

Introduction

Abraham Geiger's work, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judentume aufgenommen?* (1833)¹ lays out a case for the Qur'an's use of the Hebrew Scriptures and the general influence of Jewish literature on Mohammed.² Of course, Geiger was not the first person to recognize this. Indeed, John of Damascus (c 675 – 749) asserts, even if in a rather polemical way, Mohammed's dependence on both the New and Old Testaments (*Concerning Heresy [Peri eréseon]*, 101). Nonetheless, Geiger's work brought this influence to modern consciousness. Geiger's approach is based on comparing particular themes, theological *tendenz* we might say, between the Hebrew Scriptures as interpreted through Rabbinic literature and the Qur'an.³ Less than thirty years later, Nöldeke published *Geschichte des Qorâns*.⁴ It is hard to overstate the influence this work has had on Quranic studies, even to this day. The focus of these studies has generally proceeded along similar lines as the source critical study of the Hebrew Scriptures, looking for sources and attempting to locate the various *suras* in the context of Mohammed's life.

Almost exactly 100 years after Geiger, Heinrich Speyer, in *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*,⁵ wrote what has been called the most comprehensive and detailed work dealing with the various Christian, Jewish, Gnostic and even Samaritan parallels in the Qur'an.⁶ Speyer organizes his work starting with creation, working through various prominent biblical characters (Adam, Noah, Moses, etc...) before finishing up with a series of brief topical studies (prophets, torments of fire, and parables). As comprehensive as Speyer's work is, it was written prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which have shed important light on the fluidity of the scriptural text(s) around the time of Jesus and the development of distinct text forms of the Hebrew Scriptures.⁷

¹ Abraham Geiger, *Was Hat Mohammed Aus Dem Judentume Aufgenommen?*, 2. rev. Aufl. ed. (Leipzig: M. W. Kaufmann, 1833; reprint, 1902).

² I will use Mohammed as a convenient shorthand for whomever may have authored the various Suras of the Qur'an, recognizing, if not necessarily agreeing with, the concerns raised by scholars in the last 50 years. Cf. John E. Wansbrough and G. R. Hawting, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus, 2006). The challenge of authorship and date does little to affect the overall project's goal: utilizing the Qur'an as a witness to non-Masoretic text forms.

³ Susannah Heschel, "Abraham Geiger and the Emergence of Jewish Philislamism," in *"Im Vollen Licht Der Geschichte" Die Wissenschaft Des Judentums Und Die Anfänge Der Kritischen Koranforschung*, ed. Dirk Hartwig (Würzburg: Ergon, 2008).

⁴ Theodor Nöldeke, *Geschichte Des Qorâns* (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1860).

⁵ Heinrich Speyer, *Die Biblischen Erzählungen Im Qoran*, 2., unveränderte Aufl. ed. (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1931; reprint, 2013).

⁶ Franz Rosenthal, "The History of Heinrich Speyer's *Die Biblischen Erzählungen Im Qoran*," in *"Im Vollen Licht Der Geschichte" Die Wissenschaft Des Judentums Und Die Anfänge Der Kritischen Koranforschung*, ed. Dirk Hartwig (Würzburg: Ergon, 2008), 113.

⁷ C.f., Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd rev. ed. (Minneapolis Assen: Fortress Press; Royal Van Gorcum, 2001). Eugene Charles Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Origins of the Bible*, Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature (Grand Rapids; Leiden; Boston: Eerdmans; Brill, 1999).

The purpose of this study is to show the feasibility of a larger project looking at which text form(s) of the Hebrew Scriptures may be preserved in the Qur'an, giving potentially unique insights into the form(s) of the Hebrew Scriptures available in Mohammad's (d. 632) Middle Eastern context. In examining this question, our approach will be a combination of text critical methodologies, as utilized with the Hebrew Scriptures across multiple ancient translations and text forms, combined with intertextual approaches to scripture. This study will focus exclusively on the second Sura, verse 93, a passage not covered by either Geiger or Speyer, as a case study to demonstrate the Qur'an's use of text forms differing from the Masoretic Text (MT).

Sura 2 (البقرة, *Al Baqarah*, The Cow)

(93) And when We made with you a covenant and caused the Mount to tower above you, (saying): Hold fast by that which We have given you, and hear (Our Word), they said: We hear and we rebel....⁸

We will focus on just the last phrase, سَمِعْنَا وَعَصَيْنَا (sami'nā wa'asha'nā), what Pickthall translates as "We hear and we rebel."

The first thing that stands out in this verse is that the Israelites, upon Moses' coming down off the mountain (Sinai), did not say this exactly. There are two differences between this verse and the text of Exodus 24, which concludes that part of the narrative in Exodus. Specifically, in Exodus 24:7, the (MT) says the Israelites responded, "Everything that the Lord has said we will do, and we will obey"⁹ (וְעָשׂוּ וְשָׁמְעוּ). The Qur'an reverses the order found in the MT and changes the wording from "do and obey (hear)" to "hear and/but rebel" (i.e., not do). While Deuteronomy 5:27 does have the words in this order (וְשָׁמְעוּ וְעָשׂוּ), wěšāma'nū wě'āsīnū), the context is not from when Moses came down from the mountain. Here, the context is situated just prior to entering the promised land and the Israelites are portrayed as too afraid to draw close to God, so they request that Moses alone go before God and represent them. The context of 2:93, then, is clearly the context in Exodus.¹⁰ We will look more closely at this when we examine the text critical issues with the Exodus passage.

The question remains, then, what might be the reason for both the different wording and word order? Did Mohammed misread the Hebrew text (if, indeed, he could read) and/or misunderstand it? Could the Quranic text reflect an alternate text form or tradition that differs from the MT? Could Mohammed have been recasting the story for homiletic purposes? Or, is it a combination of some or all of the above?

⁸ Pickthall, M. M. (Ed.). (n.d.). *The Quran*. Medford, MA: Perseus Digital Library. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are from Pickthall.

⁹ *Common English Bible*. (2011). (Ex 24:7). Nashville, TN: Common English Bible.

¹⁰ Katsh seems to view verse 93 (which for an unknown reason, he calls 87) as being based on Exodus 24:7 as well. Cf. Abraham Isaac Katsh, *Judaism in Islām, Biblical and Talmudic Backgrounds of the Koran and Its Commentaries: Suras Ii and Iii* (New York: Published for New York University Press by Bloch, 1954), 82-83.

We hear and [but] disobey (سَمِعْنَا وَعَصَيْنَا, sami 'nā wa 'aṣaynā)

The phrases, “we hear and disobey” and “we hear and obey” are found in a handful of verses in the Qur’an. These include verses 2:93 and 285, 4:46, 5:7 and 24:51. In each case, whether it says obey or disobey, the words are consistently in the same order.

In verse 2:285, the expression is a direct echo of the response in Exodus 24:7 as part of the conclusion to the second Sura.

(2:285) The messenger believeth in that which hath been revealed unto him from his Lord and (so do) believers. Each one believeth in Allah and His angels and His scriptures and His messengers - We make no distinction between any of His messengers - and they say: We hear, and we obey.

The Arabic here reads: سَمِعْنَا وَأَطَعْنَا (sami 'nā wāṭa 'nā).

We find this combination of hear/disobey and hear/obey specifically juxtaposed in Sura 4, verse 46.

(4:46) Some of those who are Jews change words from their context and say: "We hear and disobey; hear thou as one who heareth not" and "Listen to us!" distorting with their tongues and slandering religion. If they had said: "We hear and we obey: hear thou, and look at us" it had been better for them, and more upright. But Allah hath cursed them for their disbelief, so they believe not, save a few.

The only other places where the formula of hear/obey is found are verses 5:7 and 24:51, both of which use the same Arabic phrase, سَمِعْنَا وَأَطَعْنَا (sami 'nā wāṭa 'nā) as the other verses.

(5:7) Remember Allah's grace upon you and His covenant by which He bound you when ye said: *We hear and we obey*; And keep your duty to Allah. Lo! He knoweth what is in the breasts (of men).

(24:51) The saying of (all true) believers when they appeal unto Allah and His messenger to judge between them is only that they say: *We hear and we obey*. And such are the successful.

From these verses we can observe that the idea of “hear and obey” is a formulaic response expected from believers. Conversely, the response, “we hear and disobey” is specifically placed in the mouths of rebellious Jews in both 2:93 and 4:46 as the epitome of how not to respond. But what about this response of disobedience? Where might it come from?

Misunderstanding or Creative Usage?

Hirschfeld asserted that Mohammed mistook the Hebrew ועשינו (wě 'āsínû) for the Arabic

وَعْصِينَا (wa‘aṣāʾnā).¹¹ While there is a certain linguistic similarity between the words and disobey fits well with the polemic against the Jews found in the broader section, it ignores that the biblical phrase is used elsewhere, as just noted. So the chance that Mohammed originally misunderstood the word and later corrected his mistake does not work well. This is especially the case if the tradition is correct that holds that Sura 24, with the correct understanding of the word, came out of the Meccan period and therefore is earlier than Suras 2 and 4 with the supposedly incorrect understanding, both of which are traditionally ascribed to the later Medinan period. But more significantly, it fails to explain Sura 4, where the two are deliberately juxtaposed in the same verse, separated by only a dozen words or so. Given the polemical nature of the sections in Suras 2 and 4 where this wording occurs, it appears that this was a deliberate change to set the inappropriate response of the Jews in direct contrast to the appropriate response of believers. Therefore, we have to reject the idea that Mohammed misunderstood the text. Instead, it appears that this passage is part of a broader approach to biblical narratives.

Reynolds argues the Qur’an has the hallmarks of homily with its frequent allusions to both biblical and extra-canonical literature.¹² This is similar to how the New Testament expects a thorough understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures, both in what it quotes as well as the broader context to which it alludes.¹³ If this is the case, then those allusions in the Qur’an can point us to the variety of narratives that Mohammed would have assumed his original audience already knew. Indeed, this can be seen, whether from the extended references to biblical characters such as Jonah (Sura 10), Joseph (Sura 12) and Noah (Sura 71), to the frequent references to Abraham and Pharaoh, or with the references to extra-canonical works, such as to Mary in the *Protoevangelium of James* (Sura 3),¹⁴ the Syriac story of the sleepers in the cave (Sura 18), or Jesus making clay pigeons and giving them life in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (Suras 3 and 5). But Mohammed does not follow the biblical and extra-biblical texts slavishly. Instead they are creatively reshaped. As Reynolds suggests, “For the Qur’an all that matters is the impact on the reader, the degree to which its discourse on these characters and place might lead the reader to repentance and obedience”¹⁵

This helps explain what is going on in 2:93. In verse 87, Mohammed begins with Moses, to whom God gave the original Scripture, and notes that Moses was followed by a series of messengers, including Jesus and Mary, most of whom were rejected and even killed. Mohammed’s complaint seems to be that he was not being accepted in the same way that these

¹¹ Hartwig Hirschfeld, *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qoran* (London: 1902), 109. Referenced in Katsh, *Judaism in Islām, Biblical and Talmudic Backgrounds of the Koran and Its Commentaries: Suras Ii and Iii*, 82n4.

¹² Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Subtext*, Routledge Studies in the Qur'an (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), 232.

¹³ Cf. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989).

¹⁴ Reynolds, *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Subtext*, 140-144.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 239. Note that Reynolds’ understanding of Mohammed’s use of biblical Scripture is not all that different from how Hays’ sees Paul using scripture. “Indeed, Paul’s way of using Scripture suggest that homiletical and prophetic readings can sometimes be more faithful than rigorously exegetical ones.” Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, 184.

earlier messengers were not accepted (88). Likewise, the scripture that came from God through Mohammed was also apparently being rejected (89-91). In a sense, then, he is comparing his situation with that of Moses. When Moses came down from the mountain with clear signs (the tablets with the Decalogue), he finds the Israelites had chosen to worship the calf and not God. So even though the Israelites said “All that the Lord has said, we will do and will obey (hear)” (Exod 24:7), their actions, by worshiping the calf, indicated what they really meant was, “we hear but we will disobey” (2:93). Mohammed, then, is saying this is not how true believers should respond. This is spelled out at the very end of the Sura. He concludes by insisting to his audience that true believers “believeth in Allah and His angels and His scriptures and His messengers - We make no distinction between any of His messengers - and they say: We hear, and we obey.” The purpose is quite apparently homiletic, exhorting his audience to be true believers and both accept Mohammed as God’s messenger, a messenger just like those who came before him, and, as the book of James aptly puts it, to “be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”¹⁶

Text Critical Considerations for Exodus 24:7

If, as we have argued, this verse is homiletic in nature and based on Exodus 24:7, we are still left with the question about the difference in word order. It is here we will turn to text critical considerations of this verse. As we have noted, the MT has the words in a different order, נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע (na‘āše wənišmā‘). In this section, we will look at different text forms and their major textual witnesses to determine if any might support the Quranic reading. This will include Greek, Latin, Aramaic Targumim, Syriac Peshita and the Samaritan Pentateuch text forms. Unfortunately, this particular verse was not found amongst the Qumran corpus, so we will not have the benefit of what are often the earliest witnesses to the Hebrew Scriptures.

Of the great uncials the text is not extant in Sinaiticus. In Vaticanus it reads, ποιήσομεν και ἀκουσόμεθα, paralleling the MT. This is the common reading in the Greek, with the exception of Codex Ambrosianus A 147 (F, 5th Century), which reads ακουσομεθα και ποιησομεν,¹⁷ reversing the word order, just as we find in the Qur’an. The Latin reads “faciemus et erimus obedientes,” following the MT and the critical edition of the *Biblia Sacra Vulgata* lists no variants for this verse.¹⁸ Both Targum Onqelos and Jonathan read נַעֲבִיד וְנִקְבִּיל (na‘bēd wunqabēl, “we will do and we will accept”).¹⁹ The order here follows the MT, with a nonliteral translation. Targum Neofiti

¹⁶ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (1989). (Jas 1:22). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. Note that I am not saying Mohammed was necessarily directly influenced by the book of James just that his exhortation finds remarkable affinity with it.

¹⁷ Henry Barclay Swete and Cambridge University Press., *The Old Testament in Greek, According to the Septuagint*, 3 vols. (Cambridge Eng.: The University Press, 1925), 151. See also the BHS critical apparatus in Rudolf Kittel, Wilhelm Rudolph, and Hans Peter Rieger, *Torah, Nevi'im U-Khetuvim = Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, Editio 2. emendata / ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1984).

¹⁸ Robert Weber and Roger Gryson, *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, 4., verb. Aufl. ed. (Stuttgart: Dt. Bibelges., 1994).

¹⁹ "Cal Targumic Studies Module", <http://cal.huc.edu/targumstartpage.html> (accessed 10/30/2016).

is more literal in its translation, נַעֲבֹד וְנִשְׁמָע (n'bd wnšm', "we will do and we will hear/obey"). All of these major text forms (Greek, Latin, Targumim) generally follow the MT, with the exception of Greek manuscript F, which appears to provide an early witness to the word order found in the Qur'an.

When we look at the Peshitta, we see a more consistent early witness to the word order of the Qur'an. It reads: נַעֲבֹד וְנִשְׁמָע (nshm' wn'bd, "we will hear and we will do"). The Leiden Peshitta critical apparatus lists no variants for verse 7.²⁰ The Leiden Peshitta is based on Codex Ambrosianus (Milan, Ambrosian Library, B. 21 Inf.) and is dated to the sixth or seventh century,²¹ which means this manuscript (and not just the text) is contemporaneous with the rise of Islam or even a little earlier. But it is not just the Peshitta that supports the alternate wording found in the Qur'an. The Samaritan Pentateuch also has the wording נַשְׁמָע וְנַעֲבֹד, nšm' wn'sh, "we will hear and will do) in Exodus 24:7.²² Additionally, this is supported in the Samaritan Targum, נַשְׁמָע וְנַעֲבֹד (nšm' wn'bd, "we will hear and we will do"), showing that even with the early translation, the Samaritan text with the reversed wording was stable in the instance of Exodus 24:7.

Concluding Remarks

Investigating the biblical references in the Qur'an is definitely not a straightforward enterprise. But just because it is not always clear, we should not simply assume that Mohammed did not know what he was doing. As we have seen, he worked with the text, recasting it for his context. Indeed, it appears he retold the biblical narratives in a creative way in order to provoke the desired response from both his followers and his enemies. If this is true, we should be able to detect, at least at times, the text forms he was referencing.

And this is what we have seen in verse 2:93, where the Quranic reading appears to be influenced by either the Samaritan Pentateuch or the Syriac Peshitta. Without additional data, it is impossible to say for sure which it is. However, given the prevalence of Syriac Christianity in Middle East at the time, a tentative initial hypothesis would be to suggest that the Qur'an's biblical references may well be based on the Peshitta. Further research would need to be done to attempt to validate this hypothesis and it is entirely possible we would find that the Qur'an utilizes multiple textual traditions for its sources. But before we go down that path, we can at least acknowledge that the form of the text utilized in 2:93 is slightly different than the Masoretic Text that came to be the dominant form of the Hebrew Scriptures.

²⁰ *Leiden Peshitta*, (Leiden: Peshitta Institute Leiden, 2008).

²¹ Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 152.

²² Mark Shoulson, *The Torah: Jewish and Samaritan Versions Compared*, 2nd ed. (Leac an Anfa, Co. Mhaigh Eo, Éire: Evertime, 2008).

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