

# The Qur'ānic Subtext of Early Arabic Bible Translations

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In 2018, Gabriel Said Reynolds published a valuable reference work with the title *The Qur'an and the Bible: Text and Commentary*.<sup>[1]</sup> In this book, Reynolds accumulates research on what is commonly known as *the biblical subtext of the Qur'an*, i.e., Qur'ānic references to the Bible, or rather to the interpreted Bible, in use among Jews and Christians at the time.<sup>[2]</sup> In short, he argues that substantial portions of the Qur'an should be studied, not only in light of what comes immediately after it (*ḥadīth*, *Sirat Muḥammad*, *tafsīr*), but also in light of what comes before it, i.e. the reception of the Bible among Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity.<sup>[3]</sup>

The Qur'an thus contains interpretations of an already interpreted Bible and as such it constitutes a now widely recognized treasure of biblical reception. The fact that religious interactions continued to be recorded in the production of sacred texts has received far less attention. As already noted by Sidney Griffith, the rise of the Bible in Arabic in its written form might be an attempt to "set the biblical record straight in Arabic."<sup>[4]</sup> The emergence of Arabic translations then may respond not only to a general linguistic shift to this new *lingua franca*, but also to what can broadly be referred to as *taḥrīf*, i.e. the Muslim notion that Jews and Christians distorted the original version or meaning of the Bible. It is therefore of great interest to note that the earliest Syriac-based Arabic translations, i.e. those appearing during the long 9th century, often exhibit a notably Islamic/Qur'ānic-sounding language, as if their authors were in dialogue with an audience who knew and valued such references. It seems then that just as the Qur'an reflects a biblical subtext, early Syriac-based Arabic translations in particular disclose what may be referred to as a Qur'ānic subtext.<sup>[5]</sup> Just as the audience of the Qur'an was expected to catch and make sense of biblical references, so were allusions to a Qur'ānic subtext presumed to be meaningfully interpreted by the recipients of these translations.

The function of these references sometimes appear to be of literary character such as the sporadic insertion of the vocative *allāhumma* "O God!" in an early translation of Daniel.<sup>[6]</sup> Other references appear to be polemical: the same translation of Daniel uses the word *ḥajj* in the dedication of the statue that Nebuchadnezzar set up (Dan 3:1–3). Despite the proximity in meaning between *ḥajj* and its Semitic cognates *ḥāg* (Heb)/*ḥaggā* (Syr) "feast," such a word choice seemingly linked biblical idolatry with the Muslim pilgrimage.<sup>[7]</sup> Yet other references are allusive, which is the case in an early Christian Arabic rendition of the Joseph narrative (Gen 37:9) where, by subtle additions, the translator makes the biblical rendition very similar to *sūrat Yūsuf* 4.<sup>[8]</sup>



صور على الدل الادي دلها . مثل هذا احد ابقول  
 رب الادياب هوذا اعطى تحت بصرك ملك بابل ارض مصر  
 ويا حد مواشيتها ولسوسيتها وينصب ثمنها ويكون  
 اح كنده ونذل الفعل الادي فعل بصوره . اعطيته  
 ارض مصر والرب الادياب . وادله اليوم اتفرق  
 قرن لبند اسرائيل وافتح همك ليهم ويعلموا اني انا الرب  
 الادياب . وكان على كلام الرب . اذ يقول بن الانسان تلبسوا  
 وجل هكذا يقول رب الادياب . عولوا وبولوا اف ليوم  
 بعد دنا اليوم رب يوم الرب . يوم التجاب ودمار الشعوب  
 وتنايد الحربه على مصر ويكون الداهيه في الكليشتر  
 اداوعدوا القلا بمصر ويا حدوا مالها ويعبدوا  
 ايديها والكليشتر القطور وللبيير وكل عرايط وكوت  
 وابنا الارض الذين يعاوموها بالحرب لسبطون . هكذا  
 يقول رب الادياب . تبع دعوات مصر ونيكسر  
 بوه عزها مبروح سويا بالحرب يععوا ايها . والرب  
 الادياب . ويهلك نبات الارض الذين يوحدون ومحا  
 هتفزين الصدايق الحرباء يحزن . ويعلمون اني انا الرب  
 الذي سرحت النار في مصر . وانكسروا كل اعوا  
 نها . في ذلك اليوم كرحوا من دماي ملائكه مستعجلين  
 لبفسدوا الكليشتر الساكنه في الهراء . ويعتاشهم  
 الارجاسوع يوم مصر . وهوذا ابدلوه هكذا  
 يقول رب الادياب . ايد دافع مال مصر بيد تحت  
 نصر ملك بابل اليه والى اعز الشعوب الذين ياتون لبفسدوا  
 الارض . ولبلوا يبلونهم على مصر . ويلمون الارض  
 وتلا . واحعل الاضداد للفساد . وادفع الارض في

Illustration 1: Sinai Ar. 1, fol. 124r. The oldest extant (Syriac-based) Arabic translations of Job, Daniel, Jeremiah including Lamentations, and Ezekiel. Ca. 9th c. © Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, Egypt. Courtesy of Father Justin.



In addition to using Islamic/Qur'anic-sounding language and inserting subtle allusions to the Muslim scripture, similar methods of re-interpreting biblical material appear both in the Qur'ān/Muslim tradition and in early Syriac-based Arabic Bible translations. In both cases, they may go back to the Syriac heritage. Take for instance the well-known Muslim tradition that Ishmael and Abraham built the Kab'a together, which (re)locates the biblical figures to the Ḥijāz. The idea that Abraham and his son were building a sanctuary together was not an originally Muslim idea but traceable to Jacob of Serugh (d. 521), who had Isaac helping his father to build a house.[9] The strategy of relocating events is apparently at play in a Christian Arabic translation of Job (42:17, i.e. the Syriac additions). Here the source text (prob. Syro-Hexapla) identifies the land of Uz as a place on the borders of Idumea and Arabia and Job's wife as Arabian. Whereas the source text places Job in the southern parts of Transjordan and in Arabia, the Arabic translator moves Job to Damascus and Ḥawrān (modern Syria), and makes his wife a Ḥawrānite.[10] The "identification technique" we see in the Muslim tradition, which (re)locates a biblical narrative closer to the reader's vicinity, appears to be similar to that detectable in this Arabic translation of Job. This technique probably goes hand in hand with the exegetical endeavor to identify geographical locations in the Bible and is ultimately part of the broader project of making biblical narratives relevant to new contexts and new generations of readers.

Another good example in this translation has been noted by Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala. In Job 28:22, the Syriac word *abdānā* "destruction" translates the Greek ἠλώλια and Hebrew *ābaddōn* with the same meaning. In Arabic, however, this word is rendered into *al-malāk* "the angel." Monferrer-Sala argues that this non-literal rendition reflects the Jewish-Christian mythology where *Abaddōn* is the name of the angel of destruction (cf. Rev. 9:11).[11] The Arabic translator thus turned the original wording in Job 28:22 "Destruction and Death say," into "Death and the Angel said" expecting the audience to understand that the "angel of destruction" was intended here and not an ordinary angel. It is worthwhile pointing out in this context that the Qur'ān sometimes refers to biblical figures by their epithets: Jonah is referred to as *dhu-l-nūn* "the one with the fish" (*sūrat al-Qalam* 48) and Saul as *Ṭālūth* which probably means "the tall one" and refers to the biblical account of Saul as tall and handsome (1 Sam. 9:2). The use of epithets in the Qur'ān may be motivated by style (to make verses rhyme).[12] In any event, in both the Christian Arabic case and in the Qur'ān, this is a homiletic technique that requires an audience submerged in biblical knowledge. Such renditions are often influenced by prevalent interpretative traditions and thus reflect an already interpreted Bible, which in one form or the other must be transmitted together with the holy scripture in order to provide "the full picture."

In this connection it should be mentioned that early Arabic Bible translations use the Qur'anic form of Saul, i.e. *Ṭālūth* and not, as expected, *Šā'jul* (the common form of the name in later traditions).[13] This word choice hence represents yet another of many examples where early Christian Arabic authors chose to dress their holy scriptures in a language that echoes the Qur'ān.[14]



Illustration 2: The Mingana Christian Arabic Additional 137, Cadbury Research Library (10th c.) © and courtesy of the Cadbury Research Library.

In sum, especially early Syriac-based Arabic Bible translations occasionally reflect a pre-Islamic Syriac tradition wherein adaptations of biblical material took place. In other cases, the Qur'anic subtext of these translations attests to vivid religious and literary interactions devised by creative translators who ultimately seemed motivated to appropriate the biblical legacy in an environment where the struggle over divine revelation was at its height.

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## Footnotes

- [1]. Gabriel S. Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and the Bible: Text and Commentary*. Yale: Yale University Press, 2018.
- [2]. Such interpretations appear especially in homiletic, liturgical and exegetical material. For more on the topic, see Sidney H. Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the "People of the Book" in the Language of Islam*. Princeton: Princeton University Press: 2013, esp. 91–96.
- [3]. For the relationship between *tafsīr* and the Qur'ān, see Gabriel S. Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext*. London: Routledge, 2010, esp. 3–36.
- [4]. Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, 53.
- [5]. I.e. as having the Qur'ān and early Islamic tradition in mind, or using the same interpretative strategies as those detectable in the Qur'ān. A larger study on the topic will be found in Miriam L. Hjälms, "The Bible in Muḥammad's Hijāz and the Rise of Early Arabic Bible Translations," submitted.
- [6]. Miriam L. Hjälms, *Christian Arabic Versions of Daniel: A Comparative Study of Early MSS and Translation Techniques in MSS Sinai Ar. 1 and 2*. Leiden: Brill, 2016, 254. *Allāhumma* appears several times in the Qur'ān.
- [7]. Hjälms, *Christian Arabic Versions of Daniel*, 254.
- [8]. Ronny Vollandt, *Arabic Versions of the Pentateuch: A Comparative Study of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Sources*. Leiden: Brill, 2014, 189.
- [9]. Joseph B. Witztum: "The Syriac Milieu of the Quran: The Recasting of Biblical Narratives." Ph.D. dissertation submitted at Princeton University, 2011, 168; cf. Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and the Bible*, 69–70. The Syriac tradition developed several genres where the re-telling of biblical events took place. For instance, dialogue poems were composed wherein psychological dilemmas presumably experienced by biblical figures were put into play and by doing so the listeners were invited into the biblical world, see Sebastian Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition*. Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2006, 81–88.
- [10]. See fol. 11a–b in Sinai Ar. 1. Cf. the reproduction and discussion in Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala: "Liber Iob detractus apud Sin. Ar. 1 Notas en torno a la Vorlage siríaca de un manuscrito árabe cristiano (s. IX)," *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia*, 2003, 1, 119–42, here 133. His transcription slightly differs from that of the present author.
- [11]. Monferrer-Sala, "Liber Iob detractus apud Sin. Ar. 1," 129–31.
- [12]. Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext*, 198, 234, 241.
- [13]. Cf. Miriam L. Hjälms: "Scriptures beyond Words: 'Islamic' Vocabulary in Early Christian Arabic Bible Translations," *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia*, 2018, 15, 49–69; Adriana Drint: "Some Notes on the Arabic Versions of IV Ezra and Apocalypse of Baruch in Ms MT Sinai Arabic Codex 589," *Parole de l'Orient*, 1999, 24, 165–77, here 171; Alphonse Mingana, *Catalogue of the Mingana Collection of Manuscripts, Now in the Possession of the Trustees of the Woodbrooke Settlement, Selly Oak, Birmingham: Vol. 3, Additional Christian Arabic and Syriac Manuscripts*. Cambridge: W. Heffer, 1939, 5.
- [14]. For more examples, see Hjälms, "The Bible in Muḥammad's Hijāz."  
[Arabic Bible](#), [Arabic Bible Translations](#), [Bible in Arabic](#), [Early Arabic Bible Translations](#), [Miriam Lindgren Hjälms](#), [Muslim Bible](#), [Qur'ānic Subtext](#)
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