



## The Book of Genesis in the Qur'an

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The intent of this article is to show the impact of the book of Genesis on the Qur'an and how it used the Genesis material.

I write as an outsider to the Islamic religion, as one not committed to the Islamic theologoumenon that the Qur'an is the uncreated speech of God. I share the conclusion that Muhammad heard the biblical material appearing in the Qur'an from Jews and Christians. This is the view of non-Islamic scholars, who differ only as to whether Muhammad is indebted more to Jews or to Christians or to a Jewish-Christian-gnostic pastiche. I find the last view likely.<sup>1</sup> Muhammad imbibed, as prophets do, the cultural and religious ideas of his day; he had no direct access to the literary traditions behind these ideas.

Three of the suras (chapters) of the Qur'an are named after persons from Genesis: Joseph, Noah, and Abraham. These are representative of how the Genesis material is handled in the Qur'an.

The Joseph sura<sup>2</sup> presents the Qur'an's most direct use of the Old Testament, exhibiting by qur'anic standards a remarkable fidelity to the biblical text. The

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<sup>1</sup>Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islam* (1898; reprint, New York, KTAV, 1970); Heinrich Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (1930; reprint, Hildesheim: Ohms, 1961); Jacques Jomier, *The Bible and the Koran* (New York: Desclee, 1964). One leading western Islamicist, W. Montgomery Watt, in deference to Islamic scholars, eschews speaking of the Qur'an in any sense as the product of Muhammad's conscious mind. While this may be advisable in Islamic-Christian dialogue, I work differently in this article. Cf. *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an*, rev. and enlarged by W. Montgomery Watt (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 1970) vi.

<sup>2</sup>Sura 12.

Abraham sura<sup>3</sup> and the Noah sura<sup>4</sup> exhibit little or no connection with these biblical characters other than the names themselves. The Abraham sura is a treatise on messengers that includes a reference to Moses. Its only Abrahamic material is a short prayer by Abraham on behalf of himself, Ishmael, and Isaac. The Noah sura is a thoroughly unbiblical dialogue between God and Noah.

The remainder of the qur'anic Genesis material lies between these two extremes of fidelity to the biblical text on the one hand and free composition on the other.

This material is found scattered throughout the Qur'an, the frequency of the references ranging from one-time references, such as the Cain and Abel story, to often repeated allusions, such as the creation of the human.

## I. JOSEPH

The Joseph story apparently impressed Muhammad as did no other biblical story. Briefly told, the Qur'anic Joseph story goes like this:

Joseph has a dream—only one!—of eleven stars plus the sun and moon bowing down before him. He relates it not to his brothers, as in Genesis, but to his father, who warns him not to tell it to his brothers. His brothers nevertheless determine to kill Joseph. An unnamed brother suggests putting Joseph into a pit rather than killing him. Thereupon they ask their father to let Joseph play with them, promising to protect him. Promptly they put him into a water-filled well (the Genesis pit contains no water) and tell Jacob that a wolf ate him. They sell Joseph for a handful of dirhams (coins).

In Egypt, the governor's wife—Potiphar remains unnamed—tries to seduce Joseph, who, though about to succumb, is dissuaded when he sees a “proof of his Lord.”<sup>5</sup> When Joseph tries to flee, the governor's wife tears his shirt from behind, which becomes a factor in his being judged innocent. To counter the jeers of the women of the city, the governor's wife invites the women in for a meal, giving each a knife. When they see how divinely handsome Joseph is they all cut themselves.

Though found innocent, Joseph is nonetheless sent to prison because “it seemed good to them.” In prison he interprets the dreams of the butler and the baker, appending a sermonette on monotheism.

When the king of Egypt (never referred to as pharaoh in sura 12 but so named 74 times elsewhere in the Qur'an) reports his two dreams of seven fat and lean kine and seven green and withered ears of corn, his counsellors are unable to interpret them, calling them “a hotchpotch of nightmares.”<sup>6</sup> In another departure from the

<sup>3</sup>Sura 14.

<sup>4</sup>Sura 71.

<sup>5</sup>“Proof” is Arberry's rendering of *burhan* in 12:24. Cf. Arthur Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (London: Oxford University, 1964). Ali takes it to be “evidence,” God's presence visible to the pious Joseph but invisible to Potiphar's wife; cf. A. Y. Ali, *The Holy Quran* (Washington, D.C.: American, 1946) 558, n. 1668. Geiger (201) refers to Jewish traditions which identify the “proof” or “sign” as an appearance of Joseph's father or mother.

<sup>6</sup>Arberry's translation (12:44).

biblical text, Joseph interprets the dreams while still in prison. Only after this does the king summon Joseph to the court.

The attempted seduction by the governor's wife and the women's cutting of themselves is brought up again. This time Joseph is fully exonerated and set up as a ruler in Egypt.

Joseph's brothers come to him in Egypt for their first visit with no mention of the famine that caused their journey. Joseph sends them back to Canaan with grain plus their returned money and with a request to bring their younger brother when they return. Benjamin is not mentioned by name.

When they make the second journey to Egypt, Jacob warns them—unlike Genesis—not to enter the city by the same gate (the purpose being ostensibly similar to the contemporary rubric that a group not travel on the same airplane).

Joseph privately reveals his identity to Benjamin before planting his drinking cup in Benjamin's sack and having him arrested. The eldest brother (not Judah) stands in for Benjamin.

When Jacob is told that Benjamin has been accused of theft, he is reminded of Joseph and renews his mourning for his lost son, much to the disgust of the other sons.

On their third visit Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. Joseph sends home with them a shirt, telling them to put it on Jacob's face to cure his blindness. Jacob clairvoyantly perceives the setting out of the brothers' caravan from Egypt, and the story rapidly moves to its conclusion with Joseph welcoming both his father and his mother (sic!) to Egypt.

Some observations:

1. Muhammad must have loved the Joseph story for he had a good memory of it. Though the biblical version undergoes some deletions and additions, the basic story line is present in impressive detail. For someone who had not read the text either in Hebrew or in an Arabic translation, but had only heard it told, Muhammad reproduced the story with considerable faithfulness.

In saying this I am accepting that the term *ummi* in 7:157f. means that Muhammad was a cultured person who could read and write but who had never read the Bible or had even had it read to him.<sup>7</sup> The Joseph sura supports this interpretation by relating the storyline but remaining vague on names. The only characters mentioned by name are Jacob and Joseph. The Bible reader can recognize the roles of Reuben, Simeon, Judah, and Benjamin, but the Qur'an does not name them. Likewise Potiphar and pharaoh are not mentioned but are given other titles. This is what one would expect in the telling and retelling of a story: the events are more memorable than the names. It is also possible, of course, that some of the omissions and additions derive from those who told the story to Muhammad.

2. Muhammad enjoyed the story of Joseph for itself. The sura begins: "We

<sup>7</sup>Watt, 36f. This controversial term can mean "uneducated" or "illiterate."

will relate to thee the fairest of stories in that We have revealed to thee this Koran, though before it thou wast one of the heedless"(12:3).<sup>8</sup> "Fairest" is Arabic *ahsan*, which can also be rendered by "best," "nicest," "loveliest." No other sura is described in this way, which indicates Muhammad's delight in the Joseph story.

Muhammad's admiration is also evident from the fact that the Qur'an does not utilize the Joseph story as it does other similar material. The Qur'an is mostly homiletical, admonishing against idolatry, encouraging the worship of Allah, and inveighing against those who do not accept Muhammad's preaching. Such paraenetic expansions appear only rarely in the Joseph story:

- a. The observation that judgment and knowledge were given Joseph as a reward is accompanied by the theological observation, "Even so we recompense the good-doers" (12:22). ("We" is the Qur'anic pronoun commonly used by the deity.)
- b. The invective that accompanies Joseph's interpretation of the dreams of the butler and baker is short and mild: "I shall tell you the interpretation....I have forsaken the religion of a folk who believe not in Allah and are disbelievers in the Hereafter. And I have followed the religion of my fathers....O my two fellow-prisoners! Are divers lords better, or Allah the One, the Almighty?" (12:37-39). This is the longest paraenetic expansion within the Joseph story proper.
- c. Only at the end of the sura is the Qur'an more expansive, including ten verses of

exhortation.

## II. NOAH

The Qur'an contains forty-three references to Noah and the flood in 28 different suras.

The short sura named after Noah<sup>9</sup> is made up of three parts: a divine injunction to Noah to preach, a short sermon of Noah's to his contemporaries, and a psalm-like complaint of Noah's to God about the hardness of the people's hearts. It has no biblical counterpart.

In comparing the Joseph sura to the Noah sura one notices literary styles similar to those found in Genesis. According to pentateuchal source theory, the J tradition transmits Genesis 14 virtually untouched while creating the wooing of Rebekah (chapter 24) as a *de novo* narrative. Similarly, the Qur'an keeps the Joseph story relatively intact while using the Noah material with great freedom. Thus Genesis and the Qur'an share a common methodology. Turning to the remaining references to Noah which are scattered throughout the Qur'an and putting them in biblical sequence we get the following picture:

In contrast to the biblical and to some extrabiblical flood stories, no reason for the flood is given in the Qur'an. Noah is simply commanded to build the ark

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<sup>8</sup>Citations from the Qur'an are taken from Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (New York: Mentor, 1953).

<sup>9</sup>Sura 71, "Noah," has 28 verses compared with 111 in the Joseph sura.

(11:37). When he is enjoined to warn the people, his preaching sounds very similar to that of Muhammad.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Noah and Muhammad are both referred to as "plain warners."<sup>11</sup>

Noah's contemporaries despise and mock him.<sup>12</sup> Most of the 28 verses of the Noah sura are Noah's complaint to God about the people's refusal to listen to him, concluding with a plea that all flesh be destroyed.<sup>13</sup>

God commands Noah to enter the ark (11:41), the flood comes (54:11f.; 6:6), and Noah is saved on the ark (54:13; 69:11). Noah has only one son, not three, and that one refuses to join his father in the ark, preferring to climb a high mountain. When Noah discusses this with God, God tells Noah that his son is an evildoer. Noah's biblical relation to Ham may underlie this otherwise quite unbiblical twist (11:42-46).

Whereas the Bible has the wind dry out the earth, in the Qur'an the earth simply swallows the water. The ark comes to rest on a mountain called Al-Judi (11:44).

Noah's wife, like Lot's wife, proves faithless and is consigned to fire (66:10).

According to Genesis, Noah's total life span is 950 years. According to the Qur'an, Noah reaches the age of 950 before the flood commences (29:14).

## III. ABRAHAM

The Qur'an's theological use of Abraham is more extensive and more profound than that of Joseph, but the references are scattered. There is an Abraham sura (14), but it is largely a sermon of judgment with only one reference to Abraham. The patriarch is mentioned by name 69 times in 25 different suras, a statistic exceeded only by the 136 times Moses is mentioned in 34 different suras.<sup>14</sup>

In the words of one scholar, "Abraham was Muhammad's greatest prototype, the man of

whom he thought most highly, and the one with whom he liked best to compare himself and to make out as one with himself in opinion.”<sup>15</sup>

Much of the Qur’anic treatment of Abraham duplicates biblical material. Abraham is called by God,<sup>16</sup> is visited by angels and entertains them (11:69-73). He pleads on Lot’s behalf (11:74). Lot offers up his daughters to protect the messengers (11:77f.), the city of Lot (Sodom remains unnamed) is destroyed,<sup>17</sup> and Lot’s family minus his wife is saved.<sup>18</sup> Abraham prays for a son (37:100), but none of the biblical

<sup>10</sup>7:59: “We sent Noah (of old) unto his people, and he said: O my people! Serve Allah. Ye have no other God save Him. Lo! I fear for you the retribution of an Awful Day.”

<sup>11</sup>Noah is called “plain warner” (*nadir mubin*) in 11:25; 71:2; Muhammad in 7; 184; 22:49; 29:50. 35:24 says every nation had “warners” sent to them.

<sup>12</sup>11:27, 32; 23:24f.

<sup>13</sup>71:26: “My Lord! Leave not one of the disbelievers in the land.”

<sup>14</sup>The Qur’an has 114 suras.

<sup>15</sup>Geiger, 95.

<sup>16</sup>2:124; 33:7; 57:26.

<sup>17</sup>11:82; 15:74; 26:173; 27:28; 54:34.

<sup>18</sup>15:60; 27:57; 37:133-136.

tension that leads up to Isaac’s birth in Genesis plays a role in the Qur’an. Abraham is asked in a dream to sacrifice his unnamed son (understood by Muslims as Ishmael) but is prevented from carrying it out by another word from God (37:102ff.).

The variations from Genesis regarding Abraham are substantial and significant. In the Qur’an Abraham has conflicts with his father and with his contemporaries which are unknown in Genesis.

Abraham chides his father for idolatry<sup>19</sup> and smashes his father’s idols (21:58). He asks God to forgive his father, but finally cuts off relations with him when it becomes clear that his father is an enemy of Allah (9:114; 60:4).

Abraham has disputes with his contemporaries about the worship of the one God (6:81; 20:69-93). They conspire to burn him alive (21:68; 37:83-100), but God intervenes and spares him (21:69; 37:98).

Even greater changes include defining Abraham’s religion as Islam, magnifying Ishmael as the inheritor of the Islamic branch of Abraham’s family, and seeing the Kaaba as built by Abraham and Ishmael.

Muhammad’s religious genius becomes apparent in his endorsing aspects of the leading religions of his day, Judaism and Christianity, but even more in using those traditions as springboards to establish the religion of Islam in Arabia.

In a pivotal passage Abraham is described as neither Jew nor Christian but as an upright man (*hanif*) who had surrendered himself (*muslim*) to God.<sup>20</sup>

By tracing Muslim spiritual ancestry back to Abraham via Ishmael<sup>21</sup> and by having both father and son build Islam’s central sanctuary in Mecca (2:125-127) the Qur’an did for the Arabs what David did for Israel, giving them a history and a central sanctuary.

## IV. OTHER MATERIAL FROM GENESIS 1-11

### 1. *Creation of the World*

The creation of the world looms large in the Qur'an. It provides the background for another important theme: the day of judgment. The overriding tone of the Qur'an, for all of its protestations that God is merciful, is one of impending judgment upon those who reject its message: Obey God's laws and believe God's prophet, Muhammad, and you will live the good life now and be resurrected later; be disobedient and unbelieving, and you have no claim to the good life either in this world or in the next. The God who created the world has decreed this and will enforce it on the day of judgment.

In five separate passages the Qur'an espouses a six-day creation, agreeing

<sup>19</sup>6:75; 19:42-49; 21:53-58.

<sup>20</sup>3:67. Cf. also 2:131: "When his Lord said to Abraham, 'Surrender (*aslim*)' Abraham said, 'I have surrendered to the Lord of the worlds.'"

<sup>21</sup>8:48; 14:39; 19:54.

with Genesis,<sup>22</sup> but in three other passages the Qur'an insists that God did not rest on the seventh day.<sup>23</sup>

A feature of the creation account in the Qur'an is the fourfold mention of the divine throne that God mounted after the work of creation.<sup>24</sup> Genesis, of course, makes no mention of a throne. The image is derived from passages like Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1 and superimposed on the creation story. It serves to emphasize God's transcendence as well as God's judging of the world, now and at the last day.

### 2. *Creation of Humankind*

Whereas the Genesis 2 account has God making Adam of the dust of the earth while the rest of humankind derives from the union of Adam and Eve, the Qur'an, while affirming that Adam was created out of dust,<sup>25</sup> says that post-Adamic people are created by God out of dust and semen.<sup>26</sup> Thus Allah is directly involved in every birth. Muhammad's transcendent God can also be very immanent.

### 3. *The Adoration of Adam*

An unbiblical element appears in the so-called adoration of Adam. In no less than six passages Adam's supremacy in creation was acknowledged by all creatures, including the angels, who were specifically commanded by God to worship Adam. The repeated appearance of this theme places great emphasis upon what is probably the fall of Satan motif in the Qur'an. Iblis, the Arabized version of the Greek *diabolos*, refused to worship Adam and was on that account banished from heaven. With God's connivance, Iblis thereupon determines to mislead the human race. Only God's perfectly devoted slaves, the true Muslims, will escape the misleading of Iblis.

This story is found in the Christian legend of *The Life of Adam and Eve*, datable between A.D. 60 and 300.<sup>27</sup>

### 4. *The Fall*

The story of the fall is found in only one passage, and that in a form relatively close to the

biblical text (7:19-26). But, as in the New Testament (Rev 20:2), the serpent of Genesis 3 has become Satan. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil has been reduced to “this tree” and there is no tree of life that could offer immortality to the sinful pair. Rather they are driven from the garden with the promise that they will be raised to life after they die, thus supporting a doctrine of resurrection.

<sup>22</sup>7:54; 10:4; 11:7; 25:59; 37:4.

<sup>23</sup>46:33; 50:38; 50:15. This last passage (50:15) observes that since God was not worn out by the first creation, one can be assured God has enough energy left for the new creation, namely the day of resurrection. This idea may be traced to Jewish sources for it is expressed in *Genesis Rabbah* 120:110; 27:1.

<sup>24</sup>10:4; 11:7; 13:2; 50:4.

<sup>25</sup>3:29. Or, as in two passages, mud (7:12; 17:61).

<sup>26</sup>16:4; 22:5; 23:14; 35:11; 40:67; 76:2.

<sup>27</sup>R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913) 129.

### 5. *Cain and Abel*

The Cain and Abel story appears only once, with neither brother mentioned by name; they are referred to only as the two sons of Adam (5:27-31). They offer their sacrifices, only one of which is accepted. There is no conversation, as in Genesis, between Cain and God. Rather there is a short interchange between Cain and Abel in which Cain threatens Abel who responds that he will remain passive, declaring his innocence and heaping a curse upon Cain should Cain kill him.

Cain then kills Abel, whereupon God sends a raven that scratches the ground to show Cain how to bury his brother. Cain bewails his lack of strength to inter his slain brother and repents. The moral drawn from the Cain and Abel story is closely related to the Mishna: “He who kills a human being shall be looked upon as though he had killed all mankind and whoever saves a life shall be regarded as though he had saved all mankind.”<sup>28</sup>

### 6. *The Tower of Babel*

The tower of Babel story appears in the Qur’an in three places, but in varied form. One is a cryptic reference to humankind’s being one community, “but then they differed” (10:20). The other two passages refer to the building of a high tower, but the tower is one that pharaoh commands Haman to build so that he, pharaoh, may see the God of Moses face to face. Haman’s scaffold becomes the tower of Babel with the purpose of reaching to heaven (28:38; 40:36f.).

## V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In order of biblical appearance—for there is no chronological or even thematic order in the Qur’an—we have seen that:

1. The creation of the world appears in the Qur’an as an undergirding of a belief in a transcendent and judging deity.
2. The creation of the human is used as the occasion to allow the expulsion of the devil from heaven.
3. The fall story occurs in an abridged version with the identification of the serpent as Satan.
4. The Cain and Abel story appears with some amplification plus the mishnaic

observation about the value of human life.

5. Noah appears more as a preacher than as the hero of the flood, though the flood is mentioned.

6. If the tower of Babel is alluded to it is done so only vaguely.

7. Abraham looms large in the Qur'an, though not in a sustained story line. Of his many exploits and sermons, his championing of the kind of monotheism espoused by Muhammad is central. He and Ishmael build the Kaaba in Mecca.

8. Jacob appears as a figure in the Joseph story, a story that appears in great detail in the Joseph sura with only little difference from the Bible.

<sup>28</sup>5:32. Cf. tractate *Sanhedrin* 4:5 of the Mishna where the original seems to speak of the killing of an Israelite, not just any human being (though some Mishna texts read "human being" [*ben 'adam*]).

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The Qur'an gives ample evidence of acquaintance with the book of Genesis. While the Qur'an omits typical Genesis material, such as genealogies, dates, and lists of nations, it contains key story elements from both the primeval history and the ancestral cycles, but transformed and shaped into a new form.

It has become a common observation in biblical studies to note that the Old Testament itself shows signs of forming and reforming its own traditions and that the New Testament exhibits a similar, if not greater, freedom in handling the traditions it claims to inherit from the Old Testament. The Qur'an has certainly Islamicized Abraham. But the church in a sense saw in Abraham the first Christian.<sup>29</sup> Christians will disagree with the Qur'an's conclusions, but they cannot really quarrel with its method.

<sup>29</sup>See Robert W. Wilkin, "The Christianizing of Abraham: The Interpretation of Abraham in Early Christianity," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 43 (1972) 723-731.

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