The Bible and the Qur’an: A Comparative Study

Presented by Prof. Gabriel S. Reynolds, Ph.D.
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Course Overview

What would you like to know about the Qur’an? How is it different from, and similar to, the Bible? How does the Qur’an portray Abraham, Moses, Mary and Jesus? The answers to these questions, and many more, will surprise and engage you.

Written in poetic and rhythmic language, the Qur’an comprises 114 suras (“chapters”). To Christians, its structure can at first seem unusual. Indeed, while it is also considered to be the Word of God by adherents of an Abrahamic religion, the Qur’an differs in many ways from our scriptures. As you study the Qur’an, however, you will gain a deep appreciation for the beauty and importance of this religious text revered by 1.7 billion Muslims around the world.

In this superb course, you will receive a general introduction to the Qur’an, paying particular attention to its relationship with the Bible. Prof. Gabriel S. Reynolds, a Catholic scholar of Islamic studies and Notre Dame professor, guides you through the history, interpretation, and structure of the Qur’an. By embarking on this exploration, you will more deeply understand Islam and its conversation with Christianity.

The first part of The Bible and the Qur’an: A Comparative Study will introduce you to the life of Muhammad, the structures and literary genre of the Qur’an, and its historical context. After looking closely at the themes of the Qur’an, you will explore its portrayals of Jesus and other biblical figures, as well as how Christianity has interacted with it throughout history. Then, you will look at academic controversies and traditional Islamic teachings on the Qur’an. Finally, you will examine how Muslims approach the Qur’an in the modern world.

To Muslims, the Qur’an is the eternal, uncreated Word of God—not an inspired scripture like the Bible, but rather the literal divine Word descended from heaven to earth. They consider it perfect in regard to its literary qualities, accounts of nations and prophets, and scientific information. Thus, learning about the Qur’an is essential to understanding the relationship between Islam and Christianity—and between Muslims and Christians—in our own age and throughout history.
Lecture 1. Introduction to the Life of the Prophet

Overview

To the great majority of Muslims the Qur’an is a text that can only be properly understood when it is seen through the lens of the traditional biography of the Prophet Muhammad. According to that biography—which was written well over a hundred years after his death—the angel Gabriel revealed the Qur’an to Muhammad gradually, in the cities of Mecca and Medina in western Arabia, between AD 610—632. Muslims will accordingly connect individual passages of the Qur’an with specific moments or events in Muhammad’s biography.

I. Muhammad and Mecca

- According to the traditional date (although we cannot verify this in a historically accurate manner) Muhammad was born in AD 570 in the city of Mecca in the western part of the Arabian Peninsula.

- The city of Mecca in Muhammad’s day, according to the traditional sources, was marked by the following characteristics:
  1. Idolatry (centered around a black shrine, al-Ka’ba, with its 360 idols).
  2. It was the center of trade which led its leading tribe, the Quraysh, to become both wealthy and powerful.
  3. It was once the city of Abraham and there were certain figures who remembered this and were faithful monotheists in the Abrahamic tradition (though neither Jews nor Christians).

- Islamic tradition tells the story of how Abraham left his wife Sarah and son Isaac behind in Hebron and walked with Hagar and Ishmael all the way to the spot in the Arabian Desert where Mecca would be built. There he and Ishmael built the Ka’ba as a pure temple to the one true God (he then, according to the traditional account, left Hagar and Ishmael and returned to Hebron).

- One of the basic points of the story of Muhammad’s life then is that he brought Mecca back to its Abrahamic roots. One symbolic way he did this was to cleanse the Ka’ba of idols late in his life after he conquered Mecca.
II. The Revelation of the Qur'an

- According to the traditional account Muhammad began to receive revelation from God at the age of 40.

- The revelation came from heaven in two stages:
  1. The angel Gabriel brought down the Qur'an, a heavenly book which existed from all eternity, from the highest heaven to the lowest heaven.
  2. The angel Gabriel would travel back and forth from the lowest heaven the prophet Muhammad, giving him discrete oral messages on the basis of that book.

- The very first of these messages, according to this account, took place when Muhammad was meditating on a mountain outside of Mecca (Hira) and an angel revealed to him the first words of chapter ("sura") 96 of the Qur'an:
  1. Read: In the Name of your Lord who created.
  2. Created man from a clot.

- To Muslims the Qur'an is the very word of god—it is not like the Bible but like Jesus.

- This is why Muslims, when speaking about the Qur'an, do not say “Muhammad says…” but rather “God says…”

- Western scholars have often assumed that Muhammad is himself the true author of the Qur'an. When speaking about the Qur'an in these lectures, I will simply say “the Qur'an says,” because I believe the question of the authorship of the Qur'an is uncertain. I think it is possible that there were multiple authors, and multiple editors.

III. The Revelation of the Qur'an in Mecca and Medina

- According to Islamic tradition Muhammad was in Mecca for 12 years where he continued to receive divine revelations from the angel Gabriel. At the same time he sought to convince the Meccans to believe in his message with very little success. At this time he had not received any command from God to fight.

- At the same time, according to later Islamic traditions, Muhammad also performed, or received, many miracles. He made a tree move across the earth, split the moon in two, and traveled on a magical beast through the sky from Mecca to Jerusalem.
• Eventually (in 622, according to the traditional date), Muhammad emigrated to Yathrib (later called Medina, short for “city of the prophet”), a city to the north. There he found that the Arabs were ready to accept him, but three Jewish tribes refused his claims to be a prophet.

• Soon after his arrival, Muhammad received a command from God to begin fighting and he began to launch raids against his pagan enemies (including those from his native city of Mecca) and to avenge himself of the Jews, exiling two Jewish tribes and killing a third.

• Eventually, Muhammad defeated all of his rivals, conquered Mecca, and then began planning raids further to the north against allies of the Byzantine Empire.

• Later Muslims saw this as proof that God willed the Islamic conquests not to end with Mecca, but to extend throughout the entire earth.
Reflection Questions

1. According to the traditional Islamic sources, what were the characteristics of the city of Mecca before Islam?

2. Describe the two stages by which, according to the traditional Islamic sources, the Qur’an was revealed to humanity.

3. How did Muhammad’s career as a Prophet differ in the Meccan and Medinan periods?
Lecture 2. The Structure of the Qur’an

Overview

The Qur’an is made up of 114 “suras”—divisions or units of the text which vary greatly according to length. Most of the long suras are at the beginning of the text and most of the short suras are at its end. Most suras cover a diverse range of topics and often move abruptly from one to another. They are also, however, marked by rhyme and certain formulas at the beginning and the end which suggest that they were written with attention to their literary effect.

1. The Qur’an and Its Suras

- The Qur’an is a book divided into 114 chapters or “suras”—the Arabic name given to these chapters by Islamic tradition. Overall, the Qur’an is a relatively short book, about 2/3 the size of the New Testament.

- The Qur’an was given the title “Qur’an” by later Islamic traditions because of references within the book itself to a “recitation” (which, in Arabic, is “qur’an”).

- These chapters proceed, for the most part, from longer to shorter (an order known to us from the canonical order of the letters of Paul—Romans to Philemon—in the New Testament).

- The most notable exception to this rule is the first sura, al-Fatiha, “The Opening,” which has only 7 verses and seems to have been written as a prayer meant to be recited before reciting from the main text of the Qur’an.

- All of the suras except one (sura 9) begin with the divine invocation “In the Name of God the Merciful the Benevolent.”

- The suras all have titles, titles which are neither the first word in the sura nor the topic of the sura but rather certain “keywords” usually from the text of the sura which work as labels by which scholars can refer to the suras as a whole.

  1. Thus sura 2 is entitled al-Baqara, “the Cow,” but it is not about a cow.
II. The Structure of the Suras

- As a rule the suras do not have unified topics (sura 12, on Joseph, is an exception). This means that the overall progression of the suras do not progress from topic to topic (or time-period to time-period) since a variety of topics are generally covered within each sura.

- Scholars have long debated whether there is a consistent logic or strategy which binds the suras together.

  1. Some of them, such as sura 2, move frequently from one topic to another

     (i) Qur’an 2:1-29, on Faith and disbelief; 2:30-39 on Creation, Adam, and Satan; 2:40-86, Biblical history, Moses etc.

  2. One scholarly position is that the frequent change of topic reflects a conservative editing process, that the editors of the Qur’an collected together many individual pieces of text and did not want to eliminate any of them or add material to connect them, so they put them altogether as they are.

  3. Very often (as with Qur’an 33, or 36) the beginning and the end of Qur’anic suras seems to match, which suggests that – at least the beginning and ending of the suras was often scripted with a literary concern.

III. Literary Genre of the Qur’an

- Rhyme is very important to the Qur’an:

  1. Almost all passages of the Qur’an involve rhyme where the last sound of the last word of a verse rhymes with that which comes before and/or after.

  2. This can be heard distinctly in Arabic, but is not evident in translation.

- One sign of the importance of rhyme to the Qur’an is the way it seems to change the shape of words to make them rhyme.

  1. Thus the word for Mt. Sinai is in one place (Q 23:30) saynaʾ and in another place (Q 95:1) sinin.

  2. The word for Elijah is in one place ʿilyas (Q 6:85) and in another place al-yasīn (Q 37:130).

- The importance of rhyme to the Qur’an tells us that the author of the Qur’an is very interested in the effect that the recitation of this text will have on its audience. It tell us that the Qur’an is not so much a reference work, or a book of instruction, as much as a book of exhortation.
Reflection Questions

1. Describe the characteristics of *suras* in the Qur’an: How many are there? How are they ordered? Are individual *suras* focused on certain topics?

2. What points to the importance of rhyme in the Qur’an?
Lecture 3. The Historical Development of the Qur’anic Text

Overview

Islamic tradition holds that the Prophet Muhammad did not write down the revelations given to him. It was the first political successor of the Prophet—or caliph—Abu Bakr, who first had the proclamations of Muhammad (which according to tradition had been memorized by his companions) written down. The third caliph, ʿUthman, would establish an official Qurʾanic text which he distributed (while having other versions destroyed). Academic scholars, however, question the reliability of these traditions on the collection of the Qurʾan.

I. The Collection Story

- According to traditional Islamic doctrine Muhammad was illiterate. Therefore, he never wrote down passages of the Qurʾan himself.
- According to the traditional doctrine Muhammad also did not request that his divine proclamations be systematically recorded. Nevertheless many of his followers (according to the standard teaching) write down pieces of the revelation.
  1. According to one tradition they would record it on “palm branches, camel shoulder blades, and thin stones or preserved in the hearts of men.”
- Islamic tradition gives us two stories which together tell us how the Qurʾan was collected after the death of Muhammad.

II. The First Story

- The first story relates that many of the men who had memorized the Qurʾan died in a battle soon after the death of Muhammad, at a time when the first “caliph” (or ruler)—Abu Bakr—was leading the community.
- At this a figure named ʿUmar (who would become the second caliph) asked Abu Bakr to write down the Qurʾan before the memory of it is lost.
- At first Abu Bakr resisted, declaring “I will not do what Muhammad did not do,” but eventually he accepted.
- He gathered the scraps of material on which the Qurʾan was written and organized a commission led by Muhammad’s former scribe Zayd b. Thabit.
  1. The commission came up with one text, written on separate leaves. Abu Bakr kept that text privately.
2. It was passed down to ‘Umar when Abu Bakr died, and then, when ‘Umar died, to his daughter Hafsa.

III. The Second Story

- The second story involves the successor to ‘Umar, the third caliph ‘Uthman. The story involves a completely different scenario:
  1. While Muslim troops were on campaign in distant Armenia, Syrian and Iraqi soldiers among the Muslim forces began to fight over the pronunciation of the Qur’an.
  2. At this, one of the Muslim generals, named Hudhayfa, rushed back to the caliph and told him to “settle the matter of the text of the Qur’an before Muslims are divided the way that Jews and Christians are divided over their scripture.”
  3. At this, ‘Uthman gathered a new commission, again led by Zayd b. Thabit, which collected the materials with elements of the Qur’an written on them (including the leaves which Abu Bakr recorded and were now in Hafsa’s possession). Once completed, ‘Uthman had these new copies of the Qur’an distributed to the main cities of the Islamic empire and burned all competing copies.

IV. Problems with the Collection Story

- Most academic scholars do not trust the traditional story of the collection of the Qur’an for a number of reasons:
  1. The two stories seem to duplicate each other: why would ‘Uthman need to gather a commission together led by Zayd b. Thabit when a commission led by Zayd had already been gathered under Abu Bakr?
  2. The Arabic text which ‘Uthman established would not have had vowel markings (our early Qur’an manuscripts have consonants only) and therefore would not have solved the conflicts over pronunciation which the Syrian and Iraqi soldiers were allegedly having.
  3. There are many variations to these accounts, some of which involve the fourth caliph, ‘Ali.

V. Variants

- The collection of the Qur’an story involving ‘Uthman is useful to later Muslim scholars in part because it allows them to posit the existence of variant manuscripts (which were destroyed by
Islamic exegetical literature includes many reports of the sorts of variants allegedly found in these manuscripts.

1. One typical way of explaining a proposed re-reading of a Qur’anic passage was to imagine that a different reading existed in one of these manuscripts.

2. For example Q 11:71: “His wife was standing by, so she laughed. And We gave her good news of Isaac; and after Isaac, Jacob.”

(i) This verse speaks about Abraham’s wife (Sarah) standing. According to a variant reading there were a few more words which explained about Abraham: “and he was sitting.”

- Other sorts of variants, known as “canonical variants,” were produced when Muslim scholars attempted to read the text passed down to them (known as the “ʿUthmanic” text because of the story involving ʿUthman).

- Because the text was in a “defective” script it allowed scholars to read it in many different ways and so many different canonical readings were developed through the centuries. Eventually seven ways of reading the text became predominant.

VI. The Cairo Text

- In 1924 the Egyptian ministry of education published a printed Qur’an based on one of these seven ways of reading the Qur’an.

- This version—known as the “Cairo Qur’an”—has since become the dominant printed version of the Qur’an.

1. Because of the success of this version one has the impression today that only one version of the Qur’an exists.

2. In fact the history of the text of the Qur’an is much more complicated.
Reflection Questions

1. What, according to the traditional story, led Abu Bakr to have the Qur’an written down?

2. What, according to the traditional story, led ʿUthman (again) to collect the Qur’an and then to send out copies of his text of the Qur’an to the principal Islamic cities?

3. Why do critical academic scholars doubt the reliability of both the Abu Bakr and ʿUthman accounts of the Qur’an’s collection?

4. Describe the sorts of variants to the standard text of the Qur’an that are reported.

5. When and where was the version of the Qur’an that is currently in use established?
Lecture 4. The Punishment Stories

Overview

The Qur’an—not unlike a preacher or homilist—addresses its audience directly, seeking to convince them of certain claims, namely to believe in its God and to accept its Prophet. In order to convince its audience of these things the Qur’an tells stories of earlier peoples who have rejected earlier prophets (some of whom, but not all, are known from the Bible) and been destroyed by God.

I. The Qur’an as a Book of Exhortation

- The Qur’an is not so much a book which seeks to retell stories or provide information as much as it is a book with an argument: believe in its God and its messenger.
- The Qur’an provides its audience with three principal reasons why they should accept its argument:
  1. Punishment Stories
  2. Heaven and Hell
  3. The Blessings of Nature
- Here we will focus on punishment stories, stories which are meant to show that people in the past have refused to accepted God and the messengers sent to them and been destroyed by God for this.
- By telling these “punishment stories” the Qur’an is essentially asking its own audience if they are willing to do the same thing and risk divine destruction.

II. The Punishment Stories

- The punishment stories involve a similar scenario in three steps:
  1. God sends a prophet to a people.
  2. The people reject the prophet.
  3. God destroys the people.
- The Qur’an tells these stories as a cycle in a number of suras:

- These stories seem to involve a mix of characters. Some (Noah, Lot, Moses, Abraham) are known from the Bible, while others (e.g., Hud, Salih, Shuʿayb), likely come from local Arab lore.

### III. The Purpose of These Stories

- These stories are very similar to one another. The role of the prophets is much the same between stories, although they are not set in a clear historical context.
  1. In several cases one prophet refers to the mission of an earlier prophet (note Q 11:89, for example), otherwise there is very little else that connects these stories.
  2. They are not part of a larger “history of salvation,” but rather individual examples of God’s wrath which collectively are meant to convince the Qurʾan’s audience to take heed.

- The Qurʾan’s interest in telling precisely the same sort of story (involving a prophet who warns his people) leads to Biblical characters being shaped to match this story.
  1. Moses in the Qurʾan is more concerned with convincing Pharaoh and his people to believe in God than he is in convincing Pharaoh to let the Israelites go.
  2. Noah and Lot are made to warn their peoples of divine punishment, something that they do not do in Genesis (although this transformation is already suggested by 2 Peter 2:5-8).

- We might think of Muhammad as the “last of the prophets of the punishment stories.” He might have imagined himself as being sent to his people as earlier prophets were sent to their peoples, and he might have expected that a divine punishment was going to come upon his people to destroy them, as earlier peoples had been destroyed. In any case, this scenario shows that the Qurʾan believes humans have a tendency to forget God and need divine warnings to remind them.
Reflection Questions

1. Describe the scenario of a Qur’anic “punishment story.”

2. Why is the Qur’an so interested in telling these stories?

3. Why do you think, of all of the Biblical characters, the Qur’an makes Noah, Lot, and Moses prophets of the “punishment stories”? 
Lecture 5. The Afterlife and The Blessings of Nature

Overview

The Qur’an, perhaps anticipating that the argument for belief in God and His Prophet based on the punishment stories might not convince all (seeing that many evil people live long lives and are never destroyed by God), also makes an argument for belief by referring to heaven and hell. It describes heaven as the Garden of Eden, filled with physical pleasures, and hell as a place of physical torture. Finally it also makes an argument by calling on humans to be grateful to God for the blessings He has given them in nature. Here the conscience, and not self-interest, is called upon.

I. The Qur’an as a Book of Exhortation

- In the previous lecture we introduced the three reasons that the Qur’an provides to convince its audience to believe in its God and its messenger:
  1. Punishment Stories
  2. Heaven and Hell
  3. The Blessings of Nature
- We also discussed the way the Qur’an tells stories of divine punishment in order to make an impression on its audience. Here we will discuss two other strategies the Qur’an uses:
  1. Discussions of heaven and hell
  2. Reflections on the blessings given by God in nature
- The Qur’an wants to explain that even those unbelievers who escape divine punishment during their lives still have to face the prospect of it after their death.
  1. It adds that believers will be rewarded with blessings after their death.
- Here we might pause a moment to note how important the question of belief is to the Qur’an. The key question is not morality – although the Qur’an does mention this. Ascribing partners to God is the unforgiveable sin identified by the Qur’an:
  1. Q 4:48 (cf. 116) God does not forgive asociation with Him, but He forgives anything less than that to whomever He wills. Whoever associates anything with God has devised a monstrous sin.

II. Heaven and Hell

- The Qur’an provides vivid, physical descriptions of heaven and hell, for example in Q 55:11-28:
  11 Woe on that Day to the deniers.
Those who play with speculation.

The Day when they are shoved into the Fire of Hell forcefully.

"This is the Fire which you used to deny.

Is this magic, or do you not see?

Burn in it. Whether you are patient, or impatient, it is the same for you. You are only being repaid for what you used to do."

But the righteous will be amid gardens and bliss.

Enjoying what their Lord has given them, and their Lord has spared them the suffering of Hell.

Eat and drink happily, for what you used to do.

Relaxing on luxurious furnishings; and We will couple them with gorgeous spouses.

Those who believed and their offspring followed them in faith—We will unite them with their offspring, and We will not deprive them of any of their works. Every person is hostage to what he has earned.

And We will supply them with fruit, and meat; such as they desire.

They will exchange therein a cup; wherein is neither harm, nor sin.

Serving them will be youths like hidden pearls.

And they will approach one another, inquiring.

They will say, "Before this, we were fearful for our families.

But God blessed us, and spared us the agony of the Fiery Winds.

Before this, we used to pray to Him.

He is the Good, the Compassionate."

• Scholars have long hypothesized that the image of paradise as a heavenly garden in the Qur’an is due to the Arabian origins of Islam, the idea being that people from the desert often dreamt of lush, cool, gardens and therefore Muhammad gave them an image of paradise to match their dreams.

• It is much more likely, however, that the Qur’an’s idea of paradise reflects a conviction that heaven is a return to the Garden of Eden—indeed the Qur’an refers explicitly to heaven as the Garden of Eden on several occasions (Q 9:72; 13:23; 16:31, etc).

III. Nature

• Other passages that seem to make an argument for belief in the God and prophet of the Qur’an take a different approach. They ask the audience to reflect on the good things of nature which God has provided them with, for example Q 50:6-11:

6 Have they not observed the sky above them, how We constructed it, and decorated it, and it has no cracks?
7 And the earth, how We spread it out, and set on it mountains, and grew in it all kinds of delightful pairs?
8 A lesson and a reminder for every penitent worshiper.
9 And We brought down from the sky blessed water, and produced with it gardens and grain to harvest.
10 And the soaring palm trees, with clustered dates.
11 As sustenance for the servants. And We revive thereby a dead town. Likewise is the resurrection.

• Such reasoning is substantially different from the reasoning of the punishment stories and the passages on heaven and hell. Here the Qur’an is not holding out the prospect of punishment (or reward), but calling on humans to examine their conscience. It is as though the Qur’an is here asking its audience: will you be grateful, or an ingrate?
Reflection Questions

1. Why is the Qur'an so interested in describing heaven and hell?

2. Why does the Qur'an present heaven as a garden?

3. How are the Qur'an’s references to nature a sort of appeal to human conscience?
Lecture 6. Angels, Demons, and the Cosmos

Overview

In the previous two lectures we have been discussing the three principal arguments the Qurʾan uses to convince its audience to believe in God and His messenger. Yet the Qurʾan does more than present arguments, it also presents a cosmology. In this lecture we will look at bit more closely at that cosmology and explore how the Qurʾan understands the world around it. In a number of passages the Qurʾan presents a vision of the cosmos in which the earth is flat and heaven is like a dome stretched above, dividing the celestial realm, where God speaks to the angels, from the terrestrial realm, where humans live along with demons and jinn (probably another term for fallen angels, but considered by Islamic tradition to be a unique class of creatures). The demons and jinn long to enter into heaven in order to learn divine secrets, but God chases them away by pelting them with fire.

1. Demons, Jinn, and Cosmology

- The first point to make about the Qurʾan’s cosmology is that the Qurʾan seems to imagine a flat world covered by an arched dome. The stars are lodged in said dome, which is a barrier separating the heavenly and divine realms. On the other side of that dome is heaven, where God dwells with His angels, and paradise is found. We can detect this cosmology in the passages that describe the way demons speak of the stars and describe how demons seek to get close to heaven, for example Q 15:16-18.

> 16 We placed constellations in the sky, and made them beautiful to the beholders.
> 17 And We guarded them from every outcast devil.
> 18 Except one who steals a hearing, and is followed by a visible projectile.

- This cosmology explains what the Qurʾan says about unbelievers, a few verses earlier. Q15:14-15:

> 14 Even if We opened for them a gateway into the sky, and they began to ascend through it.
> 15 They would still say, “Our eyes are hallucinating; in fact, we are people bewitched.”

- Q 37:6-10 again alludes to the way that demons who get too close to heaven are bombarded by God:

> 6 We have adorned the lower heaven with the beauty of the planets.
> 7 And guarded it against every defiant devil.
> 8 They cannot eavesdrop on the Supernal Elite, for they get bombarded from every side.
> 9 Repelled—they will have a lingering torment.
> 10 Except for him who snatches a fragment—he gets pursued by a piercing projectile.

- Also similar is Q 72:5-9, which speaks not of angels but of jinn—the genies that we know from the Arabian Nights (and the Disney film Aladdin):

> 5 And we thought that humans and jinn would never utter lies about God.
6 Some individual humans used to seek power through some individual jinn, but they only increased them in confusion.
7 They thought, as you thought, that God would never resurrect anyone.
8 We probed the heaven, and found it filled with stern guards and projectiles.
9 We used to take up positions to listen in; but whoever listens now finds a projectile in wait for him.

II. Demons and Inspiration

• All of this informs us that the demons and the jinn are above all interested in learning things from heaven. This suggests that, according to the author of the Qur’an, these beings are constantly looking for ways to learn heavenly secrets, or interfere with revelations.

1. This explains why the Qur’an tells its audience to seek refuge from demons before they read from their scripture (Q 16:98):

98 When you read the Qur’an, seek refuge with God from Satan the outcast.
99 He has no authority over those who believe and trust in their Lord.

• Thus we see that the references to the demons and jinn trying to get into heaven are connected to the references in the Qur’an to the demons seeking to interfere with those reciting God’s word.

III. On the Nature of Angels, Jinn, and Demons

• The Qur’an relates that humans are created from dirt and the jinn from fire. A later Islamic tradition (not found in the Qur’an) reports that the angels are created from light.

• The Qur’an speaks of angels who record even the thoughts, words, and deeds of humans, as in Q 43:80:

80 Or do they think that We cannot hear their secrets and their conspiracies? Yes indeed, Our messengers are by them, writing down.

• And Q 50:16-18:

16 We created the human being, and We know what his soul whispers to him. We are nearer to him than his jugular vein.
17 As the two receivers receive, seated to the right and to the left.
18 Not a word does he utter, but there is a watcher by him, ready.

• Angels bring messages from God angels deliver announcements to Zechariah (3:39) and Mary (3:45, cf. 19:17).

• Angels also appear to be agents of divine punishments. In Q 11:69-70, Abraham is afraid when angels visit his house. They tell him not to worry, because they have been sent against the people of Lot.

The Annunciation by Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1896.
• On the day of resurrection angels will beat the damned (8:50; 47:27), hurl them into hell (16:29; cf. 79:1-5) and then stand watch over the hellfire (66:6; 74:31).

• With its references to jinn the Qurʾan might in fact simply be using another term for demons. The Qurʾan (according to Q 72) relates that some of the jinn believe in God. However, this idea might be inspired by James 2:19:

> You believe in the one God—that is creditable enough, but even the demons have the same belief, and they tremble with fear. (Jam 2:19)

• Remarkably the Qurʾan seems to make Iblis a servant of God. In several passages, including 17:62-64, the Qurʾan reports a deal which God and the devil make that allows Satan to seek to sway humans from the straight path until the Day of Resurrection:

> 62b. If You reprieve me until the Day of Resurrection, I will bring his descendants under my sway, except for a few."
> 63 He said, "Begone! Whoever of them follows you—Hell is your reward, an ample reward."
> 64 "And entice whomever of them you can with your voice, and rally against them your cavalry and your infantry, and share with them in wealth and children, and make promises to them."
Reflection Questions

1. Describe the Qur’an’s vision of the cosmos.

2. Why does the Qur’an describe the attempts by demons (and jinn) to enter into heaven?

3. What roles do the angels play in the Qur’an?
Lecture 7. The God of the Qur’an

Overview

From the perspective of the Qur’an, the most important religious duty of humanity is to recognize the supremacy, sublimity, and sovereignty of its God. From this perspective the Qur’an is a thoroughly theological book—what one says about God is of the utmost importance, even more important than human morality. The Qur’an’s polemic against Christians emerges from this theological point. The Qur’an maintains that Christ is not God incarnate, but rather a man whom Christians have deified, thus compromising the exclusive sovereignty of Allah.

I. The Qur’an is Above All about Theology

- The Qur’an’s greatest demand of its audience is to speak properly of God (here lies the connection with theology, which etymologically speaking is “God-speak”). The Qur’an wants its audience to recognize that God is transcendent, sublime, and totally other. Thus Q 13:16:

  Say, "Who is the Lord of the heavens and the earth?" Say, "God." Say, "Have you taken besides Him protectors, who have no power to profit or harm even themselves?" Say, "Are the blind and the seeing equal? Or are darkness and light equal? Or have they assigned to God associates, who created the likes of His creation, so that the creations seemed to them alike? Say, "God is the Creator of all things, and He is The One, the Irresistible."

- This is why the Qur’an makes the unforgiveable sin not some sort of action, but rather the theological error of making something else equal to God (an error known to Muslims by the Arabic word *shirk*). Thus Q 4:48:

  God does not forgive association with Him, but He forgives anything less than that to whomever He wills. Whoever associates anything with God has devised a monstrous sin.

- This also helps us understand the Qur’an’s polemic against Christians, for example in Q 5:72-73:

  72 They disbelieve those who say, "God is the Messiah the son of Mary." But the Messiah himself said, "O Children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord. Whoever associates others with God, God has forbidden him Paradise, and his dwelling is the Fire. The wrongdoers have no saviors."

  73 They disbelieve those who say, "God is the third of three." But there is no deity except the One God. If they do not refrain from what they say, a painful torment will befall those among them who disbelieve.

- This idea is reflected in the common Islamic slogan: *allahu akbar*, “God is greater.”
II. God Is Not “Father”

- The Qur’an does not refer to God as father, and does not refer to humans as the children of God. Instead God is Lord (rabb) and man is his servant (’abd). This is generally understood as corresponding to the otherness or transcendence of God.

- In the text, *Major Themes of the Qur’an*, by Fazlur Rahman, in the chapter on “God,” he expresses serious criticism of the Christian idea of God as loving Father. He writes: “But such religious ideologies as have put their whole emphasis on God’s love and self-sacrifice for the sake of His children have done little service to the moral maturity of man” (p. 9). But he then continues: “But the most vicious for the Qur’an are those who formally or substantively deny God’s existence: materialistic atheists and ‘those who assign partners to God.’”

- Again, Rahman writes (p. 12): “God’s friendship may not be presumed at any point by either any individual or any community, even though the Qur’an speaks of God’s promises to individuals and communities. One must exercise *taqwa*, meaning that if one has the proper perception then one must be constantly ‘on one’s guard’ (which is the literal meaning of *taqwa*)”

- Finally Rahman alludes (p. 15) to the statements of the Qur’an that speak of the way that God leads some astray, or has “sealed up” hearts. For example, Q 2:6-7:

  6 As for those who disbelieve—it is the same for them, whether you have warned them, or have not warned them—they do not believe.
  7 God has set a seal on their hearts and on their hearing, and over their vision is a veil. They will have a severe torment.

- Also, in Q 9:67:

  The hypocrite men and hypocrite women are of one another. They advocate evil, and prohibit righteousness, and withhold their hands. They forgot God, so He forgot them.

- There is also an aspect of the Qur’an which involves God as one who closely scrutinizes every human deed, every word, every thought, to judge whether humans have been faithful to Him. Thus:
7:156 “My punishment—I inflict it upon whomever I will, but My mercy encompasses all things.”

- This verse seems to juxtapose the justice of God with the mercy of God, how do you see these two corresponding in the Qurʾan?

50:16 “We created the human being, and We know what his soul whispers to him. We are nearer to him than his jugular vein. As the two receivers receive, seated to the right and to the left.”

- Thus all of this leaves us with a distinct image of the Qurʾanic God. Both Muslims and Christians have recognized this, for which reason we see both groups hesitate over the translation of the Arabic word for God in the Qurʾan: Allah; i.e. should it be rendered as “God” in the English or kept as “Allah” (thereby suggesting that the God of Islam is somehow different). The Catholic Church, as seen with Lumen Gentium and many statements by Pope John Paul II and his successors, clearly teaches however that the God of Muslims and Christians is the same God.
Reflection Questions

1. What does it mean to say that the Qur’an is an especially “theological” scripture?

2. How is the Qur’an’s theology connected to its anti-Christian polemic?

3. Why does Fazlur Rahman argue that “God’s friendship may not be presumed”? 
Lecture 8. Adam in the Qur’an

Overview

In the Qur’an God describes Adam as his “vicegerent” or representative on earth and thus comes close to the Biblical tradition of humanity’s creation in the image of God. The Qur’an also relates a story, known to us from late antique Christian texts, in which God commands the angels to bow down to Adam. In the Christian texts this story is meant to show Adam (before his fall) as a prototype of Christ, whom the angels worship. In the Qur’an this story expresses the superiority of Adam, or mankind in general, to the angels, and the need to obey God’s commands at all time.

I. Adam in the Qur’an

- We turn now from themes of the Qur’an to a particular discussion of the Qur’an’s relationship to the Bible. We’ll begin doing so by looking at a series of Biblical characters who also appear in the Qur’an, the first of whom—logically enough—is Adam.

- The material on Adam shows us that the Qur’an—rather than repeating things found in the canonical Bible—participates in a tradition of exegesis already going on among Jews and Christians of the time period. Additional stories were developed in the Qur’an to elaborate upon the Biblical text.

II. The Creation of Adam

- In sura 2 the Qur’an refers to a conversation between God and the angels surrounding the creation of Adam:

2:30 When your Lord said to the angels, “I am placing a khalifa (“successor”) on earth.” They said, “Will You place in it someone who will cause corruption in it and shed blood, while we declare Your praises and sanctify You?” He said, “I know what you do not know.”

31 And He taught Adam the names, all of them; then he presented them to the angels, and said, “Tell Me the names of these, if you are sincere.”

32 They said, “Glory be to You! We have no knowledge except what You have taught us. It is you who are the Knowledgeable, the Wise.”

- This passage is unlike the passage on the creation of man in Genesis 1:26-27:

26 God said, “Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves, and let them be masters of the fish of
the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all the wild animals and all the creatures that creep along the ground.”

27 God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.

- In Qur’an 2:30-32, the angels are present, and they object to man’s creation. They anticipate that man will cause corruption and shed blood. God responds, more or less saying “You have no idea what you are talking about.” His superior knowledge is vindicated when the angels are not able to name the things he shows to them.

- This Qur’anic passage appears to follow from the way Jews and Christians understood Psalm 8:4:

1. “What are human beings that you spare a thought for them, or the child of Adam that you care for him?”

- Jews and Christians alike read this passage as a question which the angels asked of God. Their perspective led to traditions such as that which we find in the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 38b):

1. When the Holy One, blessed be He, wished to create man, He [first] created a company of ministering angels and said to them: Is it your desire that we make a man in our image? They answered: Sovereign of the Universe, what will be his deeds? Such and such will be his deeds, He replied. Thereupon they exclaimed: Sovereign of the Universe, What are human beings that you spare a thought for them, or the child of Adam that you care for him? Thereupon He stretched out His little finger among them and consumed them with fire. The same thing happened with a second company. The third company said to Him: Sovereign of the Universe, what did it avail the former [angels] that they spoke to Thee [as they did]? The whole world is Thine, and whatsoever that Thou wishest to do therein, do it.”

III. The Prostration of the Angels

- Other passages of the Qur’an add another detail: God commands the angels to bow down to Adam upon his creation. Q 15:28-34:

28 Your Lord said to the angels, "I am creating a human being from clay, from molded mud.”

29 "When I have formed him, and breathed into him of My spirit, fall down prostrating before him."

30 So the angels prostrated themselves, all together.

31 Except for Satan. He refused to be among those who prostrated themselves.

32 He said, "O Satan, what kept you from being among those who prostrated themselves?"

33 He said, "I am not about to prostrate myself before a human being, whom You created from clay, from molded mud."

34 He said, "Then get out of here, for you are an outcast".
This story (a story to which the Qur’an refers seven times) raised a problem for Muslim commentators. The Qur’an emphasizes, as we have seen, the worship of God alone. Why then would God tell the angels to bow down before Adam as bowing would seem to be an action which implies worship?

This episode is best understood in light of the subtext of the Qur’an, with one difference. The prostration of the angels before Adam was a story that Jewish scholars generally did not like because it seemed to compromise divine monotheism. Hence we have a tradition in the midrashic text Genesis Rabba (8.9) which explains how God kept the angels from bowing before Adam:

1. “When the Lord created Adam, the angels mistook him [for a divine being]. What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He caused sleep to fall upon him, and so all knew that he was [but mortal] man. Thus it is written, ‘Have no more to do with humankind, which has only breath in its nostrils. How much is this worth?’ (Isaiah 2.22).”

Christians, however, liked this story, because of the parallel they draw between Adam and Jesus. Already we have in the New Testament the idea that the angels prostrated, or will prostrate, before Christ:

1. Hebrews 1:6: “Again, when He brings the First-born into the world, He says: Let all the angels of God pay him homage.”

2. Philippians 2:10: “…all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld, should bend the knee at the name of Jesus…”

These sort of references led later Christians, who followed the parallel that Saint Paul drew between Adam and Christ (for example in 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Timothy 2), to develop the idea that the angels bowed also before Adam (before the fall, when he still maintained the perfect image of God in which he was created). Thus we have a story of the angelic prostration before Adam in the early Christian Syriac text Cave of Treasures, which is quite close to the Qur’an:

1. God formed Adam with his holy hands, in His image and in His likeness. When the angels saw the image and the glorious appearance of Adam, they trembled at the beauty of his figure….Moreover, the angels and celestial powers heard the voice of God saying to Adam “See, I have made you king, priest and prophet, Lord, leader and director of all those made and created. To you alone have I given these and I give you authority over everything I have created.” When the angels and the archangels, the thrones and dominions, the cherubim and seraphim, that is when all of the celestial powers heard this voice, all of the orders bent their knees and prostrated before him.
2. When the leader of the lesser order saw the greatness given to Adam, he became jealous of him and did not want to prostrate before him with the angels. He said to his hosts, “Do not worship him and do not praise him with the angels. It is proper that you should worship me, since I am fire and spirit, not that I worship something that is made of dirt.”

- For the Qur’an the story of the prostration of the angels is not an anticipation of the angelic worship of Christ (as it was for Christians) but it does seem to be a reflection of the idea that Adam was created in the image of God (even if later Islamic tradition would reject this doctrine).
Reflection Questions

1. How does the Qur'an’s Biblical subtext help us understand why the angels object to the creation of Adam in Qur'an 2:30?

2. Why does the Qur'anic story of the prostration of the angels before Adam trouble Muslim commentators?

3. What is the Christological meaning of the story of the prostration of the angels before Adam in Christian texts?
Lecture 9. Abraham and Moses in the Qur’an

Overview

The figures of Abraham and Moses, are of central importance to the Qur’an. They are the most frequently named characters: Abraham is mentioned 69 times and Moses 136 times. In the Qur’an Abraham represents a vigilantly monotheistic character who rejects the idolatry of his own father and of his people. Moses, for his part, is a character who courageously confronts Pharaoh, a symbol of arrogance and blasphemy in the Qur’an.

1. Abraham

- The Abraham of the Qur’an is born in the midst of an idolatrous people and learns to worship God only after contemplating worshipping heavenly bodies. Q 6:76-79 describes how this move to monotheism took place through contemplation of first the stars, then the moon, and finally the sun.

  75. Thus We showed Abraham the empire of the heavens and the earth, that he might be one of those with certainty.
  76. When the night fell over him, he saw a planet. He said, "This is my lord." But when it set, he said, "I do not love those that set."
  77. Then, when he saw the moon rising, he said, "This is my lord." But when it set, he said, "If my Lord does not guide me, I will be one of the erring people."
  78. Then, when he saw the sun rising, he said, "This is my lord, this is bigger." But when it set, he said, "O my people, I am innocent of your idolatry.
  79. I have directed my attention towards Him Who created the heavens and the earth—a monotheist—and I am not of the idolaters."

- When first the stars, then then moon, and finally the sun set in the western sky, Abraham realizes that it is unworthy of worship. Ultimately he decides to worship the creator alone.

  1. Thus Abraham appears in the Qur’an as a rational monotheist, a believer who discovers the existence of one God through an examination of natural signs.

  2. It is precisely this activity that the Qur’an so often asks of its audience, insisting that the existence of God is evident in the signs of nature.

    (i) See e.g, Q 7.57 (re: rain); 26.7 (fruit); 50.6-11 (the sky, mountains, rain, trees etc.); 55.4-12 (sun, moon stars, trees, crops), passim.

- Immediately after this scene the Qur’an describes how Abraham fought with his people about the worship of one God:

  Q 6:80. And his people argued with him. He said, "Do you argue with me about God, when He has guided me? I do not fear what you associate with Him, unless my Lord wills it. My Lord comprehends all things in knowledge. Will you not reconsider?"
81. And why should I fear those you associate with Him, and you do not fear associating others with God for which He sent down to you no authority? Which side is more entitled to security, if you are aware?"

- In other passages, such as Q 26:70-82, the Qur'an makes it clear that Abraham’s own father was among the idolaters. Here Abraham confronts his father and their people:

70. When he said to his father and his people, "What do you worship?"
71. They said, "We worship idols, and we remain devoted to them."
72. He said, "Do they hear you when you pray?
73. Or do they benefit you, or harm you?"
74. They said, "But we found our ancestors doing so."
75. He said, "Have you considered what you worship.
76. You and your ancient ancestors?
77. They are enemies to me, but not so the Lord of the Worlds.
78. He who created me, and guides me.
79. He who feeds me, and waters me.
80. And when I get sick, He heals me.
81. He who makes me die, and then revives me.
82. He who, I hope, will forgive my sins on the Day of the Reckoning."

- This seems to make him quite unlike the Abraham of the Bible, who (even if he makes a covenant with God) is not a champion of monotheism; in the Bible, Abraham never confronts polytheists or idolaters for their offenses to God.

- As with the case of Adam, however, we can understand the Qur’an’s portrait of Abraham by appreciating the development of the Biblical picture of Abraham in the Jewish and Christian literature which developed after the Bible, but before the Qur’an.

1. In the Jewish text Jubilees (3rd-1st C. BC) Abraham comes to believe in God although his father, Terah, is an idolater. Abraham confronts his father, presenting a series of proofs drawn from nature for the worship of God alone and asking, “What help or advantage do we have from these idols?” Eventually Abraham also burns down the sanctuary of the idols. Terah (presumably afraid of the idolaters’ vengeance) takes Abraham and Sarah to Harran (Jubilees 12.14-5). That is where Abraham has a vision of the heavenly bodies, Jubilees 12:16-17:
(i) And he was sitting alone making observations [of the stars] and a voice came into his heart saying, “All the signs of the stars and the signs of the sun and the moon are all under the Lord’s control. Why am I seeking [them out]? If He wishes, He will make it rain morning and evening, and if He desires He will not make it fall, for everything is under His control.

2. In the Apocalypse of Abraham (ca. 2nd C. AD) Abraham’s father Terah is truly guilty of paganism. In order to save his father from his disbelief, Abraham presents a logical argument for the existence of one God. He describes to his father how fire is subdued by water, water by earth, and earth by the sun (Apocalypse of Abraham 7.1-7).

- Such traditions, including the Qur’anic material on Abraham’s discovery of monotheism, are ultimately shaped by two verses:
  1. Deuteronomy 4:19, “When you raise your eyes to heaven, when you see the sun, the moon, the stars—the entire array of heaven—do not be tempted to worship them and serve them. Yahweh your God has allotted these to all the other peoples under heaven.”
  2. Genesis 15:5 in which God takes Abraham outside and commands him, “Look up at the sky and count the stars if you can.”

II. Moses

- The character of Moses in the Qur’an also differs from what we find in the Bible, although in different ways. Here we will focus in particular on a passage in Q 26 in which Moses, after his foray into Midian, appears in the court of Pharaoh in which he was raised (Q 26:18-27):

  18. He said, "Did we not raise you among us as a child, and you stayed among us for many of your years?
  19. And you committed that deed you committed, and you were ungrateful."
  20. He said, "I did it then, when I was of those astray.
  21. And I fled from you when I feared you; but my Lord gave me wisdom, and made me one of the messengers.
  22. Is that the favor you taunt me with, although you have enslaved the Children of Israel?"
  23. Pharaoh said, "And what is the Lord of the Worlds?"
  24. He said, "The Lord of the heavens and the earth, and everything between them, if you are aware."
  25. He said to those around him, "Do you not hear?"
  26. He said, "Your Lord and the Lord of your ancestors of old."
  27. He said, "This messenger of yours, who is sent to you, is crazy."

- This passage suggests that Pharaoh himself adopted Moses—the impression is still greater when it is read together with Q 28, which relates how Pharaoh’s wife (and not his daughter as Exodus has it), finds the infant Moses who has been cast into the river by his mother (Q 28:7-9):

  7. We inspired the mother of Moses: "Nurse him; then, when you fear for him, cast him into the river, and do not fear, nor grieve; We will return him to you, and make him one of the messengers."
8. Pharaoh's household picked him up, to be an opponent and a sorrow for them. Pharaoh, Hamaan, and their troops were sinners.

9. Pharaoh's wife said, "An eye's delight for me and for you. Do not kill him; perhaps he will be useful to us, or we may adopt him as a son." But they did not foresee.

- The Qur'an seems to have Pharaoh’s wife (and not his daughter) adopt Moses so that Pharaoh (the evil tyrant and unbeliever) can be cast in the role of the father of Moses (the prophet of God). In the Bible the Pharaoh who is reigning during Moses' childhood is not the same Pharaoh whom the adult Moses confronts. In Exodus Moses flees to Midian because he is afraid that the Pharaoh will seek his life for this killing. He returns to Egypt only when he learns that this Pharaoh has died and a new one has taken his place.

- The Qur'an, however, relates that the Pharaoh whom Moses confronts and demands to set the Israelites free is the same Pharaoh who once adopted Moses (hence Q 26:18. “[Pharaoh] said, ‘Did we not raise you among us as a child, and you stayed among us for many of your years?’”).

1. Exodus 2:15, “When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh, and stayed in the land of Midian; and he sat down by a well…4:19 And the LORD said to Moses in Midian, ‘Go back to Egypt; for all the men who were seeking your life are dead.’”

1. In my opinion the Qur'anic author’s very purpose for this scene is to have a confrontation between father and son, that is, to have Moses choose his obligation to God above his obligation to his “father.”

- The way in which the Qur’an makes the encounter between Pharaoh and Moses a family affair reflects a central theme of its religious exhortation, namely that faithfulness to God should come before faithfulness to one’s family. The Qur’an’s concern with this theme is seen in the way it often portrays the unbelievers as a people who do things the other way around, who stubbornly cling to the false religion of their forefathers:

Q 2:170. “And when it is said to them, “Follow what God has revealed,” they say, "We will follow what we found our ancestors following.” Even if their ancestors understood nothing, and were not guided?”

Q 5:104. “And when it is said to them, ‘Come to what God has revealed, and to the Messenger,’ they say, ‘Sufficient for us is what we found our forefathers upon.’ Even if their forefathers knew nothing, and were not guided?”
Reflection Questions

1. Why do you think the Qur’an tells stories of Abraham arguing about the worship of God alone with his pagan people?

2. Why does the Qur’an emphasize Abraham’s discovery of the worship of God alone through the observation of natural signs?

3. Why does the Qur’an make Moses the son of Pharaoh?
Jesus is an extraordinary figure in the Qur’an. The Islamic scripture names him a “word of God” and a spirit from God; it describes the virgin birth and mentions many of his miracles (including those known from apocryphal Gospels and not the New Testament). On the other hand, the Qur’an seems to deny the crucifixion and criticizes Christians for their belief that Jesus is the son of God. Ultimately, the Qur’an’s Christology is subject to its vision of God, or Allah, which has no room for a Trinity or an Incarnation.

1. Jesus in the Qur’an Generally

- The Qur’an regularly calls Jesus the Christ, or masih “messiah” (Arabic, like Hebrew is a Semitic language), but does not understand anything special by this.

- Many of the miracles that the Qur’an attributes to Jesus are known to us from apocryphal Gospels. These include the creation of a bird from clay, and bringing it to life (Q 3:49; 5:110), speaking as an infant (Q 3:46; 19:19-33), and informing people of the things in their houses (Q 3:49). On some occasions, the Qur’an insists that Jesus was only able to accomplish these miracles by the permission of God (e.g. 3:55).

- The Qur’an has God breathe his own spirit into Mary to create Jesus:

  Q 21:91. And she who guarded her virginity. We breathed into her of Our spirit, and made her and her son a sign to the world.

- Thus the Qur’an accepts the virgin birth of Jesus (Q 3:45-47):

  45. The Angels said, "O Mary, God gives you good news of a Word from Him. His name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, well-esteemed in this world and the next, and one of the nearest.
  46. He will speak to the people from the crib, and in adulthood, and will be one of the righteous."
  47. She said, "My Lord, how can I have a child, when no man has touched me?" He said, "It will be so. God creates whatever He wills. To have anything done, He only says to it, 'Be,' and it is."
1. In light of this the Q regularly calls Jesus “son of Mary”—this is unusual, no other character in the Q is known as the son of his mother. The Bible only calls Jesus by this title once:

   (i) “This is the carpenter, surely, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joset and Jude and Simon? His sisters, too, are they not here with us?” And they would not accept him. (Mark 6:3 NJB)

2. This shows the Qur’an’s argument against Christians (he is not son of God) and against Jews (he is son of Mary).

- The Qur’an regularly associates Jesus—and no one else—with the Holy Spirit.

   2:87. We gave Moses the Scripture, and sent a succession of messengers after him. And We gave Jesus son of Mary the clear proofs, and We supported him with the Holy Spirit (cf. Q2:253; 5:110).

- Nevertheless, the Qur’an is clear that Jesus should not be considered God or son of God:

   5:75. The Messiah son of Mary was only a messenger, before whom other Messengers had passed away, and his mother was a woman of truth. They both used to eat food. Note how We make clear the revelations to them; then note how deluded they are.

   9:30. The Jews said, "Ezra is the son of God," and the Christians said, "The Messiah is the son of God." These are their statements, out of their mouths. They emulate the statements of those who blasphemed before. May God assail them! How deceived they are!

- Islamic doctrine is that Jesus is simply one of the prophets—and that he prepared the way for Muhammad whose law and teaching totally replaced that of Jesus. Jesus cannot be more than this because of the overall vision that the Qur’an has of God’s relation to humanity. Still the Qur’an is extraordinarily interested in Jesus. It refers to him by name 25 times (more than Muhammad, 4 times) and it names him the word and spirit of God:

   3:45. The Angels said, "O Mary, God gives you good news of a Word from Him. His name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, well-esteemed in this world and the next, and one of the nearest.

   4:171. O People of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion, and do not say about God except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, is the Messenger of God, and His Word that He conveyed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him.

- The Qur’an denies that the Jews killed or crucified Jesus—something we will return to in a moment—and reports that God raised Jesus to himself in Q 4:157-159.

   157. And for their saying, "We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the Messenger of God." In fact, they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it appeared to them as if they did. Indeed, those who differ about him are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it, except the following of assumptions. Certainly, they did not kill him.

   158. Rather, God raised him up to Himself. God is Mighty and Wise.
159. There is none from the People of the Scripture but will believe in him before his death, and on the Day of Resurrection he will be a witness against them.

II. Jesus as Prophet of the Punishment Stories

- Like Abraham and Moses, Jesus also is sent to a people, namely to the Israelites.

61:14. O you who believe! Be supporters of God, as Jesus son of Mary said to the disciples, "Who are my supporters towards God?" The disciples said, "We are God's supporters." So a group of the Children of Israel believed, while another group disbelieved. We supported those who believed against their foe, so they became dominant.

- Jesus brought signs like Ṣaliḥ (camel) and Moses (staff, etc.). He was rejected by the Israelites.

61:6. And when Jesus son of Mary said, “O Children of Israel, I am God's Messenger to you, confirming what preceded me of the Torah, and announcing good news of a messenger who will come after me, whose name is Ahmad.” But when he showed them the miracles, they said, “This is obvious sorcery.”

- The Jews were indeed punished, however, the Qurʾan was not able to say that the Israelites were destroyed because the Jews were still around so the Qurʾan insists that they were cursed:

5:13. Because of their breaking their pledge, We cursed them, and made their hearts hard. They twist the words out of their context, and they disregarded some of what they were reminded of. You will always witness deceit from them, except for a few of them. But pardon them, and overlook. God loves the doers of good.

- The Qurʾan mentions the sin of killing the prophets just before passage on the Crucifixion (Q 4:157):

4:155. But for their violation of their covenant, and their denial of God's revelations, and their killing of the prophets unjustly, and their saying, “Our minds are closed.” In fact, God has sealed them for their disbelief, so they do not believe, except for a few.

- Muslims often argue that the Qurʾan rejects the crucifixion and the death of Jesus, but Q 4:157 only says that the Jews’ boast of killing Jesus is wrong—presumably because God was behind Jesus’ death, as he is behind the death of all people—something the Qurʾan mentions on numerous occasions. Thus the Qurʾan presents us with a figure of Jesus who was sent to Israelites and rejected by them as previous prophets were sent to other peoples and rejected by them. God, however, vindicated Jesus by raising him to heaven.
Reflection Questions

1. What are the titles that the Qur’an uses for Jesus? What do these titles say about the Qur’an’s teaching about him?

2. What distinguishes Jesus from other prophets in the Qur’an?

3. Describe the Qur’an’s position on the crucifixion? Why does the Qur’an take this position?

4. How does the Qur’an use Jesus to say something about the rejection of prophets?
Lecture 11. The Qurʾan on the Bible

Overview

On a number of occasions the Qurʾan accuses Jews and Christians (but especially Jews) of misreading scripture or writing something on their own and claiming that it is scripture. These accusations led to the development of a theory that the Bible is an inauthentic, falsified book. Thus while the Qurʾan refers to revelations given to Moses and Jesus, Islamic tradition argues that these revelations are not faithfully preserved by the Bible. From an academic point of view, however, there is reason to believe that the author of the Qurʾan was not aware of the contents of the Bible.

1. Terms for Earlier Scriptures

- The Qurʾan never refers to the Old Testament and the New Testament by those terms. It also never refers to any specific Biblical book from Genesis to Revelation. Instead the Qurʾan speaks only in terms of general revelation given to Moses, named the tawrat, to David, named the zabur, and to Jesus, named the injil.

  Q3:3. He sent down to you the Book with the Truth, confirming what came before it; and He sent down the Torah and the Gospel.
  4. Aforetime, as guidance for mankind; and He sent down the Criterion. Those who have rejected God's signs will have a severe punishment. God is Mighty, Able to take revenge.

  4:163. We have inspired you, as We had inspired Noah and the prophets after him. And We inspired Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the Patriarchs, and Jesus, and Job, and Jonah, and Aaron, and Solomon. And We gave David the Psalms (zabur).

- These words seem to have their roots in Biblical tradition. Tawrat is related to the Hebrew word Torah (used by Jews for the first 5 books of the Bible); Zabur is close for the words used by Christians in Ethiopic and Syriac for the book of Psalms, and injil is closely related to the Syriac version of the Greek word euangelion, meaning “gospel.”

  1. It is noteworthy that the Qurʾan speaks of a “gospel” generally, and not of the four Gospels; the word gospel never occurs in the plural in the Qurʾan.

- All of this leads to the development of an Islamic doctrine of revelation by which God sent down angels from heavenly who brought complete scriptures to prophets (the tawrat to Moses, injil to
Jesus, Qur’an to Muhammad etc.). These books were always in Arabic, the language of God, and in cases where the prophet spoke another language the angel would translate it for them.

II. The Qur’an on the Falsification of Revelation

- This doctrine necessarily led to the Muslims casting doubt on the authenticity of the Bible, which does not match their conception of what a “scripture” should look like (it does not appear to be the tawrat and injil of Islamic tradition). Hence Muslims argue that the scriptures given to Moses and Jesus were “corrupted.”

- One such tradition that reflects this argument has some Jews of Medina bring to Muhammad a man and a woman from their community accused of adultery. When Muhammad asks them what penalty the Torah prescribes for this case, they reply that the offenders are to be flogged. At this a companion of Muhammad, ‘Abdallah b. Sallam (himself a recent convert from Judaism), counters that the Torah itself contains a verse condemning adulterers to death by stoning. When they bring out the Torah scrolls to solve the matter a rabbi places his hand over a passage in the text, reciting only what precedes and what follows it. Ibn Sallam strikes the rabbi’s hand, uncovering the verse with the stoning penalty, and declares, “This, O messenger of God, is the verse of stoning which he refuses to read to you.” Muhammad is appalled, and cries out, “Woe to you Jews! What has induced you to abandon the judgment of God which you hold in your hands?”

1. This story seems to be a way of explaining Q 5:43: “But why do they come to you for judgment, when they have the Torah, in which is God's Law? Yet they turn away after that. These are not believers.”

2. The detail of a Jew physically covering a portion of the Torah, meanwhile, relates to the Qur’an’s command, “And do not mix (talbisu – literally “clothe”) truth with falsehood, and do not conceal the truth while you know (cf. Q 3.71).” (Q 2:42). A different story has a Jew literally hide a portion of the Torah behind his back, thus explaining Q 3:187: “When God made a covenant with those who had been given revelation, [He commanded them,] ‘Present it to the people. Do not hide it from them.’ Yet they cast it behind their backs, bartering it for a cheap thing. They have only bartered for evil.”

- When we look at the Q, however, we see that there seem to be two different views on the authenticity of the Bible:

1. A number of verses suggest that Jews and Christians misread scripture, or fabricate certain things which they claim to be scripture, for example Q 2:79: “So woe to those who write the Scripture with their own hands, and then say, ‘This is from God,’ that they may exchange it for a little price. Woe to them for what their hands have written, and woe to them for what they earn.” (cf. Q 2:42, 59, 75, 140, 146, 174; 3:71, 187; 4:46; 5:13, 15 41).

2. Other verses (notably Q 4:136), however, command the believers to accept the scriptures sent down to earlier messengers (and make no mention of the idea that those scriptures are lost or corrupt).

   (i) Q 5:47 commands the “People of the Gospel” to follow what then find in the gospel: “O you who believe! Believe in God and His messenger, and the Book
He sent down to His messenger, and the Book He sent down before. Whoever rejects God, His angels, His Books, His messengers, and the Last Day, has strayed far in error.”

(ii) Q 10:94 seems to command Muhammad himself to ask the Jews and Christians about their scripture: “If you are in doubt about what We revealed to you, ask those who read the Scripture before you. The truth has come to you from your Lord, so do not be of those who doubt.”

III. Did the Author of the Qur’an Know the Bible?

- The Qur’an does not differentiate between stories from the Bible and those from apocrypha or later texts (Adam and angels, Abraham’s infancy, etc.). This suggests at least the possibility that the author of the Qur’an was not aware of exactly what is found in the canonical Bible.

- At times what the Qur’an says about the tawrat and the injil does not line up with what we find in the Bible, for example:
  1. Q 7:157: “Those who follow the Messenger, the Unlettered Prophet, whom they find mentioned in the Torah and the Gospel in their possession.”
     (i) This Qur’anic verses seems to be an assertion that Muhammad is found in the Bible, but he is not.
  2. Q 9:111: “God has purchased from the believers their lives and their properties in exchange for Paradise. They fight in God's way, and they kill and get killed. It is a promise binding on Him in the Torah, and the Gospel, and the Qur’an.”
     (i) This verse suggests that the command to fight a holy war, and the promise of heaven for doing so, is found in the Bible, but it is not there.

- These are not the sort of things that we find in the Bible, which leaves us with a dilemma. Did the author of the Qur’an simply not know the Bible well? Or did the author of the Qur’an mean to portray the Bible in a certain way to its audience, to attempt a particular reading of scripture?
Reflection Questions

1. What sort of vocabulary and turns of phrase does the Qur’an use to refer to revelations given to earlier prophets?

2. What is the injil according to the Qur’an?

3. How does the Qur’an accuse Jews and Christians of falsifying scripture?

4. Do you think that the author of the Qur’an knew the canonical text of the Bible? Why or why not?
Lecture 12. A Christian Interpretation of the Qur’an?

Overview

In the previous lecture we discussed how the Qur’an considers the Bible, including those passages which seem to take a critical view of the Bible’s authenticity. We also looked at the Islamic tradition in which the Bible is completely corrupt or falsified. By this tradition the Qur’an is a text completely opposed to the Bible and Christian teaching. Not everyone has arrived at this conclusion. In their responses to Islam, Christians have not always and inevitably argued that the Qur’an is a false scripture or that Muhammad was a false prophet. Already in the classical period Christians such as Paul of Antioch argued that Christian messages can be found within the Qur’an. In the 20th century, Giulio Basetti-Sani developed a comprehensive reading of the Qur’an as a Christian text whose meaning can be unlocked by the Church. This reading involved, among other things, an argument that the apparently anti-Christian messages of the Qur’an are in fact directed only against Christian heretics.

I. The Ancient Apologetic Tradition

- There is a long tradition of Christians building apologetic arguments from the text of the Qur’an:
  1. Paul of Antioch (d. 1180) argued that the Qur’anic invocation, “In the name of God the gracious, the merciful” is a restatement of the Christian invocation (also in three parts), “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”
  2. He also held that the way the Qur’an refers to Jesus as the word of God (Q 3:45; 4:171) and a “Spirit from God” (4:171) testifies to Christian teaching on the divinity of Christ.

II. Basetti-Sani: Muhammad is a Prophet

- In *The Koran in the Light of Christ* (1977), the Italian Franciscan Giulio Basetti-Sani, argued that the Qur’an—properly understood—actually defends Christian teaching. Basetti-Sani wrote in the context of post-Vatican II theological debates on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions, influenced by *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate*. He sought to come up with a comprehensive Christian reading of the Qur’an.

- Basetti-Sani was motivated by a personal conviction that Muslim believers are sincere in their worship of God and have an authentic spirituality. This conviction led him to argue that Muhammad was in fact a divinely-inspired prophet, but also a Christian prophet. Like the prophets of the Old Testament he was given prophecies that point to Christ.
  1. Thus the Church should unlock the Christian meaning of the Qur’an as it has done with the Old Testament (the Hebrew Scriptures).
(i) “I noticed that the interpretation of the Old and New Testaments, made with a rabbinical ‘key,’ was quite different from one made with a Christian ‘key.’ I thought it must also be possible to read the Koran with a Christian key, even if the Muslim count not have understood its actual sense or that, today, we might be able to ‘open’ it with a Christian key.”

2. He holds that Muhammad (like prophets of the Old Testament) may not have been aware of the Christian nature of the revelation:

(i) “It is not necessary to admit that Mohammed, and after him his followers, understood the complete sense of the Koran’s message. It is well to remember what St. Thomas wrote about the knowledge the prophets may have had about what they were writing: ‘Since the mind of the prophet is a defective instrument, even true prophets did not always know everything the Spirit intended by visions and words and deeds.’

3. To this end, Basetti-Sani refers to 2 Corinthians 3:14: “But their minds were closed. Until this very day, the same veil remains over the reading of the Old Testament: it is not lifted, for only in Christ is it done away with.”

III. Basetti-Sani’s Method of Reading the Qur’an

• Basetti-Sani argues that the Qur’an’s material on Christ, which is thought by Muslims and Christians alike to be directed against Christian doctrine, is in fact meant as a refutation of the Jews and a correction of Christian heresies.

1. For example, when the Qur’an says (e.g. Q 2:116; 19:35), “God would not take a son” it means to refute Nestorian Christians who considered God to have adopted Jesus as a son.

2. When the Qur’an says (4:171), “Do not say three,” it does not mean to refute the Trinity but to respond to Jews who argued that Christians are tri-theists for their belief in the Trinity.

3. When the Qur’an relates (Q 5:72) “They disbelieve who say God is the messiah” it means to refute monophysite Christians who deny that Christ has a human nature.

• While the Qur’an is often thought to deny the crucifixion (4:157), it only denies that the Jews killed Christ: this, Basetti-Sani holds, is the teaching of the Church, who holds that the death of Christ was the work of divine providence.

• Basetti-Sani concludes: “Mohammed never knew the doctrine of the Catholic Church, of orthodox Christianity; hence he was unable to reject it. He rejected distortions of Christianity.”
Basetti-Sani also holds that the Qur'an has explicitly Christian passages, such as Q 4:172:

The Messiah does not disdain to be a servant of God, nor do the favored angels. Whoever disdains His worship, and is too arrogant—He will round them up to Himself altogether.

Basetti-Sani compares this passage to Philippians 2:5-8 (NJB):

Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped.

But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being,

he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.

In the end Basetti-Sani’s ideas were not widely followed. Christians generally disagree with the idea that Muhammad could be a prophet, and Muslims uniformly reject the idea that he could have been a Christian prophet.
Review Questions

1. Why would Christians such as Paul of Antioch choose to argue for the legitimacy of Christianity on the basis of the Qur’an?

2. What does Basetti-Sani mean when he says that the Church has the ‘key’ to unlock the meaning of the Qur’an?

3. How does Basetti-Sani account for passages in the Qur’an that appear to be anti-Christian?
Lecture 13. The Uncertainty of the Muslim Exegetes

Overview

The goal of this lecture is to introduce the section of our course dedicated to critical studies of the Qur’an. From the perspective of academic scholarship the Islamic texts that are meant to explain the Qur’an were written much later. More importantly the authors of these texts do not seem to know the Qur’an well. Such skepticism emerges from the lack of consensus of early Muslim scholars over the meaning of the Qur’an. If early Muslim scholars were unsure of the Qur’an’s meaning one doubts that there was a transmission of knowledge from the time of the Qur’an’s origins. They often tell stories which are simply extrapolations of turns of phrase in the text, and when the text does not so easily yield stories (for example with the “mysterious letters”) they do not have any clear explanation to offer. This suggests that the ancient meaning of the Qur’an was lost and scholars might seek to rediscover it today.

I. Unclear Translations of the Qur’an

- The profound differences in translations of the Qur’an regarding certain passages reflect differences found in early Islamic literature about the meaning of certain terms or turns of phrase.
- For example, the word *samad* in Q 112:2 is translated in many different ways:
  1. *Sahih International*
     (i) “Allah, the Eternal Refuge.”
  2. *Muhsin Khan*
     (i) “Allah-us-Samad (The Self-Sufficient Master, Whom all creatures need, He neither eats nor drinks).”
  3. *Pickthall*
     (i) “Allah, the eternally Besought of all!”
  4. *Yusuf Ali*
     (i) “Allah, the Eternal, Absolute;”
  5. *Shakir*
     (i) “Allah is He on Whom all depend.”
  6. *Dr. Ghali*
     (i) “Allah, The Everlasting Sovereign.”
• Another example is the word *samum* in Q 15:27, which seems to describe the fire from which jinn were created:

  1. *Sahih International*
     
     (i) “And the jinn We created before from scorching fire.”
  
  2. *Muhsin Khan*
     
     (i) “And the jinn, We created aforetime from the smokeless flame of fire.”
  
  3. *Pickthall*
     
     (i) “And the jinn did We create aforetime of essential fire.”
  
  4. *Yusuf Ali*
     
     (i) “And the Jinn race, We had created before, from the fire of a scorching wind.”
  
  5. *Shakir*
     
     (i) “And the jinn We created before, of intensely hot fire.”
  
  6. *Dr. Ghali*
     
     (i) “And the jinn race We created earlier of the fire (The Arabic word *samum* is sometimes understood to be pestilential wind) of a pestilential (fire).”

II. The Disconnected Letters

• Larger elements of the Qur’an are also unfamiliar to early Muslim scholars. Among these are the disconnected letters that appear at the opening of 29 suras. For example, *sura* 2 begins with the letters *a – l – m* which are written in printed Qur’an’s in a disconnected fashion to make it clear they do not form a word.

• Abu Ja’far al-Tabari, reports over fourteen different interpretations of these letters. Among these interpretations the letters could represent:

  1. Different names for the Qur’an
  
  2. Names of different *suras*
  
  3. Names for God
  
  4. A mystical way in which God makes a vow upon His own divinity
  
  5. The letters might each be abbreviations for different words
6. A method of counting camels

7. Each letter possibly has a numerical value, thereby recording the length that certain nations will last

8. The letters could simply be a mystery known only to God.

- Tabari’s discussion of the first three disconnected letters takes up over nine pages in the standard edition of his commentary. He concludes his discussion with his own view, that each letter is an abbreviation for more than one word. This is a perfectly logical deduction, since it explains why the Qur’an might use a letter instead of a word (although Tabari does not attempt to identify which words are intended by each letter).

- The uncertainty of Tabari is especially surprising because a careful study of the letters shows that none of his proposed interpretations is likely to be right. Instead these “disconnected letters” seem to have played an important role in the organizational structure of the Qur’an.
  1. We notice that every consonant form in the Arabic alphabet is represented at least once by these letters, while no form is used for more than one letter.

    Moreover, suras that begin with the same or similar letters are grouped together, even when that grouping means violating the larger ordering principle of the Qur’an (from longer to shorter suras). Tabari, however, is unaware of this.

III. The Sabi’un

- The Qur’an twice includes a group called the Sabi’un among four groups (including also the believers, the Jews, and the Christians) who are assured that they need have no fear—an expression which suggests they are promised entry into paradise.

- One imagines that when the Prophet Muhammad proclaimed the Qur’an he would have explained to his audience the identity of the Sabi’un. The audience would have wanted to know the identity of this group to whom God promises paradise. In fact the early Muslim commentators are confused over the identity of this group. Tabari records seven different opinions who they might be:
  1. Anyone who leaves a religion
  2. People of no religion
  3. A group between Zoroastrians and Jews
  4. A tribe in the Sudan
  5. A religion in Mesopotamia with one god, but no prophets or law or book
  6. An angel worshipping religion
  7. A religion that prays towards Mecca, but reads the Psalms as their Scripture.

- In the end Tabari does not even attempt a solution.
• Scholars today tend to associate the Sabi’un either with Manicheans or a group from southern Iraq known as the Mandaeans.

**IV. Conclusion**

• In describing the nature of early Islamic commentaries, the historian Lawrence Conrad writes:
  
  1. “Even words that would have been of great and immediate importance in the days of Muhammad himself are argued over and guessed at, sometimes at great length, and with no satisfactory result. …Confusion and uncertainty seems to be the rule, and at the centre of it all, is a written text in which textual anomalies could not be solved, and for which oral tradition offered no help, and for which clarifying context was unknown.”

• Thus it seems that the *mufassirun* were not involved in a process of remembering, but rather in a process of logical speculation. Because of this, scholars today feel justified in imagining new, non-traditional, interpretations of the Qur’an in their efforts to understand the ancient meaning of the text.
Chart of the Qur'anic initial letters, mysterious letters. Photo by Mustafaa.
Review Questions

1. Describe the disconnected letters. What sorts of theories do classical Muslim exegetes propose to explain them?

2. How does the Qur’an refer to the Sabi’un? Why would we expect early Muslim scholars to know who they are?

3. What sort of scholarly consequences can one deduce from the inability of the classical Muslim exegetes to explain important elements of the Qur’an?
Lecture 14. Reconsidering the Qur’an and the Life of the Prophet

Overview

The principal task of early Muslim interpreters of the Qur’an was to tell stories meant to explain material in the Qur’an, stories which involve the Muslim prophet, Muhammad, even when he is not clearly mentioned in the text. This meant that the Qur’an became a scripture about Muhammad (who is in fact named only 4 times in the text). Until recently, Western scholars largely accepted this method of interpreting the Qur’an, and therefore sought to assign suras either to the Meccan or Medinan period of Muhammad’s prophetic career.

I. Chronological Tradition

- In this second of three lectures on “Academic Controversies over the Qur’an” we will discuss a fundamental element of traditional scholarship on the Qur’an, namely the conviction that the Qur’an is properly read by linking its passages to certain moments in the Prophet Muhammad’s life (even when those passages say nothing about Muhammad).

- If you open an Arabic copy of the Qur’an you will usually find certain bits of information at the top of each sura: the title of the sura, the number of verses in the sura, and then a word – either makkiyya or madaniyya, that is, “Meccan” or “Medinan.”

  1. These terms reflect a conviction that the suras were revealed to Muhammad as complete units, one by one, so that they can be lined up in a chronological order according to his prophetic career.

     (i) Those suras revealed when the Prophet was preaching in Mecca (the first twelve years of his career) are “Meccan.”

     (ii) Those revealed when he was preaching in Medina (the later ten years) are “Medinan.”

  2. Some Qur’an’s are more precise. The official 1924 Cairo edition of the Qur’an lists an exact order in which all of the suras were allegedly sent down to Muhammad.

II. Asbab al-Nuzul

- The idea of asbab al-nuzul, or “occasions of revelation,” is important in order to understand this chronological reading of the Qur’an. The asbab al-nuzul are reports that claim to explain what was going on when a certain verse or passage was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.

  1. For example the story of Muhammad’s night journey on a fabulous winged beast from Mecca to Jerusalem is understood to explain Q 17:1:
Glory to Him who journeyed His servant by night, from the Sacred Mosque, to the Farthest Mosque, whose precincts We have blessed, in order to show him of Our wonders.

- Similarly the story in which Muhammad, while still in Mecca, is tricked into proclaiming a verse that Satan had whispered to him is meant to explain Q 22:52:

  We never sent a messenger before you, or a prophet, but when he had a desire Satan interfered in his wishes. But God nullifies what Satan interjects, and God affirms His revelations. God is Omniscient and Wise.

- The story by which God tells Muhammad and his followers, while in Medina, no longer to pray towards Jerusalem but rather towards Mecca (or the Ka`ba, to be more precise) is meant to explain Q 2:144:

  We have seen your face turned towards the heaven. So We will turn you towards a direction that will satisfy you. So turn your face towards the Sacred Mosque. And wherever you may be, turn your faces towards it.

- The 11th century scholar Wahidi (d. 1075), author of the most famous book on asbab al-nuzul, tells the follow story about Q 9:49:

  2. This was revealed about Jadd ibn Qays the hypocrite. This is because when the Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and give him peace, was preparing for the Battle of Tabuk, he said to him: “O Abu Wahb, would you not like to have scores of Byzantine women and men as concubines and servants?” He said: “O Messenger of Allah, my people know that I am very fond of women and, if I see the women of the Byzantines, I fear I will not be able to hold back. So do not tempt me by them, and allow me not to join and, instead, I will assist you with my wealth.” The Prophet, Allah bless him and give him peace, turned away from him and said: “I allow you,” and so Allah, exalted is He, revealed this verse.

### III. The Chronological Reading of the Qurʾan Among Western Scholars

- The question of developing a “chronology of the Qurʾan” according to the life of the Prophet Muhammad was the first task of critical academic research in the 19th century.

- Western scholars generally accepted the concept of the dating of suras, but they felt they could do a better job than traditional Muslim scholars, in part because they mistrusted asbab al-nuzul reports, many of which seem to have been written long after the Qurʾan as a way to explain Qurʾanic passages.

- Many Western scholars felt a better way to develop a chronology of the Qurʾan was to seek to detect the development of the Prophet Muhammad’s thinking—and even his psychological state—by detecting different theological, political, and emotional dispositions in the text of the Qurʾan.
1. The first volume of Theodor Nöldeke’s *Geschichte des Qorans* ("History of the Qur’an") is entirely dedicated to the question of a chronology. Nöldeke (following an earlier German scholar, G. Weil) proposed to divide the Qur’an between four stages or periods: three sub-periods under the category of “Meccan,” and lastly “Medinan.”

2. After Nöldeke, the French scholar Régis Blachère was even more critical of relying on *asbab al-nuzul* stories, but believed an internal chronology could be developed (he even published a translation of the Qur’an in a chronological sequence).

   (i) Today there is no bigger controversy among academic scholars of the Qur’an than the question of chronology.

   (ii) For some scholars, such as Angelika Neuwirth, every serious scholar must take into account the moment in the career of Muhammad when a certain passage was proclaimed.

- Other scholars (I among them) reject entirely the notion of chronology. From my perspective, chronology is built on stories about the Qur’an, but those stories were written precisely to explain the Qur’an. The whole idea is circular.

   1. What is more: we do not know well enough how the Qur’an was written. It is possible that there were multiple authors and a complicated process of redaction. The idea of chronology ignores all of this and assumes that Muhammad is responsible for the entire text of the Qur’an, and that the text was never edited after him, that the text was essentially frozen from the moment he proclaimed it.
Review Questions

1. What does it mean to say that a *sura* is “Meccan” or “Medinan”?

2. What is an “occasion of revelation”? Give an example.

3. What is distinct about the methods used by Western scholars to come up with a “chronological” order of the Qur’an?

4. What is circular about the notion of a chronological order of the Qur’an?
Lecture 15. The Qurʾan’s Self-Understanding

Overview

In our last lecture on academic controversies over the Qurʾan we will look at an extraordinary aspect of the Qurʾan: the way it refers to itself. Quite unlike the Bible, the Qurʾan refers to itself, usually in the course of defending its own authenticity or insisting that it is a text which comes from God. This “self-referentiality” is seen in the way that the Qurʾan (capital “Q”) speaks regularly of the words given to its Prophet as a qurʾan (lowercase “q”), or (according to the Arabic meaning of the word) the “recitation.” This concern with insistence on its own authenticity suggests that the Qurʾan was proclaimed in contexts where Jews and Christians challenged the claims of Muhammad as a prophet.

1. *qurʾan* in the Qurʾan

- A good place to begin to understand what is meant by the Qurʾan’s self-referentiality is with the name Qurʾan itself. Early Muslim scholars chose to name their scripture “the Qurʾan” because of the appearance therein of the Arabic word “qurʾan”, meaning “recitation,” and in particular because the word *qurʾan* seems to be used for the revelation which God has given to Muhammad:

  6:19 Say, "God is Witness between you and me. This Qurʾan was revealed to me, that I may warn you with it, and whomever it may reach. Do you indeed testify that there are other gods with God?" Say, "I myself do not testify." Say, "He is but One God, and I am innocent of your idolatry."

  12:3 We narrate to you the most accurate history, by revealing to you this Qurʾan. Although, prior to it, you were of the unaware.

  20:2 We did not reveal the Qurʾan to you to make you suffer.

  3 But only as a reminder for him who fears.

- Early Muslim scholars understood these references to *qurʾan* as references to the Qurʾan as it once existed in heaven. They interpret *qurʾan* as a proper noun, as the name of the book which the angel Gabriel transported from heaven to Muhammad on earth (this interpretation is evident in Itani’s translation, as he capitalizes Qurʾan).

  1. This understanding is connected to broader view of revelation, namely that a compendium of all revelations exists with God in heaven, and that from this compendium God sends angels to earth with individual scriptures.

  2. He sent one angel with the *tawrat* to Moses, another with the *injil* to Jesus, and another with the *qurʾan* to Muhammad.

- Early Muslim scholars developed this view of revelation in part on the basis of passages such as Qurʾan 43:3-4:
3 We made it an Arabic Qur’an, so that you may understand.
4 And it is with Us, in the Source Book, sublime and wise.

II. Self-Referentiality

- The Qur’an, early Muslim scholars held, is one part of this “Source Book” (literally, “Mother of the Book” umm al-kitab).

- Yet, upon careful examination of the Qur’an’s self-referentiality, it becomes apparent that things are not so simple. The Qur’an could hardly be referring to itself—the complete book with 114 suras—when it speaks of al-qur’an for those very references that were written or proclaimed as the Qur’an were still incomplete and yet being proclaimed.
  1. In other words, when Qur’an 20:2 was being proclaimed (with its reference to al-qur’an) Qur’an 20:2 was not yet part of the Qur’an—the Qur’an was not yet a complete book with 114 suras. Thus those references must be to something else.

- This point has been made eloquently by the French scholar Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau, author of the work Le Coran par lui-même. She asks how such occurrences could both refer to the Qur’an and be part of the Qur’an? Boisliveau argues that we should understand the Qur’an’s self-referentiality in more general terms, as references to the message which God progressively gave to the Qur’an’s prophet, and not to the scripture as it was later canonized.

- Boisliveau also emphasizes that the Qur’an’s concern with the revelations given to Muhammad, reflects a context in which his legitimacy was challenged. The Qur’an is passionately concerned with proving that Muhammad is a prophet and so it often speaks of the legitimacy of his revelations.

- Indeed, the Qur’an’s self-references often appear as responses to claims of those who refuse to believe that Muhammad is a prophet. Thus we see the refutations of a variety of claims including that he was nothing but:
  1. A soothsayer (Q 52:29; 69:42)
  2. A poet (Q 21:5; 37:36; 52:30; 69.41)
  3. Inspired by demons (Q 26:210-12)
  4. Possessed by a genie (Q 15:6; 44:14; 68:51, etc.)
  5. Simply a human who made things up (Q 6:91; 21:3; 74:25, etc.)
One strategy the Qur’an uses to insist on its own legitimacy is to align itself with earlier revelations:

10:37 This Qur’an could not have been produced by anyone other than God. In fact, it is a confirmation of what preceded it, and an elaboration of the Book. There is no doubt about it—it is from the Lord of the Universe.

Such references suggest that the challenges to the legitimacy of the Qur’an came principally from Jews and Christians, and not from pagans (as has long been assumed).
Reflection Questions

1. How did the Qur’an get its name?

2. What do we mean by Qur’anic “self-referentiality”?

3. What is the best way to understand the Qur’an’s references to a “book” or a “recitation”? 
Lecture 16. The Development of Exegesis in Islamic Tradition

Overview

We turn now from the ways in which Western academic scholars have analyzed the Qurʾan to the ways in which Muslim scholars through the centuries have interpreted it. Our principal interest in this lecture is a particular genre of literature, usually marked by commentary that proceeds verse by verse (or passage by passage), through the entire text of the Qurʾan, known in Arabic as tafsir. Early Islamic authors of Qurʾan commentary tend to proceed through the Qurʾanic text verse by verse, offering paraphrases of the Qurʾan’s Arabic expressions. Later, “classical” commentaries often report a number of longer traditions, attributed to early authorities, with detailed narratives, and which sometimes offer different perspectives on the same passage. Eventually, more conservative commentators would argue that only narratives from Muhammad or his companions offer a reliable source for the interpretation of the Qurʾan.

I. Early Commentaries

- We will exam early, classical, and modern commentaries, focusing on one example from each period.
- The best known early commentator is Muqatil b. Sulayman (d. 767), whose work is effectively our earliest commentary. Muqatil’s commentary is often a paraphrase of the Qurʾanic text but with names or details given in the places where the Qurʾan gives none. One has the sense that early commentators were generated by a desire to fill in all of the blanks which the Qurʾan leaves.
- For example, on Q 2:30, with its reference to the creation of man as a “successor,” Muqatil explains accordingly that God “created the angels and the jinn before He created Satan and humans.” Tafsir Muqatil explains that the angels were created to be residents of heaven and the jinn residents of earth.

II. Classical Commentaries

- The best known commentary from the classical period is that of Tabari (d. 923). Whereas Muqatil simply provides his own explanation for the meaning of Qurʾanic references, Tabari, typical of commentators from this period, compares a number of different views of earlier scholars before offering his own opinion.
  1. As a rule his opinion is shaped by a conviction that the Qurʾanic text is perfect and that its word order should therefore be a guide to deciphering its meaning. Thus he works with a method we might call scriptural reasoning.
• For example, in his analysis of the reference to Sarah’s laughter in the Qur’an (compare Genesis 18:12), Tabari compares seven different views before concluding that she laughed because she learned that the angels who visited Abraham and her were sent by God to destroy the people of Lot (whom she knew were sinners and deserved destruction). Tabari comes to this conclusion because in the Qur’an the report of her laughter is immediately preceded by the angels’ explanation of the people to whom they were sent in Q 11:70-71:

70. But when he saw their hands not reaching towards it, he became suspicious of them, and conceived a fear of them. They said, "Do not fear, we were sent to the people of Lot."
71. His wife was standing by, so she laughed. And We gave her good news of Isaac; and after Isaac, Jacob.

III. Modern Commentaries

• A wide variety of perspectives and methods are to be found in later tafsirs. For example, the tafsir of Zamakhshari (d. 1144) is largely rationalist, while that of Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli (d. 1459) and his pupil Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 1505) succinctly presents the standard Sunni interpretation of Qur’anic passages.

• Shi’ite commentaries develop in a distinct way, in part because of a reliance on a different set of traditions, and in part because many Shi’ite commentators, such as the 20th century Iranian Ṭabaṭaba’i (d. 1982), show an interest in philosophical matters.

• In the 20th century we find that many commentators, including the Sunni rigorist Sayyid Qutb (executed in 1966 in Egypt) show a particular interest in apologetic arguments. They seek to prove that the Qur’an is accurate historically, in part as a response to critical scholarship on the Qur’an in the West. Thus Sayyid Qutb, discussing the flood in his commentary In the Shade of the Qur’an, insists that the Qur’anic account is more accurate than that of the Bible:

1. “The legends of different communities often speak of a flood far back in their history, one caused by the erring ways of their ancestors. The stories related in the Old Testament also mention the flood that overwhelmed Noah’s people. None of this, however, should be discussed in conjunction with the Qur’anic account of the flood, because that would mix the true and accurate account of the Qur’an with myths of unknown origin and poor authenticity.”

• Some recent commentaries—especially online—show an interest in proving that the Qur’an is accurate scientifically. For example Maurice Bucaille (d. 1988) makes this case regarding a reference to spiders:
Q 29:41. The likeness of those who take to themselves protectors other than God is that of the spider. It builds a house. But the most fragile of houses is the spider's house. If they only knew.

- Bucaille comments: “A spider's web is indeed constituted of silken threads secreted by the animal's glands and their calibre is infinitely fine. Its fragility cannot be imitated by man. Naturalists are intrigued by the extraordinary pattern of work recorded by the animal’s nervous cells, which allows it to produce a geometrically perfect web.” Thus Bucaille, like Tabari long before him, is convinced of the perfection of the Qur’an.
Reflection Questions

1. What was the principal goal of early works of Islamic commentary on the Qur’an (or tafsir)?

2. What are two characteristics of Tabari’s commentary on the Qur’an?

3. What does it mean to say that many 20th (and 21st!) century commentaries on the Qur’an are “apologetical”? 
Lecture 17. The Qur’an and Islamic Law

Overview

Having examined Islamic exegesis we now turn to Islamic law. Islamic societies are largely shaped by the way in which jurisprudents have interpreted and applied Islamic law. In this lecture we will examine the role of the Qur’an in that process. The Qur’an is considered by Muslims to be the most important source of knowledge of the eternal divine law (or shari’ā). However, as the Qur’an contains seemingly contradictory information on the same topic (e.g., on drinking wine) Muslims developed the idea that verses revealed later to Muhammad abrogate verses revealed earlier. Moreover, as the Qur’an is hardly comprehensive in regard to legal matters, Muslims also accepted other sources for knowledge of the shari’ā, including the sunna (example of the Prophet), analogy, and consensus.

I. Abrogation

- The first challenge face by Muslim jurisprudents is how to use the Qur’an as a source of law when it contains conflicting messages on the same topic. In order to address this challenge jurisprudents developed the theory that during the prophetic career of Muhammad, God sent down revelations which replaced or abrogated earlier revelations. Those earlier revelations, then, have no legal force, even though they are still considered to be no less the word of God.

- For example, when it comes to establishing “law” on war and peace one has deal with Qur’anic verses that seem to encourage coexistence with unbelievers and others that seem to encourage confrontation with unbelievers, and even attacking them. For example:

  Coexistence:

  68:44. So leave to Me those who reject this discourse; We will proceed against them gradually, from where they do not know.
  45. And I will give them respite. My plan is firm.
  73:10. And endure patiently what they say, and withdraw from them politely.

  Confrontation:

  9:5 When the Sacred Months have passed, kill the polytheists wherever you find them. And capture them, and besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every ambush. But if they repent, and perform the prayers, and pay the alms, then let them go their way. God is Most Forgiving, Most Merciful.

  9:13. Will you not fight a people who violated their oaths, and planned to exile the Messenger, and initiated hostilities against you? Do you fear them? It is God you should fear, if you are believers.
14. Fight them. God will punish them at your hands, and humiliate them, and help you against them, and heal the hearts of a believing people.

- Muslim jurisprudents argued that those verses that encourage coexistence were revealed earlier and thus are abrogated by those verses that encourage confrontation. Therefore the passages (according to the jurisprudents) with legal value are those that encourage confrontation.

II. Alcohol

- A second interesting case of abrogation relates to the question of whether or not it is permissible to drink alcohol. Qur’an 2:219 implies that there is some benefit in alcohol:

  They ask you about intoxicants and gambling. Say, "There is gross sin in them, and some benefits for people, but their sinfulness outweighs their benefit." And they ask you about what they should give: say, "The surplus." Thus God explains the revelations to you, so that you may think.

- Qur’an 4:43 implies that the only prohibition surrounding drinking is not to pray while drunk:

  O you who believe! Do not approach the prayer while you are drunk, so that you know what you say…

- However, Qur’an 5:90 seems to command the believers not to drink at all:

  O you who believe! Intoxicants, gambling, idolatry, and divination are abominations of Satan’s doing. Avoid them, so that you may prosper.

- Muslim scholars use a chronological reading of the Qur’an to argue that God revealed Qur’an 5:90 last, and therefore that alcohol is forbidden. Accordingly, Muslims around the world are instructed to avoid alcohol.

III. Jurisprudence

- Muslims call the sum of God’s will for human action the shari’a.

- It is important to point out, however, that the Qur’an is only one of four different sources of law for Muslims. Indeed the Qur’an is a short book with only a modest amount of legal material. Consequently Muslim scholars were obliged to find other tools in their self-assigned task of determining what God would want humans to do in the circumstances of day to day life.

- In addition to the Qur’an, Muslims considered the following to be valid sources of law:
  1. **Sunna**: the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad
  2. **Analogy**: a comparison of new legal questions with settled legal questions
  3. **Consensus**: a principle, based on a saying of Muhammad, that Muslims collectively will not agree on error.
Eventually four different legal schools developed within Sunni Islam, each of which was named after its alleged founder:

1. Hanifi: Abu Hanifa, d. 767
2. Maliki: Malik b. Anas, d. 795
3. Shafi’i: Shafi’i, d. 820
4. Hanbali: Ibn Hanbal, d. 855

Shi’ite Muslims developed a distinct tradition of legal thinking, a system which allows for more frequent recourse to independent reason.

Thus it would be simplistic to think that Muslim law and practice simply comes from the Qur’an. For Muslims shari’a is a theoretical concept only part of which is found in the Qur’an.

1. Indeed the Qur’an has very little to say about law and practice: most major aspects of Islamic religious law are either missing or discussed only briefly in the Qur’an.

2. Islamic law, in fact, is a complicated concept regarding which Muslims have different opinions and which has developed in diverse ways through the centuries.
Reflection Questions

1. Explain the Islamic idea of abrogation and its use in deriving laws from the Qur’an.

2. What is shari‘a? Is the shari‘a contained by the Qur’an?

3. How do Muslim scholars seek to know the shari‘a?
Lecture 18. The Qur’ān and Islamic Mysticism

Overview

In our final lecture in the section of our course dedicated to “Islamic Interpretation of the Qur’ān” we look at Islamic mysticism, and in particular the Islamic spiritual and intellectual tradition known as Sufism. (The term Sufism likely derives from the Arabic word for wool, “Suf”, and the ascetic habits of the first Islamic mystics, who wore woolen garments.) Islamic mysticism, or Sufism, involves the belief that humans should seek to break free from their carnal instincts and seek oneness with God through ascetic practices and by following a master. Mystics, inspired by this belief, read the Qur’ān with a conviction that it holds esoteric messages about the journey of the soul towards God which are more important than the exoteric meaning found by other interpreters.

1. Sufism and the Qur’ān

- The first step to understanding the system of Islamic mysticism is gaining an appreciation for its anthropology. Sufis generally agree that all humans are faced with the challenge of a defiant element that is a part of their very beings.

  1. This element, known as the nafs (“Carnal Soul”), constantly seeks to lead them away from divine things and towards earthly, carnal things.

  2. The idea of the nafs is in part inspired by Qur’ān 12:53, where the wife of Potiphar—admitting her guilt for having sought to seduce Joseph—blames her nafs for her wrongdoing:

     “Yet I do not claim to be innocent. The nafs commands evil, except those on whom my Lord has mercy. Truly my Lord is Forgiving and Merciful.”

     (i) About this verse the early Muslim mystic Sahl al-Tustari (d. 896) comments: “Truly, the [evil-]inciting self (nafs) is lust, which is the role played by man’s [basic] nature; ‘…unless my Lord shows mercy’, is the role played by the [divine] protection.”
• Sufis told different traditions about Muhammad and other prophets (especially Jesus), traditions which made these prophets into exemplars for the mystical life. Thus Muhammad—who in other traditions is remembered for his love of perfume and women—is said in Sufi traditions to have shunned the pleasures of this world.

• Eventually Sufis developed very clear ideas of the spiritual progression of those dedicated to their way. Mystics passed through various stages on a path towards union with God. They are helped along this path by an ascetic lifestyle (which keeps their focus on spiritual things), constant prayer, and the guidance of a Sufi master who had already reached spiritual illumination.

• Some Sufi masters claimed to have formed such a close union with God that the divine penetrated their very souls. Most famously, a mystic named al-Hallaj (d. 922) is said to have declared at a moment of particular spiritual ecstasy: “I am the Truth.” For such things—which seemed to the Muslim authorities to be blasphemous statements incompatible with Islamic ideas of monotheism—Hallaj was ultimately tried and executed.

II. Sufi Exegesis

• Within the Sufi tradition, exegesis features a particular concern for the inner, or esoteric meaning of Qur’anic passages (as opposed to the outer or exoteric meaning). Again it is Sufi masters who have a sort of enlightenment that allows them to see the inner meaning. One example of this is the interpretation of Q 110:1-3.
  1. When there comes God's victory, and conquest.
  2. And you see the people entering God's religion in multitudes.
  3. Then celebrate the praise of your Lord, and seek His forgiveness. He is the Accepter of Repentance.

• In most exegesis, this sura, which speaks of a “victory,” is imagined to refer to a real military victory over non-Muslims. The Sufi Sahl al-Tustari, however, interprets this victory in a spiritual sense:
  1. “[Therefore], help your spirit against your lower self (nafs) by preparing for the Hereafter… The lower self desires the world because it comes from that, but the spirit desires the Hereafter because it comes from that. Gain ascendancy over the lower self and open for it the door to the Hereafter by glorifying [God] and seeking forgiveness for your nation.”

• Other verses in the Qur’an, some quite beautiful, seem to have a spiritual meaning:

  5:54: O you who believe! Whoever of you goes back on his religion—God will bring a people whom He loves and who love Him, kind towards the believers, stern with the disbelievers. They strive in the way of God, and do not fear the blame of the critic. That is the grace of God; He bestows it upon whomever He wills. God is Embracing and Knowing.

  24:35: God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The allegory of His light is that of a pillar on which is a lamp. The lamp is within a glass. The glass is like a brilliant planet, fueled by a blessed tree, an olive tree, neither eastern nor western. Its oil would almost illuminate, even if no fire has touched it. Light upon Light. God guides to His light
whomever He wills. God thus cites the parables for the people. God is cognizant of everything.
Reflection Questions

1. According to Sufi Islam, what is the *nafs*?

2. What is the goal of the Sufi spiritual life?

3. What is distinctive of Sufi exegesis of the Qur'an?
Lecture 19. The Qur’an and Society

Overview

In this final section of the course we will be looking at what kind of practical effects the Qur’an has in the world today. Many countries with a majority Muslim population officially recognize *shari‘a* as a source of law, although the implications of this vary widely since *shari‘a* is an abstract concept (there is no one “book” of *shari‘a*). Among the most influential advocates for *shari‘a* was Sayyid Qutb, an influential Egyptian scholar and member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Qutb argues that societies which do not make the Qur’an a principal source of legislation revert to a sort of ignorant paganism.

I. Islamic Countries

- The notion of *shari‘a*—of God’s universal will for humanity—has been fundamental in shaping the religion of Islam in the modern period as in earlier periods. As we saw in an earlier lecture, the Qur’an is generally considered the first source for humanity’s knowledge of the *shari‘a* (even if it does not in fact have much legal material). Accordingly, Islamic countries often acknowledge the Qur’an even in their constitutions as a primary and definitive source of legislation. To see what this looks like, we will examine parts of the constitutions of Iran (a Shi‘ite country) and Pakistan (a Sunni country):

  1. Iranian Constitution (October 24, 1979)

     Article 2

     The Islamic Republic is a system based on belief in:

     1. The One God (as stated in the phrase "There is no god except Allah"), His exclusive sovereignty and the right to legislate, and the necessity of submission to His commands.

  2. The Constitution of Pakistan (April 12, 1973)

     Preamble

     In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Benevolent,  
     Whereas sovereignty over the entire Universe belongs to Almighty Allah alone, and the  
     authority to be exercised by the people of Pakistan within the limits prescribed by Him is  
     a sacred trust;  
     And whereas it is the will of the people of Pakistan to establish an order;  
     Wherein the State shall exercise its powers and authority through the chosen  
     representatives of the people;  
     Wherein the principles of democracy, freedom, equality, tolerance and social justice, as  
     enunciated by Islam, shall be fully observed;
Wherein the Muslims shall be enabled to order their lives in the individual and collective spheres in accordance with the teachings and requirements of Islam as set out in the Holy Qur’an and Sunnah…

- In both cases, it seems that this leaves much to be decided. The Qur’an is a text (as we have seen) that is mostly interested in calling humans to belief and repentance. Very few passages in the Qur’an have unambiguous legal prescriptions, and everything in the Qur’an can be interpreted in a variety of ways.

- Thus if many Islamic countries profess a fidelity to the Qur’an in the way they structure society, this has different implications in each case.

  1. For example, Pakistan has a democratic system while having strict religious laws—most famously the blasphemy laws about the desecration of a Qur’an or insult of the prophet.

  2. Saudi Arabia, another Sunni country, is a monarchy, and has even stricter religious laws: women cannot drive; Christians cannot practice their religion or even wear crosses; volunteer religious police enforce dress and the closing of shops at prayer time.

- Today part of the attraction of ISIS, or the Islamic State, among young radical Muslims is the idea that they are fully applying Islam where others only seem to be doing so partially.

II. Sayyid Qutb and the “Qur’anic” Society

- The Muslim Brotherhood, an Egyptian movement whose ideology has been influential throughout the Sunni world, was founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928, but its ideology was established by Sayyid Qutb, a prolific author who was executed by the Egyptian government in 1966.

- Qutb wrote Milestones (Ma’alim fi l-tariq) in 1964, and it was in part because of this book that he was put to death. Chapter 1 of this work is called the “Un-Qur’anic Generation.”

  1. In defense of the idea that the Qur’an alone is enough to establish laws and guidelines for a society he makes the point that the first companions of Muhammad had nothing but the Qur’an:

     “The Holy Qur'an was the only source from which they quenched their thirst, and this was the only mold in which they formed their lives. This was the only guidance for them, not because there was no civilization or culture or science or books or schools.”
2. Behind the sentiment of Sayyid Qutb is the notion that the Qurʾan is not simply a spiritual book, rather it is an all comprehensive book with answers to every aspect of life for individuals, and for societies. It is, according to Qutb, a book meant to guide human action:

“It did not come to be a book of intellectual content, or a book of literature, or to be considered as a book of stories or history, although it has all these facets. It came to become a way of life, a way dedicated to God. Thus, God Most High imparted it to them in a gradual manner, to be read at intervals…”

3. Qutb emphasizes that there are only two paths in life: the Qurʾanic path and the jahili path—the path of ignorance. The term “jahili” was usually used to describe the society of the Arabs before Islam. Qutb insisted, however, that modern societies which do not implement the Qurʾan fully are no less “jahili.” This includes Islamic societies who do not establish legislation on the basis of the Qurʾan:

“We classify them among jahili societies not because they believe in other deities besides God or because they worship anyone other than God, but because their way of life is not based on submission to God alone.”

• Not all Sunni Muslims agree with this idea. The Turkish intellectual Mustafa Akyol makes the point that the Qurʾan itself never claims to be the constitution of any society:

“However, Muslim believers should not only praise the Qurʾan, but also be aware of what it says. And when we look at the Qurʾan, we can see that it says nothing about being “the constitution” of any party or nation.”

(i) To Akyol the Qurʾan is a spiritual guide for individuals, not a political guide for societies.
Reflection Questions

1. What accounts for the different ways in which Islamic countries seek to implement shariʿa?

2. How does Sayyid Qutb make the case that the Qurʾan should be a sufficient guide to run an Islamic society?

3. Explain the word jahili and the particular way in which Sayyid Qutb used it.
Lecture 20. The Qur’an, Marriage, and Sex

Overview

Here we will closely examine one particular case where the content of the Qur’an has practical implications for Islamic society: the rules governing marriage and divorce. The Qur’an gives a man the right to marry up to four women (and demands that they all be treated justly) and to keep other women as concubines (a practice recently revived by ISIS, or the Islamic State). It also gives the man the right to repudiate, or divorce, his wife when he wishes to do so (some Islamic legal codes allow for a woman to request a divorce). The Qur’an teaches that sex is legitimate only within marriage (or in concubinage) and commands strict punishments for fornication.

1. Marriage

- In *sura* 2 the Qur’an encourages Muslim men to marry believing women:

  \[Q \text{ 2:221: Do not marry idolatresses, unless they have believed. A believing maid is better than an idolatress, even if you like her.}\]

- In that same section of *sura* 2 the Qur’an seems to give permission to Muslim men to have sexual relations with their wives (and perhaps also concubines) according to their desires:

  \[Q \text{ 2:223: Your women are cultivation for you; so approach your cultivation whenever you like, and send ahead for yourselves.}\]

- Elsewhere (e.g., Q 24:32), the Qur’an insists that Muslim men should look for women who are virtuous.

- Q 4:34 seems to command man to beat his wife or wives if they are particularly disobedient. Muslim modernists have looked for a variety of ways to interpret this verse differently.

- Q 4:3 seems to give permission to a man to marry up to 4 women and to possess an unlimited amount of concubines. It does, however, put all of this in the context of showing justice to orphans (which could imply that plural marriage at least is allowed only when one is marrying orphans). It also suggests that justice needs to be done to all of one’s wives, which is often understood to mean that they must be treated equally.

Photo by Flavio Lorenzo Sánchez
II. Interfaith Relationships

- Qur’an 5:5 seems to permit Muslim men to marry Jewish and Christian women (“people who were given the Scripture before you”):
  
  Q 5:5 (understood to be later): Today all good things are made lawful for you. And the food of those given the Scripture is lawful for you, and your food is lawful for them. So are chaste believing women, and chaste women from the people who were given the Scripture before you, provided you give them their dowries, and take them in marriage, not in adultery.

- Here the Qur’an does not speak about the right of Muslim women to marry non-Muslim men. Because Islamic law operates with the assumption that men are the head of the household, and that children will therefore follow the religion of the father, all schools of Islamic law consider it unlawful for Muslim women to marry non-Muslim men, even Jews and Christians.

III. Divorce

- As the Qur’an approaches such things from the perspective of the man, it speaks of divorce as “repudiation” (talaq)—that is, it implies that men have the right to repudiate their wives at will.
  
  1. Q 2:229 speaks of repudiation being allowed twice, which lead Muslim jurists to conclude that if a woman is repudiated thrice the divorce is final and the woman can only be taken back if she marries another man first.

- Q 2:236 refers to a bride-price paid to a woman, and it is often said that this offers her some protection from repudiation, as the full bride-price must be paid upon a divorce.

IV. Sex

- Sex, and even the details of sexual relations, are a normal part of Islamic legal discourse. Since Muslims consider Islamic law to be all-encompassing in both social and personal aspects of life, they consider it natural that God has instructions in this domain as well.

- The Qur’an (Q 57:27) rejects monasticism and Muslim jurists generally interpret this as a rejection of celibacy as well.

- Fornication is a very serious transgression, and some Muslim scholars present the openness to polygamy, and even sex with concubines, as a sort of widening of the bounds of marriage which helps prevent fornication.

- Those who transgress those bounds, however, are to be punished severely. The Qur’an speaks (Q 24:2-3) of a hundred lashes for those guilty of adultery.
  
  1. Islamic law, basing itself on the example of Muhammad, holds that those guilty of adultery or fornication are to be stoned to death.
Reflection Questions

1. What sort of instructions does the Qur’an offer to men regarding marriage?

2. What sort of instructions does the Qur’an offer to men regarding divorce or “repudiation”?

3. Why do Muslim scholars make the case that sex, and even the details of sexual relations, is a natural part of legal discourse?
Lecture 21. The Qur’an, Violence, and Peace

Overview

The Qur’an praises those who “fight” in the way of God, considers those who fight to be superior to those who refuse to join military campaigns, and promises heaven to those who die while fighting. Many Muslims, however, have developed creative strategies of reading the Qur’anic text in a way that encourages pluralism and peace.

I. Violence in the Qur’an

- In the popular media there is a lot of talk about the term *jihad*, especially since the rise of ISIS, or the Islamic State.
  
  1. Some scholars who seek to disassociate Islam from violence emphasize a tradition according to which the “Greater Jihad” is the struggle against one’s inward sinful urges (i.e., the concept of the *nafs* we encountered in lecture 18).
  
  2. However, the Qur’an speaks of holy war with terms including, but not limited to, *jihad*. It also speaks of *qital*, fighting, and even *qatl*, killing.

  (i) On the other hand the Qur’an includes other passages which seem to encourage peaceful coexistence with non-Muslims.

II. Escalation in the Chronological Reading

- As with other topics, one’s appreciation for the topic of violence in the Qur’an depends on one’s method of reading the text.

  1. If one reads the Qur’an chronologically—according to a supposed chronology in which God sent down individual passages to the Prophet—then the Qur’an would seem move from early, peaceful revelations to later, belligerent revelations.

  2. Many “early” revelations call on Muhammad to endure any trials patiently without recourse to fighting, often with the reassurance that God will deal with wrongdoers in the afterlife. Thus Q 52:45-47 (cf. Q 19:83-84; 43:88-89; 73:10-11):

     45. So leave them until they meet their Day in which they will be stunned.
     46. The Day when their ploys will avail them nothing; and they will not be helped.
47. For those who do wrong, there is a punishment besides that; but most of them do not know.

3. According to this “chronological” reading, the revelations given to Muhammad became progressively more belligerent, from permission to fight in self-defense (Q 2:19-94; 22:39-40), to commands to attack unbelievers (3:152; 8:38-42; 47:4-6), and declarations that God prefers those who fight to those who refuse to fight (Q 4:95), and promises that those who die in war will be given a reward in paradise:

Q 3:157 (cf. q 9:111; 22:58) If you are killed in the cause of God, or die—forgiveness and mercy from God are better than what they hoard.

- In sura 9, generally considered to be the last sura revealed, the Qurʾan has God threaten those who refuse to fight with hellfire:

Q 9:38 O you who believe! What is the matter with you, when it is said to you, "Mobilize in the cause of God," you cling heavily to the earth? Do you prefer the present life to the Hereafter? The enjoyment of the present life, compared to the Hereafter, is only a little. 39. Unless you mobilize, He will punish you most painfully, and will replace you with another people, and you will not harm Him at all. God has power over all things.

- In the shadow of this method of reading the Qurʾan, classical Muslim jurisprudents developed the notion that Islam was in a constant state of struggle with non-Muslims. The entire world, they submitted, could be divided between the “Domain of Islam” (dar al-islam) and the “Domain of War” (dar al-harb). Muslims, inspired by the revelations given to Muhammad in the latter part of his prophetic career, were always to be seeking to attack and subdue non-Muslims.

III. Modern Readings of the Qurʾan

- On the other hand, there are other methods of reading the Qurʾan. Many Muslim intellectuals argue that the exhortations to fight in the Qurʾan are commands which applied only in Muhammad’s time.

1. This approach, which represents a break from the traditional notion that “later passages” abrogate earlier passages, undermines the categories of the “Domain of Islam” and the “Domain of War.”

2. The Egyptian scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (d. 2010) argued for just such a break, commenting:

(i) “If we follow the rules of interpretation developed from the classical ‘science’ of Koranic interpretation, it is not possible to condemn terrorism in religious terms. It remains completely true to the classical rules in its evolution of sanctity for its own justification. This is where the secret of its theological strength lies.”

- However, and as we are regularly reminded on the news, not all Muslims agree that the violent passages in the Qurʾan apply only to Muhammad’s time. Indeed, in recent years we have seen the rise of a global Sunni jihadi movement, most recently with the “Islamic State” (ISIS).
1. In some ways this movement is distinctly modern. Classically, Muslims held that only a duly recognized leader of the Islamic community could practice *jihad* (indeed doing so was seen as a sign of his legitimacy).

2. In the course of the last century, however, traditional structures of power have broken down in the Islamic world and independently organized militant groups have multiplied, each claiming the right to wage *jihad* (indeed often competing with each other to prove that they are the most aggressive in doing so).

- It should be added that this global *jihadi* movement exists only within Sunnism. Shiʿites have played no role in it.
  1. Indeed Shiʿites have often been the victims of this global *jihadi* movement in places like Iraq, Syria, and Saudi Arabia.

- This point shows us that there is nothing inherently violent in Islam and no reason to think of the Qurʾan as scripture which encourages violence. Different Islamic movements read the Qurʾan in different ways. Some find in it justification for violence, while others find in it the inspiration for a peaceful spiritual life.
Reflection Questions

1. How can a chronological method of reading the Qur’an lead one to support more belligerent interpretations?

2. What is meant by dar al-islam and dar al-harb?

3. Why is it relevant to our understanding of possible interpretations of the Qur’an that contemporary jihadism is an exclusively Sunni (and not Shi’ite) movement?
Bibliography

Works on Islam

- An accessible introduction to Islam which avoids excessive criticism or apologetics.

- A reflection on Islam from an Evangelical Protestant perspective.

- One of many eloquent reflections on Islam by Cragg, an Anglican priest.

- The classic biography of the Prophet.

- An accessible introduction to the rise of Islam and the origins of the Qur’an.

- A precise and enlightening interview with a leading Catholic voice in Muslim-Christian relations.

Works on the Qur’an

- A collection of introductory articles to various aspects of the Qur’an by leading scholars.

- A critical scholarly translation with informative notes. This is the only serious academic translation of the Qur’an available in English.

Itani, Talal. *Qur’an in English* (available at clearQur’an.com) and for download on amazon.com.
- This is the Qur’an translation, based on traditional Islamic sources, used in this program.

- A discussion of the two scriptures from a Catholic Perspective.

- A discussion of the Qur’an’s message from the perspective of a well-known Pakistani Muslim reformer.

- An approachable discussion of the Qur’an’s intersection with various aspects of contemporary societies by a critically-minded Muslim scholar.