

Contextualizing the Scripture:
Towards a New Understanding of the
Qur'an - an Arab-Christian Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Over the course of history Christian theologians have adopted various approaches to understanding the Qur'an. Throughout the Middle Ages, for example, a polemical method was preponderant among most theologians who simply took the Bible as the "true" scripture and canonical basis from which to develop arguments against the invalidity of the Qur'an. At other times, especially after the Enlightenment, new approaches emerged. These included the historical-critical analysis of scripture; the *traditionsgeschichtliche* study of the history of scripture in the context of the religious community which professes its holiness; and the literary approach of those who, following the 19th century German scholar, Max Muller, have taken a comparative approach to scripture. In the post World War II era, the studies of Wilfred Cantwell Smith,¹ Heikke Raisanen² and Hans Kung³ have paved the way towards a new understanding of the Qur'an which bears important potential for a new missiological approach.

In this paper I wish to study the Qur'an from the perspective of a contextual Arab theologian, a member of an Arab (Palestinian) Christian community which has lived within Islamic society for many hundreds of years⁴.

Islam has been the most significant component in the world of Arab Christianity for almost 1400 years. Arab Christians and Muslims share Arabic culture, history and language; their fate is intertwined and inseparable. Likewise, Arab Christians are an inseparable part of the world of Islam. Dialogue with Muslims is a necessary and important aspect of Arab Christians' life and survival⁵.

The challenge facing Arab Christians is, however, two-fold. Just as Arab Christians are part of the Arab Islamic world, so they are an inseparable part of the Christian world. They belong to both the Arab nation and the universal Church. Belonging to two worlds has, for centuries, constituted a great challenge which is not easy to resolve. Sometimes it appeared as though Arab Christians fell between two chairs. They were often misunderstood and betrayed by both sides . . . But Arab Christians were also able to profit very often from this double belonging . . . they functioned both as transcoders of borders and as bridge builders⁶.

It is with bridge building, in relation to the way Christians and Muslims read the Qur'an, that I am concerned in this paper. I write with both Christians and Muslims in mind. As a Christian theologian I am grounded in Christian understandings of revelation and history, and I have been trained in historical as well as theological methods for studying the Bible. My hermeneutical approach to scripture arises from and is an expression of my Christian identity. But my identity as an Arab Christian demands that I approach the Qur'an not as an alien scripture - an alien "other" in competition or conflict with the Bible - but rather as another scripture which has had, and continues to have an immense influence on the moral values and socio-political character of the

society to which I fully belong. I recognize that Muslims have their distinctive ways of understanding and interpreting scripture, both the Qur'an and the Bible. Western scholars often stereotype these as pre-critical in contrast to Western critical mythologies. Without being drawn into this debate, I would simply insist that this is an example of the Arab Christian experience of falling between chairs. Rather than foundering in such a quagmire, I shall try to build bridges. In this paper I propose to explore an Arab Christian approach to the Qur'an which may help Western Christians toward a greater appreciation of its scriptural value, and at the same time show Muslims that Christians can engage with their (Muslim) sacred text in a constructive manner. My approach is grounded in my commitment to contextual theology. "The context of Christian Arabs is the Arab-Islamic space"⁷. If the plurality of religions in the Middle East has frequently been exploited for divisive political goals, a priority of contextual theology is to redefine the concept of religion as "a positive relationship between God and humans, simultaneously forming the basis for all of a person's relationships to other human beings and the environment"⁸. The question which therefore faces an Arab Christian contextual theologian is: how to develop a contextual approach to the understanding of Muslim scripture which can provide a basis for Christian-Muslim relationship within contemporary Arab society?

Two methodological principles are involved in answering this question. In search of a renewed understanding of the plurality of religions in Arab culture, it is imperative to deal carefully with history. A Christian contextual approach to the Qur'an will thus take seriously that the Qur'an's original meaning in history always depended on the context of the Prophet Muhammad. Muslims themselves have recognized this from the beginning, and the most

creative Muslim experimentation in a modern scriptural hermeneutic - as illustrated for example by Muhammad Arkoun⁹ provides convincing evidence that contextual approaches to scripture are by no means foreign to contemporary Islamic scholarship.

A second methodological principle of contextual theology is that it must strive to be a truly local theology. This is where, I maintain, Arab Christians have a qualitative advantage over their Western co-religionists in terms of understanding the Qur'an. The Qur'an identifies itself as "an Arabic Qur'an"¹⁰. Arabic is a language shared by Muslims and Christians in the Arab world. The Arabic language has deeply influenced the liturgical and theological character of Arab Christianity. It is also the definitive language of Islamic faith and practice. Linguistically and culturally, therefore, the two religious traditions share a common space. From within this space the Qur'an, as will be discussed in the body of this paper, engages contextually with important elements of the biblical tradition: for example, the enculturation of many biblical stories, as well as the contextualization of Jewish-Christian theology and methodology. In a precise sense, which I shall clarify later, the Qur'an may be said in Christian perspective to represent an attempt to arabize the biblical message. To the degree that this is so, it is my conviction that Arab Christianity may, therefore, offer meaningful analogies which, from a Christian perspective, may open the way to a deeper understanding of the Qur'an and of the Prophet Muhammad.

THE QUR'AN IN THE FIRST MECCAN PERIOD:

A WARNING TO THE MECCANS

Today, on the basis of the research of the great German scholar of Islam, Theodor Noldeke, it is generally accepted among scholars that the suras (chapters) of the Qur'an can be identified and dated by the linguistic style of the earliest Meccan suras. As Noldeke wrote:

The speech is majestic, rich and full of audacious images; the rhetoric momentum has completely poetic colors. The fervent movement, which is often interrupted by simple yet powerful, gentle information, and the colorful discrepancies are reflected in the short verses, and the whole speech rhymes and consists of a big yet unexpectedly pleasant color¹¹.

The early Meccan suras are different from those that followed, not only in style, but also in content. Stylistically their form is very similar to that of the ancient Arabian kahin or "soothsayer"¹². It was on these grounds that Muhammad's critics, seeking to impugn his claim to speak as a prophet, likened him to a poet, an obsessed man or a soothsayer¹³. The content of these early suras also provided grounds for such a comparison. The role of the kahin was always locally bound. The Prophet's emphasis on being sent to a particular tribe, the Banu Hashim¹⁴, as a scion of the tribal confederacy of Quraish¹⁵, and thus to the people of Mecca, over whom the Quraish exercised its hegemony, corresponds to the localism of the Arabian soothsayer.

In these early suras, the single instance of the use of the word Qur'an conveys the meaning of "recitation." This denotes the function which Muhammad fulfilled - being commanded by God

to "recite" what was revealed to him¹⁶ as distinct from the name of the message which he conveyed. Insofar as the message had a single name, Muhammad typically referred to it as a *tadkira* or "warning"¹⁷, or *amr*, "order"¹⁸. This can be understood within the earliest context of Muhammad's ministry in which he confronted the ubiquitous phenomenon of idol worship among the people of Mecca. His message was one of exhortation to his Meccan kinsfolk to believe in one God, remember God's warnings, and to escape the blazes of hell.

In support of these admonitions, Muhammad reminded his audience that the same message is found in "the writings of Abraham and Moses"¹⁹, whose message was nonetheless valid for Arabs as well. Importantly, however, he added to these the testimony of several non-biblical Arab prophets - Hud²⁰, Salih²¹ and later on Shu'aib²². This is critical for understanding Muhammad's Arabian contextuality. From the outset of his preaching, Muhammad integrated Arab prophets into his sermons, showing how they were sent to their people and clans, and how, in contradiction of their preaching, these peoples and clans allowed themselves to be lured back into paganism, for which God punished them. Featuring as keystones of his early message, these stories demonstrate how Muhammad used his Arabian context as the criterion for selecting and utilizing the other traditions - specifically those of Abraham and Moses - from which he drew. The Prophet spoke from within his context, with the result that he offered a thoroughly contextualized rendering of the Abrahamic message.

THE QUR'AN IN THE SECOND AND THIRD MECCAN PERIODS

Following the development of Muhammad's preaching into the later Meccan periods, which Noldeke identifies, several themes and emphases which amplify the Prophet's sense of contextuality emerged.

a. Muhammad's self-identification as a prophet for the Arabs

The Meccans resisted Muhammad's message so fiercely that the future of his entire mission was jeopardized. This compelled him to seek an alternative location in which his early followers could mould themselves into a new community. In 615 AD Muhammad sent his followers to Abyssinia in what was to be the first Hijra or "emigration." The only information we have about what actually occurred once the émigrés reached Abyssinia are the stories which have been transmitted in the Islamic tradition. These tell of the Muslim representatives receiving the hospitality of the Abyssinian king (Negus, [Ar.] Najashi), and of friendly conversations which are alleged to have taken place about the sanctity of Jesus and Mary²³. Although the Qur'an is said to contain certain verses that were revealed to Muhammad in relation to this event²⁴, the scripture does not contain any historical reference to the event itself. Nor do we have any information from other sources, including - most unfortunately - any of indigenous Abyssinian Christian provenances.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that from this time Muhammad's message underwent a transformation of style and content. As his utterances became more elaborate, it is clear that Muhammad was

determined to distance himself from the culture of the kahin with its parochial localism and pagan associations and that he turned more frequently towards other revealed religions. One of the reasons for this was that the Prophet now had a young community which was in search of a communal identity. The question of identity was highlighted by the encounter with Abyssinian Christians. In theological terms this raised the question: was Muhammad's message identical, similar or different from that of the Abyssinian Christians? This then raised the question of the relation between the Bible and Qur'an. The Islamic tradition reveals that Muslim émigrés in Abyssinia recited part of Sura Mariam, the chapter of Mary²⁵, where the story of the birth of Jesus is reported in order to show that the qur'anic message was in accordance with the biblical one. The conversion of one of Muhammad's followers to Christianity and his decision to stay in Abyssinia had raised awkward questions for the young Islamic community. It was time, therefore, to address the question of Islam's relationships to the other revealed religions.

To employ the terminology of Christian theology, the issue of Heils geschichte had to be addressed. How did Muhammad articulate the unfolding purposes of God in history? How did he understand the relationship between the events in which he was caught up as God's instrument of change and the action of God in and through other revealed religions? A study of the suras belonging to the second and third Meccan periods shows that a simple linear story of "salvation history," progressing in a direct line from beginning to end, did not commend itself to the Prophet. In contrast to this construction of the biblical view, the qur'anic concept presents a "decentralized" interpretation of God's action in the history of human communities.

I prefer the term "decentralized" to the misleading concept of "cyclical" history which the German scholar, Johann Fuck, has suggested²⁶. The Heilsgeschichte of the Qur'an does not have a center comparable to the Jewish understanding of the People of Israel and the Christian understanding of Jesus Christ. Qur'anic Heilsgeschichte is decentralized. It was no longer bound exclusively to a Judeo-Christian context but it was, as mentioned, an important place for the Arab prophets none of whom is mentioned in the Bible. The qur'anic Heilsgeschichte underlines that God calls a special prophet from within each "people" (qawm²⁷). The prophet is ordained to the task of calling his people, in their language, to turn to God in true monotheistic faith, trusting that God alone is worthy of their worship and obedience²⁸. A decentralized Heilsgeschichte runs the obvious danger of losing its unity. The Qur'an resolves this problem by insisting that unity lies in the message which prophets preach. Wheresoever God has called them, and among the many different peoples to whom they are sent, prophets are united by the fact that their message comes from the one and only God. What binds the prophets, therefore, is the message itself, which remains universally the same.

A good illustration of this understanding of Heilsgeschichte may be found in Surat Hud²⁹ which takes its name from one of the Arab prophets- the prophet Hud-who was sent to the people of 'Ad. The first two verses of the chapter provide a clear statement of the prophet understanding of the divine origin of the Qur'an and his specific ministry:

AL R³⁰ (this is) a book, with verses of which are known and then separated (from each other), from the (One who is) Wise and Instructed (of all), (which teaches) that you should worship, none

but God (the only God); truly He sends me to bring you a warning and to announce the good (of previous messages)³¹.

The chapter then continues with a summary of the message preached universally by Muhammad and all previous prophets:

“Seek forgiveness from your Lord and direct yourself (repentantly) to Him, and He will grant you over a certain period of time a goodly provision which is favorable to you, to show you His grace. However, if you distance yourself from Him, I fear that punishment will overcome you one great day. Direct yourself to God. He is the Almighty.”³²

Later the story of the Prophet Noah is told, the central tenet of his preaching being expressed in words identical to those cited above:

“We sent Noah (as our messenger) to his people. (He said :) 'I am the one who will warn you clearly, that you must serve none but God. I fear that punishment will overcome you one terrible day.’”³³

The chapter then recounts the stories of the non-biblical Arab prophets,

“And then to 'Ad (we sent) their brother Hud (as our messenger)... And to Thamud (we sent) their brother Salih (as our messenger)... And to Madyan (we sent) their brother Shu'aib.”³⁴

Finally, the chapter turns to the story of Moses who preached the divinely-ordained message of the prophets to Pharaoh³⁵. In this manner Surat Hud offers an instructive example of the way in which the middle and later Meccan portions of the Qur'an develop a fascinating interplay between the stories of the biblical and extra-biblical prophets in what I have termed a decentralized Heilsgeschichte.³⁶ The prophets were sent to their peoples with a monotheist message; the message was mostly received with

disbelief, except for a faithful few who listened, repented, believed and lived righteously. In contrast to these few, however, the unbelievers ridiculed, mocked and persecuted the prophets, and as a result were engulfed by God's judgment while the prophets and the faithful were saved³⁷.

At the same time biblical stories were increasingly interpreted through the contextual prism of Arab culture, ^{s38}as Muhammad drew similarities between the biblical and the Arab prophets. This characterization of prophetic history provided the framework in which Muhammad was able to interpret his own experience of being God's contemporary messenger to the Arabs in continuity with both Arab and biblical prophets of the past. He set his preaching and his suffering at the recalcitrance of the Meccan people against the measure of the life and work of previous messengers. Mecca was also compared to the previous communities who had rejected the divine message and turned their backs against God's prophets. Mutatis mutandis, the stories of the previous messengers of God were adapted more and more to the contours of Muhammad's situation, and earlier generations of unbelievers provided a metaphor for the pagan Meccans and their impending fate.

Clearly, these stories reflect Muhammad's context and are shaped by it. Muhammad did not consider his message to be something new or special, since its veracity depended on it being essentially the same as that of the previous prophets. All of the prophets - Muhammad included - received their revelation directly from the one and only God who calls all human communities to worship Him alone. By the same argument, Muhammad understood his message to be a confirmation of the previous prophets³⁹. The claim

of uniqueness had no place in this scheme. On the other hand, Muhammad was contextually conscious of his particularity: that he was sent to a community or people who had not been graced in earlier history by a messenger from God⁴⁰, and to whom no scripture had previously been granted⁴¹.

b. The Qur'an - a holy liturgy in Arabic

In the above mentioned verse, God addresses Muhammad regarding the Meccans in the following terms,

“And We have not granted them any scripts (previously), in which they could have searched, nor have We sent messengers to them before you to warn them.”⁴²

The first sentence of this verse is evidence that Muhammad did not know of the existence of any scripture in Arabic, either an original Arabic scripture or an Arabic translation of the Bible. Yet he was obviously aware of the important status that scripture enjoyed in both Jewish and Christian traditions of worship. He would have been familiar with the sight of Arabian Jews reciting the Torah in Hebrew and was aware that the various Christian peoples of Syria, Egypt and Arabia recited the Bible in their own languages.

The recitation of scripture was an indispensable element in the worship of God in both Jewish and Christian religious traditions in the Middle East. Indeed it gave rise to and became the essential component of liturgy. Prior to Muhammad, an Arabic liturgy did not exist. The Arab peoples had nothing to compare with the liturgical wealth of their Jewish and Christian neighbors. This was the source of much concern for Muhammad as he sought to bring his people to worship God in the true way. It was to remedy this

impoverishment that he emphasized the priority of an "Arabic Qur'an."

As mentioned, the word qur'an denotes something which is recited, words that are spoken aloud, and a message that is chanted. In its Semitic context, this concept qur'an appears to derive from an Aramaic precedent, where the term qeryana denoted any biblical text sung as part of the liturgy of the Syrian Church⁴³. A parallel concept is found in Jewish rabbinical literature in what Hebrew - calls miqra. This is used in the Talmud to refer to the whole Jewish Bible, serving "to underline both the vocal manner of study and the central role the public reading of the scriptures played in the liturgy of the Jews"⁴⁴. These terminological explanations suggest a concept of the way the Bible functions in worship that differs greatly from contemporary (especially Protestant) practice in the West. Recent research, however, has shown that the Western concept of scripture as something silently read and privately studied is a relatively recent phenomenon.

There is substantial evidence "that it is in only relatively recent history and specifically in the modern West that the book has become a silent object, the written work a silent sign, and the reader a silent spectator."⁴⁵

The biblical practice with which Muhammad would have been familiar in indigenous Jewish and Christian liturgies was a "community book" something which was chanted in worship. In this sense, were Muhammad alive today, he would arguably be more at home in a Middle Easterner Jewish or Christian liturgy than would the average Western Jew or Christian. It is reasonable, therefore, to conjecture that as Muhammad sought to persuade his people to worship God, it would have been with a liturgical

concept of scripture with which he attempted to remedy what was lacking in their cultural heritage. It might almost be said that in contrast to wishing to create a new religion with its own scripture, he intended to establish a local Arabic "liturgy" (qeryana, miqra, qur'an) comparable to that which the Jewish and Christian recipients of previous scriptures enjoyed.

An analysis of the form and composition of the qur'anic suras confirms this perspective. As Angelica Neuwirth has noted in her book, *Studien zur Komposition der Mekkanischen Suren*, the Qur'an was originally constructed as a liturgical speech and a recited text. She shows that Muhammad was aware that various religious groups had already evolved this practice of scripture. That which was common to the liturgical practices of these groups were the elements of introit, prayers and songs in between prayers, all of which were based on the words of scripture. Neuwirth argues that the form in which the qur'anic suras are composed is best understood within the comparative history of liturgy in the Middle East, where historic custom set scripture inseparably in the context of liturgical worship⁴⁶.

Neuwirth applied her thesis in a detailed study on the opening chapter of the Qur'an, Surat al-Fatiha. Rather than reading it as the introduction to a book, she interprets it as the introit to "prayer liturgy." Prayer (salah) was the essential element of the developing Islamic cult, of worship during the Meccan period, and quickly became the distinguishing feature of the group of converts who surrounded the Prophet. The content of their prayers comprised verses of the Qur'an which were recited from memory in the as-yet entirely oral tradition of retaining holy words⁴⁷. The Fatiha was the primary form of such prayer, and has continued to be so in Muslim

practice throughout history. The link between prayer and recitation led Neuwirth to conclude that the organizational format of the Quran should be understood "in the context of the familiar forms used for the opening ceremony of the communal services at Prophet Muhammad's time"⁴⁸.

Related to this important insight into the liturgical nature of the Qur'an is the fact that it was/is an Arabic liturgy (qur'an 'arabi) as the Qur'an several times emphasizes by way of self-definition⁴⁹. This raises the issue of language as an essential ingredient of contextualization. As has already been shown, Muhammad was convinced during the Meccan period of his preaching that his message was identified in content with earlier prophets and particularly to the Jews and Christians who are known collectively in the Qur'an as the ahl al-kitab, "the People of the Book." The message he was preaching differed from these biblical scriptures in one respect only, namely the language in which it was revealed and communicated. It was an Arabic Qur'an, accepted and internalized by Arab converts, who then reflected on its meaning in prayerful liturgy in the Arabic language. The fact that it was in Arabic, the language of the people, was inseparably connected in Muhammad's mind with its quality as revealed truth.

To understand this connection it is helpful to examine closely a verse in Surat Fussilat⁵⁰ which reads:

“Should we have had it, a Qur'an (in a language) other than Arabic, they would have said: 'why its verses are not explained (separately) - a non-Arabic Qur'an and an Arabic (messenger)!' Say: For all who believe, it is guidance and a healing. For those who do not believe it causes deafness in the ears, and it deprives them of their sight. They are people who are being called from afar.”⁵¹

At one level this verse speaks unambiguously to the cultural imperative that scripture be in the language of the people in order that it be understood. A Qur'an in the indigenous Arabic language was a condition of its being understood by the Arab people to whom it was revealed, and thus an aid for their belief⁵². Beyond the level of comprehension, however, the concept of the Qur'an as an Arabic, liturgy allows for a more profound dimension of meaning. A liturgy enacted in a foreign language is deprived of the power to affect, impress and transform the worshipper. The word of God, as it were, remains in the dark - silent, inconceivable.

In Christian experience, a local liturgy corresponds with the Christian concept of Incarnation. As Jesus' disciples believed that in Jesus they had seen into the mystery of God - into God's manner of revealing divinity to them, of God's being with them in Jesus' person, actions and words - so later generations of Christians have continued to encounter God-in-Christ in the divine liturgy. Does this ancient Christian understanding of the spiritual significance of liturgy afford an insight into the meaning of the Qur'an? In the concluding sentence of the above-quoted verse, the unbelievers (whose hearing and sight have been made useless) are said to be a people who are being called from a distant place. By contrast, those who believe, and for whom, therefore, the Qur'an provides guidance and healing, must be understood as experiencing God's Word as an immediate, intimate reality – actually present in words of the Arabic Qur'an. This surely implies Muhammad and following his precedence, all devout Muslims experiencing God calling them in and through the Qur'an, near and clear, not "from afar" where, for the unbeliever, God remains remote.

The Qur'an thus becomes for Muslims the point of divine-human encounter, just as divine liturgy has traditionally been the same for Middle Eastern Christianity. In the Middle Eastern Churches revelation has never been related primarily to text, but rather to the liturgy which is characterized as "holy". God makes His presence known in liturgy as the presence of Jesus Christ is known in the celebrated sacrament. In this respect Cantwell Smith is correct in drawing a comparison between the Muslim recital of the Qur'an and the Christian celebration of the Eucharist⁵³.

This means of understanding the liturgical quality of the Arabic Qur'an also addresses another issue upon which Islamic orthodoxy insists: that the Qur'an is not to be translated. Translation is of course technically possible albeit fraught with philological perils. The Qur'an has been effectively translated into many languages for purposes of human understanding though not for authoritative reference in matters of faith and ethics. Yet by the criterion of a liturgical understanding of the holy quality of the Qur'an, a purely cognitive approach to the text as implied in the question of translation is clearly inadequate. Translation cannot transmit the proximity of God which is experienced in the liturgical recitation of the Qur'an in Arabic. A translated text does not touch the soul; it cannot inspire people to meditate, pray and weep - or as the Qur'an puts it:

“When the verses of [God] Most Gracious are recited to them, they fall down prostrate in adoration and in tears.”⁵⁴

Though intellectual meaning may be conveyed through translation, the spiritual quality of the text is dulled; it remains distant and becomes, as it is for unbelievers, something which merely "calls from afar.”

Revealed scripture by this liturgical reckoning cannot be translated because it would lose its revelatory quality. That which applies to the translation of the Arabic Qur'an into another language is the same logic which would have constrained Muhammad from translating the Bible from its original languages into Arabic. Muhammad claimed recognition as a prophet, not as a Bible translator⁵⁵. Eager as he may have been to learn as much as possible of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, and convinced that the message he was preaching was essentially the same as theirs, his specific vocation was to render divine revelation to the Arabs in their own tongue. The Arabic Qur'an could not be the scriptural liturgy for Arabs that Muhammad intended if it were merely a translation of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts.

All revelation needs to be culturally specific, both in language and content. In this sense the Arabs needed "a new revelation" and the Qur'an calls to be recognized as such. This is the logic of a decentralized concept of revelation. Revelation, in the early qur'anic understanding is re-iterated in culturally-specific forms linguistically diverse but united in the message it conveys. The preaching of God's word is not controlled by a single authoritative center which sends missionaries out to disseminate and translate the message; rather, it is communicated by many local prophets who proclaim the message to their people. A processed "indigenization" is redundant because the messengers and the message are already indigenous. As the Qur'an puts it,

“And We have sent you no messenger (to any nation), except (with a message) in the languages of its people, so as he can offer them clarity.”⁵⁶

It is the linguistic clarity of qur'anic scripture, and its liturgical impact through which God's presence is known and celebrated, that infuses the Qur'an with the quality of "inimitability" or "uniqueness" – i'jaz in Arabic, which Muslim religious scholars have applied to both its form and content.

THE QUR'AN IN MEDINA

The suras belonging to the Meccan periods of Muhammad's preaching were not then understood as constituting a new scripture, independent of the scriptures of the Jews and Christians. It has been argued that they should be understood, instead, as a form of liturgical contextualization of God's word, parallel to the Jewish and Christian liturgies with which Muhammad would have been familiar. Muhammad vehemently rejected the taunt of pagan Meccans who claimed that they would not believe anything he had to say until and unless he brought them a book that they could read⁵⁷. The idea of a new scripture was tantamount to disbelief. After the Hijra from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD, Muhammad was faced with a new context which required new responses. The concept of a prophet for his own qawm (people, or tribe) no longer pertained to the confined, localized sense it originally had in Mecca. His own people tribe of Quraish had repudiated him, whereas another people, the tribe of Medina, welcomed him and many became his devout followers. The message, consequently, had to be broadened and expanded beyond Mecca. The situation in Medina differed also in that its population included several resident Jewish tribes. This gave Muhammad his first sustained contact with Jews with whom, as "the People of the Book" (ahl al-kitab) he had identified himself spiritually while in Mecca. As he encountered them in Medina, however, he was quickly

disappointed on two counts. They rejected his credentials as a prophet with the same message as theirs, and with Abraham and Moses in particular; and they argued among themselves which suggested to Muhammad that they were in disagreement about the revelation which they had received from their prophets - the very prophet whose missions Muhammad invoked in authentication of his own. The rejection of Muhammad's claim to be a prophet was especially painful since it came not from pagans but from those whom he regarded as fellow believers. This forced him to rethink his position and develop a new orientation in two major areas. First, he needed to re-define his understanding of the relationship between his message and that of the People of the Book who rejected it. Second, he had to explain the divisions among the People of the Book themselves. These two existential issues cast in a new light what had been a key premise of his teaching during the Meccan period: namely, that the message of the various prophets is universally identical. Were this the case, Muhammad must now have asked himself, surely the faith of the Jewish tribes would have led them to recognize his status as a prophet of God? Unity among the followers of a monotheistic tradition of faith should have also resulted. In that this was evidently not the case on either count, the Meccan teachings had to undergo modification and expansion.

With this context in mind, it is possible to examine the development of Muhammad's teaching in relation to his understanding of scripture and the concept of "a chosen people." The scenario in which the evolution took place was evidently one of dispute with the Medinan Jew though by extension it applied to Christians as well. In contrast to the harmonious spirit of the Meccan suras, the Medinan passages of relevance to this

discussion are of a more disputatious nature. It is noteworthy that the line of Muhammad's argument displays interesting parallels with earlier religious controversies, evident in the texts of the New Testament between emergent Christianity and Judaism.

a. The Qur'an - a "furqan" for former scriptures

According to the evidence of Islamic historical texts, it seems likely that Muhammad had direct discussions with Jewish rabbis⁵⁸. In these debates the rabbis would have produced many arguments to dismiss Muhammad's claim that the Qur'an was identical to the Torah. Muhammad, for his part, would have argued the obverse proposition, that it was the Torah which was out of harmony with the Qur'an.

This involved several explanations. A small but significant qualification was introduced into the qur'anic description of "the People of the Book" from the original "those, who were granted scriptures," to those who were granted part [nasib] of the scriptures,"⁵⁹ This in effect reduced the Torah, in qur'anic estimation, to the status of a partial and, therefore, imperfect scripture by comparison with the Qur'an which contained the full account of God's word.

It was in this Medinan context that Muhammad first employed the terms tawrat and injil⁶⁰ to distinguish two discrete scriptures - the Torah and the Gospel - neither of which was deemed to be complete inspiration of the Word of God. A second line of argument focused on the human stewardship of scripture. The Jews in particular were reproached for allegedly having distorted their scripture⁶¹. The Qur'an, by contrast, professed to be a perfect book, qualified therefore to function as the criterion of divine truth

against which the shortcomings of earlier scriptures could be exposed⁶². The term furqan denotes this discriminatory function, establishing the authoritative canon by which the true word of God is established. The Qur'an thus became an independent scripture, differentiated from both the tawrat of the Jews and the injil of the Christians. No longer did it serve only as an Arabic liturgy, but came to be construed as a holy book (kitab), comprising revelations which henceforth were to be recorded and compiled - though the textual result was fully established only after Muhammad's death.

b. The Qur'an - a revelation for the "pagan"

Muhammad interpreted his rejection by the Jews as evidence not only of their mis-understanding of scripture but also as the error of their own self-understanding of being a "chosen people"⁶³. It is with respect to the latter perspective that the Jews denounced Muhammad and characterized the Muslim community in Medina as "pagan"⁶⁴. The term ummiyyun is the Arabic equivalent of the Hebrew ummot, meaning "pagan peoples." Although for the Jews it carried pejorative implications, Muhammad accepted the term and infused it with a positive meaning. Using the singular form of the word he referred to himself as al-nabi al-ummi. This clearly did not mean that he regarded himself as in any way a "pagan" prophet, but rather a prophet called by God from outside the ranks of those who regarded themselves as God's specially chosen: a prophet for those who, by the standards of the Medinan Jews at least, were marginalized from God's workings in history⁶⁵. For the reader of the New Testament, this recalls the Apostle Paul's styling himself, when faced by the rejection of his fellow Jews, as the "pagan" prophet sent to the Gentiles. In a comparable manner,

Muhammad turned consciously away from the Jews and identified himself and his mission specifically in relation to the Arab ummiyyun.

If his rejection by the Jews was the historical contingency which prompted this change, Muhammad's decision was entirely consistent with his understanding of a decentralized Heilsgeschichte. The Qur'an therefore claims that Muhammad was predicted to fulfill the role of al-nabi al-'umi in both the tawrat and the injil⁶⁶ - in the former by Abraham who is said to have petitioned God to send the Meccans an indigenous prophet⁶⁷, and in the latter by Jesus who is said to have predicted the advent of a prophet named Ahmad⁶⁸ whom Muslim scholars identify as Muhammad. Muslim scholars have seen in this qur'anic reference an insinuation of the Paraclete references in the Gospel of John⁶⁹.

A further criticism of the Jews' exclusivist understanding of Heilsgeschichte is found in the importance the Qur'an attaches to the prophet Ishmael (Isma'il) in the Medinan period of Muhammad's ministry. Already mentioned in the Meccan verses, his specific role as a prophet was not elaborated; he is simply included among other prophets⁷⁰ without any specific link to Abraham being established. This latter connection is only elaborated in the Medinan passages of the Qur'an, most importantly in the story of Abraham's (re) building of the ka'ba in Mecca⁷¹. The reason for this may again be found in the context of Muhammad's controversy with the Medinan Jews. It is certainly not difficult to imagine the latter, considering themselves to be the "chosen people" proudly parading their genealogical lineage as the descendants of Abraham and Isaac before Muhammad and disparaging the Arabs for being merely the descendants of Ishmael.

This, after all, is consistent with the view of the Hebrew scriptures which has God's Heilsgeschichte run selectively from Abraham through Isaac to Jacob, and in effect writes Ishmael out of the story⁷². Muhammad's genius is that he took up the cause of the excluded and marginalized⁷³. In Medina he thus focused much more specifically on the mission of the prophet Ishmael who now assumed a status fully equal to that of Isaac⁷⁴. Each of these references includes an important phrase: "We make no distinction between one and another among them." The Qur'an's decentralized Heilsgeschichte therefore places all the prophets - Isaac and Ishmael included - in equal rank in the sight of God. Ishmael was rescued from the shadows of Jewish Heilsgeschichte, and with him the Arabs were given equal status with the Jews.

It is important to note that the qur'anic phrase, "We make no distinction between one and other among them [i.e. the prophets]," applies not only to Isaac and Ishmael. In the two occurrences of the phrase cited in the previous paragraph, specific mention is made also of Moses and Jesus. This clearly raises a question against the Christian understanding of Jesus, though this is not the issue I propose to pursue here.⁷⁵ Within the present discussion, the attribution of equal status for Moses and Jesus serves a different purpose. It places each prophet and their followers - Jews and Christians respectively - in an equal relationship with Abraham.

Abraham, in the Meccan suras, was the paradigm of the hanif, an Arabic word, probably of Syriac derivation whose original meaning (either "pagan" or "true believer") is disputed by scholars⁷⁶. In its qur'anic usage, it conveys the sense of "one who is God-fearing" and denotes anyone, regardless of religious creed, who professes belief in the monotheistic God and lives in ethical

obedience to Him. The word is used paradigmatically of Abraham, against the background of the story of his break with the polytheistic traditions of his father's religion⁷⁷. In the Medinan elaboration of the quality of Abraham's faith, hanif becomes the defining characteristic of the religious community (milla) which comes to be identified with Abraham - the milla ibrahim.

In the context of Muhammad's dispute with the Jews (and by extension the Christians), this characterization of Abraham's religion provided a basis on which to debate the question of legitimate descent. The dynamics of the argument are clear in the Qur'an passage which reads,

“They [the People of the Book say: You have to be Jew or Christian if you are to be on the path [of salvation]. Say: No! [For us there is only] the religion of Abraham, a hanif, who was not one of the idolaters.”⁷⁸

This argument against salvific privilege on the basis of religion was designed to counter theological opposition by the People of the Book to Muhammad's message. For those familiar with the New Testament, this again echoes an argument of the Apostle Paul in relation to his dispute with Jewish rabbis who claimed that the legacy of Abraham was confined exclusively to Jews who had been circumcised into God's covenant with Abraham. On the basis of his exegesis of Genesis 15 to 17, Paul argued that Abraham's faith was deemed righteous before he was circumcised; hence faith, not circumcision, is the true mark of Abrahamic righteousness. Muhammad was making a similar point, this time against both Jews and Christians:

“You People of the Book: why are you quarrelling over Abraham when the Torah and the Gospel were only sent after his time? Have you no understanding? . . . Abraham was neither Jew nor Christian. Rather, he was hanif who submitted to God and was not an idolater.”⁷⁹

A further ramification of this argument began to change the original qur'anic view of a decentralized Heilsgeschichte. The concept of “Islam” in the Medinan portions of the Qur'an is gradually transformed from the attitude toward God shown by the God-fearing hanif, of whom Abraham was the exemplar par excellence, to become the crystallization of the religion and religious community (mill) which Abraham led. Muhammad identified himself with this community in unambiguous terms:

“Say: My Lord has guided me to a straight path, an established religion, the religion of Abraham, a hanif who was not an idolater . . . Truly, my prayer and my sacrifice, my life and my death are all for God, the Lord of the Worlds. No partner has He. Of this I am commanded, and I am the first of those who submit [i.e. muslims.]”

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c. The Qur'an - a contextual legislation for a new religion

The process of differentiation between Islam and the earlier religions of Judaism and Christianity did not take place solely at the level of theological debate. The debate itself was set in the context of the expansion of the Muslim community in Medina as the Medinan Arab tribes converted enmasse to Muhammad's teaching. Islam was rapidly becoming a definition: community, with requirements of community identity and structure. Externally it was locked in conflict with the Meccan oligarchy of

Quraish whose tribal leaders engaged in an economic war with Medina over control of the Arabian trade routes. As Muhammad prevailed in this contest, more and more of the Arabian tribes looked to Medina as the centre of a new Arabian empire, whose socio-political power was rooted in Muhammad's religious teaching.

Another aspect of Islam's disengagement from Judaism is evident in the ritual sphere of religious self-definition. It is in Medina, therefore, that Islam emerges with a distinctive cult, centered upon symbols which were a deep part of local Arab culture.

The key feature of the emerging Islamic cult was the ka'ba, an ancient cube-shaped sanctuary in Mecca, the origins of which doubtlessly belong to indigenous traditions of Arabian tribal religion. Already mentioned in the earliest Meccan portions of the Qur'an as the sanctuary specifically associated with the Quraish⁸¹, the ka'ba takes on much greater significance once Muhammad is in Medina where its origins are linked to the missions of Abraham and Ishmael⁸². The ka'ba was covered as it were, with the tapestry of Abraham's story to which, for reasons already discussed, Ishmael's was linked. As Abraham's religion was the paradigmatic form of monotheism, so the ka'ba became the original shrine of monotheistic worship. The Qur'an is not clear as to when or by whom it was built. Did Abraham himself, assisted by Ishmael⁸³, build it or did they simply restore and cleanse an already existent sanctuary⁸⁴, constructed by someone else, which had fallen into idolatrous misuse by their day? The lack of a historical answer to this question need not concern us, however, since it is the cultic significance of the ka'ba with which the Qur'an is concerned in the critical passage mentioned earlier and now quoted in full.

It takes the form of a prayer which Abraham and Ishmael are said to have prayed by the side of the ka'ba at a place referred to since then as "Abraham's place of prayer" (musalla Ibrahim) or alternatively, (maqam Ibrahim), "the place where Abraham stood":

“Lord, accept [this] from us [both]. You are the One who hears and knows all. Make us submissive to You (muslimin) and let our descend-ants become a community submissive to You (umma muslima). And show us our rites. And turn to us in mercy, for You are the merciful and compassionate.”⁸⁵

Of the rites here in question the most important is that of pilgrimage (hajj). This was originally an ancient Arab cultic festival performed at the ka'ba. Now, in a process of symbolic transference, it was given new meaning in association with Abraham and Ishmael who in turn are robed in purified Arab cultic garb. It was no coincidence that Muhammad physically purified the ka'ba of all idolatrous associations as his first act after Mecca's capitulation to Islam in 630 AD.

The continuation of Abraham's prayer at the kab'a says:

“Lord, send among them [i.e. the descendants of Abraham and Ishmael] a messenger from their own ranks, who will recite Your signs [revealed verses] to them, who will instruct them in the scripture and wisdom, and purify them [from the pollution of paganism]. You are the Almighty and the All-wise.”⁸⁶

This prayer draws us to "the heart of the matter" in understanding how Muhammad must have perceived himself and the religious community which he created. He was the nabi al-ummi - the prophet for the Arabs who had been excluded from the biblical Heilsgeschichte. Like Ishmael, whom the Jews had marginalized

from God's purposes in history, his prophethood was impugned and his preaching criticized. He responded with a radical act of local contextualization, consistent with the decentralized Heilsgeschichte which he had developed from his earliest preaching in Mecca. Abraham was not the patriarch of a single people, but "the leader of humankind"⁸⁷ who, by association with his son Ishmael could bear a distinctly Arab identity while at the same time being the father of Isaac, the progenitor of the Jews. The symbolism of this identity focused cultically on the ka'ba and the rites of prayer (salah) and pilgrimage (hajj). Muhammad saw himself as the embodiment of this contextualization of Abrahamic history and his followers as its communal realization.

Conclusion

By re-reading the Qur'an in a text-critical and contextual way, the different developments in qur'anic self-understanding become clear. In the Meccan period one can see the Qur'an as a warning to the people of Mecca, Muhammad as a prophet to the Arabs, and the Qur'an as an Arab Judeo-Christian liturgy. A positive attitude towards the Jewish and Christian scriptures in particular can be seen during this period. In the Madinan period, the Qur'an is increasingly distinguished from previous scriptures. It begins to function as a criterion by which the formed are judged. It is a revelation to the "pagans" - those outside the Judeo Christian Heilsgeschichte, and a cultic law for the newly established Muslim community. It is interesting in this regard to see how the Qur'an deals with the biblical heritage, including the Arabization of the scripture, the enculturation of Biblical stories and the contextualization of Jewish- Christian theology and methodology. This process was shaped by the interaction of three different

elements, namely: Arab culture, the Judeo-Christian heritage, and the experience of the Prophet himself. In all stages of this process one can see an obvious tendency to Arabize and to contextualize the Judeo-Christian heritage. In this regard, the Prophet Mohammed can be viewed as a master of contextual theology and the Qur'an as the scripture for Arab tribes.

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¹ For his classic article dealing with this subject, see "Is the Qur'an the Word of God?" (Smith, 1981: 282-300). For his fuller elaboration of this approach, Smith, 1993: 21-44.

² Das Koranische Jesusbild, Helsinki, 1971.

³ Christianity and the World Religions: Paths to Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. London: Collins, 1985.

⁴ See Raheb (1995), especially the chapter "My identity as a Palestinian Christian", pp. 3-14.

⁵ (Raheb, 1995: 9).

⁶ (Ibid.: 10-11)

⁷ (Ibid: 4-6)

⁸ (Ibid.: 44)

⁹ (Arkoun, 1992)

¹⁰ (Q12:2 et passim)

¹¹ (Noldeke, 1970: 7)

¹² (Fahd: 420)

¹³ (Q52, 29; Q69, 41; Q37, 35)

¹⁴ (Q111)

¹⁵ (Q106)

¹⁶ (Q75, 18)

¹⁷ (Q74, 49-56; Q69, 47)

¹⁸ (Q97, 3)

¹⁹ (Q87: 18; Q53: 37-54)

²⁰ (Pellat: 537); see Q26,123-40; Q11,52-63; Q7,63-70 et passim for the main features of Hud's story among the people of 'Ad between modern-day Uman and Hadramawt in Southern Arabia.

²¹ See Q7: 73; Qll: 61 Q26:141; Q51:43; Q54: 24; Q69:4; Q27: 45 for the story of Salih's mission among the people of Thamud, in Northern Arabia.

²² (Q69: 4-6); see Qll: 89; Q26: 176-89; Q50: 13; Q15: 78; Q3: 13; Qll: 84-95; Q29: 36 for the story of Shu'aib's mission among the Medianites. He may be identified with Yethro in the Hebrew scriptures.

²³ (Guillaume, 1978: 146)

²⁴ (Q5: 85-6)

²⁵ (Q19)

²⁶ (Paret. 1975:175)

²⁷ In contrast to modern usage of this term, the qur'anic term denotes a tribe or clan, or a group of people who accept a common patriarchal leader, with a common genealogy, and shared locality. In this latter sense it may denote a city-state.

²⁸ (Q35: 24; Q14: 4; Q10: 47)

²⁹ (Q11)

³⁰ These letters are an example of the phenomenon of consonantal prefixes which appear at the beginning of thirty suras of the Qur'an. They are known as the "abbreviated letters" (al-muqatta'at), the meaning and function of which are unclear.

³¹ (Q11: 1-2)

³² (Q11: 3-4)

³³ (Q11: 25-26)

³⁴ (Q11: 50-95)...

³⁵ (Q11: 96-109)

³⁶ I coin this term in preference over Johann Fueck's characterization of the Qur'anic concept of revelation being "cyclic"; see Paret, 1995: 175.

³⁷ (Busse, 1988: 102)

³⁸ For example, the story of the creation and sin: 7, 11-25, 15, 26-4§; 17, 61-65; 21 116-124; 38, 71; 11, 69-76; 15, 51-56; 19, 41-50; 21, 51-72; 26, 69-86; 37, 83-113; 4: 26; 51; 24-37; of Joseph (above all sura 12); of Moses: 7, 104-162; 10, 75-82; 11, 17, 10 19, 51-53; 20, 9-98; 26,10-68; 27, 7-12; 28,1-

50; 40, 23-46; of David: 17, 55; 21, 78; 2 15; 34, 10; 38, 18-25; and Solomon: 21, 81; 27, 15-44; 34, 12; 38, 30-40. Other verse relate to the New Testament stories, which stem most of the time from Medina (3, 33-5' 4, 157-158; 5, 110-120).

³⁹ (Q12: 111; Q26: 196; Q46: 12)

⁴⁰ (Q32: 3; Q36: 6)

⁴¹ (Q34: 44)

⁴² (Q34: 44)

⁴³ (Bowman, 1981: 31-8)

⁴⁴ (Graham, 1987: 90)

⁴⁵ (Ibid: 45); see also Smith, W. 1993.

⁴⁶ (Neuwirth, 1981: 1-10)

⁴⁷ (Q7: 204)

⁴⁸ (Neuwirth, 1991: 331-57)

⁴⁹ (Q12: 2; Q13: 37; Q41: 44; Q42: 7; jQ43: 30)

⁵⁰ (Q41)

⁵¹ (Q41: 44).

⁵² (Q12: 2; Q20: 113; Q41: 3; Q42: 3; Q26: 198)

⁵³ (Smith, 1981: 244)

⁵⁴ (Q19: 58)

⁵⁵ (Paret, 1975: 83)

⁵⁶ (Q14: 4)

⁵⁷ (Q17: 93)

⁵⁸ (Guillaume, 1978: 192)

⁵⁹ (Q3: 23; Q4: 44, 51)

⁶⁰ The Arabic word injil probably derives from the Ethiopian term wangel and should therefore be differentiated etymologically from the Greek euangelion. The term is used twelve times in the Qur'an, exclusively in Medinan chapters.

⁶¹ (Q5:13; Q2: 75; Q4: 46; Q5: 41)

⁶² (Q3: 3; Q4: 105; Q5: 51)

⁶³ (Q2: 80, 94, 111; Q3: 24; Q4: 49; Q5: 18)

⁶⁴ (ummiyyun: Q3: 75)

⁶⁵ (Noldeke, 1970: 159)

⁶⁶ (Q7: 157)

⁶⁷ (Q2:129)

⁶⁸ (Q6: 61)

⁶⁹ (John 14: 16-17; 16: 7-11)

⁷⁰ (Q6: 86; Q21: 85)

⁷¹ (Q2: 124-128)

⁷² See especially Genesis 16, 17, and 21: 9-21.

⁷³ (Hayek, 1964)

⁷⁴ (Q2, 136; Q3, 84)

⁷⁵ For a discussion of the difference between Muslim and Christian views of Jesus, see Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (1991).

⁷⁶ (Watt: 165).

⁷⁷ (Q6: 74-82; Q19: 41-50)

⁷⁸ (Q2: 135)

⁷⁹ (Q3: 65-67)

⁸⁰ (Q6: 161-163)

⁸¹ (Q106)

⁸² (Q2: 124-129)

⁸³ (as Q2:127 might suggest)

⁸⁴ (as suggested by Q2: 125)

⁸⁵ (Q2: 128)

⁸⁶ (Q2: 129)

⁸⁷ (imam li'l-nass: Q2: 124)