

New Trends in Qur'ānic Studies

International Qur'ānic Studies Association
Studies in the Qur'ān

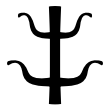
Series Editor

David Powers

Number Two
New Trends in Qur'ānic Studies
Text, Context, and Interpretation

Mun'im Sirry, editor

New Trends in Qur'ānic Studies
Text, Context, and Interpretation



LOCKWOOD PRESS

Atlanta, Georgia

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ISBN: 978-1-948488-18-1

Library of Congress Control Number:

Cover design by Susanne Wilhelm

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

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Acknowledgments

The present volume is the fruit of the International Qur'anic Studies Association (IQSA) international conference held in collaboration with the State Islamic University (UIN Sunan Kalijaga) in Yogyakarta, Indonesia (August 4–6, 2015). Without generous support from both institutions, the conference and the publication of this book would not have been possible. A debt of gratitude is owed to the leadership of IQSA for the trust they put in me to organize the first of a series of biennial international conferences. I should mention a few names: Reuven Firestone (then President of IQSA), Gabriel Said Reynolds (Chair of the Board of Directors), Emran El Badawi (Executive Director) and Daniel A. Madigan (then Chair of the International Programming Committee). Thank you all for your support and advice! I would like to express my deepest gratitude and appreciation to my colleagues at the UIN Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyakarta, especially, Noorhaidi Hasan, Sahiron Syamsuddin, Syafa'atun Almirzanah and Moch Nur Ichwan, who enthusiastically supported the IQSA conference that resulted in the publication of this volume. They deserve all the credit for the success of the Yogyakarta conference.

I also thank the IQSA publications and research committee, especially, David S. Powers (chair of committee), for their encouragement throughout the process of editing this volume. Working closely with Professor Powers has been a rewarding experience. His judicious corrections and insightful suggestions have immeasurably improved each essay in this volume. Thank you, David, for your thoroughness and careful attention to detail! I am grateful to G. R. Hawting (then chair of IQSA publications and research committee) for his untiring support and guidance. A special thanks goes to the contributors to this volume, who have displayed patience and good cheer over the lengthy period of time between the conference and final product, and to all of the conference participants whose papers—mostly by their own choice—are not included in this volume. Last but not least, grateful acknowledgment is made here to those who continue to support IQSA as a new learned society. As the current chair of the International Programming Committee, I encourage my colleagues, wherever you are, to become members of IQSA and to participate in our conferences.

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From Clerical to Scriptural Authority: The Qur'ān's Dialogue with the Syriac New Testament

EMRAN EL-BADAWI

“Clerical authority” refers to the religious, social and political power vested in institutions or individuals and their capacity to lead a *bodypolitik*. “Scriptural authority” refers to the teachings extrapolated from the interpretation and study of holy books. In the late antique Near East, “clerical authority” (Arab. *sultān*; Syr. *shuṭānā*) was ultimately bestowed by God, both upon holy men (clergy; Arab. *rahbāniyyah*) and upon holy books (scripture; Arab. *kitāb*);¹ and Jewish rabbis, Christian priests and charismatic holy men exercised considerable influence on the lives of a diverse, sectarian Near Eastern audience.² The Qur'ān exhorts this audience to return to scriptural authority, which it views to be a purer, more ancient and untainted source of leadership (Arab. *imām*). The text delegitimizes rabbinic authority, argues that the early Church went astray and posits the supreme authority of scripture in place of the clergy.

All translations are my own.

1. See further *EQ*, s.v. Authority (Wadad Kadi).

2. On the influence of holy men (and women) on the late antique and early Islamic Near East, see Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), 80–101; Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Sebastian Brock and Susan Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

The delegitimization of rabbinic authority in the Qur'an is in conversation with the condemnation of the Pharisees by Jesus in the Syriac Gospels. The Qur'an's account of the early Church's decline and perversion goes back to the Syriac Acts of the Apostles, especially chapters 13 and 20, where Paul's mission to the gentiles overtakes Peter and his Jewish flock. The dispute between Peter and Paul is most acutely fought over the issue of circumcision at the Council of Jerusalem in 50 CE. This dispute shook the early Church and contributed to the weakening of the early Jerusalem leadership. But some members of the early Church continued to practice circumcision and observe Jewish law. Near Eastern Christendom become more fractured over subsequent centuries. The Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth century CE gave rise to the three Eastern Churches. A number of Arab tribes belonged to the West Syrian, East Syrian, and Chalcedonian Churches. Other Arabic-speaking groups, such as those in the Qur'an's milieu, shared an affinity with the "Jewish-Christian" community of the early Church. As we embark on this examination of the relationship between the Qur'an and the Syriac New Testament, we discuss how the Qur'an comes to reject the authority of both Jewish rabbis and Christian priests.

The Qur'an always refers to these rabbis and priests in the plural. This observation reinforces the idea that the text functions in a milieu in which the institution of the clergy is highly active and organized.³ The clergy is explicitly discussed in Āl 'Imrān (Q 3), al-Mā'idah (Q 5), al-Tawbah (Q 9) and al-Ḥadīd (Q 57).

The Transgressions of the Rabbis

Q 3 and 5 are concerned with, among other matters, the integrity of the prophet Muḥammad's community of believers. Many of the passages in these two *sūrah*s seek to integrate Jews and Christians into this community while protecting it from scriptural tampering and theological schism. Q 3:69–103 asserts that "submission to tradition" (*islām*; cf. Syr. *mashlmānūtā*) is the true religion, condemns the disobedience (*kufūr*) of the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*) and warns those who believe (*alladhīna āmanū*) from going down the same

3. The use of the plural as a means of identifying an institution, culture, or community is a semantic and rhetorical device applied on several occasions to good holy men, like prophets (*anbiyā'*), messengers (*rusul*), saints (*awliyā'*), sincere ones (*siddīqūn*) and martyrs (*shuhadā'*). The poets (*shu'arā'*) are the only class of evil holy men who are identified once in the plural (Q 25:224). Otherwise, ancient as well as false classes of holy men are usually referred to in the singular, e.g., poet (*shā'ir*; Q 69:41), temple priest (*kāhin*; Q 69:42), magician (*sāḥir*; Q 51:52), and instructed or possessed man (*mu'allam majnūn*; Q 44:14).

path. Q 3:78 alludes to the clergy as the group (*farīq*) who distort scripture and knowingly lie about God.⁴ Q 3:79 then states,

It is not [lawful] for any creature that God would bring him the Writings, Law and Prophets (*al-kitāb wa'l-ḥukm wa'l-nubuwwah*) and then say to the people, “be my servants above God.” To the contrary, be teachers (*rabbāniyyūn*)⁵ according to the scripture you used to teach (*tu'allimūn al-kitāb*) and according to what you used to interpret (*tadrusūn*).⁶

Q 3:78–79 argue that the rabbis in the Qur'an's milieu have overstepped the limits of their clerical authority to the point of falsifying scripture and demanding subservience to the authority of their person. The polemic challenges the rabbis to stay true to the juridical nature of their profession, as “interpreters and scholars” of scripture. It is the preservation of scripture and maintenance of the juridical tradition that endows as well as limits their authority. The scripture to be preserved is composed of the three sections of the TANAKH, albeit in atypical sequence—the Writings, the Law and the Prophets (*al-kitāb wa'l-ḥukm wa'l-nubuwwah*)—which are also cited in Q 6:89.⁷ The scholarly tradition to be maintained is made up of the Talmud and Midrash: *tu'allimūn* is a verbal calque for *talmūd* and *tadrusūn* is derived from the same root as *midrāsh*.⁸ However, in my view the nuances of Q 3:78–79 compel us to consider this passage alongside the image of Jesus as the true teacher or rabbi in the Syriac Gospels (Syriac *rabōnī*; Arabic *rabbānī*). His “teaching” (*yulpānā*) and words—unlike those of the wicked Pharisees—were “authoritative” (*mshaltā*; cf. Matt 7:29; Mark 1:22–27; Luke 4:32).

4. The accusation of “distorting the scriptures” leveled against members of the clergy may be a hermeneutical strategy on the part of the Qur'an to condemn the latent differences in Bible canons at the time. See Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Alternatively, the accusation may point to more egregious editorial practices as a result of the Christological controversies. See idem, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

5. See Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh b. Muslim b. Qutaybah, *Tafsīr ghariḥ al-qur'ān*, ed. Aḥmad Ṣaqr (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1978), 143, which glosses *rabbāniyyūn* as *ulamā'*.

6. See Abū al-Ḥasan al-Wāḥidī, *Asbāb nuzūl al-qur'ān*, ed. Kamāl Zaghlūl (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1991), 115–116, which sets this passage in a rather fantastic tale involving the Christians of Najran and the Prophet Muḥammad.

7. Heb. *ketūbīm*, *tōrah* and *nebī'im*, respectively. On the legal dimension of *kitāb*, see EQ, s.v. “Book” (Daniel Madigan).

8. The fact that this scholarly tradition is endowed with authority (*sulṭān*) is confirmed in Q 68:37.

In a sequence of interrelated passages in Q 5:41–69, God consoles the messenger (Muḥammad), who warns the Jews (*al-yahūd*, *alladhīna hādū*) and Christians (*al-naṣārā*) who have joined his community of believers against heresy and schism. He also commands them to abide by their own Hebrew and Christian Scriptures (*al-tawrāt wa'l-injīl*).⁹ In these passages, rabbis are mentioned twice. The first mention occurs in Q 5:44, after the text argues that the Jews paid lip service to the community of believers when in fact they served different communities. It states:

Indeed we have revealed the Hebrew Scripture (*al-tawrāt*) which contains guidance and light so that the prophets who have submitted may judge by it on behalf of those who accept Judaism (*alladhīna hādū*), the teachers and the scribes (*al-rabbāniyyūn wa'l-aḥbār*), according to what they managed to preserve from the scripture of God over which they were witnesses.

As in Q 3:79, so too in Q 5:44 the teachers should be subservient to scripture, which alone commands supreme authority. Hebrew Scripture should be legally binding over the Jewish *bodypolitik*, including their teachers and rabbis. This brings us to the second reference to teachers in Q 5:61–63. The passage states,

And when they [i.e., Jews and Christians] came to you (pl.), they said “we believe,” when in fact they had entered and departed in [a state of] disobedience, and God is most knowledgeable about what they used to conceal. Thus you see many of them racing towards wickedness, offence and their devouring bribes (*suht*).¹⁰ Truly evil is what they used to do! If only the teachers and scribes (*al-rabbāniyyūn wa'l-aḥbār*) had prohibited them from speaking their wickedness and devouring bribes. Truly evil is what they used to carry out!

According to this passage, the Jews—from the perspective of the Qur’ān—pose as believers but secretly cause wickedness, offense, and devouring of bribes. The details surrounding these crimes echo Jesus’s invectives against the Pharisees in Matt 12 and 15. The implications of the polemic in Q 5:44, 61–63 underscores the failure of rabbis and scribes to prevent their *bodypolitik* from committing such crimes. Similarly, Q 62:5 illustrates the failure of rabbinic leaders to “bear the burden of the Torah.”¹¹ They failed to serve as an institution of leadership and, to the contrary, misguided their people.

9. On the inclusion of Jews, Christians, and other monotheists among the believers, see Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 68–74.

10. Ibn Qutaybah, *Tafsīr gharīb al-qur’ān*, 143 has *rashā* (bribery) as a gloss for *suht*, which fits the context of the invectives in the Gospels.

11. Q 62:5 is in conversation with traditions echoing Gen 49:14, including *Tract. Avodah Zarah* 5b.

As in passages from Q 3 and 5, Q 9:30–35 warns the community of believers against the subservience of the Jews (*al-yahūd*) to their rabbinic leadership—beginning with the figure of Ezra the Scribe (fifth century BCE)—as well as the deification of Christ by the Christians (*al-naṣārā*). The passage then condemns Jews and Christians:

They [i.e., Jews and Christians] have taken their scribes (*aḥbārahūm*) and their priests (*ruhbānahūm*) as lords (*arbāb^{am}*)¹² above God and Christ the son of Mary. Yet they were not commanded but to worship one God... Oh you who believe, indeed many of the scribes (*al-aḥbār*) and priests (*al-ruhbān*) devour the wealth of people falsely (*la-ya'kulūn amwāl al-nās b'ḥl-bāṭil*) and obstruct [others] from the way of God. For those who hoard gold and silver and do not spend it in the way of God, warn them of an agonizing torment (Q 9:31, 34).¹³

The main polemic in this passage is directed against the Jews and rabbinic leadership. Q 9:34 criticizes the submission of the Jewish *bodypolitik* to the will of their “scribes” (*aḥbār*) and “priests” (*ruhbān*), over and above the worship of the “one God.” This polemic echoes passages in the Syriac Gospels and Acts of the Apostles. That is to say, the pairing of “scribes and priests” rearticulates the pairing of “scribes and Pharisees” (*sāfīw wa prīshē*) in Matthew’s Gospel. Also the criticism against submission to the rabbinic authority reflects the words of Peter, “We must obey God rather than any human authority” (Acts 5:29). Furthermore, the condemnation of crimes committed by the scribes and Pharisees is in close dialogue with the Syriac language of the Synoptic Gospels, where Jesus condemns the scribes and Pharisees for reveling in the pride of being called “my lord, my lord” (*rabī rabī*; Matt 23:5–8), for “devouring the households of widows” (*āklīn bātē d-armlātā*; Mark 12:40; Luke 20:47) and for their greed and hypocrisy in matters of charity (Matt 6:1), all of which condemn them to hell (Matt 23:31–33).¹⁴

The Perversion of Early Church Leadership

The Qur’ān’s understanding of Christian leadership is more complex than its outright condemnation of rabbinic authority. The early Church is viewed as

12. Cf. Francois de Blois, “Naṣrānī and Ḥanīf: Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and Islam,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65:1 (2002): 9, n. 49. De Blois traces *ruhbān* and *aḥbār* to a Christian context in the Persian sphere.

13. Like Ibn Qutaybah and others, Wāḥidī, (*Asbāb nuzūl al-qur’ān*, 249) claims that the *‘ulamā’* and *qurrā’* among the People of the Book accepted bribery. See *EP*, s.v. Rāhib (A. J. Wensinck).

14. On the Qur’ān’s intertextual dialogue with the Gospels, see Emran El-Badawi, *The Qur’ān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions* (London: Routledge, 2013).

fundamentally good. This positive view, however, changes as the early Church comes to be dominated by Gentiles. From the Qur'an's perspective—I argue—the spread of the church among Gentiles marks a period of decline and deterioration because the Church stops observing Jewish law, which the Qur'an considers sacred. This is where the text's dialogue with the Syriac Acts of the Apostles is most illuminating. We begin by examining Q 5's warning against the hypocrisy and disloyalty of the Jews and Christians in Muḥammad's community of believers. Verses 82–85 state:

You will surely find the severest of people in enmity to those who believe are the Jews and those who have associated [lords above God; *alladhīna ashrakū*], and you will surely find the closest of them in friendship to those who believe are those who said, “We are Christians (*naṣārā*).” This is because among them are elders (*qīssīsūn*)¹⁵ and priests (*ruhbān*),¹⁶ and because they are not arrogant. For when they hear what was revealed to the messenger, you see their eyes flowing with tears on account of what truth they have learned. They say, “Lord we believe, so record us among the witnesses (*shuhadā*)! For why should we not believe in God and what truth has come to us? Thus we desire that our Lord enters us among the apostles (*sāliḥūn*).”¹⁷ So God rewarded them on account of what they said with gardens underneath which rivers flow, [dwelling] therein forever. For such is the reward of the strong.¹⁸

Unlike the Jews and those who associate lords above God—perhaps Chalcedonian Christians—there is a subset of Christians who are most friendly and faithful to Muḥammad's community of believers. They are quite possibly Christians who nominally belong to one of the eastern churches, but whose tradition and perhaps even observance of Jewish law go back to the early Church in Jerusalem. The speech act, “we are Christians,” echoes an imagined conversion of pagans to Christianity. Coupled with their inclusion among the “witnesses” (*shuhadā*) and “apostles” (*sāliḥūn*)—that is, the *sāhdē*

15. Abū Bakr 'Abd Allāh b. Abī Dāwūd al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-maṣāḥif*, ed. Salīm Hilālī (Cairo: al-Farīq al-ḥadītha, 2002), 476 mentions *ṣiddīqīm* (Zadokites?) as an alternate.

16. The accusative case of “priests” (*ruhbān^m*) after the partitive “among them” (*minhum*) is unexpected and does not conform to the rules of classical Arabic grammar. Could this word preserve a Syriacized substratum—*rahbānē*?

17. The Arabic noun *sāliḥ* is generally understood to mean “righteous one” or “pious one.” However, in this context, it is clearly synonymous with, if not derived from, Syriac *shlīḥā*, “apostle.”

18. Wāḥidī (*Asbāb nuzūl al-qur'ān*, 205–207) claims that this passage goes back to the episode between Ja'far b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 8/629) and his sympathetic Christian hosts in Abyssinia. This claim seems plausible on the surface, but unlikely given the passage's conversation with Acts.

and *shlīḥē* mentioned in Acts (cf. Q 4:69)—this statement echoes that of Peter before the people of Jerusalem, “To this we are witnesses (*sāhdē*)” (Acts 3:15; cf. 5:32; 10:39). Among the ranks of these Christians were elders (*qissīsūn*) and priests (*ruhbān*), not the evil “elders” (*qashīshē*) and “priests” (*kāhnē*) of rabbinic leadership most frequently referenced in the New Testament, but rather the believing “elders” (*qashīshē*) and “apostles” (*shlīḥē*) of the early Church in Jerusalem mentioned in Acts 15–16. The Qur’anic representation of this nascent Christian leadership implies that its leaders were not “arrogant,” that is, they did not demand the subservience of the Jewish people. Nor did they demand the reverence of the people at the expense of worshipping the one God (see above). Moreover, once the Christians extolled in this passage “hear what was revealed”—ostensibly to the prophet Muḥammad—they irrevocably join his community of believers and are rewarded by God for their faith. The underlying logic is that the new faith of the Qur’an is the legitimate heir to the early Church.

Among the founders of the early Church in Jerusalem were the disciples Peter and John (Acts 3–4, 8). Among the “prophets and teachers” (*nabīyē w-malḫānē*) sent to help found the Church in Antioch were the disciple Barnabas and the apostle Paul (Acts 13:1). At the Council of Jerusalem (ca. 50 CE) Paul and his growing gentile camp convinced much of the early Church that Gentile converts to Christianity need not be shackled by the authority of Jewish law (Gal 2; Acts 15)—especially with regard to male circumcision. Q 57 gives additional detail concerning the development of the early Church and commentary on the events narrated in Acts. From the Qur’anic perspective, Jewish law and scripture are one and the same (cf. discussion below on Q 11:17; 46:12), and Paul’s revolutionary act signaled the demotion of scriptural authority and the inevitable promotion of clerical authority in its place.¹⁹

The Church became divided after Paul’s bold move at the Council of Jerusalem. According to the New Testament, God had bestowed upon Peter the “apostleship to the circumcised,” and upon Paul the “apostleship to the Gentiles” (Gal 2:8), who made up the majority of the population outside Judaea. In Acts 20:28, Paul exhorts the Gentile masses as follows:

Watch, therefore, over yourselves and all the flock (*mar’ūtā*) which the Holy Spirit has entrusted unto you (*aqīm kūn*) as clergy (*epīsqōpē*),²⁰ to care for the church of God (*d-tē’ūn l-’idteh d-alāhā*), which he purchased with his blood.

Concerning this episode and the formation of the early Church, Q 57:26–27 states,

19. On the authority latent in some uses of *kitāb*, see *EQ*, s.v. Book (Daniel Madigan).

20. I take the NRSV translation of the Greek term *episkopos* as “overseer” to be synonymous with clergy in this context.

Indeed We sent (*arsalnā*) Noah and Abraham; and we placed in their offspring prophecy and scripture (*al-nubuwwah wa'l-kitāb*). Some of them are guided but many of them are corrupt. Then We matched (*qaffaynā*) their followers (*'alā āthārihim*) with our messengers (*rusul*), and We matched (*qaffaynā*) them with Jesus the son of Mary, and We gave him the Gospel (*al-injīl*) and placed in the hearts (*qulūb*) of those who followed him leniency (*ra'fah*), mercy (*rahmah*) and leadership (*rahbāniyyah*),²¹ which they perverted (*ibtada'ūhā*) [and which] We did not decree for them (*mā katabnāhā 'alayhim*), except [rather] for the desire to please God (*ibtighā' riḍwān allāh*). However, they did not care for it as it should have been cared for (*fa-mā ra'awhā ḥaqq ri'āyahā*). Thus We gave to those among them who believed their wage (*ajrahum*), but many of them are corrupt.²²

This passage is in strong dialogue with the “prophets and teachers” in Acts 13:1 and the “shepherd of the Church of God” in Acts 20:28. In the context of Q 57:26, the progeny of Noah and Abraham are the Christians of Antioch. Their “prophecy and scripture” (*al-nubuwwah wa'l-kitāb*) represent none other than the “prophets and teachers” (*nabīyē w-malḥānē*) of Acts 13:1. That “some of them are guided” echoes the “remnant of Israel” found throughout Hebrew Scripture and Romans 9:27, but refers specifically to the minority of Christians who clung to the scriptural authority that lay at the heart of Jewish law. Thus, the statement “but many of them are corrupt” is likely a denunciation of Paul and his camp who amassed Gentile followers at the expense of Jewish law.

Q 57:27 then claims that God “matched” (*qaffā*) the corruption of the Church in Antioch with the more established and conservative Church in Jerusalem, which was rooted in the teachings of God’s “prophets” (*rusul*), “Jesus the son of Mary” and “the Gospel.” Furthermore, God “placed in the hearts” of the Christians of Jerusalem “leniency (*ra'fah*), mercy (*rahmah*) and leadership (*rahbāniyyah*),” which are all innately good (cf. Acts 8:21; 2 Cor 3:3; 4:1).²³

21. The translation of *rahbāniyyah* as “monastic state” in *EP*, s.v. *Rahbāniyya* (A. J. Wensinck) is correct generally, but imprecise given the passage’s precise conversation with specific passages in the New Testament.

22. Muslim exegetes do not appear to be aware of the passage’s conversation with Acts. See, for example, Ibn Qutayba, *Tafsīr gharīb al-qur’ān*, 454–455. Majd al-Dīn Abū Ṭāhir Muḥammad b. Ya’qūb al-Fayrūzābādī, *Tanwīr al-miqbās min tafsīr Ibn ‘Abbās*, ed. Yousef Meri, trans. Mokrane Guezou (Amman: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2007) 652, demonstrates little knowledge of the passage’s conversation with Acts. He speculates that “they built monasteries and cloisters to escape the sedition of Paul, the Jew.”

23. Classical exegetes—including Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, ed. Aḥmad Farīd, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyyah, 2003), 3:327—and modern translators incorrectly truncate the alliterated tripartite list—*ra'fah wa rahmah wa rahbāniyyah*—so as to exclude the latter as a purely human contrivance. However,

In fact, the clergy of the early Church was established out of the “desire to please God” (*ibtiḡhā riḏwān allāh*). However, this “leadership” (*rahbāniyyah*) eventually became “perverted” (*ibtadaʿ*) after the Council of Jerusalem in which many leaders of the early Church conceded to Paul’s abandonment of Jewish law and to his growing Gentile flock. For this new (perverted) Church, expanding its membership to the Gentile majority was more important than adhering to Jewish law. In this context, *ibtidāʿ* should be understood as “perversion,” that is, transforming or rejecting the spirit of Jewish law, rather than simply “innovation.”

The “leadership” of the early Church (*rahbāniyyah*) in Q 57:27 is synonymous with the “clergy” (*epiqōpē*) in Acts 20:28. From the qur’anic perspective, the Church was taken over by Paul and his camp and was, therefore, “corrupt.” Moreover, efforts by Paul’s camp to “watch over” their “flock” (*marʿūtā*) and to “care for the church of God” (*d-tēʿūn l-ʿidteh d-alāhā*) in Acts 20:28 have failed. This is precisely what is meant by the statement, “they did not care for it as it should have been cared for” (*mā raʿawhā ḥaqq riʿāyatihā*; Q 57:27), where the Arabic verb *raʿaw* and the Aramaic noun *marʿūtā* and verb *tēʿūn* are all derived from the root *r-ʿ-y*, meaning to tend to, care for, or feed a flock.²⁴ The concluding remark of Q 57:27 assures us that God paid a believing minority of the clergy their wages for fulfilling their role as shepherds (e.g., Gen 31:41), but insists that—once again—the majority are corrupt (cf. Q 5:81; 57:16; Rev 2:23–24).

In sum, the Qurʾān condemns the early Church only after it had stripped itself of its commitment to Jewish law. This Jewish-Christian sensibility, furthermore, has its origins in the Council of Jerusalem and—before that—the debate between the Churches in Jerusalem and Antioch.

Renewing the Authority of Scripture in the Jewish-Christian Context

In this chapter I have argued that the qur’anic condemnation of rabbinic leadership is in conversation with the invectives directed by Jesus towards

this reading is incomplete. For God placed all three items in the hearts of Jesus’s followers, the last of which, *rahbāniyyah*, was innately good but later perverted. The term *rahbāniyyah* in the Qurʾān should be understood as fulfilling the same function as the saintly leadership (*imāma*) or clerical institutions (*mashyakha*) of later Islamic times.

24. Robert Payne-Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1903), 545–546. The same terminology and spirit are employed in the *ḥadīth* ascribed to Muḥammad: “Beware! Every one of you is a shepherd; and every shepherd is responsible for his flock,” *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Beirut: Dār al-fikr, 1997, 20:4496). See also Beeston, *Dictionnaire sabéen*, 113.

the Pharisees in the Syriac Gospels, and that the Qur'an considers the early Church's relinquishing of Jewish law and the Church's spread among the Gentiles to be a process of decline and corruption. This qur'anic perspective on Church history builds upon the Syriac Acts of the Apostles. Taken together, these arguments have several implications for the study of the Qur'an and its late antique milieu.

Despite the Qur'an's generally negative assessment of the clergy, it is not in principle against them as an institution; rather, the Qur'an condemns the perpetual misconduct of its leaders—for example, arrogance, hoarding of wealth, and neglecting its promises. Clerical authority is by nature prone to the abusive whims of the human beings who make up the body of the clergy. The misuse of clerical authority, according to the Qur'an, justifies a return to scriptural authority. In other words, the authority to lead the community should no longer remain vested in holy men, but rather in holy books. This is why the Qur'an posits Jewish law, first, and itself, second, as the only source of guidance for the community. First, Q 11:17; 46:12 declares that prior to the Qur'an, the "Law of Moses" (*kitāb mūsā*) was a "leader and mercy" (*imām^m wa raḥmat^m*), where *imām* means "leader" (subsequently it came to signify an Islamic clergyman).²⁵ Second, Q 13:37 declares that the Qur'an is an "Arabic Law" (*ḥukm 'arabī*), implying that it is a compliment to, or substitution for, earlier Jewish law (cf. Q 5:44–47).²⁶ It follows that the clergy should obtain their authority to lead the community through the study of scripture—that is, Talmud and Midrash. This qur'anic appeal to scholarly and juridical practice may, in part, explain why law (*fiqh*) flourished in the second/eighth century Near East as the earliest and most quintessential Islamic science.²⁷ This, however, is a discussion for another day.

There are further implications concerning clerical authority in the Qur'an and its relationship to Jewish-Christianity. Consider that the qur'anic term *ruhbān* generally refers to priests or members of a clergy. Hence, *raḥbāniyyah* in Q 57:27 means "clergy" in general. But when *ruhbān* is appended to *rabbāniyyūn* or *aḥbār*, it refers to rabbinic authority; and when it is appended to *qissīṣūn* it refers to the early Church and its leadership in Jerusalem (see above). The use of *ruhbān* to refer to the clergy of both Judaism and Christianity suggests that clergy in those two religious communities served the same clerical function. This terminology appears to be a relic from a time and place where the

25. On the intersection of *imām* and *kitāb*, see *EQ*, s.v. Book (Daniel Madigan).

26. On religious authority in the qur'anic use of *ḥukm* (lit. "judgment"), see *EQ*, s.v. Authority (Wadad Kadi).

27. See, generally, Arthur Vööbus, *Important New Manuscript Sources for the Islamic Law in Syriac: Contributions to the History of Jurisprudence in the Syrian Orient* (Stockholm: ETSE, 1975); Ahmed El-Shamsy, *The Canonization of Islamic Law: A Social and Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

clerical authority of Jewish rabbis and Christian priests were one and the same. Among Christians in the Qurʾān's milieu, the "good *naṣārā*," who were a minority, were the ones who kept Jewish law. This may be a reference to the earliest generation of Christians, or "Jewish-Christians." "Bad *naṣārā*" did not keep Jewish law. This idea, and the strong dialogue between Q 57:26–27 and Acts 13:1; 20:28, implies that the Church experienced a golden age until it was taken over by the Gentile *bodypolitik* of the Roman Empire and divided by the Christological controversies that make Christ God (Q 5:17, 72–75).²⁸

For early Christians, the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles remained the link to Jesus and the first bishops of Jerusalem. Between 135 CE and the first articulations of the Qurʾān ca. 610, the clerical authority of Jewish law was "interpreted and studied" (cf. Q 3:79) both outside of Jerusalem and outside the Talmudic and Midrashic traditions. Before the legal insights of Jacob bar Addai (d. 578), Babai the Great (d. 628) and other renowned authors of the Syriac-speaking Churches, anonymous "scholars and jurists" between the second and fifth centuries CE authored or translated Syriac texts like the *Didache*, *Didascalia* and Pseudo-Clementine literature. These texts were foundational for the development of religious laws among Arabic-speaking Christians and within the Qurʾān's milieu.²⁹ This brief explanation does not do justice to the complex relationships between the Arabic Qurʾān and the world of late antique Syriac literature. My aim, rather, is to demonstrate that the legal sensibilities of the Qurʾān are mediated—not through secretive Christian origins or heretical influences—but rather through a well-developed network that emphasized the authority of scripture, the "interpretation" of its verses and the "study" of its laws.

28. See Richard Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God: The Epic Fight over Christ's Divinity in the Last Days of Rome* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1999); cf. Phillip Wood, *We Have No King but Christ: Christian Political Thought in Greater Syria on the Eve of the Arab Conquest (c. 400–585)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 173, who describes the activity of Syriac-speaking Churches as "mob politics."

29. See Holger Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum as a Point of Departure* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 13–27. Similar to *Did.* 26, the community in Q 4:28 and Q 5:110 believes that Jewish law should be lightened but not abolished.