

THE TWO SONS OF ADAM: RABBINIC RESONANCES AND SCRIPTURAL VIRTUOSITY IN SŪRAT AL-MĀ’IDAH*

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Abstract

The qur’ānic Cain and Abel narrative in Q Mā’idah 5, which features a well-known ethical maxim about the value of human life, exhibits a conspicuous connection to a Jewish precursor. As has been observed since the time of Abraham Geiger, the coincidence of the narrative and the maxim in Mishnah tractate Sanhedrin and its parallels in classical rabbinic literature appears to demonstrate the Qur’ān’s direct dependence on a Jewish source. In this article, I will pursue a more nuanced approach to the relationship between Sūrat al-Mā’idah and rabbinic tradition. On the one hand, I will propose a new interpretation of the famous motif of the raven that Cain imitated in burying his brother, which has persistently—but incorrectly—been understood to be drawn from a midrashic precursor. On the other, I will show that Sūrat al-Mā’idah does not intersect with tractate Sanhedrin solely at the point of this individual tradition; rather, investigation of the larger context of both the qur’ānic passage and the apparent source of the Jewish maxim in the Mishnah indicates that the two are linked through a much larger web of intertwined textual allusions. This coincidence possibly has implications for our understanding of the circumstances of the *sūrah*’s revelation as well as of the Jewish presence in the Medinan milieu, especially on the basis of the Qur’ān’s legitimization of violence in response to the alleged Jewish crime of spreading corruption in the land (*fasād fī ’l-ard*).

Over the last decade, research into the literary and religious background to the Qur’ān has shifted strongly towards a focus on Eastern Christian scriptural and parascriptural traditions, reviving the pioneering work on Syriac comparanda by scholars such as Tor Andræ and Alphonse Mingana over a century ago.¹ This trend stands in sharp contrast to the emphasis on Jewish

* I presented early discussions of some of the material in this article in two conference papers, one at the panel “Prophets and Prophethood between Bible and Quran”

precursors and parallels that formerly prevailed among those inclined to investigate the late antique sources of the Qur’ān, an approach that dominated the field from the time of Abraham Geiger’s germinal work in the 1830s until the emergence of major debates over method in the 1970s and 1980s.² As Devin Stewart has noted regarding what we might call the “Syriac turn” in the field, although the arguments of those whom he dubs the “New Biblicalists” tend to be subtler and more refined than those of their predecessors who focused on Jewish comparanda, those arguments are functionally quite similar to those of older scholarship rather than representing a wholly new approach.³ Nevertheless, a conspicuous difference marking contemporary arguments is that most scholars working today strive to avoid the wild reductionism of the past, especially what I have elsewhere termed the “influence paradigm” that was once pervasive in work on the Qur’ān and Islamic origins.⁴

Judging by current trends in scholarship, it might seem somewhat retrograde to attempt to revisit Geiger’s claim that the qur’ānic corpus was strongly informed by dialogue with Jewish informants, or predominantly shaped in a Jewish matrix. However, despite the enormous contribution that scholars working on Syriac Christian parallels to the Qur’ān have made to the field in recent years, the basic phenomenon Geiger observed in the Qur’ān cannot be denied. We certainly cannot endorse a return to Geiger’s methodology, in which Muhammad’s Jewish companions and informants are presented as the main vectors of “influence” upon him; nor should we revert to a perspective that reduces the Qur’ān’s engagement with older

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1. For concise overviews of the issues, see Emran Elbadawi [sic], “The Impact of Aramaic (Especially Syriac) on the Qur’ān,” *RC* 8 (2014): 220–228 and Devin Stewart, “Reflections on the State of the Art in Western Qur’ānic Studies,” in Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook (eds.), *Islam and Its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur’ān* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 4–68, 20–28.

2. For Geiger’s understanding of the origins of the Qur’ān and Muhammad’s attitude towards the Jews and the scriptural knowledge he received from them, see *Judaism and Islám: A Prize Essay*, trans. F. M. Young (Madras: M.D.C.S.P.C.K. Press, 1898), 4–17.

3. Stewart, “Reflections on the State of the Art,” 23.

4. See my “The Hebrew Bible and the Quran: The Problem of the Jewish ‘Influence’ on Islam,” *RC* 1 (2007): 643–659.

scriptural and parascriptural tradition to a dynamic of passive reception and half-garbled regurgitation. But it is abundantly clear that at least some passages of the Qur’ān demonstrate a close relationship with specific precursors drawn from rabbinic literature, and that relationship may reasonably be construed as reflecting the direct impact of rabbinic literary material upon the qur’ānic milieu.

As has long been noted, qur’ānic discourse appears to have been shaped to a significant degree by direct engagement with Jewish interlocutors; although the Qur’ān’s engagement with Christians and Christianity is significant as well, qur’ānic material seemingly oriented towards Jews and Judaism is much more prominent in the corpus.⁵ Barring some unforeseen discovery of seismic importance for our understanding of the origins of the Qur’ān, uncovering the exact historical processes of transmission and reception that shaped the corpus and led to the genesis of the Islamic community in late antique Arabia will probably remain beyond our reach. However, acknowledging the discernible relationships between textual corpora does not mean that we must blithely indulge the problematic proposition of Geiger and others among the scholarly *salaf* of the Euro-American academic tradition: that rabbinic scholars in Medina simply schooled Muḥammad, who unknowingly wrote down (or struggled to memorize, but often misremembered) what he heard in adapting Jewish teachings for his pagan Arab audience in order to convince them of his prophetic bona fides.

In what follows here, I will present a case study that has perennially attracted much scholarly attention, the qur’ānic account of Cain and Abel, and suggest a different approach to both the interpretation of the tradition and the Qur’ān’s broader revelatory context, particularly as it pertains to the question of Jewish “influence” on formative Islam.⁶ As has often been acknowledged, the Qur’ān here exhibits a particularly conspicuous connection to a Jewish precursor, insofar as the passage in which the Cain and Abel narrative is found also contains what seems at first glance to be a direct quotation of rabbinic tradition. This is a famous maxim about the value of human life, still frequently quoted today, that is preserved in the

5. This is to say nothing of those passages in the Qur’ān that appear to address both groups together under the rubric of *ahl al-kitāb*, and possibly *banū isrā’il* as well. For the permutations of these overlapping signifiers and their complex associations, see Michael E. Pregill, “The People of Scripture (*Ahl al-Kitāb*),” in George Archer, Maria M. Dakake, and Daniel A. Madigan (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to the Qur’ān* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 121–134.

6. I will refer to the brothers by their biblical names throughout this article, although—like their mother Eve—they are actually anonymous in the Qur’ān.

Mishnah as well as both Talmuds. In contrast to older approaches, I will argue that the Qur’ān does not intersect with rabbinic tradition here solely at the point of this individual tradition. Rather, investigation of the larger context of both the qur’ānic passage in Sūrat al-Mā’idah and the apparent source of the Jewish maxim in the mishnaic tractate Sanhedrin indicates that the two passages are linked through a much larger web of interwoven textual allusions.

Overall, the passage in Sūrat al-Mā’idah in which the Cain and Abel story appears stands in close proximity to a textual precursor that is recognizably rabbinic in origin. It portrays the fratricidal episode from Genesis, read in a very specific way, with a readily identifiable parallel in a major rabbinic text; it then proceeds to adumbrate an ethical maxim, famously paralleled in the same part of that rabbinic text; and finally, it explicitly signals its relationship with the rabbinic precursor in noting a precedent for the maxim in God’s previous revelation to the Jews—implying that God is, essentially, just repeating Himself here in the Qur’ān in rehearsing the rule for a new audience.

Scholars have of late tended to see the biblical-parabiblical substrate in qur’ānic discourse as originating through processes of oral diffusion and strategic adaptation—an assimilation and appropriation of shared material circulating in a common cultural milieu, rather than a relationship of “dependence,” “borrowing,” or the like. However, in the case at hand, a direct connection between the texts seems like the most plausible explanation for their resemblances. It is equally noteworthy that this qur’ānic passage also appears to contain exegetical flourishes of a clear Christian ambience as well; this is more in keeping with those contemporary approaches to the Qur’ān’s cultural horizon that favor Syriac precursors, and must be taken into account in considering both the compositional background and intended rhetorical and ideological function of the qur’ānic passage. Finally—a point I will revisit in the conclusion—it is plausible that this appropriation and restructuring should be located in the historical context of the early community’s conflict with the Jews of Medina.

Understanding the full reasoning behind Sūrat al-Mā’idah’s evocation of a mishnaic intertext—both the Cain and Abel story and the maxim it is cited to explain—demands that we appreciate the very particular way the *sūrah* addresses questions of the Qur’ān’s own legitimacy, the primacy of the prophetic community it is bringing into being, and the deficiencies of the rival communities that it seeks to subordinate, delegitimize, and either assimilate or demolish. What sets Sūrat al-Mā’idah apart in the qur’ānic corpus is its particular emphasis on themes of violence and bloodshed in relation

to questions of authority, specifically the way it uses the question of the proper, authorized use of punitive violence to draw distinctions between a set of intertwined binaries: the old and the new revelations; legitimate and illegitimate types of bloodshed, particularly those sanctioned or mandated by God and those that are counter to His will; and the community of rightly-guided believers who follow the *Qur’ān* and the older communities who have misinterpreted their revelations, concealed what they know to be their true significance, and broken their pledges to God. Understanding how *qur’ānic* arguments were constructed out of not only the narrative traditions but the larger scriptural logics of rival communities to address such situations makes a substantial contribution to our conception of the *Qur’ān*’s originality, reflected in its deft, strategic appropriation and recasting of its scriptural and parascriptural predecessors.

“I Could Not Even Be Like This Raven ...”: Jewish and Christian Textual Artifacts in the *Qur’ān*

Scholars have repeatedly observed the conspicuous points of connection between the *Qur’ān*’s depiction of the fatal encounter between the brothers referred to only as “the two sons of Adam” (Q 5:27) and Jewish tradition.⁷ These points of connection have—in keeping with the long-prevalent “influence paradigm” inspired by Geiger—usually been interpreted as signaling the *Qur’ān*’s clear relationship of dependence on midrashic traditions and teachings. As we shall see, this evaluation is only partially correct, and demands much more nuance and precision than have usually been offered in such appraisals.

The core of the *qur’ānic* story appears in Q 5:27–31:

²⁷ Recount to them truthfully the story of the two sons of Adam. When they brought offerings, that of one of them was accepted, but that of the other was

7. See, e.g., Susannah Heschel’s trenchant comments on the passage and the impression it made on Geiger and his contemporaries at the beginning of her “The Philological Uncanny: Nineteenth-Century Jewish Readings of the Qur’ān,” *JQS* 20.3 (2018): 191–211. Classic older treatments of the *Qur’ān*’s presentation of the story are found in Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islām*, 80–81; William St. Clair Tisdall, *The Original Sources of the Qur’ān* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and New York: E. S. Gorham, 1905), 62–66; and Heinrich Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Quran* (Gräfenhainichen: C. Schultze & Co., 1931, actually published 1937–1939), 84–88. Heribert Busse’s 2001 treatment of the episode is not unusual for its focus on later Muslim interpretation of the story rather than that of the *Qur’ān* itself (“Cain and Abel,” *EQ*, s.v., 2001).

not. The latter said: “Oh, I’m going to kill you!” The other replied: “God only accepts offerings from those who truly fear Him.²⁸ If you raise your hand against me to kill me, I won’t raise my hand against you to kill you. It’s only God, the Lord of the Worlds, that I fear!²⁹ I would rather you bear responsibility for my sins as well as your own, so that you join the inhabitants of the Fire; that is the recompense of wrongdoers.”

³⁰ Despite this, the first brother was still driven to kill the other, and he did so, and thus joined the ranks of the losers.³¹ Then God sent a raven to scratch in the ground, to show him how he should cover up the shameful corpse of his brother. He said: “Woe to me! Could I not even be like this raven, to cover up the shameful corpse of my brother?” And he became one of those who regret.⁸

Arguably, as some translators and commentators have recognized, this account is thematically linked to the verses that follow, and so Q 5:27–34 should be read as a single pericope. Conversely, reading the account of the two brothers in isolation from what follows obscures the story’s real significance. We will return to this point momentarily.

There have been a number of important contributions to our understanding of aspects of *Sūrat al-Mā’idah* in recent years. Above all, we must take into account Michel Cuypers’s magisterial 2007 study *Le Festin* (published in English in 2009 as *The Banquet*), a thorough structural analysis of the chapter as a whole. The work represents the culmination of Cuypers’s extensive research into qur’ānic *sūrahs* as compositional unities over a number of decades, and he makes numerous significant remarks about the Cain and Abel pericope and its place in the chapter.⁹ Also noteworthy is a 2011 article by Gabriel Said Reynolds on the culminating episode of the *sūrah*, the descent of the eponymous *mā’idah* (commonly translated as “table,” but actually “feast”) called down from on high by Jesus for his apostles (vv. 112–115). Many have been content to interpret this scene as an overly literal distortion of the gospel depiction of the Last Supper. In contrast, Reynolds points to the *sūrah*’s engagement of a *topos* from the Hebrew Bible that seems to have been filtered through a Christian intermediary in Ethiopic, but reoriented in order to communicate an anti-Christian message—essentially appropriating and subverting an older Christian appropriation and subversion of Jewish tradition.¹⁰ This twinned dynamic of appropriation and

8. All translations from primary sources are the author’s unless otherwise noted.

9. Michel Cuypers, *The Banquet: A Reading of the Fifth Sura of the Qur’ān* (Miami: Convivium Press, 2009). The main discussion of the Cain and Abel pericope appears on 191–219.

10. Gabriel Said Reynolds, “On the Qur’ān’s *Mā’ida* Passage and the Wanderings of

subversion is especially relevant for understanding how the *sūrah* draws upon older sources on the Cain and Abel story, but ultimately reorients the narrative in the service of a new message.

The aforementioned publications reflect two possible approaches to material in *Sūrat al-Mā’idah*, mirroring two dominant approaches to the qur’ānic corpus in general. On the one hand, we have a very thorough, sophisticated literature of relatively recent vintage on the compositional structure of the *sūrah* as a whole, epitomized by the monograph of Cuypers.¹¹ On the other hand, we have a more traditional scholarly literature that has focused on the origins and background of the *sūrah*’s presentations and reinterpretations of well-known biblical episodes and topoi, particularly in the light of its messaging concerning Jews and Christians; the Reynolds piece on the eponymous table (or feast) may be considered an especially productive contribution to this branch of the scholarly literature. Typically, structuralist approaches to qur’ānic *sūrahs* tend very strongly to focus on the text as we have it, avoiding the question of sources in favor of more holistic methods of reading and literary analysis. Conversely, scholars more concerned with precursors and parallels—emphasizing specific traditions as the end-result of particular trajectories of narrative and exegetical development—have usually tended to speculate about the background of an individual story without much regard for the larger context of the *sūrah* in which it is embedded, or the purpose that story might serve in the *sūrah*’s overarching literary design.

However, the Cain and Abel pericope demonstrates that structural-literary analysis and source criticism can and should go hand-in-hand. Investigation of the Qur’ān’s methods of engagement with its precursors can be considerably enriched through understanding the internal literary context in which such traditions are embedded. In turn, the attempt to investigate the larger literary design of *sūrahs* can be enriched by understanding how and why the Qur’ān seems to repurpose older traditions. In this connection, it is worth noting that the intertextual resonances of the treatment of Cain and Abel in the chapter represent one of the very few examples in

the Israelites,” in Carlos A. Segovia and Basil Lourié (eds.), *The Coming of the Comforter: When, Where, and to Whom? Studies on the Rise of Islam in Memory of John Wansbrough* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2011), 91–108.

11. See also Neal Robinson, “Hands Outstretched: Towards a Re-reading of *Sūrat al-Mā’ida*,” *JQS* 3.1 (2001): 1–19, an important forerunner to the structuralist treatment of Cuypers.

Cuypers's work where he actually ventures to discuss the Qur'ān's use of older source material.¹²

At the outset, we must address one of the most famous, and yet persistently misunderstood, aspects of the story, one that has continually invited speculation concerning the purported Jewish background to the Qur'ān. This is the detail of the raven sent by God "to scratch in the ground, to show [Cain] how he should cover up the shameful corpse of his brother" (v. 31). Traditions that mention a raven—or, for that matter, a *pair* of ravens, or some other bird entirely—in connection with the Cain and Abel episode are found in two major Jewish sources that are roughly contemporary with the Qur'ān, *Midrash Tanhuma* and *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eli'ezer*.

The passage from chapter 21 of *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eli'ezer* is likely the better-known Jewish version of this story:

Adam and his helpmate were sitting and weeping and sorrowing (*mit'abbelim*) over Abel, and they did not know what to do with his body, for they did not know what burial is. Then they saw a raven, one of its fellow ravens dead by its side. It took its fellow and dug in the earth, then buried the body in the ground before their eyes.¹³

Notably, here the instruction is offered to Adam and Eve, who proceed to follow suit by burying Abel. Moreover, the second raven is here already dead, with the cause of its demise left unknown.

In contrast, the parallel from the *Tanhuma* is more explicit, and somewhat more disturbing. In one respect it is closer to the qur'ānic account, in that the episode is more overtly fratricidal; however, oddly, here the birds involved are no longer identified as corvids.

When Cain slew Abel, his body remained splayed out there on the ground, for Cain did not know what to do with him. Then the Holy One, blessed be He, chose a pair of clean birds and induced one to kill the other. Then it dug in the earth with its talons and buried the body. From this, Cain learned how he should bury Abel.

12. Cuypers focuses on Matt 23:33–38, Jesus's famous attack on the Pharisees as a "brood of vipers" who shed the blood of their prophets. He also notes that structural analysis can assist in the recognition and understanding of intertextual allusions (*The Banquet*, 218–219), but sees the repurposing of Jewish intertexts as ultimately less relevant here than the *sūrah*'s extended engagement with Christianity.

13. *Pirke de-Rabbi Elieser*, ed. and trans. Dagmar Börner-Klein (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004), 233. The word for "mourning," *mit'abbel*, is suggestive of "Abel" (*hevel*) and perhaps implies that the word was coined in reference to him—since, of course, Abel's was the first death, and Adam and Eve the first bereaved.

The passage concludes by noting that on account of this event, birds killed for food merit having their spilled blood covered over with earth—a token of respect not afforded to unclean animals.¹⁴ Due to the impulse to connect this episode etiologically to the custom of *kissûy ha-dam* or “covering blood,” the author of this tradition has specifically designated the birds as pure (*tahôr*); this passage from the *Tanhuma* thus effaces the connection to ravens entirely, since corvids are halakhically unfit either for consumption or sacrifice.¹⁵

Geiger cites the *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eli‘ezer* account as the primary influence on the qur’ānic narrative. However, beginning in the first half of the twentieth century, a number of scholars recognized that this account actually dates to the early Islamic period.¹⁶ At this point in the history of scholarship on the narrative, it became fashionable to assert that the *Tanhuma* is the source of the account of the qur’ānic raven instead, a claim that persisted in the literature for a number of decades.¹⁷

Given that the two midrashic versions of the raven story appear in sources that were redacted after the rise of Islam, one might justifiably be skeptical of claims that these traditions furnish the influences upon which the qur’ānic version draws.¹⁸ Even more stupendously anachronistic arguments

14. *Midrash Tanhuma* (Vilna, 1831; repr. Jerusalem: Levin-Epstein, 1964), 10. The details surrounding the covering of the blood of a slain animal are somewhat complex, but Lev 17:13 unambiguously legislates the practice for a beast of the field or a wild bird slain for food.

15. Corvids are established as impure, presumably because they are predatory and carnivorous, in Lev 11:15.

16. Thus Victor Aptowitzer, *Kain und Abel in der Aggada: Der Apokryphen, der Hellenistischen, Christlichen und Mohammedanischen Literatur* (Vienna and Leipzig: Löwit, 1922), 54.

17. This view was popularized by the treatment in the widely cited work of David Sidersky, *Les origines des légendes musulmanes dans le Coran et dans les vies des prophètes* (Paris: Geuthner, 1933), 18; it has recently been revived in the treatment of the episode in Meir Bar-Asher, “Les Judaïsme et le Coran,” in Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and Guillaume Dye (eds.), *Le Coran des Historiens* (3 vols.; Paris: Cerf, 2019), 1.293–329, 1.309–310. Bar-Asher’s repetition of Sidersky’s claim is unsurprising given the conservatism of his approach to the subject.

18. Scholars now commonly recognize that *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eli‘ezer* was redacted after the rise of Islam and cannot be trusted as a source of securely pre-Islamic narrative material. Although the traditional printed version of the *Tanhuma* undoubtedly preserves some unique older material, this text was also redacted well after the rise of Islam, and like *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eli‘ezer*, arguably much of its contents bears the stamp of later aggadic developments in direct or indirect response to Muslim tradition. The episode with Cain and the birds is lacking from the so-called Buber

appear in the scholarly literature as well. Thus, in a short notice published in 1981, Hans Peter Rüger acknowledges that the *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eli'ezer* tradition is only peripherally related to the *Sūrat al-Mā'idah* story, but then argues that both the *Qur'ān* and *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eli'ezer* are here indebted to an ancient Jewish tradition that is no longer extant except as preserved in a medieval witness. Without any obvious justification, he identifies the interpretation of the Cain and Abel episode preserved in the Bible commentary of Jacob ben Asher (known as the *Ba'al ha-Turim*, d. 1343) as the ultimate source of the versions of both *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eli'ezer* and the *Qur'ān*. This hypothesis was refuted some years later by Christfried Böttrich.¹⁹

In my recent book on the *qur'ānic* Golden Calf episode—another example of a narrative in the *Qur'ān* purportedly derived from a Jewish precursor—I have demonstrated that similar claims of dependence have long been predicated on traditions drawn from these works, especially *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eli'ezer*. However, the relevant narratives preserved in these works likely do not precede the *Qur'ān*, but rather are modeled on the interpretations of the *qur'ānic* episode found in early Muslim commentary or *tafsīr*.²⁰ In the case at hand, one may likewise justifiably be suspicious of claims that the *qur'ānic* story is based upon these aggadic accounts, let alone a lost midrashic tradition that is now only extant in a demonstrably late source.²¹

Admittedly, the *Qur'ān* relates the Cain and Abel story in characteristically vague fashion, with much detail seemingly elided; this makes it hard to speak with total confidence about what it includes and what it omits from its possible precursors. However, one cannot help but notice that the

recension of the *Tanhuma*, which has often been understood as the older version of the work.

19. H. P. Rüger, "Das Begräbnis Abels: Zur Vorlage von Sure 5,31," *Biblische Notizen* 14 (1981): 37–45, 44. Böttrich follows Sidersky in seeing the *Tanhuma* narrative as the ultimate source of the *qur'ānic* raven story ("Die Vögel des Himmels haben ihn begraben": *Überlieferungen zu Abels Bestattung und zur Ätiologie des Grabs* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995], 34–40; cf. 46–50 for his criticism of Rüger's preference for the Jacob ben Asher tradition).

20. See Michael E. Pregill, *The Golden Calf between Bible and Qur'an: Scripture, Polemic, and Exegesis from Late Antiquity to Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 303–317.

21. On the propensity for some scholars to point to lost midrashic traditions as the sources of the *Qur'ān*, see *ibid.*, 297–303; this approach seems to have been particularly fashionable in the early to mid-twentieth century among scholars who recognized the anachronism of many of Geiger's arguments, but who wished to maintain the thesis of a pervasive Jewish influence on the *Qur'ān*. Rüger's argument appears to be a late example of this tendency.

fundamental point of the story in Sūrah 5 is that Cain was ignorant of how to bury his brother and had to be taught how to do so through God's providential sending of the raven, who scratched at the ground and so indicated through analogy how Cain should dispose of the body of his brother. This depiction is congruous with a motif that is ubiquitous in the Qur'ān: the signs of nature providentially demonstrate essential moral and theological truths (and, apparently, practical lessons for upright behavior) to the perceptive individual who is sensitive to them. This reading of the basic thematic point of the story is underscored by an interesting linguistic element of the Arabic text: v. 31 punningly states that God sends (*ba'atha*) the bird so it can scratch (*yab'hathu*) in the ground and teach Cain what to do.

In contrast, the Jewish parallels noted above seem essentially like secondary elaborations on the basic scenario presented in the Qur'ān. In the qur'ānic account, the bird merely scratches in the dirt, from which Cain is to learn the proper action through inference. Here the solitary bird is not burying anything, and there is certainly no fratricide involved on the part of the animal. The Pirqe de-Rabbi Eli'ezer version appears to reflect the first stage of development of the basic narrative: here it is Adam and Eve who learn the raven's lesson; presumably the identity of the protagonists has been shifted in order to avoid valorizing the murderous, cursed son by depicting his remorse and his engaging in the virtuous act of burial. More importantly, a second, deceased bird has been introduced, making the lesson Adam and Eve were to learn from the corvid more transparent. In the Tanhuma version, even more changes have been introduced into the basic narrative template: the first bird has now explicitly been made a fratricide, like Cain himself, with God not only teaching him the custom of burial by means of the bird's actions but actually driving the message home for Cain by having its act of killing mirror Cain's exactly. Further, as noted above, the birds in this account are no longer ravens at all; their species is unknown, but they are rendered clean birds rather than corvids so that the story can serve as a prooftext for a halakhic practice.

Overall, it is rather unlikely that the more straightforward narrative of the Qur'ān represents a simplification of either of these midrashic accounts, with two birds reduced to one, or the act of burial (and killing, in the case of the Tanhuma) becoming a mere scratching in the ground. This is especially the case given that the qur'ānic version is cogent on its own terms, much more so than we would expect to be the case if the narrative elements presented here had been drawn out of an originally much more complex narrative and streamlined. Rather, it is more plausible that the midrashic versions both represent reinterpretations of the more basic script provid-

ed in the qur'ānic story.²² However, the important differences between the Jewish and qur'ānic accounts—and the way in which the former seem to build on the foundation of the latter and not vice versa—have usually been overlooked in scholarship.

More precisely, these midrashic accounts may actually be Hebraizations or Judaizations of the narrative as known from Islamic traditions on the episode that themselves elaborate upon the qur'ānic account. In the Muslim commentary tradition, we see a number of imaginative developments of the qur'ānic story; we may thus readily conclude that these, rather than the *Qur'ān* itself, are the sources of the late midrashic parallels in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eli'ezer* and *Midrash Tanhuma*. This is especially likely because we find some of the same narrative developments in commentaries on the qur'ānic account that we observe in the midrashic versions. In particular, in traditions preserved in works of qur'ānic exegesis (*tafsīr*) and collections of “tales of the prophets” (*qiṣas al-anbiyā'*), the single raven often becomes a pair, with one becoming a fratricide just like Cain.²³ As a representative example, we might consider the account in the famous *tafsīr* of al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286):

“Then God sent a raven to scratch in the ground, to show him how he should cover up the shameful corpse of his brother” (Q 5:31). It is related that when [Cain] killed [his brother], he was perplexed about the situation and didn’t know what to do with him, given that this was the first death in human history. So God sent a pair of ravens, and they fought, and one of them killed the other. Then it commenced digging with its beak and talons, and cast the body of the other into the hole it had dug.²⁴

22. Witztum emphasizes that the raven’s activity in the qur'ānic story is limited to digging rather than burial per se, and so similarly concludes that the midrashic accounts typically adduced as the precursors to that version are most likely dependent upon it. See Joseph Witztum, “The Syriac Milieu of the Quran: The Recasting of Biblical Narratives” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2011), 119–121.

23. For a comprehensive treatment of the understanding of the episode in Islamic tradition, see the classic work of Waltraud Bork-Qaysieh, *Die Geschichte von Kain und Abel (Hābil wa-Qābil) in der sunnitsch-islamischen Überlieferung* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1993). Bork-Qaysieh’s study is unfortunately limited to Sunnī tradition, but ranges from the classical to the modern period, and encompasses material from a stunningly wide variety of sources. See also the more recent discussion in Robert C. Gregg, *Shared Stories, Rival Tellings: Early Encounters of Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 75–108, a subtle and sensitive consideration of Muslim approaches to the story compared with those found in Jewish and Christian tradition.

24. Nāṣir al-Dīn Abū 'l-Khayr 'Abd Allāh b. 'Umar al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl al-*

The sight of the raven's act with its companion's body thus triggers Cain's conscience and he undertakes to do likewise with Abel's body.

In approaches to the intersections of midrash and *tafsīr* on this story in the scholarly literature, a conspicuous anachronism once again prevails. Thus, Norman Stillman claims that the qur'ānic version of the story is an "epitome" of that found in the *Tanhuma*, while the version found in the *tafsīr* of *Baydāwī* accurately preserves the original aggadic tradition, albeit in Arabic translation.²⁵ However, it is more likely that the versions of both *Baydāwī* and the *Tanhuma* echo an older Muslim precursor that elaborates on the qur'ānic episode rather than hearkening back to some pre-Islamic Jewish precursor that originally informed *Sūrat al-Mā'idah*.

Overall, the fission of one raven at the scene into two, as well as the depiction of the first bird killing its counterpart just as Cain had, appears to be a post-qur'ānic narrative development, and the traditions from *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eli'ezer* and the *Tanhuma* most likely drew upon Muslim exegesis of the *Qur'ān* that featured this development. Suffice to say, these Jewish traditions should not be considered potential sources of the qur'ānic story. If we disqualify these late aggadic traditions as the sources of the qur'ānic narrative, however, no single textual precursor presents itself as a wholly credible alternative. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, then, we might conclude that the inclusion of the raven in the retelling of the Cain and Abel story here in *Sūrat al-Mā'idah* is original to the *Qur'ān*.

But why a raven specifically? We might conjecture that the qur'ānic author is playing on certain time-honored associations of the raven in order to endow the story with subtle symbolic resonances. The raven seems to have a bad reputation in the folklore of many cultures, probably based upon its

ma'rūf bi-Tafsīr al-Baydāwī (5 vols.; Beirut: Dār Ihyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, [n.d.]), 2.124, *ad* 5:31. As Witztum notes, occasionally Muslim commentators did recognize the simple, unadorned sense of the qur'ānic reference to the single raven scratching in the ground; see "The Syriac Milieu of the Quran," 119–121, citing the common-sense readings of Abū Muslim al-Isfahānī (d. 322/934) and al-Qurtubī (d. 671/1273), in contrast to the "fanciful" readings of other exegetes, far more prevalent in *tafsīr* and related genres.

25. Norman Stillman, "The Story of Cain and Abel in the *Qur'an* and the Muslim Commentators: Some Observations," *JSS* 19 (1974): 231–239, 236–237. For another demonstration of the complex relationship between *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eli'ezer*, the *Tanhuma*, and Muslim tradition, see Michael E. Pregill, "Some Reflections on Borrowing, Influence, and the Entwining of Jewish and Islamic Traditions; or, What an Image of a Calf Might Do," in Majid Daneshgar and Walid A. Saleh (eds.), *Islamic Studies Today: Essays in Honor of Andrew Rippin* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 164–197, 184–191.

readily observable behavior of predation on smaller birds, especially hatchlings in the nest, as well as its penchant of scavenging in garbage and especially picking at carrion and corpses. In many ancient mythologies, ravens are symbols of desolation and isolation, and even a harbinger of death; as is widely known, in English a congregation of crows, another member of the genus *corvus*, is termed a “murder.” In European myth and folklore, ravens may be associated with intelligence and wisdom, as with the famous ravens Huginn and Muninn who attend the Norse god Odin/Wotan, but they may also carry more sinister associations, for example, as the symbol of the Celtic war goddess Morrigan/Mór-Ríoghain. Closer to the cultural ambit of the Qur’ān, the famed British antiquarian Reginald Campbell Thompson noted a number of traditions associating ravens with demonic forces in his classic *The Demons and Evil Spirits of Babylonia*, including some drawn from Arab and Syriac Christian lore, although admittedly (as is common in such encyclopedic treatments of the nineteenth century) the provenance and chronology of Thompson’s material is generally vague and uncertain.²⁶

However, in the qur’ānic story the raven is not a diabolical presence; there is no hint of a demonic aspect to it here. Rather, the connection to the story of Cain and Abel plays upon an association with desolation and death that is readily inferred as an aspect of the bird’s identity in Arab culture, though again it is difficult to establish this for the pre-Islamic period. In Arabic, *ghurāb* seems to be a loanword from Latin *corvus*, but Arab lexicographers derived the term from the root *gh-r-b*, which has a basic meaning of “estrangement”; this perhaps contributed to the bird becoming a symbol of desolation and alienation (a role played by owls in later Persian art and literature).²⁷ It is not difficult to see how these themes linked the bird to Cain, though we have no evidence that this thematic connection is authentically pre-Islamic; if it were, then we might argue that the association of the raven with Cain would have seemed natural to the Qur’ān’s audience.²⁸

26. R. Campbell Thompson, *The Demons and Evil Spirits of Babylonia*, vol. 1: *Evil Spirits* (London: Luzac, 1903), XLI, L–LI. It seems that demons taking the form of ravens is something of a trope in some Syriac sources, though this appears somewhat remote from our concerns here. Notably, in a well-known case discussed by Sebastian Brock, the early Jewish source *Jubilees* depicts Mastemah (i.e., Satan) sending ravens to plague Abraham, but in later Syriac versions of this story the ravens are presented as minions of God instead. See Sebastian Brock, “Abraham and the Ravens: A Syriac Counterpart to *Jubilees* 11–12 and Its Implications,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 9 (1978): 135–152.

27. Ch. Pellat, “*Ghurāb*,” *EL*, s.v. (1965).

28. Thus Pellat. For an example of the appearance of the raven as sign of the de-

However, there is another possibility. Although the Qur'ān's depiction of Cain's learning how to bury his brother by imitating a raven is likely prior to those Jewish traditions that develop this image, the specific choice of a raven here may allude to genuinely older late antique traditions that depict the raven as cursed. These traditions are not explicitly tied to the episode of the primordial fratricide, but nevertheless suggest a subtle connection between the bird and Cain, who would be cursed by God for killing his brother. David Goldenberg has discussed a number of these traditions in connection with the theme of the raven being cursed in the time of Noah, and this curse then being reflected in the raven's plumage being turned black. In one early tradition, Philo Iudaeus posits that the raven was originally black; Noah's sending the raven away from the Ark is construed allegorically, as a symbol of the necessity of casting evil out of the mind. Thus, the animal's cursed nature is, as it were, inherent, and reflected in its black plumage from the start.²⁹ However, in the famous *Metamorphoses* of the Roman poet Ovid (an older contemporary of Philo), the raven is originally white and cursed to be black in retribution for its tattling and so bringing the wrath of Apollo upon an unfaithful lover.³⁰ Philo's precedent notwithstanding, the conception of the raven's acquiring its black plumage (or some other distinctive physical alteration) as a curse would later become quite widespread among authors glossing the biblical story of the flood.

The critical question, naturally, is how widespread this conception was before the rise of Islam. Already in the early centuries of the Common Era a brief reference to Noah blessing the dove and cursing the raven is found in the Mandaean *Ginza Rabba*, though the content of the curse is not specified.³¹ A more substantial description of the cursing of the raven, one that specifically recounts that Noah cursed the originally white bird by making

parture of the beloved (and thus symbolic of desolation) in a putatively pre-Islamic poem, see Omar Edaibat's partial translation of the *qaṣīdah* of al-Nābighah in Harry Munt et al., "Arabic and Persian Sources for Pre-Islamic Arabia," in Greg Fisher (ed.), *Arabs and Empires before Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 434–500, 481–482.

29. David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 51, citing Philo's *Questions on Genesis* 2.35–36. On the biblical and early Jewish depiction of Noah's raven, see also David Marcus, "The Mission of the Raven (Gen. 8:7)," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 29 (2002): 71–80.

30. The story of Coronis (*Metamorphoses* 2.531–632).

31. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham*, 287, citing *Ginzā: Der Schatz oder Das Grosse Buch der Mandäer*, ed. and trans. Mark Lidzbarski (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht and Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1925), 410 (the *Right Ginza*, Book 18 [381, 3]).

it black, is found in a tradition ascribed to Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373). However, this tradition is only preserved in a late source, a unique Leiden manuscript that probably dates to the thirteenth century. The text is a *catena* or commentary on scripture that compiles quotations from various ancient authorities; it is in Arabic, presumably having been translated at some point from Syriac, and was published by Paul de Lagarde over one hundred and fifty years ago.³²

The pertinent passage in the tradition attributed to Ephrem in the Leiden *catena*, which elaborates upon the scene with Noah and the raven in Gen 8:7, describes how Noah sent the raven forth from the ark to scout out dry land; at that time, the bird's plumage was pure white. Failing to find dry land at first, after a time the raven spotted the remains of animals and people who had been drowned in the deluge floating in the water, and it began feeding on these remains (not an implausible behavior to anyone who has observed the animal's attraction to carrion). Distracted by this unseemly feast, the raven forgot all about its mission. By the time the raven remembered to return to Noah, the waters had already receded from the earth, and when Noah learned how the raven had abandoned its mission, he cursed it to be black as a sign of its impure status among all the birds.³³

As Goldenberg notes, there is some question of whether this statement is authentically attributable to Ephrem, as with the associated tradition found in the Leiden *catena* that depicts the curse of blackness on Ham and Canaan. None of these statements are found in the extant corpus of works attributed to Ephrem that are generally believed to be genuine.³⁴ However, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the tradition on the raven represented here may reflect a genuinely pre-Islamic conception. Goldenberg avers that the tradition of the curse of blackness imposed on Ham and his descendants is attested no later than the fourth century CE, though the dating of the text upon which he relies for this, the Samaritan Tibat Marqe, is somewhat problematic.³⁵ That said, an associated rabbinic tradition attested in multiple

32. Scaliger Arab. 230 in the collection of the University of Leiden; published in volume 2 of Paul de Lagarde, *Materialien zur Kritik und Geschichte des Pentateuchs* (2 vols.; Leipzig: Teubner, 1867).

33. De Lagarde, *Materialien*, 2.79. Goldenberg's interest in this tradition in the Leiden *catena* is due to its foreshadowing of the curse of blackness imposed on Ham and his son Canaan for uncovering the nakedness of Noah, depicted later on in the text (2.87).

34. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham*, 99–100.

35. Ibid., 100. Here Goldenberg refers to the Tibat Marqe tradition as “one of the earliest” stories about the curse of blackness upon one of Noah’s descendants (whether

sources connects Noah's son Ham with the dog and the raven, all of whom were cursed because they engaged in coitus with their partners on the Ark against Noah's wishes. In this case, though, it seems the curse on the raven, like the curse on the dog, pertains to an aspect of its physiology linked to copulation, not to the animal's appearance (as is the case with Ham).³⁶ Nevertheless, here too the raven is said to be cursed, as in the *Ginza*.

The *Qur'ān* does not directly refer to Cain as cursed, of course—although it does note that by killing Abel he became one of the losers, *min al-khāsirīn*, a common *qur'ānic* phrase that designates someone joining the ranks of the damned on account of some grave sin. But a general perception among late antique communities of the raven as cursed could have suggested an analogy with Cain, with the *qur'ānic* author capitalizing upon this symbolic resonance by introducing the bird to the narrative of the fratricide. Put another way, the presence of the raven in the *qur'ānic* story may be a reflex of two originally separate ideas: the raven as a cursed animal and Cain as a cursed man. Neither is explicitly cursed in the *Qur'ān*, but the conjunction of the raven and Cain in the *Sūrat al-Mā'idah* story may reflect both of these genuinely pre-Islamic conceptions.

Again, one may reasonably question whether the tradition in the Leiden *catena* is actually pre-Islamic. However, I am not suggesting that this tradition is the direct source of the scene with the raven in the *Qur'ān*, only that

it is Ham, Kush, or Canaan). However, elsewhere in his book Goldenberg notes (following Ben-Hayyim, the editor of *Tibat Marqe*) that the later sections of *Tibat Marqe* seem to have been reworked extensively in the sixth through ninth centuries, although (again following Ben-Hayyim) “these linguistically later texts are likely to contain older concepts and traditions drawn from early sources” (382, under the glossary entry for *Marqe*). One must admit that although the *floruit* of the Samaritan commentator *Marqe* himself is dated from the third to the late fourth century CE, the tradition on the curse of blackness in *Tibat Marqe* cited by Goldenberg here is drawn from a section of the work that appears to represent the later stratum of the *Marqe* (or pseudo-*Marqe*) tradition, though Goldenberg fails to acknowledge this. In his later revisiting of the theme of the curse of blackness, Goldenberg once again cites the *Tibat Marqe* tradition and presents it as plausible evidence of the early (third–fourth century) circulation of the motif, again failing to note the problematic chronology. See David M. Goldenberg, *Black and Slave: The Origins and History of the Curse of Ham* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 45.

36. Goldenberg, *Black and Slave*, 103, citing y. *Ta'an.* 1:6, 64d, b. *Sanh.* 108b, and *Tanh.* (Buber), *Noah* 12:9 (the parallel tradition at Gen. Rab. 36:7 mentions Ham and the dog, but not the raven). See also Goldenberg's discussion of this rabbinic tradition as it was misunderstood by later commentators and modern scholars alike in *Black and Slave*, 253–256.

the narrative in *Sūrat al-Mā'idah* reflects a general notion of the raven as a cursed animal that may have been current in the late antique milieu. Positing this motif as part of the more diffuse cultural background to the qur'ānic story is arguably more cogent than claiming that story's direct dependence on Jewish traditions that are evidently posterior to the *tafsīr* tradition, let alone to the Qur'ān.

The possible link between the qur'ānic raven and the Syriac milieu specifically is bolstered by another aspect of the tradition that may have been informed by Christian precursors. In his brief treatment of the story and its interpretation, Stillman, like others before him, correctly discounts the *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eli'ezer* account as late and so unlikely to be the source of the narrative element of the raven in the Qur'ān. Unfortunately, as already noted, Stillman mistakenly points to the depiction of the episode in *Midrash Tanhuma* as the putative source instead.³⁷ Nevertheless, Stillman was quite prescient in surmising that the amount of Jewish material taken over into the Qur'ān had been exaggerated by scholars, and that there were no doubt significant traces of Eastern Christian literary traditions to be found in the Qur'ān as well. He thus conjectures that the distinctive element of Abel's passivity in the qur'ānic story, with his lack of resistance to Cain strongly underscored (v. 28: "If you raise your hand against me to kill me, I won't raise my hand against you to kill you"), may reflect Christian approaches to the story.³⁸ In Christian exegesis, Abel is important as a prefiguration or type of Jesus, and while he is not exactly a willing victim here in the qur'ānic story, his refusal to resist violence with violence is certainly reminiscent of the well-known Christian admonition to turn the other cheek.³⁹

Stillman was ultimately unable to furnish a Christian prototype for the Qur'ān's depiction of its Christ-like Abel. However, almost forty years later, Joseph Witztum confirmed the ultimate basis of this portrayal in Syriac sources. Witztum's chapter on the Cain and Abel narrative in his 2011 dissertation is perhaps the most important contemporary treatment of the episode; here, he links narrative elements such as Abel's passivity and Cain's

37. Stillman, "Some Observations," 236. Thus Cuypers as well (*The Banquet*, 200).

38. Stillman, "Some Observations." This attitude is already anticipated by Geiger, who prefacing his massive discourse on the Jewish material on the Qur'ān by noting that only through a thorough exploration of the Christian sources could one definitively determine that Muḥammad had relied on one tradition and not the other in any particular case (*Judaism and Islám*, 29).

39. On the Christian depiction of Abel as willing victim and protomartyr, see John Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition: Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the First Sibling Rivalry* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), esp. 190–196.

wickedness in vv. 27–30 to similar portrayals in such texts as the *Homily on Cain and Abel* by Isaac of Antioch and Symmachus's *Life of Abel*. In these sources, the episode has been rewritten in various ways that clearly seem to anticipate its portrayal in the Qur'ān.

In particular, in contrast to many of the Jewish traditions on the episode in which Cain and Abel engage in disputation, in these late antique Christian versions Cain simply announces his intention to kill Abel and Abel states in turn that he will not resist, though Cain will be damned for his act.⁴⁰ As Witztum notes, the qur'ānic account not only resembles these versions thematically but linguistically as well, with verbal roots and other aspects of the phraseology found in the Syriac versions paralleled in the Arabic of the Qur'ān.⁴¹ These aspects of the text make it very likely that the qur'ānic account reflects more than casual familiarity with this Syriac tradition, which is especially noteworthy given that, as we shall demonstrate, that account is mainly shaped by a broader engagement with a rabbinic precursor.

“We Ordained for Israel in Their Scripture”: A Shared Mishnaic-Qur'ānic Ethical Maxim

The overwhelming amount of attention scholars have placed on the motif of the raven as evidence of Jewish influence on the Sūrat al-Mā'idah account of the two sons of Adam has often distracted them from investigating the larger significance of the passage in which it appears. If one posits that there is a fundamental coherence to Sūrat al-Mā'idah, or at least important thematic continuities and symmetries undergirding it, then we should try to ascertain how the appropriation and redeployment of older scriptural or parascriptural materials such as we see in the Cain and Abel pericope advance the larger message and agenda of the *sūrah* as a whole. I would sug-

40. A disputation scene between the brothers is found in the Tanhuma account as well as the roughly contemporary Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, but is not found in the narrative in Pirqe de-Rabbi Eli'ezer. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and related witnesses to the Palestinian targum tradition exhibit a curious growth of material pertaining to Abel's words to Cain in Gen 4:8; it seems clear that this is a Jewish response to Christian elaborations on the theme that began in Late Antiquity and continued into the medieval period. See the concise discussion of Rimon Kasher, “The Palestinian Targums to Genesis 4:8: A New Approach to an Old Controversy,” in Isaac Kalimi and Peter J. Haas (eds.), *Biblical Interpretation in Judaism and Christianity* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 33–43.

41. Witztum, “The Syriac Milieu of the Quran,” 125–144.

gest that understanding the overarching thematic structure and design of the chapter not only illuminates the meaning of the qur'ānic interpretation of this episode, but allows us to discern something of the specific purpose behind the author's evocation of Jewish and Christian precursors. Arguably, such evocation is deliberate, enhancing the larger message the author wishes to project through a conspicuous display of virtuosity in navigating and synthesizing a specific set of scriptural intertexts.

The next set of verses in the *sūrah* appear to be essential to the larger meaning and function of the Cain and Abel pericope.⁴² I would thus suggest that vv. 27–37 constitute a coherent whole, and that the gist of the underlying argument that informs the qur'ānic presentation of Cain and Abel in vv. 27–31 cannot be grasped without considering the following vv. 32–37 as well. From the initial invocation of the story of the two sons to the passage's final exhortation to the believers to strive in the path of God, vv. 27–37 are conceptually united as well as being deeply linked to broader themes in the *sūrah* as a whole.

While v. 32 is well known, and much commented-upon, because it seems to confirm a Jewish background to the pericope, neither it nor the preceding verses on the first homicide should be isolated from the further development of the central themes of the passage in vv. 33–34 following:

³² On account of that (*min ajli dhālika*) [i.e., Cain's act], We ordained for Israel in their scripture (*katabnā 'alā bani isrā'īl*) that whoever slays a single soul, it is as if he had slain all humanity, except if it is in retaliation for homicide or spreading corruption in the land. And whoever preserves a single soul, it is as if he had preserved all humanity. Our messengers have come to them with clear signs, but even after that, many of them committed excesses in the land.

³³ The recompense of those who wage war against God and His messenger and spread corruption in the land is that they will be killed, or crucified, or mutilated with alternating hands and feet chopped off, or be exiled from the

42. Scholars have seldom agreed on the exact parameters of the pericope and how the Cain and Abel account relates to the surrounding verses. Many scholars and translators seem to identify 5:27–32 as a discrete passage, seeing the episode of the brothers as ending with the maxim about the slaying or saving of a single soul (cf., e.g., Busse, "Cain and Abel," 1.270; Robinson, "Hands Outstretched"). Cuypers divides v. 32 in half, seeing the clause that begins "Our messengers have come to them ..." as the start of a new section (*The Banquet*, 200–203). At the very least, vv. 33–34 must be recognized as thematically continuous with vv. 27–32, as these two verses represent a crucial addition that helps to illuminate the subtext of the Cain and Abel story.

land. Their lot is humiliation in this world, and a tremendous punishment in the next,

³⁴ unless they repent before you overpower them. Know that God is forgiving and merciful.

Verses 35–37 then serve as a conclusion to the passage. Here a contrast is drawn between the unbelievers, who are promised an inescapable, terrible punishment in the afterlife, and the believers, who will prosper if they obey the injunction to strive in the path of God (*jāhidū fī sabīlihi*), which here most likely means engaging in violence against the community's opponents.

The principle adumbrated in v. 32—*whoever slays or saves a single person, it is as if they had done the same to all humanity*—has for many modern commentators provided the linchpin for the argument about Jewish influence on this passage, since a direct parallel to it is found in the Mishnah, the foundation document of rabbinic Judaism, which reached its final form in the early third century CE. There, the maxim is given as “the one who causes a single soul to perish, scripture imputes it to him as if he had caused an entire world to perish, but the one who preserves a single soul, scripture imputes it to him as if he had preserved an entire world.”⁴³

There has occasionally been some discussion of the fact that this mishnaic maxim is given in divergent forms in the two Talmuds. While the line is attested in the form given here in the Palestinian Talmud, the version in most manuscripts and the standard printed edition of the Babylonian Talmud has a crucial addition, and so specifies that the rule refers to the one who kills or saves a single soul *in Israel*.⁴⁴ The question of why what appears

43. M. Sanh. 4:5, emending the standard text slightly to omit what is universally acknowledged to be a later addition (see next note). The maxim is often given in the more famous formulation “*whoever saves a single life saves the world entire*,” or some variation on this; it is also very often decontextualized from its origins in rabbinic tradition, similar to Hillel’s statement from Avot, “*If not now, when?*” (often misattributed to Goethe and so de-judaized completely). By referring to this dictum as a “maxim” or “rule,” I attempt to bridge the gap between its presentation in rabbinic tradition, where it is not strictly halakhic, and the Qur’ān, which implies that it is law by using the language of prescription (*kataba ‘alā*, on which see below).

44. Y. Sanh. 4:11, 22b; b. Sanh. 37a. For the Yerushalmi, I have followed the text as represented in *The Jerusalem Talmud, Fourth Order: Neziqin, Tractates Sanhedrin, Makkot, and Horaiot*, ed. and trans. Heinrich W. Guggenheimer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 164; for the Bavli, I rely on the standard printed edition. Confusingly, most modern printed editions of the Mishnah, as well as very many translations, correct the text to conform to the Bavli, and so the more particularistic statement is commonly believed to be original there (see, e.g., my own mistaken comment in Mehdi

to be a universalizing sentiment seems to have been altered in the Bavli tradition to make it more restricted and particular is significant, though not particularly germane for our concerns here. While some might cite this instance as evidence that the *Qur’ān* may be closer to Palestinian rabbinic tradition than Babylonian—a logical enough inference even based simply on political geography—even this is not particularly germane for the present argument.⁴⁵ For our purposes here, it is immaterial whether the *Qur’ān* is engaging this rabbinic discourse through the medium of the Mishnah or the Palestinian Talmud (though I will take the former largely for granted). It is the basic fact of such engagement, which appears to be extensive and profound, that I would emphasize here.

There has also been some uncertainty regarding the way the *Qur’ān* presents its quotation of the Mishnah here, with God stating that He had ordained this principle for Israel in their scripture (*katabnā ‘alā banī isrā’īl*)—literally, that he had “written” or “prescribed” it for them, which is to say, that He revealed it to them in the Torah.⁴⁶ It may at first appear that there is some confusion between the canonical Bible and the Mishnah here, but in Late Antiquity, rabbinic Jews would have considered the Mishnah genuine revelation, communicated orally rather than in writing as the canonical scriptures were. Regarding the seeming slippage in terminology, the most one can say is that there is a certain irony in the *Qur’ān* here deploying a

Azaiez et al. [eds.], *The Qur’ān Seminar Commentary* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016], 109, and compare the correct evaluation of Holger Zellentin on 110). See the authoritative discussion of E. E. Urbach, “*Kol ha-meqayyem nefesh aḥat*: *Gilgūlaw shel nōṣah, teḥapūkhōt ṣenzūrah we-‘esqē madpīṣim*,” *Tarbiz* 40 (1971): 268–284.

45. Yahuda asserts the *Qur’ān*’s proximity to Palestinian Jewish tradition based on the similarity of the *qur’ānic* depiction of the conversation between Cain and Abel to that found in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, getting the chronology of narrative development wrong. See A. S. Yahuda, “A Contribution to *Qur’ān* and *Hadith* Interpretation,” in S. Löwinger and J. Somogyi (eds.), *Ignace Goldziher Memorial Volume, Part I* (Budapest: Globus Nyomda Müintézet, 1948), 280–308, 292–293.

46. The phrase *katabnā ‘alā* is also used to note God’s prescription of the *lex talionis* in Q 5:45 (echoing Exod 21:23–25 and Lev 24:19–21); and compare Q 2:178, where retaliation is similarly “prescribed” for the believers (*kutiba ‘alaykum*). The quotation of Ps 21:105 in Q 37:29 is marked by *katabnā* as well; there has been some significant scholarly commentary on this verse (see, e.g., Walid Saleh, “The Psalms in the *Qur’ān* and in the Islamic Religious Imagination,” in William P. Brown [ed.], *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014], 281–296). Madigan notes that *kataba ‘alā* carries a general sense of legal obligation or prescription of punishment for a transgression; see Daniel Madigan, *The Qur’ān’s Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam’s Scripture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 108–113.

term that connotes revelation but literally indicates writing when the Mishnah was primarily transmitted through the medium of orality in antiquity—as the Qur’ān itself was when it was first revealed, and for decades after, though it too is *kitāb* in its own self-fashioning and presentation.⁴⁷ It is also perhaps significant that the Qur’ān here seems to recognize and enfranchise rabbinic claims about the authority of the oral Torah as genuine revelation.

In any event, what is indisputable is that the Qur’ān presents the institution of the maxim or rule as a direct consequence of Cain’s act.⁴⁸ Overall, what we have in this pericope is a concatenation of a biblical story (Cain and Abel), a classic rabbinic dictum (the rule about killing), and then narrative flourishes of possibly more contemporary vintage (the raven, Abel depicted as an obedient victim) that have at least remote, and possibly more proximate, Christian roots in particular. One could argue that this simply vindicates a diffusionist model of qur’ānic composition: perhaps it was simply the case that these diverse elements were floating around in the environment when the Qur’ān was revealed, and they were knitted together by the qur’ānic author or editors into the form we now see in Sūrat al-Mā’idah.

However, the Qur’ān’s linkage of the Cain and Abel story and the rule about killing is absolutely not coincidental, for the mishnaic passage likewise alludes to the fratricide and uses it as the pretext for adumbrating the rule: “So we have found in the case of Cain, who slew his brother … therefore was man created alone in the world initially, to teach you that the one who causes a single soul to perish …” The mishnaic passage also openly invokes scriptural authority for the rule, as it is scripture that imputes blame or assigns credit to one who slays or saves a life.⁴⁹ In Geiger’s view, the citation of the rule about killing is a *non sequitur* after the depiction of the Cain and Abel story in the qur’ānic passage, and so he concludes that we can only make sense of that passage if we posit the Qur’ān’s direct dependence on

47. For a classic discussion of early Muslims’ awareness of rabbinic claims about the oral Torah, see Michael Cook, “The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam,” *Arabica* 44 (1997): 437–523, 498–507.

48. The specific phrase *min ajli dhālika* used in v. 32 (“on account of that …”) is unique in the Qur’ān. As Lane notes, one of the basic meanings of the root *’-j-l* is “to commit a crime”; the infinitive form *ajl* seems to connote causation or consequence, especially a negative one. See Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (8 vols.; London: Williams and Norgate, 1863–1893), 1.24–25.

49. This, perhaps, is the underlying logic behind the Qur’ān’s implication that both Jews and Christians should know the rule; the Bibles of both communities indict Cain for the murder of Abel, so Jews and Christians alike should understand the consequences of unjustified killing.

the Mishnah here. For him, this is irrefutable proof of Muhammad's reliance on Jewish informants; otherwise the qur'ānic passage is simply incoherent.⁵⁰ This position is rather puzzling, not least of all because the underlying logic that unites the two elements in the qur'ānic passage—the depiction of the first murder occasioning a strident condemnation of this crime as equivalent to killing all humanity—is not particularly difficult to discern.

I cannot accept the premise of the qur'ānic passage's incoherence, for its message is entirely cogent both in itself and in the larger context of the *sūrah*.⁵¹ However, I would agree with Geiger that the coincidence between the Qur'ān and the Mishnah here is too much to ignore. If one carefully compares the qur'ānic and mishnaic passages, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the former not only presupposes the latter, betraying its familiarity with that textual precursor in several ways, but is engaging in a deliberate rescripting of the rabbinic text.⁵² Moreover, consideration of *how* the mishnaic passage is being rescripted, and to what end, may, in the final analysis, allow us to advance a hypothesis about the context in which this passage was composed. While the connection between the maxims of Q 5:32 and m. Sanh. 4:5 has been observed consistently since the time of Geiger, there has been virtually no scholarly interest in examining the larger literary setting in the Mishnah in which the original rule is located and how this might relate to the repurposing of this material in Sūrah 5—that is, discerning the larger textual logics at work both in the Mishnah and in the Qur'ān, especially how each text relates the rule about murder to the primordial fratricide.

50. Geiger, *Judaism and Islám*, 80–81. St. Clair Tisdall makes the same point in *Original Sources*, 65–66, which is unsurprising since he, like Geiger, often emphasizes Muhammad's confusion and the resulting incoherence of the Qur'ān.

51. For an especially convincing and sensitive reading of the qur'ānic story on its own terms, see John Kaltner, *Ishmael Instructs Isaac: An Introduction to the Qur'an for Bible Readers* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), 40–46. Kaltner argues that the Sūrat al-Mā'idah narrative is steeped in irony. On the one hand, Cain needs the bird to instruct him how to dig, although he himself is a tiller, which demonstrates his initial cluelessness, both practical and moral. On the other, Cain's repentance is providential, triggered by his observation of the bird, and although he does come to an awareness of his proper role regarding his brother—contrary to his statement in the biblical original (Gen 4:9), he *is* his brother's keeper after all—in the end, he remains ignorant of God's role in the affair, and thus of his dependence on the Creator.

52. My use of the language of writing here and throughout this article is not meant to foreclose upon the possibility that the reception of older material and the composition of the qur'ānic corpus were oral processes. "Rescripting" may be taken metaphorically, as pointing to a process of oral reformulation.

Considering the larger literary context in which the parallel passages appear in both the Qur'ān and the Mishnah demonstrates that the two passages are linked through a much larger network of intertextual allusions. The overarching theme of tractate Sanhedrin is judgment, in particular the constitution of courts that may administer the law legitimately in accordance with the precepts of Torah. It is certainly relevant to our interests here that the procedures concerning capital cases brought before the Sanhedrin predominate in the tractate, and chapter 4 is entirely concerned with the special considerations such proceedings entail.⁵³ Thus, the mention of Cain's killing of Abel is prompted here by a reference to the grave admonitions that are to be issued to witnesses in such cases; it is in this context that the Mishnah articulates its famous maxim about the value of human life:

In capital cases the witness is accountable for the blood of the accused and the blood of the descendants he would have had for all eternity. So we have found in the case of Cain, who slew his brother—as it is written, “The voice of your brother’s blood (*dāmîm*) [lit. bloods] cries out to me ...” (Gen 4:10). It says “your brother’s bloods” and not “your brother’s blood,” for it refers to both [Abel’s] blood and the blood of his descendants ...

Therefore was man created alone in the world at first, to teach you that the one who causes a single soul to perish, scripture imputes it to him as if he had caused an entire world to perish; the one who preserves a single soul, scripture imputes it to him as if he had preserved an entire world.⁵⁴

The idiomatic reference to the “bloods” of Cain’s brother (*dāmē ’āhîkā*) crying out to God is glossed as meaning that because God established humanity by creating a single person, when one of Adam’s sons killed the other, it was not only the life of Abel himself that demanded retribution. Rather, those of his countless unborn descendants did so as well, for all of their lives—their “bloods”—were extinguished when Abel was slain.⁵⁵

53. For our purposes here, it is irrelevant whether the historical Sanhedrin—if there ever really was such an institution, at least as the rabbis imagined it—ever had the power to try capital cases. Beth Berkowitz argues elegantly for a reading of this mishnaic tractate in symbolic and ritualized terms; in her view, as a composition the tractate tells us more about the rabbinic construction of authority than about actual historical circumstances (see *Execution and Invention: Death Penalty Discourse in Early Rabbinic and Christian Cultures* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006], ch. 2).

54. M. Sanh. 4:5.

55. Reuven Firestone is the latest in a series of commentators to point out that whereas the Mishnah here invokes the precedent set by Cain on the basis of the specific phrasing of the Genesis prooftext, that phrasing has no parallel in the Qur'ān

This exegesis then leads to the citation of the maxim: the taking of a single life is like taking the lives of all humanity, while the sparing of one life is comparable to sparing the lives of all. For this reason was humanity created from a single soul, and thus did Cain's murder of his brother cause all his unborn progeny to cry for justice, because one life is tantamount to many lives—perhaps the lives of all beings in the world. Thus, judges and witnesses in capital cases, in which a human life is at stake, must take their responsibilities very seriously indeed.

The passage in the Mishnah goes on to give other reasons for God's creation of humanity through the original (and originally unique) protoplast Adam. Notably, the literature on the qur'anic parallel seldom if ever takes the continuation of the passage into account, presumably deeming it irrelevant for our understanding of the qur'anic "reception" of the mishnaic material:

[Humanity was also created from a single soul] for the sake of maintaining peace among God's creatures, so that one person should not say to his fellow, "My father was greater than yours"; and also so sectarians (*mînîn*) should not say, "There are many powers in heaven." It also teaches God's greatness, for while a man may stamp many coins with one press, they will all come out the same, while the King of All Kings, blessed be He, stamps all people with one press and yet they all come out different. Thus, anyone may justifiably say, "For my sake was the world created."⁵⁶

The subtexts of this passage are complex. The overarching theme is one of equality and singularity: people all have the same origin and are all created equal by God, and so all lives have the same value, the diversity of individuals notwithstanding. But the implied *us* of the passage is of course not a universal humanity, but rather the idealized Jewish subject that rabbinic texts address—or rather construct—as their audience.⁵⁷

While Adam is naturally recognized as the ancestor of all humanity, gentiles and Israel alike, the reference to "sectarians" (*mînîn* or *mînîm*) here indicates that particular sorts of communal concerns are at hand. It is not farfetched to imagine that the lesson communicated here is that one *Jew*

or Arabic, making the Qur'ān's dependence on the mishnaic precursor even more conspicuous; see Azaiez et al. (eds.), *The Qur'an Seminar Commentary*, 108.

56. M. Sanh. 4:5 continued.

57. Rabbinic tradition recognizes a concept of gentile moral capacity and accountability, most famously expressed in the idea of the Noachian commandments that the Creator expects all people to observe. Nevertheless, it is highly probable that the rule is here related for the benefit of Jews, not a generic humanity.

should not say to another that he is greater: all members of the flock of Israel are equal, while perhaps implicitly being greater than gentiles. The equality of people may be discerned from their common descent from a single ancestor; in turn, we should also conclude that the Creator is unitary as well from this. However, some, specifically designated as *mînîm* or “sectarians” (whoever such heretics may be, whether Gnostics, Christians, or others) countenance the possibility of multiple divine powers or aspects or hypostases. Ironically, given that the point of the passage is to denounce the communal strife caused by sectarians, the theological speculation of said sectarians is asserted to place them beyond the bounds of belonging to the community of Israel. By denying that unity above, they disrupt unity below, and so must be excluded from it.

The famous utterance attributed to the *mînîm*—namely, that there are “two powers in heaven”—has been widely discussed. In the past, it was understood either to confirm the existence of Gnosticism in first-century Jewish circles as a distinct communal formation, or else to point to an early and normative distinction between Jews and Christians based on dichotomous theologies.⁵⁸ In contrast, contemporary scholarship has tended to recognize the invocation of the term *mînîm* as signaling a discursive turn towards issues of communal integrity and identity in rabbinic literary sources, regardless of whether these “sectarians” are conceived as—or actually represent—heretics, Christians, Gnostics, or just straw men.⁵⁹

This is to say that beyond its superficially egalitarian message, this passage is about ethnopolitics and communal boundaries. Embedded in a larger discussion about judicial authority and the legitimacy of punitive violence, we find a subtle and concentrated reflection upon communal stability and the claims that potentially disrupt it. As God is one and creates all as one,

58. The literature debating the meaning of the “two powers” tradition is substantial. For recent contributions, see Adiel Schremer, “Midrash, Theology, and History: Two Powers in Heaven Revisited,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 39 (2007): 1–25, and compare the introductory comments in Andrei A. Orlov, *The Glory of the Invisible God: Two Powers in Heaven Traditions and Early Christology* (London: T&T Clark, 2019) and the bibliography therein.

59. The rabbinic construction of orthodoxy and the polemic against *mînîm* has been debated extensively; see, e.g., Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Christine E. Hayes, “The ‘Other’ in Rabbinic Literature,” in Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 243–269; and Adiel Schremer, *Brothers Estranged: Heresy, Christianity, and Jewish Identity in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

people—that is, the people Israel—should also maintain the oneness of God and humanity, and avoid contentious particularist claims that could cause strife, whether it is exalting themselves above others or denying the singularity of the divine creator. If there really is a universalizing sentiment here—with the equality of all humanity writ large at stake—it is hard to reconcile this with the broader implications of the passage, which is quite finely attuned to the familiar communal concerns that often abide in rabbinic sources.⁶⁰

Corruption in the Land: The Primordial Fratricide as Admonition to the Jews

Numerous modern commentators on the Cain and Abel passage in *Sūrat al-Mā'idah* have concluded that the overarching point of the Qur'ān's reinterpretation of the story is to align its prophet and community with Abel, the righteous victim of aggression, while vilifying their Jewish opponents as latter-day embodiments of Cain. The dual integration of Jewish and Christian subtexts in the passage thus serves the primary agenda of a hermeneutic reorientation of the biblical account.⁶¹ I agree with the fundamentals of this characterization, but would go much further than this. First, it is the

60. Thus, we might conclude that the addition of the *Bavli* that restricts the application of the rule—“the one who causes a single soul to perish *in Israel...*”—is perhaps not so much changing the valence of an originally universalizing statement as it is merely making explicit a particularist sentiment that was always implicit. This is the view of Urbach, who emphasizes that in the original context in tractate *Sanhedrin*, the *Mishnah* is addressing the situation in which Jews are bearing witness against other Jews accused of capital crimes (“*Kol ha-meqayyem*,” 269).

61. See, e.g., Robinson, who observes the very strong symmetry between vv. 27–31 and 51–53, which establish a vigorous and direct parallel between Cain and the Jews as potentially fratricidal if taken as allies (“Hands Outstretched,” 12–13); and compare Witztum, “The Syriac Milieu of the Quran,” 145–152, where Cain is understood as a “literary proxy” for the Jews (147). In contrast to the qur'ānic use of these figures, the story of the wicked Cain's aggression against his righteous brother Abel was invoked in discussions of intra-communal violence in early Muslim discourse, and the original context of the qur'ānic allegory was mostly forgotten. As van Ess has demonstrated, some early commentators presented the image of Abel's passive acquiescence as a model for the behavior of upright Muslims during the outbreak of civil war in the community, refusing to fight other Muslims and atoning for their sins through passive acceptance of death at the hands of others. See Josef van Ess, “Unfertige Studien 6: Der Brudermord des Kain aus theologischer Sicht,” *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques* 73 (2019): 447–488.

Qur'ān's engagement with the Mishnah in particular that is most significant; as I have already shown, that engagement is rather more profound, extensive, and deliberate than has sometimes been recognized. Moreover, the revisiting and reorientation of mishnaic motifs here is entirely purposeful: the passage not only casts the qur'ānic prophet's Jewish opponents as heirs of Cain, but appropriates and restructures the logic of the larger mishnaic passage to present the claim that the shedding of Jewish blood is licit according to principles adumbrated *in their own scripture*, which Israel recognizes (or should recognize) as the foundation of their law.

This is not to say that the appropriation of Christian narrative currents in this passage is unimportant, or that we should disregard Sūrat al-Mā'idah's particular anti-Christian (or broadly anti-'Israelite,' that is, targeting both Jews and Christians) messaging, in which its anti-Jewish rhetoric is embedded. Here, the analysis of Cuypers may be especially germane, for he locates our passage in the larger structural context of vv. 27–40, a unit within the *sūrah* to which he assigns the rubric "the punishment of the rebel children of Israel." Cuypers divides the *sūrah* into two halves, with the major theme of the first half (vv. 1–71) being the establishment of a new covenant through the revelation of the Qur'ān. The initial sections of the chapter draw a sharp contrast between "you who believe" (*allādhīna āmanū*), for whom a quasi-Israelite code of behavior mainly centering on purity is legislated, and other, deficient monotheists who are critiqued for their shortcomings. They are variously identified in the first part of the *sūrah* as Israel (*banī isrā'īl*, vv. 12, 32), the People of Scripture (*allādhīna ūtū 'l-kitāb* or simply *ahl al-kitāb*, vv. 5, 15, 19), Jews and Christians (*yahūd* and *naṣārā*, vv. 14, 18), and "the people of the Gospel" (*ahl al-injīl*, v. 47).⁶²

According to Cuypers, the *sūrah* reaches an initial crescendo in vv. 48–50, in which the qur'ānic prophet's authority as judge is asserted not only over his followers, but seemingly over Jews and Christians as well, before the transition to the second half of the *sūrah* (72–120), in which Christians are summoned to enter the new covenant with the believers. If one follows Cuypers's line of reasoning about the structure of the first part of the *sūrah*, the Cain and Abel passage appears in the center of this sequence of verses, which would seem to highlight its importance for the underlying argument of this portion of the text. This is not accidental, for Cuypers avers that

62. The locution *ahl al-injīl* is unique to Q 5:47, and its obvious counterpart, *ahl al-tawrāh*, does not appear in the Qur'ān at all, though it is common in later Muslim discourse on the Bible and Jews. Nevertheless, repeated mention is made in Sūrat al-Mā'idah to the Torah specifically (and its recipients' refusal to follow it), sometimes juxtaposed with the Gospel and revelation to Israel in general (e.g., Q 5:66–67).

Muhammad's authority as arbiter and judge rests on the license to engage in the legitimate violence of retaliation, which is granted in v. 45.⁶³

Although his structuralist approach has met with sharp critique, Cuypers's analysis at the very least encourages us to consider the function of the Cain and Abel pericope within the larger message of *Sūrat al-Mā'idah*.⁶⁴ Here the Qur'ān positions both its own authority and that of its prophet above that of the older revelations and communities to which it is the successor. Arguably this is one of the most strongly supersessionist *sūrahs* in the Qur'ān: here the claims of Jews and Christians to special chosen status are contested—especially since they have misinterpreted and failed to fulfill their covenants (e.g., v. 14)—while the chosen status of the *ummah* is asserted, on the very basis of their anticipated (or current?) fulfillment of their covenantal obligations. This is implied by the very first line of the *sūrah*: *yā-ayyuhā 'llādhīna āmanū awfū bi'l-'uqūdi*, “O you who believe, fulfill the stipulations.”⁶⁵ As in older Christian discourse vis-à-vis the Bible and the Jews, the supersessionist impulse is here manifest in twin gestures of delegitimation (as in vv. 17–18, which state that Jews and Christians are not real monotheists and falsely assert their elect status) and appropriation (as in vv. 44–45, in which the biblical *lex talionis* is reiterated and expanded, and thus valorized as an aspect of Qur'ān rather than Torah or Gospel).⁶⁶

63. See Cuypers, *The Banquet*, 242–253. It is important to note that vv. 48–50 have sometimes been seen as maladroit in the *sūrah*, but Cuypers argues quite convincingly that this segment, the effective center of the chapter, should be understood as key to deciphering the meaning of the whole. Given that the legitimization of violence, the theme of the qur'ānic presentation of Cain and Abel, is crucial to the establishment of the qur'ānic prophet's authority, we can see quite clearly here that structural analysis makes a critical contribution to our interpretation of the purpose behind the Qur'ān's appropriation and deployment of mishnaic material.

64. For such a critique, see Nicolai Sinai, “Review Essay: Going Around in Circles,” *JQS* 19.2 (2017): 106–147; see also his brief comments regarding the structure of *Sūrat al-Mā'idah* in “Towards a Redactional History of the Medinan Qur'an: A Case Study of *Sūrat al-Nisā'* (Q 4) and *Sūrat al-Mā'idah* (Q 5),” in Marianna Klar (ed.), *Structural Dividers in the Qur'an* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 365–402, 383–386.

65. Compare also v. 7, the believers said “we hear and obey,” in contrast to the Jews' distortion of what they were commanded to utter (v. 13 and 41, as elsewhere in the Qur'ān) and the failure of both the Jews and the Christians to uphold their pledges (vv. 12–14, and likewise similarly expressed elsewhere).

66. It cannot be accidental that the next verses (46–50) refer first to Jesus being sent to Israel with the Gospel to confirm the Torah, then to the qur'ānic prophet's mission to confirm what came before him and establish God's law for both his followers and the remnants of older prophetic communities.

It should be acknowledged that the Qur'ān here recognizes the authenticity of the older manifestations of *kitāb* that the forerunner communities possessed, but positions itself as the new primary embodiment of divine law, which its community will and must follow—in contrast to those older communities who failed to follow the law as mediated through the older instantiations of *kitāb* that were bestowed upon them.⁶⁷ Essentially—so the *sūrah* implies—if Jews and Christians will not judge according to the precepts of Torah and Gospel (vv. 66, 68), the *ummah* will. It is specifically in relation to this question of the failure to uphold the divinely mandated law that the *sūrah* seems to address the Jews in particular, especially pertaining to the question of legitimate or illegitimate bloodshed. I do not mean to suggest that this is the only organizing theme of significance in the *sūrah*, or that other approaches to its interpretation are incorrect. However, focusing on themes of violence and bloodshed helps us to tie together some of what seem like disparate or incongruous elements within the chapter.

Blood and the spilling of blood are concerns that recur throughout the *sūrah*; arguably, they are the underlying theme that ties its opening passage, the legislative jumble of vv. 1–5, together—when to fight, what to eat, when to hunt, even whom to marry.⁶⁸ But the activity tied to bloodshed that is arguably of greatest concern in Sūrat al-Mā'idah is fighting. In contrast to the rules issued here about when blood can legitimately be shed by believ-

67. For a classic discussion of *kitāb* as connoting God's ongoing revelatory process to humanity more than "scripture" per se, see Madigan, *The Qur'ān's Self-Image*.

68. Given the reference to licit foodstuffs at the beginning of the *sūrah* and that to the table or feast demanded of Jesus by his disciples towards the end (vv. 112–115), it is a natural exegetical imperative to try to draw them together. Thus, in his translation of the Qur'ān, Abdel Haleem highlights the theme of food in his introduction to this chapter (M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, corrected ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016], 67). Likewise, Freidenreich's nimble reading of food prohibition and permission in Sūrat al-Mā'idah convincingly demonstrates the importance of this theme to the erection and negotiation of communal boundaries in the chapter (David M. Freidenreich, *Foreigners and Their Food: Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011], 136–143). However, there is much here in the *sūrah* that does not concern food; further, dietary rules and guidelines about commensality are not particularly prominent in the chapter as a whole. Still further, in the first two verses of the *sūrah* believers are enjoined to uphold strict behavioral standards regarding a number of things, including diet, but also the rites and taboos associated with the Sanctuary, the pretexts for entering into hostilities with enemies, and providing support to weaker members of the community.

ers, we here see a countervailing emphasis on Israel's total failure to shed blood appropriately in accordance with the divine will.

In the opening passages of the *sūrah*, it seems that the divine narrator's largely negative attention is directed at the People of Scripture in general, or Jews and Christians together, or even Christians specifically (e.g., Q 5:14 and 5:17). But the flow of the chapter diverts in a decidedly Israelite or Jewish direction in v. 20. Strikingly, this verse opens the passage that immediately precedes the Cain and Abel narrative: the qur'ānic version of the story of how the Israelites would not enter the Promised Land and fight when they were commanded to do so by Moses (vv. 20–26).⁶⁹ This account stands in sharp contrast with the subsequent story, that of the first murder, Cain's totally illegitimate spilling of the blood of his brother. One is clearly *jihād fī sabīl allāh*, here designating legitimate violence under specific conditions; this Israel were commanded to undertake, but refused to do. The other is *qatl al-nafs bi-ghayr nafs*, the unjustified homicide denounced in Q 5:32, which Cain, arguably a cipher for Israel, *did* do.⁷⁰

Notably, after the Cain and Abel pericope (which again I have identified as the entire passage from v. 27 to 37) the text digresses to note the corporal punishment to be meted out to thieves (more authorized bloodshed), and then to once again assert God's singularity and omnipotence before undertaking another extended denunciation of the corruption of the Jews (vv. 41–45). The remaining eighty or so verses of the chapter then proceed

69. The obvious parallel is with the story of Saul (Q 2:246–253). For a strong historicist reading of this passage that deftly grounds it in the conjectured context of the qur'ānic prophet's mission, see Walid A. Saleh, "What If You Refuse, When Ordered to Fight?: King Saul (*Talūt*) in the Qur'ān and Post-Qur'ānic Literature," in Carl S. Ehrlich in association with Marsha C. White (eds.), *Saul in Story and Tradition* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 261–283. In Sūrah 2, the biblical story of Saul and Goliath is seemingly repurposed to critique the believers' reluctance to take up arms against their enemies; however, in Sūrat al-Mā'idah, the analogous story from the time of Moses (evoking the story of the spies from Numbers 13) is retold to establish a contrast with the story of Cain (juxtaposing a story about violence being shunned when legitimate with one in which it is indulged though illegitimate).

70. Cuypers is particularly concerned to vindicate the coherence of the qur'ānic account despite its rapid temporal shift from the account of the Mosaic era to the time of the protoplasts, and cites the remarks of classical commentators regarding Muḥammad's Jewish audience to support this (*The Banquet*, 197). However, if we identify legitimately sanctioned violence as the *Leitmotif* that explains the relationship between the two passages, this thematic continuity overrides any perceived disjunction between vv. 26–27 and the preceding section.

to range over a number of issues.⁷¹ Most importantly, we must note that although the *sūrah*'s various statements about Jesus and Christianity have generally received the greatest amount of scholarly attention, much of the polemic that follows in subsequent sections of the chapter are directed either at the People of Scripture or Jews and Christians collectively, and there is no shortage of material in these subsequent passages that may be construed as criticism of Israel or the Jews specifically.

Overall, here in this *sūrah*, as elsewhere in the qur'ānic corpus, we see a direct association of Israel or the Jews with breaking their pledges (vv. 12–13, also a crime of the Christians, v. 14); with spreading corruption in the land (vv. 32–33); with treachery (and thus the believers should not take them or Christians as allies, v. 51); and with the killing of prophets (v. 70).⁷² The last allegation is made a number of times in the Qur'ān, and is especially conspicuous here in the culminating passage in the *sūrah*, which re-

71. Like many of the other long *sūrahs* of the Medinan period, Sūrat al-Mā'idah appears at first glance to be a very heterogeneous collection of ruminations on a mixed bag of topics (cf. Robinson, "Hands Outstretched," 18, citing Neuwirth's characterization of the longer Medinan chapters as *Sammelkörbe* or "collection baskets"). The conspicuous heterogeneity of the later long chapters of the Qur'ān helps to explain the historical reluctance of scholars to see them as unitary compositions. It is easy to sympathize with the "mixed bag" view of Sūrah 5, for it does appear to be a strange combination of legal prescriptions of a very diverse sort with critique of the *ahl al-kitāb*. However, the efforts of scholars such as Robinson and Cuypers have shown that we need not necessarily conclude that diverse contents combined with exceptionally long verses in chapters such as al-Mā'idah means that they are just incoherent jumbles.

72. On this motif, see Gabriel Said Reynolds, "On the Qur'ān and the Theme of Jews as 'Killers of the Prophets,'" *Al-Bayān* 10 (2012): 9–32. As noted, for Cuypers the killing of the righteous is the main theme linking the Cain and Abel episode (specifically Abel's utterance in Q 5:28–29) with the precursor in Matt 23 (specifically the reference to the spilled blood of the holy in v. 35). Admittedly, the claim of the killing of the prophets does not sit well with qur'ānic prophetology as it is understood by the classical Islamic tradition, which generally sees the prophets as safeguarded by God on their missions and inevitably vindicated. The depiction of the apostles in Sūrat al-Mā'idah is typical of that of the Qur'ān as a whole, which sees the *hawāriyyūn* as sincere in their belief but eventually abandoning their faith, the implication being that Christians should return to the original message of Jesus by accepting the qur'ānic prophet—a message writ large over this *sūrah* (see Gabriel Said Reynolds, "The Quran and the Apostles of Jesus," *BSOAS* 76 [2013]: 209–227). As a recent contribution by Younus Mirza shows, the traditional exegetical approach to the qur'ānic disciples of Christ is more nuanced than one might expect; see "The Disciples as Companions: Ibn Taymiyya's and Ibn al-Qayyim's Evaluation of the Transmission of the Bible," *ME* 24 (2018): 530–560.

counts (expressing a clear anti-Christian sentiment) the story of Jesus and his followers and the miracle of the eponymous feast. Notably, no mention is made in this *sūrah* of the death of Jesus. The question of whether the Qur’ān denies the crucifixion of Christ entirely—the position of many Muslim exegetes—is an exceedingly complex one. There is a strong case to be made for another interpretation, namely, that the Qur’ān is here signaling that the events surrounding the execution of Jesus did not transpire as the main culprits, the Jews, intended or thought—though “it seemed so to them” (*shubbiha lahum*, Q 4:157).⁷³ For our present purposes, we will note only that it is difficult to imagine that a chapter that casts Cain as a symbol of Jewish violence and explicitly refers to the Jews killing their prophets invokes the name of Jesus without the crucifixion lurking in the background as a subtext—the preeminent example of Jewish violence targeting a prophet, whether or not the culprits were successful in their aim.⁷⁴

I have highlighted the prominent themes of treachery, violence, and bloodshed (specifically legitimate versus illegitimate bloodshed) in Sūrat al-Mā’idah because this helps us to make sense of the rationale behind the Qur’ān’s engagement of the mishnaic tractate Sanhedrin. The thematic parallels between the two are abundant. In particular, the emphasis in the mishnaic parallel on communal boundaries and stability that we previously remarked is significant, because these themes resonate throughout Sūrat al-Mā’idah as well, albeit refracted through the Qur’ān’s distinct perspective and concerns.

If one accepts Donner’s basic hypothesis of the trajectory of development of communal identity among Muhammad’s followers during the span of his career, then Sūrat al-Mā’idah was evidently composed at a time when this formerly more open and “ecumenical” *ummah* had matured and sought

73. Notably, it has recently been suggested that the point of the famous qur’ānic reference to the crucifixion is to provide a counter-narrative to the portrayal of the execution of Jesus in the Babylonian Talmud, itself a counter-narrative to the gospel tradition. Here (b. Sanh. 43a) Jesus is depicted as a heretic who was executed by a Jewish court by stoning, a depiction meant to contradict the gospel account and thus defang Christian claims about Jesus’s messianic significance. Thus, it is the question of agency that is addressed by Q 4:167, not that of the fact of Jesus’s death per se. See Ian Mevorach, “Qur’ān, Crucifixion, and Talmud: A New Reading of Q 4:157–58,” *Journal of Religion & Society* 19 (2017): 1–21.

74. This is especially likely given that the Gospel precursor for Abel’s statement, Jesus’s condemnation of the Pharisees for killing the prophets in Matt 23:35, hints at his own imminent death, which then serves to implicitly confirm the very indictment he issues here.

to establish not only social and political, but also religious, autonomy.⁷⁵ The *sūrah* repeatedly draws a sharp contrast between the believers and the Jews and Christians to whom they stand opposed, signaling directly that an inflection point in the distinction between communities—a parting of the ways—has been reached: “Today I have perfected your religion for you and made My grace complete, and chosen *al-islām* for you as your religion” (Q 5:3). Whether one sees *islām*/Islam as representing a coherent body of beliefs and practices here or not, *al-islām* is explicitly positioned as a criterion of difference, which corroborates a late date for the *sūrah*. Notably, the tradition itself posits that this verse was one of the last in the corpus, revealed during the Farewell Pilgrimage of 10/632, towards the end of the Prophet’s life. The tradition also recognizes the supersessionist implications of this “perfecting,” with the purification of the rites of the Ka‘bah as the fulfillment of the legacy of Abrahamic monotheism:

Al-Sha‘bī reported: “The verse ‘Today I have perfected your religion ...’ came down when the Prophet was standing at ‘Arafāt, at *mawqif Ibrāhīm*, when idolatry was overcome and the beacon of Jāhiliyyah collapsed, and the people were forbidden from approaching the Ka‘bah naked.”⁷⁶

75. It is worth underscoring that Q 5 is, according to most chronological schemes, a very late composition in the qur’ānic corpus (possibly followed by only two more chapters, *sūrahs* 9 and 110). We may readily observe a strong thematic continuity between al-Mā’idah and al-Tawbah concerning what would become the *status quo* for the *ummah*’s relationships with other communities: Q 5 establishes what would become the mature position towards Jews and Christians mainly on a theological-ideological level, whereas Q 9 takes that position somewhat further, in particular by articulating what would eventually be understood as the Qur’ān’s final policy on *jihād* against unbelievers. On the “ecumenical” nature of the early community, see the influential discussion of Fred Donner in *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2010). Donner’s ideas about the permeable boundaries of the primitive *ummah* have now been developed, in strikingly different ways, by Stephen J. Shoemaker in *The Apocalypse of Empire: Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018) and Juan Cole, *Muhammad: Prophet of Peace amid the Clash of Empires* (Nation Books, 2018); see my review of Shoemaker’s monograph in *RQR* 6.7 (2020).

76. Muhammad Ibn Sa‘d, *Kitāb al-Tabaqāt al-kabīr* [Ibn Saad, *Biographien Muhammads*], ed. Eduard Sachau et al. (9 vols. in 16 parts; Leiden: Brill, 1904–1940), 2.1.135. The reference to the performance of pilgrimage naked is a metonym for the *jāhili* religious order. A *ḥadīth* attested in al-Bukhārī and elsewhere notes that in former times pilgrims circumambulated the Ka‘bah naked (Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Ismā‘il al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-musnad al-ṣahīḥ al-mukhtaṣar*, *al-hajj* 91, *bāb al-wuqūf bi-‘Arafah*, no. 1665); another—attested several times in al-Bukhārī—states that around the time of the Farewell Pilgrimage the Prophet stipulated that idolaters

Thus, this *sūrah* seems to represent a late summation of the qur’ānic author’s perception of, and attitude towards, Jews and Christians, providing an extended critique of their claims and articulating a posture of separation and distinction from these communities. It is therefore not surprising that in vv. 17–18 of the chapter, in the lead-up to the Cain and Abel pericope, we see an explicit condemnation of Christians for their beliefs about Jesus. Those beliefs, the fundamental basis of their distinct sectarian identity, are decried as *kufr*, disbelief.

¹⁷ Those who assert that God is the Messiah, son of Mary, have disbelieved. Say to them: “Who could in the slightest impede Him if He wished to annihilate the Messiah, son of Mary, along with his mother, and everyone else on earth too! Mastery over heaven and earth and everything in between is God’s. He creates as He pleases. God is the one who determines everything.”

Among the verses of the Qur’ān that condemn Christian claims about Jesus, this one is unusual only for its assertion of God’s ability to actually destroy Jesus, Mary, or any other created being as proof of His omnipotence. The passage then continues, explicitly drawing the Jews into the fray:

¹⁸ The Jews and the Christians have said: “We are the children of God, his favorites.” Say to them: “So why does he punish you for your sins? No, you are just human beings He has created; He will forgive whomever He pleases, and punish whomever He pleases. Mastery over heaven and earth and everything in between is God’s, and all paths lead to Him.”

What is striking about these two verses is that they condemn the same offenses that are decried in m. Sanh 4:5. There, it will be recalled, the creation of humanity from the single protoplast Adam was intended “for the sake of maintaining peace among God’s creatures, so that one person should not say to his fellow, ‘My father was greater than yours’; and also so *mînîn* should not say, ‘There are many powers in heaven.’” These verses in the Qur’ān similarly single out two kinds of wrongdoing, the association of lesser beings with God—implying that there are indeed many powers in Heaven—and the claim of favored status with the Deity, even that “we are the children of God”—implying that their father is indeed greater than others’. Beyond these parallels, a broader comparison of the two passages demonstrates conspicuous similarities between them, despite some structural differences. The Mishnah relates the Cain and Abel story, then con-

were no longer to perform the Hajj and no one would be permitted to circumambulate the Ka’bah naked (see, e.g., nos. 4655–4657). See my further comments regarding the dating of Sūrat al-Mā’idah below.

demns those who exalt themselves over others (by saying “my father was greater than yours”), then those who cause strife (in the Jewish community) through associating others with God. In turn, reversing the two points of the critique, the Qur’ān condemns those who associate others with God, and then those who exalt themselves by claiming to be His children and so favored over others. Then, after the intervening passage about the Israelites’ unwillingness to fight (not incidental to the larger argument of this section of the *sūrah*), it relates the Cain and Abel story. The constituent elements of the two passages are basically the same, only presented in a different order.⁷⁷

In light of the larger themes of the *sūrah*, it is not surprising to see Jews and Christians condemned for their teachings here in the passage leading up to the Cain and Abel story. What is more surprising is that they are explicitly condemned both for associating others with God and for vaunting themselves over others—violating those very same principles that the Mishnah asserts in connection with the Cain and Abel story.⁷⁸ The polemic of the qur’ānic account appears to appropriate that of the Mishnah, inverting its structure and subverting its message. The lesson God sought to inculcate in Israel through the creation of humanity through Adam appears to have been forgotten, and so the Qur’ān castigates the Jews for neglecting God’s lesson and vying with others over their putatively chosen status, employing a discursive pattern Jews presumably recognized and understood.⁷⁹

Having appropriated and reoriented the mishnaic message about communal integrity, the qur’ānic passage proceeds to advise the recipients of older revelation where they should turn for correct guidance:

¹⁹ O People of Scripture: Our Messenger has come to you to make things clear to you after a break (*fatrah*) between messengers, so that you cannot say that no bearer of glad tidings or warner has come to you—for a bearer of glad tidings and warner has indeed come, and God is the one who determines everything.

77. Curiously, the question of who has legitimate authority to marshal the people to fight also surfaces in the mishnaic tractate, though it is mentioned there only obliquely, and not in connection with the Cain and Abel narrative (see 1:5, 2:4).

78. Here, of course, the focus is on Christian theological deficiency, whereas that of both Jews and Christians is asserted elsewhere, most notably in the famous statement about their claims about sons of God in Q 9:30. As with the theme of legitimate violence, this motif is yet another conspicuous linkage between the very late Sūrat al-Mā’idah and the (supposedly) penultimate revelation of Sūrat al-Tawbah.

79. In this, the Qur’ān itself replicates the discourse of competition at the very moment it castigates Jews and Christians for engaging in it; cf. Q 2:113.

As is so often the case in the Qur’ān (in distinction to later Muslim doctrine), this passage does not presuppose that the scriptures of older communities are corrupt or invalid. Rather, the message of the older revelations is validated, essentially recapitulated in the new one, with the qur’ānic prophet’s continuity with older messengers underscored.⁸⁰ As if to drive home this point, the *sūrah* then segues to its presentation of the episode of Moses and the Israelites who were reluctant to fight, another appropriation that clearly illustrates the Qur’ān’s compatibility with—or rather supplanting—of older scripture. As already noted, that episode then transitions to that of the two sons of Adam.

In keeping with this dynamic of appropriation and reorientation, it is striking that both the Mishnah and the Qur’ān explicitly anchor the rule or law concerning the value of life in revelation. The qur’ānic story of the sons of Adam emphasizes that Israel should know about this principle because it was ordained for them in their own scripture (v. 32). This is then reiterated by God asserting that “Our messengers have come to them with clear signs” (*wa-la-qad jā’athum rusulunā bi’l-bayyināt*, v. 32 continued), which again emphasizes Israel’s previous reception of God’s grace through revelation. This directly parallels the Mishnah’s statement that “therefore was man created alone in the world initially, to teach you that the one who causes a single soul to perish, scripture imputes it to him (*ma’aleh ‘alav ha-katūv*) as if he had caused an entire world to perish ...”⁸¹ The Mishnah likewise asserts the principle’s scriptural foundation: this lesson was the whole point of relating the story in Genesis, and the Mishnah even goes so far as to assert that it is scripture itself that indicts the murderer. Scripture holds the one who slays another responsible; there is no doubt that they are accountable because scripture makes the rule plain, through relating the narrative of Cain’s killing of Abel.

In short, we here witness the Qur’ān deliberately echoing rabbinic tradition by alluding to a biblical story, to articulate—as rabbinic tradition does—a rule rooted in divine revelation. One might be tempted to infer that such a gesture communicates what we today would call an ecumen-

80. On the qur’ānic conception of *tahrīf* in distinction to that articulated in later Muslim tradition, see Gabriel Said Reynolds, “On the Qur’anic Accusation of Scriptural Falsification (*tahrīf*) and Christian Anti-Jewish Polemic,” *JAOS* 130 (2010): 189–202.

81. Note that the Yerushalmi removes the reference to scripture, making it only implicit; thus, the Guggenheimer edition reads “the one who causes a single soul to perish, it is imputed to him (*ma’alīn ‘alav*) as if he had caused an entire world to perish...” (*The Jerusalem Talmud*, ed. and trans. Guggenheimer, 165).

ical lesson: the Qur’ān asserts both the integrity of older revelation—what was ordained for Israel—and a basic commonality of moral sensibility here. Verse 32 is in fact often cited in popular discourse as expressing exactly this sentiment, usually intended to underscore both the fundamental respect for human life as primary in Muslim ethics and Islam’s compatibility with “Western values.” But reading the convergence of Mishnah and Qur’ān as a specimen of pre-modern ecumenism is clearly anachronistic if we conflate it with or project it onto the original historical milieu that the Qur’ān was revealed to address. Rather, given the overarching thrust of the *sūrah*, we must conclude that the rabbinic precursor has been deliberately appropriated and its major themes strategically reconstrued to propel a more strident, if not openly militant, message.

Verse 32 in the qur’ānic passage states, like m. Sanh. 4:5, that killing a single soul is like killing all of humanity, but the Qur’ān then goes on to add an important caveat as well. It makes exceptions to this principle in cases of retribution for murder or manslaughter or spreading corruption in the land (*faṣād fī ’l-ard*). As we saw above, vv. 33–34 following then lay out the penalties for fighting God and His messenger or spreading corruption in the land, implying that the people who are doing so are a very proximate danger. The culprits are threatened with a series of grave penalties—death, crucifixion, mutilation, or exile. If they do not repent—and they can repent, for God is merciful and turns to those who offer sincere repentance—“their lot is humiliation in this world, and a tremendous punishment in the next” (v. 33). For numerous reasons, it is not implausible to conclude that this warning is here issued against the Jews—presumably not Jews in general, but rather a specific group that presented a manifest threat to the qur’ānic prophet’s community.⁸²

The message of the text here is quite clear: scripture not only relates a lesson to Israel in the story of Cain and Abel, but uses it as a medium to communicate what is essentially a divine law. In the Mishnah, whether the rule can be read as intended for all humanity is really immaterial; the text is concerned with its application to Israel specifically—Jews must understand the rule that God intended them to observe, whether or not it applies to gentiles. In the Qur’ān, the textual logic is inverted, and two crucial changes

82. The reference in v. 33 to “humiliation in this world and a tremendous punishment in the next” recurs at the conclusion of v. 41 as the penalty exacted from the Jews for their distortion of God’s revelation. Further, the general theme of the Jews being punished by humiliation in this world, here conveyed by the term *khizy*, resonates with references to the disgrace (*dhillah*) visited on Israel or the *ahl al-kitāb* for their crimes elsewhere in the Qur’ān (e.g., Q 2:61, 3:112, 7:152).

in interpretation occur. First, the rule itself is here construed not simply as “thou shalt not kill” but rather as “thou shalt not kill except for legitimate reasons”—a more practical guideline for life in pre-Islamic Arabia (to say nothing of biblical Israel), with the specific crimes that actually do merit the penalty of death adumbrated here. The second shift in interpretation of the rule is even more consequential: it is not primarily the Jews to whom the rule about not killing is being communicated, though they were its original audience; rather, now it is the Jews who fall into the category of the express *exceptions* to the rule. They are no longer the subjects of its mandate, but rather its object. It is the shedding of Jewish blood that is now legitimated, because they have committed those crimes in response to which the rule is justifiably suspended. They should have known better, for their own scripture bears witness to the truth.⁸³

Numerous aspects of the text corroborate this interpretation; the most conspicuous are the allusions to spreading corruption in the land in the passage, which is a *locus classicus* for the concept in the Qur’ān. The discourse surrounding “corruption” and “excess” reverberates throughout the corpus. In Meccan passages, *fasād* is often associated with the peoples of the past who were subjected to God’s punishment and destroyed.⁸⁴ In earlier *sūrahs* it is sometimes at least implicitly connected to violence, as when Pharaoh is characterized as “one who spreads corruption” (*innahu kāna*

83. The notion that the Jews are indicted of various crimes by their own scripture is found throughout early and late antique Christian polemical literature. For example, in a passage from Ephrem’s *Hymns on Faith*, he states bluntly of Israel’s sin with the Golden Calf: “Behold, their Calf proclaims their sin; their scripture testifies to it”; see Ephrem, *Hymnen de Fide* 61.10, ed. and trans. Edmund Beck (2 vols.; Louvain: L. Durbecq, 1955), 1.190. This is not the only passage in the Qur’ān in which the authority of Torah is invoked to justify violence; compare Q 9:111, which cites Torah, Gospel, and Qur’ān alike to validate the everlasting covenant, the promise of reward to those who kill and are killed fighting in the cause of God that the Qur’ān articulates in the Medinan period (cf. Q 3:169, 33:23). But this passage in Sūrat al-Mā’idah is unusual in invoking the testimony of Torah to legitimate violence against the children of Israel themselves.

84. In perhaps the earliest passage to refer to *fasād* (according to the traditional chronology), it is mentioned as the crime of various wrongdoers who received severe chastisement from God: ‘Ād, Thamūd, and Pharaoh (Q 89:6–14). This characterization recurs throughout the Meccan *sūrahs* (see, e.g., Q 7:74.85.103, 27:48, 89:12). Further, in the Meccan *sūrahs* corruption is a cardinal sin that distinguishes believers from infidels as inheritors of paradise (see, e.g., Q 28:77, 28:83, 38:28), and the believers are often warned against it, just as peoples of the past were warned (and, failing to heed the warning, were destroyed).

mina 'l-mufsidīn) in connection with the slaughter of the Israelite children (Q 28:4).⁸⁵ However, it is in Medinan passages that an additional dimension emerges in the discourse surrounding *fasād*. While the motif continues to recur in the recollection of ancient peoples or general admonitions to believers, in later *sūrahs* it comes into focus as the activity of a community that opposes the qur'ānic prophet in the here and now. Insofar as *fasād* is still invoked in connection with figures of the past, this is done to underscore the gravity of transgressions being committed in the present. In Medinan chapters *fasād* implies violence both as a provocation that cannot be ignored and as the justified response to such provocation, as here in Sūrat al-Mā'idah, where the most drastic penalties against its perpetrators are not only sanctioned but mandated. This corruption is a crime against people, nature, and God alike that demands a resolute response.

Moreover, it is not an overstatement to say that in the Medinan period *fasād* becomes strongly associated with the Jews as a proximate threat to the qur'ānic prophet and his *ummah*. Already in the middle Meccan Sūrat al-Isrā', Israel is indicted of *fasād* in a most dramatic way: it was in response to their corruption that God ordained the destruction of the Temple, not once but twice (Q 17:4)—an exceedingly grave penalty for a grave crime. Notably—and rather reminiscent of Q 5:32—God decreed this in their scripture (*qadaynā ilā banī 'isrā'ila fī 'l-kitāb*), and so they were fairly warned. In *sūrahs* conventionally identified as Medinan, the linkage between the Jews and *fasād* becomes more frequent, and more momentous; it aligns Israel with wrongdoers of the past, like their former oppressor Pharaoh, or with the impending chaos and destruction of a possibly imminent apocalyptic age, like the *fasād* Gog and Magog are prophesied to wreak upon the earth (Q 18:94).⁸⁶

85. Elsewhere, Pharaoh's role as a *mufsid* is confirmed by God at the moment of his death (Q 10:91). Pharaoh's *fasād* acquires an ironic tinge, since in multiple passages the Egyptians are said to have oppressed the Israelites out of fear that they would commit *fasād* in their land (e.g., Q 7:127, 40:26). In a previous age, Joseph's brothers were anxious to deny precisely the charge of having come to Egypt to commit *fasād* (Q 12:73); Abdel Haleem's rendering as "make mischief" downplays the gravity of the accusation.

86. The notion of *fasād* as a specifically apocalyptic type of corruption perpetrated by Jews—heralding or even precipitating the End Times—is developed in both classical and modern Islamic culture, for example in the jihadist rhetoric of Hamas. See Anne Marie Oliver and Paul Steinberg, *The Road to Martyrs' Square* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 107–110.

A new emphasis on *fasād* is already conspicuous in the Medinan manifesto Sūrat al-Baqarah, and many of the pointed references to it here are clearly, if only implicitly, aimed at Jews (which would obviously be significant soon after the *hijrah* to Medina, if one accepts the traditional chronology of revelation). Thus, at the beginning of the *sūrah* those who profess to believe in God and the Last Day but do not really believe are warned not to spread corruption; in response they claim that they are just doing what is right, despite the fact that what they are doing is clearly *fasād* (Q 2:11–12).⁸⁷ Somewhat further on, we find a denunciation of those who have broken God's covenant after having sincerely pledged obedience (*allādhīna yanqudūna 'ahdā 'llāhi min ba'di mithāqihī*), and spreading corruption is then added to the charge (Q 2:27).

Sūrat al-Baqarah also contains the famous objection of the angels to God's creation of Adam (Q 2:30): "Will you create on earth one who will spread corruption in it, and shed blood (*man yufsidu fīhā wa-yasfiku 'l-dimā'a*)?" Like the objection to murder in Sūrat al-Mā'idah, this reference to primordial history may seem to imply a universalizing context.⁸⁸ However, if the particular conjunction of *fasād* and bloodshed here really is meant to be universal, then it is anomalous, as somewhat later on in the *sūrah*, Moses is depicted warning his people not to spread corruption, returning to an Israelite focus for the concept, and naturally implying that his people disobeyed and *did* spread corruption (Q 2:60).⁸⁹ We might also note the

87. Literally, they claim that they are "making things right," *muṣliḥīn*; it is tempting to think of this *islāh* as *tiqqūn* *ōlam*, a concept generally associated with kabbalistic thought but with roots in the Mishnah, where it appears in chapter 4 of the tractate Gittin several times. Sometimes it seems to be a shorthand for what we would convey with the phrase "making the world a better place," though at other times it seems to mean something more like "maintaining good order" or even simply "best practices."

88. The traditions on the protoplasts in the Hebrew Bible are often read as naturally speaking to the experience of universal humanity. Against this, see Seth D. Postell, *Adam as Israel: Genesis 1–3 as the Introduction to the Torah and Tanakh* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 2011), which emphasizes the commonsensical, but usually overlooked, conclusion that the protoplast traditions speak not to lessons about the general human condition but rather foreshadow major themes in God's relationship with Israel as articulated throughout the biblical corpus.

89. Note the contrast with the previously remarked Meccan passages in which Pharaoh accuses the Israelites of *fasād* or the brothers of Joseph anxiously deny the allegation. Here, *fasād* is something that is much more closely associated with Israel as perpetrators. As noted above, Q 2:60–61 contains a somewhat veiled allusion to the story of the spies that is more fully rehearsed in Sūrat al-Mā'idah, where it fore-

reference in the late Meccan or Medinan *Sūrat al-Ra'*d to those who spread corruption in the land being cursed and promised a “terrible abode,” *sū'* *al-dār* (Q 13:25). The emphasis on natural phenomena as signaling divine sovereignty and peerlessness that predominates in the *sūrah* might at first suggest that the argument is staged against pagans, as would the reference to the prophet’s interlocutors denying the resurrection (Q 13:5). However, in Q 13:25 those who are guilty of *fasād* are again said to have broken God’s covenant after having sincerely pledged obedience, a recurrence of the allegation made against the Jews in Q 2:27 that uses the same terminology.⁹⁰

The discourse surrounding *fasād* in the Qur’ān then reaches a crescendo in *Sūrat al-Mā’idah*, where it continues to be strongly associated with the Jews. As we have seen, in v. 32 *fasād fi ’l-ard* is one of the two major exceptions that justifies homicide. Later in that verse an allusion is made to those “who commit excesses in the land” (*fi’ l-ard la-musrīfin*); then, in the very next verse, severe corporal punishment is prescribed for those “who spread corruption in the land,” using phrasing slightly different from before (*yas’awna fi ’l-ard fasādan*, v. 33).⁹¹ The immediate context heavily implies that the Jews are meant here, and subsequent verses of the *sūrah* seem to bear this out.⁹² For a moment, it may seem like a less focused denunciation of wrongdoing is being offered here, on the basis of vv. 38–39, where the

shadows the legitimate, obligatory violence commanded of the Israelites (Q 5:20–26) that is contrasted with the illegitimate violence perpetrated by Cain (vv. 27–31).

90. The specific mention of damnation here is reminiscent of the previously cited reference to the *fasād* of Israel in *Sūrat al-Isrā’*. There the Jews are offered the choice of mercy in exchange for sincere repentance or perdition; God avers that “We have made Hell a prison for unbelievers” (Q 17:8).

91. Immediately afterwards, damnation is again mentioned; here it is promised to those who disbelieve, but the context suggests that those who are guilty of *fasād* in vv. 32–33 are also those accused of *kufr* and so threatened with the penalty of the Fire in vv. 36–37.

92. Q 5:33 is conventionally termed the *hirābah* verse and has long been understood as the primary basis for the qur’ānic penalty for “brigandage” or robbery. In classical discussions of the verse, commentators recognize a variety of occasions for its revelation, and frequently dissociate it from the Jews (or *ahl al-kitāb*) as the specific referent. For an illuminating discussion of the often hair-raising reports on violent crime and its just deserts that comprises the early juristic discourse on the subject, see Khalid Abou El Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 47–60. Similarly, in a recent discussion Juan Cole argues, on the basis of parallels with Justinianic law, that the *hirābah* verse is informed by the “logic of punishment” generally operative in the Roman Empire, and so he likeways downplays the specifically Jewish context of the verse; see “Muhammad and Justinian: Roman Legal Traditions and the Qur’ān,” *JNES* 79 (2020): 183–196.

punishment for theft is declared. But the Jews come sharply back into focus in v. 40, where they are again explicitly mentioned as distorting scripture, with further deficiencies mentioned in vv. 41–43, leading up to the adumbration of the *lex talionis* in v. 44.

We have already noted the more generalized critique of the People of Scripture that unfolds in subsequent verses in this *sūrah*, alternating with more specific critique of the Jews for various failings. The link between the Jews and violence then recurs in the much-commented v. 64, which asserts directly that God's revelation to the Jews only increases their rebelliousness (*tughyān*) and disbelief; their enmity to the believers is everlasting; "every time they kindle the fire of war, God snuffs it out, yet still they spread corruption in the land (*wa-yas‘awna fī ’l-ard fasādan*), though God does not love the corrupters." *Sūrat al-Mā’idah*'s emphatic statements about the *mufsidīn* reach its climax here; the root *f-s-d* does not appear again in the *sūrah*, nor does it recur in the last two chapters of the corpus. We should thus see this cluster of references to *fasād* and related concepts in *Sūrat al-Mā’idah* as the Qur’ān’s final word on the matter; while *fasād* is by no means exclusively connected with Israel in the Qur’ān, by the time of the final revelations, it is established as distinctly characteristic of them.

In short, the link between *fasād* and the Jews in *Sūrat al-Mā’idah* is the culmination of a longer discursive trajectory that develops gradually in the qur’ānic corpus. Older strata of the corpus emphasize failings and offenses of the Jews that are essentially theological in nature—their traducing the qur’ānic prophet, their disputing with him over various matters, their concealment and distortion of what was revealed to them.⁹³ By the time *Sūrat al-Mā’idah* is revealed, spreading corruption in the land is presented as a direct and tangible offense against God’s law, a “subversion of God’s created order,” in opposition to the mandate of the community of the believers to promote peace and uphold the divine law.⁹⁴ It is an offense wrought not by words or in the heart but with actual deeds, and notably, Q 5:33–34 is the only passage in the Qur’ān that mandates actual this-worldly punishment for its commission.⁹⁵ This conception of how the Jews have transgressed

93. This discourse continues in Medinan *sūrahs* as well, however; for example, one might note that all of the qur’ānic references to *tahrīf*, the misrepresentation of scripture, are Medinan (Q 2:75, 4:46, 5:13.41).

94. Frederick Mathewson Denny, “Corruption,” *EQ*, s.v. (2001). Denny notes *fasād* as a direct and severe subversion of the divine order on earth, in contrast to the Jews’ concealment and distortion of the truth (including, for example, *tahrīf*), but he fails to remark the conspicuous linkage of the latter as well as the former with the Jews.

95. Thus Abou El Fadl (*Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law*, 47–48).

the law revealed to them and so contemned the divine will by their actions and not just their words fits the martial and activist mentality exhibited in Medinan discourse well, especially its positioning of the qur'ānic prophet's community as the agents who will take up arms to exact divine retribution for these crimes.

This is all to say that there is much more at stake in the implicit analogy Sūrat al-Mā'īdah draws between Cain and the Jews than previous commentators have recognized. There are, of course, multiple facets to the parallelism established between them in the chapter. Thus, early in the *sūrah*, mention is made of God's protecting the believers when a "group" (or "people," *qawm*) "stretched out their hands against you, but He kept their hands away from you" (v. 11). It is not difficult to imagine that this refers to the *ummah*'s Jewish opponents, and later, similar terminology is used to refer to Abel's anticipation of violence from Cain: "If you stretch out your hand against me to kill me, I won't stretch out my hand against you to kill you" (v. 28). The image of the outstretched hand recurs again later on, with quite a different valence, in a famous verse, in which God's power to restrain the hands of the community's enemies is certainly a subtext (v. 64): "The Jews say, 'God's hand is bound'—may their hands be bound instead! May they be cursed for what they say, for both His hands are outstretched. He dispenses His bounty as He pleases."⁹⁶ Triangulating between these verses, it is not difficult to read their import: Cain's violence against Abel recurs in that threatened by the Jews against the qur'ānic prophet and his community, but unlike that primordial precursor, now that violence is deflected by God, and the only outstretched hand that matters is God's, bestowing His largesse upon the faithful.⁹⁷

A variety of other lexical symmetries and resonances throughout the *sūrah* reinforces the connection between Cain and the Jews. In v. 30, Cain murders Abel because "his soul urged him on" (*tawwa'at lahu nafsu*); by murdering his brother, he "joined the ranks of the losers" (*khāsirīn*). In vv. 51–53, the believers are exhorted not to take Jews and Christians as allies; they will come to sorrow because of what they concealed in their souls, and have now "joined the ranks of the losers."⁹⁸ Another important point of

96. On this well-known verse in the Qur'ān, see below.

97. Notably, Robinson does not see v. 11 or 28 as symmetrical with 64. He observes a particularly prominent wordplay between "hand" (*yad*, also appearing here as *aydīhim*, "their hands") and "Jew" (*yahūd*) in v. 64 ("Hands Outstretched," 13). Presumably if *yad* is meant to bring to mind *yahūd* here in this verse, it would in vv. 11 and 28 as well.

98. Thus Robinson (*ibid.*, 12–13).

thematic symmetry between Cain and the Jews is the reference to “recompense,” *jazā’*.⁹⁹ Before his death, Abel reminds Cain that wrongdoers receive recompense in the Fire (v. 29); the term *jazā’* again appears in v. 33, where it refers not to the afterlife but rather the corporal punishment inflicted on those who wage war on God and His messenger, though a terrible penalty (*‘adhāb ‘azīm*) in the afterlife is mentioned here as well.⁹⁹

All of these parallels and associations bolster the presentation of the *fasād* of the Jews who oppose the qur’ānic prophet and his community as an emblematic sin of Israel, a contemporary recurrence of the primordial violence and malice of their precursor Cain. The Qur’ān relates the story of the sons of Adam as a cautionary tale, intended to communicate a very specific message to its audience. On account of Cain’s sin, God clearly prohibited killing for Israel; this rule implicitly applies to everyone, but especially to the Jews because this was communicated to them as revelation. But the Qur’ān adds exceptions to the mishnaic version of the rule, for killing is legitimate as a penalty for certain crimes, especially spreading corruption in the land. However, who is it that spreads corruption in the land? It is the Jews themselves; as they are guilty of grave transgressions, they deserve to have the penalty for *fasād* imposed on them. The Qur’ān’s incorporation and reconstruing of the rabbinic principle, integrated into the argument that the Jews should know all this and accept the penalty for their behavior, can hardly be construed as ecumenical, as it has sometimes been read.

We should also note that even in adumbrating exceptions to the rule about homicide—and thus legitimating combat against a manifest Jewish threat—the Qur’ān here too follows the precedent set by the Mishnah, adapting it in keeping with its own perspective and context. In the later parts of the mishnaic tractate in which the Cain and Abel passage is found, the question of communal integrity raised by the previous reference to sectarians recurs, in terms that once again resonate quite clearly with numerous parallels in *Sūrat al-Mā’idah*.

Thus, chapter 10 of tractate *Sanhedrin* discusses those who are “real” Israelites (those who have a share in the world to come) and those who are not. Here contemporary and biblical history are telescoped as the text relates various examples of scriptural characters whose behavior put them beyond the bounds of redemption; this is a familiar feature of the Qur’ān, in *Sūrat al-Mā’idah* and elsewhere, and yet another way in which mishnaic

99. Notably, the term *jazā’* appears three more times in the *sūrah*, in reference to this-worldly punishment for the thief (v. 38); reward for the righteous in the afterlife (v. 75); and an atoning compensation believers must pay if they violate the sanctity of the *haram* (v. 95).

discourse seems to anticipate it. Critically, the latter half of this chapter in Sanhedrin discusses an extreme example, the purgative violence in which loyal Israelites are licensed to engage when they take up arms to eliminate an erring city (*‘ir ha-niddahat*; cf. Deut 13:13–18). This is the hypothetical case of an entire community meriting destruction by the righteous when led astray by hopelessly corrupt men; here, quite obviously, the rule to take care in exacting the penalty of death simply does not apply.¹⁰⁰

The next chapter, the conclusion of tractate Sanhedrin, is mostly concerned with the problem of illegitimate authority. Communal elders who overstep their bounds in issuing rulings outside their jurisdiction are to be judged by the highest courts; further, false prophets are mentioned here as particularly dangerous, even if their judgments conform to the halakhah. Notably, like the denizens of the straying town and others whose crimes justify the suspension of the general rule against killing, false prophets are also directly prescribed the penalty of death.¹⁰¹ As in Sūrat al-Mā’idah, here too in Mishnah tractate Sanhedrin there are clear limits to the idea that slaying a single soul is like slaying all humanity. Killing is in fact warranted, it seems, if the crime of those marked for death is extreme enough. Notably, those so marked are subversives, those whose claims might hold some appeal for the believing community, but must be stridently rejected—or even suppressed by force. This too seems to anticipate the Qur’ān’s presentation of the Jews in Sūrat al-Mā’idah as the primary agents of corruption in the land.¹⁰²

100. M. Sanh. 10:4–6. Earlier in the tractate authority to declare the blood of the denizens of such a city licit is reserved for the Sanhedrin (1:5).

101. As with the city led astray into godlessness, authority to mandate the death sentence for a false prophet is reserved for the Sanhedrin (1:5). It is perhaps significant that here the court’s authority to administer capital punishment to both the denizens of the apostate city and the false prophet is asserted alongside that of sanctioning a king’s declaration of war (*milhemet ha-reshūt*, that is, a war initiated by the king and not fought either by divine mandate or in self-defense; see note 77 above).

102. In his 2008 dissertation, Peter Matthews Wright argues that the point of the Qur’ān’s allusion to the Mishnah here is that both seek “to limit the opportunities to impose capital sanctions upon specific crimes” (“Modern Qur’anic Hermeneutics,” Ph.D diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2008, 160). I would suggest that this reading misses the point of both texts’ approach to the question of when violence may be sanctioned, and against whom. I owe this reference to Marianna Klar.

Scriptural Virtuosity and Intercommunal Politics

Overall, the Cain and Abel pericope in *Sūrat al-Mā’idah* demonstrates why we must be as attentive as possible to the nuances of the Qur’ān’s appropriation and deployment of the textual artifacts of pre-Islamic Jewish tradition. Naturally, the possible origin of any given tradition—the focus of much of the classic literature on source criticism of the Qur’ān, such as it is—tends to galvanize the scholar’s attention, particularly for what it may reveal of the obscure origins of much of the qur’ānic corpus. But we must also consider how received material is adapted, rescripted, and recombined with other materials; in which literary settings within the qur’ānic corpus; and—most importantly—to what end. As I have shown, in this pericope, we have a biblical story that is viewed through the lens of a Jewish predecessor, but partially informed by the perspective of older Christian tradition as well. However, it is the dynamism and sophistication of the Qur’ān’s engagement with the Jewish literary matrix that is most significant here: its presentation of the story reflects not only deep familiarity with the proximate context in which the story appears in the Mishnah, but is also designed to appropriate and subvert the specific claims of the rabbinic precursor in an extremely subtle, deft, and effective way.

In contrast to the former emphasis on Muhammad’s passive reception of influences drawn from his environment—“Abrahamic” scriptural traditions of which his pagan allies and adversaries were only superficially aware at best—contemporary scholars typically view qur’ānic appropriations and subversions of older scriptural and parascriptural materials as deliberate reconfigurations of discourses that were deeply familiar to its audience.¹⁰³ To revisit a point made at the beginning of this article, over the last ten to fifteen years, scholars have investigated numerous examples of this phenomenon, but generally in relation to Christian materials, usually in Syriac. It is here, many have argued, that we find the most plausible literary and

103. The shift in scholarly understanding of the Qur’ān’s interlocutors from primarily pagan to acculturated in some form of monotheist tradition is perhaps one of the most lasting contributions of revisionism to the discipline of Qur’ānic Studies. See the classic discussion of G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), arguing that accusations of *shirk* represent a form of intra-monotheist polemical discourse; compare the studies collected in Patricia Crone, *The Qur’ānic Pagans and Related Matters: Collected Studies in Three Volumes*, vol. 1, ed. Hanna Siurua (Leiden: Brill, 2016), many of which argue that the qur’ānic “pagans” were entirely cognizant of, and even cited, standard monotheistic concepts but rejected them (thus the dismissal of the qur’ānic message as “tales of the ancients” and so forth).

religious horizons of qur'ānic discourse. Whereas scholars once emphasized the Qur'ān's origin as a wholesale, unsophisticated borrowing of rabbinic tradition, today many are convinced that the genesis of Islam's scripture lies in a persistent, subtle, and proficient engagement with late antique works of mainly Christian provenance such as the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, the Aramaic gospels and Acts traditions, the Alexander Romance, the *Diatesseron*, and the hymns and homilies of Ephrem, Aphrahat, and Jacob of Sarug.¹⁰⁴

In certain ways, *Sūrat al-Mā'idah* fits this pattern. It is particularly concerned to refute Christian claims about Jesus, and (as Reynolds has shown in regard to the eponymous story of the heavenly table) it makes use of a subtle interweaving of pentateuchal, psalmic, and gospel traditions to polemicize against the errors and waywardness of Jesus's disciples, critiquing contemporary Christians as the heirs of the errant *hawāriyyūn* rather than true followers of Jesus. As regards the Cain and Abel pericope, here too we see a nuanced engagement with a traditional Christian portrayal of Abel as a prefiguration of Christ; and it is likewise possible that the association of the raven with the story has Christian roots as well. To many, it would seem irrefutable that the background and context for this *sūrah* must have been predominantly Christian.

Given the current popularity of such an approach—entirely justified, in this author's view—the qur'ānic engagement with rabbinic texts seems to fade as a concern. At the very least, the goal of uncovering the Jewish influences supposedly borrowed by Muhammad now seems far less relevant, in comparison to its centrality for Geiger and his followers. However, our discussion here has shown the striking parallels between the overarching concerns of both the mishnaic tractate and the qur'ānic *sūrah* in question: the circumstances under which punitive violence, especially but not exclusively in the administration of justice, is legitimate; the necessary foundation of such legitimacy in revelation; and the rigorous defense of communal

104. The bibliography on the impact of Syriac literature on the Qur'an is sizeable and continues to grow. For representative treatments of this theme as pertains to the *Didascalia*, see Holger Zellentin, *The Qur'an's Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum as a Point of Departure* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) and Pregill, *Golden Calf*, 412–420; to the Aramaic gospels, see Emran El-Badawi, *The Qur'an and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014); to the Alexander Romance, see Kevin van Bladel, "The Alexander Legend in the Qur'an 18:83–102," in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 175–203 and Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Apocalypse of Empire: Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 79–86.

integrity. Both texts idealize a believing community that is distinguished by its submission to the divine will and seeks to regulate violence and bloodshed through the guidance of revelation, such that engaging in violence vindicates the authority of both revelation and communal leadership. It is not an overstatement to say that for both Mishnah and Qur’ān, violence as regulated through revelation becomes *constitutive* of community and identity. Through this process, the public sphere, in which the administration of justice through various means necessarily occurs, is rendered or reconfigured as holy through the explicit policing and governing of the collective according to a divinely mandated code of justice.

This is a quintessentially late antique nexus of concerns, and so it is not surprising to find it reflected in both Mishnah Sanhedrin and Sūrat al-Mā’idah, though they are separated by some three hundred years.¹⁰⁵ However, the finesse with which the Qur’ān elaborates on these themes by revisiting their treatment in the Mishnah, signaled most of all by the subversive recontextualization of the mishnaic portrayal of Cain and Abel and the ethical lesson drawn therefrom, provokes significant questions. It is perhaps not going too far to suggest that Sūrat al-Mā’idah seeks to establish its own authority and bona fides as a replacement for the Mishnah among both Jews and the followers of the qur’ānic prophet. At the very least, we must recognize that both texts serve as an elaboration on or recapitulation of Torah, and seek to renovate Torah for their respective audiences. But while the Mishnah speaks exclusively to Israel, the Qur’ān clearly speaks to Israel and *ummah* alike—or rather, it seeks to compel Israel to recognize its claims and subordinate itself to the *ummah*, threatening severe sanctions against recalcitrant Jews who do not submit: “humiliation in this world, and a tremendous punishment in the next, except for those who repent before you overpower them” (Q 5:33–34).

Sūrat al-Mā’idah is particularly important as evidence of a late stage of development of qur’ānic discourse (and presumably the attitude and ideology of the prophetic community on the eve of the Arab conquests). On the one hand, it adopts a strong rhetorical posture of distinction and separation from older communities who do not recognize the authority of its prophet and scripture. On the other, strategic use is made of the very scriptural traditions and materials cited by those older communities as warrant for

105. My debt to the work of Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), is no doubt conspicuous here. One of the panels on which I originally presented this research, “Violence and Belief in the Qur’ānic Milieu,” was devoted to papers inspired by or addressing Sizgorich’s work.

their claims, appropriated and exploited for the qur’ānic author’s own ends, on behalf of the fledgling *ummah*. This is reminiscent of how Jewish authors of the Second Temple period crafted apologia for Judaism by using the philosophical constructs, literary forms, and conceptual categories of their Greco-Roman interlocutors, or how Christian sources of late antique Syria and Mesopotamia (e.g., the *Didascalia*) drew on a rich body of traditions of clear Jewish ambience to legitimate their own community and delegitimize others. The necessity of forcing a distinction from *both* Jews and Christians is evident here in the *sūrah*, which may help to explain its simultaneous exploitation of conspicuously Jewish and Christian intertexts. In any event, the fundamental anchoring of *Sūrat al-Mā’idah*’s arguments in a particular specimen of authoritative rabbinic tradition is difficult to deny; its engagement with the mishnaic tractate *Sanhedrin* seems neither accidental nor incidental.

I will conclude here by taking note of two recent trends in research on the Qur’ān. The first is that a number of other scholars have similarly revisited Geiger’s thesis of a primary Jewish impact on the Qur’ān, recalibrating his observations, supplementing them in new ways, or otherwise seeking to illuminate the Jewish matrix in which various qur’ānic passages, themes, and claims were shaped. Sometimes these scholars’ findings corroborate my own (or those of Geiger, for that matter). One example is Mehdi Azaiez’s analysis of the dialogical form found in a number of qur’ānic passages concerning resurrection, for which he adduces a striking parallel in the Babylonian Talmud (notably, in tractate *Sanhedrin*); comparing these passages, one sees that “not only shared themes but also equivalent literary forms … indicate the case for intertextuality.”¹⁰⁶ Somewhat more broadly, Abdulla Galadari has postulated that the qur’ānic passages on the *qiblah* represent not the physical direction for prayer prescribed for the believers, but rather a discourse concerning the importance of purifying and properly directing the heart towards God when engaging in prayer. In support of this interpretation, he cites a number of passages from both the Pentateuch and talmudic tradition, implying an intertextual connection between them.¹⁰⁷ A

106. “The Eschatological Counter-Discourse in the Qur’ān and in the Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 90b–91a,” in Holger M. Zellentin (ed.), *The Qur’ān’s Reformation of Judaism and Christianity: Return to the Origins* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 261–270, 269.

107. “The *Qibla*: An Allusion to the *Shema*,” *CIS* 9 (2013): 165–194. Unfortunately, inquiries into the significance of the term *qiblah* in qur’ānic discourse have fostered a rather freewheeling and at times even conspiratorial line of research arguing that the mosques of the proto-Muslim community were initially oriented in a variety of

third example is the recent research of Saqib Hussain, who stages a provocative argument concerning a much-discussed passage from *Sūrat al-Nisā'*; in his view, Q 4:34, long controversial for its apparent sanction of physical discipline against a disobedient wife, actually concerns suspicions of adultery, and should be read in proximity with—or even as an allusion to—the mishnaic discussion of the *sōṭah* ritual undertaken to ascertain the guilt or innocence of a woman accused of fornication.¹⁰⁸

Each of the aforementioned studies argues that qur'ānic passages may be illuminated through reference to a parallel in a normative rabbinic source, including the Mishnah. Notably, their authors are generally agnostic regarding the implications for our larger understanding of how the *Qur'ān* relates to older scriptural forms and discourses—the how and the why that explains the instrumentality and intentionality behind intertextuality.

In another recent piece, Shari Lowin reaches conclusions that are in this respect closer to mine. In investigating the aforementioned claim in the *Qur'ān* that the Jews say God's hand is bound, Lowin identifies an important precursor in a piyyut or liturgical composition ascribed to El'azar ha-Qallir, a Jewish poet of the pre-Islamic period. Notably, the qur'ānic verse does not echo or allude to the poem, but rather critiques the language and imagery found therein: in the piyyut, as well as other, conceptually adjacent, Jewish traditions, God is said to have restrained Himself from protecting Israel at moments when they merited punishment for their sins, enacted against them through the depredations of their worldly enemies and persecutors. The qur'ānic verse deftly appropriates this idea, but shifts its context and alters its meaning in order to belittle the Jews for what they believe. Here the evident textual precursor cannot be understood as a mere “influence,” but rather must be viewed as a critical stimulus that provoked a polemical response. Most significantly, the point of the qur'ānic riposte is not simply to challenge the theological integrity of the idea that God can be restrained somehow, but rather to subtly undermine the claim of a special covenantal relationship implied by the Jewish source material.¹⁰⁹

Michael Graves reaches similar conclusions in his analysis of the image of God raising the mountain over Israel during the revelation of Torah at Sinai, a scene that is portrayed in four different *sūrahs* of the *Qur'ān* as well

different directions, or even that Islam originated in an Arab settlement north of the Hijāz, for example in Nabataea.

108. “The Bitter Lot of the Rebellious Wife: Hierarchy, Obedience, and Punishment in Q. 4:34,” *JQS* 23.2 (2021): 66–111.

109. Shari L. Lowin, “*The Jews Say the Hand of God is Chained*: Q. 5:64 as a Response to a Midrash in a *piyyut* by R. El'azar ha-Kallir,” *JQS* 21.2 (2019): 108–139.

as in two passages in the Babylonian Talmud. In the qur’ānic presentation, this motif is deployed in such a way as to insinuate that Israel only accepted the Torah under duress; notably, this is also the sentiment of the talmudic treatment of the episode.¹¹⁰ However, the qur’ānic treatment subverts the basic message of the rabbinic depiction of the scene, which emphasizes Israel’s special status among the nations. In the qur’ānic treatment, Israel’s unique covenantal status is implicit, as it often is in the *Qur’ān*, but the punitive theme comes to the forefront.¹¹¹

In these qur’ānic adaptations of Jewish precursor materials, we may detect a similar dynamic of appropriation and reversal to that we have observed in the relationship between *Sūrat al-Mā’idah* and Mishnah tractate *Sanhedrin*. Most of these cases pertain to material found in normative rabbinic sources, though the relevant Jewish precursor in the case discussed by Lowin is found in a genre that can at most be characterized as para-rabbinic. Perhaps more significantly, my case is unique in that here we appear to see a sustained engagement with a specific rabbinic literary composition—a putative source text that is directly evoked in a particular *sūrah*—and not a motif, theme, or discursive form that resonates more broadly in the qur’ānic corpus.

The second trend in recent research on the *Qur’ān*, which I have discussed at length elsewhere, is the contemporary revival of interest in the historical Muḥammad—an approach to the origins of the *Qur’ān* that anchors it in a framework by and large dependent upon the traditional Muslim account of the Prophet’s life and mission.¹¹² The resurgence of such an approach—and the rejection of revisionist skepticism it implies—is a multi-faceted issue that we cannot dwell upon here. Our main concern is whether we can invest credence in the Islamic tradition’s accounts of Muḥammad’s complicated, and eventually fractious—dare we say fratricidal—relations with the Jewish tribes of Medina.

Some scholars take the presence and prominence of the Jewish tribes in the Medinan milieu for granted, while others would decry the attempt to

110. As Graves notes, the *Bavli* treatments seem to elaborate upon a more positive depiction of the image in the halakhic midrash *Mekilta de-Rabbi Yishma’el* (which is itself grounded in a literal reading of Deut 4:11), but adapts it to the new, cosmopolitan context of Sasanian Iraq.

111. Michael Wesley Graves, “The Upraised Mountain and Israel’s Election in the *Qur’ān* and Talmud,” *CIS* 11 (2015): 141–177.

112. For an overview of the issues, see my “Positivism, Revisionism, and Agnosticism in the Study of Late Antiquity and the *Qur’ān*,” *JlQSA* 2 (2017): 169–199, and also my recent review of Shoemaker’s *The Apocalypse of Empire* in *RQR* 6.7 (2020).

correlate the evidence of the Qur’ān with what the *sīrah* tells us about these Jewish tribes and their relationship with Muḥammad as hopelessly misguided. Most germane for our concerns is the approach of Michael Lecker, who holds that the traditional Muslim sources present an image of Muḥammad’s relations with the Jews that is basically reliable in its broad details, though that image is naturally colored by the ideology of a later time.¹¹³ Moreover, Lecker has suggested, on the basis of the traditionally transmitted details pertaining to the clans and tribes mentioned as signatories to the Constitution of Medina and otherwise involved in the politics of the Ḥijāz after the *hijrah*, that the emigration of the Prophet and his community may ultimately have been orchestrated by the Byzantines in a deliberate attempt to counter the local hegemony of the Jewish tribes, agents of the Sasanian dominion.¹¹⁴

As previously noted, Muslim tradition usually dates Sūrat al-Mā’idah quite late, and sometimes recognizes that its message is embedded in the context of the Prophet’s declining relations and ultimate hostilities with the Jews of Medina.¹¹⁵ On this basis, scholars have typically dated the *sūrah* sometime in the period from 7/628 to 9/630, with parts of it perhaps as late

113. Lecker’s approach, developed over a number of decades, is synthesized in his *Muḥammad ve-ha-Yehūdīm* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzḥaq ben Zvi and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2014). While much of Lecker’s work has been impactful on scholarship in Europe and the Americas, this synthesis and its implications have largely been overlooked.

114. Michael Lecker, “Were the Ghassānids and the Byzantines behind Muḥammad’s *hijra*?” in Denis Genequand and Christian Julien Robin (eds.), *Les Jafnides: Des rois arabes au service de Byzance (VIe siècle de l’ère chrétienne)* (Paris: De Boccard, 2015), 277–293; cf. G. W. Bowersock, *The Crucible of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 106–114. For specific details on the implications of Lecker and Bowersock’s argument, as well as observations on the irreconcilability of this approach with much of contemporary qur’ānic scholarship, see my comments in “Positivism, Skepticism, and Agnosticism.” For a provocative discussion of anti-Judaism in the context of the Roman-Persian Great War, see Sarah Gador-Whyte, “Christian-Jewish Conflict in the Light of Heraclius’ Forced Conversions and the Beginning of Islam,” in Wendy Mayer and Bronwen Neil (eds.), *Religious Conflict from Early Christianity to the Rise of Islam* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 201–214.

115. Interestingly, Ibn Kathir identifies “those who commit excesses in the land” (*fi ’l-ard la-musrifin*, Q 5:32) as the Jews of Medina, but on the basis of their practices in the pre-Islamic past, in particular their participating in warfare with their allies the Aws and Khazraj. According to his account, the Jewish tribes would fight each other alongside their pagan confederates and then offer and accept ransom and bloodwit for the captives and the slain, a practice for which God chastised them in Q 2:84–85. See Abū ’l-Fidā’ Ismā’īl Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘azīm*, ed. Sāmī b. Muḥammad

as 10/632. Thus, to take but one example, Theodor Nöldeke saw Q 5:15–38 as a discrete passage that must date to sometime after the intensification of hostilities between Muḥammad and the Jews, probably close to the campaign against Khaybar in 7/628.¹¹⁶ The traditional location of the revelation of at least part of the *sūrah* at the time of the Prophet’s Farewell Pilgrimage in 10/632 is significant because during this time he is also said to have declared the blood of believers to be illicit to other believers.¹¹⁷ This stands in sharp contrast to the guidelines established in *Sūrat al-Mā’idah* to justify war against the Jews as unbelievers, making their blood licit on account of their crimes.

This timing is plausible not only in terms of the *sūrah*’s rejection of the Jews and authorization of violence against them on the basis of their *fasād* and other transgressions, but also possibly in terms of an appeal to Christians, whom the qur’ānic prophet may have countenanced as potential replacement allies at this time.¹¹⁸ Similar to the articulation of a threat against the Jews in terms they would understand in this *sūrah*, it is possible that the various echoes of Christian tradition we have detected here are intended as flourishes that the qur’ānic community would recognize as familiar and thus appealing. This conjecture may help to explain aspects of the *sūrah* that seem anomalous or superfluous in terms of its overarching message. For example, if the point of the *sūrah* is to justify hostilities against those who spread corruption, Abel’s insistent nonviolence—or rather, his forgoing of retaliation—in vv. 28–29 appears somewhat maladroit if he is to serve as a cipher for an *ummah* girding itself for war against the Jews.¹¹⁹ At the same time, even if we follow Cuypers and others who read the real thrust of *Sūrat*

al-Salāmah (8 vols.; Riyadh: Dār Ṭaybah li’l-Nashr wa’l-Tawzī‘, 1418/1997), 3.94, *ad* Q 5:32.

116. *GdQ*, 1.229–230.

117. For the account of Ibn Ishāq, see Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Malik Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīrah al-nabawiyyah*, ed. ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Salām Tadmūrī (4 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1410/1990), 4.248.

118. Obviously, such a hypothesis would oblige us to explain Q 5:51, the famous verse that urges the believers “do not take Jews and Christians as allies, for they are only allies to each other.” In fact, one must acknowledge that the entire passage from vv. 51–69 seems stridently hostile to the *ahl al-kitāb* on the whole.

119. Notably, Bell proposed an earlier date for the entire *sūrah* based on the incongruity of the “pacific attitude” of these verses in a martial conquest; see Richard Bell, *A Commentary on the Qur’ān* (2 vols.; Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1991), 1.154. We might also note Q 2:178, where retaliation (*qīṣāṣ*) is similarly “prescribed” (*kutiba ‘alaykum*), but with a recommendation for leniency that is perhaps ultimately drawn from Matt 5:38–39.

al-Mā'idah as an appeal to Christians to accept the qur'ānic prophet and subordinate them to his authority, one must acknowledge that vv. 27–37, on which I have focused here, are more than just a mere momentary diversion or aside addressing the question of the Jews. Rather, this passage must be read as presaging an intensification of hostilities that would reshape the multilayered social and religious terrain surrounding the *ummah*.¹²⁰

A final detail drawn from the traditional sources in connection with this *sūrah*, albeit indirect, is worth noting. According to a famous account in the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* of Ibn Ishāq, when Muḥammad and his followers turned against their former allies the Banū Qurayzah after their betrayal during the Battle of the Trench (5/626–627), the fate of the defeated tribe was put in the hands of one Sa‘d b. Mu‘ādh, a Qurazi who embraced Islam and fought for the Prophet, and who was injured during the preceding battle. Sa‘d’s judgment against his former coreligionists was that the men should be killed, the women and children taken as slaves, and their property divided as spoils of war.¹²¹

As Martin Lings notes regarding this episode, Sa‘d’s judgment against the Qurayzah conforms to the fate legislated for the denizens of an enemy city defeated by Israel in Deut 20:13–14.¹²² It is striking in the light of our reading of Sūrah 5, so closely aligned with the mishnaic legitimization of violence, that Islamic tradition should present an analogous justification for the decree against Banū Qurayzah, anchored in a different register of Jewish scriptural tradition, but one that is conceptually and thematically congruous with the mishnaic one. Noteworthy as well is that this is actually the more *lenient* penalty prescribed for defeated enemies in this chapter of Deuteronomy: the following passage (20:16–18) addresses the case of defeated

120. I borrow the term “multilayered” from Holger Zellentin, who applies it to the Medinan milieu. See his “Trialogical Anthropology: The Qur’ān on Adam and Iblis in View of Rabbinic and Christian Discourse,” in Rüdiger Braun and Hüseyin I. Çiçek (eds.), *New Approaches to Human Dignity in the Context of Qur’ānic Anthropology: The Quest for Humanity* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 59–129. Here Zellentin shows quite clearly that the Medinan narrative of Adam and the angels in Sūrat al-Baqarah (2:28–39) builds on the previous elaborations on the episode from the Meccan period, but also draws in unique traditions of clear Jewish ambience as well. Zellentin infers that this textual dynamic speaks not only to a largely oral milieu, in which different textual traditions freely intermingled, but may have specifically been tailored to address multiple constituencies, including both Jews and Christians.

121. Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīrah al-nabawiyah*, 3.190.

122. Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Rochester, VA: Inner Traditions, 1983), 232 (mistakenly citing the passage as Deut 20:12).

cities of the Canaanites and mandates that they should be utterly destroyed, with none left alive whatsoever. This is the also the pitiless fate decreed for an erring city in Deut 13:13–18, one of the sanctions discussed in the mishnaic tractate Sanhedrin. In contrast, the invocation of Deut 20:13–15 here admits at least some small quantum of mercy rather than total annihilation; this is also the judgment of the *Qur’ān*, which threatens gruesome punishments for those who wage war against God and His Prophet, but also admits the possibility of mercy in response to repentance (5:33).

It is ultimately unclear how much confidence we can invest in what the tradition reports about the Jews of Medina and whether the information we glean from the sources really illuminates the authentic revelatory context of the *Qur’ān*. I would certainly not go so far as to suggest that my interpretation of *Sūrat al-Mā’idah* validates or corroborates every detail of the *sīrah*’s account of Muhammad’s relations with the Jews of Medina. However, a breakdown in the *ummah*’s relationship with Jewish tribes in the vicinity, eventually accelerating into open conflict, provides a broadly plausible context for the emergence of the messaging of the *sūrah* as I have understood it here. Given circumstances in which the qur’ānic prophet’s appeal to Jews in his social ambit was purportedly abandoned in favor of open confrontation—culminating, according to the *sīrah*, in the purging of Banū Qurayzah and the campaign against Khaybar in 5–7/627–628—it strains credulity to think that the legitimization of violence against Jews in *Sūrat al-Mā’idah* is merely coincidental. This is the entire point of *Sūrat al-Mā’idah*, especially its reorientation of the Cain and Abel story, which tradition dates to approximately this point in the Prophet’s career.

As I have shown here, this messaging is intrinsically tied to the strategic appropriation and reorientation of rabbinic Jewish tradition, more direct and concrete in *Sūrat al-Mā’idah* than perhaps anywhere else in the *Qur’ān*. Some would conclude from this that the Jews of Medina must have been halakhically observant and linked to the rabbinic communities of Palestine and Iraq.¹²³ This is surely an overinterpretation, especially given the variety of the echoes of ancient Jewish tradition exhibited by the qur’ānic corpus. But given the proximate, even intimate, knowledge of a normative rabbinic source that appears to be reflected throughout the *sūrah*, a reconsideration

123. A hypothesis most recently advanced by Haggai Mazuz in *The Religious and Spiritual Life of the Jews of Medina* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), a work that has been widely critiqued for its overconfidence in seeking to recover information about the religiosity and traditions of its subjects. For a countervailing position, see Aaron W. Hughes, *Shared Identities: Medieval and Modern Imaginings of Judeo-Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), ch. 2, esp. 55–57.

of the connection between the evidence of the Qur'ān and what the traditional sources tell us about the relations between the *ummah* and the Jews towards the end of the Medinan period—at least in broad terms—comes into focus as an especially urgent task. Perhaps the most provocative question remains unanswered, and brings us back full circle to Geiger: how to square the fact of the profound knowledge of rabbinic Judaism and sheer scriptural virtuosity of the qur'ānic prophet with the portrait of Muḥammad that the tradition offers us.