

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

Shari L. Lowin

STONEHILL COLLEGE

When it comes to the Qur'anic assessment of and attitude toward the Jews—referred to variously as *al-Yahūd*, *alladhīna hādū*, *Banū Isrā'īl*, and *ahl al-kitāb*—the holy text of Islam remains notoriously difficult to sum up elegantly and definitively. On the one hand, the Qur'an presents the Jews as righteous followers of the words of God (e.g. Q. 3:113–114), as God's preferred people (Q. 2:47, Q. 2:122), and as monotheists in covenant with Him (e.g. Q. 2:40, *'ahd*; Q. 5:12, Q. 2:63 *mithāq*)¹, whose food Muslims may eat (Q. 5:5), whose women Muslims may marry (Q. 5:5), and whose houses of prayer are places where God's name is mentioned and, as such, are worthy of Muslim protection (Q. 22:40).² Indeed, the Qur'an instructs Muḥammad in Q. 10:94 that should he find himself in doubt about something God has instructed, he is to confer with those who have been reading the revelations before him, understood to be the Torah and the Injīl. In other words, the Jews are presented as trustworthy regarding revelation and its interpretation (as are the Christians).

On the other hand, the Qur'an also presents Jews as violators of their covenant with God (e.g. Q. 3:187). They are charged with killing their own prophets (Q. 2:91; Q. 3:181),³ and perceived to be the people most violently opposed to those who believe in God and His Prophet (Q. 5:82). They are said to be full of blasphemy and irreverence bordering on wickedness (e.g. Q. 5:41–42) and, perhaps even worse, as intentional misconstruers of the word of God (e.g. Q. 4:46, Q. 2:75ff). Some of the Jewish ritual practices are understood to constitute punishment for earlier Jewish bad behaviour (Q. 4:160; on the laws of *kashrut* in particular, see Q. 6:146).⁴

In one of the more sarcastic of the Qur'an's taunts against the Jews, the Qur'an reproaches the Jews for claiming that God is miserly and ungenerous. Q. 5:64 relates: *The Jews say: the hand of God is chained (maghlūla). [May] their hands [be] chained*

and [may] they [be] cursed for what they say! No! Both his hands are outstretched (*mabsūtātān*): He gives (*yunfiq*, lit. 'spends') as He pleases.⁵ Neither the Qur'an nor the exegetical commentaries understand the Jews' words, presented here as a direct quote, as a literal statement about the hands of God. Rather, as the Qur'an's response to the Jewish accusation reveals (*He gives as He pleases*), the statement is to be understood from the outset as a blasphemous metaphor about God's beneficence. This understanding is embraced by the classical exegetes who explain that verse indicates that the Jews assert that God's gifts and generosity are withheld (*mumsik*), God having pulled back (*amsaka*) from granting them to the Jews.⁶

For the reader familiar with Jewish teachings, the Qur'an's accusation poses a very basic problem. Namely, Judaism does not maintain that God has turned a closed hand to His people—or, really, any people—in an act of parsimoniousness and lack of generosity. Rather, the Hebrew Bible and the rabbinic tradition speak of God's 'hands' as wide-open to those who have earned His favour. Psalms 145:16, for example, says of God: 'You open Your hand (*pote'ah et yadecha*) and satisfy every living thing with favour.'⁷ Even those who have *not* earned God's favour receive His open-handed generosity; as God says in Isaiah 65:2, 'I constantly spread out My hands (*peirasti yadai*) to a disloyal people, who walk the way that is not good, following their own designs.'⁸ In other words, even when humans do the wrong thing by following their own sinful desires and God should turn away from them, He continues to greet them with open hands.⁹

1. God's Chained Hand in the Hebrew Bible and the Midrash

However, while the Hebrew Bible never accuses God of hand-chained parsimoniousness, it does include statements about God's hand being *restrained*, or, more accurately, God restraining His own hand. Some scholars have suggested these verses as possible sources for the Qur'an's claim. Most commonly we find reference to a verse in Lamentations 2, where the text—traditionally ascribed to the prophet Jeremiah¹⁰—relates that because of Israel's sins, God desired to punish the nation with a military defeat at the hand of her enemy (a not uncommon cause-and-effect situation in the Bible). Lamentations 2:3 then ominously states that in 'blazing anger' God cut down all the might (lit., 'horn') of Israel and 'has withdrawn His right hand in the presence of the foe'.¹¹ The Hebrew phrase used here, *heshiv ah̄or yemino*, implies that God placed His arm behind Him. In other words, God intentionally restrained Himself from defending His people against the oncoming enemy, and allowed the enemy to emerge victorious.

A similar depiction of God's restrained right hand appears in a non-canonical Jewish text closer in time to the appearance of the Qur'an, the pseudepigraphal fifth century 3 Enoch. This too has been suggested as a possible source for Q. 5:64. In 3 Enoch, R. Ishmael relates that the angel Metatron approached him and offered to bring him

before God (referred to here as *ha-Maqom*, 'the Place'), who, Metatron reports, sits despondent and dejected.¹² Specifically, says Metatron, 'Come and I will show thee the Right Hand of MAQOM laid behind (Him) because of the destruction of the Holy Temple' (ch. 48A:1).¹³ R. Ishmael accompanies Metatron to heaven and finds God sitting with His right hand thrown behind Him, just as Metatron had described. Noting the similarity to Q. 5:64's chained hand of God, David Halperin comments, 'This suggests that some at least of the *Hekhalot* traditions were known to Jews in seventh century Arabia'.¹⁴ Halperin thus understands not only that the mystical 3 Enoch inspired Q. 5:64's claim about the Jews' statement but that the Qur'an's verse in turn testifies to the existence of an Arabian Jewish community familiar with certain mystical traditions. While such a Jewish community may in fact have existed, we should be wary of using Qur'anic statements about what the Jews said and did as historical evidence for what the Jews said and did. As scholars have previously noted, the Qur'an's statements about Jews are often polemical declarations and should not be seen as factual historical testimony regarding actual Jewish practice or belief.¹⁵

More recently, Holger Zellentin informally suggested to me a Talmudic source for Q. 5:64, a passage in *BT Menahot* 29b. There, R. Judah relates in the name of Rav that when Moses went up to Mount Sinai to get the Torah from God (recorded in Exodus 19–20), he came upon God sitting and painstakingly drawing crowns on the letters of the Bible.¹⁶ Said Moses to God, 'Master of the Universe, who delays Your hand (*mi me'akev yadcha*)?' In other words, Moses wished to know who was preventing God from finishing His transcription of the holy text and sending it down to the Israelites. God replied that in the future a scholar named 'Aqiba ben Joseph¹⁷ would arise and expound mountains of rabbinic teaching on each crown. Zellentin posited that according to the rabbis God here holds Himself back, restrains His own hand, in order 'to leave the interpretation of the Torah to the Rabbis'.¹⁸ Indeed, rabbinic teaching, here and elsewhere, celebrates the rabbinic enterprise of Torah explication as a sort of rabbinic-God partnership that is Divinely ordained. Zellentin, however, suggests that Q. 5:64 flips this rabbinic teaching on its head, using the Talmud's own language to reject its claims.¹⁹ Unlike the rabbis, the Qur'an maintains that God does *not* restrain Himself in order to allow human participation in His revelation; what's more, for the Qur'an the claim that He does so borders on sacrilege. While Zellentin's proposal takes into account the often polemical nature of the Qur'an's use of the texts of the earlier monotheist traditions against them, a parallel with the Talmud skirts important differences between the two images under discussion here. Most importantly, the depiction of God in the Talmudic text bears no sense of being chained or restrained. Quite the opposite: when Moses comes upon God, he finds Him actively using His hand, studiously drawing seemingly unnecessary crowns on the tops of letters and, as Moses' words imply, delaying His completion of the text and delivery of the written revelation to Moses.²⁰