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Florian C. Reiter  
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Christian Bauer, Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst, Lutz Edzard,  
Patrick Franke, Jürgen Hanneder, Herrmann Jungrathmayr,  
Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz, Jens Peter Laut,  
Joachim Friedrich Quack und Michael Streck

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Verantwortlich: Prof. Dr. Florian C. Reiter (s.o.)

Fachherausgeber: Prof. Dr. Christian Bauer (Südostasiatische Philologien), Humboldt-Universität Berlin, Unter den Linden 6, 10099 Berlin, E-Mail: christian.bauer@staff.hu-berlin.de; Prof. Dr. Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst (Iranistik), Turfanforschung, Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Jägerstr. 22-23, 10117 Berlin, E-Mail: durkin-meisterernst@bbaw.de; Prof. Dr. Lutz Edzard (Arabistik, Semitistik, Linguistik), Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, 91054 Erlangen, E-Mail: lutz.edzard@fau.de; Prof. Dr. Patrick Franke (Islamwissenschaft), s.o.; Prof. Dr. Jürgen Hanneder (Indologie), Deutschhausstraße 12, 35032 Marburg, E-Mail: hanneder@staff.uni-marburg.de; Prof. Dr. Hermann Jungraithmayr (Afrikanistik), Unter dem Gedankenspiel 56, 35041 Marburg, E-Mail: jungraithmayr@em.uni-frankfurt.de; Prof. Dr. Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz (Tibetologie, Mongolistik, Religionswissenschaft), s.o.; Prof. Dr. Jens Peter Laut (Turkologie), Heinrich-Düker-Weg 14, 37073 Göttingen, E-Mail: jlaut@phil.uni-goettingen.de; Prof. Dr. Joachim Friedrich Quack (Ägyptologie), s.o.; Prof. Dr. Florian C. Reiter (Ostasien), s.o.; Prof. Dr. Michael Streck (Altorientalistik), Goethestr. 2, 04109 Leipzig, E-Mail: mstreck@rz.uni-leipzig.de.

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: Prof. Philip  
of. Dr. Patrick  
:k.franke@uni-  
1, Lerchenweg  
iedrich Quack,  
drich.Quack@

lin, Unter den  
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E-Mail: durkin-  
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## “Observe the Prayers and the Middle Prayer”: Jewish and Christian Origins of Q. 2:238

By NESYA RUBINSTEIN-SHEMER, Ramat Gan

**Summary:** The close and mutually fruitful ties between the Jewish tradition and the Muslim tradition are topics that scholars have been intensely dealing with for the past 200 years. The times of the prayers in Islam were formulated as a result of the textual influence of Judaism and Christianity that penetrated Islamic literature through the Jewish and Christian converts. It is my opinion that Q. 2:238 is a metamorphosis of the Talmudic expression, “One must always be careful of the *Minḥa* prayer”. In Muslim literature itself, one can find reference to the idea that the extra holiness of the *ṣalāt al-‘aṣr* in Islam was influenced by early Jewish and Christian texts. The Muslim tradition portrays the Jews and the Christians as neglecting prayer, so that it is the antithesis of the Muslims who are very strict when it comes to prayer. This tendentious description is for theological and polemic purposes in order to justify the existence of Muslims as part of the newly chosen nation.

### Introduction

Academic research recognizes the fact that Islam was influenced by the religions that preceded it. Analyzing and distinguishing between the different elements borrowed and absorbed from Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Paganism has been the focus of research for over the last two hundred years. Jews and Christians inhabited the Arabian Peninsula long before the birth of Islam. It is not surprising, therefore, that various elements of Judaic Law as well as Jewish lore have penetrated the new faith which Muhammad brought to the Arabians at the beginning of the seventh century. This tendency was reinforced thanks to the military and political success that accompanied Islam during the first centuries of its consolidation. As the advancing Arab conquerors swept through the Fertile Crescent and North Africa, the large and various populations of these areas were added to the Islamic fold through conversion. The learned Jews among the converts became the channel through which Judaism flowed into the Islamic Faith.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> G. LIBSON: *Jewish and Islamic Law: A Comparative Study of Customs during the Geonic Period*. Cambridge 2003, pp. 1–7; Z. MAGHEN: *After Hardship Cometh Ease: The Jews as a Backdrop for Muslim Moderation*. Berlin 2006, pp. 1–7.

## Jewish and Christian influence on Islamic prayer law

Much research has been carried out studying Jewish and Christian prayers and their timing as models for Islamic prayers. Researchers' opinions are divided into two schools in regard to the question of influence on the number and time of prayers in Islam: Some say that the influence is Jewish and some say that the influence is Christian. GOLDZIEHER claimed that in the beginning, Muslims prayed twice a day, in the morning and in the afternoon, as in the pre Islamic period (*ǧabiliyya*). Then they added three more prayers.<sup>2</sup> Later, GOLDZIEHER postulated a new theory: Originally Muslims prayed three prayers like the Jews but later, due to Zoroastrian influence, they added two prayers.<sup>3</sup> RUBIN holds that at the beginning, the Muslims prayed *ṣalāt al-ḍuḥā* and *ṣalāt al-ʿaṣr*, the *ḍuḥā* after sunrise and the *ʿaṣr* before sunset. According to him, *ṣalāt al-ʿaṣr* was influenced by Jews and *ṣalāt al-ḍuḥā* originated from paganism. *ṣalāt al-ḍuḥā* was later switched for *ṣalāt al-ḥaḡr* which takes place before sunrise just like *shaharit* in Judaism.<sup>4</sup> TORREY claims that during the Meccan period, Muḥammad and his followers prayed three times a day, morning, noon and evening, similar to the three prayers in Judaism. After Muḥammad's death, the Muslims acted in contrast to the usage of the neighbouring society (*muḥālafā*)<sup>5</sup> and wanted to show the Jews that they were more pious by adding two daily prayers.<sup>6</sup> SHIM'ON DURAN claims that Muḥammad, influenced by the five prayers on the Jewish Day of Atonement, set five daily prayers.<sup>7</sup> ABRAHAM KATSH suggests a different explanation. Based on GINZBURG's research on the Jerusalem Talmud, he claims that the Jews of Arabia observed an old custom of the Land of Israel—to convene five times a day for prayer.<sup>8</sup> YORAM ERDER, in a comparative research study of prayer times for the Jewish sect of Karaism and Islam, reached the conclusion that Judaism was the basis for Islam and Karaism with regard to the times of prayer and their number.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup> I. GOLDZIEHER: *Muslim Studies*. Transl. C.R. BARBER/S.M. STERN. London 1971, vol. 1, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> D.A. KING: *In Synchrony with the Heavens: Studies in Astronomical Timekeeping and Instrumentation in Medieval Islamic Civilization*. Leiden 2004, vol. 1, p. 589. On prayer times in Zoroastrianism see: M. BOYCE: *A History of Zoroastrianism*. Leiden 1975, vol. 1, 259, note 36.

<sup>4</sup> U. RUBIN: "Morning and Evening Prayers in Early Islam." In: *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 10 (1987), pp. 54–56.

<sup>5</sup> On *Muḥālafā* see MAGHEN 2006, p. 60.

<sup>6</sup> CH. C. TORREY: *The Jewish Foundation of Islam*. New York 1933, p. 135.

<sup>7</sup> SH. DURAN: *Keshet ve-Magen*. Berlin 1881, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> A. I. KATSH: "Rabbinic Background of the Five Daily Prayers in Islam." In: *Jews in the Arts and Science*. Jubilee vol. New York 1954, pp. 83–88.

<sup>9</sup> Y. ERDER: "Daily Prayer Times in Karaite Halakha in Light of the Times of Islamic Prayers." In: REJ 153, 1–2 (1994), pp. 5–27.

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<sup>10</sup> KIN

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In contrast to the claim of the researchers who argue that the number of prayers and their time in Islam were inspired by Judaism, other researchers, those who are of a Christian Protestant background, claim that the formative influences on Muḥammad were not Jewish but Christian. This is the opinion of TOR ANDRAE, RICHARD BELL and DAVID KING.<sup>10</sup> In ancient Christianity, prayer was held three times a day—in the morning, noon and evening—just as in Judaism. Later, Eastern Christianity adopted seven daily prayers on the basis of the verse from Psalms 119:164: “Seven times a day I praise You, Because of Your righteous ordinances.” This is questionable since the number of prayers in Eastern Christianity is seven and the number in Islam is five.

DAVID KING’s answer is that if we add the two optional prayers in Islam, the *duḥā* and the *tahaḡḡud*, to the five obligatory prayers, we reach seven prayers. KING is also aware that his claim is slightly problematical: “The comparison with Christian practice leaves us with more prayers than are found in the standard Islamic ritual.”<sup>11</sup> KING claims that if we compare the names of the prayers and their times in Syrian Christianity to the names and times in Islam, the resemblance is beyond coincidence. His conclusion is that the Muslims, starting from the seventh century, copied the Christian prayer times.<sup>12</sup>

GOITEIN combines the two approaches and claims that the number of prayers in Islam is the result of the dual influence of Judaism and Christianity. In his view, the five daily prayers in Islam represent an average of the three daily prayers in Judaism and the seven in Eastern Christianity. The Muslims who were in contact with these two cultures formed the middle ground between the two, in the spirit of Qur’ān 2:143.<sup>13</sup>

Some of these theories are acceptable to me while others are not. What I have tried to do in bringing this discussion is to show that in the eyes of many scholars, there are many possible parallels in the matter of prayer between the text sources, Jewish and Christian practices and Muslim practices.

### The discussion in the Islamic sources regarding Q. 2:238

Q. 2:238 states: “Maintain with care the [obligatory] prayers and [in particular] the middle prayer and stand before Allāh, devoutly obedient” (*Hafizū ‘alā al-Ṣalawāt wa-’l-Ṣalāt al-wustā waqūmū li-llāhi qānitīn*). Islamic

<sup>10</sup> KING 2004, vol. 1, p. 598.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 602.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> S. D. GOITEIN: *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions*. Leiden 1968, pp. 84–85.

commentators comment that the words *Ḥafizū ‘alā al-Ṣalawāt* mean the observance of the *times* of the prayers. Each prayer should be prayed on time and not be missed (*al-muḥāfaẓa ‘alā waqtiḥā wa-‘adam al-sabw ‘an-hā*).<sup>14</sup> The meaning of the verse is to observe prayer times and *especially* the time of the middle prayer.<sup>15</sup>

Because this verse is ambiguous as to the exact identification of the middle prayer, there is an extensive discussion on this issue in the Islamic sacred texts. Various medieval Muslim scholars have tried to decide which prayer was “the middle prayer”. It is important to indicate here that the identification of the middle prayer is not just a religious legal topic, as no laws are learned from this verse in the Qur’an (neither positive commands nor negative commands). The Qur’anic verse remains as a warning regarding the importance of strictness in keeping the time for the middle prayer. Islamic traditional texts deal with the virtues of this prayer and its rewards. Because of this, one cannot find a discussion on this issue in all of the religious law books. The Shāfi‘ī Egyptian scholar ‘ABD AL-MU‘MIN IBN ḤALAF AL DUMYĀTĪ of the 14<sup>th</sup> century who, in his time, was considered to be an expert on *ḥadīth*<sup>16</sup> wrote a book that dealt with the question of the identity of the middle prayer called “*Kashf al-muḡḥattā fī Tabyīn al-Ṣalāh al-Wuṣṭā*”, in which he gathered all of the traditions that dealt with the identity of the middle prayer as well as the opinions of the various scholars on the subject. Below I will bring the main points of the discussion in this book and also excerpts from the *Tafsīr*, *Ḥadīth* and jurisprudence that have dealt with this matter.

There are five main opinions on this subject, like each one of the obligatory prayers. According to minor opinions, the middle prayer can also be each one of the other prayers like the Friday prayer, the holiday prayers, the night prayer, etc.<sup>17</sup> According to another opinion, it doesn’t matter which prayer it is because one must be strict regarding the times of all of the prayers.<sup>18</sup>

We shall now discuss the various traditions regarding this debate. The first opinion argues that the words *al-ṣalāh al-wuṣṭā* refer to *ṣalāt al-‘aṣr*. There

<sup>14</sup> MUḤAMMAD IBN ĠARĪR AL-ṬABARĪ: *Ġāmi‘ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl āy al-Qur’ān*. Cairo 2008, vol. 2, p. 1388. See same idea in: MUQĀTIL IBN SULAYMĀN: *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*. Beirut 2003, vol. 1, p. 126: “*al-ḥams fī mawāqitihā*”.

<sup>15</sup> HUSAYN IBN MAS‘ŪD AL-BAĠAWĪ: *Sharḥ al-Sunna li-l-imām al-Baġawī*. Beirut 1983, vol. 2, p. 232.

<sup>16</sup> On AL-DUMYĀTĪ’s biography see the introduction that has been written about him by MAĠDĪ FATḤĪ AL-SAYYID, who revised an edition of his book from the manuscript. ‘ABD AL-MU‘MIN IBN ḤALAF AL-DUMYĀTĪ: *Kashf al-Muḡḥattā fī Tabyīn al-ṣalāh al-wuṣṭā*. Tanta 1989, pp. 5–8.

<sup>17</sup> AL-DUMYĀTĪ 1989, pp. 139–154.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 136–138.

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are many traditions narrated by important figures from the companions of the prophet (*ṣahāba*) and the generation that came after them (*tābi‘ūn*), like ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, the two wives of the prophet, ‘Ā’iṣa and Ḥafṣa, ‘Abdallāh ibn Mas‘ūd, Abū Hurayra and others.

The main tradition is attributed to ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib in regard to the Battle of the Trench. It is written that: “The messenger did not pray the afternoon prayer at the Battle of the Trench, only after the sun set.” He said about the infidels: “May Allāh burn their graves and homes. Because of them, we did not pray the middle prayer on time but only after sunset.”<sup>19</sup> According to Alī, until that day, they were sure that the middle prayer was the Morning Prayer. It was only at the Battle of the Trench that they heard from the prophet that it was the Afternoon Prayer. Another tradition attributed to ‘Alī mentions that the Middle Prayer is the Afternoon Prayer and that King Solomon was tested by God regarding it (*hiya alati furīta fihā ibn dawud wa-hiya al-‘aṣr*).<sup>20</sup> Qur’ān 38:31–33 describes how King Solomon was busy with his horses and missed the time of the Afternoon Prayer, He noticed it only after sunset when one cannot pray this prayer. Out of regret, he slaughtered his horses:

And to David We gave Solomon. An excellent servant, indeed he was one repeatedly turning back [to Allah]. when there were exhibited before him in the afternoon (*‘ashī*) the poised [standing] racehorses. And he said, “Indeed, I gave preference to the love of good [things] over the remembrance of my Lord until the sun disappeared into the curtain (*Tawārat bi-’lḥiḡāb*).”

From the words of this verse one can find proof that Solomon missed the *al-‘aṣr* prayer as horses were only brought in the evening (*‘ashī*). The Qur’ān commentator AL-MĀWARDĪ, in his commentary of this verse explains that the word *‘ashī* relates to the time that the sun begins to move from the center of the sky (*zawāl al-shams*) until it sets. An additional word from the same root is (*a’shā*) which indicates a man with poor vision. In other words, this root comes to show a lack of light, in this case in the eyes of a man. So, too, it is with the sun. The time of *‘ashī* is the time that the light of the sun begins to diminish.<sup>21</sup> The continuation of this verse indicates that the latest time for this prayer, the one was missed by Solomon, was at the time of the setting

<sup>19</sup> See for example versions of this tradition at: AL-ṬABARĪ 2008, vol. 2, pp. 1393–1395, *hadīth number* 5403–5418; AL-BAĠAWĪ 1983, vol. 2, p. 233; AL-QUSHAYRĪ, MUSLIM IBN AL-ḤAĠĀĠ: *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim bi-Sharḥ al-Nawawī*. Beirut 1990, vol. 5, p. 128. For a full discussion on this tradition, its various versions, transmitters and its validity, see: AL-DUMYĀTĪ 1989, pp. 17–26.

<sup>20</sup> AL-ṬABARĪ 2008, vol. 2, p. 1389, *hadīth* 5369.

<sup>21</sup> ‘ALĪ IBN MUHAMMAD AL-MĀWARDĪ: *Tafsīr al-Māwardī: al-Nakt wa-’l’nyūn*. Kuwait 1982, vol. 3, p. 260.

of the sun. What strengthens AL-MĀWARDĪ's argument is that we are talking about *ṣalāt al-ʿaṣr* whose time is until the sunset.

There are also traditions which describe the virtue of *ṣalāt al-ʿaṣr* and praise it. For instance, there is a tradition which compares the Afternoon Prayer to the most cherished items in a man's life—his family and his property. A person who misses the Afternoon Prayer is described as a man whose family and belongings were robbed (*ʿInna ʿaladhī tafūṭhu ṣalāt al-ʿaṣr fa-kannamā wutira ʿahluhu wa-māluhu*).<sup>22</sup> This exaggeration of the virtue of the Afternoon Prayer led the scholars to conclude that the Afternoon Prayer is the Middle Prayer.<sup>23</sup> According to another tradition, the prophet ordered that the Afternoon Prayer should be prayed earlier on a cloudy day in order not to miss its time. He explained that a man who did not pray the Afternoon Prayer—all of his efforts will fail (*man taraka ṣalāt al-ʿaṣr ḥubīṭa ʿamaluhu*).<sup>24</sup>

In another *ḥadīth*, it is told that in the copies of the Qurʾān which were in the possession of ʿĀʾiṣa and Ḥafṣa, the words *ṣalāt al-ʿaṣr* were written in addition to the words *al-Ṣalāt al-wustā*: “*Ḥafizū ʿalā al-Ṣalawāt wa-ʿl-Ṣalāh al-wustā wa- ṣalāt al-ʿaṣr*.” These two wives of the prophet explained that this was the formula they used to read on the days of the prophet.<sup>25</sup> There is a long discussion on this tradition in al-Dumyāṭī's book, since the meaning of this tradition is that the Middle Prayer is not the Afternoon Prayer, but another prayer. AL-DUMYĀṬĪ, who belonged to the *shāfiʿī* school, struggles to prove that the Middle Prayer is nevertheless the Afternoon Prayer, despite this tradition. AL-DUMYĀṬĪ gave several reasons why this tradition must be rejected, even though it is considered a valid tradition (*ṣahīḥ*). He argues that this tradition (*ḥadīth ʿĀʾiṣa*) contradicts other reliable traditions such as the tradition narrated by ʿAlī at the Battle of the Trench (*ḥadīth ʿAlī*). *Ḥadīth ʿAlī* is considered more reliable than *ḥadīth ʿĀʾiṣa* because it is quoted in the two most esteemed *ḥadīth* collections—*Muslim* and *al-Buḥārī (al-ṣahīḥānī)*—and there is a general agreement regarding its reliability (*muttafaq ʿalayhi*). *Ḥadīth ʿĀʾiṣa*, on the contrary, is quoted only in the collection of *Muslim* but not in the collection of *al-Buḥārī*.<sup>26</sup> In addition, there is an imperfection in its chain of transmission (*isnād*), since it is a *mursal ḥadīth*, which means a report that was narrated by a second generation believer (*tābiʿī*), from the

<sup>22</sup> AL-ṬABARĪ 2008, vol. 2, p. 1390, *ḥadīth* 5372; MUḤAMMAD IBN ISMĀʿĪL, AL-BUḤĀRĪ: *Ṣahīḥ al-Buḥārī*. Cairo 1950, vol. 1, p. 131; MĀLIK IBN ANAS: *Muwattaʿ al-Imām Mālik*. Bombay 1991, vol. 1, p. 597; AL-BAGAWĪ 1983, vol. 2, p. 237. For a full list of the various versions of this tradition, its transmitters and validity, see: AL-DUMYĀṬĪ 1989, pp. 53–58.

<sup>23</sup> AL-DUMYĀṬĪ 1989, pp. 53–58.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. pp. 59–64.

<sup>25</sup> AL-ṬABARĪ 2008, vol. 2, pp. 1390–1391, *ḥadīth* 5376–5381.

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Prophet Muhammad or his wives, but the *isnād* of which skips over the intervening of a first generation believer (*ṣaḥābī*) link, which makes it less perfect.<sup>27</sup>

AL-DUMYĀTĪ continued to argue that the only problem with *ḥadīth ‘Ā’iṣa* is with one letter, an extra *waw* (و). If we will reduce it from the word *wa-ṣalāt al-‘aṣr*, we will get “*Ḥafīẓū ‘alā al-ṣalawāt wa-’l-ṣalāh al-wuṣṭā, ṣalāt al-‘aṣr*”. The meaning of the verse will be: “Maintain with care the [obligatory] prayers and [in particular] the Middle Prayer, [which is] *ṣalāt al-‘aṣr*.” AL-DUMYĀTĪ suggests that it might be that in the process of the delivery of this tradition, an unnecessary *waw* was added. He explains that this is a widespread phenomenon in the Qur’ān and also in Arabic poetry and gives many examples of it.<sup>28</sup>

Another tradition transmitted by al-Barā’ b. ‘Uzayb, may shed light on *ḥadīth ‘Ā’iṣa*. According to *ḥadīth al-Barā’*, there were two versions of the Qur’ānic verse. In the first version, the words *ṣalāt al-‘aṣr* and *al-ṣalāt al-wuṣṭā* were written. Then Allāh abrogated it (*naṣaḥahu*) and the new version with only the words *al-ṣalāt al-wuṣṭā* was revealed.<sup>29</sup> AL-DUMYĀTĪ writes that this tradition is considered valid and reliable and matches the final version of the Qur’ān. *Ḥadīth ‘Ā’iṣa* not only contradicts *Ḥadīth ‘Alī*, but also the tradition regarding King Solomon—which is agreed upon by the consensus of the scholars (*Iğmā’*)—and the other reliable traditions that are cited above.<sup>30</sup>

In addition, there is another reliable tradition attributed to the first two Caliphs, Abū Bakr and ‘Umar, who sent a young boy to the prophet, to ask him which prayer is *al-ṣalāh al-wuṣṭā*.

Ibrāhīm ibn Yazīd al-Dimaškī tells of the time that he sat with ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Marwān, who said to one of the people present: “Go to Mr. X (*fulān*) and ask him what he heard from the Prophet in regard to *al-ṣalāh al-wuṣṭā*.” So then, one of those waiting with him said: “When I was a young lad Abū Bakr and ‘Umar sent me, to the Prophet to ask him about *al-ṣalāh al-wuṣṭā*.” The Prophet took my little finger and said: “This is the Morning Prayer”. Afterwards he held the finger that came next and said: “This is the Afternoon Prayer”. After that, he grabbed my thumb and said: “This is the Evening Prayer”. Afterwards, he grabbed my next finger and said: “This is the Late Evening Prayer”. Afterwards he asked me, “Which finger is left?” I said to him: “The middle finger”. He asked me, “What prayer is left?” I said to him “*ṣalāt al-‘aṣr*”. The prophet said to me: “This is *al-ṣalāh al-wuṣṭā*.”<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 92.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. pp. 94–96.

<sup>29</sup> AL-ṬABARĪ 2008, vol. 2, p. 1392, *ḥadīth* 5420; AḤMAD IBN ḤUSAYN AL-BAYHAQĪ: *Ma’rifat al-Sunan wa-’l-Athār*. Cairo 1991, vol. 2, p. 311.

<sup>30</sup> AL-DUMYĀTĪ 1989, pp. 93–94.

<sup>31</sup> AL-ṬABARĪ 2008, vol. 2, p. 1392, *ḥadīth* 5425. And see also: al-Dumyātī 1989, pp. 100–101.

URI RUBIN in his article "Morning and Evening Prayers in Early Islam", cites other traditions which deal with the distinctiveness of the afternoon and morning prayers. According to one tradition, the angels of the night and the day meet at those times, since these are the meeting points between day and night. The angels change shifts and if they find the Muslims praying at the same time, they report that to Allāh. At those times, the believer is able to "see" God:

We sat with the Messenger of Allāh on the night of *al-Badr* when he looked at the moon and said: "You could see your Lord as if you see the moon with no doubt if you observe the prayers before sunrise and before sunset, meaning the morning and the afternoon prayers."<sup>32</sup>

According to the second opinion, the Middle Prayer is the Afternoon Prayer (*ṣalāt al-zuhr*). Saʿīd ibn al-Musayyib said:

I sat with Ibrāhīm ibn ʿAlī and ʿUrwa ibn al-Zubayr. I said, "I heard *Abū Saʿīd al-Hudrī* say, 'The Middle Prayer is *ṣalāt al-ʿaṣr*.'" ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿUmar walked by. Then ʿUrwa called out: "Send a messenger to ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿUmar and ask him!" We sent a young man to him to ask. When the young man arrived, he said: "The Middle Prayer is *ṣalāt al-zuhr*." We doubted his word and thus we all walked to ibn ʿUmar in order to ask him. We asked him and he said: "The Middle Prayer is *ṣalāt al-zuhr*."<sup>33</sup>

An additional *ḥadīth* tells that Zayd ibn ʿAbdillāh, the Prophet's secretary, used to say that the Middle Prayer is *ṣalāt al-zuhr*.<sup>34</sup>

Why did *ṣalāt al-zuhr* become what is considered to be the Middle Prayer with a special warning to pray it on time? Another tradition tells us that *ṣalāt al-zuhr* was the first prayer that Muhammad began to pray facing the direction in which prayers are faced today (*qiblah*).<sup>35</sup> Additionally, *ṣalāt al-zuhr* is positioned at midday and that is the time that man is the most involved in his commerce and business and therefore he has to be strict in ensuring that he doesn't become distracted about the time of his prayers. A different explanation is cited in the name of *ʿIkrima*, who maintains that *ṣalāt al-zuhr* is the Middle Prayer since there are two prayers before it—*al-ʿiṣā* and *al-faḡr*—and two prayers after it—*al-ʿaṣr* and *al-maḡrib*. According to a different traditional version, *ṣalāt al-zuhr* is the Middle Prayer because *ṣalāt al-faḡr*

<sup>32</sup> U. RUBIN: "Morning and Evening Prayers in Early Islam." In: *JSAI* 10 (1987), pp. 54–58.

<sup>33</sup> AL-ṬABARĪ 2008, vol. 2, p. 1398, *ḥadīth* 5434, 5440.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, *ḥadīths* 5435–5437; AL-BAGAWĪ 1983, vol. 2, p. 236; ʿABD ALLĀH IBN MUḤAMMAD IBN ABĪ SHAYBA: *Muṣanaf ibn Abī Shayba fī al-Aḥādīth wa-l-Āthār*. Beirut 1989, vol. 2, p. 389.

<sup>35</sup> AL-ṬABARĪ 2008, vol. 2, p. 1399, *ḥadīth* 5439.

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<sup>36</sup> AL-  
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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*

is before it and *ṣalāt al-‘aṣr* is after it.<sup>36</sup> It should be pointed out that this explanation could be used for each one of the prayers because for each of them one can argue that there are two prayers before it and two prayers after it.

According to another interpretation for *ḥadīth ‘Ā’iṣa*, which was mentioned above, it was written in the copies of the Qur’ān, which had belonged to the wives of the Prophet, *‘Ā’iṣa* and *Hafṣa*: “Observe the prayers and the middle prayer and *ṣalāt al-‘aṣr*.” It turns out that therefore, one must be stringent in regard to the time of *ṣalāt al-‘aṣr*, even if it is *not* the Middle Prayer. If according to this verse *ṣalāt al-‘aṣr* is not the Middle Prayer, so the middle prayer is *ṣalāt al-zuhr*. The reason for the special need to be strict in regard to the time of *ṣalāt al-zuhr* is because this is the time when man is especially busy and distracted.<sup>37</sup> It is told how the Prophet, who was angry because the people were busy with their commerce and did not come to pray the *ṣalāt al-zuhr*, said: “It is my wish to burn all those people who are in their homes at the time of prayer.” Afterwards the verse came down: “Watch over the prayers and the Middle Prayer.” Due to the closeness of the two issues—the one of the Prophet in regard to the people who didn’t come to pray *ṣalāt al-zuhr* and the verse regarding the Middle Prayer, it is learned that the Middle Prayer is *ṣalāt al-zuhr*.<sup>38</sup>

An additional explanation in regard to the importance of being strict at the time of *ṣalāt al-zuhr* is the heavy heat that exists at this hour. According to the *ḥadīth*, the Prophet used to pray *ṣalāt al-zuhr* at the hottest time of the day (*ḥāḡira*), which was the most difficult hour for the people. Therefore, the Prophet used to pray it when there were only one or two lines of people behind him.<sup>39</sup>

The third opinion maintains that the middle prayer is the Evening Prayer, *ṣalāt al-maḡrib*. According to this opinion, the nickname *wuṣṭā*, the average between two ends, is most applicable for the Evening Prayer, since it has a permanent number of three genuflection cycles, in contrast to the rest of the prayers—*al-zuhr*, *al-‘aṣr* and *al-‘iṣā*—where there are four genuflection cycles. (And these can be shortened if travelling.) The Evening Prayer stays the same and is never shortened. It must be mentioned that the above explanation does not answer the problem of the Morning Prayer (which has two genuflection cycles) which is also never shortened when travelling. An additional explanation that supports the commentary that the Middle Prayer is the Evening Prayer is that all the rest of the prayers have two times when they can be prayed but the Evening Prayer has only one time which is at

<sup>36</sup> ‘ALĪ IBN ḤABĪB AL-MĀWARDĪ: *al-Ḥāwī al-Kabīr*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr 1994, vol. 2, pp. 8–9.

<sup>37</sup> AL-TABARĪ 2008, vol. 2, p. 1399, *ḥadīth* 5441.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., *ḥadīth* 5443.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., *ḥadīth* 5442; IBN ABĪ SHAYBA 1989, vol. 2, p. 387; AL-MĀWARDĪ: *al-Ḥāwī*, pp. 8–9.

sunset. The Prophet always prayed it at the same time and he didn't make it earlier or later.<sup>40</sup> According to this opinion, due to its "average" characteristic permanence, it is appropriate that the Evening Prayer is called the Middle Prayer.

The fourth opinion contends that the Middle Prayer is the Morning Prayer. This tradition was passed on mainly by Ibn 'Abbas, but also through additional tradition transmitters, such as 'Ikrima, Ġābir ibn Zayd Muġāhid, etc.<sup>41</sup> According to these traditions, it is appropriate to call the Morning Prayer the Middle Prayer, since the time for it is far away from the rest of the prayers. Because of this, one cannot join it to any other prayers during a journey (*al-ġam' bayna al-salātayni*). The Morning Prayer also stands in between—between the light of day and the darkness of night—and is not defined as a morning prayer or an evening prayer. According to a tradition narrated by 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and Ubayy ibn Ka'b:

The Middle Prayer, which Allāh made unique, is the Morning Prayer. And that is because the Noon Prayer and the Late Afternoon Prayer are the two prayers which are day prayers and the Evening Prayer and the Late Evening Prayer are the two prayers which are night prayers, so the Morning Prayer stands between them.<sup>42</sup>

Another *hadīth* tells that at the time of the Morning Prayer, the contingent of angels which came down at night goes back up to the sky and the contingent of agents of the day goes down and they both meet at this time. That is why this is a good time for prayer as there are two contingents of angels together who testify before Allāh in regard to the prayers of men at that time.<sup>43</sup> Based on these sources, the *Šāfi'i* jurist *Abū Ishāq al-Širāzī*, who wrote the book *Al-Muhadhab fī Fiqh al-Imām al-Šāfi'i*, ruled that the Middle Prayer is the Morning Prayer: "The time for the Morning Prayer begins when the people are deeply sleeping and that is why God made it unique and with a special guard in order for it not to be missed due to sleep."<sup>44</sup> It is important to note that in the *Šāfi'i* school there is a division between the early opinion of AL-ŠĀFI' and his later opinion. In the beginning, AL-ŠĀFI' believed that the

<sup>40</sup> AL-MĀWARDĪ: *al-Hāwī*, vol. 2, p. 9; al-Ṭabarī 2008, vol. 2, p. 1399, *hadīth* 5454; AL-BAĠAWĪ 1983, vol. 2, p. 238.

<sup>41</sup> YAḤYĀ IBN SHARAF AL-NAWAWĪ: *al-Maġmū': Sharḥ al-Muhadhab*. Cairo 1966, vol. 3, p. 60; AL ṬABARĪ 2008, vol. 2, pp. 1401–1403, *hadīth*: 5455–5469.

<sup>42</sup> AL-BAĠAWĪ 1983, vol. 2, p. 235; AL-ṬABARĪ 2008, vol. 2, pp. 1401–1403, *hadīth* 5462; *Muṣanaf ibn Abī Shayba*, vol. 2, p. 387.

<sup>43</sup> MUḤAMMAD IBN ISMĀ'IL AL-BUḤĀRĪ: *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Buḥārī*. Cairo 1950, vol. 1, p. 138; MUSLIM IBN AL-ḤAĠĀĠ AL-QUSHAYRĪ: *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim bi-Sharḥ al-Nawawī*. Beirut 1990, vol. 5, p. 133; AL BAYHAQĪ 1991, vol. 2, p. 307.

<sup>44</sup> AL-NAWAWĪ 1966, vol. 3, p. 60.

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<sup>49</sup> AL-

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Middle Prayer was the Morning Prayer but later on he changed his opinion and ruled that the Middle Prayer was the Afternoon Prayer, because of the large amount of reliable traditions which show this. The following saying is attributed to AL-ŠĀFI‘Ī: “If there is a reliable tradition of the Prophet which contradicts my words—it is the tradition of the Prophet which should be given priority. Don’t imitate my practices.”<sup>45</sup> The reason that al-Šāfi‘ī changed his opinion from the Middle Prayer being the Morning prayer to it being the Afternoon Prayer, even though it went against his previous opinion, is because of this opinion of his, that when there is a tradition by the Prophet which negates one’s own opinion, one should follow the tradition of the Prophet.

An additional tradition in this context, which interprets the end of Q. 2:238: “*Wa-qūmū li-‘llāhi qānitīn*” (and stand before Allāh, devoutly obedient) narrated by Abū Raḡā’, who said: “I prayed the Morning Prayer with Ibn ‘Abbas in the mosque in Baṣra. He made a *qunūt* before he bowed (*rukū‘*) and said: This is the Middle Prayer about which it was said in the verse ‘*wa-qūmū li-‘llāhi qānitīn*’.”<sup>46</sup> The expression *qunūt* and its derivatives are mentioned many times in the Qur’ān with different meanings. It has a number of explanations: Abstention from talking during prayers, a personal prayer during the official prayers, prayers standing up, man’s feeling worthless in the eyes of his creator, etc.<sup>47</sup> In regard to the Ibn ‘Abbas *ḥadīth*, it is a personal prayer (*du‘ā‘*) which is said in the Morning Prayer before the bowing. According to this *ḥadīth* of Ibn ‘Abbas, the term *qunūt*, which appears at the end of the verse, shows that this verse refers to the morning prayer, because in the morning prayer the *qunūt* is performed.<sup>48</sup> In regard to this argument, the supporters of the other opinions will argue that there are other meanings for the term *qunūt* (as we have shown above) and one cannot argue unequivocally that the *qunūt* is a personal prayer that is said in the Morning Prayer, but it is definitely possible to argue that the intention of *qunūt* in this verse is for a general piety.<sup>49</sup>

The fifth opinion does not even attempt to investigate which prayer is being discussed because it is of no importance. In any case, one needs to be

<sup>45</sup> AL-DUMYĀTĪ 1989, pp. 111–113.

<sup>46</sup> AL-ṬABARĪ 2008, vol. 2, pp. 1401–1403, *ḥadīth* 5458; AL-MĀWARDĪ: *al-Ḥāwī*, p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> A. J. WENSINCK: “*Kunūt*.” In: EI<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>48</sup> AL-ṬABARĪ 2008, vol. 2, p. 1403, *ḥadīth* 5472: “*fa-la ṣalah maktūba min al-ṣalawāt al-ḥams fihā qunūt siwā ṣalāt al-ṣubḥ, wa-‘allama bi-dhalika annaha hiya duna ḡayriha*”. See also: AL-MĀWARDĪ, *al-Ḥāwī*, p. 8; AL-NAWAWĪ 1966, vol. 3, p. 60.

<sup>49</sup> AL-NAWAWĪ 1966, vol. 3, p. 61: “‘*wa-qūmū li-llāhi qānitīn*’ mimma yunkirūhu al-muḥalifūn wa-yaqūlūn lā nusallim iḥbāt alqunūt fi al-ṣubḥ, wa-‘in salamnā, lā nusallim anna al-murād bi-l-qunūt hadhā al-qunūt al-ma‘rūf ‘indakum, bal al-qunūt: alṭā‘ah wa-l-‘ibādah.”

strict about the times of prayer for all the prayers: "Abū Fātima said: 'I asked Rabī' ibn Ḥayṭam about the Middle Prayer.' In return, he asked: 'If you will know which one it is, does that mean that you will only be strict with the time for that prayer and neglect the other prayers?' I answered him: 'No.' He said to me: 'If so, if you have watched over the times of all the prayers, then you have also watched over the time of the Middle Prayer.'"<sup>50</sup> Nāfi', the *maṭlā* of ibn 'Umar, was asked regarding the Middle Prayer and he indicated that since the Middle Prayer is one of the prayers and if someone keeps the time of all the prayers, then he will also keep the time of this prayer.<sup>51</sup> Sa'īd ibn al-Musayyib said: "The companions of the Prophet sat with him and they were divided among themselves in regard to the question of the Middle Prayer. In his answer, the Prophet put all his fingers together."<sup>52</sup>

The Qur'ān commentator and historian, AL-ṬABARĪ, argued that the correct explanation for this verse is *ṣalāt al-ʿaṣr*, since there are many traditions that report this. In addition, there are many specific *ḥadīths* narrated by the Prophet that tell of the importance and the virtues of *ṣalāt al-ʿaṣr* and how the Prophet was very careful regarding the time of this prayer. AL-ṬABARĪ explains why *ṣalāt al-ʿaṣr* grants man such a large reward. He divides the day into times. At night a man sleeps. At the time of the Morning Prayer, it is still too early to carry out business. The time of *ṣalāt al-zuhr* is the hottest time of the day when many people rest and are not involved in commerce. The time that people are busy with their own matters is the time from sunrise up until the time of *ṣalāt al-zuhr*. During this time, there are no obligatory prayers but only permitted prayers such as *ṣalāt al-duḥā*. The second time that people are busy with their own matters is the second half of the day from the afternoon until sunset. At this time, man has the obligation to pray *ṣalāt al-ʿaṣr*. Therefore, Allāh warned him to watch over it and increased the reward as this is the time that man is most involved in his own matters.<sup>53</sup> According to this explanation by al-Ṭabarī, it is *ṣalāt al-ʿaṣr*, which is a type of test of a man's piety, to see if at a man's most overburdened time, a time close to the end of the main day of commerce on whether he is busy with his business or busy praying on time.

AL-ŠĀFI'Ī believed that the best explanation is to argue that the Middle Prayer is the Morning Prayer. But despite the fact that this is his opinion, he is willing to accept a different one, since many other traditions report that

<sup>50</sup> AL-ṬABARĪ 2008, vol. 2, p. 1403, *ḥadīth* 5474.

<sup>51</sup> AL-ṬABARĪ 2008, vol. 2, p. 1403, *ḥadīth* 5473. See also: AL-NAWAWĪ 1966, vol. 3, p. 61: "*wa-ʿan baʿdubum ʿinnaba ʿihdā al-ṣalawāt al-ḥams muḥhama ... wa-ʿan baʿdubum ʿinna al-wuṣṭā ḡamīʿ al-ṣalawāt.*"

<sup>52</sup> AL-ṬABARĪ 2008, vol. 2, p. 1403, *ḥadīth* 5475.

<sup>53</sup> AL-ṬABARĪ 2008, vol. 2, p. 1405.

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<sup>54</sup> AL-NAWAWĪ 1966, vol. 3, p. 61: "*ibn sharaf.*"

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.,

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it is *ṣalāt al-‘aṣr*. AL-MĀWARDĪ, who was an Islamic jurist who lived in the eleventh century, quotes the opinion of AL-ŠĀFI‘Ī:

What is most correct in my eyes is that we are talking about *al-fağr*, through the proof of logical arguments, but together with this, every time that I put forth my own opinion which contradicts the tradition, I am the first to recant from my explanation. We received reliable traditions that it is *ṣalāt al-‘aṣr* and therefore I support the view that it is *ṣalāt al-‘aṣr* and not *ṣalāt al-fağr*. There is no way that this can be explained in two different ways as some of the companions of the Prophet mistakenly thought.<sup>54</sup>

If AL-ŠĀFI‘Ī is quoted here correctly, then one can see that he gave priority to tradition in order to keep the unity of ruling over his personal opinion.

The *Hanbalī* school also accepted the opinion that the Middle Prayer was the Afternoon Prayer, *ṣalāt al-‘aṣr*. The *Hanbalī* jurist IBN QUDĀMA says in his book *Al-Kāfi fī Fiqh al-Imām Aḥmad ibn Hanbal* that *ṣalāt al-‘aṣr* is the Middle Prayer.<sup>55</sup> He attributes this to *ḥadīth ‘Alī* (‘Alī’s report from the battle of the trench) which is a reliable *ḥadīth* and which appears in all reliable *ḥadīth* collections. In addition, it was the opinion of AḤMAD IBN ḤANBAL. It is unknown if there was anyone with a different opinion about this.<sup>56</sup> IBN QUDĀMA writes in his book, *Al-Muğnī*, that *ṣalāt al-‘aṣr* is the Middle Prayer because: “This is the opinion of the majority who transmitted the tradition to the companions of the Prophet and others.”<sup>57</sup> AL-DUMYĀTĪ, in his book, writes that according to the *Hanafī* school, the Middle Prayer is *ṣalāt al-‘aṣr*.<sup>58</sup>

Among the *Mālikī* school, the Morning Prayer is the Middle Prayer. This is because there is an agreement among the people of Medina that the meaning of the Middle Prayer that is mentioned in the Qur’ān is the Morning Prayer. In the *Mālikī* judicial law book *Hāshiyat al-‘adawī ‘alā Kifāyat al-ṭālīb al-Rabbānī*<sup>59</sup>, it says that: “The Morning Prayer is the Middle Prayer among the people of Medina and it is called, *ṣalāt al-fağr*.”<sup>60</sup>

It is evident that Muslim traditions are not uniform in the matter of the identification of the Middle Prayer which appears in Qur’ān 2:238. One can

<sup>54</sup> AL-MĀWARDĪ, *al-Hāwī*, vol. 2, p. 10. See also: AL-NAWAWĪ 1966, vol. 3, p. 61; *yahyā ibn sharaf al-Nawawī, Rawḍat al-Tālibīn*. Beirut 1992, vol. 1, pp. 293-294.

<sup>55</sup> MUHAMMAD IBN QUDĀMA AL-MUQADASĪ: *al-Kāfi fī Fiqh al-Imām Aḥmad ibn Hanbal*. Beirut 2001, vol. 1, p. 176.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., footnote 3.

<sup>57</sup> MUHAMMAD IBN QUDĀMA AL-MUQADASĪ: *al-Muğnī*. Cairo 2004, vol. 1, p. 474.

<sup>58</sup> AL-DUMYĀTĪ 1989, p. 119.

<sup>59</sup> This book is a commentary on the *Risālah* of Ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawānī (d. 996) who was a *Mālikī* scholar from Kairouan.

<sup>60</sup> ‘ALĪ IBN AḤMAD AL-‘ADAWĪ: *Hāshiyat al-‘Adawī ‘alā Kifāyat al-ṭālīb al-Rabbānī li’Risālat ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawānī*. Beirut 1997, vol. 1, p. 307.

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also observe that in the end, the opinions of two major groups gained an advantage over the rest of the traditions and they became the basis for today's traditions in regard to the morning and afternoon prayers. Among the two, the opinion that became accepted in the end by the majority of scholars is that the Afternoon Prayer is *ṣalāt al-ʿaṣr*.

### Goldziher's theory

In 1906, GOLDZIH<sup>ER</sup> wrote an article called "Die Bedeutung der Nachmittagszeit im Islam" in which he claimed that the holiness of the time of the Afternoon Prayer stemmed from ancient sources in Eastern Christianity and Judaism. According to his theory, during the period of the revelation in Mecca, the Afternoon Prayer did not exist at all and its observance only began during the Medina period, probably as a result of the influence of the Jews of Medina. GOLDZIH<sup>ER</sup> demonstrates that in early Islam the meaning of the word *wustā* was not "middle" but "noble". GOLDZIH<sup>ER</sup> also proved from various Muslim sources that the Islamic sages attributed a special holiness to this time out of a perception that this time is a time of "good will" in the heavens.

Muslim judges have witnesses swear on the Qur'ān at the time of the Afternoon Prayer based on the assumption that witnesses will not dare to lie at such a holy time when the angels report people's deeds to Allāh.<sup>61</sup>

According to GOLDZIH<sup>ER</sup>, the idea that God judges the deeds of man at that time is not only Islamic but has parallels in previous cultures. One Jewish parallel for this idea, which GOLDZIH<sup>ER</sup> cites, is the Kabbalistic writing of the book of the Zohar. Another parallel, is an Ethiopian Arabic text called "*Testamentum Adami*" or the "Cave of Treasures". The source of this manuscript is in Eastern Christianity. In this manuscript, God gives Adam an account of the different divine activities during the day. Praising at the seventh hour is recommended as it is the time when the angels change shifts. The prayer is brought to the creator and there is a promise that this prayer will be accepted.<sup>62</sup>

DAVID KING addressed GOLDZIH<sup>ER</sup>'s claims. He is of the opinion that GOLDZIH<sup>ER</sup> mistakenly swapped the Noon Prayer for the Afternoon Prayer. He proves this from many sources—that the time of the Afternoon Prayer is the ninth hour and not the seventh. He is also unconvinced by the citing of

<sup>61</sup> I. GOLDZIH<sup>ER</sup>: "Die Bedeutung der Nachmittagszeit im Islam." In: *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 9 (1906), pp. 293–302.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

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“*Testamentum Adami*”, since the use of temporary hours in Islam only dates back to the tenth century CE.<sup>63</sup>

According to conventional research opinion, which was conducted after GOLDZIHNER’s death in 1921, the book of the *Zohar* was written in Spain in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by MOSHE DI LEON, six centuries after Muhammad.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, I would like to suggest that the source for the preferred status of the Afternoon Prayer comes from an earlier source—the Babylonian Talmud.

### The Talmudic parallel of Q. 2:238

Tractate *Berakhot* is the first tractate of the *Mišna* collection *Seder Zera’im*. This tractate primarily addresses the rules regarding prayer. On the sixth page of this tractate, there is a collection of rulings of *Rav Hunā*, narrated by his student, *Rabbi Helbo*.<sup>65</sup> *Rav Hunā* of Diakora was born in about 216 CE. He was the head of the big and dominant academy (*yeshiva*) of *Sūrā*, in Babylonia.<sup>66</sup> The learning method for the rabbis of *Sūrā* was to use the Bible as a source for their rulings (*Halakha*).<sup>67</sup>

Regarding the importance of the *Minḥa* prayer, the Talmud says:

*Rabbi Helbo* said in the name of *Rav Hunā*: “Man should always beware of the *Minḥa* prayer time, since Elijah was answered only during the *Minḥa* prayer.”<sup>68</sup>

The Talmud is referring to Kings I: 18, verses 19–39, which describes how the prophet Elijah, while competing with the prophets of Ba’al on Mount Carmel, prayed to God at the time of *Minḥa* and his sacrifice was received. Therefore, the Talmud views prayer at that time as very important.

Nonetheless, one can see in the Talmudic discussion additional opinions that require caution and strictness for the other prayers. *Rabbi Yohanan* added that even the *Ma’ariv* prayer is important because while praying it, one’s prayers were answered. To prove his opinion, he quotes the verse in Psalms 141:2 where it is said: “Let me prayers stand as incense before you, the lifting of my hands as an afternoon offering”. *Rabbi Naḥman bar Yizḥaq* said that even the *Šaḥarit* prayer is worthy of special carefulness. He bases

<sup>63</sup> KING 2004, vol. 1, pp. 602–603.

<sup>64</sup> See G. SCHOLEM: *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. New York 1961, pp. 156–243. I. TISHBY: *The Wisdom of the Zohar*. Oxford 1989, pp. 30–55.

<sup>65</sup> On Rabbi Chelbo, see SH. FRIEMAN: *Who’s Who in the Talmud*. London 1995, pp. 103–104.

<sup>66</sup> On Rav Huna, see *ibid.*, pp. 167–169. G. BADER: *The Encyclopedia of Talmudic Sages*. London 1988, pp. 694–699.

<sup>67</sup> B. LAU: *Sages*. Vol. 4: *From Mishnah to Talmud*. Tel Aviv 2012, p. 166 [Hebrew].

<sup>68</sup> BT Brachot 6:2.

this on Psalms 5:4: "God, at dawn, hear my voice at dawn as I arrange my prayer before you and I wait expectantly".<sup>69</sup>

The discussion in the Islamic traditional sources is amazingly similar to the discussion in Jewish traditional texts. One can see here that the way of thinking is similar between the Jewish scholars and the Muslim scholars. Both feared that a preference for one prayer over the others will cause people to neglect the other prayers. Another point of similarity is that the prayer chosen at the end of the process is the Afternoon Prayer.

We cannot rule out the possibility that the strictness of the Afternoon Prayer in Islam is under the influence of the biblical story of Elijah at Mount Carmel. Elijah is mentioned in Qur'an 6:85 and Qur'an 37:123–132 (which gives a shortened account of the Biblical story) and perhaps Qur'an 3:183 also refers to Elijah.

#### The figure of *al-Khidr* in Muslim tradition and its tie with the Afternoon Prayer

As corroboration to this argument, one can allude to the close relationship that developed in Islamic literature between the character of Elijah (*al-Khidr* in Islamic tradition) and the importance of prayer. One of the reasons for Elijah's nickname "*al-Hidr*" (literally the green), is that he often prayed in nature. *Al-Khidr* is seen as someone who is diligent in his prayers, whose prayers cross over time and place and work beyond nature's boundaries. *Al-Khidr* prays many supplicatory prayers before God (*du'ā'*), teaches the people how to pray and is seen as a mediator who represents the supplicatory prayers before God who appointed him to listen to them and to bring them to him. The influence of *al-Hidr's* prayers is recognized in the literature of all the Islamic factions—Sunnites, Shiites and Sufism—and one can find many traditions and legends about *al-Khidr* and the topic of prayer.<sup>70</sup>

PATRICK FRANKE in his comprehensive book about the character of *al-Khidr* in Islamic tradition, cites many traditions that illustrate the close relationship between Elijah, *al-Khidr* and prayer. According to some traditions, *al-Khidr* and Elijah used to meet during the *Ḥaġġ* season. They would do the encirclement around the *ka'ba* and would pray day and night for the Muslims. Some of the reports say that they met at *minā* and some report that they met at *'arafah*.

<sup>69</sup> BT Brachot 6:2.

<sup>70</sup> P. FRANKE: *Begegnung mit Khidr: Quellenstudien zum Imaginären im traditionellen Islam*. Beirut 2000, pp. 106–114.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., F

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., F

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According to other versions, the two met in Jerusalem during the nights of *Ramaḍān*. *Al-Khidr* and Elijah were fasting in Jerusalem during the month of *Ramaḍān*. One could see them meeting in Jerusalem, on the Temple Mount, after *ṣalāt al-‘aṣr*.<sup>71</sup>

An additional tradition is told about a man who met two strangers in Jerusalem after *ṣalāt al-‘aṣr*. He asked both of them to identify themselves and one of them said, “I am *al-Khidr* and this is my brother Elijah”. The man began shaking from so much excitement to meet these two important and holy people. *Al-Khidr* calmed him down and gave him good advice:

Whoever prays *ṣalāt al-‘aṣr* on Friday, in the direction of the *qiblah* and says ‘Ho Allāh the merciful’, up until the sunset and asks a request wholeheartedly, it will be fulfilled.<sup>72</sup>

### *Minḥa* Prayer in Jewish tradition

In the Bible, the concept of “*Minḥa*” is interpreted in two ways. The first explanation means “a present” and the second means a “fragrant sacrifice”, one which is sacrificed to God to appease Him. The time chosen for making this sacrifice is toward evening, at sunset, which is considered to be the best time for praying to God, a time of heavenly mercy. In Psalms 141:2 it says: “Considered should be my prayers as incense before You; the lifting of my hands as an offering of the afternoon”. From this verse we learn that the most desirable time for prayer is before sunset. Biblical characters such as Ezra, Daniel and Elijah chose to pray precisely at that time. The time for the *Minḥa* prayer is from the 9<sup>th</sup> hour of the day until sunset.<sup>73</sup>

Since the time for *Minḥa* is in the middle of the day when people are occupied and busy and since one is allowed to pray this prayer only until sunset, the sages were afraid that the people would forget to pray this important prayer on time. Based on *Rav Hunā*’s warning regarding *Minḥa*’s time, the Jewish *Halakha* was set. That is why the Talmud enumerates a number of activities which are prohibited before the *Minḥa* prayer due to the concern that they would take up too much time or from the fear that something unexpected would happen that would prevent the recitation of the *Minḥa* prayer. Thus, in Jewish *Halakha*, it was ruled that man is prohibited from

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp. 145–146.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., pp. 430–431.

<sup>73</sup> M. WEINFELD: *Normative and Sectarian Judaism in the Second Temple Period*. London 2005, pp. 122–125.

eating, entering a bathhouse, getting a haircut or even learning Torah close to the time of *Minḥa*.<sup>74</sup>

The similarity between the *Minḥa* prayer and *ṣalāt al-‘aṣr* is not only its importance and holiness, but also in its times. Eugene Mittwoch claimed that the noon and the afternoon prayers in Islam, were set in times equal to the two times of *Minḥa* in Jewish law –the “grand *Minḥa*”, which is prayed half an hour after midday, just as the Islamic Noon Prayer (*ṣalāt al-zuhr*), and the “small *Minḥa*”, which is prayed at twilight, close to sunset, just as the Afternoon Prayer in Islam (*ṣalāt al-aṣr*).<sup>75</sup>

We can also find evidence in Islamic tradition itself of the idea that the holiness of the Afternoon Prayer is not originally Muslim but borrowed from Judaism and Christianity:

The Messenger of Allāh prayed the Afternoon Prayer with us in a location called *Mahmas* and said: “This prayer was offered to those before you and they neglected it. Any one of you who observes it will get double the reward.”<sup>76</sup>

And another tradition states:

Abū Baṣra al-Ġifārī said: “The Messenger of God prayed with us the Afternoon Prayer (*ṣalāt al-aṣr*) and when he finished he said: ‘This prayer was obligated on those who were before you and they neglected it. Whoever will pray it among you will get double reward. There is no prayer after it until a star will be seen.’”<sup>77</sup>

The term “those who were before you” in the Qur’ān refers to the religions and nations that were before Islam—mainly the Jews and Christians. For example, Qur’ān 2:183 commands Muslims to fast like “Those who were before them”. The commentators explain that God commanded Jews and Christians (*ahl al-kitāb*) to fast and they neglected this obligation.<sup>78</sup>

Another tradition in this spirit can be found in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Buḥārī*:

The Messenger of Allāh said that the relations between you, Muslims and the Jews and the Christians are like this fable: “A man [to be understood as Allāh] looked for workers who would work for him from the beginning of the day until midday for a *Qirāt* [a currency]. The Jews came and worked. Then the Christians worked from midday until the afternoon for a *Qirāt*. Then the

<sup>74</sup> D. BROFSKI: *Hilkebot Tefilah: Meqorot ve-Iyonim*. Jerusalem 2013, pp. 309–312 [Hebrew “Jewish Law of Prayer: Origins and Discussions”].

<sup>75</sup> E. MITTWOCH: *Zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Islamischen Gebets und Kultus*. Berlin 1913.

<sup>76</sup> IBN KAṬĪR: *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm*. Beirut no date, vol. 1, p. 292.

<sup>77</sup> AL-ṬABARĪ 2008, vol. 2, p. 767.

<sup>78</sup> ABD AL-RAḤMAN AL-RĀZĪ: *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm*. Mecca 1997, vol. 1, p. 305. IBN KAṬĪR: *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm*. Vol. 1, pp. 213–214.

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Muslims came and worked from the time of the Afternoon Prayer until sunset and got two *Qirāʾts*. The Jews and the Christians said angrily: ‘We worked more time for less pay.’ The man asked: ‘Did I break the agreement with you?’ The Jews and Christians said: ‘No.’ The man said: ‘This is my grace and I give it to whom I want.’<sup>79</sup>

It seems that this Islamic tradition is of Christian origin. The same story appears in the Gospel of Matthew entitled: “The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard”:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, “You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” So they went. He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, “Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?” “Because no one has hired us”, they answered. He said to them, “You also go and work in my vineyard.” When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, “Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.” The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. “These who were hired last worked only one hour,” they said, “and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.” But he answered one of them, “I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?” So the last will be first, and the first will be last.<sup>80</sup>

The Muslim version takes one step further in explaining the story for the reader. Groups of rivals turn into members of the three large monotheistic religions. If the last group in the Christian version is the Christians, in the Muslim version, the last workers are Muslims. The theological message of the story is clear: “The last will be first and the first will be last.” The Christians have replaced the Jews as the Chosen People and now the Muslims have come and have replaced both the Jews and the Christians. That is the idea of substitution and abrogation of former prior religions by Islam (*nashb*) between Islam and the other religions. The times that are presented in the

<sup>79</sup> MUHAMMAD IBN ISMĀʿĪL AL-BUḤĀRĪ 1950.

<sup>80</sup> Gospel of Matthew, 20:1–16.

Christian original relate to the times of the prayers where the Muslims have accepted the best time for the owner-Allāh- to work.

The Muslims in the fable received the holiest time, the afternoon, to worship Allāh. Their way of worship is the quickest and their reward is double that of the members of the other religions. This fable expresses the idea that the Muslims are the final chosen people and that Islam came to the world to spiritually supersede the previous religions.

HAVA LAZARUS-YAFEH, in her book *Intertwined Worlds*, proves from various Islamic sources, that fruitful discussions took place between the various religious communities in regard to the explanations of the sentences and traditions. The Muslim authors collected information from their Jewish and Christian neighbors and even debated with them in regard to various religious issues. The Jewish converts were the path through which Jewish oral tradition flowed to the Muslim authors.<sup>81</sup>

The Jews and the Christians in the Muslim fable are presented in a negative light, as those who are not strict and who even make fun of God's commandment to be strict in regard to the Twilight Prayer. In contrast, the Muslims are presented in a favorable light as being especially strict about the time of this prayer. This description is far from reality. Up until today, observant Jews are especially fervent with the time of the *Minchah* prayer. The Talmud even sets special boundaries that do not exist for the other prayers in order that man will not miss the time for the *Minchah* prayer. If the Muslims were involved in the customs of their Jewish neighbors, as HANA LAZARUS-YAFEH argues, what is the reason for this inaccurate description?

This description matches the theory which ZE'EV MAGHEN raised in his book *After Hardship Cometh Ease*, where he shows how entire Talmudic discussions are reflected in the *Tafsīr* and the *hadīth*, which testifies without a doubt to the close contact and the mutual influence between the learned Jews and the Muslims. He also examines the negative descriptions of the Jews in Muslim literature and comes to the conclusion that the Jews in Muslim literature serve as the antithesis of the Muslims. And just as on a background of darkness the light is seen brightly, so too, on the background of lack of faith of the Jews and the Christians, the Muslims are presented as the true believers.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>81</sup> HAVA LAZARUS YAFEH: *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism*. Princeton 1992, pp. 131–136.

<sup>82</sup> MAGHEN 2006, pp. 210–223.

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