The stranger at the sea: Mythopoesis in the Qur'ân and early tafsîr

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Summary: This study's point of departure is a famous statement issued by Charles Adams in 1967 that contends that the History of Religions and Islamic Studies are essentially incompatible. In revisiting Adams' claim, this study examines the use of myth and mythopoesis in the Qur'ân. For within this sacred scripture there exist many mythemes that connect it, both linguistically and structurally, to wider and deeper semiotics of meaning. The particular focus is on Qur'ân 8:60-82, which recounts Moses' encounter with a mysterious stranger at "the place where the two seas meet." After some methodological reflections, I examine the Qur'ân's ability to absorb, transform, and subsequently erase previous near eastern narratives. Following this, I examine the way in which Tabari, a 10th-century exegete, attempted to make sense of this passage in such a manner as to connect it explicitly back to these earlier narratives.

Résumé : Le point de départ de cette étude est l'affirmation remarquée de Charles Adams en 1967 ; il prétendait que les sciences religieuses et les études islamiques étaient essentiellement incompatibles. Cette étude analyse l'emploi du mythe et de la mythopoésie dans le Qur'ân. Dans ces écritures, il existe plusieurs mythèmes, qui les rattachent linguistiquement et structuralement à une sémiotique du sens plus grande et plus profonde. Le Qur'ân 8:60-82 raconte la rencontre de Moïse avec un étranger mystérieux « là, où les deux mers se rejoignent ». Suite à quelques réflexions méthodologiques, j'examine la capacité du Qur'ân à absorber, transformer et par conséquent à effacer les anciens récits du Proche-Orient. J'analyse ensuite la façon dont Tabari, un exégète du X^{e} siècle, cherche à faire sens avec ce passage tout en le reliant à ces récits du passé.

The traditional conception of Islam is that of an iconoclastic, austere and anti-mythological religion. Although certain commentators, both past and pres-

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ent, would love to have us believe this, a quick perusal of the Qur'ânic narrative immediately belies such a statement. For within the Qur'ân there exist many mythemes that connect the Qur'ân, both linguistically and structurally, to wider and deeper semiotics of meaning. Indeed these mythemes function at a meta-textual level, appearing here and there as faint echoes in a text that, stylistically, shuns storytelling. However, these mythemes, to use the words of Jaroslav Stetkevych, "remained afloat in the collective Arabian memory, not always differentiated in their communal proprietorship and provenance" (1996: 10). Such mythemes and mythopoeia cannot be subdued for long. They cry out for retrieval, interpretation and re-interpretation, for they are the very stuff of Islam's engagement with and in the world.

Theoretical considerations

As a generalization, Islamic data is often organized, arranged and classified according to one of two competing methodological approaches, which, for lack of better terms, I call the orientalist and the apologetic. These two approaches find concrete expression in how they deal with the sources of the tradition. Many orientalists, until recently, operated with an extreme, one could say virulent, hermeneutics of suspicion: the sources are regarded as either chronologically dubious or spurious and, thus, marginalized or completely ignored (see Schacht 1950; Wansbrough 1977, 1978; Crone and Cook 1977). There is, however, nothing particularly methodical about the apologetic approach since it tends to take at face value all that the sources say (see Azami 1992; Cantwell Smith 1981).

According to the latter, following the lead of the Muslim sources, there exists a hermetically-sealed border between the period prior to the advent of Islam—referred to, tellingly, as "the age of ignorance" (*al-jâhiliyya*)—and the period in which Muhammad received his prophetic call. The unstated goal behind this construction is to create a genuine Muslim mythos that is diametrically opposed to the ideals and imagination of pre-Islamic Arabia (J. Stetkevych 1996: 3-6). For example, whereas the age of ignorance had poetry, Islam has the Qur'ân; whereas the age of ignorance had mythology, Islam has religion or *dîn*. This border, like all borders imposed retroactively, is more apparent than real (S. Stetkevych 1994: 1-8; J. Stetkevych 1994: 58ff.). In fact, the *jâhiliyya* presents the existential and ontological categories that Islam not only abrogates but also fulfills (S. Stetkevych 1993: 50ff.). Without the *jâhiliyya*, then, there could not be Islam. The goal should not be to claim that the latter is distinct from the former, but to see how the former permeates and influences the latter.

In much the same manner, orientalist methodologies have, at least historically, attempted to construct a hermetically sealed border between the emerging Muslim polity and other monotheistic heritages. Certainly, there is no doubt that Islam spread into other geographic areas and that, in the process, it encountered and subsequently absorbed trajectories from other

religions. However, rather than focus on the rich legacy of Islam's religious, cultural and intellectual encounter with these other traditions, this approach, at least historically, has been obsessed with finding precursors and antecedents to anything that can prove the derivative status of Islamic phenomena. Within this context, Islam and its scripture, is regarded as a garbled version of biblical (both Jewish and Christian) stories, rabbinic *aggadot*, etc. J. Z. Smith's comments about "comparative" studies of early Christianity are apropos here: a two-term type of comparison (e.g., "x resembles y") is often based on extra-historical categories and is, therefore, ideological, political and unsupportable. In its place the three-term type of comparison (e.g., "x resembles y more than z with respect to…") is desired (Smith 1990: 43-51). The goal of bringing disparate phenomena together is not to compare their quiddities, but to juxtapose their relational aspects, to contextualize how they generate meaning for humans (Smith 1990: 50). It is this latter type of comparison that brings to light, and makes meaningful, the ways in which human communities construct and subsequently interpret their environments.

Let me begin to apply some of these theoretical considerations by introducing into the equation a quotation from the historian of religions and student of Islam, Charles Adams, formerly of McGill. Although written roughly 35 years ago, his comments are still symptomatic of Islam's often ambiguous place within the academic study of religion. Adams writes, somewhat autobiographically, of his initial optimism of leaving graduate school at the University of Chicago:

> I advanced into the Islamics field with the expectation that a deeper knowledge of what scholars had done and were doing in the History of Religions would prove to be among the most valuable of resources for the work that lay ahead. I understood my growing interest in the religious life of the Muslim community as a specification of a more general interest in the religious life of mankind as a whole. (1967: 177)

For Adams, these expectations were never realized. He argues that the potentially promising relationship between Islamic Studies and the History of Religions failed to materialize. Why is this? To paraphrase Adams, the study of Islam and the History of Religions speak two different vocabularies, with each one seemingly impervious to the other. The categories of the History of Religions, in short, are not those of Islamic Studies. He concludes:

> For the student of Islam… the succession of emphases and the direction of development in the History of Religions has had little direct meaning…. The historical stuff of Islamic religiousness is extraordinarily, one may say almost perversely, impervious to significant analysis along the lines which the majority of historians of religions have followed and are following. (1967: 181-82)

The "emphases" that Adams has in mind include the likes of myth and ritual. In what follows, I want to focus on, question, and ultimately examine the soundness of Adams' main thesis from the vantage point of the early 21st century. Is the academic study of Islam (still) truly "impervious" to the History of Religions?

Myth and/in the Qur'ân

As an attempt to begin to rethink the relationship between the academic study of Islam and the History of Religions, in what follows I examine the use of myth and mythopoesis in the Qur'ân. My goal in doing this is not to reduce the sacred scripture of Islam to either general platitudes or the type of reductionism that characterized earlier attempts to reveal its sources. On the contrary, the goal is to articulate a set of questions and angles of approach that are likely to yield insight into the various ways in which humans negotiate an ongoing set of social, historical and textual environments.

The creation of a new tradition, literary or otherwise, involves delineating an uncharted religious, intellectual, textual or cultural space. The new tradition is subsequently authenticated by virtue of its proximity to an exemplary past, real or imagined. The new tradition, in turn, brings with it a set of expectations for its audience and a new object of discourse that is clarified by comparison with and differentiation from previous traditions (see Foucault 1972).

Now one of the foremost problems facing the historian of early Islam is the inability to situate accurately the teachings and message of Muhammad within their pre-Islamic Arabian context (Wansbrough 1978: 50-53; Cook and Crone 1977: 3-9; Peters 1994: 257-68). What, for example, is the status of the many mythic fragments and intertexts within the Qur'ân? How do these fragments, in turn, connect the Qur'ân, linguistically, culturally and structurally, to other religious and cultural traditions?

In what follows, I want to focus on a particular Qur'ânic fragment, 18:60-82, which describes Moses' search for, and subsequent adventures at, the place where the two seas meet (*majma`al-bahrayn*). This passage represents the nexus of a number of disparate textual trajectories (biblical, rabbinic, near eastern). The goal is not to suggest that the Qur'ânic account is somehow derivative; on the contrary, it is to demonstrate that it ingeniously reweaves previous discourses into a fabric that is much more than the sum of its parts. This is, in many ways, a textual setting of the basic claim that Islam makes on a theological and supra-textual level. The richness of the mythic dimensions of the Qur'ân should emerge from this examination, allowing us, in the process, to see the way in which the Qur'ân perceives itself in the light of previous myths and sacred scriptures.

One of the peculiarities of a scriptural-based religion, such as Judaism or Islam, is its obsession for recreating a semiotic world, restoring the fragments of an original Text (Derrida 1978: 67). Since this Text represents, on a certain level, the collective memory it is necessary to make sense of it, to bridge the ontological differences that exist between contemporary situations and the sacred past (Hughes 2003: 154-59). This occurs either through the expansion of scripture or by exploring the manner in which scripture can read itself intratextually and intertextually (see Boyarin 1990: 41).

Since language is by nature referential, there exists an intricate thread that not only connects all texts, but also liberates them from one another. Syncretism makes it quite impossible to define with any degree of exactitude the point of origin of any text (Todorov 1984: 64). The most that one can do is posit a hypothetical chain of transmission.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to characterize the manner in which scholars have traditionally perceived the relationship between early Islam and its neighbors. Many were quick to point out the derivative nature of the Qur'ân, in particular the way in which it copies from other sources and, in the process, often conflates them nonsensically (e.g., Geiger 1970 [1896]; Katsh 1962). In a recent analysis, however, Steven Wasserstrom argues that we must begin to shift the focus from plagiarism to that of symbiosis. The early Muslim polity was probably well aware that it was utilizing old religious narratives. Yet, this utilization was but a small part of the building blocks that went into the construction of a tradition which acknowledged the authoritative legacy of earlier communities (Wasserstrom 1995: 172; cf. Firestone 1990: 15-21). In absorbing the histories of the communities around it, early Islam, according to Wasserstrom, overcame its "anxiety of influence" (181). In using these previous mythologies, hagiographies and sacred histories, the early Muslim polity allowed these "foreign" narratives to attest to the truth of Islam (Wasserstrom 1995: 174).

The Qur'ân as intertext

The Qur'ân claims that it is a book like no other, the recitation of the Text which only God has seen (43:1-3; cf. 12:1, 20:ca. 110, 30:ca. 57, 39:ca. 20). Although it claims that its message is not novel, its uniqueness resides in the fact that it is an "Arabic recital," a clear sign to restore the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitâb*) to their original position (e.g., 43:1-4). In an intertextual universe, the Qur'ân becomes the intertext par excellence: it is one of the few texts that is aware that it represents the absorption, transformation and subsequent reamalgamation of previous texts. More specifically, the Qur'ân presents itself as the shatterer of the Jewish and Christian holy texts which are perceived as calcifications of the dynamic and only true Text (e.g., 3:3).

Nevertheless, the very fact that the Qur'ân claims that it is the repository of prior texts automatically situates it within a web of signification that connects it to different universes of discourse. The need to make sense out of the apparently disjointed and non-linear narrative progression of the Qur'ân is not a modern phenomenon; indeed textual exegesis (*tafsîr*) is virtually as old as the Qur'ân itself. To demonstrate this, the last part of this study will focus on the work of al-Tabari (d. 923), one of the most important exegetes and historians in early Islam. Within this context, I argue that one of tafsîr's primary, although often implicit, goals is to activate in the individual an awareness of the referential dimension of the Qur'ân. Tafsîr reconstructs for

the individual and the community all of the trajectories which the Qur'ân, in its intertextual vision, has sought to erase.

Tafsîr is existential. It reconstructs, and subsequently anchors, the material out of which the Qur'ân has been constructed. The main task of the early exegete is to recreate a dialogue with previous discourses that the Qur'ân, through its terse style, has abolished. In the subsequent recreation, however, tafsîr also provides a series of exegetical surprises and unexpected possibilities which also deconstruct the original thrust (if it can be discovered) of the prior discourse. Much like commentary in general, tafsîr is one among many means of locating a human tradition in both cosmic and terrestrial space vis-à-vis other traditions, aspects of the real word, etc.

The Qur'ân is not only a genizah of various trajectories of biblical and near eastern *aggadot*, but also a kaleidoscope which gives these trajectories a new vision. Nowhere is this more evident than chapter 18, which includes, *inter alia*, Moses' search for the place where the two seas meet. Since this passage forms the core of my analysis, it is worth quoting in its entirety. I use my own, somewhat awkward, translation to show the terse style of the Arabic:

> Behold Moses said to his attendant, "I will not depart until I reach the place where the two seas meet or until I progress for many years." Then when they reached the meeting place they forgot their fish and it took its path into the sea, burrowing. When they had gone on, he said to his attendant, "Bring us our breakfast, for we have encountered exhaustion from this our journey." He [the attendant] said, "Did you see when we took refuge on the rock, I forgot the fish and no one but Satan made me forget to remember it; and it took its way into the sea wonderfully." He [Moses] said, "This is what we were both seeking!" And they returned to their track, retracing their footsteps. They found a servant from among our servants, whom we had given mercy from us and we taught him knowledge directly from ourselves. Moses said to him, "Can I follow you so that you can teach me about what you have been taught, about right judgment?" And he [the servant of God] said, "You will not be able to have patience with me. How can you have understanding about that which you do not completely understand." And he [Moses] said, "You will find me patient, if God wills, and I will not disobey you." He said, "If you follow me do not ask me about anything until I speak to you about it." So they proceeded until they were in a boat and he bore a hole in it. Moses said, "Did you bore a hole in it in order to drown those inside, surely you have done a strange thing!" He responded, "Did I not tell you that you would not be able to have patience with me?"…So they proceeded until they met a young man and he [the servant of God] killed him. Moses said, "Why have you killed an innocent person, who has killed no one? This is certainly an evil thing you have done!" He said, "Did I not tell you that you would not be able to have patience with me?"…So they proceeded until they came to the people of a town, they asked them for food but they refused them. But they found a wall there that was ready to fall down, but [the servant of God] set it up straight. Moses said, "If you had wanted, you could have taken money for this." He responded, "This is the parting between me and you, now I will tell you the interpretation (*ta'wîl*) of that which you were not able to be patient. As for the boat, it belonged to poor men who worked on the water and I wanted to make it unserviceable because a king who took every boat by force

was after them. As for the boy, his parents were people of faith and we were afraid that he might grieve them with suppression and unbelief; so we wanted their Lord to give them in exchange a better and purer one than he and one closer in mercy. As for the wall, it belonged to two orphaned youths in the city, underneath it was a buried treasure; their father was a righteous man and your Lord wanted them to attain their [proper] age and they could bring their treasure because of the mercy of your Lord. I did not do this on my own. This is the interpretation [*ta'wîl*] of that which you were unable to have patience. (Qur'ân 8:60-82)

This passage conflates a number of disparate sources and, in what follows, I attempt to pry apart the precursor texts that have been welded together in order to account for some of the reasons why they are here given a new signification.

Midrashic intersubjectivities and Alexander romances

In tractate *Tamid* (redacted around the 6th century C.E.) from the Babylonian Talmud, there exists a narrative unit very similar to the one found in the Qur'ân. In the Talmudic passage, however, the protagonist is not Moses, but Alexander the Great. Returning from Africa (equated with the ends of the earth),

He sat by a well and began to eat. He had with him some salted fish, and as they were being washed they gave off a sweet odor. He said, "This shows that this well comes from the Garden of Eden." Some say that he took some of the water and washed his face with it; others say that he went alongside it until he came to the door of the Garden of Eden. He cried out, "Open the door for me!" They replied, "This is the gate of the Lord." (32b)

Although this passage diverges from the Qur'ânic passage, the hermeneutical situation that informs it seems to be similar. Returning from a journey that took him to the ends of earth, Alexander the Great, presumably with an unnamed companion or servant to whom he speaks, prepares to eat some salted fish. However, before he begins to eat, he is attracted to the vivifying qualities of the water. As he approaches the water's source, he is denied entry to the waters of immortality.

Despite the similarities, there are also a number of crucial differences between the two accounts. Primary is the protagonist: here the main character is Alexander, whereas in the Qur'ânic version it is Moses. Second, there is no mention of an "attendant" in the Talmudic account. Third is the location: whereas the Qur'ânic Moses searches for the "place where the two seas meet," Alexander here is by a well, whose waters are somehow connected to the waters from the Garden of Eden.

In addition to this, there also exists a similar story found in the Alexander Romance of Pseudo-Callisthenes which dates to the 4th century C.E., upon which both the Talmudic and the Qur'ânic accounts seem to be based (Cary 1956: 1-15; Southgate 1978: 1-5; Waugh 1996: 237ff.). According to this

narrative, Alexander and his cook, Andreas, are searching for the waters of immortality. One day, Andreas is washing a fish in the water of a spring that suddenly makes the fish return to life and jump back into the water; Andreas jumps in after the fish and becomes immortal. After Andreas tells Alexander of this, all subsequent attempts to find the spring fail (Wensinck 1979; more recently, however, see Wheeler 1996). Alexander, according to one account, is so angry with Andreas that he throws him into the sea (Friedlaender 1940).

The account of Alexander and his attendant found in the Alexander Romance displays a number of features that are common to the previous accounts. Again, we have Alexander and his attendant in a quest for the waters of immortality. Unlike the Qur'ânic version, however, we learn the fate of the attendant. In addition, the account found in the Alexander Romance also connects the search for the elusive water of immortality with a fish, which somehow points out the proper direction to the protagonist.

The crucial difference between the Qur'ânic account and the other two, in addition to the identity of the protagonist, is that the latter lack the mysterious stranger (later identified as al-Khidr, "The Green One"; see Schimmel 1975: 105-6). There is, nevertheless, an interesting analogy in Jewish midrashic literature involving Elijah and Rabbi Joshua ben Levi. Significantly, Elijah was, according to the biblical narrative, someone who never died, who ascended to heaven in "a chariot of fire and horses of fire" (2 Kings 2:11). Unlike Moses, who died before he could enter the promised land, Elijah, especially in the intertestamental and kabbalistic literature, became a figure associated with special *gnosis*. According to Jewish legend, Elijah granted Rabbi Joshua ben Levi the fulfillment of any wish he desired; in response to this offer, Rabbi Joshua accompanied Elijah on his journeys throughout the world. Elijah, however, imposed one condition on the rabbi: that Rabbi Joshua not ask any questions concerning his actions. As they travel, Elijah acts in a rather paradoxical and unexpected manner. Most similar to our story is the following:

> That night they reached the house of a wealthy man, who did not pay his guests the courtesy of looking them in the face. Though they passed the night under his roof, he did not offer them food or drink. This rich man was desirous of having a wall repaired that had tumbled down. There was no need for him to take any steps to have it rebuilt, for, when Elijah left the house, he prayed that the wall might erect itself, and, lo! it stood upright. Rabbi Joshua was greatly amazed at this, but true to his promise he suppressed the question that rose to his lips. (Ginzberg 1968b: 224)

After several more similar displays, Rabbi Joshua finally asks Elijah why he is behaving so paradoxically. Elijah gives an answer similar to that of the stranger in the Qur'ânic account. The story concludes with Elijah saying,

> "Know, then, that if you see an evil-doer prosper, it is not unto his advantage, and if a righteous man suffers need and distress, think not God is unjust." After these

words Elijah and Rabbi Joshua separated from each other, and each went on his own way. (Ginzberg 1968b: 225-26)

Standard treatments have claimed that the Qur'ân simply copies this *aggadah* and then changes or confuses the names (c.f., Wensinck 1979). This, however, is not very helpful. I disagree with the "confusing" or "garbling" thesis; in its stead I opt for a hermeneutical approach: the various ways in which a reader—be it Muhammad, the redactor/s of the final version of the Qur'ân, Tabari, myself, etc.—provides the intertext becomes the basis whereby sense is made of the focal text. It is this constant interplay between allusions that make the text meaningful to the reader (Iser 1980: 50-55). Although the Qur'ân changes the characters, events and intent of the midrashic text, it nevertheless forces the reader to engage the broader existential *topos* of the quest for knowledge. This search—as Rabbi Joshua, Moses and the reader discover—is ultimately a symbol for the exegetical act; for the surface (*al-zâhir*) of the text (like the outward appearance of Elijah's or al-Khidr's actions) is distinct from its inner meaning (*al-bâtin*). In relating a narrative fragment such as this, therefore, the Qur'ân aggadically reproduces a parable about itself.

Gilgamesh and the place where the seas meet

The place where the two seas meet is a common motif in the mythology of the ancient Near East. In the epic of Gilgamesh, for example, the hero Gilgamesh, another protagonist endlessly searching for immortality, sets out to find the immortal Utnapishtim, a name often thought to mean "he (who) found life." Utnapishtim was originally a human being who was subsequently blessed with immortality and made to reside far away from mortals at the Mouth of the Rivers (Kovacs 1989: 103). In addition to his immortality, Utnapishtim is also a revealer of knowledge to the forlorn Gilgamesh. It is he who shows Gilgamesh the path to the plant which resides at the bottom of the river and that brings immortality:

Hearing this, Gilgamesh opened a conduit and attached heavy stones to his feet. They dragged him down, to the Apsu they pulled him. He took the plant and cut the heavy stones from his feet, letting the waves throw him onto its shores. (Kovacs 1989: 106)

With the desired treasure in his arms, Gilgamesh later suggests to Urshanabi, the ferryman, that they stop for some food and rest:

Seeing a spring and how cool its waters were, Gilgamesh went down and was bathing in the water. A snake smelled the fragrance of the plant, silently came up and carried off the plant. While going back it sloughed off its casing. At that point Gilgamesh sat down, weeping, his tears streaming over the side of his nose. (Kovacs 1989: 106-7)

The seas, according to Jaroslav Stetkevych, are associated with the chthonic depth of the sea/river, the locus of the secrets of the gods (J. Stetkevych 1996: 103). To use the vocabulary of Eliade, implicit in the contact with water is regeneration: water, and submersion in it, symbolizes the rhythm of the universe as embodied in creation (Eliade 1958: 188-215). For Stetkevych, Gilgamesh must be understood as a mythic figure who, upon emerging from an encounter with death or immortality, comes back as a founder/builder of his culture (J. Stetkevych 1996: 105). It is in this mythic light that the character of Moses in 18:61-82 must be understood.

Before focusing on these verses, however, I would like to return to a similar mytheme at work in Jewish exegesis. My point is not to show who had this mytheme first, but that it is part of a mythic vocabulary that is common to the region of the ancient Near East. According to Jewish midrashic literature, Adam, having been expelled from paradise, prays near the bank of an unspecified river (though presumably one that flows out of Eden). The angel Raziel hears Adam's words and goes to Adam because he "received the charge to teach you (i.e., Adam) pure words and deep understanding" (Ginzberg 1968a: 90-93). Much like Gilgamesh, then, Adam, having been banished from the eternal Garden, becomes the founder of human society.

In addition, a theme to which this *aggadah* refers is the Garden of Eden, which is associated with the source of the four rivers (Gen. 2:10-14). In the Jewish tradition with which the Qur'ân and early Islam seem to be in close conversation, the traditional place where the two seas meet occurs in Genesis 1:6-8, where the earthly and the heavenly waters are subsequently separated from one another in the act of creation. The place where they rejoin, then, symbolizes a return to the purity of the creative process. Additionally, the well beside which Alexander sits is close to the entrance of the Garden of Eden; the water from the well smells so sweet because it is in the vicinity of the region where the four rivers (two of which are real and two of which are mythological) meet. According to Jewish legend, the place from which the four rivers flow is underneath the tree of life (Ginzberg 1968a: 70). This idea also has an eschatological role; for when the Messiah comes, the spring that was originally under the Holy of the Holies will once again reveal itself and flow through the lands, uncovering all the treasures buried within the earth (Ginzberg 1968b: 321).

The Qur'ânic version nowhere specifies the mystical properties associated with the "place where the two rivers meet." Other verses in the Qur'ân describe it in a more detailed, although just as enigmatic, manner. In 55:19-23, it is the place from which "come forth the pearl and the coral" (55:19-23) or alternatively as the barrier between the fresh and salt-water (25:55-56). Another key to this puzzle may also be found in 18:109: "If the sea were ink of the words of my Lord, the sea would be exhausted before the words of my Lord are exhausted even if we added another one like it for its aid." According to this verse, the place where the two seas meet could be taken to sym-

bolize the revelatory process. The seas become the ink out of which God's words flow, the metaphor from which all other metaphors derive their potency. The meeting place becomes that imperceptible region where the finite text reaches out to the infinite Text.

The Qur'ânic account of Moses, then, seems to record yet another version of an ancient tradition that deals with the search for immortality. By doing this, it activates a much wider and more nuanced discussion of this motif. At the same time, however, it gives its own version an interesting twist. The Qur'ânic version inserts itself into the account of creation in Genesis, where Moses now wanders a barren, half-created world in the quest for knowledge. Similarly, it also situates Moses in an exegetical world, where Moses, the archetypal exegete, searches for the source of God's words.

Between Alexander and Moses

By telling a new version of an old story, the Qur'ân invites the reader to reimagine the older stories on the authority of its "new" version. This new version presents itself as the original form from which the other versions should be derived. At first glance, the most significant discrepancy between the Qur'ânic account and the others is in the identity of the main character (viz., Moses versus Alexander). There are, however, a number of possible explanations for the originality of the Qur'ânic narrative. Before proceeding, however, it might be worthwhile to note that, according to Muslim prophetic hagiography, Muhammad is often portrayed as the prophet Moses longed to be. Where Moses fails, Muhammad is often successful. The implications of this for our narrative is that Moses fails to have a deeper knowledge (or *gnosis*) of God that Muhammad possesses.

In Exodus 34:29, "Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone/grew horns (*qaran*) because he was talking with God." Significantly, the Hebrew root of this word (*q-r-n*) is the same in Arabic. Although the name Alexander the Great never appears in the Qur'ân, he is believed to be the individual referred to as *Dhu al-Qarnayn*, the "two-horned" (Newby 1978: 114). The Qur'ân here seems to be engaging in a clever metonymic transference. By doing this, the Qur'ân allows us to conceptualize Moses in terms of someone else, Alexander the Great. Such metonymic associations are central to the Qur'ân's mode of expression: they enable it not only to tie itself to the monotheistic heritage out of which it emerges, but also to break with it as it substitutes and recombines different characters and places.

It seems that on one level, the Qur'ân has taken a legend of Alexander and conflated this with Moses because they both have "horns." According to Brown, this is part of the Qur'ân's genius: Alexander and Moses "reamalgamerge" (the term is Joyce's, not Brown's) because, in the Qur'ân, "Histor-

ical material is fragmented into its archetypal constituents and then subjected to displacement and condensation, as in dreams" (1991: 88).

Another reason the Qur'ân conflates these two characters may reside in the fact that in Jewish lore, Alexander is also associated with God's intervention near the sea. In Exodus 14, God prevents the army of Pharaoh from reaching Moses and the Israelites by parting the waters of the Sea of Reeds and then returning them to their original position. Significantly, the Jewish historian Josephus relates a similar story involving Alexander. In an effort to make Moses's parting of the sea more believable to a Roman audience, he writes, that "the hosts of Alexander, King of Macedon, men born just the other day, beheld the Pamphylian Sea retire before them and, when, other roads there was none, offer a passage through itself" (Josephus 1930: 38).

A third possible explanation for the Qur'ânic story is the manner in which the early Muslim community envisaged the character of Alexander. Ibn Ishaq, in his *Kitâb al-mubtada`* as reconstructed by Newby, portrays Alexander as a messenger of God whose goal is to make the entire world worship God (Newby 1978: 193). Like Moses, and indeed like Muhammad, Alexander was a righteous spokesman who attempted to create the ideal community.

A fourth and final similarity between the characters of Alexander and Moses is the fact that both of them died before they were able to achieve their goals. Historically, Alexander died at the age of 36, just when he was preparing to take stock of his huge empire and begin the arduous task of administration. In a similar vein, because of his transgression, Moses died before he was able to enter into the land promised to him and the Israelites by God (Deut. 32:48-52). It is not surprising, then, that both of these characters are touched by tragic circumstances, unfulfilled dreams and lives that were permeated by the divine.

Again, the easy way out of this dilemma would be to posit that the Qur'ân either confuses the characters through scribal error or recklessness (a position to which the majority of 19th- and early 20th-century European commentators subscribed), or to claim that there must be a rabbinic source upon which the Qur'ânic account is based. A more sophisticated reading, however, would explain the conflation by means of a worldview that is particular to the Qur'ân. The Qur'ân wants to assert its authority by pointing to, and subsequently destroying, its web of signification with other texts. In doing this, however, it engages in further web-spinning that, willy-nilly, continues to multiply meaning with different nuances.

The Qur'ân, as a scripture that is attempting to define itself against competing scriptures, deconstructs the traditional narrative that comprises the Jewish imagination. For Brown, the Qur'ân, "in a characteristically abrupt and monumental gesture, breaks with Judaic ethnocentrism and reprojects the prophetic tradition on a new transcultural, universal, world-historical plane" (1991: 79). By doing this, it produces an infinite amount of surprises and unexpected turns that take the informed, or ideal, reader on a momen-

tous journey. In this regard, Moses himself becomes a metaphor for the Qur'ânic reader: like al-Khidr, the Qur'ân takes us on a paradoxical journey in which we are bound to the narrative rules that it invents as we proceed.

Tafsîr and the construction of taxonomies

Tafsîr, like all commentary, is fundamentally related to the ideal of location or place, both spatially and temporally. In other words, a commentary is a way of creating a taxonomy: the creation and understanding of a present through various subdivisions that are grounded in an exemplary past. Maintaining order, then, is preeminently about the construction of boundaries, a way of distinguishing between order and chaos (Hughes 2003: 149, 159-65).

Although it attempts to distance itself from what it sees as the overzealous interpretations found either within the Bible or in later codes (i.e., Mishnah, Talmudim), the Qur'ân ultimately possesses and archives such interpretations. The manner by which it does this, however, is unlike what is found in the Bible: it decenters and rejects the linearity of its surrounding textual milieu (Brown 1991: 87). By subverting Jewish and Christian scripture, erasing the chains of transmission and, thus, the idea of a clear or retrievable message, the Qur'ân provides only the traces of its precursors. It then falls to tafsîr to recontextualize the Qur'ân, to reestablish the roots or references, of these precursors.

How would a passage such as the one found in sura 18 fit into the worldview of the early Muslim community? Although impossible to reconstruct exactly, one is able to approximate its significance by analysing the early commentaries on these verses. Because of textual ambiguities and nonsequiturs found within the Qur'ân, the early community sought to make meaningful all of the passages, no matter how ambiguous or arcane. As part of the hadith tradition, tafsîr was one of the primary ways that the early community contextualized or anchored its collective memory. Either through the filling in of gaps or the expansion of its narrative kernels, the exegete sought to ground the Qur'ân in familiar categories.

Tafsîr provided the bridge that connected the Qur'ânic fragments to the wider intertext of established Jewish and Christian monotheism. By means of commentaries, the Qur'ân's implicit relationships to the Jewish and Christian intertexts were not only brought to the surface, but also deepened and expanded. The goal, then, was to make the Qur'ân more familiar as opposed to more opaque; to understand its references, no matter how ambiguous, rather than further mystify them.

An example of this ability to script the Qur'ânic version into the broader monotheistic/Jewish framework is found in Tabari's claim that the fish that was in the possession of Moses and his attendant was salted (Tabari 1954: 279, 282). Although this is something that the Qur'ân fails to mention, it is a feature common to the accounts found in both the Talmud and the Alexander Romance (see section 4 above).

Similarly, Tabari expands the Qur'ânic version to fill in the gaps regarding the fate of Moses' attendant. According to this account, the attendant drank from the water of eternity. Because this desire for personal immortality went against God's wishes, God put the attendant on a boat and sent him out into the middle of the sea, where he will remain until the Day of Judgment (Tabari 1954: 281). In another account, the attendant is given the name Joshua ben Nun (Tabari 1954: 281).

Tabari also relates a dispute about whether or not the Moses of this story is the Moses of Exodus. In so doing, he records a tradition in which the Moses of 18:60-82 is not Moses ben Moses ben `Imran, but Moses ben Manasseh (1954: 279). Although Tabari ultimately rejects this account, the fact that he comments on it indicates that he is refuting a tradition that was held by some.

According to Newby, the name Moses ben Manasseh is the result of textual ambiguity found in Judges 18:30. The masoretic (i.e., the later) version of the text in question speaks of a Jonathan son of Gershom son of Manasseh (consonantly expressed *m-n-s-h*); however, the consonantal, and thus the earliest version lacks the *nun* (i.e., the "n"), hence the name is Moses (*m-s-h*). This new "Moses" (father of Gershom and grandfather of Jonathan) would have been a contemporary of the prophet Moses (Newby 1978: 115). The context of Judges 18:30 is also significant: it speaks of the descendants of Manasseh as the priests to the tribe of Dan who had just erected an idol. If the Moses of sura 18 were not the prophet Moses, this would sidestep the thorny issue of why Moses, one of God's chosen messengers, should be searching for someone to instruct him.

The later consensus, however, is that the Moses of sura 18 is the Prophet Moses. The fact that this version did not appear in the Jewish scriptures was subsequently seen by Muslims as further proof that the Qur'ân includes material that is not found in, or that may have been deleted from, non-Muslim scripture (Lazarus-Yafeh 1992; Newby 1978: 115). Against the tradition that the Moses of sura 18 was not the real Moses, Tabari relates a conversation between Ibn `Abbas and Sa`id b. Jubair that

> Nawf, the son of Ka`b's wife, said on the authority of Ka`b that Moses the prophet who sought knowledge was Moses the son of Manasseh. Ibn `Abbas said: "Is this what Nawf says?" Sa`id answered: "I said to him, Yes, I heard Nawf say this." Ibn `Abbas said, "Did you yourself hear this, Sa`id?" He said, "Yes." Then Ibn `Abbas said, "Nawf lied!" (Tabari 1954: 279)

In an effort to make the Qur'ânic account of Moses more meaningful, Tabari also records a tradition that attempted to situate this event within the life-history of Moses as related in Exodus. For example, Moses' search for the meeting place of the two seas occurred just after Moses and the Israelites crossed the Sea of Reeds (Tabari 1954: 281). It seems that after the destruction of Pharaoh's army, Moses asks God if there is anyone more knowledgeable on

the face of the earth (another account has an Israelite ask Moses if he is the wisest human, to which he answers, yes). Serving as a reprimand to the hubris of Moses in both of these cases, God informs Moses that there is someone wiser, viz., al-Khidr. By robbing prior discourses of their immediate historical and contextual position, tafsîr shuffles and recontextualizes them into a new semiotic system which is both familiar and novel. However, tafsîr also subverts the context from which it receives its intertext: in Exodus 15, Moses sings a hymn to God at the sea, whereas in the Qur'ân the sea becomes his nemesis, providing nothing more than the traces of the fish's tracks.

Nevertheless, by giving the Qur'ânic passage a *Sitz im Leben* in ancient Israel, tafsîr serves a crucial existential role in the community. In this regard, it accounts for the otherness of the Qur'ânic passage. Rather than function as an ambiguous tale, existing as an isolated fragment in an endless sea of fragments, tafsîr roots the passage in a familiar tradition by playing down its otherness. At the same time, however, the tafsîr reinforces the uniqueness of the Qur'ânic message. Although it situates the passage within the narrative of the Hebrew Bible, it does so in such a manner that it goes against the grain of the Bible. In the Qur'ân the passage now becomes a unique event in the history of the exodus without actually appearing in the book with the same name. While tafsîr familiarizes, it also defamiliarizes.

In doing so, passages such as these contribute to the view that the Qur'ân is no ordinary book. According to Brown, "Sura 18 is the apocalypse of Islam: the heart of its message, not displayed on the surface, is the distinction between surface and substance, between *zahir* and *batin*" (Brown 1991: 81). Reinforcing this, the Qur'ân does not envisage itself as a text that can be completely interpreted:

> He it is who has sent down to you the Book. In it are basic (*muhkam*) verses, they are the Mother of the Book (*umm al-kitab*), the others are ambiguous (*mutashâbih*). And those in whose hearts is perversity follow what is ambiguous, desiring discord and searching for its interpretation. But no one knows their interpretation except God. (3:7)

Like all great texts, then, the Qur'ân is multivalent. Every verse has the potential to be either *muhkam* or *mutashâbih*; this resulted in elaborate hermeneutical theories to classify the verses of the Qur'ân (McAuliffe 1988: 52-62). Regardless of such attempts to tame its language, the Qur'ân will always blur the distinction between its outer shell and its inner meaning. It supplies the text, but rarely the context. As a result, even the most *muhkam* of verses has the potential to be the most *mutashâbih*.

Concluding remarks

By way of conclusion, let me return briefly to the statements of Charles Adams. In what remains a thought-provoking article even after 35 years, Adams argued that there exists a fundamental incompatibility between the

History of Religions and the Study of Islam. In particular, the former works with a vocabulary and set of questions that fails to resonate with the latter. Unfortunately, Adams' comments, originally a set of autobiographical reflections, have become *de rigeur* in the field. Islam and Islamic phenomena have failed to play a prominent role in the History of Religions. Why is this? Is Islamic data really of little or no significance in mapping human cultural striving and achievement?

This is not and should not be the case. Islamic material in and of itself is not inherently impervious to the types of analyses and questions that the History of Religions poses. Rather than take at face value claims that Islam is conservative, austere or anti-mythological, we need to subject traditional data—e.g., the Qur'ân and the traditions surrounding it—to a new set of questions. The results will be of importance not only for shedding new light on Islam, but also on the symbolic, metaphorical and cultural orbits of Muslims.

Within this context, I have examined the existence of mythopoesis, in the form of the stranger at the sea, in both the Qur'ân and the tafsîr of Tabari. Tafsîr, much like the Qur'ân itself, inherits many mythic florigia and symbolic dendrita that must ultimately be made sense of. They certainly do this in different ways: the Qur'ân is content to let such material sit awkwardly, even uncomfortably, in its midst, whereas tafsîr combines, shuffles, recombines and reshuffles this material in order to draw out the omni-significances buried within the Qur'ân's narrative.

Within this context the Qur'ân preserves the truth-values of itself and other texts. However, it is up to tafsîr to activate the collective memory of Islam, to ground it within the monotheist heritage that Islam claims to buttress and reconfigure. In so doing, tafsîr enables the Muslim community to encode its own religious identity, its cultural and social values.

In many ways, then, it is impossible to have a text existing in isolation, as if in a vacuum. For all text is ultimately commentary. Every text, therefore, engages not only itself, but also other texts, thereby generating further commentary. Commentary records both the structural system through which a community expresses itself and the various strategies and tropes by which it creates and sustains the world. In maneuvering between the familiar and the unfamiliar of the Qur'ânic narrative, tafsîr becomes the locus by which the Muslim community confronts its origins, its pre-history, its history and, ultimately, itself.

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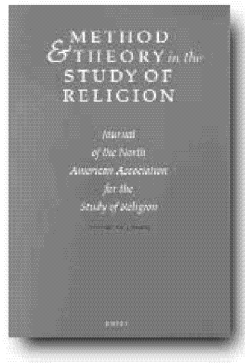

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