

## Exegetical Crossroads

# **Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – Tension, Transmission, Transformation**



Edited by Patrice Brodeur, Assaad Elias Kattan,  
and Georges Tamer

## **Volume 8**

# Exegetical Crossroads

---

Understanding Scripture in Judaism, Christianity and  
Islam in the Pre-Modern Orient

Edited by  
Georges Tamer, Regina Grundmann, Assaad Elias  
Kattan, and Karl Pinggéra

**DE GRUYTER**

ISBN 978-3-11-056114-2  
e-ISBN (PDF) 978-3-11-056434-1  
e-ISBN (EPUB) 978-3-11-056293-4  
ISSN 2196-405X

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

**Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

© 2018 Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston  
Printing and binding: CPI books GmbH, Leck  
♻️ Printed on acid-free paper  
Printed in Germany

[www.degruyter.com](http://www.degruyter.com)

# Table of Contents

Georges Tamer, Regina Grundmann, Assaad Elias Kattan and Karl Pinggéra

## **Exegetical Crossroads**

Understanding Scripture in Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the  
Pre-Modern Orient — 1

William A. Graham

## **“A Wandering Aramean was My Father”**

An Abrahamic Theme in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Scriptures and  
Interpretations — 9

Cornelia Horn

## **Jesus, the Wondrous Infant, at the Exegetical Crossroads of Christian Late Antiquity and Early Islam — 27**

Martin Heimgartner

## **The Letters of the East Syrian Patriarch Timothy I**

Scriptural Exegesis between Judaism, Christianity and Islam — 47

Mark N. Swanson

## **Scripture Interpreting the Church’s Story**

Biblical Allusions in the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* — 61

Sidney Griffith

## **Use and Interpretation of Scriptural Proof-Texts in Christian–Muslim Apologetic Literature in Arabic — 73**

Najib George Awad

## **“*Min al-‘aql wa-laysa min al-kutub*”**

Scriptural Evidence, Rational Verification and Theodore Abū Qurra’s  
Apologetic Epistemology — 95

Juan Pedro Monferrer Sala

## **The Lyre of Exegesis**

Ibn al-Ṭayyib’s Analytical Patterns of the Account of the Destruction of  
Sodom — 119

Alison Salvesen

**“Christ has subjected us to the harsh yoke of the Arabs”**

The Syriac Exegesis of Jacob of Edessa in the New World Order — 145

Haggai Ben-Shammai

**From Rabbinic Homilies to Geonic Doctrinal Exegesis**

The Story of the Witch of En Dor as a Test Case — 163

Lennart Lehmhaus

**“Hidden Transcripts” in Late Midrash Made Visible**

Hermeneutical and Literary Processes of Borrowing in a Multi-Cultural Context. — 199

Martin Accad

**Theological Deadlocks in the Muslim-Christian Exegetical Discourse of the Medieval Orient**

Identifying a Historical *Meta-Dialogue* — 243

Nicolai Sinai

**Two Types of Inner-Qur’ānic Interpretation — 253**

Gabriel Said Reynolds

**Moses, Son of Pharaoh**

A Study of Qur’ān 26 and Its Exegesis — 289

Stefan Wild

**Unity and Coherence in the Qur’ān — 303**

Berenike Metzler

**Qur’ānic Exegesis as an Exclusive Art – Diving for the Starting Point of Şūfī Tafsīr — 319**

Reza Pourjavady

**Ibn Kammūna’s Knowledge of, and Attitude toward, the Qur’ān — 329**

**Bibliography — 339**

**Authors — 379**

**The Editors — 381**

**Index of used verses from the Bible, the Qur'ān and Apocrypha — 383**

**Index — 391**





Georges Tamer, Regina Grundmann, Assaad Elias Kattan  
and Karl Pinggéra

## **Exegetical Crossroads**

Understanding Scripture in Judaism, Christianity and Islam  
in the Pre-Modern Orient

### **Introduction**

Judaism, Christianity and Islam do not only share the broad geographic and multicultural context of their respective origins in the Orient, but also numerous characteristics intrinsic to their constitutions. Most specifically, they are religions of revelation, with revelation understood primarily as communication. Indeed, the foundational narrative of each of these three religions is characterized by an act of communication. In Judaism, God gives Moses, in conversation, the two Tablets of the Torah; in Christianity, the Word of God is incarnated as a communicating human being; in Islam, the Qur'ān, which includes God's words, is communicated orally. These three 'world religions' are, thus, word-religions. The God they proclaim does not eternally persist in dark seclusion. According to the three traditions, God shares some of himself with humans, speaks to them, and lets them recognize something of him at certain times in history. Captured in scriptures, God's communicative action incites further communication. His narrated communication with man is once again re-communicated among them in the context of community. That what is believed to be divine revelation takes its final literary shape through the activity of communication-based communities who ultimately canonize such interactions and transmit them in the form of a holy scripture from generation to generation. The result of such diverse, accumulative, multi-faceted and, as long as religion persists, never-ending communicative action builds the corpus of each of the three religions.

Although the original act of communication at the foundation of each of these religions occurs under specific historical conditions within particular social and cultural contexts, scriptures possess, in the context of their interpretive communities, normative universality due to their belief in a divine origin that transcends, for the faithful, the boundaries of human experience. The interpretation of Scriptures consists primarily in making God's message, which believers claim to be communicated to people at a certain point of history, accessible to later generations under changing historical conditions. Interpretation is, in

fact, a complex matrix of communication. The interpreter communicates with the transmitted Scriptures and attempts to penetrate their depths by engaging in dialogue with them. He/She unpacks these texts within their respective contexts and thus introduces them to new forms of communication.

Not only does monotheistic belief lie at the core of all three religions, but such belief is also based on core Scriptures that have normatively determined the relationship between man and God, and between man and his environment. Over the course of centuries, Judaism, Christianity and Islam have developed different methods of interpreting these Scriptures. Every generation of religious scholars that has attempted to disclose their 'true' meaning has faced the same challenge: that is linking their own interpretations to a specific exegetical tradition and, at the same time, finding answers to questions arising in their own particular era.

In this, the three exegetical traditions have exerted influence on one another, either through demarcation of boundaries or through appropriation. The exegetical developments unfolded ultimately by and large in a culturally heterogeneous environment marked by mutual influence. While public discourse today seems to be focusing on the differences rather than similarities between the three religious traditions, we tend to ignore the high degree of religious and cultural commonality that has characterized Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Most centrally, the position of revealed Scripture at the very core of every religious community in the pre-modern Orient is one of those commonalities that have provoked further cross-cultural entanglements.

The religious traditions considered in the present volume appear nowadays to be sources of dispute and conflict in some regions of the world, especially in the context of their origin. Nevertheless, religious scholars operating within culturally heterogeneous contexts such as the pre-modern Orient had to deal with each other as well as other traditions. They demonstrated cooperation in multifarious ways through mutual influence and the demarcation of boundaries. How productive were these interactions for the further development of their own respective traditions? Have there been blurred spaces of scholarly activity that transcended sectarian borders? What was the role played by mutual influence in how these scholars demarcated the boundaries of their own traditions? In what way did dynamic processes within particular traditions remain alive via discussion between younger exegetes and their past masters? These and other related questions have been dealt with by exegetes in all three religions who actually shared similar interests, similar worries and similar struggles for answers as some of the contributions in the present volume document.

The exact investigation of these questions as well as a critical assessment of the relationship between exegetical traditions in the pre-modern Orient gives us

the opportunity to expand our understanding of these traditions and, subsequently, of our present time. This is necessary not in the least because the contemporary religious and cultural traditions of all three religions are based on exegetical methods and inner-religious discourses of that era. It is, therefore, an important task of research to illuminate this area of common heritage. The alignment of this volume with this particular focus seems to be all the more urgent, as this topic deserves more scholarly attention than it has received up to now.

This can be accomplished via interdisciplinary cooperation between scholars from relevant areas of research. Accordingly, most contributions in the present volume are devoted to the interrelationship of at least two of the three religious traditions. Interdisciplinary research remains invaluable for exploring the complex religious phenomena which developed in the Orient in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. We hope that this volume can offer a useful contribution to interdisciplinary scholarship related to these intertwined religions, particularly in the cultural realm of the pre-modern Orient, which witnessed their rise and early decisive theological developments.

This examination of the reciprocity and interdependency between the exegetical traditions in Christianity, Judaism and Islam is the outcome of a conference organized by the editors at the Friedrich-Alexander-University in Erlangen between February 20 – 22, 2014. The contributions chiefly address the exegetical understanding of Scripture in the three religions. They also tackle interpreting Scriptures in pluralistic religious contexts, taking into account apologetic and polemical tendencies intended to establish certain lines in the sand. Another topic addressed concerns how later interpreters assessed the approaches and results of earlier exegetes in order to determine the continuity or discontinuity of discourses in their respective traditions.

The journey to discover exegetical crossroads in Judaism, Christianity and Islam starts in this volume with Abraham, the prototype of the faithful, whose obedience to God still serves as a model for exemplary behavior in all three religions. William Graham offers a selective account of interpretive trajectories in the three traditions that regard Abraham as sojourner and founder of sacred sites. He points to ways in which, both in Scripture and particularly in exegesis, this particular Abrahamic theme underwent significant interpretive expansion. Yet such expansion occurred with very different points of emphasis and for different ends within each of the three traditions. Graham argues that all three traditions resonate in a variegated fashion to the paradigm of Abraham as the man who, on pure faith, abandons his homeland to wander and establish new places of worship at God's behest, thereby ultimately founding a new tradition of monotheistic faith in a new land.

Cornelia Horn engages with processes of exegetical and interpretative recreation of “Jesus the Wonderworker” in the more widespread, unofficial, or popular literature of Christianity and Islam. She considers aspects of the presentation of Jesus as wonderworker among others in Christian apocryphal texts in Syriac and Arabic, as well as parts of the rich body of Islamic works on the Lives of the Prophets. This comparative approach using para-Biblical material permits a reconstruction of certain aspects of theological, polemical, and exegetical settings which do not surface in other records from this period. The comparison illuminates an interdependence that can potentially form the starting point for a more in-depth investigation.

Similarly, Martin Heimgartner presents exegetical works of the East Syriac Patriarch Timotheos I. written in an Islamic context regarding Jesus. Against the background of the Qur’ānic image of Jesus, Timotheos addresses the question of whether Christians may call Jesus God’s ‘servant’, a Christological title borrowed in the early church from Deutero-Isaiah. The paper shows how Timotheos develops a classification of such writings into four groups out of the conventional distinction between literary and metaphoric writing. He often adds explanatory and interpretative words or sentences in quotations, a device that, in extreme cases, results in rendering the meaning of certain statements into its veritable opposite.

Mark Swanson deals with the use of Biblical quotations and echoes in the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* which was accomplished by a team led by the Alexandrian deacon Mawhūb ibn Manṣūr ibn Mufarrij. The paper examines how intertextual connections are made through quoting and alluding to the Bible and how these quotations illuminate and shape the presentation of events in the historiographical work. In doing so, the paper evaluates the hypothesis that the quotation of, or allusion to, the Bible opens to Christian readers possibilities for interpretation not immediately available to Muslim readers, thus allowing for deeper and even slightly subversive readings of what has normally been considered a ‘semi-official’ history.

It is in the realm of Arabic that Christians made use of Biblical texts in order to support their positions against their Muslim interlocutors. This is the subject matter of Sidney Griffith’s contribution. He demonstrates that from the very beginning of Christian apologetic literature in Arabic, authors made abundant use of quotations from the Old and New Testaments, along with allusions to and echoes of their narratives, in an effort to provide the scriptural proof necessary to support the beliefs and practices which the Islamic Scripture criticized. Arabic-speaking apologists adapted Biblical testimonies widely deployed in earlier Christian literature in Greek and Syriac in order to meet the requirements of the new challenge. In response, Muslim apologists also assembled Biblical tes-

timonies, particularly in support of the Qur'ān's contention that the Torah and the Gospel had announced the coming of Muḥammad and Islam. And right from the start, in addition to Biblical proof texts, Christian apologists were not slow to enlist quotations from the Qur'ān in support of their own apologetic arguments. Thereby a spiraling, interscriptural, interreligious controversy ensued in the course of the early Islamic centuries that arguably reached its apogee in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Najib Awad discusses Theodore Abū Qurrah's apologetic epistemology in his article, examining whether Abū Qurrah's apologetic thought, developed in an Islamic context, presents a Christian *mutakallim* arguing from religious scriptures in defense of Christian faith, or rather depicts a Christian *mutakallim* who defends his religious belief primarily on the basis of reason. This inquiry is made in conversation with Sidney Griffith's publications on this subject. Awad endeavors to shed light on central claims and views in Abū Qurrah's literature and thought that would disclose which rule of argument is more genuinely definitive of his approach: 'arguing from reason', or 'arguing from Scriptures'.

Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala deals with Ibn al-Ṭayyib's analytical patterns regarding the account of the destruction of Sodom with the saga recounted in Gen 19, containing the story of Sodom and the daughters of Lot as part of a broader episode (Gen 18–19) narrating a whole day in the life of Abraham, in which his nephew Lot plays a major role. This Biblical narrative is a textual example of what might be termed a 'shared tradition' common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The paper discusses Ibn al-Ṭayyib's treatment of the Biblical account and comes to the conclusion that the analytical approach he adopts, common amongst Aristotelian Eastern Christian thinkers, results from his attempt to preserve the Syriac Christian heritage in Arabic.

Alison Salvesen depicts how Jacob of Edessa drew an explicit parallel between the captivity of Judah under the Babylonians and the subjugation of Christians under the Arabs, which he attributed to the sins of the people of God. She argues that his reasoning reflects the pervasive influence of the Deuteronomistic theology of the Old Testament, which had also led rabbinic Jews to see their own loss of sovereignty under the Roman and Byzantine empires as the result of their community's failure to keep their covenant with God by observing the Jewish Law. This paper assesses how far Jacob's Biblical exegesis tried to meet the challenge of the contemporary social, political and religious reality of late 7<sup>th</sup> century Syria, or whether his approach is fundamentally a conservative one that attempts to preserve Syrian Orthodox identity without innovation.

Focusing on the Witch of En-Dor story in 1 Sam 28, Haggai Ben-Shammai discusses the shift from rabbinic homilies to geonic exegesis, which occurred in a multi-religious environment. Three stages in the history of the meaning

and interpretation of the story in Jewish sources are examined: The plain meaning and message of the story in the Hebrew Bible, its focus in rabbinic sources and finally its focus in Judaeo-Arabic Bible exegesis. Examination of the different attitudes towards the appearance of Samuel in the different stages reveals an interesting relationship between Jewish pre-modern sources on the one hand and Christian and Muslim ones on the other.

For his part, Lennart Lehmhaus investigates hermeneutical and literary appropriations in geonic era Midrash within a cultural and religious plurality of the formative Islamicate period. Contrary to earlier scholarship, beginning with the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, which was primarily occupied with the adoption of Jewish motifs, narratives and literary elements, he draws attention to more subtle forms of exchange and processes of mutual cultural formation in early Islam. The contribution discusses adoptions and adaptations that mirror developments in Arab-Muslim and Syriac Christian traditions as well as shifts within broader Jewish culture, especially among grammarians, Scripturalists and pre-Karaite groups. In this context, an increased attentiveness to Hebrew and a 'return to Scripture' can be observed. Moreover, in contrast to the polyphonic discourses in classical Midrash, authorial voices emerge in later texts. Most likely, the literary and intellectual blooming among non-rabbinic Jews played a major role in linking Arab-Muslim culture with Midrashic appropriations.

Martin Accad draws our attention to the large amount of Biblical exegetical material that developed within the Islamic tradition. He argues that an exploration of the Islamic exegetical discourse on the Bible reveals a serious epistemological challenge: the traditional understanding of the Qur'ān is the core hermeneutical key to Muslim discourse on the Bible. With the Christian academic approach to the Bible today in mind, he emphasizes the importance of recognizing the Muslim exegetical discourse as a key hermeneutical context for Christians in their attempt to theologize in the presence of Islam. For this purpose, he proposes a three-step method to deal with Islamic discourses on the Bible.

Some of the articles included in this volume center around the Qur'ān. Nicolai Sinai investigates processes of interpretive engagement with Biblical passages in the Scripture of Islam. He presents some of the ways in which Biblical narratives are manifested there. While dealing with the Qur'ānic reception of Biblical stories, the paper distinguishes between interpretively motivated secondary expansion and revision of Qur'ānic passages, and interpretive back-referencing in the treatment of chronologically earlier narratives in later sūras. The Qur'ānic Adam narratives are presented as examples for this hermeneutical technique.

Gabriel Reynolds offers in his study a discussion of passages in Q 26 *The Poets* on Moses and his relationship to Pharaoh and how these passages are interpreted in several classical and modern Qur'ān commentaries. He shows how

the Qur'ānic accounts dissociate from the Biblical narrative in order to make Moses the son of the Egyptian ruler.

Drawing on recent studies, Stefan Wild discusses the topic of textual unity and coherence in the Qur'ān. He observes a shift which occurred in scholarship on formal aspects of the Qur'ānic text and which consists in moving from earlier endeavors emphasizing the unity of the sūra towards a new trend considering the textual incoherence of the Qur'ān as a sign of its divine origin.

Berenike Metzler takes a different direction in her contribution. She presents the exegetical work of the Muslim Sufi al-Muḥāsibī on understanding the Qur'ān, thus shedding light on the formative era of Sufi Qur'ānic exegesis. In this work, traditional skepticism towards the human capacity to understand God's word collides with the author's own practice as well as with the emerging idea of Qur'ānic exegesis as an exclusive art.

Reza Pourjavady investigates Ibn Kammūna's discourse on the Qur'ān and its development in his writings. Obviously, the Jewish thinker wrote his treatise on Judaism, Christianity and Islam for Muslim circles. In the chapter on Islam, he challenges the orthodox views on some issues dealing with the Qur'ān mainly by drawing upon the works of the Muslim scholar Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. The divine origin of the Qur'ān, the history of its revelation and canonization, and some Qur'ānic interpretations were among the issues Ibn Kammūna dealt with in this chapter as well as in his earlier works.

The editors wish to thank Dr. Stephan Kokew, Ms. Dorothea Dietzel M.A., Mr. Martin Herholz, Ms. Katharina Linnemann and Ms. Saskia Pilgram for their help getting this volume edited. We finally thank the publisher Walter de Gruyter, especially Dr. Sophie Wagenhofer, for accepting the volume in the book series *Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – Tension, Transmission, Transformation* and for professional assistance during the production process.

The Editors





William A. Graham

# **“A Wandering Aramean was My Father”**

An Abrahamic Theme in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim  
Scriptures and Interpretations

## **1 Introduction**

This volume highlights the complexities of scriptural hermeneutics and scriptural communities, not least because the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions whose interpretive activities are at issue here have been theologically as well as historically so complexly intertwined. To be sure, the intertwining has not been such as to make the three traditions very compatible through much of their long history of interactions, which arguably have focused more on divergences than on commonalities. This notwithstanding, one finds today the irenic notion of a shared “Abrahamic tradition” used frequently as the preferred entrée into interreligious dialogue among the three traditions. My several forays over the years into the vast literature on Abraham in the three traditions have left me, not unlike my colleague Jon Levenson, who has written extensively on the subject,<sup>1</sup> somewhat wary of using Abraham as the ideal meeting point of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Even though he is arguably the most obvious figure whom all three venerate, typically Abraham is invoked by each group to support an exclusivist claim for its own members being his true successors.

Fortunately, the present volume is aimed not at interfaith dialogue among the three traditions, but at exploration of intersections and crossings of scriptural interpretation among them, and the varied contributions treat both similar and disparate modes and instances of scriptural interpretation in all three. I am well aware that to attempt to range across the three traditions even on a delimited topic is both to have to skim the surface of the material and, further, to risk missteps in interpretation of material on which one or more of the other contributors are specialists. Nevertheless, in what follows I make bold to sketch something of the remarkable range of interpretive possibilities in both intra- and extra-scriptural exegesis that the figure of Abraham specifically in his role as a sojourner and pilgrim has opened up in each of these traditions.

---

<sup>1</sup> See especially his book, Levenson, Jon, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.

The Abraham story-cycle—as redacted in *Genesis*, then referenced and elaborated in other parts of Tanakh, New Testament, and Qur’ān, and even more extensively in the massive exegetical traditions of all three—is what I like to call a *patterning narrative*. By this I mean a foundational story that has been so ramifying for a given tradition that it has become a wellspring of allusions, metaphors, and meanings widely accessed not only in religious and scholarly discourse, but in everyday life in the cultures permeated by that tradition. *Patterning narratives* are important touchstones for not only religion but art, literature, language, and culture; and the Abraham narrative has been a particularly resonant one in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim contexts for centuries.

Abraham plays obviously a prominent role in the divergent understandings of *Heilsgeschichte* that the three traditions developed over time. Post-exilic Jewish tradition looks back for a model of monotheistic faith, obedience, and piety to Abraham as the pre-Mosaic patriarch of Genesis who first made a covenant with God and was promised descendants who would be his special people and inherit a special land. In New Testament and later Christian interpretation, Abraham figures as patriarch and model of faith from long before Moses and Sinai. In the Qur’ān and later Muslim tradition, he plays an even more prominent role as the paradigmatic, pre-Mosaic and pre-Christian *muslim*, or monotheistic “submitter,” as well as the progenitor of the Arabs through his son Ishmael. All three traditions revere Moses, yet both Christian and Muslim scriptures take Moses and the Exodus-Sinai event as emblematic of the Jewish tradition. Thus in their polemic both look to pre-Mosaic, pre-Torah history for authority for their own traditions. And while for all three traditions, Adam and Noah are prominent in the pre-Mosaic story of God’s earliest dealings with humanity, it is the postdiluvian figure of Abraham who figures, however differently, as the physical and/or spiritual progenitor of each of the three. In Gen 17:5, God calls Abraham “the father of a multitude of nations,” and elsewhere in the Tanakh, as well as in the New Testament and Qur’ān, he is termed “father Abraham.”<sup>2</sup> Each of the three monotheistic communities looks to him as the symbolic founder of its faith and practice. While Isaac and Ishmael and Abraham’s grandson Jacob carry special if differing patriarchal or prophetic status in the three traditions, it is Abraham who stands symbolically for them all as the emblem of mon-

---

<sup>2</sup> E.g., in the Tanakh: Exod 3:6, “I am the God of thy father (*avik*), the God of Abraham”; Josh 24:3 and Isa 51:2, “your father Abraham (*Avraham avikum*).” On the centrality of “Our father Abraham” (*Avraham avinu*), see Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, p. 3. In the New Testament, examples of “our father Abraham” are found in Luke 1:73 (*Abraām tōn patēra hēmōn*), Rom 4:1 (*Abraām tōn propátora hēmōn*), and Jas 2:21 (*Abraām ho patēr hēmon*). Cf. Q 22:78: “*millat abikum Ibrāhīm*,” “the religion of your father Abraham.”

otheistic faith. And in their treatment of Abraham, the three have emphasized, if differently and to differing degree, three aspects of Abraham’s story in particular: (1) Abraham’s monotheistic faith and rejection of idolatry; (2) Abraham’s testing by God in the *aqedah*, or “binding” of his son for sacrifice; and (3) Abraham as father of the faithful and model of faithfulness.

I want to pursue a fourth, less-frequently treated dimension of Abraham as a paradigmatic figure. Deut 26:5 begins, “A wandering Aramean was my father (*Arami oved avi*).” While most rabbinic commentators identify this father as Jacob, significant interpreters from Rashbam<sup>3</sup> in the 12<sup>th</sup> century to Martin Buber in the 20<sup>th</sup> identify Abram/Abraham as Deuteronomy’s wandering Aramean. Buber terms him “a nomad of faith.”<sup>4</sup> Arguably he is the wandering Aramean *par excellence* of Genesis, and it is the varied interpretations of this role that I shall briefly explore: Abraham as pilgrim or peregrine sojourner—as stranger and exile who travels and settles in foreign territory. This theme encompasses also his founding of altars or shrines consecrated to the worship of the one God as he moves about Canaan and, in the Muslim case, on to Mecca. This sojourner and altar- or sanctuary-builder subtheme is found in all three scriptural and later interpretive traditions; it is always linked to the central motif of Abraham as paradigm of faith, but it is treated quite differently in each tradition.

## 2 Abraham the Sojourner in the Tanakh and Jewish Interpretation

The Tanakh itself offers a prime example of intra-scriptural exegesis in what the foundational narrative of Gen 11–25 does with the image of Abraham as a wandering sojourner. In this account, he appears as one who, at God’s command, leaves home and becomes a stranger traveling and dwelling in tents in strange lands, with the promise of an eventual homeland for his progeny. Until his death he remains a sojourner, not a property owner; at his death the only land he possesses is a burial plot in the Promised Land. This peregrine dimension of Abraham is closely tied to his obedience to God’s command to abandon the land of his birth and go where God directs. It is also tied to his faith in, and dedicated worship of God, signaled in part in Genesis by references to his build-

---

<sup>3</sup> Samuel ben Meir, “Rashbam” (d. c.1158), grandson of Shlomo Yitzhaki, “Rashi” (d. 1105).

<sup>4</sup> Buber, Martin, *The Prophetic Faith*, trans. from the Hebrew by Carlyle Witton Davies. New York: Harper & Row, 1960, p. 35.

ing of at least six altars or shrines to his Lord during his movements as a sojourner in Canaan.

However one interprets the complex textual history of Genesis, its redactors present Abraham's story clearly as a fundament of the larger *Heilsgeschichte* of God's dealing with the Hebrews, who are destined to become the Children of Israel through the Exodus and Sinai events. This is most evident in the depiction in Genesis of Abraham's pilgrim journeying as an analog, even a prefiguration, of Israel's defining experience under Moses in the Exodus. God's drawing Israel out of Egypt onto its extended journey to the Promised Land is preceded and prefigured by Abraham's own going forth from Mesopotamia to Canaan, his descent into Egypt, his rescue by God, and his return to Canaan. Much of Genesis in its eventual scriptural form likely took shape only in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, which makes the anachronistic allusions and parallels in the Abraham narrative to Israel's experience in Egypt and Sinai unsurprising. Some scholars consider especially chapter 15 to be a late portion of Genesis, from not long before codification of the Torah.<sup>5</sup> It can be seen as an effort to harmonize the Abraham story with that of Moses, the Exodus, and the wilderness experience, and to align Patriarchal traditions with the whole of the Pentateuch. Compare God's self-introduction in Gen 15:7, "I am YHWH who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans" with the beginning of the Decalogue in Exod 20:2, "I am YHWH [...], who brought you out from the land of Egypt." Here the earlier focus in Gen 11 on Abraham's father Terah as the one who abandons Ur for Haran has shifted completely to Abraham as the one God draws forth from Ur. This is what we then find elsewhere in the Tanakh e.g., Neh 9:7: "Thou art the Lord God who chose Abram and brought him forth out of Ur of the Chaldeans"; or Josh 24:3: "I took your father Abraham from beyond the river and led him through all the land of Canaan."

Furthermore, later in Gen 15, God tells Abraham that his progeny, the Children of Israel will live "as strangers in a land that is not theirs" and end up in Egyptian slavery, after which they will "depart with great possessions" eventually to inherit the promised land of Canaan from Egypt to the Euphrates (vv. 13, 16) —all clear allusions to statements concerning the Exodus and exile in Deut 10 and 11, Josh 1:4, and elsewhere in the Tanakh.<sup>6</sup> Thus the theme of Abraham as exile and sojourner in Canaan, looking forward to a promised homeland for his people, is mapped onto the Israelites' long servitude in Egypt and their sub-

---

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Römer, Thomas, "Abraham and the 'Law and the Prophets'," in *The Reception and Remembrance of Abraham*, ed. by Pernille Carstens and Niels Peter Lemche, pp. 87–101. Piscataway, N.J.: Georgia Press, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

sequent departure and wandering as exiles and sojourners under Abraham’s descendant, Moses, until they reach the Promised Land. In the Tanakh, Abraham’s going down as an alien into Egypt prefigures Israel’s sojourn there generations later, just as his safe escape with new wealth mirrors the Israelites’ escape “with great possessions” into the wilderness of Sinai.

Post-Biblical Jewish interpretation only expands on this alignment of the Abraham and Exodus sojourning narratives. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE *Book of Jubilees* there are only indirect references to the parallel between his sojourning in Canaan and Egypt and that of the Children of Israel in Egypt and then Babylonia, but there are repeated references to Abraham as a sojourner in the land of Canaan and to the many altars to God that he built throughout the land.<sup>7</sup> In the much later (likely 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) *Apocalypse of Abraham*, the final chapter ends with a pointed reference to the Exodus: God assures Abraham that in the seventh generation after him, his progeny, like Abraham himself, “will go out into an alien land. And they will enslave them and oppress them as it were for one hour of the impious age [...]”<sup>8</sup>

Still later, no earlier than the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, the rabbinic Midrash on Gen 12:10 ff. in *Genesis Rabbah* makes explicit the analogy between Abraham and the Children of Israel under Moses. It begins, “You find that whatever is written in regard to our father, Abraham, is written also with regard to his children,” after which the text pairs passages from the story of Abraham’s Egyptian sojourn in Gen 12 and 13 with ones from Exodus, Numbers, later chapters of *Genesis*, and the Psalms regarding the Israelites’ sojourn in Egypt before the Exodus. Thus Gen 12:10, “So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land” is matched with three texts, “our fathers went down into Egypt” (Num 20:15); “we have come to sojourn in the land” (Joseph’s brothers speaking to Pharaoh in Gen 47:4); “for the famine was heavy in the land” (Gen 43:1). Another pairing is of Gen 13:3, “And [Abram] went on his journey,” with Num 33:1, “These are the journeys of the Children of Israel.” The phrase-by-phrase parallels in this Midrash identify the story of Abram explicitly with the story of Israel: both he and the Israelites were sojourners and exiles in

---

<sup>7</sup> E. g., in *Jubilees*, chs. 13, 14, 15, 16, and 18, in *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, trans. by Robert H. Charles. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913.

<sup>8</sup> “The Apocalypse of Abraham,” last modified September 22, 2015.  
[http://www.pseudepigrapha.com/pseudepigrapha/Apocalypse\\_of\\_Abraham.html](http://www.pseudepigrapha.com/pseudepigrapha/Apocalypse_of_Abraham.html).

Egypt and God brought them forth, Abram “very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold” (Gen 13:3) and the Israelites “with silver and gold” (Ps 105:37).<sup>9</sup>

Nor does the linking of Abraham with Moses and the Children of Israel stop with rabbinic *midrashim*. The major 13<sup>th</sup> century kabbalistic work, the *Zohar*, in making refining and purification in exile a preparation for spiritual consummation, likens the sojourn of Abraham in Egypt to that of the Israelites and to that of the personified Holy Land under pagans before the coming of God’s chosen people:

Come and see the secret of the word:  
If Abram had not gone down into Egypt  
and been refined there first,  
he could not have partaken of the Blessed Holy One.  
Similarly with his children,  
when the Blessed Holy One wanted to make them unique,  
a perfect people,  
and to draw them near to Him:  
If they had not gone down to Egypt  
and been refined there first,  
they would not have become His special ones.  
So too the Holy Land:  
If she had not been given first to Canaan to control,  
she would not have become the portion, the share  
of the Blessed Holy One.  
It is all one mystery.<sup>10</sup>

What we can say finally is that in Jewish interpretation, growing out of the scriptural narrative in *Genesis* and extending for centuries, the *galut*, or exile—a major theme of post-Biblical Judaism altogether—is arguably already inscribed upon the figure of *Avraham* ‘*avinu*, “Our Father Abraham,” whose life as a “stranger and sojourner” becomes a foreshadowing or pre-enactment of Egyptian exile and slavery, Babylonian exile and captivity, and even the *galut* after the fall of the Second Temple.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis*, trans. and ed. by Jacob Neusner, vol. 2. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985, pp. 77–85, 90–91.

<sup>10</sup> “*Zohar* 1:83a,” in *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment*, trans. by, Daniel C. Matt. Toronto: Paulist Press, 1983, p. 64.

<sup>11</sup> Also ultimately, even a foreshadowing of, or looking forward to the eschatological (or, third) Temple being rebuilt—even while a substantial Jewish community continued to flourish in Palestine, as we know from the texts produced there, such as the Mishna, the Jerusalem Talmud, and late-antique and medieval Midrashic collections (Levenson, personal communication, Feb. 2014).

### 3 Abraham the Sojourner in Christian Interpretation

The Christian New Testament unsurprisingly offers a very different interpretation of Abraham as patriarchal forefather—one central to the early Christian effort to distinguish the new preaching of the messianic Christ from Jewish tradition by using that very tradition against itself. Best known here is the Apostle Paul’s polemic in Romans and Galatians where the Jewish convert takes Abraham and his faith over against Moses and the Law, as model and symbol of true faith in God, a faith that Christians find in fullness only in the Christ. The Jews become synonymous with “works alone” according to the Law of Moses and the Christian faithful with “salvation by faith” after the model of their spiritual father Abraham. Note Paul’s claim in Gal 3:7 that “those who have faith” are the true “sons of Abraham,” or his words in Rom 9:6–8:

For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants [...]. It is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as his descendants.<sup>12</sup>

While the theme of Abraham as model of faith takes pride of place in both New Testament and later tradition, the Epistle to the Hebrews vividly moves the emphasis to the pilgrim/sojourner theme of Abraham as stranger and exile. The unknown author, steeped in priestly tradition, identifies in Heb 5:5–6 the enigmatic priest-king Melchizedek of Genesis with the Christ and then in Heb 7:1–17 makes Abraham blessed by Melchizedek (Gen 14) a prototype of the Christian blessed by the atonement and intercession of Christ. In Heb 11, the author calls even more strongly upon the model of the first patriarch by referencing the Gen 23 image of Abraham as “stranger and sojourner,” *ger we thoshav* (LXX: *xénos kai parepidēmos*; Vulgate: *advena et peregrinus*). The text, Heb 11:8–16, bears citing in full:

<sup>8</sup> By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. <sup>9</sup> By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with

---

**12** This polemic is of course at odds with the Letter of James 2:20–24, which also calls on Abraham but asks, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up his son Isaac upon the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works, and he was called the friend of God. So you see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

him of the same promise.<sup>10</sup> For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.<sup>11</sup> By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.<sup>12</sup> Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.<sup>13</sup> These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and pilgrims (*xénoi kai parepidēmoi*) on the earth.<sup>14</sup> For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.<sup>15</sup> If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return.<sup>16</sup> But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

Here the writer not only builds on Abraham and Genesis but also Lev 25:13, Ps 39:12, and Ps 119:19, all of which stress that as humans we are *all* “strangers and sojourners” on God’s earth. Abraham is the model of the pilgrim sojourner in foreign territory, the prototype of the faithful Christian who in this world is, like him, “living in tents” (and of course also like Moses and the Israelites “tenting in the wilderness”). The Christian is a pilgrim stranger and sojourner in “a foreign land”—without a home on this earth, but looking “forward to a city which has foundations”: one prepared by God to receive the pilgrim exile because of his or her faith. Like Abraham, the Christian has on faith left home and family without looking back, to follow Christ, yet now under the new dispensation s/he desires not the earthly Jerusalem and the land promised to Israel, but “a better country, that is, a heavenly one.” In the city God has prepared for them, the faithful will be with Him eternally, no longer strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

Not surprisingly, the writer of Hebrews goes on to sketch the trials, faith, and rescue of Moses with his people from the Red Sea and then the rest of the *Heilsgeschichte* of the Israelites according to Biblical chronology, after which he polemicalizes that of course these wandering, suffering Children of Israel, “though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect” (Heb 11:39–40). Finally, the last two chapters of Hebrews bring the Christian faithful “to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem,” and the author rejoices that

[...] we have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go forth to him outside



the camp, bearing abuse for him. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come.<sup>13</sup>

Here Abraham as stranger and sojourner in the land is recapitulated, first in the crucified Christ, and then in the Christian follower as a stranger and sojourner on this earth, seeking the city to come, not the earthly Jerusalem (which of course in this polemic stands for the land of Zion, the Law, and the Jews). A similar echo of “stranger and pilgrim” in the Tanakh is found in 1 Pet 2:11, where the Christians in Asia Minor are addressed thus: “Beloved, I beseech you as strangers and sojourners (*paroikous kai parepidēmous*) to abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against your souls,” reminding Christians that they are only passing through this earthly world; it is not their permanent home.

In Christian interpretation ever afterward, this powerful scriptural linkage of the Christian faithful to Abraham as stranger and sojourner in this world bound for a heavenly promised land remains a persistent theme.<sup>14</sup> We find the linkage in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E. *Epistle to Diognetus*, where the writer speaks of Christians as strangers and sojourners whose “existence is on earth, but their citizenship is in Heaven.”<sup>15</sup> In the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century, Origen (*Contra Celsum* 8:74–5<sup>16</sup>) speaks similarly of Christians as citizens in earthly cities but members of the higher community of the Church of God, and by living their faith in earthly cities coming ultimately into “a divine and heavenly city.” This idea is similar to Augustine’s words in the opening lines of *The City of God*: that the City of God “pursues its way as a stranger among unbelievers” in this life, all the while belonging to “the secure and eternal home beyond,” which the faithful citizens of the City wait patiently to realize on Judgment Day.<sup>17</sup> He follows a similar line in *On Christian Doctrine* I.4, describing humans as “wanderers in a strange country” entranced by its ephemeral beauties:

---

13 Heb 13:10–14.

14 One possible indication of this is the use of *Perigrinus* and *Viator* as early Christian personal names. See, e.g., “Behind the Name.” Accessed on January 29, 2014, <http://www.behindthename.com/names/usage/late-roman>.

15 Lightfoot, J.B., “Epistle to Diognetus,” in *The Apostolic Fathers: Revised Texts with Short Introductions and English Translations*, ed. and completed by J. R. Harmer. London: Macmillan, 1891, pp. 490–511. Online: “Early Christian Writings – Diognetus.” Accessed on February 4, 2014.

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/diognetus-lightfoot.html>.

16 Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans. by Henry Chadwick. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953, p. 510.

17 Augustine, *The City of God*, abridged and trans. by John W. C. Wand, vol. 1. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1963, Preface p. 1.

We have wandered far from God; and if we wish to return to our Father's home, this world must be used, not enjoyed, that so the invisible things of God may be clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, that is, that by means of what is material and temporary we may lay hold upon that which is spiritual and eternal.<sup>18</sup>

Augustine's 4<sup>th</sup> century contemporary, Ambrose of Milan, interprets the Abraham story almost entirely allegorically: he says that Abraham departed from his homeland not for another country but for true religion, since the meaning of *Canaan* is "true religion."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, he takes Gen 15:13, "Thy seed shall be a sojourner," to mean that either "we must all be sojourners on this earth—for Abraham is the father of all men" or "[...] the true seed of Abraham will be a sojourner in this world [...]. Finally, Ambrose closes his argument with the declaration, "For whoso is a stranger here is a citizen in Heaven [...]."<sup>20</sup>

This theme resounds through Christian exegesis down the centuries in the books and sermons of writers in various languages, from Gregory the Great in the 6<sup>th</sup> century and St. Boniface in the 7<sup>th</sup> through the Middle Ages to Chaucer and Dante and well beyond, most famously perhaps in 17<sup>th</sup> century England in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Still later, even Lord Byron picks it up: "Man is a pilgrim spirit cloth'd in flesh/ And tenting in the wilderness of Time."<sup>21</sup> Indeed, whatever the permutations, what begins in Genesis with Abraham as "stranger and sojourner" and is mapped onto both the Exodus story and the Christ event has perdured in the rhetoric of Christian religion and culture.

## 4 Abraham the Sojourner in the Qur'ān and Muslim Interpretation

In the Qur'ān, the particular theme of Abraham as stranger and sojourner is little developed in contrast to Tanakh or New Testament interpretation. There are only

---

**18** Augustine, "On Christian Doctrine," in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. by Philip Schaff, vol. 2. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977–86. Online: "Philip Schaff, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, vol. 2 (St. Augustin's City of God and Christian Doctrine)." Accessed on February 4, 2014. <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/ddc.html>

**19** In his small book, *De Abraham*. See Ambrose of Milan, *On Abraham*, trans. by Theodosia Tomkinson. Etna: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2000, p. 51.

**20** *Ibid.*, p. 81.

**21** Lord Byron, *The Soul's Pilgrimage: A Poem*. Cambridge: Metcalfe, 1818, p. 12.

three clear Qur’ānic references to Abraham’s departure from Mesopotamia. In Q 19:48–9, Abraham says to the idol worshippers around him:

I shall draw apart from you and whatever you call upon instead of God and pray to my Lord only [...] And after he had drawn apart from them and all that they worshipped instead of God, We gave him Isaac and Jacob and made each a prophet [...].<sup>22</sup>

His separating himself from the idolaters of his land of birth is also referenced in Q 37:99, when he says to them, “I shall depart and go to my Lord, as he will guide me.” In the third instance, in Q 21:71, the only one that refers specifically also to Abraham’s being guided to the Promised Land, God says, “We rescued him and Lot and [led them] to the land that We blessed for all beings.” These spare statements about Abraham are, of course, consonant with the thoroughly “referential” style that is an earmark of the Qur’ān: in almost every mention of Abraham, the text is clearly alluding to a more extensive Abraham story-cycle so well known to its audience as only to need barest reference to make clear what is being referenced.

Not surprisingly, the familiar theme in rabbinic and Christian exegesis of Abraham’s stalwart monotheism and rejection of polytheism (a theme that ironically is not explicit in Genesis itself<sup>23</sup>)—does loom large in the Qur’ān alongside that of Abraham the true “submitter” (*muslim*) as the paradigm of faith. Both of these themes correspondingly permeate later Muslim tradition as much as, or possibly even more than they do Jewish and Christian tradition. A few examples from the Qur’ānic text itself are worth citing: In Q 3:65, we see a polemical call upon Abraham as model of faith: “O people of Scripture! Do not quarrel about Abraham, for the Torah and the Gospel were only revealed after him!” This is picked up two verses later: “Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a *ḥanīf muslim* [a righteous person submitting to God alone] and not a *mushrik* [idolater].” Q 6:161 speaks of the “straight path” and “right religion” that is “the way of Abraham,” *ṣirāṭ Ibrāhīm*; and Q 3:95 and Q 4:125 urge listeners to follow *millat Ibrāhīm ḥanīfan*, “the religion of Abraham, a righteous man,” with the addition in Q 4:125, “God chose Abraham as friend (*khalīl*: cf. Isa 41:8).” According to the Qur’ān, Abraham’s faith and monotheistic creed are what God has presented anew to humankind through Muḥammad in the Qur’ān. Not surprisingly, Abraham in the Qur’ān, and still more so in later interpretation, is taken as the prefiguration of Muḥammad, much as in Genesis and rabbinic tradition he is the prefiguration of Moses.

<sup>22</sup> All Qur’ānic translations are the author’s own.

<sup>23</sup> Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, pp. 3–5.

By contrast, the *explicit* Biblical theme of Abraham as stranger and sojourner is at best only *implicit* in the Qur'ān, even though the text apparently assumes the broad outlines of the ancient story of his migration southwestward from Mesopotamia to Canaan (or greater Syria), adding specifically that he also reached Mecca. What we do see in the Qur'ān that may be closest to the Genesis theme of Abraham the sojourner and altar-builder is the Abraham of the Medinan-period revelations who goes to Mecca, and at God's command, with his son Ishmael's help, purifies God's "House," the Ka'ba, and rebuilds it as a sacred place of pilgrimage. In Q 2:125, God says:

[Remember] when We made the House a refuge and a sanctuary for the people, [saying], 'Take the place where Abraham stood as a place of worship.' And We charged Abraham and Ishmael with the purifying of Our House for those who circle [around it], those who hold fast [to it], and those who bow and prostrate themselves.

On the basis of his cleansing and building up of the Ka'ba for the worship of God, Abraham becomes for Muslims forever linked to the Ka'ba and the rites of the *ḥajj*, which include stopping to pray at "the place where Abraham stood," *maqām Ibrāhīm*, during the *ṭawāf* (circumambulation) of the Ka'ba; stoning the *jamarāt*, the three pillars representing Satan, to recall Abraham's rejection of idolatry; sacrificing an animal at Minā just as Abraham did; and the *sa'y*, or running back and forth between the two points, *aṣ-Ṣafā* and *al-Marwa*, to remember Hagar's distress at lack of water for her infant Ishmael (to which distress God responded with the miraculous appearance of the spring of Zamzam—a close parallel to the story of Hagar in the wilderness in Gen 21).

It is worth considering, even though there is no evidence of direct influence, that the Qur'ānic Abraham's building (or restoring) of the Ka'ba and institution of the pilgrimage rites in the sacred territory of Mecca can be seen as paralleling the Biblical Abraham's building of altars or sites of worship to God wherever he pitches his tent (six instances: two each in Gen 12 and 13, and one each in Gen 21 and 22).<sup>24</sup> In the text of the Qur'ān, as in Tanakh and NT, we see reinterpretation and reconfiguration of older material in the *Gestaltung* of Abraham as not only the first *muslim*, but also the founder of the most sacred site in the world. And even if Abraham's going forth from his homeland to sojourn and to build altars

---

<sup>24</sup> Gen 12:5–7; 12:8; 13:3–4; 13:17–18; 21:33; 22:9. Note that Firestone argues that the association of Abraham with establishing sacred sites in Genesis "was probably the source for his pre-Islamic connection with the founding of the Ka'ba". See Firestone, Reuven, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990, p. 82.

to God in new places is not overtly linked in the Qur’ān to his institution of the rites of the *hajj*, it is hard not to find there an echo of the pilgrim of faith whom God extracts from his home and sends to Canaan and Mecca—something that has been mirrored in every performance of the *hajj* down to the present day when pilgrims specifically remember Abraham at multiple points during the *manāsik*, or ritual acts of the *hajj*.

Finally, Muslim interpretation (*tafsīr*) of the Qur’ānic Abraham narrative similarly places primary emphasis on Abraham as pre-Mosaic paradigm of faith and the first *muslim*. He is, moreover, also understood as Muḥammad’s forefather and his paradigmatic prophetic forebear. Thus, even in interpreting a Qur’ānic passage with no explicit mention of Abraham, the famous “Light Verse” of Q 24:35,<sup>25</sup> early and classical exegetes take its long metaphor of “the likeness of his light” to refer to the light as that of Muḥammad and “kindled from a blessed olive tree” to be a metaphor for Muḥammad’s descent from Abraham, with “a tree [...] neither of the East nor of the West” taken to mean that Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian. Even the words “light upon light” are interpreted as meaning that Muḥammad was a prophet descended from another prophet, namely Abraham—in one exegete’s words, “a prophet of prophetic descent.”<sup>26</sup>

This kind of interpretive placement of Muḥammad and his prophetic vocation in a lineage of prophecy going back to Abraham is only one instance of the abiding emphasis in Muslim interpretation upon Abraham as paradigm of faith and the prophetic model for Muḥammad. Similarly, Muslim exegesis treats the sacrifice of Abraham’s son extensively, with much attention given in early

---

25 The verse reads: “God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The likeness of His [his?] light is a niche (*mishkāṭ*), in which is a lamp (*miṣbāḥ*), the lamp in a glass (*zujājah*), the glass as it were a shining star (*kawkab durī*), kindled from a blessed olive tree neither of the east nor of the west, the oil of which would almost light up (*yuḍī’u*) even though no fire touched it. Light upon light (*nūr ‘ala nūr*in)! God guides to His light (*yahdī li-nūrihi*) whom He will. God coins similitudes (*al-amthāl*) for humankind, and God knows everything.”

26 The early Sunni interpreter Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 767) and the early Shī‘ī exegete ‘Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī (fl. early 10<sup>th</sup> century), as well as the pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 687) and the great aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 923) all raise the possibility that the “light” in Q 24:35 refers to Muḥammad and go on to read Abraham into the metaphor as I have indicated. The phrase, “a prophet of prophetic descent”, is from Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Al-Wujūh wa-n-naẓā’ir fī l-qur’ān al-‘aẓīm*, ed. by Ḥātim Ṣāliḥ aḍ-Ḍāmin. Riyadh: Maktabat ar-Rushd Nāshirūn, 2010, p. 160. For a fuller summary of these readings of the text and further *tafsīr* references, see my forthcoming article, “Light as Image and Concept in the Qur’ān and Other Early Islamic Sources,” in *God is the Light of the Heavens and the Earth: Light in Islamic Art and Culture*, ed. by Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015, pp. 45–59.

*tafsīr* works to Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son (and much discussion of whether it was Isaac or Ishmael who was the son in question). However, among the remaining Abrahamic themes, it is that of Abraham as sojourner in Mecca and founder of God's holy house there that most clearly looms much larger in Muslim exegesis than in the Qur'ān itself.<sup>27</sup> This is a topic that Reuven Firestone has treated well in his survey of the treatment of Abraham in Muslim exegesis,<sup>28</sup> so I will not rehearse his findings. However, two main points based largely on his work are in order.

First, as already noted, there is nothing specific in the Qur'ān about Abraham's peregrinations through greater Syria, Egypt, and the western Arabian Hijaz. Consequently, this silence offered Muslim exegetes a wide scope for elaboration. They used accordingly the riches of Talmudic and likely other regional legendary lore to fill in the story of Abraham's time in Canaan, Egypt, and Mecca. The varying strands in their accounts of the sojourning forefather reflect the fact that the basic story is tacitly assumed in the Qur'ān and was probably already circulating in different versions in the Near East of the 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E. The exegetes elaborate on moments and halting places (Haran, Syria, Jordan, Egypt)<sup>29</sup> in Abraham's peripatetic career between Mesopotamia and Mecca, and flesh out the picture of him as a nomadic prophet-patriarch figure who travels to greater Syria, *ash-Shām* (Canaan), which they identify readily as the land "blessed for all beings" of Q 21:71. Where the Qur'ān is silent on how Abraham got to Mecca, the exegetes fill in the gap, generally having him take Hagar and Ishmael there after Sarah asks that they both be banished, something also not found in the Qur'ān itself. The commentators identify the Paran desert of Gen 21:21 (where Ishmael went) with the environs of Mecca, and after retelling the story of the miraculous appearance of the Zamzam well, most accounts have Abraham assure Hagar that he will come again to build or restore God's House there.<sup>30</sup>

Second, it is also evident from Firestone's survey that it is the Ka'ba's rebuilding and the institution of the pilgrimage thence by Abraham (both at God's command) that loom large in Muslim exegetes' treatment of Abraham's journey south from Canaan to Mecca. Only the binding of Isaac gets more attention in Muslim exegesis than does the (re-)building of the Ka'ba (on the foundations of Adam's original structure) and the associated institution of the rites of

---

<sup>27</sup> Albeit still very much subordinate to emphasis on Abraham as paradigm of prophethood and faith, and forebear of Muḥammad.

<sup>28</sup> Firestone, *Journeys*, esp. chs. pp. 3–12.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25–30.

<sup>30</sup> On Abraham's movements and time in Mecca in particular, see Firestone, *Journeys*, pp. 8–10.

the *hajj*.<sup>31</sup> Whether seen as the sole builder or having his son Ishmael as helper, Abraham becomes for Muslim tradition the effective founder (or post-diluvian re-founder) of the Ka'ba and the associated pilgrimage rites of the *hajj*. As such, he is also a prefiguration of the Prophet Muḥammad, who cleanses the Ka'ba and establishes (or re-establishes) the proper *hajj* observances as recounted in *Sīra*, Hadith, and other traditional sources. The exegetes build their interpretations especially on Q 22:26–7,<sup>32</sup> “Remember when We prepared for Abraham the place of the House, [saying]: ‘Do not ascribe any partner to me and purify my House for those who circumambulate, stand, bow, and prostrate. And proclaim to humanity the *hajj*.’” Although the sequence of events and the details vary in different exegetical accounts, most have Abraham proclaim the pilgrimage just as Q 22:27 enjoins him to. A lesser number describe him as making the first *hajj* himself, sometimes with Gabriel's help, then calling others to do the same.<sup>33</sup>

Overall, as Firestone's survey shows, Islamic exegetical tradition regarding Abraham focuses on (1) the Qur'ānic allusions to his departure from his homeland out of revulsion at its idolatry, (2) his trials as a monotheist in an idolatrous world, (3) his demonstration of faith by offering to sacrifice his son, and (4) his establishment of the Ka'ba and *hajj* rituals at Mecca where he settled Hagar and Ishmael and by extension his Arab progeny. With respect to our sojourner and altar-builder motifs, we can say that, unlike Jewish and Christian scripture and exegesis, both the Qur'ān and later exegesis emphasize less the wandering of Abraham and much more his rejection of his idolatrous homeland (no. 1 above). Further, instead of the Biblical portrayal of Abraham as a regular builder of altars to God wherever he goes, the Qur'ān and its interpreters focus on his building up of the Ka'ba, God's most holy House, and his attendant institution of the rites, or *manāsik*, of the *hajj*.

Abraham's move from the idolatrous land of his birth to Canaan, however emphasized, is clearly consonant with the older Biblical story of the patriarch first told in Genesis. And while there is no clear influence on the Ka'ba-building of Abraham from the altar-building of Genesis, it is hardly far-fetched to say that both are of a piece in their emphasis on Abraham's role in the three traditions as the postdiluvian man of faith chosen by God to be founder of monotheistic faith and practice before Moses and Sinai, before Jesus and his crucifixion, and before Muḥammad and his cleansing of the Ka'ba and institution of the *hajj*. Where

---

<sup>31</sup> Firestone, *Journeys*, pp. 88.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 76–103.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96–102.

Abraham in both Tanakh and Jewish tradition is the type and prefiguration of Moses and Israel in his travel to and emergence from Egypt, or in the New Testament and Christian tradition the stranger and sojourner who is the *type* of the Christian traveling through this world with eyes fixed on the next, in the Qur'ān and Muslim interpretation Abraham is not only the type of the faithful *muslim*, but also the father who settles his son Ishmael and his mother Hagar at Mecca and later returns to build with his son the holy House of the Ka'ba, which has always been seen as the earthly holy of holies for Muslims. Still more, even though it is not developed in classical *tafsīr*, because Abraham is also clearly a type and prefiguration of the prophet Muḥammad in the Qur'ān and later tradition, his abandonment of Mesopotamia and its idolatry might also be seen typologically as a type or prefiguration of the migration or *hijra* that Muḥammad makes to escape the persecution of the idolaters in Mecca and to found his new community of faith in Medina.

## 5 Conclusion

The foregoing has been a rapid review of interpretive trajectories in the three traditions regarding Abraham as sojourner and founder of sacred sites. In looking at his role as Buber's "nomad of faith," a tent dweller who is also a builder of altars or sanctuaries to the God whom he follows, I have tried to point to ways in which, in the scriptures and even more in the exegetical traditions of all three monotheisms, this particular Abrahamic theme underwent significant interpretive expansion, yet with very different emphases and for very different purposes in each of the three traditions. Apart from, but related to Abraham as the prototype of the person of pure faith and obedience, all three monotheistic traditions resonate variously to the paradigm of Abraham as the man who on faith abandons his homeland to wander, to establish new places of worship at God's behest, and ultimately to found a new tradition of monotheistic faith in a new land. Abraham has been a prolific source of interpretation and reinterpretation across the three traditions,—whether he becomes in Tanakh and Jewish tradition the prototype of Moses and the Children of Israel bound for a promised land, or in New Testament and Christian tradition the prototype of the faithful Christian seeking a heavenly promised land, or in Qur'ān and Muslim interpretation the prototype or prefiguration of Muḥammad, his prophetic successor, by establishing God's holiest sanctuary and instituting the pilgrimage rites. Abraham's story in all three traditions, for all its divergences, portrays him as a sojourner whose unshakable faith in God and dedication to His worship are paradigmatic for all who consider themselves his physical or spiritual progeny.



I would suggest that the rich variation in Abrahamic traditions, interpretations, and extensions of interpretations, one segment of which I have touched on briefly here, simply reminds us that interpretation is always inventive as well as conservative, always taking up new, often polemical, agendas as well as trying to clarify what has gone before. Interpreters are always capable of latching onto different elements, however small or secondary, of any sacred history and making these the basis for new hermeneutical trajectories. Nor can we forget that every scriptural text itself is already replete with ongoing interpretation in its own pages, even though all of its meanings rest ultimately in the hands of later interpreters of those pages.

In that regard, let me close by paraphrasing the likely spurious Hadith cited by al-Dārimī: *as-sunna qāḍiya ‘alā l-qur’ān, wa-lā l-qur’ān bi-qāḍin ‘alā s-sunna*: “tradition controls the Qur’ān, not the Qur’ān tradition.”<sup>34</sup> Here we could easily substitute “interpretation” for “tradition” and “scripture” for “Qur’ān” to form a general axiom: “interpretation controls scripture, not scripture interpretation,” for it is interpretation both within and beyond scriptural texts that always develops the meanings of those texts for communities of faith, which are of course always communities of interpretation.

---

<sup>34</sup> Al-Dārimī, ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Rahmān, *Kitāb as-sunan*, ed. by ‘Abdullāh al-Yamānī al-Madānī. 2 vols. Cairo 1386/1966, *Muqaddimah* [Introduction], section 49.



Cornelia Horn

# Jesus, the Wondrous Infant, at the Exegetical Crossroads of Christian Late Antiquity and Early Islam

## 1 Introduction

One of the prominent features of Jesus' presentation in the canonical gospels highlights his role as a healer of illness and disability.<sup>1</sup> Healing the sick was an essential aspect of Jesus' ministry and message as well as of that of his disciples (see for example Luke 10:9 and Acts 2:22, 3:1–10). Yet the New Testament featured him as someone who worked also many miracles that did not pertain immediately to the realm of healing sicknesses. The gospels showed him to have turned water into wine (John 2:1–11), to have multiplied five loaves and two fish (Matt 14:13–21; Mark 6:30–44), to have walked on water (Matt 14:22–33; Mark 6:45–52), and at the very end of his life to have risen from the dead (Matt 28:1–10; Mark 16; Luke 24:1–12; John 20:1–18). For many Christian readers of the gospels in the ancient world, the narratives of Jesus' miracles supported his special character as a wonderworker. Yet the signs and wonders he was thought to have worked likewise strengthened belief in him as the Messiah and functioned as proof of his divinity. The representations of Jesus as a wonderworker supported and promoted the faith and self-identity of many ancient Christians as believers in God having become man in Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

---

1 The research and writing of this article for publication was supported through a Heisenberg Fellowship (GZ HO 5221/1–1), for which the author wishes to express her gratitude to the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG).

2 See for instance Zeilinger, Franz, *Die sieben Zeichenhandlungen Jesu im Johannesevangelium*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2011. Main elements of the thematic trajectory of the image of Jesus as a miracle-worker in support of claims to Jesus' divinity in the ancient Syriac-speaking realm are discussed in Horn, Cornelia, "Jesus' Healing Miracles as Proof of Divine Agency and Identity: The Trajectory of Early Syriac Literature." in *The Bible, the Qur'an, and Their Interpretation: Syriac Perspectives*, ed. by Cornelia Horn, Eastern Mediterranean Texts and Contexts 1, pp. 69–97. Warwick, RI: Abelian Academic, 2013.

Jesus' identity as a worker of miracles was a significant part of early Christians' interest in his presentation.<sup>3</sup> Polemical and theological writings offered exegetical and interpretive approaches to the New Testament witnesses on the topic. In the process, authors expanded the repertoire of miracles they thought could have been part of the story of Jesus' life. Especially early Christian apocrypha that were composed from the second century onward filled in periods of Jesus' life with wondrous activities that were not thoroughly or even not at all part of the texts that eventually came to be regarded as canonical.<sup>4</sup> Along with this, one perceives shifts in the representation of Jesus as a wonderworker that emphasized more strongly Jesus extraordinary qualities and powers. Responses of non-Christians to the New Testament portrait as well as to the representation of Jesus reflected in other Christian texts that established claims to the identity of Jesus as a wonderworker are in evidence in late ancient Jewish sources, the Qur'ān, and subsequent medieval Islamic writings. The present article aims to contribute to the ongoing project of tracing the shifting perceptions of Jesus as a wonderworker, healer, and man of miracles in developing Christian apocrypha, Jewish literature, and early and medieval Islamic texts. It focuses on exegetical intersections between infancy-of-Jesus episodes in Greek and Syro-Arabic apocrypha from the Christian realm and the Qur'ān.

---

<sup>3</sup> For a helpful collection of some of the early evidence see Zimmermann, Ruben, in collaboration with Detlev Dormeyer and Susanne Luther, *Die Wunder Jesu*, Kompendium der frühchristlichen Wundererzählungen 1. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlags-Haus, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Accessible recent collections of Christian apocrypha in modern translations with scholarly introductions include Bovon, François; Pierre Geoltrain and Sever Voicu, et al., eds., *Les écrits apocryphes chrétiens*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade 442 and 516. Paris: Gallimard, 1997–2005, and Marksches, Christoph and Jens Schröter, in collaboration with Andreas Heiser, eds., *Antike christliche Apokryphen in deutscher Übersetzung. I. Band in zwei Teilbänden: Evangelien und Verwandtes. 7. Auflage der von Edgar Hennecke begründeten und von Wilhelm Schneemelcher fortgeführten Sammlung der neutestamentlichen Apokryphen*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012. Further volumes are to appear in due course. Until then, the reader may still consult with benefit the two volumes of the English translation of the sixth edition of the Hennecke-Schneemelcher. See Hennecke, Edgar and William Schneemelcher, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. by Robert McLachlan Wilson and Angus John Brockhurst Higgins. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963–1966.

## 2 Interpretations of Jesus as a Wonderworker in Early Christian Apocrypha

Questions that consider which qualities enabled Jesus to work miracles were already part of the concerns that motivated the interactions, even if one-sided, between patristic writers and authors of other religious literature in the earliest Christian centuries. In some circles, particularly among so-called Gnostic writers, one seems to have thought that Jesus was only able to work miracles once Christ had descended upon him. Irenaeus of Lyons for instance adduced information concerning Cerinthus' opinion that "it was only after his baptism that Christ, [descending] from the highest power, which is above everything, had come down upon him in the form of a dove, and from then on, he [Jesus] had proclaimed the unknown father and had worked miracles."<sup>5</sup> From other Gnostic teachers, Irenaeus had gathered that "only when Christ descended upon Jesus, [Jesus] began to work miracles, heal, proclaim the unknown Father and reveal himself openly as Son of the First Anthropos."<sup>6</sup> Implicit in this perspective is

---

5 Rousseau, Adelin and Louis Doutreleau, eds., *Irénée de Lyon. Contre les hérésies. Livre I. Tome II*, Sources chrétiennes 264. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1979, pp. 344–346: "Et Cerinthus autem quidam in Asia non a primo Deo factum esse mundum docuit, sed a Virtute quadam valde separata et distante ab ea Principalitate quae est super universa et ignorante eum qui est super omnia Deum. Iesum autem subiecit non ex Virgine natum, impossibile enim hoc ei visum est, fuisse autem eum Ioseph et Mariae filium similiter ut reliqui omnes homines, et plus potuisse iustitia et prudentia et sapientia ab omnibus. Et post baptismum descendisse in eum ab ea Principalitate quae est super omnia Christum figura columbae, et tunc adnuntiasset incognitum Patrum et virtutes perfecisse; in fine autem revolasse iterum Christum de Iesu, et Iesum passum esse et resurrexisse, Christum autem impassibilem perseverasse, existentem spiritalem." In later Christian theology, various ideas about Christ's birth expressed themselves in different, but not unrelated ways. Consider for instance, as late as the eighteenth century, the Unctionist/Sost Ledat ("three Births") Christology prominent in Ethiopia/Eritrea. According to this theological perspective, Christ was born three times: once from the Father, once in the incarnation from the Virgin Mary, and once through the Holy Spirit. For comments, see for instance Kaplan, Steven, "Dominance and Diversity: Kingship, Ethnicity, and Christianity in Orthodox Ethiopia." *Church History* 89, 1–3 (2009): pp. 291–305, here 302–303.

6 Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon*, pp. 380–382: "Multos ergo ex discipulis eius non cognovisse Christi descensionem in eum dicunt; descendente autem Christo in Iesum, tunc coepisse virtutes perficere et curare et adnuntiare incognitum Patrem et se manifeste Filium Primi Hominis confiteri. In quibus irascentes Principes et Patrem Iesu, operatos ad occidendum eum; et in eo cum adduceretur, ipsum Christum quidem cum Sophia abstitisse in incorruptibilem Aeonem dicunt, Iesum autem crucifixum." See also Bauer, Johannes B., "Wunder Jesu in den Apokryphen." In *Heilungen und Wunder: Theologische, historische und medizinische Zugänge*, ed. by

the view that Jesus' miracles expressed that his nature and identity were not limited to being human, but that divine power dwelled within him. Simply to label this understanding as Gnostic and dismiss it may not be justified, since it had too strong a basis in mainstream Christian thinking. Christian art moreover readily promoted and continued the idea that Jesus' baptism was the event that empowered him to be able to work miracles.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, for groups within the emerging early mainline Church, this perspective was defective since it did not extend Jesus' possession of divine identity to the whole of his life. When early Christian apocryphal literature ascribed also to Jesus' childhood and youth the ability to work miracles, it became possible to show that Jesus' divine powers were present in him throughout his life.

In the canonical New Testament, Jesus began to work miracles as an adult. The miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana was said to have been the beginning (ἀρχή) of his signs (John 2:11).<sup>8</sup> Early Christian writers regularly highlighted this event and emphasized its Christological importance<sup>9</sup> and this scene was depicted in Early Christian art as well.<sup>10</sup> As early as the 5<sup>th</sup>

---

Josef Pichler and Christoph Heil, in *Zusammenarbeit mit Thomas Klampfl*, pp. 203–214. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007, here p. 203.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance the depiction of Biblical scenes on an early-fifth-century ivory plaque, preserved at the Staatliche Museen, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, in Berlin-Dahlem, that shows a row of three scenes, from top to bottom, of the massacre of the children at Bethlehem, Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, and the miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana. For a discussion of the dating and a depiction of the ivory plaque, see Kitzinger, Ernst, *Byzantine Art in the Making: Main Lines of Stylistic Development in Mediterranean Art, 3<sup>rd</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> Century*. London: Faber and Faber, 1977, p. 47 and plate 84. Scholars have argued that this plaque was once part of a five-part diptych, which was intended to be used as a book cover. See for instance Schnitzler, Hermann, "Kästchen oder fünfteiliges Buchdeckelpaar?" in *Festschrift für Gert von der Osten*, ed. by Horst Keller, Rainer Budde, Brigitte Klesse, et al., pp. 24–32. Köln: DuMont 1970. For a full-page depiction of the Berlin ivory plaque, accompanied by a plaque now kept in Paris that may also have been part of this five-part diptych, see Schnitzler, "Kästchen", p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> For refocusing the discussion of the wedding feast at Cana as the beginning of Jesus' miracles, see more recently the contribution by Förster, Hans, "Die johanneischen Zeichen und Joh 2:11 als möglicher hermeneutischer Schlüssel." *Novum Testamentum* 56 (2014): pp. 1–23.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance the study of patristic exegesis of the wedding feast at Cana that is offered in Smitmans, Adolf, *Das Weinwunder von Kana. Die Auslegung von Jo 2,1–11 bei den Vätern und heute*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Exegese 6. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1966. Smitmans shows a greater concern with Christology, and a lesser interest in Mariology, in patristic exegesis of the passage, when compared to the interests of Roman Catholic exegetes of his own time.

<sup>10</sup> In addition to the above-mentioned five-part diptych, the scene is found for instance on a relief on the rear side of the archepiscopal ivory throne of Maximianus (545–553 CE) and on

century early Christian art may have integrated the scene within a cycle of depictions of scenes from Jesus' childhood.<sup>11</sup> The witness of non-Christian texts offers some evidence that the miracle of the wedding feast at Cana was indeed an important step in characterizing Jesus as a wonderworker. Early Islamic *qışaş al-anbiyā'* literature reworked this miracle and its context multiple times. The work of one or several Islamic redactor(s) may then have assembled material from different strands of traditions from within and outside of early Islam.<sup>12</sup> The Islamic variants on Jesus' presence at a wedding feast placed such a miracle within the context of the not-yet-twelve-year-old boy's sojourn in Egypt. This suggests that when stories of Jesus' miracles moved from one religious tradition to another, the overall framework, place, and role of the miracle within the context of Jesus' life story could be transformed. The more prominent and articulate emphasis on the reception of this particular miracle into the context of Jesus' childhood stories may serve as a pointer to the strong resonance and impact that the developing literature of apocryphal infancy gospels had at the exegetical intersections of Christian literature with the literatures of other religions. Firmly established elements of the stories of the Christian tradition became subject to change and transformation and entered the discussions at the interreligious crossroads in a new garb.

Different from the canonical record, early Christian apocrypha continued to increase the details of the image of Jesus displaying exceptional features already during his childhood. The present discussion examines one complex example of the *Traditionsgeschichte* of infancy miracles of the Christ-child, highlighting the special circumstances that accompanied Jesus' birth and the manifestations of wondrous powers of the newborn infant at the intersection of the Christian and Islamic traditions.

---

a 6<sup>th</sup>-century ivory fragment from Egypt (see MacLagan, Eric, "An Early Christian Ivory Relief of the Miracle of Cana." *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 38, 217 (1921): pp. 178–195.

11 Schnitzler, "Kästchen," pp. 29–30, argues convincingly that the Berlin ivory plaque depicting the three scenes of the massacre of the Bethlehemite children, Jesus' baptism, and the wedding feast at Cana were part of a cycle of infancy-of-Jesus depictions, complemented by and paired with a separate cycle of miracles of Jesus as part of the decorations of a set of book covers.

12 See for instance Brinner, William M., trans., '*Arā'is al-majālis fī qışaş al-anbiyā'* or "Lives of the Prophets" as Recounted by Abū Ishāq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Tha'labī, *Studies in Arabic Literature, Supplements to the Journal of Arabic Literature* 24. Leiden: Brill, 2002, pp. 650–651.

### 3 The Wondrous Infant Working Miracles

The mid-to late-second-century apocryphal infancy gospel known as the *Protoevangelium of James* tells the story of Mary's childhood, youth, and of her conception and giving birth to Jesus.<sup>13</sup> In this account, the scene of the birth of Jesus is shrouded in mystery. Two marvelous events frame comments on how Joseph searched for a midwife while Mary was resting in the cave before the delivery of her child. In a scene that is preceding Jesus' birth, but could be construed to be simultaneous to it, time seemed to stand still and the characters came to be caught in the midst of their actions.<sup>14</sup> A second vignette tells how Joseph and the midwife beheld "a bright cloud overshadowing the cave." When the cloud withdrew, their "eyes could not endure" the light that appeared there. Only when "little by little that light withdrew," "the young child appeared," being already sufficiently developed physically to go and take "the breast of his mother Mary" on his own accord.<sup>15</sup> In the *Protoevangelium of James*, these two scenes suggested the special nature of the newborn child. They supported the midwife's claim that "a virgin ha[d] brought forth."<sup>16</sup> Yet these descriptions also revealed to the reader that the true nature of the child was not limited to the human realm.

Ideas about the special nature of the newly born Jesus were more widespread. This is illustrated in the second-century *Ascension of Isaiah*, a composite pseudepigraphical text of Jewish origins, which nevertheless is to be regarded as a Christian work in the form it assumes in its final redaction.<sup>17</sup> Building on the interpretation of Isa 7:14 as a prophecy of Jesus' birth, the second half of the *Ascension of Isaiah*, known as the *Vision of Isaiah*, featured a report of the Savior's miraculous birth as a child that both Mary and Joseph witnessed. *Ascension of*

---

13 See Pelegrini, Silvia, "Das Protevangelium des Jakobus." in *Antike christliche Apokryphen in deutscher Übersetzung. I. Band in zwei Teilbänden: Evangelien und Verwandtes. 7. Auflage der von Edgar Hennecke begründeten und von Wilhelm Schneemelcher fortgeführten Sammlung der neutestamentlichen Apokryphen*, ed. by Christoph Marksches and Jens Schröter, in collaboration with Andreas Heiser, I.2, pp. 903–929. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012, here p. 907

14 De Strycker, Émile, ed., *La forme la plus ancienne du Protévangile de Jacques. Recherches sur le Papyrus Bodmer 5 avec une édition critique du texte grec et une traduction annotée*, Subsidia Hagiographica 33. Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1961, pp. 148–151.

15 De Strycker, *La forme*, pp. 154–157.

16 Ibid., pp. 158–159.

17 For the text of *Ascension of Isaiah*, together with extensive commentary, see Bettolo, Paolo; Alda Giambelluca Kossova and Claudio Leonardi et al., eds., *Ascensio Isaiae: Textus*, Corpus Christianorum, Series Apocryphorum 7. Turnhout: Brepols, 1995; and Norelli, Enrico, *Ascensio Isaiae: Commentarius*, Corpus Christianorum Series Apocryphorum 8. Turnhout: Brepols, 1995.



*Isaiah* 11.7–11 tells of how one day, while Mary was pregnant, she “straightaway looked with her eyes and saw a small babe, and she was astonished.”<sup>18</sup> Yet any signs of pregnancy on her body had disappeared immediately after parturition. Likewise, Joseph experienced that “his eyes were opened and he saw the infant.”<sup>19</sup> The description of the appearance of the child in the *Protoevangelium of James* at the point when the bright light had subsided somewhat from the cave may have built on earlier traditions preserved in the *Ascension of Isaiah*. Or, this latter text may reflect revisions of the Christian redactor that had their origins in the *Protoevangelium of James*.<sup>20</sup> The birth of Jesus occurring without any labor pains and the child manifesting himself prominently through visual experiences serve as evidence that in those layers of the Christian society, in which apocryphal and pseudepigraphical texts circulated, ideas originated and found propagation that readily ascribed to Jesus’ birth wondrous circumstances that collaborated and revealed the child’s exceptional nature, a nature not limited to the restrictions of the physical human body.

Within the apocryphal Christian record, ideas about the special nature of the newborn child quickly translated into descriptions of manifestations of the wondrous powers of that child and his body. In the *Protoevangelium of James*, Salome did not intend to accept the virgin birth upon its mere proclamation.<sup>21</sup> When she physically examined Mary to test her virginity, Salome’s hand withered and was said to have felt as if consumed by fire.<sup>22</sup> Yet when an angel instructed Salome to stretch out her hand and lift the baby up, Salome confessed the child to be the king of Israel, and she was healed.<sup>23</sup> In the literary construction of the scene of Salome’s reaction, her healing was interpreted as resulting from the intertwining of her physical contact with the baby and her recognition or confession of faith in the child as Lord. Yet it was understood that had she not come into direct contact with the newborn Jesus’ body, she would not have received healing. Miracles worked through immediate contact with Jesus, even while he was still a newborn

---

<sup>18</sup> Bettolo et al., *Ascensio Isaiae*, pp. 120–121.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Norelli, *Ascensio Isaiae*, pp. 65–66, argues that *Ascension of Isaiah* 6–11 is a product of the end of the first century and *Ascension of Isaiah* 1–5 likely had its origins in the first half of the second century. In his commentary on the passage that is relevant here, Norelli highlights the connections between the Gospel of Matthew and *Ascension of Isaiah*, and emphasizes the difference between *Ascension of Isaiah* and the *Protoevangelium of James*.

<sup>21</sup> De Strycker, *La forme*, pp. 156–159.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 158–161.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 162–167.