



## *banū isrāʾīl, ahl al-kitāb, al-yahūd wa-l-naṣārā*

### The Qurʾanic Community's Encounters with Jews and Christians

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**ABSTRACT** This study argues for a new understanding of the Qurʾan's view of Jews and Christians based, firstly, on their developing role in Qurʾanic discourse, and, secondly, on the Qurʾan's continuous understanding of the three designations for Jews and Christians: *banū isrāʾīl*, "the children of Israel," *ahl al-kitāb*, "the Scripture People," and *al-yahūd wa-l-naṣārā*, "the Jews and the Christians." Whereas there is a scholarly consensus that the term *ahl al-kitāb* designates both Jews and Christians, I offer two correctives: first, the term *banū isrāʾīl* equally designates the Qurʾan's Jewish and Christian contemporaries (or, more often, their common ancestors), and, second, the predominantly collective usage of *al-yahūd wa-l-naṣārā* shows that the three designations for Jews and Christians must be understood both in their continuity and in the increasing internal differentiation of Jews and Christians from each other.

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**KEYWORDS** Qurʾan, Judaism, Christianity, Israel, Religious Encounters, Islam

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## Introduction

No direct road leads from heresiology to historiography: heresiological statements, like all late antique descriptions of any religious Other, mostly teach one about the self of their author. Discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi library have shown how misguided scholarship was that sought to depict Palestinian Judaism at the turn of the millennium based on the New Testament, or to understand 'Gnostic' Christianity in light of Irenaeus' or Epiphanius' descriptions. Yet, the view from the 'other side' that was eventually afforded to scholars confirmed that *some* of the depictions of the religious Other *did* have a basis in reality, however distorted. These findings affirm the possibility of transfer of knowledge across communal boundaries.<sup>1</sup> In order to assess the plausibility of the transfer of information between religious groups, one first needs to establish contacts between them. This study argues

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1 For considerations of the historical value of heresiology, see, e.g., Berzon (2016), Iricinschi and Zellentini (2008).

that the Qur'an's sustained representation of its community's individual and collective contact with Jews and Christians is internally consistent and historically plausible; it moreover seeks to trace the community's relations with Jews and Christians from the Meccan through the Medinan phase. It also revisits the qur'anic terms for Jews and Christians: "Children of Israel," "Scripture People," and "the Jews and the Christians." Illustrating the continuity of all three qur'anic terms as designating both Jews and Christians as indissolubly interlinked successors to the biblical Israelites, this study points to the heresiological and historical motivations guiding the Qur'an's terminology. Overall, I seek to offer a more solid basis for the assessment of transfer of information between Jews, Christians, and their leaders, on the one hand, and the Prophet and his community, on the other.

The Qur'an's prerogative of divine authorship does not allow for heresiological discourse per se: while the Qur'an seeks to correct false interpretations of the Jewish and Christian tradition, its claim to authority is predicated on prophecy rather than orthodoxy.<sup>2</sup> The Qur'an focuses on the individual believer in a way that emphasises the in-group—eventually, the *umma*—differently than Christians and rabbinic Jews conceived of church- or peoplehood towards the end of Late Antiquity. This difference did not dispel the dynamics of communal interaction, traceable across the Meccan and Medinan periods (following Nöldeke's chronology as a rough heuristic device).<sup>3</sup> Rather, I hold that the Qur'an's portrayal of encounters with Jews and Christians often constitutes more direct evidence than many comparable Jewish and Christian reports about encounters with each other or with heretics. At the same time, the Qur'an's record of these contacts can be fruitfully compared with and contrasted to heresiological discourse. [2]

This study consists of three parts. As a way of establishing the basic historic reliability inherent in the Qur'an's prophetic mode of depicting the interactions between the Prophet and his audience, the first part considers how the Qur'an reflects instances in which the public, and in one case the Jews and Christians, turn to the Prophet with questions. This depiction serves as a guide to parts two and three, which focus on representations of the interactions of the Prophet and his nascent community with Jewish and Christian leaders and their communities. The second part considers the development of these interactions in Mecca, where these contacts are largely restricted to individuals. The third part traces the more tumultuous Medinan period, marked by communal encounter, intense exchange, and conflict. [3]

Assessing the historicity of the individual encounters as shown in the Qur'an is difficult. That there *was* contact between the Qur'anic community and Jews and Christians has hardly been doubted and is buttressed by increasingly specific analyses of the Qur'an in its late antique context.<sup>4</sup> Recent archaeological and epigraphical findings, moreover, point to the pres-

2 My emphasis on the Qur'an as a prophetic text, produced *ad libitum* in front of a developing community, is consciously contrasted with the problematic assumptions of the Qur'an as an 'authored' written text; I am much indebted to Angelika Neuwirth ([2010] 2019). For a starkly diverging approach, see Shoemaker (2022) and many of the analyses underlying Amir-Moezzi and Dye (2019).

3 The chronological model of Theodor Nöldeke ([1909–1938] 2013) remains fundamental for Qur'anic studies. Its basic distinction between the Meccan and Medinan periods, and its rough sequencing of Meccan suras, is affirmed by a majority of scholars; for a summary and some modifications based on external criteria, see Sinai (2016, 111–37); for my own attempts to base chronology on a comparative literary approach, see H. Zellentin (2019b); for a very critical approach to the issue, cf. Gabriel Said Reynolds (2011).

4 For the relationship between the Qur'an and Late Antiquity, see Neuwirth ([2010] 2019), Reynolds (2018) and Sinai (2016, esp. 59–78 and 138–158); for my own views, see Zellentin (2022, 2013); see also note 10 below.

ence of Jews and Christians in and around the Hejaz.<sup>5</sup> There are, moreover, good arguments for the basic historical reliability of the Qur'an's depiction of its audience's experiences. The Islamic Scripture seeks to convince its audience by appealing to their intellect, knowledge, personal experiences and collective memories. Its engagement with verifiable and therefore falsifiable events within the lifetime of its audience is therefore more likely than not to reflect a factual basis.<sup>6</sup>

Importantly, much of what the Qur'an relates stands in tension with its own goals, which heightens the likelihood of historical accuracy of its statements within a hermeneutics of suspicion. Its reports of disbelief are unlikely to be invented and buttress the historicity of instances that portray the prophet's eventual success in gaining followers. The Qur'an's prophetology, especially in Mecca, accentuates that prophets—who are usually native to the community to which they are sent, with notable exceptions, such as Jesus' and Muhammad's dual address to Israel and all of humankind—tend to be rejected. The emphasis on rejection suggests that the depictions of pastoral, communal, and military success, especially in Medina, are likely to be historically accurate.<sup>7</sup> The solid continuity between Medinan political prerogatives and the subsequent establishment of Islamic civilization should equally guide our reading.<sup>8</sup> Finally, the Qur'an's disagreements with its contemporaries never point to a dispute about empirically perceivable reality. If what is at stake is reality's interpretation, then the representation of reality itself, including depicted encounters with Jews and Christians, can become potential source material—subject to careful analysis—for our historical inquiry.

In order to avoid the methodological quagmire that would result from arguing for the historical plausibility of each case of contact, I assume that the historicity of contacts between the Qur'anic community and Jews and Christians is uncontroversial. I therefore submit that we should take the Qur'an as containing both *direct* and *indirect* evidence of encounters with Jews and Christians (which, henceforth, can always also be understood as indicating either 'more direct' or 'more indirect' evidence, on a sliding scale). I will treat the Qur'an's portrayals of communal interaction as (more) *direct historical evidence* since they are generally plausible and, as importantly, would have been falsifiable by a less than friendly audience. That is not to say that all details should be taken as facts—the events to which the Qur'an refers would obviously have been retold from its own perspective and retooled for its own purposes.<sup>9</sup>

5 A growing archaeological record firmly locates Jewish and Christian communities in Southwest Arabia, e.g., in Najran, Qaryat al-Faw and Ḥimā, in Northwest Arabia, e.g., in al-'Ulā, Taymā' and Madā'in Sāliḥ, and in historical Bahrain and several Gulf islands, including Šir banī Yās (see, e.g., Fisher 2015). The presence of Jews and Christians in Mecca and especially in Medina, by contrast, can thus far only be determined by relying on the evidence of the Qur'an and the Islamic tradition; see, e.g., Osman (2005, 67–80) and note 10 below.

6 For example, even the promise of divine intervention in battle in Q8:9–11 is hedged in careful, almost psychologizing ways, ensuring that the Scripture's veracity never depends on the believers' experience of any miracle other than the revelation itself.

7 Moses, foreshadowing the mission of Jesus and Mohammad, is also sent to both the Israelites and to non-Israelites, in his case the people of Pharaoh. The addressees of Yonah, by contrast, are not explicated in the Qur'an. On the prophetology of the Qur'an, see Hussain (2022), O'Connor (2019), Saleh (2018), Goudarzi (2018), and Dost (2016).

8 On the Qur'an and historical plausibility, see also Ghaffar (2020, 1–14).

9 On the difficulty of drawing historical conclusions from the portrayal of encounters between community leaders and heretics in the Jewish tradition, see, e.g., Bar-Asher Siegal (2019) and Hedner-Zetterholm (2018). While these encounters should be understood first and foremost as attempts to construct rabbinic self-identity, they equally reflect an underlying historical reality of actual encounters, as Hedner-Zetterholm points out, and are at least indirect evidence of Jewish-Christian encounters. An instructive parallel in the Syriac-speaking world is Aphrahat (see, e.g., Neusner 1997). The most famous parallel case

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thermore, I will treat the Qur'an's discourse in as far as it relates to Jews and Christians and to the Jewish and Christian tradition as (more) *indirect historical evidence* for communal encounters. I attribute more weight to the scarce cases of direct evidence than to the overwhelming weight of indirect evidence, yet the cumulative abundance of the latter type of evidence has a reliability all of its own.

Importantly, Meccan passages tend to represent intercommunal encounters more concretely. At the same time, they also reflect late antique heresiological discourse, which requires careful unpacking. Medinan passages depicting such encounters, by contrast, are less concrete and fit the Qur'an's own distinct rhetorical and quasi-heresiological paradigms within which it places the Jews and the Christians. The most important aspect of these novel paradigms is the Qur'an's categorizing Jews and Christians as two sub-groups that descend from the *one* Israelite people. [7]

In order to show how the Qur'an's portrayal of its interactions with Jews and Christians is shaped by its view of them as Israelite siblings, I consider the instances where the Qur'an univocally describes contact between its community and Jews or Christians—the “Children of Israel” (*banū isrāʾīl*), the “Scripture People” (*ahl al-kitāb*), the “Jews and Christians” (*al-yahūd wa-l-naṣārā*), or their leaders, the “rabbis and colleagues” (*al-rabbāniyyūn wa-l-aḥbār*), and the *ruhbān* and *qissīsūn* (more on these terms below).<sup>10</sup> My focus will exclude the Biblical past and squarely rest on Jews and Christians contemporary with the Qur'anic community's present. I will not aspire to use the resulting evidence to draw a concrete image of Judaism and Christianity in Western late antique Arabia, even if I hope to fortify the basis for future research dedicated to this question. Rather, I establish a preliminary claim that the Qur'an *explicitly* testifies that the Prophet and his community had repeated contact with Jews and Christians at least from the Middle Meccan period onward, which will not come as a surprise to students of the Qur'an. The two central new contributions are (1) that numerous interpersonal channels for the transmission of religious knowledge in both directions were established during most of Muhammad's career, and (2) the classification of these channels. The Qur'an's view is that *individual* exchanges between the Prophet and Jews and Christians took place from the middle Meccan period onward. These encounters were expanded by the Qur'anic *community's* encounters with Jews and Christians that may have begun in the late Meccan period. They clearly became a frequent occurrence throughout the Medinan period, during which individ-

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in the Greek-speaking Christian world is Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho*, whose historicity has long been debated (see, e.g., Wendel 2011, esp. 129–141); see also notes 37 and 39 below. There is little question that John Chrysostom's Christian audience *did* participate in Synagogue services; his diatribes should be understood in this context (see Wilken 2004). Despite cultural, political, geographic, and chronological differences, it is difficult to deny the instructive parallels between the development from Justin's benign attitude to Chrysostom's attacks on the Jews and the development from the Qur'an's relatively benign attitude towards Jews and Christians in its Meccan phase to its—often still restrained—attacks in its Medinan phase.

10 There are numerous further passages that likely reflect contact with Jews and Christians, especially among the verses preceding or succeeding the verses here analysed. However, in order prevent ambiguity about which groups are meant, I focus on verses using concrete terms for Jews and Christians. I also exclude Islamic historiography and exegesis even though I would posit its basic historical reliability as employed, e.g., by Pregill (2021) and Lecker (2014); see also note 5 above. However valuable, the importance of classical Islamic sources for the critical study of nascent Islam presupposes a more solid contextualization of the primary historical source of this period—the Qur'an—in its own time than has yet been accomplished. While my attempt to argue for the Qur'an's historical credibility may be beside the point for those who take it for granted, I believe that only a reading of the Qur'an within the rules of historical critical analysis can provide a firm basis for further research.

ual exchanges between the Prophet and Jews and Christians, in turn, are enacted through addresses *to* these communities which take the place of the Meccan reports *about* them.

In addition, I seek to refine our understanding of the concepts and the vocabulary the Qur'an employs to describe Jews and Christians. It seems that the terms "Children of Israel" (*banū isrā'īl*) and "Scripture People" (*ahl al-kitāb*) include Christians alongside Jews in the Biblical past and the Qur'anic present. The idea of Christians as "Israelites" is surprising only in modernity. An "Israelite" Christian self-identity can be detected in layers of East and West Syrian, Byzantine and Axumite Christianity (see Zellentin 2022, 101–5).<sup>11</sup> The rabbis, by contrast, saw the Byzantine Empire as "Edomite" and Christians therefore as descendants of Esau, Israel's brother, rejecting precisely such a Christian claim to the Israelite lineage all the while rooting them in the Abrahamic family line (see Morgenstern 2022, 261–322; cf. Schremer 2010, 121–42). These competing claims have been conducive to the Qur'an's representation of Jews and Christians as each constituting one a "group (*tā'ifa*) of the Children of Israel," who split apart in the times of Jesus (according to the Medinan passage Q61:14, to which I will return).<sup>12</sup> This study illustrates how the expressions "Children of Israel," "Scripture People," and "Jews and Christians" are predicated on the agglomeration of Jews and Christians even when the Qur'an addresses only one of the two groups (e.g. in Q5:57–66, see below). I hold that this amalgamation, achieved through the retooling of biblical terms ("Children of Israel," "Jews" and "Christians"), the introduction of novel terms ("Scripture People"), and their conceptual linkage, constitutes an expression of the Qur'an's prophetology and especially of its self-understanding as a divine intervention geared towards resolving doctrinal tensions between the two groups of Israelites.

The Qur'an's three main expressions to depict Jews and Christians are not full synonyms. "Children of Israel" predominantly denotes the Israelites in Biblical times *as the ancestors of both Jews and Christians*, i.e., before their split, yet it can equally depict the Jews and Christians in the Qur'anic community's present.<sup>13</sup> The term "Scripture People" exclusively indicates the Jews and Christians in the Qur'anic community's lifetime.<sup>14</sup> The expressions

11 See also note 16 below. Note that rabbinic Jews lamented the Christian appropriation of Israelite self-identity, see e.g. Tanhuma *Ki Tisa* 34:1–3 and parallels.

12 The term *tā'ifa*, "group," used in Q61:14, also denotes factions among the Scripture People in Q3:69 and 72, using the same term.

13 Uri Rubin (2003) has rightly noted that the "Children of Israel" designates "Jews ... and Christians ..., in reference mainly to past generations" and that "[s]ometimes, the label "Children of Israel" is interchangeable with "People of the Scripture" (see also Sachedina 1986). This viewpoint is corroborated by Zellentin (2013, 163–64), Crone (2015, 230) and Goudarzi (2018, esp. 324–50).

14 My translation of *ahl al-kitāb* as the "Scripture People," rather than "People of the Book," follows Daniel Madigan's (2001) important distinction between the many books and the one divine Scripture. Mohsen Goudarzi (2018) has confirmed and further sharpened Madigan's insights by identifying the Qur'anic "Scripture" in the phrase *ahl al-kitāb* as the Torah (cf. Stewart 2021). We should also note Cecilia Palombo's (2015) intriguing suggestion that "it is worth wondering whether the formula[...] *ahl al-kitāb* do[es] not, in certain passages, ... [refer] to people who had deep knowledge of Biblical traditions (however and in whatever form these were transmitted), rather than generically to Christians and Jews or, even more vaguely, to all monotheists. The long pericope at Q. 5:42–68, for instance, is so concerned with a problem of correct understanding of the revelations that the question arises whether *ahl al-kitāb* in that context might not mean something akin to *ahbār*, "scholars" or "authorities." A similar line of argument is put forward by Hussain (2022, 136n11). While there are good reasons to countenance Palombo's and Hussain's suggestion as equally implied by the term, my understanding of the Scripture People is based precisely on the basic meaning of Arabic *ahl* as "family" or "people"—the *ahl al-kitāb*, in other words, is a genealogically defined, temporarily split community that has received divine revelation in the form of the tablets given to Moses and confirmed by Jesus.

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“the Jews and the Christians” obviously signify Jews and Christians, as contemporaries of the Qur’anic community.<sup>15</sup> In the Qur’an, the phrase “Jews and Christians” suggests their close relationship. By juxtaposing Jews and Christians in most of the cases where the two distinct terms appear, the Qur’an continues its conceptual agglomeration of the two types of Scripture Peoples, and, indirectly, of the two groups among the Israelites. I will thus argue that the Qur’an’s *primary* dialogue with the Meccans, Muhammad’s non-Israelite contemporaries, must be broadened to constitute a triologue with individual Jews or Christians during the Meccan period. In Medina, the Qur’an develops its nomenclature of Jews and Christians, and their leaders, in light of ongoing encounters with more specificity, again reflecting late antique uses of language.<sup>16</sup>

## The Qur’an on the Interaction between the Prophet and his Community

The Qur’an’s *implied authorship* combines a divine address to the Prophet with the understanding that this address is to be reiterated to his contemporaries. Its *intended audience*, and quite likely its historical audience, consisted of the Prophet and three groups whom he addresses. There is the in-group, “the believers,” who accepted Muhammad’s message as of divine origin. They are mostly marked by silent acquiescence and increasingly constitute what I call the Prophet’s “community,” or “the believers,” a group of which the prophet himself forms an integral part.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, there exists an out-group, or perhaps more precisely a set of partially overlapping out-groups, designated, more narrowly, as the “associators” (*mushrikūn*) and, more broadly, as the “disbelievers” (*kāfirūn*). Jews and Christians (along with the so-

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15 My list of the three Qur’anic terms designating Jews and Christians of the past and present is in no way complete. The “Children of Israel” and the “Scripture People,” for example, should be read alongside expressions such as “People of the [Scriptural] reminder,” or “the ones who were given Scripture,” “those who are charged with the Torah,” and “those who were given the knowledge.” Likewise, the “People of the Shabbat” likely designates the Jews, whereas the “People of the Gospel” designates the Christians. While a consideration of these phrases will be important in the long run, they are excluded from the present more preliminary considerations for reasons of this article’s readability (yet see Goudarzi 2018, 23–24); see also notes 46 and 49 below.

16 When tracing the development of these terms, we should remember that the Qur’an’s general shift from engaging contemporary Jews and Christians first as “Children of Israel” and then as “Jews and Christians” follows the late antique usage of the term “Israel” as an insider term when used to designate a contemporaneous community, whereas “Jew” and “Nazarenes” are predominantly outsider terms in most relevant languages. The development from “Children of Israel” to “Jews and Christians” thus describes the arch from the early Meccan evocation of Jews and Christians as witnesses to Muhammad’s cause to the increasing interaction and tension in Medinan passages, where Jews and Christians appear increasingly as opponents (with only a sub-group within each community portrayed as righteous). The unique term “Scripture People” stands in between the term “Children of Israel,” with which it shares its collective portrayal of Jews and Christians, and the term “the Jews and the Christians,” with which it shares the focus on the community’s present. The term “Scripture People” thereby becomes a central vehicle to express the Qur’an’s religious self-identity as sent down to enlighten the non-Israelite denizens of Mecca and Medina and to reform the Jews and Christians of Arabia. On the discourse surrounding the terms “Jewish” and “Israelite”, see, e.g., Cohen (2001) and the classical study by Marcel Simon ([1948] 1996). For a discussion of Israelite self-identity in Arabia and a reference to recent epigraphical findings and pertinent scholarship, see also Dost (2022) and Zellentín (2018); see also notes 65 and 67 below.

17 My designation of the Qur’anic community as the “believers” owes much to Fred M. Donner (2012). While I do not share his view of the Qur’anic community as thoroughly ecumenical beyond the Meccan period, he rightly emphasizes its *structural* inclusiveness throughout.

called *munāfiqūn* or “hypocrites”) can easily fall into either the first or the second category, but functionally often form a third, interstitial category defined by their more hesitant attitude towards the Prophet’s message.<sup>18</sup> They share with the Prophet, in diverging ways, their belief in biblical revelation, the final judgement, and the resurrection. Initially, Jews and Christians are evoked as witnesses to the veracity of the Qur’an. Later on, many seem unconvinced by its divine origins, which leads to the accusation that many of them—though never all—“associate” God with other entities, are guilty of disbelief, or are hypocritical. Yet, they are never fully fused with either the in-group, the believers, or with the out-group, the associators or disbelievers, and their identity as Israelites, distinct by lineage, remains intact throughout the Meccan and Medinan periods.<sup>19</sup>

Interactions between the Prophet and these three types of addresses—an in-group, an out-group, and those in between, such as the Israelites—vary as much as their respective attitudes. Explicit depictions of the Prophet’s interaction with his audience, however, are not as common as one would expect in a text that functions *in toto* as God’s address to a prophet facing the public. References to polemical and hostile interactions between, on the one hand, the prophet and his community and, on the other, the associators and disbelievers, are ample all along. For example, a man’s attempt to hinder Muhammad in performing a prayer is a focal point of Q96, a Meccan sura.<sup>20</sup> As for the community’s *initial* interactions with Jews and Christians, these can be said to resemble the dialogue between the Prophet and the believers more so than his conflicts with associators and disbelievers. From the late or possibly middle Meccan period, we can perceive increased hostility between the Qur’anic community and the Jews and Christians. Their proximity to the associators and disbelievers becomes a growing part of the discourse. Yet even here, a small number of Jews and Christians are singled out and praised for their affinity to the Qur’anic community.<sup>21</sup>

The present study, to reiterate, only focuses on the interactions of Jews and Christians either with the Prophet as individual or with his community. Before our actual analysis a brief look at interactions between the prophet and the believers or the disbelievers and associators will prepare the comparison with the prophet’s and the community’s interactions with Jews and Christians. It is not always clear if a given exchange between the prophet and his audience are marked by belief or disbelief in his message. In Mecca, for example, the community is presented as “asking” the Prophet six times about eschatology, theology, and narrative. These inquiries already begin in the early Meccan period, as in Q79 (all Qur’an translations in this paper are based on Qara’i 2003, with modifications):

(42) They ask you when the Hour will arrive (*yas’alūnaka ‘ani l-sā‘ati ayyāna*

18 The relationship between these various groups, both outside of the in-group and interstitial, is complex and in urgent need of further assessment. On the identity of the “associators,” see esp. Hawting (1999). On both “associators” and “disbelievers,” see also Crone (2016). On the “hypocrites,” see Adang (2002).

19 On the Qur’an’s notion of ethnicity, see Goudarzi (2019) and cf. Donner (2012). For a broader history of the ethnic and legal distinctions of Israelite and non-Israelite identities among Jews and Christians, see Zellentin (2022).

20 For an interpretation of this sura in its Jewish and Christian literary context, and of the role of the Prophet’s opponent in its literary structure, see H. Zellentin (2021a).

21 The Qur’an, in other words, is never anti-Christian, anti-Jewish or even anti-rabbinic. Rather, it criticizes specific attributes or actions of the Israelites in its past or present. Criticism, at the same time, is present from the beginning of interactions. Ghaffar (2020, esp. 27–56) persuasively argues for the Qur’an’s polemic to target not Christianity but Byzantine and Axumite imperialism, already in the middle Meccan period. Likewise, I have highlighted the sustained discourse against aspects of typological Christology in middle to late Meccan suras (see Zellentin 2017).

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*mursāhā*)

(43) How can you (sg., i.e., the Prophet) remind of it (*fī-ma anta min dhikrāhā*, i.e. mention it with any authority)

(44) Its outcome is with your Lord (*ilā rabbika muntahāhā*).

(45) You are only a warner for those who fear it.

It is unclear whether the audience addressed Muhammad because they doubt that the Hour will ever come to pass—as the associators and disbelievers typically do—or whether some of the believers want to learn the precise time of the eschaton in order better to prepare for it. Regardless, God dismisses the question. The Prophet’s role is only to warn about the eschatological hour, not to reveal its time. [15]

This question about the hour is repeated verbatim and expanded in the late Meccan passage Q7:187, and four middle Meccan passages mention other questions of Muhammad’s audience, usually with the formula “they ask you.”<sup>22</sup> With the exception of Q79:42, the question is always followed by a brief response, introduced by “say,” God’s instruction to the Prophet. The questions pertain to the nature of the Holy Spirit (Q17:85), to the narrative of Dhū l-Qarnayn (Q18:83), and again, twice, to the eschaton. Q20:105 depicts an inquiry about the mountains at the end of time, and Q51:12 again a question about “the hour.” While this last example only mentions that “they,” i.e., people in the audience, ask the Prophet (*yasʾalūna*), the diatribe against their disbelief, along with their eventual damnation when the hour will arrive, is made explicit in the context (Q51:8–14). It is thus likely that the believers and certain that the disbelievers among the Prophet’s audience occasionally address him. [16]

These occurrences give only a brief and selective glimpse into the actual moments of interaction between the Prophet and his Meccan audience. The case for an initial direct exchange as reported in the Qur’an seems likely. Especially in the case of repeated questions and turns of phrase, however, these cases seem to have become formulaic, constituting but indirect evidence. The community will indeed have asked Muhammad about the hour of destruction he has announced, either because of anxiety or as mockery, or perhaps even both. Still, they will hardly have done so numerous times by using exactly the same words—the verbatim repetition of some of the questions, rather, constitutes an aspect of Qur’an’s stylized portrayal of the Prophet’s role as a warner to an indifferent or hostile audience. Yet even so, it seems likely that the eschatological questions were asked at least once by reluctant community members, whereas questions about other theological and narrative details more likely come from the believers.<sup>23</sup> Collectively, these passages establish the essential fact that the Qur’an embraces a reluctant responsive mode: the answers provided are invariably terse. [17]

The passages depicting the general interactions between the prophet and his audience constitute a test case as to how far they constitute direct evidence, and how far they conform to established tropes of discourse, a question which will guide the rest of this study. I have previously argued that the image of Muhammad as fielding questions from the community evokes the biblical model of the Israelites posing questions to Moses and, even more so, that of Judean and Galilean community leaders posing them to Jesus. If the questions were to [18]

22 On the possible range of the grammatical meaning of “they ask you” in Q17:85 and its parallels, see Shawkat Toorawa commenting on QS 19 in Azaiez et al. (2016, 211).

23 A mocking attitude of the person asking about the hour in Q79:42–44, Q7:187, Q51:12, and Q20:105, in the context of the delay of the destruction of Mecca (yet see also the repetition in the Medinan passage Q33:63) seems plausible in light of the considerations of Saleh (2018). Mehdi Azaiez (2019, 261–63, 271–73), likewise, labels Q79:42–44, Q7:187 and Q51:12 (but not Q33:63) as “eschatological counter-discourse.”



represent a literary trope, the above passages could be seen as merely constituting indirect evidence for an exchange between the Qur'an and the Jews and Christians, or to be entirely fictitious.<sup>24</sup> However, especially against the background of the general reticence of the community to address the Prophet (or the Qur'an's reticence to memorialize such questions), I suggest that at least some of the instances actually constitute more direct evidence for such exchanges. This reticence already seems palpable in the curtness of the answers throughout the Meccan period. Another indicator for the historical veracity of these interactions may be the tension between such questions and the Qur'an's preferred mode of uninterrupted divine discourse, as in the Medinan sura Q5, which warns believers *not* to ask any questions during the time of revelation:

(101) O you who have faith!

Do not ask (pl.) about things which, if they are disclosed to you, will upset you.

Yet if you (pl.) ask about them while the Qur'an is being sent down, they shall be disclosed to you.

God has excused it, and God is forgiving, forbearing.

(102) Certainly some people asked about them before you (pl.) and then came to disbelieve in them.

[19]

Here, the Qur'an instructs its community carefully to consider addressing their prophet during revelation, since previously, some believers doubted the answers they received and apparently disliked. We can learn at least two things here. First, this passage continues to express the Qur'an's reticence vis-à-vis the audience that is addressing the Prophet directly, as in the Meccan passages analysed above. Second, the content of the questions in Medina has shifted. While it is unclear what instructions the audience disliked here (it is sketched too briefly in Q5:103), most questions in Medina are of legal nature—with two noteworthy exceptions, one of which concerns the Jews and the Christians.<sup>25</sup> This counts for eleven of the thirteen questions in Medinan passages. Nine of these use the formula “they ask you,” as with the Meccan questions. The community inquire about observance of the new moons (Q2:189), charity (Q2:215 and 219), warfare during the holy month (Q2:217), wine and gambling (Q2:219), orphans (Q2:220), intercourse during the menses (Q2:222), food (Q5:4), and the spoils of war (Q8:1). Two cases, dealing with orphans (Q4:127) and inheritance (Q4:176), feature the phrase *yastaftūnaka*, “they seek your ruling.” In Medina, there are only two instances of a non-legal question. Q33:63 repeats the inquiry about the eschaton, found in the Meccan passages Q79:42 and Q7:187, and uses the imperfect verb form *yas'aluka*, as in the second non-legal Medinan question. The passage in Q4 is unique in naming those who ask the question:

[20]

(153) The Scripture People ask you to bring down for them a Scripture from the sky.

Certainly they asked Moses for [something] greater than that,

[21]

24 See my comments on Q8:1–19 in Azaiez et al. (2016, 130–32). Another example of such interaction between Moses and the Israelites can be found in Q2:61, the connection between Moses and Muhammad in this respect is made explicitly in, e.g., Q2:108 and Q4:153 (see below).

25 An incident where the Israelites asked Moses too much about a legal issue is the story about the cow in Q2:67–73; they nearly disobey the divine command after receiving detailed answers and should have enacted the command as it was first given (see Maghen 2006, 123–60).

for they said, ‘Show us God visibly,’  
 whereat a thunderbolt seized them for their wrongdoing.  
 Then they took up the Calf [for worship], after all the manifest proofs that had  
 come to them.  
 Yet We excused that, and We gave Moses a manifest authority.

The scenario recalls the instances where the Qur’an’s audience addressed the Prophet with the same formula “they ask you” as in, e.g., in Q33:63. However, rather than the believers or other members of the public desiring theological or legal instruction, the verse describes the Scripture People as “asking” for a miracle: a Scripture from heaven. This demand links the Scripture People to their Qur’anic name. In this, the “question” of the Israelites stands closer to the plausibly mocking question about the coming of the hour in Q79:42–45, or the demands of the hostile Meccans that Muhammad bring proof of his divine messengership (see, e.g., Q6:8–9, 50, 158; Q11:12; Q15:7; and Q25:7 and 21), than to generally sincere inquiries by the believers. [22]

The passage serves as a good example of the difficulty of assessing whether or not the question constitutes direct or indirect evidence for any interaction between the Prophet and the Jews and Christians. It clearly conforms to established discourse. It explicitly compares the moments when the Israelites badgered Moses with the actions of the Jews and Christians towards Muhammad. Moreover, it evokes God’s giving of the tablets to Moses, along with other discursive tropes from the Biblical and late antique tradition; the Israelites’ reported ability to see God visibly, for example, and of course the centrality of the Golden Calf are well-attested in the rabbinic and especially in the Christian tradition.<sup>26</sup> The passage also parallels the demands for miracles other prophets faced, especially in Meccan suras (e.g., Q6:35; Q7:106; Q20:133; Q21:5; Q26:154; see also Q7:203; Q13:38 and Q40:78). In light of these elements, we may take Q4:153 as at least indirect evidence for interaction with the Scripture People. At the same time, we can equally perceive of the ways in which the passage conforms to inner-qur’anic ideological and stylistic tropes, thereby distancing them somewhat from the historical events they depict. In light of this recurring tension between historical acuity and its stylistic presentation, we can establish the likelihood of direct contact only by broadening our scope. [23]

The above passages about inquiries will provide a crucial point of reference for assessing the historical plausibility of the following reports about the interactions between the Prophet and his community, on the one hand, and the Jews and Christians and their leaders, on the other. The relative number of the six Meccan and twelve Medinan instances of the non-Israelite members of the community asking the Prophet—compared to the one Medinan verse Q4:153, where Scripture People are portrayed as having asked the Prophet—becomes meaningful only in light of the Qur’an’s own discursive prerogatives. The Qur’an only exhibits a few occasions where the believers’ inquiries are shown as shaping the direction of the revelation, and only one featuring the Scripture People. The single case where the Scripture People turn to the Prophet with questions contrasts with the frequent cases where the Qur’an depicts interaction between its community—including the Prophet—and the Scripture People and [24]

26 The Qur’an mentions the heavenly tablets in Q7:145, 150 and 154; the image of Muhammad having engraved such tablets is also rejected in Q29:48, see paragraphs 52 to 57 below. On the Christian tradition that connects the Jews with the idea of “seeing God,” see Narinskaya (2010, 245–88). On the relationship between Christian discourse on the Golden Calf and the Qur’an, see Pregill (2020) and Zellentín (2013, 127–55).

their respective leaders. Given the nature and development of these exchanges, we can find grounds on which to base the plausibility of their historicity. At the same time, in light of the centrality of the Jews and the Christians and their respective traditions for the Qur'an, we can equally note that the Qur'an is likely to be highly selective in the number and type of interactions that it includes.

## Meccan Suras on Interaction with Jews and Christians

*Banū Isrā'īl* constitutes by far the most common designation for ancestral and contemporary Jews and Christians in the Meccan suras; it occurs a total of 22 times, namely in Q7:105, 134, 137 and 138; Q10:90 (twice) and 93; Q17:2, 4, 101 and 104; Q26:17, 22, 59 and 197; Q27:76; Q32:23–24; Q40:53; Q43:59; Q44:30; Q45:16; and Q46:10.<sup>27</sup> Nineteen of these passages relate to the biblical past or the eschatological future and will be set aside. The Qur'an's overall attitude towards the Biblical Israelites—from within the House of Abraham—is as critical as that of the Bible—from within the House of Jacob—and includes similar accusations of religious and social transgressions. One passage describing the Biblical past is the late Meccan passage Q32:23–24, where we learn that God set some of the Children of Israel “as leaders to guide at Our command (*a'immatan yahdūna bi-amrinā*), once they were patient and convinced about Our signs” (see also Q7:159 and Q28:5). The Qur'an establishes a model of community leadership among the Jews and Christians that is also valid for its own present, as seen in other Meccan and Medinan passages. Already in Q32:23–24 the Qur'an expresses the perceived ambivalence of their leaders towards God's signs that also marks their attitude in the present: the Qur'an implies that it took effort to win over the ancient Israelites, making the present reluctance less surprising. Such examples show that the Qur'an's representations of the past is distinct, yet never fully separable, from its representation of the present.<sup>28</sup> [25]

The remaining three Meccan examples deal with the here and now: the two middle Meccan verses Q26:197 and Q27:76 and the late Meccan Q46:10, which we will discuss in detail. I hold that these verses constitute more direct evidence for the interaction between the Prophet and the Jews and Christians, yet in varying degrees of concreteness. Together with the late Meccan passage Q16:101–105, they seem to reflect historical encounters of the Prophet and his community with Jews and Christians in the Meccan period—though about the location of these encounters, little can be gleaned from the text. [26]

Q27, in the context of a communication about the resurrection, portrays the Qur'an as also addressed to the Children of Israel, deviating, in this regard, from the model of prophecy by which prophets are sent exclusively to their own communities: [27]

- (76) Indeed, this Qur'an recounts to the Children of Israel  
most of what they differ about [28]
- (77) and it is indeed a guidance and a mercy for the believers.
- (78) Indeed, your Lord will decide between them by His judgment,  
and He is the Mighty, the Knowing.

The passage shows the Qur'an as addressed to the Children of Israel, whose internal disputes [29]

27 Note that Q19:58 mentions the “offspring of Abraham and Israel”; while of broader relevance, the passage refers to the Israelite past rather than the Qur'an's present. Arguably, another very expansive reference to the Israelites appears in Q 6:84–90, as Goudarzi (2018, 181–82) has argued.

28 The close relationship of past and present in the Qur'an stands in line with attitudes attested broadly throughout the Middle East; see, e.g., Gardner and Osterloh (2008); see also note 49 below.

God adjudicates. In this, Muhammad mirrors the Qur’anic Jesus: the latter first addressed Israelites and then all of humankind, the former is a non-Israelite prophet who equally addressed the Israelites.<sup>29</sup> Disagreement between Jews and Christians is a recurring theme in the Qur’an, as is the notion that God will ultimately decide the quibbles between the two parties, either through the revelation of the Qur’an or at the end of days.<sup>30</sup> The accusation of disunity against a group of opponents is a late antique Jewish and Christian heresiological trope.<sup>31</sup>

The first entry of the Children of Israel into the Prophet’s discursive present thereby already displays two overlaying triangles that mark the entire Qur’an: there is a triangle between (1) the Qur’anic community, (2) the associators and disbelievers, and (3) the Jews and the Christians. This primary triangle structures Qur’anic discourse, with some fluidity between its three sides. It repeatedly makes way for a secondary one, constituted by (1) the Prophet or the believers, (2) the Jews and (3) the Christians. The prominence of the primary triangle may partially explain why the Qur’an almost always places Jews and Christians together as Israelites—even if it occasionally differentiates between believing and disbelieving ones, among whom God will adjudicate. The disagreement, in Q27:76–78, between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Israelites prepares the distinction between ‘good’ Christians and ‘bad’ Jews found in some Medinan suras.

In Q27:76–78, the Qur’an positions itself vis-à-vis the Jews and the Christians. It sees itself as an Arabic Scripture and refers to many of the ethno-cultural particularities of its context. It presents itself as a universally valid copy of the heavenly Scripture that rectifies errors partially resulting from disputes between Jews and Christians and thereby depicts these disputes as of sectarian nature.<sup>32</sup> Already here, the Qur’an brings *some* of the Children of Israel into the fold, while forcefully rejecting those who disbelieve. The term “believers” in verse 77 seems primarily to denote the believers among the Jews and the Christians, since they feature in the preceding and following verse. To these believers (who also feature in Q46:10 and plausibly in Q26:199), the Qur’an announces itself as “a guidance and a mercy,” since they follow the Qur’an’s guidance on their mutual disagreements.

This promise is coupled with a veiled threat: should disagreements persist—presupposing that what the Qur’an “recounts” is rejected—God will judge amongst the Jews and Christians. Their dismissal of the Qur’an is left implicit, yet palpable. Precisely the indirectness of this testimony to Jewish and Christian disbelief, placed outside the rhetorical focus, reduces the

29 The Qur’an does not emphasize Jesus’ mission to anyone but the Israelites, yet it implies his broad reach when stating that “We have made” him and Mary “a sign for the worlds” (Q21:91), repeating verbatim how “We have made” Noah and his family “a sign for the worlds” (29:15) (see Zellentin 2013, esp. 128–140); on the Qur’an’s prophethood, see also note 7 above and 30 and 33 below.

30 The late Meccan Q10:93 states that the Children of Israel “did not differ until the knowledge had come to them; your Lord will indeed judge between them on the Day of Resurrection concerning that about which they used to differ;” closely following the wording in Q27:78. See also the late Meccan Q16:124 (about disagreements about Shabbat), Q32:23–25, and Q45:16–17. The theme occurs in Medinan passages such as Q2:113 and Q3:19. The issue of differences after God’s revelation to a group features more generally in late Meccan passages such as Q10:19, Q16:39, and Q39:3 and 46 (and even the middle Meccan Q23:53), and Medinan passages such as Q2:176 and 213; see also notes 7 and 29 above and 42 below.

31 The topic of initial unity followed by disagreement is well established in Jewish and Christian discourse; e.g., Tosefta *Hagiga* 2:9; *Sanhedrin* 7:1; Clementine Recognitions 1.54; and Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.4.3; see the excellent discussion in Cohen (1980, 1984); see also Iricinschi and Zellentin (2008).

32 For a summary of the Christian and Qur’anic accusations regarding the corruption of Scripture, see Reynolds (2010); for a broader late antique overview, see Moiseeva (2018), Carlson (2013), and Hoffman (1997); for my own views, see H. Zellentin (2021b).

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likelihood that the passage merely uses the Children of Israel as rhetorical device. If the text points obliquely to the fact that any Jew or Christian would reject the Qur'an without drawing further conclusions from the circumstance, then it seems likely that at some point prior to uttering this verse, the Prophet had had contact with some of the Children of Israel. This conclusion, based on a close reading, admittedly bears only limited historical weight, and Q27:76–78, on its own, only testifies to the Prophet's *intention* to reach the Children of Israel. However, when reading it in the context of further Meccan passages, we get a sense that this intention was at least partially fulfilled.

Q26, which Theodor Nöldeke dates as preceding Q27, invokes the testimony of the “learned ones” among the Children of Israel, who have heard and sanctioned the Qur'an. It distinguishes between Jewish and Christian common believers and their respective religious leaders, also found in other passages: [33]

- (192) This is indeed [a Scripture] sent down by the Lord of all the worlds, [34]  
 (193) brought down by the Trustworthy Spirit  
 (194) upon your (sg.) heart so that you may be one of the warners,  
 (195) in a clear Arabic language.  
 (196) It is indeed in the Scriptures of the ancients (*wa-innahu la-fi zuburi l-awwalin*).  
 (197) Is it not a sign for them that the learned of the Children of Israel recognize it (*an ya'lamahu 'ulamā'u banī isrā'īl*)?  
 (198) Had We sent it down upon some speaker of non-Arabic (*'alā ba'di l-a'jamīna*)  
 (199) and had he recited it to them (i.e. the Children of Israel), they would not have believed in it.

This passage prepares the conclusion of a sura that sets out Qur'anic prophetology in detail; it emphasizes the Prophet's role as a warner about the immanent destruction of the Meccan community.<sup>33</sup> It plays out the Qur'an's vernacular proximity to the Meccans against the divergent linguistic tradition of the Children of Israel. The Qur'an is in “a clear Arabic language,” intelligible to the Meccans, whereas previous revelation to the Israelites occurred in a “non-Arabic” sacred language, most likely Hebrew or Aramaic—an important theme in subsequent passages on Jews and Christians.<sup>34</sup> Still, some Meccans reject the Qur'an, as marked by the very question that evokes the presence of the “learned ones,” or “scholars of the Children of Israel” (v. 197), who are said to “know” or “recognize” the Qur'an.<sup>35</sup> The repeated use of the same root *'l-m* for these scholars and their “knowledge” of the Qur'an's divine origin links [35]

33 On Q26, see Griffith (2013, 64–71). For Muhammad's role as a warner, see Saleh (2018); see also notes 7, 29 and 30 above.

34 On the notion of “clear Arabic,” see also the late Meccan Q16:105 and note 42 below. In the late Meccan Q12:1–2, God clarifies that “We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an so that you (pl.) may understand”; the Qur'an is introduced as “the clear Scripture.” The link between Arabic language and understanding is already made in the middle Meccan Q43:3; the Qur'an's Arabic nature is also emphasized in the middle Meccan Q20:113 and Q41:44 and in the late Meccan Q39:28, Q41:3, Q42:7, and Q46:12 (see also Q13:37, where it is portrayed as an Arabic legislation). On the notions of “clear Arabic” and “non-Arabic,” see Hoyland (2022), who carefully modifies Peter Webb's (2016) emphasis on the post-Qur'anic development of the notion of Arab ethnic identity. Hoyland does not engage Manfred Kropp's (2015) suggestion that the term is a translation from the Ethiopic. Accordingly, the “Scriptures of the ancients” (*la-fi zuburi l-awwalina*) in Q26:196 may well connote the Israelite Scriptures given to David (see Q21:105; Q17:55, and Q4:163), yet the term here points to the wider continuity of all true Scripture (see Q54:43 and 52; Q23:5; Q16:44; Q35:25; and Q3:184), as confirmed by Hussain (2022, 127–40).

35 On *'alima*, see Ambros (2004, 193–94). The root *'l-m* is used in South Arabian instructions for the approval of a document by seal or signature, a meaning relevant for the present context (see Stein 2021, 75). The

their prestige to the value of their testimony. There is no reason to assume that these scholars would not be able to speak or understand Arabic, or that they would not permanently reside inside Arabia, even if the Qur'an connects them with the Hebrew or Aramaic scriptural tradition, two languages often conflated in late antique discourse. In the subsequent verses God states that "they"—the learned of the Children of Israel—would have disbelieved a new revelation in Arabic that had come from "a speaker of non-Arabic," or perhaps better phrased, a person standing in the Hebrew or Aramaic Scriptural tradition. This reinforces the Qur'an's central prophetological tenet, apparently shared by the Meccans, that prophets tend to be sent to their own community, so that an Arabic revelation to a non-Arabic-speaking prophet is inconceivable (see also Q41:44)—even if its addressees *include* the Israelites next to speakers of Arabic. I suggest below that the most prominent "non-Arabs" in the Meccan Qur'an are the Israelites; the verse would thus claim that the learned Israelites would also have rejected any revelation in Hebrew or Aramaic had it come down to a speaker of Arabic, perhaps even reflecting the Jewish and Christian concepts of prophecy.<sup>36</sup>

The Qur'an thus establishes a precise linguistic identity by reference to the Israelite scholars as partial insiders—inside regarding the revelation they received, outside as speakers of non-Arabic in the sense of standing in the Hebrew or Aramaic Scriptural tradition. It presents itself as an 'endogenic' phenomenon, in line with the idea that God almost always chooses a native prophet, with Moses and especially Jesus straddling and Muhammad ultimately upending the Israelite/gentile divide by reverting to an Abrahamic paradigm as discussed below. Accordingly, the Qur'an presents itself as standing in close enough line with the Israelite tradition that Israelite scholars, with whose existence the audience is familiar, would recognize it as truthful and as compatible with their own tradition. Here we must conjecture that at least the learned Israelites could comprehend the Qur'an's "clear Arabic." Regardless, as in Q27:76–78, the *indirect* evocation of disbelief in Q26:192–199, i.e., the Meccans' or even the Israelites' projected rejection of the Qur'an, enhances the passage's weight as historical evidence. For the argument to function, the public must have been familiar with the existence of learned Jews or Christians, if not with the prophet's direct encounter with them. The second option

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meaning of Q26:197 may therefore imply 'recognition' not only in an intellectual, but also in a stricter legal sense; see also note 16 above.

36 See also Hoyland (2022, 111–12). Q26:199's conditional phrase "had he recited it to them, they would not have believed in it," presupposes actual belief. Yet the referent of "they," describing those who do believe, is ambiguous. Many commentators read it as stating that all Meccans would have disbelieved a prophecy from a non-native prophet. Inversely, it may well be the view of the learned of the Israelites mentioned in v. 197. The step from 'recognizing' or 'approving' the Scriptures to 'believing' in them is small, and one Israelite does believe in Q46:10. Nothing in the Jewish or Christian tradition precludes prophecy from reaching a non-Israelite, following the example of Balaam. The rabbis state that *Israelite* prophecy proper has ceased; see, e.g., Bavli *Sanhedrin* 11a, see also *Yoma* 9b and *Sotah* 48b. There is, to the best of my knowledge, no clear Jewish tradition that precludes the possibility of a non-Israelite prophet, whereas divine inspiration even remained a possibility within Israel (see Alexander 2007; cf. Neusner 2014). Christian tradition remained warily open to the possibility of prophecy. The end or fulfilment of prophecy is invoked in the New Testament (e.g., 1 Cor 13:8 and Mt. 16:18); the question was contentious in the early church, especially during the 'Montanist' controversy (see, e.g., Trevett 1996). The ambiguous attitude towards prophecy after Christ is put concisely by Jerome in reference to the Montanists: "We do not so much reject prophecy—for this is attested by the passion of the Lord—as refuse to receive prophets whose utterances fail to accord with the Scriptures old and new" (*Letter 41 to Marcella* 2, NPNF<sup>2</sup> 6:55). The Qur'an's repeated dual emphasis on its non-Israelite nature and on its confirmation of and conformity to previous Scripture is thus geared to meeting both Jewish and Christian concerns (see Zellentin 2013, 137–40).

is warranted: the Meccans soon turned their knowledge of such encounters into arguments against the prophet, as we will see.

The reference to Israelite scholars also stands in continuation with the Qur'an's portrayal of leaders of the ancient Israelites, seen above. (They become more clearly defined in Medina.) The Qur'an's use of these 'expert witnesses' is, moreover, a well-established model in late antique heresiology. Most famous is perhaps the case of Joseph of Tiberias, whose journey towards Christianity, and from one orthodoxy to another, equally employs a learned Jew as having recognized the divine *Christian* truth in his own tradition.<sup>37</sup> [37]

Crucially, the evocation of outside witnesses is made again in two late Meccan passages. Q10 states: [38]

(94) So if you (sg.) are in doubt [39]  
 About what We have sent down to you,  
 Ask those who read the Scripture (*alladhina yaqra'una l-kitāba*) before you  
 The truth has certainly come to you from your Lord,  
 so do not be among the doubters.

The passage stands in contrast with the Medinan encounters between the prophet and the Scripture people, here using the circumlocution "those who read the Scripture." By evoking the prophet's doubt, God instructs him to *ask* those who have read the Scripture before him. The appearance of the Children of Israel in the previous verse clearly identifies this group. Again, the element of doubt increases the likelihood of the prophet's actual access to Jews and/or Christians. [40]

The third passage about outside witnesses is Q46, commonly dated after Q10. After the (likely Meccan) disbelievers surmise that the Prophet has "fabricated" (*iftarāhu*) the Qur'an (v. 8), he is instructed to answer: [41]

(10) Say, "Do you (pl.) see, if it is from God and you disbelieve in it [42]  
 and a witness from the Children of Israel has testified to its like and believed,  
 while you are disdainful?"  
 Indeed, God does not guide the wrongdoing lot.

The Meccans are charging Muhammad with inventing Scripture, a well-known accusation also in late antique discourse.<sup>38</sup> Again, the witness of the Children of Israel is invoked in order to assure the audience of the Qur'an's divine origins. The Israelite witness serves as a marginal insider since he, unlike the Meccans, did believe. At the same time, the circle of witnesses seems to shrink: rather than "the learned ones" from among the Israelites who recognize the Qur'an as in Q26:197, we hear about only one individual of unnamed rank who became a believer. The Qur'an makes its point as before. It does not embellish the prophet's failure to convince most of his Meccan contemporaries, nor does it embellish the Qur'an's initial rejection by most Israelites, apparently adjusting the number of witnesses as it happened. [43]

Do these passages constitute evidence of any interaction between the Prophet and Jewish or Christian individuals? One might dismiss the Qur'an's recurrent appeals to Israelite outsiders as rhetorical strategy, not unlike the employment of gentiles in the Gospel of Matthew, or more [44]

37 On Joseph of Tiberias, see Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30 and the analyses by Boyarin (2004, 210–14) and Goranson (1999).

38 See note 32 above.

immediately of the tendency to ‘think with Jews’ we find, say, in Justin or Augustine.<sup>39</sup> An unprejudiced reading should consider that the Prophet would not repeatedly invoke Jewish and Christian testimony if his audience could easily falsify such a claim. The impact of the three passages and their direct reference to a range of Jewish and Christian responses to the Prophet diminishes the likelihood of rhetorical invention. Not only would the risk of falsification grow each time a Jewish or Christian witness is evoked: the claims as such are so modest, and even shrinking in their forcefulness if the sequence of suras is correct, that Occam’s razor would strongly attest to their historical veracity.

Importantly, another late Meccan passage in Q16 suggests interaction between the Prophet and a non-Arabic speaker: [45]

(101) When We change a sign (or “verse”, *āya*) with another in its place—and God knows best what He sends down—they say, ‘You are just a fabricator.’ Rather most of them do not know. [46]

(102) Say, the Holy Spirit has brought it down duly from your Lord to fortify those who have faith and as a guidance and good news for the *muslimīn*.

(103) We certainly know that they say, ‘It is only a human who instructs him’. The language of him to whom they refer is non-Arabic (*a‘jamī*), while this is a clear Arabic language (*lisān ‘arabiyy mubīn*).

(104) Indeed, those who do not believe in the signs of God—God shall not guide them and there is a painful punishment for them.

(105) Only those fabricate lies who do not believe in the signs of God, and it is they who are the liars.

This passage does not specify if the alleged instructor was a Jew or a Christian.<sup>40</sup> Yet the previous ones and the recurrence of its themes in later, Medinan verses strongly suggests that this is the case. Muhammad is again in a defensive mode, being accused of “changing” part of the revelation. As in the Meccan verse Q46:8, he is accused of “fabricating” the Qur’an (the root *f-r-y*, in Form 8, is used in both passages).<sup>41</sup> His opponents hold that an unnamed human “taught” him, evoking again the Israelite “learned ones” who “know” the Qur’an to be of divine origin (Q26:197). [47]

It thus seems plausible that the Qur’an’s reliance on outside witnesses of the Children of Israel backfired. Already in Q25:5–6, the prophet is accused of having “written down” ancient, i.e., Biblical stories which are “dictated to him” (*fa-hiya tumlā ‘alayhi*) mornings and evenings. This verse, along with Q16:103, suggests that the Prophet’s opponents believe that he has contact with Bible teachers, and now they marshal these teachers’ acquiescence to the Qur’an against him. It is no wonder that a Bible teacher would recognize Muhammad’s message: he might have taught him the Qur’an in the first place, the Meccans claim. The shifting [48]

39 The story of Roman soldier’s son’s healing in Matthew 8:5–13 and Luke 7:1–10 that ends with Jesus’ declaration that “in no one in Israel have I found such faith” (Matthew 8:10) is an example of Jewish ‘thinking with gentiles,’ a discipline plausibly continued in rabbinic literature (see Bar-Asher Siegal 2019, 2022). Inversely, many incidences of “thinking with ‘Jews,’” as Paula Fredriksen (2008, 353) aptly put it, are found across the patristic tradition; e.g., famously Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, whose role as literary foil is well established (see Rajak 1999); see also note 9 above.

40 “To whom they refer” (*alladhī yulhidūna*) in Q16:103 carries a negative connotation; the verb *lahada* is also used derogatorily, denoting “making a negative reference” in the late Meccan passages Q7:180 and Q41:40; see also the Medinan passage Q22:25 and Ambros (2004, 245).

41 On *iftarā*, see Ambros (2004, 212); Muhammad is regularly accused of inventing the Qur’an, see, e.g., Q10:38 and Q25:4, to the sequel of which we will presently turn.



accusations of the Meccans, in light of their unfavorability, attest to their historical veracity as much as to the historicity of Muhammad’s encounters with Israelites discussed above.

Q16 responds to this attack by adjusting the line of argument found in Q26:192–199. It argues that the Qur’an cannot have come from the alleged teacher, since it is in “clear Arabic,” whereas the said teacher is a speaker of “non-Arabic” (*a’jamī*), or again, someone standing in the Hebrew or Aramaic Scriptural tradition. Such a Jew or Christian is understood as unable to deliver a Scripture in “clear Arabic”; the Meccans should therefore accept the Qur’an as God’s indigenous message to their native prophet.<sup>42</sup> Individually, the Meccan passages about encounters with Jews and Christians only bear limited weight as evidence. Taken together, they suggest that Muhammad had contact with a Jewish or Christian scholar. Q16:101–105 probably directly reflects a historical occurrence, since there is no gain in constructing the accusation. Q26:192–199 and Q46:8–10 could be more easily dismissed as a rhetorical construct (despite my arguments to the contrary), yet, given the overlaps in wording and the argument about language, these passages help identify the learned person in Q16:103 as likely a Jew or Christian.<sup>43</sup> The development of the angle of attack of the Prophet’s opponent, finally, points to the plausibility that the Qur’an directly portrays historical circumstances here.<sup>44</sup>

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I therefore submit that the five Meccan passages discussed—in the suggested sequence Q26:192–199, Q27:76–78, Q16:101–105, Q10:94, and Q46:8–10—should be read as *more directly* depicting historical occurrences, as perceived through the Qur’an’s specific theological prism. The Prophet understood the Qur’an to be addressed to Jews and Christians, besides its primary Meccan audience, and some of the Jews and Christians believed in its divine origin—or were sufficiently positively disposed towards its message that it made sense to invoke them as witnesses. The “teacher” in Q16:101–105 should be understood as one of the Children of Israel. Muhammad did not deny that he had contact with a foreign, and in this reading Jewish or Christian, scholar. Intriguingly, he did not deny that said individual taught him part of his own non-Arabic tradition—yet whatever he may have learned is categorically distinguished from the revelation itself (a sense affirmed elsewhere, e.g., Q42:52). What Muhammad denies is that the Qur’an can be reduced to a product of this putative non-Arabic, i.e., Hebrew, or Aramaic teaching; rather, in its own view, it incorporates such previous revelation into the current one that both corrects and expands aspects of established Jewish and Christian teaching.<sup>45</sup>

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It is thus highly likely that Muhammad already had contact with Jews and Christians during

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42 The function of Jews and Christians as employing non-Arabic, in my view, defines their liturgy and religious tradition more broadly without necessarily implying that the Qur’an sees them as unable to speak good Arabic, see note 34 above. The communal encounters of believers with Jews and Christians already in Mecca clearly were not impinged by language problems, as we will see below. While Sidney Griffith’s (2013, 7–53) hypothesis that parts of the Bible circulated orally in Arabic in late antique Arabia may be right, Qur’anic references to Jews and Christians and their Scriptures—and to the Qur’an’s distinctness from the Bible—by and large suggest that the liturgical languages of the local Jews and Christians were non-Arabic.

43 My interpretation varies from that of Claude Gilliot (2011, esp. 460–464), who uses Q16:103 for his claim that the Qur’an is based on a written lectionary. Gilliot, in my view, does not give due consideration to the thoroughly oral nature of late antique Arabian culture; for criticism of the related claim of the Qur’an as dependent on Christian written source made by Günter Lüling, see H. Zellentin (2019a).

44 Further similar cases include Q18:22 and Q6:91, which have been excluded for the sake of brevity (yet see Goudarzi 2022).

45 Clear extensions to previous Scripture can be found in passages about revelation from “the unseen” (*al-ghayb*), e.g., Q11:49, Q12:102 and Q18:22. For corrections to Jewish and Christian teaching, see notes 32 above and paragraphs 76 to 78 below.

the Meccan period, which is hardly surprising, considering the well-attested presence of Jews and Christians around Arabia. The Qur'an's testimony of the second and third Meccan period can be read as supporting this fact not only based on content—often reflecting contemporaneous Jewish and Christian traditions—but also on its own explicit discourse. In contrast to the Medinan evidence, Meccan suras do not speak of interaction between ordinary members of the Qur'anic community and the “Children of Israel.” Such interaction, however, is already on the horizon in Mecca: the middle Meccan passage Q21:7 instructs the Qur'an's audience to “ask (pl.) the People of the Reminder (*ahl al-dhikr*) if you do not know” about the human nature of previous prophets. The instruction is a parallel to Q10:94—addressing the prophet alone—and is repeated in Q16:43. In Q21:7, the Qur'an thus invites its audience to talk to Jews and Christians, opening yet another channel of transmission of religious knowledge into the Qur'anic community.<sup>46</sup>

Likewise, the late Meccan Q29 instructs its audience how to discuss with Jews and Christians, and thereby provides the only Meccan use of the term “Scripture People,” a group that here again designates believers and sceptics—just as the term “Children of Israel”:

(46) Do not dispute (pl.) with the Scripture People [53]  
 except in a manner which is best,  
 barring such of them as are wrongdoers,  
 and say (pl.), ‘We believe in that which has been sent down to us  
 and has been sent down to you (pl.);  
 our God and your God is one  
 and to Him do we submit.’

(47) Thus have We sent down the Scripture to you (sg.); [54]  
 And those to whom We have given the Scripture believe in it.  
 And among these, there are some who believe in it,  
 And none contests Our signs except the faithless.

(48) You (sg.) did not use to recite Scripture before it, [55]  
 Nor did you write it with your right hand,  
 For then, those who dismiss (the Qur'an would rightfully be) in doubt.

Following the instruction to maintain prayer, the Qur'an instructs the believers how to discuss with Jews and Christians, and whom to engage. The verb *jādala* denotes to dispute, and verse 46 is the clearest indication yet that even those Jews and Christians who were amenable to the notion of an Arabian prophet nevertheless engaged the believers in discussions about the Qur'an and probably also about the Jewish and Christian traditions (see the partial parallel in Q16:125).<sup>47</sup> The Arabic nature of the instructions should be noted: it is likely that previous encounters with Jews and Christians also used Arabic vernacular to discuss matters of the Israelite Scripture in whichever language—Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Ethiopic, or even Greek—as well as the content of the new Scripture brought forth in clear Arabic.

It is easy to see why Q29:46–48, where the term “Scripture People” is first used, could be [57]

46 The Jewish or Christian nature of the “People of the Reminder” can be surmised in light of the Qur'an's usage of *dhakara* as indicating Scriptural narrative; on its Biblical usage, see Griffith (2013, 60–62); see also note 15 above and note 49 below. In Qur'anic times, moreover, the learned Jews and the Christians would be the only group that could be constructed in such terms.

47 On the verb *jādala*, see Ambros (2004, 57). See also the helpful commentary by Valkenberg (2021, 282–86).

considered a Medinan addition to a late Meccan sura. It shares elements with the six Meccan passages about such encounters when the audience addressed the prophet, as discussed above, and then develops them further. The double shift from the Prophet to his community and from the term “Children of Israel” to “Scripture People” marks the beginning of a phase of closer communal interactions, introducing a greater potential for conflict. Not only the Prophet, but also his community have interactions with Jews and Christians now. Regardless of whether we are dealing here with a Medinan insertion or a late Meccan passage, it is clear that the shift in social dynamic is accompanied by a shift in terminology.

These Meccan passages paint a picture of interactions between the Prophet and his community, on the one hand, and Jews and Christians, on the other. Most of the evidence pertains to the Prophet’s previous interaction with them as a group whom the Qur’an addresses (Q27:76–78), with Jewish and Christian scholars (Q26:192–199), or with two Jewish or Christian individuals (Q46:10 and Q16:101–105; though possibly one historical encounter is evoked more than once). The key element in these encounters was the way in which Jews and Christians could be useful for or a danger to Muhammad’s mission to the Meccans, even if, and especially since, the Qur’an is described as also directed at the Children of Israel (in Q27:76–78). The Jews and Christians vary in their levels of belief in the Prophet, and tend to be portrayed in terms of Scriptural and linguistic distinctness. [58]

## The Medinan Suras on Interaction with Jews and Christians

The Medinan suras continue to depict aspects of the types of interaction seen in the Meccan ones. We also see various dramatic shifts, in line with Q29:46–48, that seem to result from a change in the type of intercommunal contacts. In Medina, we encounter a nomenclature for Jews and Christians and their communal leaders that is at once more diverse and concrete than in Mecca. This shift parallels the growth in diversity in the Jewish and Christian religious traditions reflected in Medinan suras. The channels for transmission of religious knowledge between the Qur’anic community and Jews and Christians thus apparently proliferated. At the same time, late antique heresiological tropes become less prevalent and give way to a more uniform application of the Qur’an’s own particular rhetoric. The Medinan testimony, though more extensive, therefore can also be said to be less direct than the Meccan material discussed. The Medinan suras reflect a more self-assured and more self-aware communal discourse than the Meccan ones, along with more elaborate and filtered representation of the events on the ground. To a student of rabbinic Judaism, the shift seems comparable to the one from the much rawer depictions of Late Roman reality in the Talmud Yerushalmi to more stylized depictions of Late Roman and Sassanian culture in the Talmud Bavli. [59]

The “Children of Israel” are named twenty times in the Medinan suras. Thirteen deal with the past: Q2:83 and 246; Q3:49 and 93 (twice); Q5:12, 70, 72, and 110; Q20:47 and 94; and Q61:6 and 14. The ratio of past to present shifts from six to one in Mecca to roughly two to one in Medina. Some of these past references, of course, are highly relevant for the Qur’anic presence. In Q5:72, for example, all those Children of Israel who state that “God is the Messiah, son of Mary,” are described as “faithless,” a statement corroborated by Jesus’ injunction to the Children of Israel to worship God alone. The verse, along with the dismissal of the trinity in the subsequent one, is best understood as addressing Israelites past and present. [60]

The seven references to Children of Israel contemporary with the Medinan community fall into three main categories, which amplify the tendencies of the Meccan passages. These Mec- [61]

can verses make reference to the biblical past of the Children of Israel. We saw them among the audience of the Qur'an in the Meccan passage Q27:76–78 and evoked as witnesses in three others: Q26:192–199, Q10:94, and Q46:8–10. Four Medinan passages put their role in the audience into action by addressing them directly. They are enjoined to remember God's past blessing in Q2:40, 47, and 122. They are also addressed when their salvation in the past is evoked in Q20:80. Secondly, we have reviewed indications of the Prophet's interaction with the Children of Israel in some Meccan passages. Such passages are absent in the Medinan phase, yet the possibility remains open at least rhetorically: in Q2:211, the prophet is instructed, in the text's present, to “ask the Children of Israel how many a manifest sign We had given them” in the Biblical past. There is here a clear contrast with the Meccan parallel Q10:94. Whereas in the latter passage the prophet is instructed to “ask” the Israelites to assuage his doubts, he is presently instructed to “ask” the Israelites to remind them of their manipulation (*baddala*) of God's signs. This accusation belies yet another shift: whereas in the Meccan surahs, Muhammad is himself accused of manipulating and inventing scripture, such a charge is now levelled against the Israelites.

Thirdly, the potential disbelief of the Children of Israel in the Qur'anic present always remained on the horizon in the Meccan passages Q27:76–78; Q26:192–199; Q46:8–10, and Q29:46–48. This potential is explicated in two Medinan passages which respond to the deterioration of relations between the believers and their Israelite enemies. In Q5:78–80, after the “faithless among the Children of Israel” are presented as cursed in the Biblical past, the Prophet is told that he sees many of them “fraternizing with the disbelievers” in his own time—an easily verifiable charge, and therefore more reliable evidence of interaction. Q5:32, finally, turns an aspect of rabbinic legal discourse on its head by employing the rabbis' own logic in order to accuse the Children of Israel—Jews and Christians—of political violence before segueing into legislation that evokes both Biblical and Byzantine legal material. The acuteness of the charge and its finely spun web of allusions to Jewish and Christian traditions augments the likelihood of an actual exchange.<sup>48</sup>

The Qur'an's usage of the term “Children of Israel” in Medina continues Meccan attitudes. While we can perceive a shift slightly towards the present, the term predominantly continues to describe the Biblical past. In both periods the term is used to describe them as part of the Qur'an's audience and to describe the interactions of the Prophet with them, shifting from direct to indirect evidence. Their disbelief is merely evoked in Mecca, yet levelled as a direct accusation (Q5:80) in Medina. The Medinan suras' usage of the “Children of Israel” includes references to the Biblical past even when the Qur'anic present is described. As in Mecca, finally, the Medinan passages do not use the term “Children of Israel” to report interaction between the Qur'anic community and Jews and Christians. For cases relating to the present *and* to communal interaction, they employ either the term “Scripture People” (or its equivalents), used in the same circumstances once in a (possible Medinan insertion into a) Meccan sura, or the terms “Jews”/“those who profess Judaism” and “Christians,” which occur only in Medina.<sup>49</sup>

48 On this passage, see Pregill (2021), Zellentin (2023), and note 60 below.

49 It would be a mistake to overstate the general difference of emphasis between the three terms the Medinan passages use for Jews and Christians. Their amalgamation through their adjacent usage illustrates this well. In Q2, for example, the Jews and Christians appear in verse 120 (in the present), “those who were given the Scripture” (*alladhīna ātaynāhumu l-kitāba*) are addressed in verse 121, and the Children of Israel in verse 122, pointing to the importance of the Qur'an's association of past and present Israelites; see note 28 above; see also notes 15 and 46 above.

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The thirty Medinan occurrences of the term “Scripture People”—Q2:105 and 109; Q3:64, 65, 69, 70, 71, 72, 75, 98, 99, 110, 113, and 199; Q4:123, 153, 159 and 171; Q5:15, 19, 59, 65, 68 and 77; Q33:26; Q57:29; Q59:2 and 11 and Q98:1 and 6—almost all point to interactions between the believers and their prophet, on the one hand, and Jews and Christians, on the other.<sup>50</sup> At times the term has some overlap with the term “Children of Israel,” and occasionally the two terms occur in close proximity.<sup>51</sup> Overall, however, while the clear focus on the present sets the term “Scripture People” apart from that of the “Children of Israel,” the relevant Medinan passages continue the broad strokes which also determine the Qur’an’s usage of the term “Children of Israel.” First of all, the “Scripture People” are among the Qur’an’s audience; it appears that some of the Scripture People believe, yet many are accused of disbelief. Beyond instances of a direct address, however, there is little indication of actual interaction between the Prophet and the Scripture People, likely as it may be. Despite the paucity of any explicit evidence, I would argue that we have a lot of indirect evidence for the interaction between the Scripture People and the Qur’anic community. [64]

It is clear that the Scripture People are directly addressed by the Qur’an. We have discussed the unique case of the Scripture People’s request for a sign in Q4:153, to which the Prophet responds in detail. In many other Medinan passages, the Prophet continues to make direct appeals to the Jews and Christians, as in Q5: [65]

(19) O Scripture People! [66]  
 Certainly Our Apostle has come to you,  
 clarifying for you after a cessation of the apostles (*‘alā fatratin mina l-rusuli*),  
 lest you should say, ‘There did not come to us any bearer of good news nor any  
 warner.’  
 Certainly there has come to you a bearer of good news and a warner.  
 And God has power over all things.

This Qur’anic discourse seeks to meet Jews and Christians where they stand, and to even address the “gap among the apostles,” the hiatus of prophecy that both communities stipulated after the Biblical period. It also explicates the Prophet’s role as an apostle to both the non-Israelite Meccans and the Israelites of Arabia. Direct appeals to the Scripture People can also be found in Q3:64 (“come to a common word”); Q3:61 (“why do you argue?”); Q3:70 and 98 (“why do you defy God’s signs?”); Q3:71 (“why do you mix truth and falsehood?”); Q3:99 (“why do you bar the faithful from God’s way?”); Q4:171 and 5:77 (“do not exceed the bounds in your religion”); Q5:15 and 19 (“our apostle has come to you”); Q5:59 (“are you vindictive towards us?”); and Q5:68 (“you do not stand on anything until you observe the Torah and the Evangel”). The direct appeals to the Scripture People in Mecca (i.e., Q29:46–48) and in Medina are thus all forms of criticism, either overtly or, in one or two Medinan cases (i.e., Q3:64 and Q5:19), just below the textual surface. [67]

Most importantly for the present purposes, while the Meccan passage Q27:76–78 portrays [68]

50 The only exception to this focus on the present seems to be Q4:159, which focuses on the future, stating that the Scripture People will believe in Jesus before his death (or, less likely, before the death of the individual in question). The verse broadly echoes the Christian tradition about the conversion of Israel at the end of times, as indicated, e.g., in Rom. 11:25–26, and generally expected in patristic discourse, for example by Origen and Theodore of Mopsuestia, yet less so by John Chrysostom, as illustrated by Jeremy Cohen (2005); the prediction is equally adopted by the Tiburtine Sibyl of uncertain dating, see Sackur (1898, 185) and cf. Shoemaker (2018, 43–48).

51 These co-occurrences are Q3:93 and 98, Q5:12 and 15, and Q5:68 and 70; see also note 49 above.

the Qur'an as addressed to the Children of Israel more or less in passing, the Medinan Qur'an frames this claim concretely by continuously addressing Jews and Christians directly—as the Children of Israel, as Scripture People, or, as we will see, as Jews and Christians. The likelihood that this address was more than rhetorical in both phases is high indeed, since there are many passages about how Jews and Christians seem to have responded to the Qur'an's message. The negative reactions, easy to corroborate due to their public nature, are of particular importance for the present purposes. A number of these, e.g., Q2:109 and Q3:69, accuse Jews and Christians of trying to undermine the community's faith. The Medinan suras have an increased tendency to associate Jews and Christians with the “disbelievers,” the Qur'an's central opponents. Furthermore, they are accused of several doctrinal errors, the very heart of late antique heresiology. Q3:72 holds that “a group of the Scripture People” lose their faith in the Qur'an in the course of a day; Q4:123 declares the hopes of the Scripture People in intercession at judgement day to be in vain; and Q5:65 laments that their sins would have been forgiven had they believed and observed the Torah and the Gospel. Most importantly perhaps, Q98:1 and 6 associate “the faithless among the Scripture People” with the associators.

Some further passages make diverse and concrete accusations that point to a transfer of knowledge: Q2:105 states that the disbelievers among the Scripture People dislike that “good be showered upon you (pl.),” i.e., upon the Qur'anic community; Q3:75 accuse some of them of not repaying loans from the Qur'anic community, and Q57:29 informs them that they “have no power over any of God's bounty.” Again, the accusations may hyperbolically distort aspects of late antique discourse (e.g., in the case of rabbinic rulings on loans), yet the underlying affinity constitutes indirect evidence of previous contact.<sup>52</sup> [69]

These incidences give an *indirect* picture of intense communal interaction between the Qur'anic community and Jews and Christians during the Medinan period. One final category of interaction concerns sacred violence, a well-established form of late antique practice and discourse: Q59:2 holds that it was God “who expelled the faithless from the Scripture People” and Q59:11 associates them with the “hypocrites” within the community.<sup>53</sup> Q33:26 states that it was God who overwhelmed and killed or enslaved Scripture People who had supported the disbelievers in an armed conflict, which constitutes yet another form of theological disputation the Qur'an shares with the Jews and Christians of its time.<sup>54</sup> [70]

As with the “Children of Israel,” Medinan passages differentiate between believers and disbelievers among the Scripture People. Q3 states: [71]

(199) Indeed, among the Scripture People are those who have faith in God, [72]  
and in what has been sent down to you (pl.),  
and in what has been sent down to them.  
Humble toward God,  
they do not sell the signs of God for a paltry gain.

52 Rabbinic law differentiates between Jews and gentiles with regard to loans: Jews were allowed to make loans to Jews and non-Jews, but they were only allowed to charge interest to non-Jews (*hukrim*), e.g., Mishna *Bava Metsi'a* 5:6 and Bavli *Bava Metsi'a* 70b–71a; see Gamoran (1976). While the rabbinic law does not amount to a blanket permission of non-repayment of loans to the gentile believers, the distinction between Jew and gentile in rabbinic jurisprudence opens itself up to the type of criticism expressed in the Qur'an.

53 On the Qur'anic hypocrites, see note 18 above.

54 On the theological dimensions of late antique and early Medieval religious violence, see, e.g., Shaw (2011) and Sizgorich (2008); see also Sinai (2016, 188–96) and cf. Tesei (2020).

They shall have their reward near their Lord;  
indeed, God is swift at reckoning.

The language echoes Q29:46, which instructs the believers to say to the Scripture People [73] “We believe in that which has been sent down to us and has been sent down to you” almost verbatim—another plausible argument for that passage’s Medinan origin. Other Medinan passages make similar claims about the Jews and Christians, such as Q3:110: “if the Scripture People had believed, it would have been better for them. Among them are the faithful, but most of them are transgressors.” There is no reason for the Qur’an to underestimate the number of believers among the Jews and Christians, and it seems that a majority rejected the Prophet. Inversely, the nuance as well the concreteness of the Qur’an’s claims lends historical credibility to the fact that some Jews and Christians indeed accepted Muhammad as a prophet, perhaps best illustrated by Q3:113, which mentions an “upright nation” (*umma qā’ima*) among the Scripture People (see Q5:66).<sup>55</sup>

If we now turn, lastly, to the explicit occurrence of the “Jews,” “those who profess Judaism,” [74] and “Christians”—exclusively Medinan terms—, we can point to two essential qualities of their role. Firstly, the role of the “Jews and Christians” overlaps almost entirely with the role of the “Scripture People” analysed above. As with the Scripture People, but unlike the Children of Israel, the Qur’an uses “Jews and Christians” almost exclusively for the present. From the Middle Meccan period onward, the overlap between the roles of Scripture People and “Jews and Christians” includes the often-neglected fact that Jews and Christians appear in conjunction, allowing the Qur’an to maintain the triangle between, one, the believers, two, the associators and disbelievers, and, three, the Israelites. The primary social triangle of the Qur’an, between the believers, the disbelievers, and the Israelites, is marked by fluidity between its corners, as is observable from the aforementioned occasional affinity between the Jews and Christians and either the believers or the associators and disbelievers. The secondary triangle—that joining the Prophet and the Medinan community to the Jews on the one hand, and to the Christians on the other—is usually eclipsed by a rhetorical strategy that lumps the latter two together as “Israelites.” In several Medinan passages, Jews and Christians are distinct groups—showing a shift towards an emphasis on this secondary triangle over the original Meccan one. How far this shift goes will need to be assessed by others; I suspect that I remain prone to overemphasizing the importance of the Israelites for the Qur’anic self-image. Be that as it may, I argue, however, that the Medinan Qur’an’s default term for Jews and Christians is “Scripture People” (or one of its cognates) and that it refrains from using this term *only* when speaking either of Jews and Christians individually, when highlighting slight differences or tensions between them. In all other cases, it uses the terms Children of Israel or Scripture People. In order to illustrate this argument, we will first consider individual appearances of either “Jews” or “Christians,” then the passages where “Jews and Christians” appear jointly, and finally the joint appearances of their respective community leaders, which reinforce my argument.

There are twenty-one occurrences of the terms *hūd*, *al-yahūd* and *alladhīna hādū*, “the Jews” [75] and “those who profess Judaism,” henceforth translated as “Jews” (Q2:62, 111, 113, 120, 135, 140; Q3:67; Q4:46 and 160; Q5:18, 41, 44, 51, 64, 69, 82; Q6:146; Q9:30; Q16:118; Q22:17; and Q62:6), and fifteen occurrences of *al-naṣārā*, “Christians,” often in the very same passages that equally mention “Jews” (Q2:62, 111, 113 (twice), 120, 135, and 140; Q3:67;

55 On this passage, see, e.g., Zellentin (2013, 181–99).

Q5:14, 18, 51, 69, and 82; Q9:30; and Q22:17).<sup>56</sup> Only five passages squarely describe the past, four of which mention the Jews only (Q4:160; Q5:44; Q6:146; and Q16:118), and one only the Christians (Q5:14). Together, and in conjunction with some further verses, these five passages give a fairly detailed picture of how there came to be two groups of Israelites from the time of Jesus in the first place. As the Medinan passage Q61:14 puts it: one “group (*tāʿifa*) of the Children of Israel” believed Jesus and one did not; the former (i.e., the Christians) became stronger than the latter (the Jews).<sup>57</sup> This split had legal ramifications that last until the Qur’an’s present. They are explained in three of the passages in question, all of which relate to the “punitive laws,” i.e., laws given as punishment for their previous sins (Q4:160; Q6:146; and Q16:118). Q3:50 portrays Jesus as reversing some of these laws. In Q5:14, the only passage about the past of the Christians (*al-naṣārā*), by contrast, we learn that they, like the Israelites before them, “forgot a part of what they were reminded” (see Q6:45 and Q7:151). It may well be that the Qur’an, in Q5:14, simply presses the Christians into an Israelite paradigm: if the Jews forgot part of what they were reminded of, so would the Christians, a mechanism more fully analysed below. Alternatively, I have previously suggested that Q5:14 accuses Christians more concretely of having excessively abolished punitive laws, i.e., just as the Jews may have “forgotten” the cancelation of these laws by Jesus and need to reduce their observances, so the Christians need to expand them.<sup>58</sup> Most of these passages about legal observances point to the transfer of religious knowledge.<sup>59</sup>

The remaining passages mostly concern the present. Among these, there is not a single passage about Christians on their own, and only four passages about Jews alone. These testify to some form of contact between the community and Jewish individuals, perhaps the most intriguing of which is in Q5, a few verses after the passage just discussed, which consoles the Prophet with regard to those who promote disbelief among them:

(41) ... the Jews (*alladhīna hādū*) who listen with the aim of lying,  
 they listen for other people who did not come to you  
 they pervert words from their meanings,  
 they say, ‘If you (pl.) are given this, take it,  
 but if you are not given this, beware!...

This passage, which occurs in a broader pericope on the ways in which the “Israelites” as well as the prophets are to judge criminal cases, evokes a situation in which “the Jews” listen to the Prophet and then pass on his message to others as they see fit. I understand the passage to imply that the Jews here are portrayed as accepting Muhammad’s judgment only if it aligns with their own Scriptural basis for legal rulings, some of which they are accused of having altered.<sup>60</sup> The accusation that “some Jews pervert words from their meanings” occurs in an-

56 As Mohsen Goudarzi reminded me, the Qur’an’s Arabic designations for “Jews” also evokes the meaning of the verb *hāda* (to return or repent to God), which is used in Q 7:156 in relation to ancient Israelites; on the possible Qur’anic echo of the cognate Syriac understanding of “being Jewish” as “repenting,” see also Zellentin (2013, 204–5).

57 On this passage and its interpretations, see Zellentin (2013, 162–64).

58 After the accusation that Christians forgot part of Scripture, Q5:15 portrays Muhammad as having come to the Scripture People to “clarify for you much of what you used to hide of the Scripture, and excusing many [an offense of yours].” While the charge of concealing Scriptural truths is severe, the lenient attitude expressed by the offer of forgiveness likely invites the Christians to join the fold.

59 On the legal discourse shared between the Qur’an and the Christian tradition, see, e.g., Zellentin (2022, 18–29, 2013, 127–54). See also Shaddel (2016).

60 The thematic pericope Q5:27–50 opens with the fratricide among Adam’s two sons and segues into question of judgement according to the partially overlapping traditions of the Jews, the Christians, and the nascent

[76]

[77]

[78]



other passage, Q4:46, that singles out the Jews. Both passages show the previously discussed development in Qur’anic discourse, as attested in Q2:211. In the Meccan sura Q46:8, the Prophet himself is accused of scriptural invention by his non-Israelite opponents, and invokes the Jews and Christians as witnesses. By levelling the accusation of Scriptural falsification against the Jews, the Qur’an inverts the Meccan accusation while simultaneously echoing an important trope in Christian anti-Jewish polemics.<sup>61</sup> Precisely as enactment of established rhetoric, we can plausibly consider the broader Qur’anic charges against the Jews as indirect reflections of historical encounters. The same can be said about passages that accuse the Jews alone of doctrinal errors, such as claiming that “God’s hand is chained” (Q5:64) and being “God’s favourites to the exclusion of other people” (Q62:6)—polemical correctives that evoke late antique Jewish traditions.<sup>62</sup>

The twelve remaining passages featuring Jews and Christians present them jointly. These joint appearances are similar to those of the Scripture People, pointing to the far-reaching overlap of this term with “the Jews and the Christians,” which arguably denotes the two types of Israelites. To reiterate, the Qur’an uses the terms “Jews” and “Christians”—either individually, as above, or jointly, as below—only in cases when it is necessary to differentiate between certain aspects of these two groups. We may consider, in this regard, yet another passage in Q5:

(82) Surely You will find the most hostile of all people towards the faithful  
to be the Jews and the associators,  
and surely you will find the nearest of them in affection to the faithful  
to be those who say, ‘We are Christians.’  
That is because there are *qissūsn* and *ruhbān* among them,  
and because they are not arrogant.

Here, the Qur’an fully triangulates—i.e., fully overlays its secondary on its primary social triangle—between the believers, the Jews, and the Christians by associating the Jews with the “associators” and by praising the Christian leaders as close to the believers.<sup>63</sup> Even when the Qur’an distinguishes between the two groups of Israelites, and links the Jews to its non-Israelite adversaries, the “associators” (with whom it also links the “disbelievers among the Scripture People” in Q98:1 and 6), it tends to present Jews and Christians *jointly*, maintaining its original emphasis on the ethnic unity of the Israelites past and present, despite their differences and diverging relationship to the believers. Moreover, the Qur’an presents the Jews and Christians in ways that closely relate to the passages about interactions of the Qur’anic

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Islamic community; see note 48 above. I have recently argued that the Qur’an here indeed engages specific Jewish and Christian legal traditions (see, for example, Zellentin 2023). This legal context should guide our reading of verse Q5:41. The verb form *ūtītum* “you are given this” usually relates to revelation or goods given by God, as it does in Q3:73, Q17:85, Q28:60, and Q42:36. Likewise, the object of the verb *fa-ḥdharū*, “beware,” can denote God, e.g., in Q2:235. It is thus clear that the Jews question whether God is “giving” revelation to Muhammad, in this case the Scriptural basis for the legal judgements in question.

61 See note 32 above.

62 On the claim to be God’s beloved, see note 65 below; on the alleged Jewish claim that “God’s hand is chained,” see Lowin (2019).

63 As has been pointed out by previous commentators, it is not clear whether the statement “we are Christians” (*innā naṣārā*) constitutes an accurate depiction of the terminology used by Christians in Arabia; the term is a complex one and corresponds, moreover, to the epithet given to the disciples as “God’s helpers,” for example when they exclaim that “we are God’s helpers” (*naḥnu anṣāru llāhi*) in the crucial passage Q61:14. On the meaning of the term *naṣārā*, see Griffith (2011); see now also Bar-Asher Siegal (2022) and note 16 above.

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community with the Scripture People mainly or exclusively in Medina. The key difference between the usages of the summary term on the one hand and the bifurcated one on the other is that in the cases where Jews and Christians are individually named, such a context invariably references to the split between them, whether explicitly or implicitly.

To wit, there are a number of negative statements which accuse both Jews and Christians of doctrinal errors. In Q2:111, Jews and Christians say that “no one will enter paradise except one who is a Jew or Christian”; in Q2:113, “the Jews say ‘the Christians stand on nothing’ and the Christians say ‘the Jews stand on nothing’”; Q2:120 states that “the Jews and the Christians will never be pleased with you (i.e., Muhammad) unless you followed their creed”; in Q2:135, “they (i.e., the Jews and Christians) say (i.e., to the community): ‘be either Jews or Christians’”; in Q5:18, “the Jews and the Christians say ‘We are the Children of God and His beloved ones’”; and Q9:30, finally, portrays the Jews and the Christians as claiming the divine sonship of ‘Uzayr and Jesus, respectively. These statements presuppose the split between the two groups of Scripture People. At the same time, the way in which the Qur’an amalgamates Jews and Christians and their respective doctrinal errors by presenting them jointly shows that the rhetorical construction of Jews and Christians as a single group of Israelites prevails even when it is necessary to evoke their internal differences. In such cases, the Qur’an time and again engages actual doctrines attested in the Jewish and Christian tradition.<sup>64</sup>

Just as with the Scripture People, a direct appeal is made once, collectively, to “the Jews and Christians,” yet only by implication. Q2:140 asks “do you (pl.) say that Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes were Jews or Christians?” The distinction between Jews and Christians is essential here, since it shows that Christians, just as much as Jews, lay exclusive claim to Israelite ancestry. (Both Jews and Christians indeed considered the patriarchs as anticipating rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, respectively.) Yet it is equally important to note that the addressees of this verse are not named. When addressing contemporary Jews and Christians directly, the Qur’an thus tends to use the terms “Scripture People,” whereas the such usage of terms “Children of Israel” or “Jews” is much rarer (see Q62:6), while “Christians” are never directly addressed on their own.

As in the case of the Scripture People, there is also a sense of armed conflict between the Qur’anic community and some Jews and Christians, as can be deduced from the instruction in Q5:51 not to “take the Jews and Christians for allies, they are allies of each other.” The meaning of the root *w-l-y* is broad, indicating, e.g., mutual protection, friendship, or allegiance (Ambros 2004, 295–97).<sup>65</sup> Hence in this case, and in this case only, the Qur’an presents at least some members of the two factions within the Israelites as politically aligned, despite their theological conflicts. Just as with the representations of the alliance between Jews and Christians, on the one hand, and associators or disbelievers (and hypocrites), on the other, the Qur’an on its own offers no way to assess how its descriptions of these groups would have related to actual allegiances. There is, in turn, no good reason to dismiss its depiction of historical realities as fictitious, dire as they are for its own prospects, here or elsewhere.

64 The Jewish and Christian claim that “we are the Children of God and His beloved ones” (e.g., Q5:18) finds conceptual and lexical antecedents in rabbinic and Christian discourse (see Zellentin 2016, 265–67; cf. Dascalu 2021). Even the Qur’an’s joint attack on Jews and Christians for their claim to exceptionalism reaches back centuries; Origen cites Celsus as stating that it is not at all likely that the Jews, on whose status and witness the Christians rely, “are in favour of God and are loved any more than other folk, and that angels are sent to them alone.” See Origen, *Contra Celsum* 5.41 and 50, cited in Chadwick (1953, 297 and 303); for a discussion, see Schäfer (2009, 44–46).

65 See also Q5:78–80 discussed above; for its attestation in South Arabian epigraphy as “protegees,” see Robin (1982, 4).

Finally, as with the Scripture People, the Qur'an refers to believers among the Jews and the Christians: In Q2:62, the believers among the "Jews and the Christians" as well as the believers themselves and the *ṣābi'ūn* (whose identity is difficult to determine) "will receive their reward near their Lord."<sup>66</sup> This phrase is partially repeated in Q5:69. Q22:17, by contrast, stresses that God will judge among "the believers, the Jews, the *ṣābi'ūn*, the Christians, the Magians and the associators," leaving the degree of belief among the Jews and Christians open. [85]

These passages all presuppose the transfer of knowledge and some form of interaction between the Prophet and his community, on the one hand, and Jews and Christians, on the other. While rabbinic Jews uniformly saw themselves as descendants of Israel and mocked the Christian claim to such heritage by transferring it from Jacob to Esau, the Christians with whom the prophet or the community dealt—followers of Axumite, Byzantine, East or West Syrian or even of local Arabian Christian traditions—likely offered complex ways of construing one's respective relationship to "Israel." A term that may have been sufficient for the Meccan audience, the Children of Israel, may not have sufficed to meet the needs of the Medinan situation. Yet even if this were the case, we should not neglect the robust continuity of the terms across the two Qur'anic periods. [86]

The Qur'an *only* speaks of "Jews" as separable from "Christians" in contexts where their specific legal commitments or their perceived diverging doctrinal errors make it more efficient to do so by using divergent terms. The Qur'an tends to present the doctrinal commitments of Jews and Christians as relating to each other, a useful strategy which has a historical basis in the polarization of Jewish and Christian discourse. In light of this, it seems to be invested in problematizing the individual group identities of Jews and Christians in order to emphasize their joint Israelite heritage. Inversely, the Qur'an may also have an interest in highlighting the discord (*ikhtilāf*) between the Israelites along with the fact that they undermine each other. These two tendencies, in my view, do not run counter to but supplement each other. As we have seen in Q27:76–78, it is clear to the Qur'anic community that restoring the unity of the Israelites will only occur through either their acceptance of the Qur'an's teaching or in the eschatological future. [87]

A brief look at Medinan descriptions of encounters with Jewish and Christian community leaders lends further nuance to the Qur'an's portrayal of the interactions of the prophet and his community with Jews and Christians. We encountered the importance of the "learned ones among the Children of Israel" as a witness to the Prophet's message in the Meccan passage Q26:197. In Medina, only the Christian leaders are presented as amenable to his message, as in Q5:82, where the *qissīsūn* and the *ruhbān* are singled out for praise. These terms denote "priests and monks" in classical Arabic, and may do so in the Qur'an. Yet the Qur'an's categories, in my view, are both broader and more specific, and may simply depict the lower and upper tiers of church leadership, reflecting the permeable boundaries between various church offices and between clergy and monkhood. Regardless of their precise meaning, the term *qissīs* is aligned with late ancient Christian terminology and is attested in South Arabian epigraphy (Zellentin 2016; Palombo 2015).<sup>67</sup> Q5:82 is the only passage where Christian leaders appear alone, just as only one passage describes the Christians specifically, in isolation from the Jews. It is especially in its divergence from the tendency to represent Jews and Christians alongside each other that the passage suggests historical encounter between the Qur'anic community and church leaders. These instances of apparent affinity between Christians and [88]

66 On the *ṣābi'ūn* as "God-Fearers," see Goudarzi (2022, 8n23).

67 For the epigraphic reference, see Beeston (1994, 42); see also note 16 above.

the Qur’anic community echo both the Qur’an’s endorsement of leadership roles among the Israelites and the role of the scholars of the Children of Israel as collective or individual witnesses, as portrayed in the Meccan passages. The formulation of the Christian endorsement, by contrast, has been transformed from active witness to broader religious affinity.

Jewish leaders, in turn, appear twice without any reference to Christianity.<sup>68</sup> In Q5:44, [89] the rabbis and colleagues (*al-rabbāniyyūn wa-l-aḥbār*) are accepted as the successors to the prophets (*al-nabiyyūn*). The passage broadly conforms to the Rabbinic doctrine about the rabbis’ heritage to the Biblical prophets, shared by some Christian texts.<sup>69</sup> I have previously argued that the terms used for rabbinic leaders, *rabbāniyyūn* and *aḥbār*, stand closer to the Palestinian rather than the Mesopotamian usage of the Hebrew and Aramaic counterparts of these terms, again pointing to the transfer of specific religious knowledge (Zellentin 2016, 267–71).<sup>70</sup> The second passage, Q5:63, expresses the Qur’an’s detailed criticism of “rabbis and colleagues” who are accused of not properly guiding their flock:

(63) Why do not the rabbis and the colleagues (*al-rabbāniyyūn wa-l-aḥbār*) [90]  
forbid them from sinful speech  
and consuming illicit gains? (*wa-aklihimu l-suḥta*)  
Surely, evil is what they have been working.

These accusations broadly evoke the criticism of Jewish and Christian leaders expressed [91] elsewhere in the Qur’an.<sup>71</sup> Only once does the Qur’an single out the Jewish leaders for criticism, just as the Christian leaders are only once singled out for praise (in Q5:82). While this divergence from the common practice points to the specificity of the historical moment, the language in Q5:63 can be linked to Christian discourse in light of other Qur’anic accusations brought against both Jewish and Christian leaders.<sup>72</sup> Two further passages are sharply critical of what I take to be the higher echelons of both Jewish and Christian community leadership: Q9:30–31 accuses Jews and Christians of having taken their respective leaders—*aḥbār* and *ruhbān*—“as lords besides God,” a hyperbolic rendering of a central Jewish and Christian criticism that is well attested in the rabbinic and especially the Christian tradition (Zellentin 2016, 267–84). In Q9:34, they are accused of “wrongfully eating up the people’s wealth” (*la-ya’kulūna amwāla l-nāsi bi-l-bāṭili*) and “barring [them] from the way of God” (*wa-yaṣuddūna ‘an sabīli llāhi*). While the latter accusation is common throughout the Qur’an, the former corresponds to the criticism of bishops found in the Christian tradition.<sup>73</sup> In these cases, the

68 Note the possible usage of the term “rabbis” in Q3:79 and the different meaning of the same root in Q3:146; see Zellentin (2023).

69 Mishna *Pirḳe Avot* 1:1–18 establishes a link through which Moses passed on the (likely Oral) Torah, received on Sinai, to Joshua, to the Elders, to the Prophets (*nby’ym*), to the men of the Great Assembly, and eventually to the rabbis. On the continuity of the Oral Torah from Sinai to the rabbis, see also Leviticus Rabbah 22:1, Yerushalmi *Hagiga* 1.8 (76d, 32–7), Yerushalmi *Peah* 2:4 (10a), and Bavli *Berakhot* 5a; see also Zellentin (2023, 2013, 143–44). A parallel chain of transmission is also established in the Clementine Homilies, see 2:38, 3:18–19 and 47, see Reed (2008, 21).

70 The Palestinian attribution is accepted, alongside criticism to which I hope to respond to in due course, by Dascalu (2021).

71 Q5:42 also calls Jews “eaters of the unlawful” (*akkālūna li-l-suḥti*); see also Q5:62–63.

72 The criticism of “the rabbis and colleagues” Q5:63 is set in the context of a diatribe against the Scripture People (who appear in Q5:59 and Q5:68), and is succeeded by the accusation that the Jews say “God’s hands are chained” (Q5:64, see note 62 above); Jews and Christians are again named in Q5:69.

73 While the Scripture People are accused of “barring” others “from the way of God” in Q3:99 (likely also in Q4:167), this phraseology occurs in other contexts; e.g., Q7:45 and 86. “Eating up” someone else’s “wealth” on its own, likewise, is an accusation employed in various circumstances, e.g., Q2:188 and Q4:29,

Qur'an conforms to its overarching tendency to criticize Jews and Christians jointly, in line with its tendency to amalgamate the actions—and especially the transgressions—of the two groups of Scripture People, as we have seen throughout this essay. The specific accusations, by contrast, offer additional direct evidence of contact between the Qur'anic community and Jewish and Christian leaders as well as indirect evidence for the transfer of religious knowledge.

## Conclusion

This study has highlighted two aspects of the Qur'an's vocabulary and of its representations of interactions with Jews and Christians. The terms "the Children of Israel" and "Scripture People" should always *primarily* be understood as indicating either the ancestors of the Jews and the Christians in the Biblical past or their offspring in the present of the Qur'anic community—even when one of the two groups takes centre stage. While the phrase "Children of Israel" refers predominantly to the past, the Qur'an also uses it to depict Jews and Christians in its own time. In other words, the Qur'an links not only the divine promises made to the Israelites but also their recorded transgressions with both the Jewish and the Christian community. The Qur'an here employs a powerful rhetorical device vis-à-vis the Christian communities that, historically, had readily accepted positive aspects of the Israelite inheritance—an idea broadly in line with important strands of Byzantine, East and West Syrian and especially Axumite Christian thought—without fully owning up to the trope of the sins of past Israelites. While the Qur'an modifies its portrayal of the Christians' Israelite identity in the Medinan suras by introducing the concept of the "Scripture People," next to that of the Children of Israel, it seems that the amalgamation of Jews and Christians remains an important aspect for both the Qur'an's rhetoric and for its self-identity, as an Arabic as well as as an Abrahamic Scripture.<sup>74</sup> [92]

The Qur'an's term "Scripture People" expresses the idea that Jews and Christians are estranged siblings who must set aside their differences. The joint expression "Jews and Christians," and the distinct terms designating "Jews" and, only once, "Christians," should also be understood as sharing most of their semantic field with the broader term "Scripture People." Both expressions depict the Qur'an's Israelite contemporaries, with the single difference that "Jews and Christians" is mostly used to highlight specific differences between the two categories of Israelites. [93]

The reading of the Qur'an presented here offers a modified starting point for the reconstruction of the Qur'an's image of both types of Israelites, namely, Jews and Christians, with important repercussions both for historiography and for Qur'anic studies. If we consider which types of Christians adopted an Israelite self-identity that would best fit the Meccan conception of them and their leaders, we may need to shift our gaze towards South Arabia and Ethiopia—without, of course, neglecting the respective North Arabian, Byzantine, and East and West [94]

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including for defrauding orphans (Q4:2 and 10). The Christian tradition regularly warns bishops of financial misconduct in similar ways; see Zellentín (2016, 280–81).

74 Goudarzi (2019) suggests an "Ishmaelite" self-identity of the nascent Qur'anic community, combining aspects of universalist and particularistic perspectives. While I find Goudarzi's outlook persuasive in principle, a stronger emphasis on the 'Abrahamic' tradition as it is channelled through Ishmael and all the way up to the Qur'anic community would hit even closer to the mark. Finally, an integration of the detailed information of Arab tribal affiliation found in the historical record and the Qur'anic evidence remains a central desideratum in the field.

Syrian testimony. Yet the Qur'an's classification of Christians as Israelites, next to Jews, is not contingent on the historical self-understanding of Christians as Israelites, suggestive as it may be. As mentioned above, by classifying Byzantine Christians not as Jacob's but as Esau's children, the rabbis cut close to the contested sibling relationship of Israelite identity. Most importantly, however, when trying to reconstruct the Qur'an's attitude towards Jews and Christians, we should also realize that the Qur'an redirects Biblical criticism against the Israelites to serve as a powerful rejoinder not only to Jews but also to Christians, turning the table on a central tenet of Christian anti-Jewish discourse.

Finally, the study's evaluation of the Qur'an's historical reliability may be its most delicate, yet perhaps also its most fruitful contribution. The field of Qur'anic studies has moved towards accepting the Islamic Scripture as evidence for the genesis of the nascent Islamic community. So far, however, there is no consensus regarding the historical accuracy of its depictions. Based on a rather simple pursuit of the hermeneutics of suspicion, the present discussion has attempted to illustrate rather than merely to assume that what the Qur'an tells us faced immediate public scrutiny and can therefore be held to a high standard of accuracy. The Qur'an's ideology enters the arena mostly when it comes to the selection and interpretation of the facts. The representation of the facts, by contrast, seems to be dictated by the prophet's sincerity at least as much as by his appeal to observable, verifiable reality. [95]

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