relatively late interest in the term in question is shown by the absence of variants to *jamal* in most of the canonical *qirā’āt*. The variants are found only in the later collections of *shawādh* (isolated or deviant) readings. On this see Rippin, *Qur’an* 7.40 109.

¹⁷ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr* iii, 197.

¹⁸ Ibn al-Jawzī (ibid.) notes the following other possibilities: *jumal*, *juml*, *jumul*, and *jaml*. Abū Ja’far al-Ṭabarī offers *jummal* and *jumal* as alternatives. See Rippin, *Qur’an* 7.40 108. As Rippin notes (110–111) the five alternate readings are also cited by al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144). See al-Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf* ii, 103, on Q 7:40–41. For al-Ṭabarī see *Jāmi’ al-bayān* viii, 203–211 on Q 7:40.

¹⁹ See Lane (ed.), *Arabic-English lexicon* ii, 461b.

²⁰ Lane (ibid.) refers to Ibn Durayd (d. 321/933), author of *Jamharat al-luḡha*. Rippin notes

Christian exegetical speculation surrounding the Greek word *kamēlos* influenced Muslim exegetical speculation surrounding the Arabic word *jamal* and led lexicographers to develop *jummal*, an equivalent of *kamilos*, as an alternative reading of *jamal*.²¹ What seems to confirm the influence of Christian exegesis on Islamic exegesis is that, like Christian commentators, Muslim commentators report that the rope (*jummal*) in question is the sort used for seafaring. As Rippin notes, Abū ‘Ubayd (d. 286/899) comments that *jummal* means a “nautical rope” (*al-qals min qulūs al-baḥr*).²²

Rippin finds a parallel to this sort of development in the argument of Goldziher that Islamic exegesis on the Quranic term *shahīd* was shaped by the Christian idea of martyr found both with Greek *martus* and Syriac *sāhdā* (although the sense of “martyr” may already be found in Q 3:140).²³ For his part, Watt wonders if the origin of *jummal* is “polyglot nautical slang of the Eastern Mediterranean.” Rippin (with reason) finds this to be unnecessary speculation.²⁴

For our purposes, in any case, it is the first question—the relationship between the New Testament and the Quran as regards the camel and the eye of a needle—that is of particular importance. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the distinctly evangelical turn of phrase is applied in the Quran to a completely different effect. In the Gospels, this turn of phrase is meant to show how difficult it is for a rich man to enter heaven. The maxim appears after Jesus’s conversation with the rich young man who was yearning for eternal life but was too attached to his possessions to give them to the poor. In the Quran, there is no mention of this rich young man, and the topic of wealth is absent. Instead, this expression is applied to those who deny God’s signs, a concern that is prominent in the Quran.²⁵ Bishop suggests that the Quran’s use of this maxim may

that *jummal* is only found in rare recitations such as that of the Meccan Ibn al-Muḥayṣin (d. 123/740).

21 Rudolph refers to the common variant interpretation in exegesis on both the New Testament and the Quran, commenting: “Es ist hübsch, dass das arabische *ġamal* ‘Kamel’ und ‘Schiffstau’ bedeutet.” Rudolph, *Die Abhängigkeit* 15, n. 42. One can still find Muslim scholars who follow the alternative interpretation: Muhammad Asad renders the key phrase in Q 7:40: “They shall not enter paradise any more than a twisted rope can pass through a needle’s eye.” He explains in a note: “As for the word *jamal* occurring in this sentence, there is hardly any doubt that its translation, in this context, as ‘camel’ is erroneous.” Asad goes on to discuss the variant reading *jummal* (among others) in the classical commentary literature. Asad, *Message* 238, n. 32.

22 Rippin, Qur’an 7.40 108.

23 See Goldziher, *Muslim studies* ii, 346–362, and Rippin, Qur’an 7.40 109.

24 See Watt, *Camel and the needle’s eye* 157–158, and Rippin’s response (Qur’an 7.40 109).

25 On the denial of signs of God in the Quran see Q 2:39, 2:61, 2:231, 3:4, 3:19–20, 4:56, 4:140, 5:10, 5:85 *passim*.

be related to its appearance in the Arabic translation of Tatian's *Diatesseron*. (He suggests that the Syriac original may have been known in Muḥammad's context.)²⁶ There is no way to prove such a thing, and the easier explanation is simply that this maxim was circulating orally in the milieu of the Quran's origins. Apparently, biblical language—and New Testament language at that—must have been more common in that context than is commonly assumed. This is a point to which we will return.

It is perhaps worth adding here that the Quran's allusion to the camel passing through the eye of a needle appears in a sura (7) that is traditionally classified as Meccan; that is, it is supposed to have been proclaimed in a pagan context, where Muḥammad had (according to the traditional biography) no substantial interaction with Christians. The appearance of such an evangelical turn of phrase in a supposedly pagan context is jarring.

Our second example involves the two separate occasions when the Quran has the Israelites declare that they have "uncircumcised hearts." The first of these is in Sura 2:

Certainly We gave Moses the Book, and followed him with the apostles, and We gave Jesus, the son of Mary, manifest proofs, and confirmed him with the Holy Spirit. Is it not that whenever an apostle brought you that which was not to your liking, you would act arrogantly; so you would impugn a part [of them], and slay a[nother] part? * *And they say, 'Our hearts are uncircumcised'* (*qulūbunā ghulf*). ■ non-matching quotation mark Rather Allah has cursed them for their unfaith, so few of them have faith.

Q 2:87–88

The second is in *al-Nisā'* (4):

Then because of their breaking their covenant, their defiance of Allah's signs, their killing of the prophets unjustly and for their saying, '*Our hearts are uncircumcised*.' Rather Allah has set a seal on them for their unfaith, so they do not have faith except a few.

Q 4:155

²⁶ Bishop, *Eye of the needle* 357. For his part, Samir argues at the end of his article (Note sur le fonds sémitique 94) that the appearance of the same maxim in the New Testament and the Quran, and a similar maxim (involving instead an elephant) in the Talmud redounds not to borrowing or influence but to the possibility that such turns of phrase, or expressions, were common generally among Semites and crossed the boundaries of different Semitic languages (notably Aramaic and Arabic).

The declaration of the Israelites, “Our hearts are uncircumcised,” is one example among others of their infidelity: their breaking the covenant God made with them, denying God’s signs, and killing the prophets. For these sins, God has cursed the Israelites, which has prevented them from believing (Q 2:88). Yet, although the Quran’s polemic against the Jews is particularly vehement, its reference to their “uncircumcised hearts” is not new.

The language of an “uncircumcised heart” appears frequently in biblical passages that exhort or reprimand the Israelites. Moses urges the Israelites to live piously once they cross the Jordan River, declaring, “Circumcise your heart then and be obstinate no longer” (Deu 10:16). Similar language appears in Jeremiah: “Circumcise yourselves for the Lord, apply circumcision to your hearts, men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem” (Jer 4:4).²⁷ The same expression appears later in Jeremiah:

Look, the days are coming, Yahweh declares, when I shall punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh: Egypt, Judah, Edom, the Ammonites, Moab, and all the men with shaven temples who live in the desert. For all those nations, and the whole House of Israel too, are uncircumcised at heart.

Jer 9:24–25

In these passages, the language of circumcision of the heart is used to reprimand those who fulfill the law only superficially, those who follow its precepts but have not internalized its moral and spiritual teachings. In the New Testament, Paul uses this language to challenge the very idea that righteousness is found in obedience to the law. In Romans, for example, he argues that true circumcision is only spiritual:

Being a Jew is not only having the outward appearance of a Jew, and circumcision is not only a visible physical operation. * The real Jew is the one who is inwardly a Jew, and real circumcision is in the heart, a thing not of the letter but of the spirit. He may not be praised by any human being, but he will be praised by God.

Rom 2:28–29; cf. Phil 3:3

Similarly, Paul argues in Colossians that “circumcision according to Christ” (2:1) is “not by human hand but by the complete stripping of your natural self.”

²⁷ Cf. Jer 6:10.

The expression appears again in the book of Acts, in Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin, in which he declares:

You stubborn people, with uncircumcised (Syr. *lā gzīrīn*) hearts and ears. You are always resisting the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. * Can you name a single prophet your ancestors never persecuted? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Upright One, and now you have become his betrayers, his murderers. * In spite of being given the Law through angels, you have not kept it.

Acts 7:51–53

Here the point is not that the law is invalid but simply that the Israelites have not been faithful to the law. The reference to the circumcision of the heart in this passage is closer to the language of the Quran. As I have argued elsewhere, moreover, this passage seems to have a particular connection to Q 4:155. In both places the allusion to “uncircumcised hearts” appears with a reference to the Israelites’ murdering the prophets and violating the covenant.²⁸

The idiom of “circumcision of the heart” is unsurprisingly found commonly in patristic Christian literature. For our purposes, it is particularly noteworthy that the Syriac fathers employed it. In his homily *On circumcision* the Persian scholar Aphrahat (d. 345) writes (in Syriac):

So it is known that whoever does not circumcise the foreskin of his heart, then also the circumcision of his flesh is of no value to him.²⁹

For his part, Ephrem (d. 373) does so in the course of his argument against Jewish observance of the law:

Ask yourself, you fool, about the observance of the law.
 What can circumcision do for a sin that lies within?
 Sin lies inside the heart;
 And you circumcise your foreskin!³⁰

It is important to note, however, a fundamental difference with the way the Bible, or the Church fathers, employ the language of the circumcision of the heart and the way the Quran does so. In both Q 2:88 and 4:155, the Quran does

²⁸ See Reynolds, *Qurʾān and its biblical subtext* 154.

²⁹ Aphrahat, Homily 11 (On Circumcision); trans. in Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism* 23.

³⁰ Ephrem, *Sermones de fide*, Homily 3:233–237, p. 28.

not report that the Israelites have uncircumcised hearts; it has them *say* of themselves, “Our hearts are uncircumcised.”³¹ Indeed, it is not clear that the Quran means at all to invoke a distinction between the circumcision of the flesh and circumcision of the spirit, or the heart, which is central to all of the biblical passages in which this expression appears. Instead, the Quran seems to make the very declaration “Our hearts are uncircumcised” into an act of infidelity. This might be compared to the way the Quran condemns the Israelites for *declaring*, “We killed the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the apostle of Allah” (Q 4:157) and of their unnamed declaration (Q 4:156) against Mary (presumably an allusion to Jewish accusations that Mary begot Jesus through an act of fornication).

Muslim exegetes have an explanation for why saying “Our hearts are uncircumcised” (*qulūbunā ghulf*) would be an act of infidelity. A number of reports make this the response of the Jews in Medina to Muḥammad’s invitation to accept Islam. The early commentary *Tafsīr Muqātil*, for example, relates that the Jews said to Muḥammad *qulūbunā ghulf*, with the meaning: “Our hearts have shelters and wrappings on them. They do not comprehend or understand what you say, O Muḥammad.”³² Al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) compares this interpretation to the way the Quran elsewhere (Q 41:5) declares, “Our hearts are in shelters” (*qulūbunā fī akinna*).³³

According to another line of interpretation, however, this phrase is instead to be read *qulūbunā ghuluf* (s. *ghilāf*, on the pattern of *kitāb/kutub*), meaning, “Our hearts *are* containers.” An “occasion of revelation” anecdote is also provided for this variant reading: what the Jews of Medina actually meant to tell Muḥammad is that their hearts are “containers of knowledge” (of the Torah) and they do not need anything that he has to offer them.³⁴

It seems to me that these stories of Muḥammad’s conversations with the Jews of Medina should be taken as haggadic exegesis and not as “what really happened.” Indeed, it is notable that we have two different *asbāb al-nuzūl* (or “occasions of revelation”) accounts depending on which Quranic variant is followed. This suggests that both accounts were the product of storytellers. However—and this is a revision of what I have said earlier³⁵—it does seem to

31 This might be compared to the way the Quran alludes to the Christians as “those who say, ‘We are Christians’” (Q 5:82).

32 Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr* i, 419, on Q 4:155; cf. Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr* i, 113.

33 al-Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf* i, 163–164, on Q 2:87–89. See also Q 6:25, which declares that “over” the hearts of unbelievers are shelters/veils (*akinna*); also 17:46; 18:57.

34 For examples of this tradition see al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān* i, 523–524, on Q 2:88. cf. Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr* i, 113.

35 Reynolds, *Qur’ān and its biblical subtext* 153.

me right that the Quran (as with the case of the “camel passing through the eye of the needle”) is using this biblical turn of phrase in a new way. It has no concern for the relationship of fleshly and spiritual, or inward, circumcision. In fact, the Quran does not have any concern for circumcision at all. Although circumcision is a part of Islamic law and practice, it is never mentioned in the Quran.³⁶

In other words, the basic sense of Muslim interpreters is correct here. The Quran uses this biblical turn of phrase in order to have the Jews themselves declare that they refuse to hear the word of God, that their hearts are covered.³⁷ It happens to use a biblical, and richly symbolic, turn of phrase to express the idea of being covered. This, of course, suggests that biblical language was “in the air,” a point to which we will return. Nevertheless, in the Quran the expression is basically parallel, as al-Zamakhsharī suggests, to the declaration of the unbelievers in Q 41:5: “Our hearts are in shelters” (*qulūbunā fī akinna*),³⁸ and it has similarities with those passages that speak of God’s “sealing” the hearts of the unbelievers.³⁹

A third example of the Quranic reapplication, or transformation, of biblical turns of phrase is found in its references to a mustard seed. The Gospel authors have Jesus speak of a “mustard seed” in a parable on the nature of the kingdom of God:

31 He put another parable before them, “The kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed (Syr. *la-predtā d-ḥardlā*) which a man took and sowed in his field.

32 It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the biggest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air can come and shelter in its branches.”

Mat 13:31–32; cf. Mar 4:30; Luk 13:18–19

36 See Wensinck, *Khitān* 20–22.

37 One might compare to this idea to 2 Co 3:

¹⁴ But their minds were closed; indeed, until this very day, the same veil remains over the reading of the Old Testament: it is not lifted, for only in Christ is it done away with.

¹⁵ As it is, to this day, whenever Moses is read, their hearts are covered with a veil,

¹⁶ and this veil will not be taken away till they turn to the Lord.

¹⁷ Now this Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

(2 Co 3:14–17)

38 I would agree then, with the way Arthur Droge renders this expression: “Our hearts are covered.” Droge also helpfully refers to the literal meaning of the expression—“Our hearts are uncircumcised”—in a note with corresponding biblical references.

39 Q 2:7; 4:46, 155; 6:25, 46; 7:101; 17:45–46; 18:57; 41:5; 47:23.

Elsewhere, the Gospels have Jesus refer to the “mustard seed” in the course of a different argument. In Matthew 17 the disciples ask Jesus why they were unable to drive a demon out of a boy. Jesus responds: “Because you have so little faith. In truth I tell you, if your faith is the size of a mustard seed you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; nothing will be impossible for you” (Mat 17:20).⁴⁰

For its part, the Quran refers in two separate passages to a mustard seed (using a term for “mustard” that is cognate with Syriac *ḥardlā*). However, neither passage corresponds to the Gospels’ use of this expression:

We shall set up the scales of justice on the Day of Resurrection, and no soul will be wronged in the least. Even if it be the weight of a mustard seed (*mithqāla ḥabbatin min khardal*),⁴¹ We shall produce it and We suffice as reckoners.

Q 21:47

The Quran here refers to a mustard seed in order to emphasize a common Quranic lesson, namely that God records every deed of humans—even the smallest—and will judge every individual according to those deeds on the Day of Resurrection. This passage shares a phrase with Q 36:54, where the Quran declares: “Today no soul will be wronged in the least, nor will you be requited except for what you used to do.”

The second Quranic reference to a mustard seed is similar, although it occurs in the midst of a passage where the wisdom figure Luqmān (a figure perhaps based on the Assyrian sage Aḥiqar) is speaking to his son about the Day of Judgment.⁴² He declares:

O my son! Even if it should be the weight of a *mustard seed*, and [even though] it should be in a rock, or in the heavens, or in the earth, Allah will produce it. Indeed Allah is all-attentive, all-aware.

Q 31:16⁴³

40 The saying of Luke 17:6 is similar, although it is made to be the response of Jesus to the demand of the apostles that he increase their faith.

41 The term for weight (Ar. *mithqāl*) is also related to a cognate Syriac term, *mathqālā*. See Jeffery, *Foreign vocabulary* 258.

42 On Luqmān see Zahniser, Luqmān 242–243.

43 Q 4:40; 10:61; 34:3; and 99:7 all speak instead of an “atom’s weight” (*mithqāl dharra*) to represent something small. Q 4:53 speaks of a “date-stone” or a “speck on a date-stone” (*naqīr*).

In this passage, the Quran puts into the mouth of Luqmān the same message that it has God express in Q 21:47. Again, we find that the Quran has taken a biblical expression and used it quite differently. It makes no mention at all of the evangelical idea of faith as a mustard seed that grows into a great tree. Emran El-Badawi comments to this effect, “In the Quran, however, the mustard seed is dogmatically re-articulated to signify the absolute, microscopic reach of God’s justice.”⁴⁴

A fourth example of the Quran’s reapplication of a biblical turn of phrase is perhaps found with the reference in Q 16:77 to the “twinkling of an eye.” This turn of phrase, as pointed out by the team of *Corpus Coranicum*,⁴⁵ may be based ultimately on 1 Corinthians 15:51–52:

51 Now I am going to tell you a mystery: we are not all going to fall asleep,
52 but we are all going to be changed, instantly, in the twinkling of an eye,
when the last trumpet sounds. The trumpet is going to sound, and then
the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.

1Co 15:51–52

Paul here uses the expression “twinkling of an eye” (Gk: ἐν ῥιπή ὀφθαλμοῦ; Syr. *rfāf ‘aynā*) to describe the change that will come over those who are living at the moment of the resurrection. A similar idiom is used in the Quran, although it is employed in a different manner:

To Allah belongs the Unseen of the heavens and the earth. The matter of the Hour is just like the twinkling of an eye (*lamḥi l-baṣar*) or [even] swifter. Indeed Allah has power over all things.

Q 16:77

The Quran may be adapting the biblical expression “twinkling of an eye” (this is Qara’i’s rendering, but, as we will see, it is better rendered “glance of an eye”) in order to express the idea that the Day of Resurrection will come suddenly; one might say like a “thief in the night” (1Th 5:2) or as birth pangs come upon a woman (1Th 5:3). Ibn al-Jawzī concludes, “This means that the speed of the appearance of the Resurrection, and the calling forth of all beings, will be like the glance of an eye (*lamḥi l-‘ayn*).”⁴⁶ Muhammad Asad comments that the

44 El-Badawi, *Qur’an and the Aramaic Gospel* 151.

45 <http://www.corpuscoranicum.de/kontexte/index/sure/16/vers/77>. They refer to Andrae, *Der Ursprung* 142; Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen* 454.

46 Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr* iv, 474, ad 16:77.

Quranic expression means that the coming of the Day of Resurrection “will be characterized by utter suddenness and unpredictability.”⁴⁷

It is worth adding that the Arabic expression *lamḥi al-baṣar* is not exactly equivalent to the Greek expression ἐν ῥίπτῃ ὀφθαλμοῦ or, for that matter, the Syriac translation of this phrase in the Peshitta as *rfāf ‘aynā*. The Greek *ripe* (ῥίπτῃ from ῥίπτω), like the Syriac *rfāf*, refers to the sudden closing, or blinking, of the eye, whereas the Arabic *lamḥ* actually refers to a glance, or quick look. The English rendering “twinkling” does not seem to correspond well to either, as it means something like “shining” or “sparkling.” However, it has become the standard English rendering of the New Testament turn of phrase thanks to the King James Version. One might compare the better rendering of the French Jerusalem Bible: “En un instant, en *un clin d’oeil*” (1 Co 15:52).

It is interesting that most English translations of the Quran render the Arabic *lamḥi l-baṣar* as “twinkling of an eye” (thus Yusuf Ali, Pickthall, Arberry, Asad, Quli Qara’i; Droge has “blink”). Hamidullah, not surprisingly, follows the standard French rendering of the biblical expression and renders “clin d’oeil.” Such renderings reflect a certain assumption of the translators, perhaps an unconscious one, that the Quran is indeed using a biblical turn of phrase when it speaks of *lamḥi al-baṣar* in Q 16:77. The one English translation I have found that renders this expression literally, and not biblically, is that of Sahih International (to my understanding, principally composed by a woman known as Umm Muḥammad), which renders “glance of the eye.” Still, it seems to me that, although different, Quranic *lamḥi l-baṣar* is a reflection of the biblical language in 1 Corinthians.⁴⁸ The point of all of these expressions is something that takes only a moment, as does blinking the eye, or a quick glance of the eye.

There is, however, an alternative scenario that has been suggested to me by Holger Zellentin, who referred me to a note in the work *Jews and Arabs* by Gotein, according to which the reference to *lamḥi l-baṣar* in Q 16:77 is better explained in light of a line in the Jewish Amidah prayer, which relates that God “resurrects the dead in the twinkle of an eye” (Hb. *herep ‘ayn*).⁴⁹ The Palestinian Amidah prayer is generally dated from the first century BCE to the first century CE and thus possibly would have been known in the context in which

47 Asad, *Message* 253, n. 91.

48 A similar expression using a “glance” to express a quick moment is found in Q 27:40: “I will bring it to you in the twinkling of an eye” (*qabla an yartadda ilayka ṭarfuka*; the expression is different from Q 16:77, although it is rendered similarly in English by Qara’i). I am grateful to Bilal Orfali for this reference.

49 See Gotein, *Jews and Arabs* 50. The text of the Amidah prayer can be found in Schechter and Abrahams, *Genizah specimens* 656. A translation can be found in Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud* 27.

1 Corinthians was written. Alternatively, we can imagine that both the Amidah prayer and 1 Corinthians reflect the presence of this turn of phrase in the Semitic milieu of the eastern Mediterranean.

A fifth example of the way the Quran transforms biblical turns of phrase is found in its two reflections on how birds manage to fly. The first occurs only two verses after the reference to the “twinkling of an eye” in the previous example (which suggests that the two sayings might have been incorporated in the Quranic text together):

Have they not regarded the birds disposed in the air of the sky: no one sustains them except Allah. There are indeed signs in that for a people who have faith.

Q 16:79

Q 67:19 is similar:

Have they, then, never beheld the birds above them, spreading their wings and drawing them in? None but the Most Gracious upholds them: for, verily, He keeps all things in His sight.

Q 67:19

The first passage precedes a reflection on other natural signs (Q 16:80 discusses the use of animal hides as a gift from God). The second passage on the flight of birds appears in a section with similar themes (Q 67:15 mentions the sustenance that God provides).⁵⁰ The Quran’s reference to the flight of birds in both passages seems to owe something to Jesus’s reference to birds in the Gospels:

Look at the birds in the sky. They do not sow or reap or gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they are?

Mat 6:26; cf. Luk 12:24

The Quran (in both passages) asks its audience to “look” (Ar. *yaraw*) at birds, much as Matthew has Jesus ask his audience to do the same (*emblemsate*). However, whereas Jesus speaks of the way birds do not need to sow or harvest and

⁵⁰ Bell (*Commentary* ii, 403), following Barth (*Studien zur Kritik* 113–148) suggests that verses 18–19 here might be “out of place” because the discourse here is in the third person (whereas what precedes and follows is in the second person). He notes, however, that the content of vv. 18–19 seems to fit this context.

yet still find food, the Quran insists that they fly only by the power of God. The lessons that these two texts draw from the example of birds are also different. In Matthew, Jesus is making a point about trust in God, while the Quran is pointing to birds as a sign that indicates God's sovereignty.⁵¹ It is perhaps relevant, then, to note that the Quran elsewhere teaches a lesson about God's omniscience by speaking of God's omniscience and declaring, "No leaf falls without His knowing it" (Q 6:59). This might be compared to another passage in Matthew, where Christ speaks of a bird falling: "Can you not buy two sparrows for a penny? And yet not one falls to the ground without your Father knowing" (Mat 10:29).

A sixth example of a biblical turn of phrase in the Quran is a curious expression we find in Q 49:12. In the midst of that verse, the Quran warns against "spying" and "backbiting," with the following language: "And do not spy on one another or backbite (*wa-lā tajassasū wa-lā yaghtab ba'dakum ba'dan*). Will any of you love to eat the flesh of his dead brother (*ya'kula lahma akhīhi maytan*)? You would hate it." The language of "eating flesh" in this passage is striking and is unique in the Quranic text. Tellingly, however, in the letter to the Galatians, Paul addresses his audience as "brothers" and tells them not to eat each other up:

- 13 For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as
an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another.
14 For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, "You shall love your neighbor as
yourself."
15 But if you bite and devour (in Syriac, "eat": *wā-klittūn*) one another take
heed that you are not consumed by one another.

Gal 5:13–15, RSV

Our seventh example comes from Q 9:80, where the Quran, in line with a common message that believers should not pray for the forgiveness of unbelievers, declares that God would not forgive them even if Muḥammad asked 70 times for their forgiveness:

Whether *you* plead forgiveness for them or do not plead forgiveness for them, even if *you* plead forgiveness for them seventy times, Allah will never forgive them because they defied Allah and His Apostle; and Allah does not guide the transgressing lot.

Q 9:80

51 The Quran's reflection on birds here might be compared to the way it speaks of boats floating on water elsewhere: "Among His signs are the ships [that run] on the sea [appearing] like landmarks" (42:32; cf. 2:164; 10:22; 14:32; 17:66; 22:65; 31:31; 45:12; 55:24).

This might be compared to Matthew 18, where we find the following dialogue:

- 21 Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”
 22 Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.”

Mat 18:21–22

It is possible that the correspondence is only coincidental, as the Quran uses the number 70 on two other occasions. One of these (Q 7:155), however, simply follows a biblical report (the number of elders that Moses selects in Numbers 11:25). In the other (Q 69:32), the Quran speaks of a chain in hell that is “70 cubits” long. However, since both Q 9:80 and Matthew 18:21–22 are concerned with forgiveness (although admittedly in different ways—the Quran is concerned with God’s forgiveness; Matthew, with human forgiveness), it seems likely that the Quran is in conversation with its biblical subtext here.

Our eighth example is the phrase “We hear and disobey” (Ar. *samī’nā wa-‘aṣaynā*), which the Quran puts into the mouth of the Israelites on two occasions (Q 2:93; 4:46). Here, the Quran seems to follow quite closely the wording of a phrase in the Hebrew Bible, which, however, has quite the opposite sense:

Go nearer yourself and listen to everything that the Lord our God may say, and then tell us everything that the Lord our God has told you; we shall listen and put it into practice (*we-shāma’nū wa-‘āsīnū*)!

Deu 5:27; cf. Exo 24:7

The Quran also uses a positive version of this phrase, “We hear and obey” (Ar. *samī’nā wa-aṭa’nā*), on three occasions (Q 2:285; 5:7; 24:51) in order to refer to its own followers’ obedience to God. Tellingly, however, it is the negative version (Ar. *samī’nā wa-‘aṣaynā*) that matches the positive version in Hebrew (*we-shāma’nū wa-‘āsīnū*). Here, we have one of the relatively rare cases where Hebrew phraseology seems to have influenced the Arabic text of the Quran.⁵²

52 One might compare also the appearance of *hiṭṭa* in Q 2:58, perhaps connected to Num 14:40, which has the Israelites declare “we have sinned” (Hb. *hātānū*). On this see Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen* 337. Another possible example is 2:104, which reads: “O you who have faith! Do not say *rā’inā*, but say *unḡurnā*, and listen! And there is a painful punishment for the faithless.” The idea of not saying *rā’ina* (which in Arabic means “watch over us”) might be because it is close to Hebrew *rā’*, “evil.” Horovitz (Jewish proper names 204, following Geiger, *Was hat Mohammed* 17; *Judaism and Islam* 12–13) argues that through

Finally, our ninth and tenth examples might be discussed together. The first involves an image in the Quran of the heavens being rolled up “like a scroll” on the Day of Judgment:

The day We shall roll up the heaven like rolling of the scrolls (*sijill*) [meant] for writings. We will bring it back just as We began the first creation—a promise [binding] on Us. [That] indeed We will do.

Q 21:104⁵³

The metaphor of the skies being rolled up like a scroll is used in both Isaiah and Revelation:

The heavens will be rolled up like a scroll [Hb. *sēper*; Syr. *magalthā*] and all their array will fade away, as fade the leaves falling from the vine, as fade those falling from the fig tree.

Isa 34:4b

The sky disappeared like a scroll [Gk. *biblion*; Syr. *kātbā*] rolling up and all the mountains and islands were shaken from their places.

Rev 6:14

The imagery of Revelation is no doubt dependent on that of Isaiah. However, whereas the context of Isaiah is Yahweh's vengeance against the Gentiles in particular, the context of Revelation is apocalyptic and universal. The Quran similarly deploys this imagery for the sake of depicting the scene of a universal apocalypse. In other words, the Quranic application of this turn of phrase seems to connect it to the New Testament.

It is also worth noting that Q 21:104—with its image of the heavens rolled up like a scroll—appears immediately before the well-known reference to something God has written in the *zabūr* (our tenth example of a Biblical turn of phrase): “Certainly We wrote in the Psalms (*zabūr*), after the Remembrance (*dhikr*): ‘My righteous servants shall indeed inherit the earth’” (Q 21:105). Scholars have often described this Quranic verse as a quotation of a verse in the Psalms.⁵⁴ To this end, they cite most often Psalm 37:9 (“For evil-doers will be

the influence of Jews in Medina, *rā'ina* must have taken on a secondary, pejorative, sense because of its proximity to Hebrew *rā'*.

53 One might compare 39:67, where the heavens are said to be “rolled” or “folded” (*maṭwīyyāt*) in the right hand of God, although the term *sijill* does not appear.

54 Note, for example, the comment of Saleh: “It is not insignificant that Psalm 37:29 hap-

annihilated, while those who hope in the Lord shall have the land for their own” [NRSV: “shall inherit the land”]) and Psalm 37:29 (“but the upright shall have the land for their own [NRSV: “shall inherit the land”], there they shall live forever”). It is worth noting, however, that neither verse of Psalm 37 corresponds precisely to Q 21:105.

Moreover, the rendering of *zabūr* as “Psalms” is not certain. It depends on two elements: first, two Quranic passages that have God “give” the Psalms to David (Q 4:163; 17:55), which seems to reflect the traditional Jewish and Christian association of the Psalms with David, evident in the Mishnah (*Avot*, 6:9) and the New Testament (e.g. Mar 12:36–37); second, a supposed etymology of *zabūr* from Syr. *mazmūrā* or Hb. *mizmōr* “Psalm.”⁵⁵ However, it should be remembered that the Quran elsewhere uses the plural *zubur* to mean generally “books” or “scriptures”: Q 3:184; 16:44; 23:53; 26:196; 35:25; 54:43; 54:52. Moreover, the passage at hand (Q 21:105) also has a certain resemblance (like 21:104) to a New Testament passage, namely one of the Beatitudes (Mat 5:4): “Blessed are the gentle: they shall have the earth as inheritance.” Once again, it is possible that the Quran is in conversation with a Christian rendering of a Hebrew Bible expression.

Finally, it is interesting to note that these two biblical expressions (“We shall roll up the heaven like rolling of the scrolls” and “My righteous servants shall indeed inherit the earth”) occur together in the Quranic text (Q 21:104, 105). There is no clear thematic connection between the two verses (indeed, translations often indicate some kind of a break between the two), and it could be that the two biblical expressions were incorporated into the Quranic corpus simultaneously (which explains why they appear together despite the absence of any thematic connection). The situation is analogous to the appearance of our fourth (“twinkling of an eye”; Q 16:77) and fifth (“Have they not regarded the birds disposed in the air of the sky: no one sustains them except Allah”; Q 16:79) in close proximity in the Quranic text.

Another similar case—perhaps especially intriguing because it involves one Quranic sura and one New Testament book—is a correspondence between several passages in Q 24 and 2 Peter: Q 24:35 (2 Pe 1:19); Q 24:39–40 (2 Pe 2:17); Q 24:45 (2 Pe 3:5).⁵⁶

We are left with the question of what these examples of biblical turns of phrase in the Quran tell us of the relationship between the Quran and the

pens to be the only instance of an explicit verbatim quotation from the Bible in the Quran (Q.21:105).” Saleh, *Psalms in the Qur’an* 282.

⁵⁵ See Jeffery, *Foreign vocabulary* 149.

⁵⁶ For brief descriptions of these three passages see the table at the end of this paper.

Bible. Perhaps the principal argument of this paper is that the Quranic reapplication of biblical material is a common phenomenon in the text. Indeed, we could have pointed to still more examples of places where the Quran seems to use biblical language in a new way. Thus the Quran's reference to Jesus as a "word" of God (Q 3:39, 45; 4:171; 19:34); its reference to heaven as a "tillage" (Q 42:20; cf. Luk 8:15; Mat 13:23; 2 Co 9:10; Gal 6:8); the description of God's "face" (Ar. *wajh*; Gk. *prosōpon*; Syr. *afā*) remaining while other things pass away or flee (Q 55:27; cf. Rev 20:11); or a Quranic passage related to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Q 57:12–15; Mat 25:1–23). Some of these examples might reflect nothing more than idioms common to Semitic languages. Taken together, however, these examples seem to teach three lessons: first, that the Quran (even in so-called Meccan passages) is infused with biblical language; second, a disproportionate amount of these biblical turns of phrase come from the New Testament, which might suggest that Christians were a dominant element in the context of the Quran's origins; third, the Quran tends to use this biblical language in a new manner.

This "newness" could be explained in different ways. It could be that the Bible was simply not well known to the Quran's author. Perhaps he heard certain biblical sayings but was unaware of their context in the canonical Bible, or perhaps he once knew the Bible well but when the time came to compose the Quran his memory failed him. In his comments on the Quran's reference to a mustard seed in Q 31:16, Bell wonders if this turn of phrase is "a confused reminiscence of the parable of the sower and that of the mustard seed."⁵⁷ Although it has gone out of style even to consider such things, Bell's idea is not per se unreasonable. Perhaps the Quran's author did not know, or no longer knew, the Bible well.

For his part, Hartwig Hirschfeld argues that the variations on biblical names and terms in the Quran prove that the Quran's author did not have access to a written version of the Bible. Hirschfeld argues that some of the changes of biblical names and words in the Quran are due simply to "misreadings in his own notes made with unskillful hand."⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Bell, *Commentary* ii, 83.

⁵⁸ "Muhammed had undergone what I should like to call a course of Biblical training. This, of course, did not consist of systematic study nor regular instruction from teachers, but was much rather from gathering here and there sayings, tales, prescriptions, warnings, laws, morals, and parables, and supported by occasional notes gleaned by stealth and learned in seclusion. Clothed, then, in Arabic speech, adapted to the views, customs, and wants of the country the originals of the revelations are frequently hidden beyond recognition. This autodidactical method of studying accounts for nearly all the peculiarities of the Quran. It influenced Muhammad's ideas and affected his style. The Quran thus betrays

Alternatively, one could attribute agency to the Quran and see its reapplication of biblical material as a thoughtful rhetorical move. Sidney Griffith has persuasively argued that when the Quran speaks of Christians as “Nazarenes” (*naṣārā*) instead of “Christians” (*masīḥiyyūn*), it is not “influenced” by some peculiar sectarian group but rather is intentionally referring to Christians with a label that had pejorative connotations.⁵⁹

The phenomenon that we have studied in this paper might be explained in a similar manner. Perhaps the Quran’s author knew the original context of biblical turns of phrase quite well and intentionally sought to use them in an original manner. Perhaps, in these examples, the Quran’s author was particularly interested in distinguishing his scripture from the Bible. We might note that on other occasions the Quran does seem to use biblical turns of phrase in the way the Bible uses them, for example when it speaks of Abraham as a “friend” of God (Q 4:125; cf. Isa 41:8; 2 Chr 20:7; cf. Dan 3:35; Jam 2:23), of “tasting” death (Q 3:185, 21:35, 29:57, 44:56; cf. Mat 16:28; Joh 8:52), of condemnation in hell as a “second death” (Q 40:11; 44:35, 56; Rev 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8) of the faithless seeking to hide on the Day of Judgment (Q 4:42; Rev 6:16); or of God as “the first and the last” (Q 57:3; Isa 51:4; 44:6; 48:12; Rev 1:17; 22:13).⁶⁰ These examples suggest that the Quran’s author *could* follow the Bible but on certain occasions chose not to do so.

Still, it seems to me that the best explanation is somewhere in the middle. As suggested already by Hirschfeld and recently argued convincingly by Sidney Griffith, all evidence suggests that the Bible was not yet translated into Arabic at the time of the Quran’s origins.⁶¹ This means that the Quran’s author

Biblical colouring even in those portions, in which Muhammed expressed views which were undoubtedly original, or when he promulgated laws, which grew out of the incidents of the day.” Hirschfeld, *New researches* 13.

59 See Griffith, *al-Naṣārā* in the Qur’an 301–322. I have argued something similar about other Quranic passages in Reynolds, *On the presentation of Christianity* 42–54.

60 If one were inclined to argue that the Quran incorporated these biblical turns of phrase from written sources, this position would involve a new problem, namely whether the Quran is most in conversation with the text of the canonical Bible itself or rather with biblical language in other Jewish and Christian texts. For example, as for the case of the “twinkling of an eye,” Tor Andrae points to the use of this expression in Greek Ephrem. See Andrae, *Origines* 148.

61 Griffith, *Bible in Arabic*. Griffith reviews the relevant earlier literature in chap. 1 (esp. pp. 41 ff.). Note the work of Kashouh, *Arabic versions of the Gospels*. Griffith continues: “Perhaps the best evidence in support of this hypothesis is the Arabic Quran itself, in which, as we shall see in the next chapter, detailed knowledge of biblical and ecclesiastical narratives is evident, along with an almost complete lack of textual detail in the form of direct quotations or even substantial retellings of the biblical stories; the focus being instead

TABLE 3.1 Select biblical turns of phrase in the Quran

Biblical turn of phrase in the Q	Quranic reference	Biblical reference
Uncircumcised hearts	Q 2:88; 4:155	Deu 10:16; Jer 4:4; 9:24–25; Act 7:51; Rom 2:28–29; Phi 3:3; Col 2:1
“We hear and disobey”	Q 2:93; 4:46	Exo 24:7; Deu 5:27
Jesus as a “word” of God	Q 3:39; 45; 4:171; 19:34	John 1:1 <i>passim</i>
“Tasting” death	Q 3:185; 21:35; 29:57; 44:56	Mat 16:28; Joh 8:52
Seeking to hide on the Day of Judgment	Q 4:42	Rev 6:16
Abraham as “friend of God”	Q 4:125	Isa 41:8; 2 Ch 20:7; cf. Dan 3:35; Jam 2:23
“Eye for an eye”	Q 5:45	Exo 21:23–25; Lev 24:19–21, Deu 19:21; Mat 5:38–42; Luk 6:27–30
Leaf falling	Q 6:59	Mat 10:29
God is indeed the splitter of the grain and the pit	Q 6:95	Joh 12:24
Add an hour to one’s term	Q 7:34	Luk 12:25
The camel and the eye of a needle	Q 7:40	Mat 19:23–26; Mar 10:25; Luk 18:25
God will not forgive them even if you ask 70 times	Q 9:80	Mat 18:21–22
Twinkling of an eye	Q 16:77	1 Co 15:51–52
Birds in the sky	Q 16:79; 67:19	Mat 6:26; Luk 12:24
Mustard seed	Q 21:47; 31:16	Mat 13:31–32; 17:20; Mar 4:30; Luk 13:18–19
The heavens rolled up like a scroll	Q 21:104 (39:67)	Isa 34:4; Rev 6:14
The righteous shall inherit the earth	Q 21:105	Psa 37:9, 29; Mat 5:4
A day with God is a thousand years	Q 22:47	2 Pe 3:8–9
God and light	Q 24:35	2 Pe 1:19
A mirage	Q 24:39–40	2 Pe 2:17
Creation out of water	Q 24:45	2 Pe 3:5
Part-owners and one owner	Q 39:29	Mat 6:24/Luk 16:13
Hell as a “second death”	Q 40:11; 44:35; 56	Rev 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8
“Tillage” of the hereafter, “tillage” of the world	Q 42:20	Luk 8:15; Mat 13:23; Mar 13:20; 2 Co 9:10; Gal 6:8

on the patriarchal and prophetic *dramatis personae*.” Griffith, *Bible in Arabic* 52. Norman Stillman shows that the Jews of Arabia from Muḥammad’s time left behind no literature (Stillman, *Judeo-Arabic* 271–278). Griffith (*Bible in Arabic* 53): “It may well have been the case the appearance of the collected, written Quran in the second half of the seventh century provided the impetus for the first written translations of the Bible into Arabic.” In addition, see Witztum, Ibn Ishāq and the Pentateuch 1–71. Witztum argues, on the basis of citations from Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī, that Ibn Ishāq had access to an Arabic translation of the Peshitta in the second/eighth century. See also Vollandt, *Arabic versions of the Pentateuch*, especially chap. 3.

TABLE 3.1 Select biblical turns of phrase in the Quran (*cont.*)

Biblical turn of phrase in the Q	Quranic reference	Biblical reference
Like a tillage that sends out its shoots	Q 48:29	Mar 4:28
Eating the flesh of one's brother	Q 49:12	Gal 5:13–15
God's face remains	Q 55:27	Rev 20:11
God as "first and last"	Q 57:3	Isa 44:6; 48:12; Rev 1:17; 22:13
"Go back and grope for light"	Q 57:13	Mat 25:9

would have heard biblical material only orally, and then in the form of Arabic paraphrases of the Aramaic Bible. What we actually find in the Quran matches this scenario well. Brief expressions, such as the camel and the eye of a needle, or the mustard seed, are reproduced closely, but their larger biblical context is not. In other words, the cases that we have studied in this paper do not point to any direct influence of the Bible on the Quran. Instead, they point to something about the culture in which the Quran was proclaimed, namely that biblical expressions (in particular, expressions from the New Testament) circulated widely therein.

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