

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO THE GOSPELS
edited by Stephen C. Barton (2006)

Forthcoming

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO THE
QUR'ĀN

Edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe
Georgetown University



4 Themes and topics

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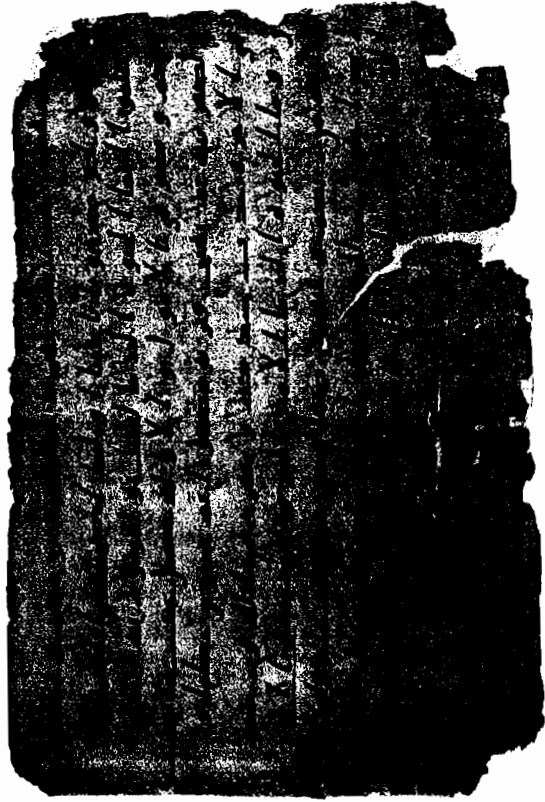


Fig. 4 Qur'an fragment from an eighth-century *hijazi* parchment in horizontal format, depicting Q.57:19–23 (Khalili Collection KFAQ.34). Courtesy of the Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art, London

It is not uncommon for people to ask what the Qur'an (or any other scripture for that matter) actually says on a particular issue. Thus it might be useful to preface this chapter with a few comments on the way that question is framed, and what it presumes. That word 'actually' suggests the questioner believes a text has a single, objectively verifiable meaning. Yet when texts speak – and that is a particularly appropriate verb in the Qur'an's case – they speak to particular people in particular circumstances. The Qur'an's meaning, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith has pointed out, is the history of its meanings.¹ That is true in both an internal and an external sense. First, the Qur'an reflects the history of its own development over the more than twenty years of its address to a varied audience. Second, since the time of its canonisation it has been read by a very diverse community of faith in widely different historical contexts.

So what the Qur'an 'actually' says, is what it says to actual readers, especially believing readers. No community of faith reads its scripture with a detachment that strives for some elusive objectivity: believers read scriptures, often at the same time reading things into them. Nor are scriptures necessarily read as a whole, with the community feeling it has to reconcile and explain every detail of the text. There are in most traditions what have been called 'canons within the canon'. A 'scriptural' approach to any subject does not emerge simply from the sacred text, but rather brings that text into conversation with other elements both from within and from outside the tradition. This chapter, then, will offer one reading of the Qur'an's main concerns. Though it may be possible to discern historical development in some aspects of the Qur'an's thought, by and large this will be a reading of the text as it currently stands, fixed as a canon of scripture, and therefore presuming a substantial unity in its thought.

God could be said to be the subject of the Qur'an in a double sense: first in that God is the speaker – the Qur'an's 'I' or 'We' – and second that in many respects God is the centre of the text's attention. For this reason it would

be inaccurate to speak of God as one theme among the many treated by the revelation; each of its themes revolves around the divine nature and the divine initiative. Therefore, in discussing each area of the Qur'an's content in this chapter, we will take as the starting point God's attributes and actions as specified in the text itself. Many of these attributes are among what are called the most beautiful names (*al-asma' al-husnā*), a term used three times in the Qur'an: 'He is God, the creator, the maker, the shaper. To him belong the most beautiful names. All that is in the heavens and the earth glorifies him. He is the mighty, the wise' (Q 59:24; see also Q 17:110; 20:8).

God's title in the Qur'an is Allāh, generally taken to be a contraction of the Arabic *al-ilāh* meaning 'the God'. The name seems to have been familiar in pagan pre-Islamic Arabia as the name of a high god, and the way in which the Qur'an uses it when addressing Jews and Christians suggests that for them too it was a familiar usage. It is close to, though not simply identifiable with, the word for God (*Alāhā*) in the Aramaic used by these two groups of believers at the time, and it is the name still used for God by Arabic-speaking Christians. Another title which seems to have functioned independently as a personal name for God in the earlier parts of the Qur'an is al-Rahmān ('the merciful'). It too is attested as the name of a divinity in southern and central Arabia prior to the emergence of Islam. In what are considered to be the later parts of the Qur'an, however, al-Rahmān apparently becomes subordinate to the name Allāh, as witness the invocation placed at the beginning of all but one of the sūras: 'In the name of God (Allāh), the merciful (*al-rahīm*), the compassionate (*al-raḥīm*).'²

GOD IS ONE, ABSOLUTE

Without doubt the Qur'an's most insistent assertion is that God is one, to the exclusion of all others, and this has become the heart of the Muslim profession of faith. Thirty times in the Qur'an the phrase 'there is no deity but him' is repeated. Several other times the people are reminded of God's unity in words reminiscent of Israel's *shema*; for example 'Your God is one God; there is no God but him, the beneficent, the merciful' (Q 2:163). The listeners are continually told to serve or to put their trust in none but God. In three of these affirmations God speaks in the first person. For example, 'He sends down the angels with the spirit of his command on those of his servants whom he wills, (saying) "Warn people that there is no God but me, so fear me"' (Q 16:2; see also Q 20:14; 21:25). In a striking usage the Qur'an tells us (Q 3:18) God himself bears witness (*shahida*) that there is no god apart from him. From this comes the divine name *al-shahid*. Q 17:111 sums

up the doctrine: God has no partner (*sharik*), no patron (*wali*), no offspring (*walad*). Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ (Q 112) commands the recitation of the creedal statement: 'He, God, is one (*aḥad*). God is the everlasting (*al-ṣamad*). He has neither begotten nor been begotten, and none is his equal (*kufuwan*).'

The insistence on the unity of God is not simply a concern for numerical unity. The uniqueness extends to many of God's attributes – for example, God alone is eternal (*al-qayyūm*, Q 2:25), glorious (*dhū l-jalāl*, Q 55:27; *al-majīd*, Q 85:15), sufficient unto himself (*al-ghaniyy*, Q 6:133), most high (*al-a'lā*, Q 87:1), powerful (*al-qādir*, Q 6:65; *al-qādir*, Q 30:54; *al-qawiyy*, Q 11:66), the first and the last (*al-awwal wa-l-ākhir*, Q 57:3).

GOD IS CREATOR

All of this would be, in a sense, academic were it not for the fact that God is creator (*al-khāliq*, Q 59:24; *al-khallaq*, Q 15:86), initiator (*al-bārī*; Q 59:24), shaper (*al-muṣawwir*, Q 59:24) and originator of the heavens and the earth (*bādī' al-samāwāti wa-l-arḍi*, Q 2:117). Without creation there would be neither proof of, nor witnesses to, God's unrivalled supremacy.

The Qur'an presents a decidedly anthropocentric view of God's creativity. God's role in the creation of human beings – both of the first person and of each successive individual born through the normal process of procreation – is rehearsed several times in the Qur'an. While the angels and jinn are created from fire (e.g., Q 15:27), the human is said to be created by God's hands (Q 38:75–6) from earth (*arḍ*, cf. Q 20:55), dust (*ṭurāb*, Q 3:59; 30:20) and from various forms of clay (*ṭin*, Q 6:2; *ṣalsāl*, Q 15:26; 55:14). God breathes his spirit into the creature (Q 15:29; 32:9; 38:72). God forms human beings in stages (*aṭwār*, Q 71:14) in the womb: 'We created the human being from an extract of clay; then made it a drop in a safe lodging; then we made the drop a clot, and then made the clot a little lump. Then we made the little lump bones, then clothed the bones with flesh, and then caused it to grow as another creation. So blessed be God, the best of creators' (Q 23:12–14).

The heavens and the earth are all arranged for humanity: 'God is the one who created the heavens and the earth, and makes water descend from the sky, so bringing forth fruit to nourish you, and who makes ships to serve you, that they may sail the sea at his command, and has made rivers to be of service to you; and puts the sun and the moon, constant in their courses, at your service, and has made serve you also night and day' (Q 14:32–3).³ Even the stars have been made in order to help people find their way (Q 6:96–7).

Furthermore, it is not only animal and inanimate creation that are thus subjected to the human beings God creates. When God tells the angels of his intention to create a human being, they protest, knowing the trouble that will be wrought on earth by this creature made from 'black mud' (cf. Q 2:30). At the moment of the creation, the angels are ordered by God to bow down to Adam, and so they do, with the exception of Iblis, who is then condemned for his rebellion and becomes the enemy and tempter of humanity. The story is told seven times in the Qur'ān, each time in a slightly different form.⁴

Many of the divine attributes can be found in created things, though of course God is their origin and perfection. God, who is all-hearing (*al-samī*; Q 2:127) and all-seeing (*al-basīr*, Q 17:1), appoints also for humanity hearing and sight (Q 32:9). While others may be alive, they are so only because the living one (*al-hayy*, Q 2:255) is also the giver of life (*al-muhyi*, Q 41:39). Others may be merciful, wise and judicious, but God is 'the most merciful of those who exercise mercy' (*arḥam al-rāḥimīn*, Q 7:151) and 'the most just of judges' (*aḥkam al-ḥākimīn*, Q 95:8). God alone comprehends all things (*muḥit*, Q 3:120; *wāsī*, Q 2:115) whereas others comprehend only what God wills (Q 2:255). God alone is omniscient (*al-ʿalīm*, Q 2:32),⁵ and others know only as much as God teaches them. At the moment of his creation, God teaches Adam the names of things – something the angels do not know – and God then humbles the angels by demonstrating their comparative ignorance (Q 2:31–3).

FAITH: THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF GOD AS SOVEREIGN CREATOR

The relationship of humanity to God is predicated on the fact that it is God who has given us life. Indeed we are told that this relationship was already acknowledged by human beings before we were individually created: 'When your lord brought forth from the children of Adam, from their loins, their seed, and made them testify of themselves, saying, "Am I not your lord?" They said, "Indeed yes. We so testify"' (Q 7:172). We are bound to God, then, in a relationship of gratitude, with the obligation to recognise the rich gift that is ours not only in having been created ourselves, but in having the rest of creation constantly shaped around our human needs. Thus there is a profound connection between faith (*īmān*) and gratitude (*shukr*).⁶ As creator, God alone is a sure guide (*hādī*, Q 25:31) to life in the world, and human beings must allow themselves to be guided (*al-muhtadīn*, Q 2:157) or they will go astray (*al-ḍālīn*, Q 1:7). God alone can be advocate (*wakīl*,

Q 73:9), protector (*walī*, Q 2:107; *mawlā*, Q 2:286) and guardian (*ḥāfiẓ*, Q 12:64; *ḥafīẓ*, Q 11:57).

The essence of unbelief, therefore, is ingratitude – the word *kufṛ* is used for both. It consists in failing to acknowledge God as creator, and so seeking protection, guidance and help from others than God. It is a failure to take seriously what is perfectly evident about God from creation. 'He gives you some of anything you ask him; if you were to count the favours of God, you would not be able to number them. Man (*al-insān*) is truly a wrong-doer, an ingrate [*kaffār* – an intensive form of the more common *kāfir*] (Q 14:34). 'He has created the heavens and the earth with truth. He makes night succeed day, and day succeed night, and he makes subservient the sun and the moon, each running for an appointed term. Is not he the mighty (*al-ʿazīz*), the forgiving (*al-ghaffār*)? He created you from one soul, then from it he made its mate; and he has provided for you eight pairs of cattle. He created you in your mothers' wombs – creation after creation – in threefold darkness. Such is God, your lord. His is the sovereignty. There is no God but him. How then did you turn away? If you are ungrateful (*in takfīrū*), God has no need of you, nor is he pleased with ingratitude (*al-kufra*) from his servants; but if you are grateful (*in tashkurū*), he is pleased with you for that' (Q 39:5–7). 'Lo! your lord is gracious towards humanity, but most of them do not give thanks' (Q 27:73). The sight and hearing that God gave us at our creation turn out to have been useless because we have denied the very evidence of those eyes and ears (Q 46:26).

IN CREATING, GOD REVEALS

God's first revelation, then, is in creation. Just as the creative activity of God is continuous and not merely confined to an initial moment, the Qur'ān insists that God is constantly providing 'signs' (*āyāt* or *āy*, plurals of *āya*) that manifest all we need to know about God and about our rightful place in relationship to God.⁷ Natural phenomena pointing to the creator are there to be comprehended by anyone who has the intelligence (*ʿaql*) to reflect on them (*tafakkara*), to acknowledge their truth (*ṣaddaqa*) and to respond with faithful submission (*īmān*, *islām*). Inanimate creation itself recognises and submits to God's sovereignty: 'Have they not observed all things that God has created, how their shadows bend to right and left, making prostration to God, and how they are humble?' (Q 16:48; see also Q 13:15). Humans, however, pay little attention to these obvious evidences of God's sovereignty. They are heedless (*ghafil*, Q 7:136) and ignorant (*jāhil*, Q 6:34); they forget (*nasū*, Q 9:67). Though they may turn to God when in danger of their lives,

as soon as the threat passes they turn back to other divinities or agencies as partners with or rivals to God (Q 29:65; 39:8).

GOD HAS NO PARTNERS

It is traditionally understood that there are two audiences addressed by the assertion of God's uniqueness: the pagans of Mecca on the one hand, and the People of the Scripture (*ahl al-kitāb*, also translated as People of the Book), the Jews and Christians, on the other. It has been customary to read the Qur'ān's polemic against the Meccans as though they were principally worshippers of idols, and the Islamic historical tradition has elaborated a great deal on the little there is in the text explicitly about idols.⁸ As a result of this there may have been too strong a distinction drawn between the two audiences. What unites these two groups is their tendency to associate other powers with God. Though the Christians and Jews are not explicitly accused of the sin of *shirk*, of being polytheists, at least some of these People of the Scripture are to be considered unbelievers (e.g., Q 2:105; 3:186). The Christians deify Christ (Q 5:72; 9:30); they are accused of reducing God to merely 'the third of three' (Q 5:73), and they consider Jesus and his mother 'two gods apart from God' (Q 5:116). The Jews are said to consider 'Uzayr (Ezra) to be the son of God (Q 9:30). Given these criticisms, therefore, commentators on the Qur'ān are not slow to apply the term *mushrik* (associater, polytheist) also to People of the Scripture.

The Qur'ān envisages a network of relationships defined by the notion of protective friendship. It is essential to choose the right *wali* or *mawla*. Ultimately God alone can be counted on as protector, though the angels also perform this role at God's command (Q 4:131), as do the messenger and the believing community (Q 5:55). The believers are protective friends to one another and should not choose as protectors People of the Scripture (Q 5:51, 57), hypocrites (Q 4:88–9), or unbelievers – even members of their own family (see, for example, Q 4:139; 9:23). Those who choose other than God as protector end up, whether they realise it or not, with the demons (*al-shayāṭin*) as their patrons (Q 7:27, 30) and it is for those demons that the unbelievers are fighting rather than for God (Q 3:175; 4:76).

GOD'S MESSENGERS

The abundant revelation in nature has by itself mostly failed to elicit the appropriate response from human beings. They scarcely remember their primordial sworn testimony to God's uniqueness and sovereignty, nor do

they reflect on the evidence that surrounds them. Even the first human being was found to be lacking in fidelity to the covenant God made with him (Q 20:115). Therefore, God sends messengers to warn of the consequences of such infidelity. Hundreds of times the Qur'ān uses words from the Arabic root *dh-k-r* indicating that messengers are sent to remind (*dhakkara*) human beings of their covenant (*mithāq*, *ahd*): 'Remember God's graciousness to you and his covenant by which he bound you when you said, "We have heard and obeyed." Revere God. He knows the nature of hearts' (Q 5:7). The messengers remind people of God's blessing (*baraka*, *ni'ma*) and the signs (*āyāt*) all around them. They call their people to faith (Q 40:10), to salvation (Q 40:41) and to guidance (cf. Q 7:148).

The messengers are also charged with relating and with interpreting for their people the history of God's dealing with humanity – the history of prophecy and the fate of the nations that have passed away before them. For example, Q 24:34: 'We have sent down for you revelations that make things clear, and the example of those who passed away before you, as an admonition for the godfearing.'

In the Qur'ān God continually revisits the signs in nature and history with a series of formulaic refrains expressing the desired response: 'Perhaps you/they might . . . ' 'Will you/they not . . . ?' 'Surely in that there are signs for a people who . . . ' The verbs used in these three refrains are strikingly intellectual – learn, reflect, reason, remember, heed, perceive, think. The *āyāt* of God, woven into nature, manifested in history, rehearsed and detailed by God's messengers, are all intended to reveal to humanity an insight into the nature of things that God alone possesses. They are there to be 'read' and the appropriate conclusions drawn. The signs, however, are not merely for information; they are intended to challenge those who encounter them to reflect and to respond in faith. Once this transforming knowledge has been gained, it is unthinkable that people should return to following their own or others' uninformed ideas (*ahwā'*) about how things are: 'Say, "The guidance of God is the guidance. If you were to follow their vain ideas after what has come to you by way of knowledge, then you would have neither protector nor helper against God"' (Q 2:120).

The *āyāt* that constitute God's revelation in nature and in history come to the people repeated, as it were, in the form of verses (also *āyāt*) of scripture to be remembered and recited. The purpose of God's repeatedly choosing messengers and entrusting them with a message is to call people back to the acknowledgement of a truth already evident in the signs around them. It could be said that there is no essential difference between the verses and the natural or historical signs: all are there to remind the forgetful

and heedless of the fundamental truth of God's sovereignty and bounteous care.

GOD WRITES

God's knowledge of everything in creation (Q 6:59; 34:3) and of everything people do (both good and bad, Q 36:12; 82:11–12) is often mentioned using the metaphor of writing and records. So also God is said to write rewards (Q 5:21; 7:156; 21:105), entitlements (Q 2:187; 4:127), punishments (Q 22:4; 4:127) and obligations (e.g., Q 2:178, 180, 183, 216, 246) – including obligations God takes on himself (Q 6:12, 54). God determines by writing the course of events (Q 3:154; 7:156; 9:51; 58:22). The Qur'ān's use of the language of writing and recording for God's knowledge and authority is closely linked to its concept of scripture (*kitāb*, literally 'a writing', pl. *kutub*). The scriptures God gives through the prophets are exercises of God's authority and revelations of God's knowledge. Obviously they cannot contain all that God commands and knows: 'If all the trees on earth were pens, and the sea [were ink], with seven more seas to help it, the words of God would not be exhausted. God is mighty, wise' (Q 31:27). A community that is given scripture and continues to recite it and live by it is in a relationship through which God continues to guide it.

Since the truth does not change, it is axiomatic for the Qur'ān that the present revelation contains fundamentally the same message as that given to the earlier messengers. The believers are expected to accept the revelations given before Muḥammad (Q 2:4, 136; 4:60, 162), since God communicated with those messengers as he has done with Muḥammad: 'We communicated to you (*awḥaynā ilayka*) as we communicated to Noah and the prophets after him, as we communicated to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and Jesus and Job and Jonah and Aaron and Solomon, and as we granted David the Psalms' (Q 4:163); 'Say, "We believe in God and what has been sent down to us and in what was sent down to Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and in what Moses and Jesus were given, and in what the prophets were given by their lord – we make no distinction between any of them – and to him do we submit"' (Q 2:136). The term that binds together these diverse manifestations of revelation is *kitāb*: 'O you who believe, believe in God and his messenger and the *kitāb* that he has sent down to his messenger, and the *kitāb* that he sent down before. Whoever disbelieves in God and his angels and his *kutub* and his messengers and the last day has already gone far astray' (Q 4:136).⁹

The Qur'ān sees itself as confirming (*muṣaddiq*) the previous revelations¹⁰ in the same way Jesus is said to have come to confirm the Torah given to Moses (Q 3:50; 5:46; 61:6). It pays a great deal of attention to asserting and defending its status as scripture that has been sent down by God – *tanzil* (e.g., Q 45:2) – rather than the human or demonic word of a poet or soothsayer: 'But no! I swear by what you see and what you cannot see that it is indeed the speech of a noble messenger. It is not poet's speech – how little you believe! Nor is it diviner's speech – how little you remember! Rather it is something being sent down from the lord of the worlds. If he had invented falsehoods against us, we would have taken him by the right hand and severed his life-artery, and none of you could have held us off from him' (Q 69:38–47; see also 52:29).

No other figure in the Qur'ān is treated in such detail and at such length as Moses – recognisably similar to the figure known from the Bible and Jewish haggada. Characteristically for the Qur'ān, all this material is presented not in a single structured narrative, but in myriad references of varying length and complexity – references that take for granted some knowledge of Moses' story. In many respects Moses is the model for Muḥammad, combining as he does a role as liberator of his people with the roles of lawgiver and channel of revelation.

The Qur'ān also appeals to a history of prophecy unknown to the Judaeo-Christian tradition to show that what is taking place in the career of Muḥammad follows a perennial pattern in God's dealings with people. The stories of these messengers, the Midianite Shu'ayb,¹¹ and the Arabs, Hūd¹² and Ṣāliḥ,¹³ follow a schema very similar to that traditionally recounted about Muḥammad during his time in Mecca – the messenger is sent to his own people to call them back to the worship of the one God; he is rejected by most, accused of being possessed or merely a poet, and then is vindicated by the divine punishment brought on the unbelievers. In the case of Muḥammad, of course, it remained to be seen how the divine chastisement would be expressed (cf. Q 46:35).

Apart from emphasising Muḥammad's place in the centuries-long company of God's messengers, the Qur'ān has two other important interests in its recounting of the history of prophecy. The first of these is the figure of Abraham (Ibrāhīm), who is identified in the Qur'ān, no less than in the Bible, as the very model of the believer. Many elements of the Abraham story have parallels in the biblical or in post-biblical Jewish traditions, though the telling is spread out through twenty-five sūras.¹⁴ Other elements, however, are unique to the Qur'ān: Abraham and Ishmael build (or restore) the Ka'ba and institute its associated rituals (Q 2:125–7). Abraham prays to God for

the people of the place, that they might always be a nation submissive to God (*umma muslima*), and that a messenger like himself be sent to them (Q 2:128–9). Eight times the Qurʾān refers to him as *ḥanif*, generally taken to mean a pious monotheist, since the word is contrasted with *mushrik*.¹⁵ In Q 30:30 the religion of Abraham (i.e., of a *ḥanif*) is described as being that according to which God formed human nature (*fiṭrat Allāh*), and there is no changing what God has created. Muḥammad in his turn is told to say to the Christians and Jews who seek to win him for their religions that he is to prefer this original, natural religion of Abraham (*millat Ibrāhīm*, Q 2:135). They are criticised for arguing about Abraham when he precedes both Moses and Jesus, both Torah and Gospel (Q 3:65). Perhaps each was claiming to be the genuine heirs of the patriarch, whereas in fact Abraham was neither a Jew, nor a Christian; rather he was a *ḥanif* who had submitted himself (*muslim*) to God, and he was not one of those who associate partners with God (*mushrikūn*) (Q 3:67).

Abraham is of key importance to the Qurʾān's understanding of religion: he is recognised as an essential part of the Jewish and Christian traditions – even to the extent that each of them would fight to claim him – yet at the same time his tradition has firm roots in Arabia, roots that pre-date either of the other traditions that look to him as a foundational figure. Islam, then, is presented as anything but a new religion. It is the return to the source, in two senses: the prophetic source of monotheism, and the real source of Arabian traditional religion. That is why it is in a position both to confirm and to offer a critique of other branches of the Abrahamic tradition: 'O People of the Scripture! Now has our messenger come to you, making clear for you much in the scripture (*al-kitāb*) that you used to hide' (Q 5:15). Accusations of altering the scriptures, common in the tradition, are not easily sustained from the text, which uses derivatives of the verb *ḥarrafa* (Q 2:75; 4:46; 5:13, 41). It probably indicates that what is at issue is misinterpretation, perhaps even deliberate, resulting from taking words out of context or ignoring certain passages.

This critique of existing religious traditions is the second concern underlying the Qurʾān's presentation of the history of prophecy. Jesus ('*Isā*) is not reduced to a schematic figure like some of the other prophets. He retains many features familiar from either mainstream or heterodox Christian traditions. Yet the Qurʾān is anxious to set the record straight on his position: 'O People of the Scripture, do not exaggerate in your religion nor say anything about God except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of God, and his word which he conveyed to Mary, and a spirit from him. So believe in God and his messengers, and do not say "Three". Cease! It

will be better for you. God is only one god. He is exalted far above having a son' (Q 4:171). However, the adoption of terms like 'word' and 'spirit', so frequently used in Christian dogma, could hardly resolve the issue, and discussion continues. Similarly the complexity of the statements about the death of Jesus (Q 3:55; 4:157–9) has opened the way to a variety of opinions in the commentary literature. The most widely held opinion is that the Qurʾān denies Jesus' death and that, therefore, he is alive and will return, undergoing death before being raised alive with the rest of creation on the day of judgement. Others hold that it is only the reality of the crucifixion that is denied, leaving open the possibility that Jesus died another kind of death, perhaps natural. Others still would interpret the verses in Q 4 as denying neither Jesus' death itself nor the reality of the crucifixion. They see there only an assertion that, even though Jesus died, the end result was that the Jews did not succeed in doing away with him, since God raised him up.¹⁶ Though they boasted of having done so 'it was only made to seem so to them' (Q 4:157).

According to Q 5:116 Jesus will be asked on the day of judgement whether he encouraged people to worship himself and his mother as deities. He will deny it, adding, 'I told them only what you commanded me: "Worship God, my lord and your lord." Whether you punish them or pardon them, they are after all your servants, you are the mighty, the judicious (*al-ḥakīm*)' (Q 5:117–18).

GOD GIVES LIFE, CAUSES DEATH AND RAISES UP

Two major strands of thought in the Qurʾānic treatment of death and afterlife should be underlined. They correspond to two major audiences of the Qurʾānic discourse: first the Arab polytheists and second the new believers. The early sūras are clearly addressed to those who do not believe in any existence beyond the grave. It is none other than time itself (*al-dahr*) – often seen by the pre-Islamic Arabs as a kind of blind fate – that is responsible for death. In its characteristic manner, the Qurʾān quotes its opponents: 'And they say: There is nothing but our life in the world; we die and we live, and nothing destroys us but time' (Q 45:24). The Qurʾān announces, however, that it is God rather than some impersonal agency that governs the world. God is repeatedly named as the one who gives life and brings death – *yuhīy wa-yumīt* (e.g., Q 2:28). Even if the pre-Islamic Arabs were correct in thinking that one's days are numbered and one's death irrevocably determined, still it is God who determines the moment, literally 'the span of time that has already been nominated' (*ajal*

musammā, e.g., Q 6:2). The word *ajal* carries the sense of being a postponement, a putting off until later of something inevitable and perhaps also deserved. God is forbearing and patient, refusing to bring death sooner than its moment, even if the person has done wrong. The idea is not only personal; each nation also has its determined time (e.g., Q 7:34; 10:49; 23:43).

This determined moment is not, however, the end of all life. Death is seen as a step before resurrection to a new life: 'And he it is who gave you life, then he will cause you to die, and then will give you life (again). Humanity is indeed ungrateful' (Q 22:66). The Qur'ān repeatedly reminds the sceptic that God is able to bring life from apparent death, so it is not difficult for God to raise the dead to life: 'And God it is who sends the winds and they raise a cloud; then we bring it to a dead land and with it we revive the earth after its death. Such is the resurrection' (*al-nushūr*, Q 35:9).

GOD IS THE MOST JUST OF JUDGES

The announcement of the resurrection from the dead is both good news and bad – in traditional Islamic terms a promise (*wa'ad*) and a threat (*wa'id*) – for this is resurrection to judgement, to reward or punishment, to the gardens of paradise or the fires of hell. This was a central theme in the early preaching of the Prophet and the basis of his ethical appeal to those who had no fear of an eschatological punishment (see, for example, Q 6:30–2). Earthly creation is seen as a testing ground for humanity: 'God made the heavens and the earth in truth, so that each soul could be rewarded for what it earned' (Q 45:22). 'And he it is who created the heavens and the earth in six days – and his throne was upon the water – that he might test you, as to which of you is best in conduct' (Q 11:7).

The resurrection to judgement will take place at 'the hour' or on a particular day (*yawm al-dīn*, 'the day of judgement'; *yawm al-faṣl*, 'the day of harvest, separation, or sorting out'; *yawm muḥīt*, 'an all-encompassing day') known only to God (Q 33:63). The Qur'ān is replete with cataclysmic details of the end of the world – trumpet blasts, the splitting of the heavens (e.g., Q 55:37) and the rolling up of the heavens like a scroll (Q 21:104); the rolling up of the sun; an enormous earthquake. An extended example is Q 81:1–14. No one, we are assured repeatedly, will escape death, and so it is understood that at a certain point everything will perish – except the face of God (Q 28:88; 55:26–7). Then all will be brought to life once more and gathered for judgement before the throne of God. It is important to note

that the Qur'ān teaches a belief not in immortality but rather in resurrection. Nothing is eternal but God. Life is God's gift, not an inherent attribute of the soul or spirit.

The experience of judgement and the reckoning (*ḥisāb*) will be terrifying even for those who are to be rewarded (e.g., Q 21:103; 37:20). Each will be presented with the record of his or her deeds – in the right hand for those to be saved, in the left for those to be damned (see, for example, Q 69:19–37). The text also speaks (Q 101:6) of the scales that will weigh with minute precision the deeds of those being judged. Being damned to hell is a kind of living death from which there is no escape: 'He who will be flung to the great fire, wherein he will neither die nor live' (Q 87:12–13; see also Q 14:17).

The Qur'ān stresses the justice of God's judging and the individual's responsibility for his or her deeds. Some verses seem to exclude the possibility of intercession, and substitution is not admitted (Q 39:41; 9:74; 2:48). Other verses, however, have been interpreted to mean that Muḥammad and the angels will be permitted to intercede and that their intercession will be effective, at least in the case of those who have not fallen into polytheism. Although without an unequivocal basis in the Qur'ān, this has become an important belief for the Muslim community, and numerous traditions (*aḥādīth*) speak of it.

GOD IS MERCIFUL

In the final analysis, the Qur'ān is concerned to assert God's tendency to forgive rather than to condemn. More than five hundred times it characterises God as forgiving (*ghafūr*, ninety-one occurrences, e.g., Q 2:173; also *ghāfir*, Q 40:3; *ghaffār*, Q 20:82; and *ʿafuww*, Q 4:43), often turning back (*tawwāb*, Q 49:12) towards sinners, generous (*karīm*, Q 27:40), kind (*ra'ūf*, Q 2:143) and loving (*wadūd*, Q 11:90). Virtually every sūra begins by naming God 'the merciful, the compassionate' (*al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*). God even claims to have prescribed mercy as a duty for himself (Q 6:12, 54). Moreover, this mercy is not incompatible with the power and command of God – it is the magnanimous, unconstrained mercy of the absolute sovereign.

An important aspect of God's mercy is the sending of prophets with revelation. Both the scriptures and the messengers are referred to as a mercy (e.g., Q 31:2–3; 44:2–6) since they provide God's warning against evil and God's guidance towards the promised reward. The reward of paradise is described in concrete detail, especially in the chapters normally dated to

the earliest period: regal splendour (Q 83:24), costly robes, perfumes and jewellery. The texts lay emphasis on visions of elaborate banquets (e.g., Q 52:22–4), where the elect will rejoice in the company of their parents, their wives and children who were faithful (Q 13:23; 36:56, 40:8; cf. 43:70). They will praise their lord (Q 35:34), leaning towards each other in love, conversing in joy and recalling the past (e.g., Q 15:47; 52:25, etc.). 'Pure consorts' are promised (Q 2:25; 3:15; 4:57) and a happy life, without hurt or weariness, neither sorrow, fear nor shame, where every desire is fulfilled (Q 16:31, 39).

'[The pious] will there enjoy what they desire and we will grant still more (*mazīd*)' (Q 50:35). This 'more', like the 'addition' (*ziyāda*) of Q 10:26, is usually associated with the 'approval' (*riḍwān*) from God foretold to the elect in Q 3:15. 'To believers, God has promised gardens beneath which rivers flow, where they will rest immortal. He has promised them goodly dwellings in the gardens of Eden. [But] the approval of God is greater. That will be the great victory' (Q 9:72). The fruits of it will be nearness to God. God will bring the elect near to his throne (*passim*), and 'on that day some faces will shine, looking towards their lord' (Q 75:22–3). The theologians argued at length as to whether the vision of God (*ru'yat Allah*) in paradise would be sight or insight.

The other major element in the Qur'an's discussion of death is the question of warfare 'in the way of God'. The text witnesses to considerable resistance on the part of the new believers to the idea of risking their lives in the warfare that became a regular part of the life of the young community after its emigration to Medina. 'Have you not seen those to whom it was said, "Withhold your hands, establish worship and pay the poor due." When fighting was prescribed [lit. 'written'] for them, a party of them fear mankind as much as they fear God or even more, and they say, "Our lord, why have you prescribed fighting for us? If only you would give us a little more time" (Q 4:77). The believers are told not to consider those who have died 'in the way of God' as being dead. They are alive with God (Q 2:154; 3:169). They should not be like the unbelievers of old who said of those killed in war, 'If they had been here with us they would not have died or been killed' (Q 3:156). Since it is God who gives life and brings death at a determined moment that cannot be escaped, it makes no difference whether those men answered the call to war or not; if their time had come, they would have died even at home in bed.

Taken all together, the major preoccupation of the qur'anic teaching is to underline the sovereignty of God over life and death – as a theological

affirmation, as a spur to moral seriousness and as an encouragement to risk all for the cause of God.

GOD IS GUIDE

The general moral and spiritual guidance offered in the earlier parts of the Qur'an become ever more specific and detailed in the later period, reflecting a developing relationship between the Prophet and his hearers. In this period obedience to God and to messenger become closely identified – fifty-seven times the Medinan sūras speak of obedience and disobedience, assistance and opposition to 'God and his messenger'. This repeated identification then becomes the basis in the tradition for the authority of the prophetic word and example – the *sunna* – alongside the Qur'an, to complete it and to give its definitive interpretation. The longest sūras all contain legislative material, covering marriage and family law (especially in Q 4), inheritance (e.g., Q 4:176), food (e.g., Q 5:1–5) and drink (e.g., Q 5:90–1), worship and purity (e.g., Q 2:140–4, 187), the conduct of warfare (e.g., Q 2:190–4), stipulated punishments (*ḥudūd*) for unlawful intercourse (Q 24:2), unsubstantiated accusation of such (Q 24:4), drinking alcohol (Q 5:90–1), theft (Q 5:38) and brigandage (Q 5:33–4).

The regulation of the community's affairs is sometimes surprisingly concrete and detailed, and no small part of this is concerned with women – particularly the wives of the Prophet, for whom very specific restrictions and privileges are established. Several parts of qur'anic teaching use both the masculine and feminine forms of participles in addressing the believers (e.g., Q 33:35 where there are ten such pairings), underlining the equality of men and women before God. Mary (Ar. Maryam), the virgin mother of Jesus, is cited by God as an example to all believers because of her chastity, faith and obedience (Q 66:11–12). Along with Moses' mother and Abraham's wife Sara, she receives revelation or inspiration from God, though the consensus of the tradition is that they are not prophets. Muhammad's wives are singled out in the qur'anic legislation as 'mothers of the believers' and thus the restrictions placed on them in clothing and seclusion (cf. Q 33:32–3, 53) become generalised in the Muslim tradition to all women.

Much of the Qur'an's legal material is not univocal, and so the tradition has had to try and discern the development in order to understand God's final word on the subject. In the case of wine (*khamr*) the progression from praise of it (Q 16:67), through reservations about it (Q 2:219; 4:43), to

outright condemnations (Q 5:90–1) seems clear enough. With the somewhat tangled explanations of inheritance obligations and shares (Q 2:180; 4:11–12, 33, 176) more elaborate analysis was required.

These rules could be seen as an essential part of the process of defining the identity of the community that has accepted to be guided by God and the messenger. Thus the legislative material is interspersed with verses contending against other groups of believers, pagans and hypocrites. *Surat al-Mā'ida* ('The Table', Q 5), for example, brings together a large number of commands and prohibitions in a context marked by contention with the Jews and Christians. Each of the three groups has been given its own law (Q 5:48), and the new community must judge by what has specifically been given to it.

'UNTIL RELIGION IS ALL FOR GOD'

The Qur'an evinces little doubt about the outcome of the conflicts it observes and in which it takes part. God is 'the one, the vanquisher' and will brook no opposition. Once it has established itself, the community of believers is commanded to struggle 'in the way of God'. Though the command to fight is clear and repeated, so too are the exceptions to be made and the conditions to be observed in that fighting: 'fight those who fight you, but do not begin the hostilities' (Q 2:190); 'if they desist, then God is forgiving, merciful' (Q 2:192); 'if they are inclined to making peace, then you too should lean that way' (Q 8:61). Struggle (*jihād*) or fighting (*qitāl*) in the way of God is not intended merely for defence against persecution (Q 22:39). It means putting one's life and livelihood at the service of that divine sovereignty which is the Qur'an's constant theme, to ensure that it is everywhere recognised.

Notes

1. W. C. Smith, 'The true meaning of scripture: An empirical historian's nonreductionist interpretation of the Qur'an', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 11 (1980), 504.
2. Even though the word *rahmān* comes to function almost like an adjective, unlike many of the other adjectives and participles that become divine names it is never used of anyone but God.
3. See also Q 2:22, 29, 164; 10:67; 16:5–8, 10–18, 80–1; 17:12; 20:54–5; 22:65; 23:17–22; 67:15; 78:6–13; 79:32–3.
4. Q 2:30–9; 7:11–25; 15:28–43; 17:61–5; 18:50; 20:116–23; 38:71–85.
5. The word applied to God in all but six of its 140 occurrences, often paired with another adjective in a rhyming verse ending characteristic of the Qur'an.

6. See A. K. Reinhart, *Before revelation: The boundaries of Muslim moral thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), ch. 6; also his 'Ethics and the Qur'an', in J. D. McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, 5 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2001–6), vol. II, pp. 57–8; J. I. Smith, 'Faith', in McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, vol. II, pp. 164–5.
7. Some of the more important passages of this kind are Q 2:164; 3:190–1; 6:95–9; 10:5–7; 13:2–4; 16:10–16, 78–81; 23:21–2; 26:7–8; 27:86, 93; 29:44; 30:20–8, 46; 32:27; 34:9; 36:33–47; 39:21; 41:37, 39, 53; 42:29–34; 45:1–6, 12–13; 50:6–11; 51:20.
8. On this subject see G. R. Hawting, *The idea of idolatry and the emergence of Islam: From polemic to history* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and his 'Idolatry and idolaters', in McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, vol. II, pp. 475–80.
9. The longest listings of prophets are in Q 21:48–91 and Q 6:83–7.
10. Q 2:41, 89, 91, 97, 101; 3:3, 81; 4:47; 5:48; 6:92; 10:37; 12:111; 35:31; 46:12, 30.
11. Q 7:85–93; 11:84–95; 26:176–91.
12. Q 7:65–72; 11:50–60; 26:123–40; 46:21.
13. Q 7:73–9; 11:61–8; 26:141–59; 27:45–53.
14. For a synthetic presentation of the material, see R. Firestone, 'Abraham', in McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, vol. I, pp. 5–11.
15. Q 2:135; 3:67, 95; 6:79, 161; 16:120, 123; cf. 4:125.
16. For discussions of this complex issue, see K. Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985) and N. Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), or his shorter treatment, 'Jesus', in McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, vol. III, pp. 7–21.

Further reading

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